Written submission from the SNP (WHC0079)

This submission is a response to the call for evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee’s inquiry on the Women in the House of Commons.

The Boundary Review
The SNP would like to clearly put on the record that we find it utterly shameful that there now more Parliamentarians appointed by a Prime Minister than elected by the people. We are pleased that the terms of reference for the committee inquiry include the objective to review the expected impact of the Boundary Review, as we are anxious that the review will have a negative effect on female and minority representation in the House of Commons.

We expect the impact of the boundary review to make matters worse if this Government pursues its plans to reduce the number of MPs while continuing to increase the number of unelected Lords. The SNP continues to call on the UK Government to abandon their plans to cut the number of MPs until the issue of the undemocratic House of Lords is addressed.

We are deeply concerned that of the 650 seats in the House of Commons, men hold 458 (70%) and women only 192 (30%) and believe that this will fall behind even further, if the total number of seats reduces to 600 in the 2020 Parliament.

Furthermore, the unique circumstances for Scotland must be taken into account by the UK Government before any changes are made. There is a critical importance to make sure rural constituencies with their unique challenges get good representation regardless of how few people are living there. So, merging existing Highland constituencies, for example, is not the best way to ensure that regional differences are best represented at Westminster.

Enhancing Women’s Representation in Parliament
The SNP are committed to advancing the role of women in public life and continue to work as a party to encourage talented women into political representation. We recognise that as a Party we have a responsibility to attract women and support women into politics.

We are committed to ensuring that the SNP’s processes work to foster women’s representation in Parliament. While we do not have official shortlists we have taken significant steps to increase the role of women in public life. At Spring Conference in March 2015, the SNP passed a new mechanism to help encourage more women to stand as candidates in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election. That is, where any incumbent SNP constituency MSP announces their intention to stand down, the National Executive Committee may direct that an all-women shortlist should be submitted by the Constituency Branch or Association.

In any constituency where more than one candidate is nominated, at least one of those candidates must be female. The National Executive Committee will have authority to add candidates to shortlists to achieve this. The National Executive Committee may take steps to balance the number of male and female candidates being submitted for regional list rankings, and will have authority to nominate additional candidates to achieve this.

Due to this mechanism, 43 per cent of SNP MSPs elected were women, an increase from the 2011 term.
At the SNP’s National Council in May 2016, new rules were agreed for the 2017 Local Government elections. These rules will require both women-only and open shortlists in seats where the Party is standing more candidates than sitting councillors. In a ward where the party has one sitting councillor and stands two candidates, at least one of the candidates will be required to be a woman.

Our mechanisms are working as we have stronger than ever gender balance credentials. At Holyrood the number of women SNP MSPs has risen from 19 in 2011, to 27 in 2016 – this is a rise from 27.5% to 43% of our Holyrood group. At Westminster the number of women SNP MPs rose from 1 in 6 in 2010 to 20 of 56 in 2015.

While we accept there is more to be done, we are firm that we are moving in the right direction.

The SNP also have a National Women’s and Equalities Convener (NWEC) who is responsible for the development, implementation and monitoring of equality strategies. The NWEC also supports constituency and branch women’s officers and chairs the SNP Women’s Academy, while advising on equality issues relating to internal procedures, such as vetting and selection. There have been several successful Women’s Conferences, bringing women together to share ideas, support each other and learn from best practice across the country.

The Scottish Government also has a 50:50 gender balanced cabinet which is a clear demonstration that the SNP Government will work hard in all areas to promote women, to create gender equality. Our First Minster Nicola Sturgeon continues to lead by an example and has ensured that the SNP Scottish Government continues to send out a strong message that the business of redressing the gender balance in public life starts by setting an example in Government.

The SNP also have 50:50 gender balance of senior policy leads in the Westminster group. This means we have female role models leading in the chamber and also in media. We believe that it is important to ensure that the strength of female politicians is highlighted through responsible reporting and equal airtime.

The Good Parliament Report
The Good Parliament report makes 43 recommendations, which aim to transform who sits in the House of Commons, significantly enhance the effectiveness of Members of Parliament, improve the quality of parliamentary outcomes, and ultimately raise the public’s regard for the House of Commons. The report concluded that Westminster remains disproportionately white, male and elite.

The SNP believe this report is an extremely important step in recognising that progress for women, families and minority groups in Westminster remains stagnant and disappointing.

It is very encouraging that the Speaker’s office have begun to act on the recommendations of the report, by setting up The Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion to lead the reform agenda. We are aware there have been plans for this group to meet up after the summer recess and look forward to hearing more about its work. We hope that the UK Government take this report very seriously and make a firm commitment to setting out an agenda to make the Parliament more representative.

Family Friendly Parliament
In Scotland, the Scottish Parliament from the outset made clear its commitment to inclusive and family friendly workplace practises with key principles of accessibility, participation and equal opportunities. In its planning phase, best practises from Parliaments across Europe were drawn upon to ensure that the establishment of this new legislature could learn from both some of the mistakes and the successes of other
legislatures, including Westminster. There was a firm understanding that Holyrood would not simply be ‘a Westminster in the North’.

The SNP believe strongly that Westminster could certainly learn from the example of the Scottish Parliament. Its Corporate Body has set out a number of inclusive work practises, which include a clear leadership commitment to diversity and inclusion and a focus on creating a diverse workforce which reflects the population of Scotland.

The Scottish Parliament also has a crèche for young children, which is available to both pass holders and visitors. In order to break down any barriers for parents with young children, the Scottish Parliament prides itself on being a family-friendly work environment with sitting hours finishing at 5pm, so that MSPs and staff do not have to stay on late into the evening – unlike in Westminster, when sitting hours can run to 1am without warning.

The SNP continue to argue that the archaic voting procedure of going into lobbies, meaning one vote can take up to 15 minutes in an evening when there may be three or four votes, continues to build barriers to parents accessing politics as they feel they have to choose between work or their family commitment. In the Scottish Parliament, the electronic voting system means each vote takes a matter of seconds.

Gender Equality

The SNP recognise that the challenges that are present for women accessing public life are also present in other work places and industry. The SNP Government in Scotland has put parents and families at the heart of key infrastructural commitments over the next Parliament, including supporting women who want to work. In 2017-18, the Scottish Government will begin the expansion of early learning and childcare and nursery capacity across Scotland, almost doubling the number of hours available for three and four year olds, and those two year olds who will benefit most, by 2020. This will support parents who want to go back to work.

Many women struggle to get back into work due to a lack of access to flexible working that allows them support care commitments. They can lose confidence and relevant skills after being out of the workforce especially, in the science and technology sectors where technology has moved on at a rapid pace. This is why in July this year a trail project was announced to help bring experienced women back into the workplace after a career break. The project will support employers to help women update their skills and knowledge.

In Scotland, the SNP Government are taking decisive action to ensure women are represented in senior and decision making roles, including in the boardroom. Our Government has also committed to legislate for gender balance on public sector boards in the first year of this Parliament. Using the new powers transferred through the Scotland Act, the Bill will lock in the gains we have already made to improve the number of women on public boards.

The SNP will continue to champion our Partnership for Change 50/50 by 2020 campaign, encouraging organisations and businesses from the private, third and public sectors to make a voluntary commitment to work towards gender balance on their boards by 2020.

A Parliament that works for everyone
The SNP are committed to enhancing equality for all, delivering a fairer Scotland and an inclusive Scotland. To do that everyone, every voice, must have adequate representation.

The SNP is proud that we have representatives of the LGBT community across our party. In the Westminster group we have eight MPs who are from the LGBT Community meaning that 16% of those MPs we had newly elected in 2015 are openly LGBT. On LGBTI equality, Scotland is rated the best country in Europe. This is welcome recognition for the progress we are making to ensure Scotland is a fair and equal country for everyone.

We continue to work to deliver fairer representation by working to include those from BME communities also. The SNP MP Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh is the first female BME MP for a Scottish constituency ever. In 2011 Humza Yousaf was elected for the SNP and is the first Scottish Government BME Minister. While we know there is much more to do, the SNP remain committed to tackling inequalities at all levels, breaking the barriers for any individual regardless of their ethnicity, socioeconomic background or their gender to make all legislative chambers more representative of Scottish society.

European Union
The SNP would like to reiterate that we believe leaving the European Union would be a significant setback for equality. European law currently provides a robust framework of guarantees, through the prohibition of discrimination in a range of areas.

The SNP remains committed to doing all that we can with the powers that we have to maintain these protections and continue to advance equality and equality of opportunity in Scotland.

Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry
The SNP welcome the inquiry by the committee and support its aims. The SNP Westminster Group Leader Angus Robertson MP gave oral evidence to the committee and set out his commitment for the party to work constructively with the inquiry.

The SNP look forward to the report from the inquiry and will look very carefully at its recommendations.

We remain committed to advancing the role of women’s representation in the House of Commons and hope that this submission clearly states our position.

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