Written submission from the Green Party (WHC0085)

Background

The Green Party have made many efforts over the last decade to increase the number of our women candidates at both General Elections and in other elections, including local elections.

For example, in Autumn 2012 we introduced a rule that we would aim for ‘at least 50% women candidates in General Elections and PR elections such as the Euros.’ Although we don’t have women only short lists, many regions choose to zip their MEP lists.

In Spring 2013 we also brought forward a rule which states that if no woman comes forward during the selection process for a constituency, the nominations have to be re-opened for a further two weeks to allow a woman to come forward. This time is used to try to encourage more women to stand.

These measures, amongst others, saw us achieve 38% women candidates in the 2015 General Election. This was a figure that put us ahead of other political parties but you will note that we were still some way off our ‘at least 50% women’ target.

Another way we have tried to raise the numbers of female MPs is by calling for the role to be open to job-sharing. In 2015, having been denied the right to stand for election as job-share candidates, I (Sarah Cope, the mother of two children with autism) and fellow Green Party member Clare Phipps (who has a disability) took our case to the High Court, seeking a Judicial Review.

Our argument was that job-sharing would open up the role of MP to a much wider group of people, particularly women with caring responsibilities, but also those with disabilities.

Although our bid to have a Judicial Review was not successful, the case brought much attention to the idea, and the Judge in the case, Mr Justice Wilkie, said that it was clearly an idea that wouldn’t go away, effectively handing the issue back to Parliament.

We therefore believe that an important step that needs to be taken is to introduce job-sharing for MPs who wish to work in this way. This way of working has already benefitted many in both the public and private sectors. Indeed, research shows that job-sharing is advantageous not only for the job sharers themselves, but for the companies and organisations that they work for.

The 2018 Boundary Commission Review

We have concerns that fewer Parliamentary seats will mean fewer female candidates and therefore less female MPs. Although the Green Party doesn’t currently operate an ‘All-Female Shortlists’ policy, due to the fact that it would be
difficult to implement when local parties have sovereignty, we broadly welcome the measure as taken by other parties, notably Labour, and wonder whether these would be less likely to operate in a situation where there are markedly less constituencies.

The awful death of Jo Cox has shown how vulnerable MPs are and we know that women are particularly targeted online by trolls, including with rape threats. This is hardly going to be a job that is attractive to the majority of women. The proposed changes to the boundaries will mean a larger caseload as well, which is of course another good reason for allowing MPs to job-share.

In addition to the changes to constituency boundaries, the changes in the way voters are registered has seen lots of women and young people ‘fall off’ the electoral roll. This has worrying implications in terms of women’s involvement in politics, in terms of both the levels at which they may choose to vote and how much they will engage in political life more widely.

Female Representation at other levels of Political Life

We have 164 councillors in principle authorities in England and Wales; 54 of those are women. That’s 33% and it has been at the same level for years. One problem we have is that fighting a lonely election campaign in an isolated area with a small local party is probably an activity that’s orientated towards men - for example there are at least perceived personal safety concerns, and childcare implications to spending three hours a day knocking on strangers’ doors. First past the post is also an obstacle to fairer representation.

In terms of concrete measures that have been put in place in order to ensure we get more women elected as councillors, the national party has rules in place to try to help ensure that we have a high proportion of women candidates in General Elections, as outlined above, but local parties are sovereign so do not have to adopt these same targets.

However, some local parties, such as in Brighton and Hove and Bristol, have adopted these rules voluntarily for the selection of candidates for local elections. Furthermore, several local parties run their own training schemes for prospective councils. For example, the Rising Stars scheme in the South East, which has trained men and women in equal numbers, equipping them with the skills they will need to be excellent local councillors.

Retention of Women MPs

Since we only have one MP – who happens to be a woman – we haven’t had to address the issue of retention thus far! However, this hopefully will not be the case for much longer as we look to expand the number of MPs we have in Westminster in 2020.

If we look at the situation with local representation, many of us feel it would be good to speak to former women councillors who have perhaps stood down after
one term, to ask what made them decide not to stand again. Being a councillor of course puts people in a highly patriarchal environment. That’s an issue for councils and politics in general but it’s especially difficult for small parties where most Green Party councillors are in groups of one or two without much support.

Another issue to address in terms of the representation of women is that the House of Commons is currently an outmoded institution, something the 2015 intake of SNP MPs have been keen to point out. Why, they have asked, is clapping not allowed, but bleating like a tortured sheep is?

Green MP Caroline Lucas reports how, when women get up to speak, particularly in the hectoring atmosphere of Prime Minister’s Question Time, male MPs have been seen to make unpleasant, sexist gestures. This isn’t the sort of behaviour that is acceptable in UK workplaces generally, so why is it seen as acceptable in parliament?

There’s a massive opportunity to reform parliament due to the fact that the Palace of Westminster is currently crumbling before our eyes – perhaps both symbolically and literally. The roofs are leaking, gutters and internal plumbing regularly fail, and there has been extensive damage to the Pugin-designed interiors. There is also asbestos throughout the building.

If MPs do not move out whilst the improvement works take place they are estimated to take 40 years and will cost the tax payer £7.1 billion.

However, if parliament moves out, we’re looking at 6 years and a reduced cost of £3.9 billion – still rather a substantial amount, but rather a lot less.

So let’s see a move out of the Palace of Westminster, away from those austere, windowless corridors and that hostile adversarial chamber, and into a better designed, airy space fit for the 21st century, and for the supposed mother of all parliaments. Somewhere people – yes, women too, most importantly – would actually want to work.

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