

**Submission from Unite – the Union  
to the Speaker’s Conference**

established on 12 November 2008 – for the House of Commons 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.*

**Unite – the Union strongly welcomes** the decision to establish the Speaker’s Conference which will identify recommendations to address under-representation “of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons”.

We would highlight the following key points for the Speaker’s Conference to consider in drawing up its recommendations :

**1. The need to include the diversity of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the recommendations, together with the general under-representation of lower paid/manual workers**

It will be important that proposals recognise the diversity of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people, including the specific under-representation of black women for example, and diversity on grounds of age, sexual orientation and class. As a trade union representing men and women working throughout the workforce, we would stress the vital importance of addressing in the recommendations the general under-representation of lower paid/manual workers as MPs in the House of Commons.<sup>1</sup>

**2. The important role of positive action in trade unions in encouraging greater diversity of participation in public life and in the political process at all levels, including in the House of Commons**

Trade union shop stewards and other union workplace representatives, delegates and union officers have wide-ranging experience directly relevant to the House of Commons, as has been demonstrated by a number of key politicians over the years, not least two Labour government ministers who were former General Secretaries of the Transport & General Workers Union : Ernest Bevin and Frank Cousins. The developing role of union equality representative at the workplace, and specialist Regional and National Officers for Women, Race & Equalities are encouraging a greater diversity of union representatives at all levels.

Positive action to ensure the fair and effective representation and participation of women, black, Asian & ethnic minority members in our union has not only tackled

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<sup>1</sup> The attached article from the Telegraph sets out specific barriers faced, and is also an example of the kind of monitoring that can be carried out

under-representation in the union, it has also led to wider involvement in the community, public and political life, eg as school governors, local councillors, MSPs, AMs, MEPs, MPs and public appointees. Government support to assist these important developments eg through the Union Modernisation Fund, play an important role.

### **3. Fair and effective representation needs to be a requirement - policy commitments and voluntary targets are important but not enough**

Extensive monitoring of elections to committees in the Transport & General Workers Union in the 1990s clearly demonstrated that a voluntary target was insufficient to change practice. It was only when the Rules were introduced requiring that the proportion of women and black, Asian & ethnic minority union members covered had to be reflected, that effective change happened. Unite – the Union has included these principles in its Rules from the outset of the new union.

The experience of selections for MPs also demonstrates this point. The significant change in the proportion of women elected to Westminster occurred in 1997, when the Labour Party's policy of All-Women Shortlists required that women be elected in some targeted seats.

The experience of the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly on the basis of a commitment to 50:50 representation, again taken up by the Labour Party, also demonstrates this.

### **4. Appropriate effective Equalities structures with sufficient powers to backup the positive action are required**

At the same time as rules were introduced in the T&G to address under-representation, the advisory committees of Women, and of Black, Asian & ethnic minority members were made equal to other union committees, and the role of Regional and National officers for Women, Race & Equalities were enhanced. This has been very important to supporting change and building more diverse participation.

A Ministry for Women, Ethnic Minorities and Disabled People and Equalities generally, for example, would be able to address the policy, legal and cultural change needed to ensure that addressing the disparity in representation is seen as strengthening politics and representative democracy across government departments (see general points below). While welcoming the co-ordinating role of the Government Equalities Office, which is increasingly playing a positive role, a Ministry would have greater authority to make a difference.

Within political parties, opportunities through eg Women's Conferences and committees for women to discuss policy issues and develop skills have been very influential.

**5. A programme of support and funding is needed to address barriers through eg Education, Mentoring/Shadowing, Awareness-raising**

The example of Emily's List and Labour Women's Network have been important here, helping women overcome barriers to becoming an MP through providing knowledge, practical advice based on experience, and financial support.

The opportunity for those interested in standing as an MP to meet existing MPs is very important. While this is generally helpful, it is particularly positive where the MP has similar experience eg for a wheelchair user to meet an MP who uses a wheelchair, for example, provides the opportunity to discuss access issues that could otherwise act as barriers, or discussing with an MP who has a young family how they balance their responsibilities can also be vital. In supporting the bus industry in increasing the numbers of women bus drivers, we have supported "Open Days", when local women can discuss with a woman driver about the role, sit in the cab, and safely experience driving the bus. In this way, we have been able to counter barriers from lack of knowledge of the role eg concerns about safety and night driving, shift work and family responsibilities, and women thinking they are too short, physically weak, or too fat to drive a bus can all be addressed.

Targeted awareness-raising events can bring together different groups of people eg Black History Month (October) activities organised in the past by the Women & Equality Unit provided a positive opportunity to encourage the participation of BAEM women who were otherwise under-represented.

Within the union, annual Women's Week education activities, bringing together large numbers of women by running a number of courses side-by-side has been both empowering and informative. The exchange of experiences and informal networking, as well as the opportunity to disseminate specific information is invaluable, and leads directly to increased numbers of women active at all levels in the union.

**6. Specific Comments in response to Questions to be considered by the Speaker's Conference follow.**

## **Comments:**

- **Are problems caused by the unbalanced representation in the House of Commons of different groups in society?**

- **If so, what are those problems?**

The unbalanced representation is both the cause and the result of discrimination. Due to discrimination women, ethnic minorities and disabled people are not represented in the House of Commons, and because of this there are insufficient role models to show that it is possible. This does not encourage more to get involved at local and national level.

Lack of trust that the state and/or the political system can actually help make a fair society and deliver for people is another issue. Those women, ethnic minorities and disabled people who get involved have to fight doubly hard, and it has been our experience that many think no one will listen to them or take them seriously, or they become discouraged from the set backs and decide not to even bother.

- **Is there a relationship between these levels of representation and voter attitudes to Parliament?**

Additionally, equality for all should be the norm and an accepted part of politics rather than seen as a tool at election times, or in response to specific events or issues - eg after the cases of Stephen Lawrence and “muslim” terrorists it appeared to be more important for the political system to address racism and ensure the votes of black and ethnic minorities and the need for political representation; or the activism of disabled people in the 90’s and their campaigns for civil rights raised similar issues. Governments should lead and foresee problems, avoid them and create an environment where everyone feels they belong and there is a benefit for them to be part of the system. This must include for example single mothers feeling they are part of the political system, not penalised by it; recognition that young black and ethnic minority men constantly stopped and searched or harassed do not feel they are part of the political system; and the impact on black, Asian and ethnic minority men and women when there is always talk of immigration as a “problem”; or on disabled people fearful of losing benefits or their jobs at Remploy; or on a 16-18 year old or a low paid worker needing many jobs to survive since the minimum wage is not a “living wage”.

Despite all this, there are many effective and determined women, ethnic minority and disabled activists but not enough of them end up in the parliament. It is vital that both politics and the media challenge false stereotypes about who governs and who is governed.

Historically when women, ethnic minorities, disabled people and young people become politically active due to national or international events and circumstances, they want to be part of the system to change it for the better. Also they push for change in government policies. For example, the women’s movement in the 70’s and 80’s, disabled people’s campaigns around access and

public transport in the 90's, young people and older people's involvement in the anti-war movement in 2000's, black people's activities around civil rights, education and anti-racism, and anti-poverty and environmental campaigning which are mobilising millions to play their part in political life. This is something that can be built on through the recommendations from the Speaker's Conference.

**• What are the reasons why more women, people from ethnic minorities and disabled people do not become members of Parliament:**

- **Why don't more from these groups consider standing for election? Or, if they do,**
- **Why aren't more of them selected? Or, if they are,**
- **Why aren't more of them elected?**

Those who are successful in public life are more likely to be well educated, from affluent families, or both; or they work or have worked particularly in professional roles. Many women, ethnic minorities and disabled people will not have had as many of these opportunities, as well as manual and lower paid workers. Society stigmatises and then discriminates resulting in undermining confidence and preventing access to circles, groups and environments that encourage participation in a wider sense.

Discrimination is the main problem and although there have been many positive and important legislative changes, the cultural change lags far behind. Sweden as a most progressive country on women's equality is actually a very good example. They have taken positive measures to ensure a high proportion of women in their parliament but one of the big issues for the government is still unequal pay – because discrimination still persists.

Having more equality in parliamentary seats would raise the potential to make a big difference, but does not of itself mean that they can change everyday life for women, ethnic minorities and disabled people. In order for this wider change, we need an organised system to encourage people from the time they enter education to when they get a job. It needs the involvement of trade unions and voluntary sector organisations to promote participation of all under-represented sections of the population. This should help women, ethnic minorities and disabled people to gain confidence, information, training or the power to make decisions and become involved.

The government's emphasis should continue to be EQUALITY – equality of outcome rather than just equality of opportunity, and an environment for this should be created through clear monitoring reports<sup>2</sup>.

### **What are the reasons why more women, people from ethnic minorities and disabled people do not become members of Parliament?**

In responding to this question, while recognising there are common barriers, many of which we have referred to above, we think it would be helpful to set out some specific barriers faced by women, people from ethnic minorities and disabled people, as follows :

#### **Specific issue that are barriers to women getting involved**

- Caring responsibilities which do not leave much time or energy for many women to consider extra activities that can lead to taking up a more political position
- Fixed attitudes about politics being for men rather than for women
- Lack of confidence in pursuing a political role
- Job segregation, part-time working and unequal pay mean that women have less financial independence

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<sup>2</sup> **CRE definition of Equality, Participation and Interaction** helpfully emphasises this point :

#### ***Equality***

*Equality means that everyone is treated equally and has a right to fair outcomes, and that no one should expect privileges because of what they are. However, it also recognises that, in some instances, there may be grounds for treating people differently in order to create a level playing field.*

*Equality is one of the three necessary conditions of integration; people who feel they are second-class citizens cannot be expected to integrate. As long as unequal treatment and unlawful discrimination continue to be commonplace, no integration will be possible.*

#### ***Participation***

*If people from some groups are not involved in the processes of politics, public appointments and other decision-making structures, our society will never be fully integrated, and we risk perpetuating the inequality that prevents integration. It is therefore extremely important to take measures to tackle this 'democratic deficit', to encourage greater participation by people from under-represented groups in local and national politics, and at lower levels of decision-making, including Local Strategic Partnerships.*

#### ***Interaction***

*Finding effective ways to overcome tendencies towards separation and polarisation between different groups is not a simple matter, and there is a need for creative thinking. Much depends on finding a commitment to integration within the affected communities, and work in the education and sport sectors, and with young people, is particularly important.*

*Crude social engineering measures (such as bussing children to different schools) are neither available, nor likely to work. But through Britain's education-funding system, there may be possibilities to encourage schools to attract a wide range of children rather than to accept passively a continuing process of separation and division, and this is a question the CRE is currently looking at."*

### **Specific issue that are barriers to ethnic minorities getting involved**

- Stereotyping, particularly of BAEM women and young BAEM men
- Institutional Racism
- BAEM women are more likely to be working full-time with caring responsibilities
- Many first generation ethnic minorities have to work extra hard to establish themselves in this country and hold many jobs to survive. This might not leave time to study, train and improve on their skills. Also being unfamiliar with the whole political system and not gaining access to the relevant forums, their families too will start at a clear disadvantage

### **Specific issue that are barriers to Disabled people getting involved**

- Discrimination and perceptions about disabled people's abilities, based on their impairment alone
- Working plays a very important part of making people part of society and when disabled people are three times more likely to be out of work then this barrier brings with it isolation and lack of access to usual circles that get you known to other people. While there are active disabled people who don't work, there are many barriers to prevent this, making them too rare
- Lack of effective reasonable adjustment at work to retain disabled workers means that they can lose access to a more public and political life, as well, with fewer opportunities to leave their homes
- Lack of Access to buildings, transport, meetings, correspondence, informal discussions
- Poverty faced by many disabled people is an important barrier

### **What are the problems and practical difficulties encountered - at any point in the process of selection and election - by members of these underrepresented groups who are looking to become MPs?**

In addition to points raised throughout this submission, we would stress :

- Lack of money acts as a considerable barrier
- Lack of knowledge of the informal as well as the formal procedures
- Assumptions and prejudice of those making selections, whether openly expressed or hidden, conscious or unconscious, need to be challenged through fair procedures and equalities training for all involved

- **What actions could be taken by the Government to address disparities in representation?**
- **What actions have been, or could be, taken by political parties, campaigning groups and others to address disparities in representation?**
- **What actions have been taken elsewhere in the UK and overseas, and by whom, to address similar concerns?**
- **How can the success of such actions be measured?**

In addition to the key points we have set out at the beginning of this submission, we would stress the importance of the following :

- Evident and effective government action and policies addressing these issues has the potential to make a huge change throughout society
- Specific positive action is vital, and we strongly welcome the government's stated commitment to extend the permissive measure which enable eg All-Women Shortlists to be used by political parties
- Recognising the impact of government policies on the opportunity to play a part in political life, including : tackling poverty through a good welfare system, work and education opportunities, equal pay, anti-discrimination and equality duty laws, housing, transport and health, crime and justice
- Focusing on changing society's attitude towards equality – a basic right which protects us all
- Specific actions we would recommend include :
  - Electing local council women's rep or similar
  - Providing baby-sitting assistance, children's activities at conferences, and compensation for salary reduction for those who wish to and are involved
  - Mentoring and shadowing
  - The Equality Duty should be used for political parties to ensure they actively promote eg race equality in their selection process
  - Building networks of women and BAEM women in particular who are currently playing a vital role in many tenants groups, community development, schools and youth activities
  - Using the Citizenship module at schools to connect with young people and encourage them to become involved in eg the Youth Parliament, Amnesty International school group. Unite has a schools programme where we go into school and teach young people about trade unions; other activities could include how to become Councillor/MP/MEP/AM/MSP
  - Investing in the Youth Service, with recognition of support for young women's activities is also important.

## **Telegraph - Women 'face higher hurdle in becoming MP than ethnic minorities' By Jon Swaine 6 November 2008**

**Women face a greater challenge in achieving fair representation in Parliament than ethnic minorities, a survey of parliamentary candidates has suggested.**

Women are being selected in about one in four constituencies, the study of candidates for the three major parties at the next general election found. In 16 contests open to both men and women, the Labour party chose only one female candidate.

Out of a total of 646 MPs, only 125 are women - 94 Labour, 17 Conservatives and nine Liberal Democrats. The number of working-age men and women in the country is roughly equal.

By contrast, the study, by the left-leaning Fabian Society, suggested that a "tipping point" has been reached in the parties' efforts to recruit more ethnic minority candidates, meaning accurate representation of the country in Parliament could be reached more quickly than previously thought possible.

There are currently 15 non-white MPs - 13 from Labour and two Conservatives. To match the country as a whole, this number would need to rise to 60, a figure analysts had predicted would not be reached for 75 years based on recent rates.

However, in its study, the Fabian Society predicted that the number could jump to 25 at the next election alone. It found that Labour is selecting black or Asian candidates in one in 10 seats, and at a rate of 14 per cent in swing constituencies. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have chosen non-white people in 5 per cent of seats, it added.

Sunder Katwala, the Fabian Society general secretary, said: "We seem to be making more progress on race than achieving equal chances for women in politics.

"Gender is a much more stubborn penalty than race," he said. "The gender penalty, though reducing, is still in place."

Mr Katwala said that he doubted deep-rooted sexism was at play, and that the disparity may instead be attributable to difficulties caused by many women's need for child care and financial support in order to pursue a political career.

He said: "It is not so difficult for a political establishment to give up 7.5 per cent of its seats to ethnic minority candidates. This can be done by finding those black and Asian candidates who fit the mould – the Oxbridge graduates, lawyers and accountants. Giving up 50 per cent of the seats [to women] is more difficult and may demand more cultural change."

The Fabian Society concluded that parties need not select candidates from all-black shortlists, despite all-women shortlists being crucial in increasing the number of female Labour MPs in 1997. The idea is being considered by the Government.

**Route to power report from Fawcett**