Written submission from Ms Lesley Abdela (WHC0071)

The activities we pioneered in the 300 GROUP were very successful. A number of women who started out in the 300 GROUP went on to become MPs, Peers, Ministers, Mayors, Local Councillors and front-bench spokespeople and to hold other senior posts in public life.

INTRODUCTION

I have campaigned, lobbied and worked as a professional Consultant on equal representation of women in politics and journalist for over 3 decades in over 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and North Africa, and the UK. There is only one way most of us will live to see gender equality in the British Parliament—reform of the electoral system to a PR voting system combined with a gender balance quota, or by introducing a gender balance quota within the first-past-the-post system.

In 1980 I founded the all party 300 GROUP campaign to get more women into Parliament. The number of women in the House of Commons has increased at every election since the launch of the 300 GROUP. But I fear that with the upcoming boundary changes, at the next election, for the first time in 3 decades the number of women MPs may drop. The British House of Commons currently rates 49th in the global league table of women in politics. We may slip even lower unless action is taken.

Introduce Temporary Special Measures

From these many years campaigning and working professionally to increase women's political participation I can state that if UK is truly committed to increasing the number of women in Parliament from a diverse range of backgrounds there is only one way to achieve it,—that is by introduction of Temporary Special Measures in the form of quotas for a period of at least 4 elections. Everything else may be seen as a cynical effort to avoid a real increase in women's numbers.

The choice of quota system is important.

There are disparities between diverse quota types, in their modalities of implementation, in their democratic credibility and in their efficiency. Other measures can help to increase women’s participation in politics and public life decision-making bodies but they have proven to be less effective than quotas. Gender quotas can lead to a strengthening of legal norms regarding Gender equality.

There are differing types of quota systems—some are more democratic than others.

The type of quota system I believe has the greater merit for the United Kingdom are Gender-balanced quotas with equal rules for both women and men and in which everyone has to stand for election. Examples are "zipping" and "twinning". A selection of political parties in countries such as Scandinavian countries with a list system of voting by proportional representation use the ‘zipper system’. Five Swedish political parties use the zipping system to achieve gender balance amongst their elected representatives. Sweden currently has the highest level of representation of women (43.6%) in any national parliament in Europe.

Gender Balanced Quotas with equal rules for women and men retain democratic credibility because once they have been chosen to be candidates by their political party, both female and male candidates still have to get elected by the voters. A Gender Balance quota with equal rules for men and women therefore eliminates the risk of the "Quota Queens“ syndrome in which women elected on a quota system are somehow perceived by colleagues and the media as "second class" representatives.

The zipper is an example of a successful gender-balanced procedure. The zipper can be used with PR electoral systems in which each Party puts up a slate of candidates. Under the zipper system the names of women and men alternate equally vertically in the critical topmost positions of the Party list of election candidates and horizontally for who heads the party list.

Under the ‘zipper system’ the names of women and men alternate equally in the critical top positions of the Party list of candidates in the election:

1. Woman
2. Man
3. Woman
4. Man etc

Or

1. Man
2. Woman
3. Man
4. Woman etc

Another example of a gender-balanced quota is to stipulate that at least 40% candidates have to be men and at least 40% women, with the remaining 20% either. This means there can be no more than 60% representation by the one sex. In a first past the post majoritarian election system the twinning quota
system was used successfully by the Labour Party in the first elections for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.

Where no Gender quotas are in place, progress on women in decision-making in political and public bodies is likely to remain painfully slow.

Most countries with more than 30% women in Parliament have used some form of Temporary Special Measures such as quotas. In all these countries, women (often with supportive men) inside and outside political parties mobilised and campaigned for quotas. Women’s groups also provided training for women in political participation.

**Set women up for success**

To set women up for success it is also important that even if there is a quota system the women candidates have received good leadership and communication skills training and been made aware of how to research and understand the issues and their rights and responsibilities as democratic leaders. Plus to build good two way contacts with women’s NGO groups around the country.

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**Background Context**

The results of the 1979 General Election brought the critical matter into sharp focus for me of just how few women there were in Parliament. I stood for Parliament in the 1979 Election. It was the election when Margaret Thatcher was elected Britain’s first woman Prime Minister. Margaret Thatcher, was one of only 19 women out of 635 Members (a mere 3%). (About the same as Afghanistan at the time.) The number of women Members of the British House of Commons had even declined since the previous decade. Despite those appalling statistics, in the late 1970s such a massive Gender imbalance in the British body politic was an invisible and mostly unremarked issue. The Media and the political Parties didn’t seem to notice or care how few women were in Parliament.

I decided we needed to do something about it. A group of us met and formed an organisation with the aim of increasing the number of women in parliament and at all other decision-making levels of politics. The goal was to change the entire perception of voters, politicians, Media and other citizens in this country towards women in politics. **We called our organisation the 300 GROUP, because our goal was to get at least 300 women elected to Parliament – half of parliament.** We were all unpaid volunteers. 300 GROUP members included supportive men as well as women. The 300 Group launched in 1980, in the Grand Committee Room at the House of Commons with the slogan- ‘A Woman’s Place is in the House’ 19 women out of 635 women in parliament.

It became clear that a series of invisible barriers prevented women from proper access to promotion on *merit* in politics and public life. The obstacles were partly a
consequence of traditional cultural attitudes and partly a consequence of institutional procedures. I call these challenges ‘The 7 Cs’:

Culture/
Cronyism/ (The old boys’ networks)
Candidate selection processes
Cash/
Chronic lack of time/
Confidence
Candidate selection processes in political parties

Having worked on women’s political empowerment in more than 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and North Africa I have discovered these same categories of barriers are universal.

The obstacles break down broadly into two categories: institutional obstacles, and obstacles caused by cultural stereotypes and attitudes. Any person or commission seriously seeking to increase women’s participation will have to consider the extra challenges faced by women from ethnic and religious minorities and women with disabilities. Women are not a homogenous category. Issues which impinge on women are cross-cut by other particular factors affecting their status: marital/widowhood status, parental background, religious grouping, ethnic minority/race, class and economic ranking (millions of women are on low pay, no pay, or up to a third less than men doing the same job), urban/rural. It is important to discuss strategies and actions to enable them to have full participation in politics. There are, nevertheless, common challenges to overcome.

As an aside—UK Parliamentarians may be interested to note that violence in politics and elections is a main challenge in a considerable number of the countries where I have worked, including Iraq, Egypt, and Afghanistan – Violence and intimidation seems to be creeping in to British politics too.

Three Ways to legitimise quotas

There are 3 main ways to legitimise quotas:
Permissive quotas
In the UK we have "permissive" legislation which allows political parties to use quotas if they wish to do so. Other countries with "Permissive" legislation include Norway, Denmark, Germany and Sweden.

Mandatory Quotas
1. Other countries have passed legislation to make quotas mandatory. These include:
   Belgium, France, Argentina, Armenia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Costa Rica, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Jordan, Macedonia, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Sudan, Serbia, Montenegro, Tanzania, Uganda, Venezuela.
Quotas enshrined in the Constitution
Some countries have enshrined quota procedures at national or local level in their Constitutions.
These include:
France, China, Eritrea, Guyana, Kenya, Nepal, Philippines, Taiwan, Tanzania, Uganda, Argentina, India.[173]

3. Further Issues impacting differentially on women—Access To Funding

Pros and cons of voluntary or legislated quotas
Voluntary quota systems devised by individual parties are considered favourable because:

✓ they promote gender parity at a more grass roots level and demonstrate that any barriers or resistance has been overcome within the ranks of the parties themselves;
✓ once agreed to internally, compliance is generally fulfilled without deviation;
✓ implementation of internal party rules that promote women’s participation can change the face of the political culture most rapidly.

• However, the advantages of quota legislation are also obvious.

✓ When mandated by law, quotas apply to all parties, not just a willing few.
✓ A basis in law provides a basis for enforcement. A quota law provides the potential for sanctions to be imposed on parties failing to comply. Such penalties might call for the rejection of the party’s list, or a reduction in the allotment of state funding for the party’s campaign.

A credible quota law will include provisions as to the manner in which vacancies will be filled if once elected, a candidate fails to accept a post, or leaves office before the end of his or her term. For example, in the interests of guaranteeing opportunities for women, a quota law may require that if a woman resigns or otherwise leaves office prematurely the replacement candidate must be the next available woman on the candidate list. Without such safeguards, the effectiveness of a quota law could be neutralized over time, or if women are pressured to resign.

Rationale for introducing quotas as a Temporary Special Measure
Introduction of quotas can be attacked on some theoretical ground, but practice demonstrates their true worth.
Back in 1980, I was totally opposed to any form of quotas, but after some years working on the issue of women’s participation in politics in the UK and overseas I became convinced that training, lobbying and similar activities on their own are helpful but are not enough. Progress is too slow. I have seen that in country after country in Europe, Africa, Asia, and it has been documented elsewhere that other
actions without some form of quota will not succeed.

In an ideal world Quotas/Equalising Action would not be needed, but people opposed to quotas in politics endlessly attack this remedy but never seem to have any answers on how to change things, except the same old "slowly, slowly, patience, patience" argument that has been used for centuries. Lacking Equalising Action, it is like waiting for fish to grow feet. More generations of excellent women will come and go, as they have over the past 90 years.

In support of my recommendation I have attached a Question and Answer briefing on using quotas in political candidate selection as Annex 1.

The Q and A is excerpted from a Trainers Manual for Women in Politics I wrote in 2005 titled "Communication Skills for Women In Politics", sponsored by the Research Centre for Gender Equality, funded by the EU. The manual was targeted at Greece, Italy and Hungary. I was Consultant to the project aimed at increasing women's representation in politics. These three countries had some of the lowest representation in the European Parliament.

**Election campaign funding**

Another issue to tackle is election campaign funding. In the Canadian Royal Commission study on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, women said financial factors were the biggest obstacle to electoral success.

At first sight it may look as though the funding challenges are the same for women and men. The reality is that women generally have far less access to funds than men for political participation and seeking office. Election campaigns and building a track record in politics can be expensive. In research for my book "Women with 'X' Appeal" in which I interviewed over 30 women in British politics I established that even as far back as the 1980s that costs in extra personal expenses incurred by being a political activist and prospective candidate can easily amount to several thousand pounds per year—and women historically have found it much harder to raise these sums for personal political activism.

Costs include:

- travelling to meetings and conferences.
- the cost of participating in regular Party social and political events
- the cost of taking part in internal party nomination and competitions as part of the political party candidate selection process
- clothes to wear in public life
- child-care or elder-care if needed when attending political meetings
- membership fees to political party and other political groups

**Suggestions for Funding Reform**
1. Make provision for childcare expenses to be included in the personal expenses of a candidate in nomination and election expenses.
2. Provide incentives through public funding: the amount of funding a party receives could be linked or dependent upon the number of women candidates it puts forward for election.
3. Provide "early money" to women contestants. Establish networks for the financing of women's electoral and nomination campaigns. This is particularly important for women in systems where there is no access to public funding.
4. Conduct more research into the effects of campaign financing on women, and explore more avenues for reform.

**Funding. Case examples**

1. The Canada Elections Act makes provision for childcare expenses to be included in the personal expenses of a candidate for election contest but not for the expenses incurred in the initial campaigning to get the nomination by the party. The Royal Commission in Canada noted that the cost of childcare imposes an unequal burden on many women seeking elected office. It proposed that childcare is a necessary expense in seeking nomination by a candidate and should be considered a legitimate tax deduction.[175]
2. In French elections, including those to the Lower House, parties are required to put forward a gender-balanced slate of candidates or pay a financial penalty. The balance does not need to be mathematically exact—a party putting forward 49% of candidates of one sex and 51% of the other sex pays no penalty. If the discrepancy is any greater than this, the party's State funding will be cut by an amount equaling half the percentage difference. A party which puts forward 45% women and 55% men—a difference of 10%—will lose 5% of its state funding.

4. Networks of women and campaigning groups inside and outside parties need funding to be effective.

NGOs, Networks, and campaigning groups in the UK and overseas have played a role in increasing women's participation in politics. With sufficient funding women’s NGOs and political parties can:

- lobby for the introduction of gender-balanced parity quotas
- encourage more women to come forward and take an active role in decision-making at all levels in politics and public life
- train women candidates and their campaign teams
- create a market demand for women as a new fresh force in politics and public life at all levels of society— village, province and national. At the same time, satisfy this new demand with well-prepared and trained women, equipped with the necessary skills for active leadership roles in political life
- help to change the culture in public life, politics and the media to become more inclusive and "woman-friendly"
- raise awareness among the nation's women about their rights and
responsibilities as citizens

- raise funds for women candidates

History
The all-party 300 GROUP UK

The 300 GROUP had over 40 branches across England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Members and Supporters were from diverse ethnic backgrounds and across the political spectrum. During the five years 1980-85 when I founded and developed the all-Party 300 Group for Women in Politics, we conducted useful activities, including debates on major subjects in Committee Rooms of the House of Commons; familiarisation meetings between prospective Party members and representatives/prospective mentors of those Parties; skills-learning sessions, often in association with entities such as the Industrial Society, Women's Institutes or major magazines like Good Housekeeping and Cosmopolitan (of which later I became their first Political Editor).

The all-party 300 GROUP formed from a grouping of women from about 10 women's organisations plus the women's wings of political parties. They met to confront the fact that at that time, in the United Kingdom's Parliament men outnumbered women 97% to 3%. The campaign developed a twin-track strategy. In marketing terms, it created a market demand from the public (ie voters) for women candidates; at the same time it prepared and provided good products by training potential women candidates and helping them to raise their public profile in the media.

The 300 GROUP pioneered a full range of activities for its members, from debates in committee rooms of the House of Commons, to annual workshop-conferences, "Town Hall meetings", Saturday skills training throughout Britain (sometimes sponsored by major women's magazines), and a quarterly newsletter which went to 5000 people.

Through this activity, the 300 Group laid the ground for several thousand women to participate fully in Britain's political life. It pressured the political Parties to encourage more and more women to seek candidacies rather than only play a traditional supportive role. It also encouraged women to lobby hard within their parties for a better gender balance.

A group of well-organised women activists within a political party can make a difference. In the early 1990s, women's networks inside the British Labour Party mobilised, lobbied, and used their voting strength within the party to get a quota introduced. The Labour women's networks analysed which seats their party expected to win at the following election and groomed individual women candidates to apply for each of those vacant winnable seats.

Women in the Labour Party formed the Labour Women's Network. They persuaded the party to introduce all women short-lists for half the winnable seats in which there was no sitting incumbent. The leap forward in 1997 was mainly due to the big swing to Labour combined with the fact that Labour introduced their then-controversial all-women short-lists. This was about the only type of quota system available in our first-past-the-post electoral system.

The pressure from outside the parties and inside the parties meant that within
4 elections the number of women in the House of Commons went from 19 to 122.

The real break though came in Wales and Scotland when Labour introduced quotas for elections to the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament. Women activists and supportive men in the Labour Party seized the chance and lobbied hard for quotas to be introduced into the Party candidate selection system for the new legislatures in Wales and Scotland. Until recently 50% of the Welsh Assembly Members were women and half the Ministers were women, but until the late 1990s only one in 20 Welsh local councillors had been a woman.

The British Liberal Democrat Party introduced a zipper quota for their party lists in the 2000 elections to the European Parliament with the result that five women and five men were elected.

—(After 20 years the 300 GROUP ceased activities because of lack of funds.)

5. Future actions needed by British Political Parties

Party Leaders have taken a few steps in the right direction to increase women's representation at Westminster. They need the courage to go all the way in both the Upper and Lower Chambers.

The big challenge (and my question) is—do Party Leaders have the political commitment and courage to deliver equality for women in Parliament and a more democratic political system?

David Cameron’s first promise when he became Conservative Party Leader was to increase the number of Tory women from the current 17 MPs out of 180 Conservative MPs. Conservative Party Chair Teresa May has been touring the country working hard to carry out her Leader’s pledge but at the current rate of candidate selection even a major swing to Conservatives would most likely result in at the most a handful more Tory women MPs.

Lib Dems slammed the door on equal representation of women and men MPs at a Party Conference a few years ago when they voted against introducing gender-balanced quotas into their candidate selection system, despite the open advocacy of almost every senior Party member, including Shirley Williams and the then-Leader. To try to compensate for this set-back a few Party activists upped the amount of training and encouragement for women budding politicians and targeted extra cash and resources at constituencies with female candidates. The results have not been encouraging. Out of the present 63 Lib Dem MPs, nine are women. At the next General Election Liberal Democrats are likely to deliver little or no increase in women— given a fair wind they might increase their number of female MPs by a couple to 10 or 11.

Transform and Reform

Even beyond the quest for justice and fairness for women, the purpose of increasing women’s participation in politics is not simply to increase numbers. It is also to support the creation of a new democratic agenda in politics that changes the lives of all people for the better.

UK and the world faces daunting challenges: climatic changes, terrorism, a
resurgence of racism, sex trafficking (now estimated to be the fourth-largest "industry" in the world), growing unemployment, wars and endless conflicts,. If we are going to overcome these challenges, our future leaders need to be chosen from the full pool of talent—women as well as men.

See also Guardian Comment is Free
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jul/07/women

Sources for further information on quotas

The International IDEA and Stockholm University Global Database of Quotas for Women. This web site gives a global overview over the use of electoral quotas for women. From this website it is possible to see how many countries have adopted constitutional quotas, legislative quotas and quotas adopted by one or more political parties in a specific country.

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