Written submission from HM Government (WHC0073)

The Government welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry into women in the House of Commons. The diversity of representation in the Houses of Parliament is an important matter and the Government looks forward to hearing the Committee’s findings and report. This submission addresses aspects of the terms of reference relating to the boundaries review, and the Good Parliament report from Professor Childs.

Boundary Commission Review

Legislation passed by both Houses in the last Parliament enables a reduction in the number of UK constituencies from 650 to 600, with each constituency having an electorate of a more equal size. The current boundary review under these new rules was launched on 24 February 2016 and must report to Parliament by 1 October 2018. The drawing of the new constituency boundaries will be a matter for each of the four independent Boundary Commissions.

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland published its provisional proposals on 6 September. The Boundary Commissions for England and for Wales each published initial proposals on 13 September 2016 and the Commission for Scotland has stated that it will publish its proposals later in 2016. There is opportunity for members of the public to comment on each Commission’s proposals, once they are published and to suggest attentive boundaries.

The Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 (as amended) sets out the factors that the Boundary Commissions can take into account when determining the boundaries of constituencies in their reviews (subject to the overriding principle of equality in constituency size), which includes the boundaries of existing constituencies under the 1986 Act. The Boundary Commissions have indicated that existing voting patterns and the prospective fortunes of political parties and their candidates should not enter their considerations during a review.

Equalising the size of constituencies in the Boundary Review will ensure everyone’s vote will carry equal weight. Without such boundary reforms, MPs could end up representing constituencies based on data that is over 20 years old, disregarding significant changes in demographics, house building and migration. As it stands, some constituencies have twice as many electors than others and the Government believes that this cannot be right.

Each constituent part of the United Kingdom will be treated equally. The appointment of candidates to contest these new seats will be a matter for political parties. It will ultimately be the decision of local voters to decide who best to represent them in the new constituencies, depending on the merits and policies of the individual candidates and parties. The Government does not believe there is an inherent or structural reason why improving female representation in the House of Commons should be hindered by updating Parliamentary boundaries.

Professor Childs’ report The Good Parliament

The Government has noted Professor Childs’ report and the extensive work that she has done in this area. The report includes forty-three recommendations for a wide range of stakeholders.

The Government looks forward to working with the Commons Reference Group, along with the House authorities and the House of Commons Commission on reviewing the
recommendations contained in the report. There will be some proposals that the Government may not wish to support – such as abolishing the party conference recess.

The Government is carefully considering the specific recommendations to the Leader of the House. We are minded to support making the Women and Equalities Committee a permanent Select Committee as part of the package of Standing Order changes that will be brought before the House in the near future.

If the Houses approve the Restoration and Renewal project, the Government will consider the recommendations to the responsible Restoration and Renewal body as appropriate. We expect any recommendations to the new Restoration and Renewal body to be considered by the House in light of the publication of the Joint Committee's report in recent weeks, and the next phase of this project.

The Government considers that it is primarily for political parties to ensure more diverse representation (including that of women) in the House of Commons through their selection of candidates.

UK political parties have operated a range of different equality strategies. A number of parties provide specific training for women candidates. The written evidence from Conservative Campaign Headquarters outlines the stance of the Conservative Party (as the governing party of this Government) in more detail.

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