



House of Commons

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# Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)

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**Interim Report**

*Report, together with formal minutes*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 14 July 2009*

**HC 167-I**

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## Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)

On 12 November 2008 the House of Commons agreed to establish a new committee, to be chaired by the Speaker and known as the Speaker's Conference.

The Conference has been asked to: "Consider, and make recommendations for rectifying, the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large". It may also agree to consider other associated matters.

The Speaker's Conference has until the end of the Parliament to conduct its inquiries.

### Current membership

Under the leadership of the Speaker, Rt Hon John Bercow MP, the membership of the Conference is:

Miss Anne Begg MP (*Labour, Aberdeen South*) (Vice-Chairman)  
Ms Diane Abbott MP (*Labour, Hackney North & Stoke Newington*)  
Mr David Blunkett MP (*Labour, Sheffield, Brightside*)  
Angela Browning MP (*Conservative, Tiverton & Honiton*)  
Mr Ronnie Campbell MP (*Labour, Blyth Valley*)  
Mrs Ann Cryer MP (*Labour, Keighley*)  
Mr Parmjit Dhanda MP (*Labour, Gloucester*)  
Andrew George MP (*Liberal Democrat, St Ives*)  
Miss Julie Kirkbride MP (*Conservative, Bromsgrove*)  
Dr William McCrea MP (*Democratic Unionist, South Antrim*)  
David Maclean MP (*Conservative, Penrith & The Border*)  
Fiona Mactaggart MP (*Labour, Slough*)  
Mr Khalid Mahmood MP (*Labour, Birmingham Perry Barr*)  
Anne Main MP (*Conservative, St Albans*)  
Jo Swinson MP (*Liberal Democrat, East Dunbartonshire*)  
Mrs Betty Williams MP (*Labour, Conwy*)

### Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Speaker's Conference are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Conference (including press notices) are on the Internet at [www.parliament.uk/speakersconference](http://www.parliament.uk/speakersconference)

### Conference staff

The current staff of the Conference are Mrs Elizabeth Hunt (Joint Secretary), Mr Paul Zimmermann (Joint Secretary), Mr Philip Aylett (Adviser), Ms Laura Kibby (Media Officer), Miss Emma Sawyer (Senior Committee Assistant) and Mr Ian Blair (Committee Assistant).

### Specialist Advisers

The following were appointed as Specialist Advisers to the Conference: Dr Sarah Childs (University of Bristol), Lorraine Gradwell MBE (Chief Executive, Breakthrough UK), Professor Shamit Saggar (University of Sussex) and Professor Paul Whiteley (University of Essex).

## **Contacts**

All correspondence should be addressed to the Joint Secretaries of the Speaker's Conference, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 0654; the Conference's email address is [spconference@parliament.uk](mailto:spconference@parliament.uk)

# Contents

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<b>Report</b>	<i>Page</i>
<b>Summary of Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>7</b>
Introduction	9
The current state of representation	9
Why should the make-up of the House of Commons reflect the make-up of wider society?	9
Why should we act now?	10
The current opportunity for change	11
<b>Formal Minutes</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Witnesses</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>List of written evidence</b>	<b>17</b>

## Summary of Conclusions and recommendations

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1. In recent weeks we have experienced unprecedented public anger in relation to the publication of Members' allowances. Trust in politicians and political parties has slumped. Data taken from the British Election Study survey for May 2009 indicates that when participants were asked to rate their trust in the political parties on a scale of 0 to 10, 85.8% gave a rating between 0 and 5; 91.6% gave a rating between 0 and 5 for their trust in politicians. Nearly a quarter (23.8%) said they had no trust at all in political parties and nearly a third (30.7%) said they had no trust at all in politicians.
2. This is a matter of urgent concern. There is a real danger that in this furore people have lost sight of the importance of democracy. All of us now should take a step back and consider the fundamental value and importance of Parliament. Without it, our democracy would simply not function.
3. We believe that the House of Commons needs to change. Increasing the diversity of MPs would make it a more just, legitimate and effective legislature. We believe that in the public's eyes this would make it a more credible legislature. There is now a significant opportunity to make this change happen, as current Members of the House announce their intentions to retire before the next general election – to be held before June 2010.
4. Leadership will be required within the political parties nationally, regionally and locally to ensure that the current round of selections for vacant seats results in a diverse list of candidates.
5. Putting forward candidates from under-represented groups is a very practical way for the 'selectorates' within the parties – those who choose the candidates to go forward for election – to show that they sincerely wish to change the culture of politics.
6. The choices which local, regional and national political parties make in regard to the candidates who will represent them will be central to shaping what the next House of Commons looks like, and in determining the extent to which it is genuinely changed. We call upon all those involved in the selection process to consider both the opportunity which is open to them, and the long term consequences of failing to take up these opportunities. The political parties might reflect whether there will be reason for the public to trust the parties and Parliament more if, after the general election, they are apparently presented with more of the same.
7. We recommend that in circumstances where the sitting MP will not contest the general election, each of the political parties should commit itself to:
  - Promote equality by selecting at least 50% women as candidates;
  - Ensure that a significantly greater proportion of candidates than at the 2005 election are selected with BME backgrounds;

- Seek to encourage a wider placement of BME candidates across the country than was present at the 2005 election; and
  - Ensure that a significantly greater proportion of candidates who identify as disabled are selected than at the 2005 election.
8. Additionally, we recommend that each of the political parties should commit itself to:
- report by 12 October 2009 the result of selections by constituency giving the date of selection, the method of selection, the candidate's gender and the candidate's ethnicity and reporting in accordance with candidates' identifications of disability and sexual orientation; and to
  - appoint a named party officer responsible for supporting the access requirements of disabled candidates.

## Introduction

1. The House of Commons exists to formulate and review the laws which govern our society. It can only do this effectively if its Members are in tune with the experiences of the population as a whole. The House will respond well to the wants and needs of the country if, in itself, it reflects the diversity of people's lives.

2. Yet despite recent changes, MPs remain predominantly white, male, middle-aged and middle class. Many people will look at MPs in the Commons debating chamber and see very few Members who look as if they have lived a similar life or who can speak for them with the authority of shared experience. Fairly or unfairly, the public generally continues to see Parliament as removed from the daily reality of their lives.

### *The current state of representation*

3. At present, the House of Commons does not reflect the fact that, in society at large, there are more women than men, approximately 1 in 5 people are disabled<sup>1</sup> and 7.9% of the population come from black and minority ethnic backgrounds<sup>2</sup>. The proportion of the population which is lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) is not currently monitored, but official and third sector estimates for the lesbian, gay and bisexual population put the proportion at 6 to 9%.<sup>3</sup>

### Why should the make-up of the House of Commons reflect the make-up of wider society?

4. There are three main reasons why the House of Commons should better reflect the social characteristics of our society.

5. The first, and most important, reason is the concept of **justice**: the representative body of our society should have a place within it for all sections of society.

6. The second reason is **effectiveness**. As we have stated, the House of Commons will work most effectively if it holds within its membership the same diversity of life experiences as are present in wider society. This means not only representing people by constituency but also reflecting the diversity of people's lives in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age and social class.<sup>4</sup>

7. The third reason is to enhance Parliament's **legitimacy** as an institution. Even when legislators do a good job in representing the breadth and depth of their constituents' concerns, the absence of a wide cross-section of society in the House of Commons means that it suffers from a lack of legitimacy. If, in these circumstances, it appears to disregard the needs and concerns of specific groups – perhaps through ignorance, inattention or a

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.odi.gov.uk/docs/res/factsheets/Factsheet\\_CivicParticipation.rtf](http://www.odi.gov.uk/docs/res/factsheets/Factsheet_CivicParticipation.rtf) : the figure refers to Great Britain.

<sup>2</sup> [www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=273](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=273)

<sup>3</sup> Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) Session 2008-09 Volume II, HC167-II, Ev 80

<sup>4</sup> Ev p188

collective failure of the imagination – its decisions and actions may be considered less legitimate than they would otherwise be.

8. These principles are supported by evidence both from the UK and from other countries which suggests that socially diverse parliaments establish different priorities for Government action. In the UK the Hansard Society points to the fact that after 1997, when the percentage of women in the House of Commons rose from 9% to 18% of the total membership, legislation was enacted on the minimum wage, family-friendly flexible working and violence against women.<sup>5</sup> There has also been progress in terms of the way in which the House conducts its business. Many Members claim that the culture, style and atmosphere of the House of Commons has changed; many women supported the partial reform of Parliament's working hours to bring them more closely in to line with other workplaces.<sup>6</sup>

9. The increase in women's representation in 1997 – when the numbers of women doubled overnight from 60 to 120 – did not happen purely by chance. A small number of the women who stood as Labour candidates in that election were selected by constituencies from all-women shortlists. Following the enactment of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which permits the use of various mechanisms designed to reduce the inequality in the numbers of women and men selected by a political party, all-women shortlists were used again by the Labour party in 2005 and will be used for the forthcoming General Election. While such measures remain contentious it is clear that using them in 1997 helped to make the 1997 Parliament very different from its predecessors. All of the main political parties agree that Parliament should be more diverse. All have taken some measures to support their commitment to greater diversity and openness in public life. Where the parties have taken specific action, the diversity of their candidates has improved.

### Why should we act now?

**10. In recent weeks we have experienced unprecedented public anger in relation to the publication of Members' allowances. Trust in politicians and political parties has slumped. Data taken from the British Election Study survey for May 2009 indicates that when participants were asked to rate their trust in the political parties on a scale of 0 to 10, 85.8% gave a rating between 0 and 5; 91.6% gave a rating between 0 and 5 for their trust in politicians. Nearly a quarter (23.8%) said they had no trust at all in political parties and nearly a third (30.7%) said they had no trust at all in politicians. This contrasts with the ratings which participants gave to their trust in people in general: 37% gave a rating between 0 and 5 and only 2.2% said that they had no trust in people at all.<sup>7</sup>**

**11. This is a matter of urgent concern. There is a real danger that in this furore people have lost sight of the importance of democracy. All of us now should take a step back**

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<sup>5</sup> *Women at the Top 2005: Changing numbers, changing politics?* Sarah Childs, Joni Lovenduski and Rosie Campbell, The Hansard Society 2005, pp19, 52

<sup>6</sup> The other UK legislatures at their establishment adopted earlier working hours: for example, Standing Orders 7.8 and 7.9 of the National Assembly for Wales state that business in the Assembly plenary must normally finish no later than 5.30 pm.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/>

**and consider the fundamental value and importance of Parliament. Without it, our democracy would simply not function.**

12. As part of that consideration we should also determine what steps we can now take to transform the House of Commons and reassert its legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness as a representative body. We know that this work will require the commitment of the political parties and the Government to wide-ranging changes; it will require further reform of Parliament's culture and procedures, and of its work of education and outreach. These are matters for the longer term, which we shall deal with in our full report towards the end of 2009. There is, however, also an immediate opportunity for change.

### **The current opportunity for change**

**13. We believe that the House of Commons needs to change. Increasing the diversity of MPs would make it a more just, legitimate and effective legislature. We believe that in the public's eyes this would make it a more credible legislature. There is now a significant opportunity to make this change happen, as current Members of the House announce their intentions to retire before the next general election – to be held before June 2010.**

14. To date, 89 Members have declared their intention to stand down at the general election – approximately 13.8% of the total Commons membership. Prospective parliamentary candidates from the same parties have been chosen for 49 of these seats, leaving 40 – equivalent to 6.2% of the total Commons membership – still to be selected. The number of potential candidates is further increased as individuals come forward from parties challenging in these seats.

**15. Leadership will be required within the political parties nationally, regionally and locally to ensure that the current round of selections for vacant seats results in a diverse list of candidates.** The evidence we have taken indicates clearly that:

- The local constituency selection process for parliamentary candidates is a key point at which individuals from under-represented groups can gain, or be denied, a real opportunity to enter Parliament;
- A major barrier to the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people is the reluctance of political parties to nominate them to seats which the party either holds, or has a reasonable chance of winning; and
- The rate at which change can be achieved nationally is impeded by the incumbency of Members who may hold a 'safe' seat – that is, a seat which the political party would normally expect to retain – for 15 or 20 years. During this time there is effectively no competition in the seat and no opportunity for other candidates to be considered.

16. If just half of the vacant and winnable seats we have highlighted as likely to arise before the next election should be filled by individuals from under-represented groups the result would be a House of Commons which not only looks different but is likely to think differently, speak differently, and bring to its work the lived experience of a much greater proportion of society.

17. We are confident from the extensive evidence we have taken that such a House of Commons would have a fresh approach to the problems the country faces. We think that this is a goal which all the political parties, and all those who care about just representation and therefore the health of our democracy, should share. **Putting forward candidates from under-represented groups is a very practical way for the 'selectorates' within the parties – those who choose the candidates to go forward for election – to show that they sincerely wish to change the culture of politics** and to show their support for the revitalisation of Parliament.

18. This is an important window of opportunity. If a more diverse group of candidates is not selected in these seats now the incumbency factor makes it likely that many of the constituencies concerned will not see another opportunity for change for the next fifteen to twenty years.

19. We believe that there would also be direct benefits for the political parties themselves in approving a greater diversity of candidates. We have been told informally that the message of inclusion is a very powerful one which could help to engage new audiences. The development of closer bonds with communities which are currently disengaged could also in time lead to greater dialogue, more effective policy formulation and the opportunity to rebuild falling party membership numbers.

20. Much work will be done over the next few months by the political parties to identify, assess and approve potential candidates. **The choices which local, regional and national political parties make in regard to the candidates who will represent them will be central to shaping what the next House of Commons looks like, and in determining the extent to which it is genuinely changed. We call upon all those involved in the selection process to consider both the opportunity which is open to them, and the long term consequences of failing to take up these opportunities. The political parties might reflect whether there will be reason for the public to trust the parties and Parliament more if, after the general election, they are apparently presented with more of the same.**

21. We recommend that in circumstances where the sitting MP will not contest the general election, each of the political parties should commit itself to:

- **Promote equality by selecting at least 50% women as candidates;**
- **Ensure that a significantly greater proportion of candidates than at the 2005 election are selected with BME backgrounds;**
- **Seek to encourage a wider placement of BME candidates across the country than was present at the 2005 election; and**
- **Ensure that a significantly greater proportion of candidates who identify as disabled are selected than at the 2005 election.**

22. Additionally, we recommend that each of the political parties should commit itself to:

- **report by 12 October 2009 the result of selections by constituency giving the date of selection, the method of selection, the candidate's gender and the**

**candidate's ethnicity and reporting in accordance with candidates' identifications of disability and sexual orientation; and to**

- **appoint a named party officer responsible for supporting the access requirements of disabled candidates.**

23. We shall continue to monitor the outcome of the parties' selection of their candidates over the coming months before our full report.

# Formal Minutes

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**Tuesday 14 July 2009**

Members present:

Miss Anne Begg, in the Chair

Ms Diane Abbott  
Mr David Blunkett  
Mrs Ann Cryer  
Mr Parmjit Dhanda

David Maclean  
Fiona Mactaggart  
Jo Swinson  
Mrs Betty Williams

Draft Report (*Interim Report*), proposed by the Vice-Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 23 read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Interim Report of the Speaker's Conference to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Vice-Chairman make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 13 October at 10.00 am.]

## Witnesses

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Transcripts of the following oral evidence sessions can be found on the Conference's website [www.parliament.uk/speakersconference](http://www.parliament.uk/speakersconference)

### Tuesday 20 January 2009

**Simon Woolley**, Operation Black Vote

**Liz Sayce**, RADAR

**Fay Mansell**, National Federation of Women's Institutes

### Tuesday 3 March 2009

**Peter Facey** and **Alexandra Runswick**, Unlock Democracy

**Sarah Veale** and **Narmada Thiranagama**, Trades Union Congress

**Trevor Philips**, Equality and Human Rights Commission

### Tuesday 10 March 2009

**Andy Hamflett**, UK Youth Parliament

**Louise Pulford** and **Omar Salem**, The Young Foundation

**Tony Bresling** and **Ade Sofola**, Citizenship Foundation

**Chris Waller**, Association of Citizenship Teaching

**Tom O'Leary** and **Aileen Walker**, House of Commons

### Tuesday 31 March 2009

**Baroness Uddin of Bethnal Green**, Black and Minority Ethnic Women Councillors Taskforce

**Helene Reardon-Bond**, Government Equalities Office

**Dame Jane Roberts**, Councillors Commission

**Councillor Anjana Patel**, London Councils

### Tuesday 21 April 2009

**Janet Gaymer CBE QC**, Commissioner for Public Appointments

**Lewis Baston**, Electoral Reform Society

**Peter Riddell** and **Dr Ruth Fox**, Hansard Society

**Ray Collins** and **Catherine Speight**, Labour Party

**Rt Hon Theresa May MP** and **John Maples MP**, Conservative Party

**Lord Rennard MBE**, Liberal Democrats

### **Monday 8 June 2009**

**Lorraine Barrett AM**, **Bethan Jenkins AM** and **Claire Clancy** National Assembly for Wales

**Martin Eaglestone**, **Sïan Davies**, **Sara Pickard**, Mencap Cymru

**Liz Morgan**, Stonewall Wales

**Lyn Richards**, **Eunice Chipachni** and **Anita Davies**, National Federation of Women's Institutes

### **Tuesday 16 June 2009**

**Alastair Campbell**

**Paul Corry**, Rethink

**Dr Anthony Zigmond**, Royal College of Psychiatrists

### **Tuesday 23 June 2009**

**John Knight**, Leonard Cheshire Disability

**Abigail Lock**, Scope

**Chris Holmes MBE**

**Agnes Hctor**, RNID

**Leys Geddes**, British Stammering Association

**Baroness Campbell of Surbiton**

**Janet Kirk** and **Nick Russell**, Labour Party Disabled Members Group

### **Tuesday 30 June 2009**

**Nan Sloane** and **Laura Wigan**, Centre for Women and Democracy

**Derek Munn**, Stonewall

### **Tuesday 7 July 2009**

**Paul Martin** and **Sian Payne**, Lesbian and Gay Foundation

**Simon Fanshawe**

**Vicky Booth**, Campaign for Gender Balance

**Tuesday 14 July 2009**

**Sunder Katwala**, Fabian Society

**Peter Wardle**, Electoral Commission

**Professor Justin Fisher**

## List of written evidence

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The Conference published a volume of written evidence on 27 May 2009. This is available online at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/167/167ii.pdf>