



HM Government

Government Response to the Women and Equalities Committee Report on Women in the House of Commons

September 2017



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Presented to Parliament
by the Minister for the Constitution
by Command of Her Majesty

September 2017



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Part 1: Introduction

The Women and Equalities Committee's Fifth Report of 2016-17 Session on Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election was published on 10 January 2017.

The Government welcomes the Committee's work on this subject and agrees that increasing women's representation is an important aim. There should be no barriers limiting women's representation in the House of Commons.

The Government shares the Committee's view that political parties have primary responsibility for ensuring that women come forward to represent them and are put in positions from which they can win seats. The main political parties have had some success in increasing women's representation in the House of Commons but more needs to be done. The Government does not believe that the best way to achieve this is through legislation and placing an additional regulatory burden on political parties. Instead, we look to the parties to lead the way through further and more vigorous voluntary action.

Political parties are responsible for candidate selection. They are in a position to pick winners and ensure their selected women candidates have the best possible chance of election. The parties are best placed to identify – and implement – the means by which further progress on women's representation can be made. The Government is ready to support them in ensuring that the significant progress made over the last twenty years continues towards full parity and equality between men and women members of Parliament.

Part 2: The Government Response

The Committee's report made six specific recommendations for Government in relation to the representation of women in the House of Commons. Set out below is the Government's response to these recommendations.

We recommend that the Government set a domestic target of 45 per cent representation of women in Parliament and local government by 2030 in response to the United Nations indicators for Sustainable Development Goal 5.5. The Government should also set out how it plans to achieve this target, working with political parties. (Paragraph 21)

The Government strongly supports the aim to increase the diversity of representation in the House of Commons. We agree that a gender-balanced Parliament is long overdue. While we cannot be complacent, the percentage of women MPs elected has increased at every general election since 2001, so the direction is positive.

The ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals are reflected in our programme for government and the Government's recent report set out its approach to delivering the Goals. It makes clear that gender parity is one of the key commitments in the UK Government's agenda to tackle injustices at home and around the world.

As the Committee itself notes, political parties must retain responsibility for candidate selection. The Government therefore believes that parties need to take the lead in ensuring diverse representation (including that of women) in both the House of Commons and local government through their selection. The Government agrees that it should support political parties in this aim, but the initiatives need to be developed by the parties in question. The Government does not believe that overall domestic targets are the solution to increasing representation.

We recommend that the Government should seek to introduce, in legislation in this Parliament, a statutory minimum proportion of female parliamentary candidates in general elections for each political party. While the goal is equality, we recognise the difficulty inherent in setting this statutory minimum at 50 per cent; such a precise target would be difficult to meet while also ensuring that men did not become under-represented. A minimum of 45 per cent would therefore be acceptable. The measure would need to be subject to a minimum threshold for parties contesting only a small number of constituencies. This measure should be brought into force if the number and proportion of women MPs fails to increase significantly after the 2020 General Election. (Paragraph 46)

The Government does not believe that quotas set out in legislation for parliamentary candidates are the right approach to this issue. It is for political parties, at a local and national level, to determine the best candidate for each constituency based on a range of factors. As the Committee heard during its inquiry, political parties are already using a variety of strategies to improve the under-representation of women including mentoring, training, all-women shortlists and fielding women in winnable seats.

The Government would be willing to support parties on approaches to improve diversity of representation, but does not believe it would be appropriate to dictate what individual parties should do.

Parties that fail to comply with this target need to face sanctions for the quota to be effective. The Government should consider a range of possible sanctions, which could include deductions from Policy Development Grants, confiscation of deposits in seats where female candidates have not been fielded, or legislating to extend the remit of the Electoral Commission to introduce fines for non-compliance. (Paragraph 47)

The Government does not support quotas set out in legislation, and therefore does not agree that sanctions should be introduced.

We recommend that the Government immediately bring into force the statutory requirement for political parties to publish their parliamentary candidate diversity data for general elections, as set out in Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010. Publication of this information is vital for public and parliamentary scrutiny of the record of political parties in selecting a diverse slate of parliamentary candidates. We also recommend that the Government bring forward legislative proposals to empower the Electoral Commission to collect and host this data, to ensure consistency and transparency from political parties. (Paragraph 58)

The proposal for publication of parliamentary candidate diversity data originated in the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation. The Conference report recommended that political parties report on their candidate selections every six months, covering up to thirteen different fields. Both the Labour and Coalition governments expressed concerns about the potential regulatory burden which this would impose, particularly on smaller parties, and have worked with the political parties to encourage voluntary collection of diversity data on candidates.

This work has been useful in increasing data on candidate selection so that, for example, the gender breakdown of candidates selected by the following parties for the 2015 General Election was:

Conservatives – 74% male, 26% female;
Labour – 66% male, 34% female;
Liberal Democrats – 74% male, 26% female.

In the 2017 General Election, the breakdown was:

Conservatives – 71% male, 29% female;
Labour – 59% male, 41% female;
Liberal Democrats – 71% male, 29% female

The Government proposes to continue the process of engaging with the parties to ensure greater transparency on selected parliamentary candidates ahead of the next General Election, rather than imposing legislative requirements through section 106 of the Equality Act.

We recommend that the Government extend the time for which the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 is in force, in order to allow political parties to use all-women shortlists beyond 2030. (Paragraph 99)

We recommend that the Government bring forward legislative proposals to update the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to allow all-women shortlists for all elected mayor and police and crime commissioner posts. (Paragraph 108)

The number of women in the House of Commons increased from 118 (17.9%) in the 2001 Parliament to 191 (29%) in 2015. Following the 2017 General Election, that number now stands at 208 (32%). All-women shortlists for parliamentary elections are one of a number of different approaches which political parties have used to help achieve that increase during this period.

However, the current legislation already provides for all-women shortlists up to 2030, so this is not at present an immediate issue that needs to be addressed. In addition, mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections are still quite recent and their evidence base is as yet underdeveloped. We will need to consider this issue further.

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