Increasing female representation

In Spring 2016 the Liberal Democrats passed the ‘Electing Diverse MPs’ motion aimed at improving the diversity of our party’s elected members at future elections, using the Equality Act Guidance to Political Parties.

To improve the recruitment of candidates from under-represented groups, the motion also created a 2020 Candidate Diversity Task Force to coordinate party-wide efforts and introduced other measures to promote and encourage female representation. The Party Leader and President have appointed a Candidate Diversity Champion to lead this work.

Amongst the measures adopted to improve the diversity of candidates at the seat selection stage, we have:

- introduced All Women Shortlists for the first time, in a limited and targeted way to ensure the selection of women in some of our most winnable seats,
- enabled all seats to choose to use All Disabled Shortlists, meaning that the Liberal Democrats are the first political party in Britain to introduce all-disabled shortlisting, and
- reserved spaces on shortlists in other target seats for people from other underrepresented groups, including black, Asian and ethnic minorities, disabled and LGBT+.

In addition, we will also now require all seats where the Liberal Democrats polled 15% or more in the 2015 General Election, to prove that they have taken serious steps to attract and search for potential candidates from underrepresented groups before the start their formal selection processes. This has worked well for the Canadian Liberal party. Across all seats we hope to meet the ambition I set of having at least 50% women candidates and at least 10% BAME candidates across Great Britain.

We recognise that because of the 2015 General Election results our party’s MPs lack diversity. We had several initiatives in place to ensure diversity amongst our parliamentarians, for example the Leadership Programme launched in 2010 provided mentoring, training and support to top tier candidates from under represented groups, and reserved places on short lists for them. The result of this was that we had an excellent number of women to standing in the seats where the incumbent was stepping down; however, with these mechanisms were not robust enough to withstand the electoral result.

Political parties, like businesses, must take proactive measures to address inequalities and prejudices wherever they find them and we are committed to doing so. However, it is widely recognised that political systems that combine proportional representation with positive action are far more likely to be able to increase representation of women, it is harder for countries that use majoritarian systems. This is not a silver bullet but there is strong evidence to show that First Past the Post clearly disadvantages female candidates and it is time to revisit and reform this archaic system.
It is also why our Party resolved, through the Electing Diverse MPs motion, to campaign for all-LGBT+ and all-BAME shortlists to be permitted. We trust that we will have the support of this committee for this initiative.

Changes to Parliament

Political parties have an instrumental role to play in increasing female representation in the House of Commons; however, we must not forget that the House of Commons is not a normal workplace and as the Good Parliament report states “Parliament's working practices still reflect the traditions and preferences of those who historically populated it.” It was a Liberal Democrat, for example, in the last Parliament who became the first to take a baby through the lobby when voting. The Liberal Democrats fully endorse the recommendations made by Professor Sarah Childs in her report to ensure that Parliament itself becomes more inclusive.

We will work across parties and with the Speaker’s office and all those involved to ensure that the recommendations are implemented and a real change of culture as well as practice takes place.

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