Written submission from Helen Belcher (WHC0077)

1 Introduction

1.1 The Committee is currently conducting an inquiry entitled “Women in the House of Commons”. I make this submission to that inquiry because of remarks made in the public session of the committee on 12 October 2016.

1.2 I welcome the committee’s inquiry. The number of women who have been MPs since women first gained the right to sit in the House of Commons is woefully small compared to the number of men elected during the same period. Although recently the proportion of women has increased, it is still nowhere near the proportion of women in the electorate.

1.3 At the Liberal Democrat spring conference in March 2016, the party adopted a motion to use All Women Shortlists in some of its target seats. I spoke in favour of the motion at that conference.

1.4 I was selected unanimously as the Liberal Democrat prospective parliamentary candidate for the Chippenham constituency on 16 July 2016. This position automatically expires, as do all other current Liberal Democrat PPC appointments, at the end of May 2017 if no general election has been called by that date, as Tim Farron MP made clear in his reply to Q87.

1.5 I should make clear that Chippenham was not a seat where an All Women Shortlist was used, nor indeed any other form of incentive to select a candidate from an under-represented group.

1.6 While different members of the committee will have different views on this, and the current political situation makes any kind of prediction extremely difficult indeed, the fact that the Liberal Democrats held Chippenham between 2010 and 2015 means that it is entirely possible that I could be elected as Chippenham’s MP at the next parliamentary election.

1.7 The committee will know me as a campaigner for the rights of trans and intersex people. I appeared before the committee at its first ever hearing on 8 September 2015, where I gave evidence about how trans and intersex people have been treated by the British media.

1.8 It is no secret that I am a woman with a trans history, and that I have campaigned for the rights of trans and intersex people for many years. I am currently a trustee of Trans Media Watch, a charity I helped found in 2010, a trustee of the LGBT Consortium, a member of Stonewall’s Trans Advisory Group and the secretary of the informal Parliamentary Forum on Gender Identity.

1.9 While there have been trans candidates for parliament before – four openly trans candidates stood in the May 2015 general election – it is probably fair to say that I am the first openly trans person who has a realistic chance of being elected to the House of Commons.
Untrue Allegation of Deselection

2.1 At the Committee’s hearing on 12 October 2016, Ben Howlett MP asked a series of questions of Tim Farron MP, the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

2.2 The formal transcript of the session records Ben Howlett MP as asking Q84, “How can we trust the Liberal Democrats to promote equality of opportunity when, ultimately, I am facing that, when the LGBT community is facing that, and also when your transgender Member of Parliament for Chippenham, who is a woman at the moment, is currently facing deselection because she is ‘a bit freaky’?”

2.3 The latter part of the question is a clear reference to me.

2.4 In correspondence which has followed between me and the chair of the committee, she stated that, as Chair, she would always want to ensure individuals knew in advance and had agreed to being referred to in an evidence session. No such approach was made to me.

2.5 Sadly, I am not currently the member of parliament for Chippenham. That honour is held by the Conservative Michelle Donelan MP. I understand she is not transgender nor a Liberal Democrat.

2.6 I state categorically that I am not facing deselection for any reason. No approach has been made to any member of the local party’s executive committee to initiate any such process, and I am not aware of any discussions between local party members on that matter either.

2.7 As stated in 1.2 above, my selection as PPC for Chippenham automatically expires at the end of May 2017. I have stated a desire to the constituency party to apply to be their PPC again when selections reopen at some point later in 2017. To date I have received nothing but support for that proposal.

2.8 The Liberal Democrat party in Chippenham currently has around 350 members. Since July I have met a large number of them. To date not one member has referred to me as “a bit freaky”, either to my face or in conversation with constituency executive members.

2.9 To suggest that I am currently facing deselection because I am “a bit freaky” is totally untrue, and actually a slur on the character of the local party.

2.10 The local party has put out a press release denying this allegation in the strongest possible terms. I understand that the chair of the local party has written to Rt Hon Mr Speaker MP on the basis that Ben Howlett MP has misled Parliament in this matter.

2.11 Given this allegation was made in a televised hearing of the committee, I would strongly suggest that any correction of the record needs to be given the same prominence.

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2 Earlier Ben Howlett MP had made some serious allegations about how his Liberal Democrat opponents in Kingston and Bath had made disparaging comments about the Conservative candidates being gay. I do not know whether those allegations have any truth in them or not.
“A woman at the moment”

3.1. I helped write the evidence submitted by Trans Media Watch to your initial inquiry on trans rights.

3.2. Clause 2.13 of that evidence states that “Language is still a problem. We have published guidance on our website for a number of years, and the PCC made rulings about what language is and isn’t appropriate”. Clause 2.14 states “The implication of this practice, as we noted in our Leveson submission, is that trans people are not really who we say we are.”

3.3. While the clauses in the Trans Media Watch evidence refers primarily to media coverage of trans people, such problematic use of language permeates everyday culture.

3.4. I have met Ben Howlett MP on at least two occasions – once at the initial inquiry hearing, and once at a parliamentary reception. At the reception he made it clear that he knew exactly who I was.

3.5. For him to refer to me as “a woman at the moment” places my identity as something which is transitory or illusory – that I may decide at some point in the future, near or far, not to “be a woman”, and that any reference to me as being a woman is made out of politeness rather than recognising reality. I need not spell out to the committee just how damaging such language can be. The committee heard plenty of evidence in their initial inquiry describing the consequences of those perceptions for trans people.

3.6. Given that Ben Howlett MP made much, quite rightly, of his championing of Tara Hudson, a trans woman who was incarcerated within the male prison estate in November 2015, his use of such language in the October 2016 hearing could be interpreted as him not being as strong an ally to the trans communities as he appeared keen to portray.

3.7. I can confirm that my identity as a woman is solid, and that I have absolutely no plans or desire to not “be a woman”.

3.8. Clause 2.15 of the Trans Media Watch evidence to your committee states “We recognise use of problematic language and historic references is often a result of ignorance and practice rather than intending any malice.” I would appreciate clarity from Ben Howlett MP as to how we should understand the use of the words “a woman at the moment” in his reference to me.

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