



House of Commons

**Minutes of Evidence
Taken Before
Speaker's Conference Committee**

Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)

Tuesday 20 October 2009

**Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP, Rt Hon David Cameron MP and
Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP**

Evidence heard in Public Questions 434 - 469

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Oral Evidence

Taken before the Speaker's Conference Committee
on Tuesday 20 October 2009

Members present

John Bercow, in the Chair

Ms Diane Abbott

Miss Anne Begg

Mr David Blunkett

Angela Browning

Mrs Ann Cryer

Mr Parmjit Dhanda

Andrew George

Miss Julie Kirkbride

David Maclean

Fiona Mactaggart

Mr Khalid Mahmood

Jo Swinson

Mrs Betty Williams

Witness: **Mr Gordon Brown MP**, Prime Minister, gave evidence.

Q434 Chairman: Good morning, I would like to welcome the Prime Minister, and also the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Liberal Democrats who will be following, to the Speaker's Conference. This is a very important occasion for the future of the House of Commons. The House can do its job effectively only if its members are in tune with the experiences of the population as a whole. Part of that is making sure that the House reflects more nearly the increasingly diverse society in which we live. However, at present, Members of Parliament, including their Leaders and their Speaker, are for the most part white, male, middle aged and middle class. That is why this Speaker's Conference was established last year to look into the reasons why women, members of the ethnic minorities and disabled people are underrepresented in the House of Commons, and to recommend ways in which the situation can be improved. The Conference has also agreed to consider issues relating to the representation of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. The close involvement of the Speaker in the Conference demonstrates the importance which the House attaches to the issue of fairer representation. This Conference began under the leadership of the former Speaker, Michael Martin; it was set up, of course, at the instigation of the Prime Minister, and I am very glad to continue its work. I also wish at the outset to pay a particularly warm tribute to the Vice Chair, Anne Begg, who has led the evidence gathering work of the Conference with great vigour and determination. She and her colleagues have put the Conference in a position in which today it can ask the leaders what they and their parties are planning to do to make sure that the House more closely reflects our society in the future. Before we start, I should simply set out what my role will be in today's session. I will preside over the session in the manner of a neutral chair of a Public Bill Committee, exercising control and facilitating participation, rather than as a conventional Select Committee Chairman who puts questions him or herself to witnesses. I am the leader of the good order and fair play party. The Conference has offered each of the leaders a chance to make a brief opening statement before answering your questions. Prime Minister?

Mr Brown: Well, there have been in our Parliamentary history only five Speaker's Conferences. They are summoned only when great issues vital to our democracy demand debate and then decision. The greatest of injustices demands the boldest of actions, so it was the first Speaker's Conference in 1916 that opened the way to guaranteeing the right to vote for women, and so it is today, when great injustice arises from discrimination and prejudice on grounds of race, gender, disability and sexual orientation. Some of those who sit on this Committee are those who have done most over recent years to address these inequalities and to plead for justice. When I entered Parliament in 1983, the House of Commons was an all white chamber. There were only 23 women, a House of Commons where 50 per cent of the population had only 3 per cent of the representation. I am proud of the record in extending representation over these last 25 years, but we have not done enough yet to address underrepresentation in our society. Seen from the outside, Parliament is not yet fit for the 21st century. So I want to suggest areas where we will move fast as a party and as a government to make change possible. For women, we want to advance further, and on a like for like basis, I expect the number of women Labour MPs in Parliament to rise to between 120 and 140 after the next election. The Equality Bill will extend all-women shortlists until 2030, and I hope there will be general support for this. On black and Asian representation, we will make sure that in relevant constituencies, a majority on the shortlist are black and Asian candidates. That will follow the passage of the Equality Bill. On disabled representation, we recognise the barriers of access, in some cases finance and prejudice to disabled candidates seeking selection, and we are determined to offer the greatest of practical support to make that possible. We will increase support for LGBT candidates, and I have said that there is a way that we can deal with some of the prejudice. Just as

marriages can take place in the presence of the House of Commons, I hope Mr Speaker will consider that civil partnerships should be celebrated here too, and I hope that he and the House authorities will consider this idea. I am committed to diversity in Parliament, not just because it is at the heart of our Labour Party values, but because it is also in the interests of the whole country, that we keep the promise of our democracy, not for some but for all the people of Britain. I do not believe that sexism, racism and disability discrimination are indelibly woven into the fabric of our society, but it is our duty as Parliamentarians to lead the way in a process that in this generation can end the discrimination and prejudice that exists, and make our Parliament a Parliament where all people feel that they are fully represented.

Q435 Miss Begg: Thank you for appearing before us, Prime Minister. I am just wondering whether you are satisfied with the speed of change to date and the speed of change that you have just outlined, and whether you think that with recent events, and the way that perhaps Parliament itself has been brought into disrepute, has actually made the whole job of increasing the diversity of Parliament even more difficult?

Mr Brown: If the final conclusion of all the various reviews, including the Legg and then the Kelly review, were to give the impression that the only people who could afford to be Members of Parliament are people who have very substantial incomes or wealth in the first place before they are considered as representatives, then that would be a very big blow to the opportunities and possibilities of people from poorer backgrounds, low income backgrounds and backgrounds where there are huge barriers to overcome to get into Parliament. So we must ensure in everything that we do that we do not create new barriers to representation. As far as being satisfied with progress, I am not. That is why I am saying that we will do more to make sure that women are properly represented in Parliament. In the Welsh Assembly and in the Scottish Parliament, it is more than 50 per cent. On our Labour Party National Executive Committee, it is 50 per cent. I believe what we are doing for women's representation is not a top down enforcement of rules, but a bottom up process which over a period of time is increasing the representation of women at a local party level, then at a council level, and also at a Parliamentary European and Welsh and Scottish Parliament level. So I believe that is a bottom up process as well as the enforcement of all-women shortlists. On the question of disabled Members of Parliament, I do believe that you have yourself sent a huge signal by the success that you have had as a Member of Parliament, but I am conscious that there are only 2.5 per cent of our candidates who are people who are self-declared as disabled. We must therefore try to remove whatever barriers do exist, and I recognise that some of them have to be financial, as well as access, mobility and everything else, to representation. On the question of black and ethnic minority representation, we have made progress by making sure that in every selection Conference, a branch will be able to nominate someone from the black and Asian community. We are proposing to make further progress by saying that in some constituencies, a majority of people on the shortlist when it comes to the members for final decision would be ethnic minority representatives.

Q436 Ms Abbott: I listened to your statement with care, and I welcomed the fact that you had a target for the number of Labour women MPs you want to see after the election, 120-140. But I notice you did not have a target for the number of black and minority ethnic Members of Parliament. The fact is it is 22 years ago that I was selected for Parliament, and 22 years later, we have just two black women Members of Parliament. It was 22 years ago that my colleagues Paul Boateng and Bernie Grant were selected as Members of Parliament, and 22 years later, we have just two Members of Parliament of African or African Caribbean background. What I wanted to ask you is what makes you think that having, as you put it, relevant constituencies, and I find that a slightly problematic formulation, because some of our best black and minority ethnic MPs do not sit for relevant constituencies at all, but what makes you think that in relevant constituencies, having a

majority of ethnic minorities on the shortlist will actually produce more black and ethnic minority candidates? The truth is that the biggest bar to diversity in selection is the ever present favourite son candidate, and the system you are proposing, which is to have a majority of ethnic minorities on the shortlist, will still allow the favourite son to occupy his position and be rammed through in the end.

Q437 Chairman: Prime Minister, there are others who want to come in on this as well.

Mr Brown: You are absolutely right, there is a great deal more progress to be made, and it is far slower than I would have wanted, but let us remember, the Labour Party has made possible the first black person elected to Parliament, the first black Cabinet Minister, the first Asian Cabinet Minister. We have four times more representation than the other parties put together. We are 88 per cent of the representation in the House of Commons, but I accept it is not enough. Why do I think that the things we are proposing will make a difference? Because they are already making a difference in the selection of candidates for the next election. We have seen a larger number particularly of women from black and Asian representation being selected in seats for the next election, but we will go further by saying that in certain constituencies, and that is a matter for debate, so I accept it is a matter for debate, but we want to make sure that a majority of people on that shortlist are from the black and Asian community. Look, this has taken more time than we would have wanted, but nobody can imagine now a situation, as I came into Parliament in 1983, where only 23 Members were women, and there were no black and Asian Members at all. That is an inconceivable situation now for a country like this. Now we have to make the further progress, but I believe it will happen in the next few years.

Q438 Jo Swinson: Despite the success of all-women shortlists and electing many more women MPs, there are still very few women who at the time of being elected had young children. Do you think that ensuring we have better representation of parents in Parliament is important, and if so, what will you do to tackle some of the difficulties faced by those with young families, both as candidates and then as MPs?

Mr Brown: I am grateful for you recognising the importance of all-women shortlists, that is what we have done as a Labour Party, I would urge other parties to consider doing this. I recognise also that when I came into Parliament, there was no -- Harriet Harman had just come into Parliament and launched a campaign for proper crèche facilities for women Members of Parliament. We have to go further in making it possible for families to be properly catered for, if one of the partners are Members of Parliament. A great deal more has to be done on that front as well. I think it is something that you, Mr Speaker, have taken an interest in improving, and I think that would be very important as well. But again, we have to recognise that MPs -- and this is one of the things that comes out of Legg, and also comes out of what will be in, I suppose, the Kelly review, you have to recognise that people are living in two places at once, they have family responsibilities, and there has to be some place for showing that the financial arrangements for MPs take account of that.

Q439 Mr Dhanda: Prime Minister, let us look at what you personally can do. Your top table, your Cabinet, there are 23 members in it. When you became Prime Minister, your predecessor left two minority ethnic Cabinet members. There are none now, yet there are four white Scottish men. Do you think this is an acceptable state of affairs? Do you think you personally can do more to correct that?

Mr Brown: Well, I think you are looking at the people -- I would point you to the people who sit at the Cabinet table.

Q440 Mr Dhanda: I am talking about Cabinet members.

Mr Brown: Yes, but I would point to people who sit at the Cabinet table, because there are people who sit at the Cabinet table who do not necessarily hold a full departmental responsibility, but are equally important to the running of the government. I would say that there are seven women sitting round the Cabinet table; we have the first Asian Cabinet Minister sitting at the Cabinet table representing issues of transport; and at the same time we have the Attorney General, who is the first black Attorney General, and a very successful one at that. So I would ask you to look at the wider picture. We have not done what other governments have done in terms of Scottish, Welsh and Irish, or considered, in terms of Scottish, Welsh and Irish representation; we have a separate Secretary of State for Scotland, a Secretary of State for Wales and a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and that has to be taken into account in how you form your Cabinet.

Q441 Mrs Williams: Prime Minister, you mentioned the bottom up process in your earlier answer. If there is resistance locally and regionally within the Labour Party concerning diversity, promoting diversity, how do you propose to tackle those issues?

Mr Brown: I think bottom up is the way in the long run that is going to make the huge difference. I do think the declaration that there will be all-women shortlists has made a huge difference in the way women are represented in Parliament. I just should emphasise, maybe in answer to Parmjit's question, that there are 35 women Ministers in the government, as well as seven round the Cabinet table, and that is far higher than at any time in the past. Equally, I would say, on this bottom up process, it really does depend on at a local level the encouragement and support being given. So Emily's List has been very important, Bernie's List in terms of black and Asian representation, Dorothy's List in relation to LGBT representation, all these have been important to establishing and encouraging the principle that more women, more disabled people, more black and ethnic minority people should be represented in Parliament, as well as lesbian and gays.

Q442 Andrew George: You have some very admirable objectives and targets with regard to black, women and disabled candidates in future, but, of course, all of these are delivered through locally made decisions in local constituency parties, as far as the candidates that are selected. How far are you prepared to go in order to ensure that those locally made decisions follow a pattern which actually help you deliver those targets? Are you prepared to overrule decisions made which will otherwise divert you away from achieving your objectives?

Mr Brown: Well, you have controversial issues locally, as we had in one Welsh constituency in the last election, which everybody is aware of. But it is not simply leaving it to local people to make the decision: when we impose all-women shortlists, that is a national decision that has been made, that is being implemented at a local level. Again, I say we are the party that has made the decision to do this, it has been proven that that makes a difference in the numbers of women who are represented in Parliament. I hope that other parties can consider doing that, and our Equality Bill will make that possible, so that it does not stop at a particular date in the near future, but goes right through and is an encouragement to young women to come forward, because it will be in existence until 2030.

Q443 Ms Abbott: It is one thing to talk about having more diverse candidates, but the important thing is to have diverse candidates in seats that are either solid Labour seats or are very winnable. All-women shortlists have proved to be a tried and tested way of getting women in for those sorts of seats. Why are you opposed to all black and minority ethnic shortlists?

Mr Brown: The principle must be that we are removing discrimination, and creating a House of Commons that is more representative of the nation as a whole. 50 per cent of the population are women, and the underrepresentation of women historically, we have found, can only be addressed

by all-women shortlists. 11 per cent of the population come from black, Asian or minority populations, and our determination to increase that representation is, as I suggested, by taking measures that at a local level encourage constituencies that this is the right thing to do. Our aim, of course, is to get a House of Commons, a Parliament that more accurately reflects all the faces and the different ethnic groups of our country. So that is our aim; how we get to that aim, of course, is going to be different in different cases and bound to be so, but the principle that we should have far greater representation for black and Asian communities, and for black and Asian MPs to be represented in the House of Commons, is shown in our determination to move forward with what we say. At a local level, a branch has the power to ensure that there is a black and Asian person on the branch nomination, there is a guarantee that there will be someone from that community who is on the shortlist, and now we are saying we are prepared to go even further than that, and I think we are the first party to do that.

Q444 Mrs Cryer: Prime Minister, can I just ask you about the difficulties for people from a poorer background of the costs of candidacy? You have already said that it would be unfortunate if only wealthy candidates could go forward. It would also be unfortunate if only people locally could go forward, because of the costs of travelling. So can I ask you, how can we ensure that candidates with different levels of income and different campaigning costs, such as disabled people, single parents, have an equal chance of being and later winning through to being a Member of Parliament?

Mr Brown: Well, I think there is potentially an issue of finance there. It is not necessarily solved by issues like primaries, which are very expensive, although there is a case for looking at primaries, but there is an issue of finance for people from low income backgrounds, and that has to be addressed internally by the parties themselves. I think we also have to recognise that there is another point about what people expect MPs now to be able to do is to be far more active locally in their own constituencies, and be far more connected to the causes and communities of their own constituencies, and to be able to reflect them. I think that is a duty on MPs that has been imposed by the public, most of us willingly accept that duty, but it is a huge change from where we were 30 years ago. It makes it necessary, and I think we have to emphasise this, that MPs have to have a base both in London and in their constituencies, and any reform of the system relating to MPs that does not recognise that will be falling very short of the mark of what the public expect of Members of Parliament now.

Q445 Angela Browning: Prime Minister, there is cross-party agreement that the approximate costs of fighting as a candidate are about £10,000 a year, so for many candidates, they are looking at £40,000 or £50,000 to fight a seat for a whole Parliament before they even get elected. Particularly for women with childcare costs, or people with disabilities, as Ann Cryer mentioned, how do you see that challenge to get more women in, who have those attendant costs, just to get into Parliament?

Mr Brown: I recognise that there are costs. I am not sure if I have the same figures as you about what it actually costs. Obviously it depends on the time that a person is selected, and the distances they have to travel, and it depends on what their home arrangements are. But I recognise that it is more difficult for people who have family responsibilities. The one thing that we want to encourage is that people who are more representative of the face of our nation are standing as candidates for Parliament, so yes, you have to look at how you can encourage that, and you have to look at how as a party you can defer some of the expenses that are involved in people being candidates once they become candidates. This is maybe something that your Committee may have to look at in more detail, but I am sure that our party is trying to deal with these issues and I hope other parties are. Can I just say on women, I do repeat, we made a decision to have all-women shortlists, we believe that that has worked. I would urge other parties to look at this issue. We have made a decision on

black and Asian candidates, that we will give full rights to be at a selection Conference, and in some cases to be a majority of candidates at selection Conference, once the Equality Bill goes through. No other party has done that, I urge people to do that. Where there have been changes made by one political party that other parties can now see have brought beneficial results, I think it is better for them to look at whether they can implement these changes, than perhaps some of the other things you are looking at the moment.

Q446 Miss Begg: Our interim report suggested that local parties should provide data for the various selection processes, and the Labour Party did provide that data. Can I ask if you are prepared to sign the Labour Party up to constantly reporting the data on all the selection processes and panels that take place under the criteria that we use or we recommend in our interim report?

Mr Brown: You are absolutely right, unless people know what is happening, then the public opinion that is being shaped about this cannot put the pressure that is necessary on the parties to change. This is not just a matter of one or two individuals, and there are heroic individuals around this table, on this committee, who have themselves brought about great changes by what they have done. I think it is fair that at this stage, I applaud people round this table who have been change makers themselves, and the world has changed as a result of them. But it does need us to educate and inform public opinion about what the opportunities are for Parliament. I repeat, I could not imagine a Parliament now that did not have the scale of women representation that we have, and indeed should have more, and equally, Parliament must have proper representation from the other communities. If this Speaker's Conference achieves anything, it must be to send a message to the public that a Parliament that is not representative of all faces of the people is not one that will command the trust and respect of the people. Therefore, we must make these changes as parties, and if necessary, make legislative changes to bring that about.

Chairman: Prime Minister, thank you for your time and your evidence, we are extremely grateful to you.

Witness: **Mr David Cameron MP**, Leader of the Opposition, gave evidence.

Q447 Chairman: Good morning. A warm welcome to the Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron. David, I think you know the form. We look forward to a brief opening statement from you, and then there will be an opportunity for questions.

Mr Cameron: Thank you very much. Thank you for the opportunity to appear in front of this Committee. I have a very straightforward approach to this issue, which is that the underrepresentation of women in Parliament, and in the Conservative Party, and the underrepresentation of black and minority ethnic candidates in the Conservative Party and in this Parliament is a real problem. It is a real problem for Parliament, and it is a real problem, it has been an even greater problem for my party, and one that I desperately want to address and have tried to address. I think it is bad in all sorts of ways, it is clearly bad for women and for ethnic minorities, it is bad for equality; it is also bad for the quality of our politics. I have a very simple view, which is that we need to make sure that the conversation we have within the Conservative Party, and the conversation we have within Parliament, is like the conversation that is going on in the rest of the country, and indeed is like the conversation we need to have with the rest of the country. Unless we have more equal representation, our politics will not be half as good as they should be, and the Conservative Party will not be half the party it should be. So I have been determined to deal with this problem, and to do frankly whatever is necessary to fix it. I have tried to do it within the confines of a democratic and quite decentralised party, so you are always looking for ways to

encourage, to cajole, to educate, to lead, to push and to prod, and that is what I have tried to do over the last four years. The way I have looked at it is there were sort of three particular problems in the Conservative Party. First, there were not enough good women candidates coming forward; secondly, there was an inbuilt tendency within Conservative Associations to choose white men, people like me; and thirdly, the procedures and the testing processes we had for picking prospective Members of Parliament tended to favour not just male candidates, but particular sorts of male candidates. So we have tried to address each of those three areas. In terms of not enough women coming forward, women2win was established as a sort of pressure group, to bring people forward. We have opened up the candidates list, encouraged people to join. We have been out and headhunted people we think would make good Members of Parliament. There is some sign of success: at the last election, 20 per cent of people on the list were women, that is now closer to 30 per cent. The second thing, the inbuilt tendency of Associations to choose men, we have tried to address that in all sorts of ways. We introduced the priority list of candidates, the so-called A-List, which was initially half men and half women, but also 20 per cent of the people on it were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Then we have changed quite a number of times some of our selection procedures to try and get more equal outcomes. So for instance, we have insisted that 50 per cent of the candidates in the final round of a selection should be women. We have just changed our selection procedures again, so that up until Christmas, we have a system where a shortlist of candidates is chosen between Central Office and the local Association, and that goes straight to the final round of selection. Again, we will be changing our procedures from January, as we get close to an election, and I might say a word about that in a second. We have also tried to address the problem of the actual testing procedures being less fair, so we have introduced things like community panels, getting representatives of the community on to a panel to ask questions of the candidates; we have had open primaries, and we have also pioneered very recently the all-postal primary, where we actually sent the CVs of the candidates and the ballot papers to every single home in the constituency, in what was a first and I think very effective. The result of all this, well, if we have a majority of one after the next election, wishful thinking I know, but indulge me for a second, if that is what happened, we would have nearly 60 women Conservative Members of Parliament, compared with just 18 today, and we would have between 10 and 15 Members of Parliament on the Conservative side from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Just one last thing I wanted to add, which is from January, we moved to what we call our by-election procedure, which is that if any MP stands down, either shortly before that date or after that date, the Central Party provides the shortlist to the Association, and it is my intention, if we continue as we are, that some of those shortlists will indeed be all-women shortlists, to help us boost the number of Conservative women MPs, and also to recognise the fact that although about 29 per cent of our candidates are women, there are many very, very good women on our priority list of candidates who have not yet been selected, and I want to give them the chance to serve in Parliament, so that is my current intention. Sorry if that was too long.

Q448 Mr Blunkett: I would like to ask you, David, about the primaries that you have mentioned already, and therefore the attempt to open up politics to people who would otherwise have not thought of entering Parliament. You mentioned women and ethnic minorities in your opening statement, but not disability. Albeit that it is the least auspicious moment in our history to be encouraging people of active citizenship and civic goodwill to think of coming into Parliament, in your endeavour, including with the postal primary, do you think that there is a real difficulty in persuading the public as a whole, as opposed to those activists who know people, who can question people, who understand the critical nature of genuine professional politics, to accept people of difference, where, for instance, they may have a disability which the population as a whole may conceive of as being a major obstacle, as I found when I came in to this place in 1987, where a substantial minority did not believe that I could do the job.

Mr Cameron: It is a very good question. I think attitudes are changing, and what leaders have to do is keep leading and keep pushing, so that these things become less of a problem. I think the truth about primaries is I do not think they are necessarily the most effective weapon for making sure we have more women in Parliament, more disabled people in Parliament, or people of black and minority ethnic backgrounds. I think the primary is a very good weapon to fight a slightly different battle, which is: are we doing things that are opening up politics to people who had not previously considered it; are we involving people more in the political process; are we giving them ownership of a really important step, which is choosing a candidate? But I do not necessarily think that the two sorts of primaries we have tried, the open primary, where anyone can turn up, or the all-postal primary, will actually necessarily help us so much with the issues we are discussing today. But I think that attitudes are changing, people are more open-minded and thoughtful, and so perhaps they will play a role in the future.

Q449 Andrew George: You described in your opening statement the party as a democratic and decentralised institution, and yet you also described the way in which the party is steering the local parties into assisting you in achieving your national objectives. I just wondered how far you are prepared to go in order to achieve that, particularly where the local parties may be resisting too much Central Office interference.

Mr Cameron: It is a balance. It is a debate we have all the time. I can see Angela Browning smiling, she has been involved in this debate. You know, the A-List, for instance, was a step that some in the party did not like, because it seemed to be -- I mean, I refer to it as sort of positive action rather than positive discrimination, but I think it is a balance. I think you have to try and get the balance right, because at the end of the day, I think it is quite important to, as I do, turn round to my own party and say: actually, in the end, I did not pick these women candidates, you did, I did not pick the black and minority ethnic candidates, you did, and it is something I have tried to make, and I think the Conservative Party is proud of it, I have tried to make them proud of what we have achieved, getting to a situation where if we do win the election, 60 women MPs against 18, it is a big step forward, not as much as I would like. I think if you just totally try and dictate, then you will not take the party with you, so it is a balance. That is not a very good answer to the question, there is no real answer to the question, it is trying to push, to prod, to encourage, to educate, to lead, and hoping that all those things will take people with you, which seems to have happened.

Q450 Mrs Williams: Following David Blunkett's question about people with disabilities, in your opening statement, you used the word headhunting, and you also mentioned community panels. How do they link together? Do you actually go out deliberately and headhunt people with disabilities or do you not?

Mr Cameron: Yes, what we do is whenever -- I mean, I have encouraged everyone in the Shadow Cabinet to do this, any people you come across who you think will make an effective Member of Parliament, and particularly be on the outlook for women candidates, for people with a disability, for people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, actually, if you come across someone in your life as an MP, or your life as a Shadow Minister, encourage them to put their name forward and go on the candidates list. That is something we have actively been doing with some success, and also after the expenses scandal, I opened up the candidates list all over again, and invited people to apply. I did that on the Andrew Marr show, and something like 4,000 people applied following that, and I think we have already added 100 or so of them to our candidates list. That is the headhunting part of it. The community panel idea; one of the problems we had was this, that when it came to the process of selecting the candidate, the process of standing up in front of the members of the local Conservative Association, making a speech and answering questions, was something that a sort of typical male candidate like me was quite good at doing, but it did not

necessarily test out what being a Member of Parliament is really about, which is holding surgeries, helping people, dealing with community issues, showing community leadership. So what we have done in some cases is assemble a community panel, so take the Chief Inspector of Police, the local person who runs the Citizens Advice Bureau, someone from the Federation of Small Business, someone who works in the PCT, and get them to interview the candidates and get them to report to the members of the Association what they were like. So the community panel was an attempt to try and bring into the selection process for candidates some of those things that are actually the skills you need to be a Member of Parliament; not perfect, but it was an attempt to sort of demachoisé it, if that makes sense.

Q451 David Maclean: Clearly you are not satisfied with the diversity of your Parliamentary party. We have heard a little bit about the top down approach you use. How do you go about persuading Conservative Associations, who jealously guard their independence, do not like taking direction from the centre, that we need to promote diversity in the party? When you meet resistance, how will you overcome it?

Mr Cameron: Before the selection procedures kick in in any of these seats, what has tended to happen is John Maples, Theresa May, Shireen Ritchie or others go to the constituency, talk them through some of the issues, and try and take people with them, and explain that the issue of diversity is important for the party as a whole. I think attitudes are changing, but as I say, it is a mixture of education and leadership; also some of these procedures and processes need changing; and then some positive action as well. But I would say, when you look at the number of women candidates now chosen, the Conservative Party is quite proud of the progress that it has made, and frequent reminders that we were the first party to have a woman Prime Minister helps.

Q452 David Maclean: We have heard some evidence from experts that that approach does seem to have worked in the Conservative Party. How do you institutionalise it so that it does not die with David Cameron in a few years as your great idea?

Mr Cameron: I think it is very worthwhile what this Committee is trying to do, but in the end, I think it is important that the parties feel they are competing with each other over this issue. I think now it has become very much a part of the Conservative Party's reform and modernisation, that if I was run over by a bus, this would continue. There are many people in the Conservative Party who feel very strongly about this issue, that we want to have more equal representation. We know it would improve the quality of our party, of our politics, of our contribution in Parliament, and it is not just me that is doing this, there is a big movement in the party to get this right.

Q453 Fiona Mactaggart: Is there not also a movement in your party to go in the other direction, as reflected in the Equality and Diversity (Reform) Bill proposed by ten Conservative Members as a Private Members' Bill last Friday, including Privy Counsellors? I was struck by that. But actually, you know that the way to increase the proportion of women is for them to be selected in seats which are either currently held or very marginal for the Conservative Party. You have told us that if the Conservative Party was in the majority, there would be nearly 60 Conservative women MPs. That means that we really, for the first time for a long time, will have fewer women in Parliament than presently. We have learnt that the Labour Party has selected women for 54 per cent of the seats currently held by male, by sitting MPs. What is the percentage that has been selected in seats where Conservative MPs are retiring which are women?

Mr Cameron: I do not have that figure. What I do know is that when it comes to the marginal seats, the seats that we hope to win, that is the very good percentage, that is why you get to 60 women MPs if we win with a majority of one. So we are very much focused, our whole approach has not been, let us try and just make sure we have a good percentage of women candidates in all seats, our

whole effort the last four years has been: let us make sure in the marginal seats we get a good percentage.

Q454 Fiona Mactaggart: What is the percentage in marginal seats?

Mr Cameron: It is about 30 per cent, I think I am right in saying. It is 33 in the Conservative held seats. But I do want us to go a bit further and faster, and that is why I have said after January, when we move to the by-election procedure, we are going to look at all-women shortlists in some of those seats that may come up, if more MPs decide to stand down.

Q455 Jo Swinson: Conservative Home has estimated the cost of Parliamentary candidacy at £41,500, which chimes with the other evidence that we have received, that is about £10,000 a year. Surely that is a huge barrier to anyone who is not well off, and what will you do to help to overcome that problem for people from a diverse range of backgrounds?

Mr Cameron: I think this is a problem, and if anything, it is getting a bit worse, because we are all, as party leaders, asking our candidates to do more and more things. I do not think there is some easy answer to this, because as we all know, money is short, and suggestions for new ways to spend public money are not exactly flavour of the month. So it seems to me, first of all, do not make it any worse. We must make absolutely clear that candidates must not be required to buy houses in the constituencies they want to represent, or contribute to their Conservative Associations or anything like that. Do not make it any worse; I think that is vitally important. Of course let us look as a party, and we will look as a party, are there procedures we can look at where we can help individual candidates? We have done that, I think, on one or two occasions. I think it is important to recognise that while the costs put forward by Conservative Home, that seems a very big figure, I think if you were, for instance, a local candidate, I do not think the cost would be anything like that. But I do not have an answer to the overall problem, because I do not think some sort of new fund for politics is going to find much favour at the moment.

Q456 Angela Browning: Following on from that, David, do you think the fact that there is this attendant cost to fighting a Parliamentary seat, and for some people it is four or five years, sometimes it is two Parliaments, it is a lot of money, does not that really affect women with childcare costs, women who perhaps have more family responsibilities, women on lower incomes who cannot afford the childcare costs they might otherwise have paid for, and, of course, people with disabilities, for whom campaigning has additional costs. So within the whole, there are some who are affected more than others.

Mr Cameron: On the issue of disability, and the costs of overcoming disability to be a candidate, I think there may well be a case, and we are looking at this, whether there ought to be some specific fund that people with disabilities who want to overcome the problems and be a candidate, I think there is -- I can see specific cases there, and we have some candidates with relatively severe disabilities who I have spoken to about this, and actually I think there may be some progress we could make. On the other issue, I am afraid I do not have the answer. As I say, it is expensive being a candidate; it is less expensive if you are a local candidate, but I do not think there is a case that we can make at the moment for more public spending to help people to be candidates. So I think it is something the parties themselves have to look at, and as I say, we are doing that.

Q457 Miss Kirkbride: It is being suggested that political parties should sign themselves up to openly reporting the candidates they have selected in each seat, and that reporting would form the basis of their gender, their ethnicity, if they have a declared disability, and if they are prepared to

reveal their sexual orientation, or they want to do so. Would you want to sign the Conservative Party up to that?

Mr Cameron: We do not do that with sexual orientation, that is not something we ask our candidates, but we do that in terms of gender, BME candidates and those who register themselves as disabled, we do that anyway. It is obviously something we monitor very closely; I have been keen, as I say, to make progress on this, so my office monitors it regularly. I think all the figures are published anyway, but we are very happy to publish them in a format the Committee would find helpful.

Q458 Mrs Williams: Could I ask you, you mentioned your targets for the 2010 Election, do you have targets for the 2015 and the 2020 General Election?

Mr Cameron: No, I do not. I am taking one step at a time. I have been very focused on the inheritance, which is 18 Conservative women MPs, and what I wanted to achieve, which was something in excess of 30 per cent, and I am just sort of crawling up to that peg and trying to get past it. My view is: (a) you do not give up on this, once we get through the 2010 election, you keep going to make sure you are driving this agenda forward; but (b) I think it will become more self-reinforcing. You know, once you get to a situation where there is not a critical mass, but just more women MPs, more Conservative Members of Parliament from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, the whole process will become easier, because it will become self-reinforcing. Just one last thing: in all of this, to me, the importance of role models, particularly when it comes to the issue of black and minority ethnic candidates, are absolutely vital, and having candidates like Sean Bailey, people like that, people that others can see, if he can do it, so can I, I think role models are as important as some of the issues of quotas and all the rest of it.

Q459 Mr Dhandra: David, the other day I watched "When Boris met Dave" on Channel 4, it was very white and Etonian and all the rest of it. Talking about targets, have you not thought of any targets in terms of your Shadow Cabinet? There are 4.6 million people in this country from an ethnic minority background, yet none in your Shadow Cabinet have a full responsibility shadowing a government department; is that not something that you think is a weakness, something you would want to put right?

Mr Cameron: At the moment, in the Conservative Party, we have two Members of Parliament from a black and minority ethnic background, only two. Both of them are Shadow Ministers, but both were elected at the last election. I think you are being a little unfair, in that Sayeeda Warsi is the first Muslim woman appointed to any Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet, and as far as I am concerned, she has extremely important responsibilities, and is an important spokesperson for the Conservative Party, so much so that when it comes to Thursday night and the Question Time programme, she is the person we are putting forward to take on the loathsome BNP. Would I like to do more? Yes, of course. But we need to get more black and minority ethnic candidates into Parliament on the Conservative side which I am very confident we will do after the next election. In terms of setting a target for the future, of course the one target I have set is to say that if we are fortunate enough to form the next government, by the end of the next Parliament, I want a third of my ministers to be women. I think that is achievable, given the sort of figures we are talking about, and I think that is a good and stretching and sensible target.

Chairman: David, thank you for your time and your evidence, we are extremely grateful to you.

Witness: **Mr Nick Clegg MP**, Leader of the Liberal Democrats, gave evidence.

Q460 Chairman: May I offer a warm welcome to the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg. Nick, you know the form, we look forward to a short opening statement from you, and then there will be an opportunity for members of the Conference to ask you questions.

Mr Clegg: First, thank you very much for holding this hearing. I think it is taking place at a very sort of timely moment. We are all in the middle of a political crisis; the contempt in which politicians and politics is held has never been greater. I think that is compounded by the fact that our Parliament, which pretends to represent modern Britain, does not have modern Britain represented in it. That is something I take very, very seriously, and in the just under two years since I have been Leader, I have certainly tried to move things along sharply to try and change the way we, the Liberal Democrats, are represented as well, because we are woefully unrepresentative of modern Britain. Having looked at it very closely, as far as the Liberal Democrats are concerned, I am absolutely confident there is no kind of systematic barriers of discrimination going on against women candidates, against candidates from black, Asian, minority ethnic backgrounds, candidates with disabilities; in fact, the evidence seems to be that once candidates from those underrepresented groups and communities get through the first hurdle, they do incredibly well. Two thirds of all women candidates on shortlists have been selected; I think of the six seats where Liberal Democrat MPs have said they are going to stand down, four have already selected women. The problem, at least as far as we are concerned, goes further back, it is just not enough women are coming forward in the first place, not enough candidates with disabilities are coming forward in the first place, not enough people from black, Asian, minority ethnic backgrounds are coming forward in the first place.¹ That is the real nub of the problem as far as I can see it, which is that politics as a whole, and perhaps our own internal procedures as well, is just so off-putting to so many people who are not represented in sufficient numbers in this place. How do you tackle it? I would suggest three ways of looking at it. Firstly, what the parties do themselves, I am very keen to answer any questions about what we have been doing. We have done an enormous amount of work over the last two or three years, we have created a sort of fully staffed diversity unit in the party, we have changed the approval process to make it easier for people to become approved candidates in the first place, we have got a new rule in place saying that every shortlist at local level needs to have both men and women on it. We have a Campaign for Gender Balance; we have a New Generation initiative, which has brought together very, very ambitious bright young candidates, and aspirant politicians from black, Asian, minority ethnic backgrounds. So we have done a great deal. Has it gone far enough? No. Am I confident it will make a change after the next General Election? Yes. Will that change be on a scale which is sufficiently large to catch up from where we are, to really be fully representative of modern Britain? Probably not, but I think the progress is certainly sharply in the right direction. Secondly, I think we all have a problem, all parties, with: what happens when you become a candidate, from whatever party? If you are a candidate with disabilities, for instance, you do not get any support for what are called reasonable adjustments in your workplace, which you would do otherwise.² Employers are expected to give you some time off for jury service; that is not the case if you want to stand as a candidate. So I think we need to look at the support we give to candidates. Finally, and perhaps more importantly than anything else, the way this place appears. It just reeks of the 19th century: we have a shooting gallery somewhere, I do not know where, but not a crèche. It is absurd. We do not address each other by each others' names; tomorrow we will have

¹ 8% of approved Liberal Democrat members come from BAME backgrounds. However, some of these candidates are not currently 'active' ie. not wanting to stand for the next election, and certain ethnic groups remain extremely underrepresented. It is therefore necessary to proactively increase our pool of approved potential candidates from these communities.

² Parliamentary candidates are not eligible for financial support for 'reasonable adjustments' whilst campaigning, whereas employees with disabilities are eligible to apply for funding to make these adjustments in the workplace.

PMQs again, the Alice in Wonderland Punch and Judy show. We do not have proper access for people with disabilities. The whole place, I think, is just systematically, from top to toe, off-putting to people who might tentatively be thinking whether they might want to go into politics, but will be put off from doing so by the way in which we do our business here.

Q461 Mrs Cryer: Mr Clegg, thank you very much for your opening comments. But can I also ask you what specific rules you have in your party which will not only encourage and allow women to come through to be candidates, but will actually get them into this place, will actually get them into seats which are very winnable, so that they become Members of Parliament?

Mr Clegg: Well, the rules, as I say, are firstly that all shortlists at local level must have candidates from both genders. I mean, tragically, there are a number of seats where no women have come forward at all. But where that has operated, it is had a dramatic success; as I said, two thirds of the seats where local parties have recently selected their candidates have selected women where women were on the shortlist. So that is working very well. Four out of the six seats which have been vacated by MPs have selected women. We have not pursued the kind of top down approach of quotas and all-women shortlists; we have tried to do it, if you like, from the bottom up. We have changed the rules, we have given support, we have created a fund, if you like, to help women and indeed candidates from other underrepresented communities and groups, and it is having an effect. Certainly if I look at the figures, as I say, of candidates who have been selected, by my reckoning, about 40 per cent of candidates in what we would term to be winnable seats, we cannot perhaps make those predictions with the safety that the Labour and Conservative Parties can, we do not really have this concept of safe, solid seats going back generations, but about 40 per cent of winnable seats now have female candidates.

Q462 Ms Abbott: When you said that the problem is women are not coming forward, it sounded like the sorts of things that people used to say 25 years ago. The truth is, 22 years ago, the Labour Party got four black people into Parliament. Even the Tories got black MPs back in the 1990s. Why is your record on diversity, particularly ethnic minorities and racial diversity, so poor relative to the other two big parties?

Mr Clegg: It is very poor here; it is not actually poor elsewhere; we have a much better record, as you know, at council level than the Labour Party.³ I think you have to look at whether these measures that have been put into place are sustainable or not. Let us take shortlists. If you look at women's representation in the Labour Party, I think of the 16 open contests which happened recently where there is not an all-women shortlist, only one has selected a woman.⁴ Roughly now I think candidates' selection, all three parties, is Even Stevens when it comes to women selection.⁵ I wish it was as easy -- well, as I say, I think at local level, we are doing rather well on that, and we are doing very poorly at Parliamentary level. We do not have a single black, Asian, minority ethnic face on our benches. That is a source of real, real regret to me, and it needs to change. I am hopeful it will change and change dramatically. You mouth "hopeful", Diane; can I guarantee it? No, in a democracy, you cannot guarantee it. Do we have candidates from black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds in seats where I think we can win? Yes.

³ Nick Clegg was referring to the percentage of women councillors when he said that the Liberal Democrats are more representative than Labour at the local level.

⁴ In fact, of the Labour party's most recent 16 open selections, 4 women were selected.

⁵ According to research conducted by the Fabian Society (2008), new selections of women candidates are running at similar rates across the parties

Q463 Angela Browning: Nick, you mentioned about women not coming forward, people with disabilities. Do you think part of that problem could be associated with the costs of candidacy? We have been told at a rough figure it is about £10,000 a year. That obviously affects people who are less well off, women with childcare costs, people with disabilities for whom the cost of campaigning can be more. Have you made any analysis of that?

Mr Clegg: Yes, we have. In fact, I think it was in March of this year we did a full review and commissioned a report on those cases where candidates have given up. We found that particularly for young mothers and young fathers, it was not sort of gender specific, but those with young children, they found it incredibly difficult to balance the competing demands of being a candidate. If you are a candidate, you are not only having to incur often personal financial costs, the time demands are just massive: you are supposed to be fronting the campaign, on the doorstep all the time, you are also doing a lot of work behind the scenes all the time. If I am really honest, I think in some local parties, our local parties, there was evidence in this review that we conducted that some local activists and campaigners bluntly were not sympathetic enough to those competing demands. So there is a financial aspect to it, but there is also a culture change that is required, that if we want people from more diverse backgrounds to represent us in Parliament, then people who campaign alongside them must not expect that they are kind of sort of campaign robots, but they are also human beings with emotional and family demands which they have to keep in play at the same time. Just about a month ago, the leader of Southwark Council, Nick Stanton, who has young children, published a pamphlet which I asked him to do, which looked at the way in which greater understanding could be provided, greater flexibility could be given to candidates at all levels, so they can particularly juggle family life with campaigning duties. But here, I am not sure if we set the right example here. Do MPs have the automatic right to parental leave when they have young children? No, they do not. You need to haggle that with your Whip. Why are we behaving differently to any other person when it comes to parental leave? So I think we need to set an example. We have, as I say, a 19th century shooting gallery but not a 21st century crèche. There are all sorts of things we could do that could make candidates think that if they could get here, they would be treated like human beings as well as MPs.

Q464 Miss Begg: I was very interested to hear what you said about the supply side, the lack of people coming forward with disabilities, and women. To pick up on Diane's point, when the Labour Party suggested all-women shortlists, the cry went out from the grass roots, "It is just the women are not there", but what the all-women shortlists did, it meant that the local parties had to go out and find women. That is the route I came through, I was approached. Can you not think that perhaps, from the Liberal Democrats, that you need that central direction, to what is a very autonomous political party, to actually say, in some cases, you will only select from a shortlist of this type of candidate, because that then forces the local party to go out and look for those candidates?

Mr Clegg: I am not theologically opposed to it. Particularly if we do not make progress in the way that I hope we will after the next General Election, I am certainly keen to look at this. I have said publicly before, for instance, that I think that the legal anomaly, where you can take positive discrimination through all-women shortlists, is not presently -- we do not have that possibility, as far as all shortlists are concerned on ethnicity, I think that needs to change, and I would support that change, to allow political parties to take those measures as well. But is it a panacea? No, it is not. It is not a panacea. If all-women shortlists were a panacea, then we would not have many, many women now deciding to leave politics in the Labour Party; we would not have, as I say, this disproportionate selection of men, where all-women shortlists are not operating in the Labour Party; and we would not have, as I tried to demonstrate earlier, the good progress that we have made, that where women have got through our approval process, in two thirds of the cases, they have been selected as the candidates in those seats. 40 per cent of our winnable seats now have women

candidates in them. So no, I am not theologically opposed to it, I certainly will revisit it if we do not make the progress we want, but the route we have chosen, Diane clearly does not like it, but it is a different route, it is trying to encourage local parties to be more diverse from a bottom up approach. I think it is working, we will see if the results bear fruit after the next General Election.

Chairman: We have a couple more people who want to come in on this question.

Q465 Mr Mahmood: I think you are being a bit disingenuous when you talk about minorities. Over the last 20 years you have managed to field candidates with minority ethnic backgrounds in Labour and Conservative seats but not one in a safe Liberal Democrat seat to get one of them into Parliament. When you talk about these figures and the figures come across about what sort of candidates you put up, you can have all these figures of how many black and minority ethnic candidates you have standing in seats, but over the last 20 years not one of them was in a safe Liberal seat. Why not?

Mr Clegg: Firstly because we do not have safe seats. That is a really important point. We are on a different trajectory as a party. I perfectly understand if you are a member of the older, larger parties where you have this culture of solid seats where if you put a blue or a red rosette you will get elected and re-elected and re-elected over generations, but we just do not have that culture. We have never been able to take any seats for granted. Do I think in the candidates we have now that we have candidates from black, Asian, minority ethnic backgrounds in seats where I am really hopeful that we will win and they will come to this place? Yes, I am. Do I wish it had happened earlier? Of course I do. Do I think we have started too late on some of these things? Yes, I do. A very precise technical example is this: most of our winnable seats select their candidates in the 12 months after a General Election. We do that as a party, I think, earlier than in most other parties because we have tended to have to work much harder and much longer to win seats. I became Leader two years ago and it is a source of regret to me that we did not take action to really try and give support to those candidates who were not sufficiently represented in that crucial 12 month period after the General Election. It is a mistake that I do not intend for us to repeat after the next General Election.

Q466 Andrew George: Do you think the party is handicapped by its enthusiasm to be a decentralised organisation? Other parties are prepared to intervene, to instruct and go beyond cajoling local constituency parties into following through, if you like, central diktat and central objectives. Do you not think there is an opportunity to review the way in which the party, if you like, so enthusiastically embraces decentralisation?

Mr Clegg: We are not a sect where the leader says this and it happens across the country in every single local party. I am proud of the fact that we have this very decentralised grass roots culture. It is push and pull. We have been pushing hard from the centre changing the approval process, insisting on new rules that every shortlist should be gender balanced, putting money, resources and people behind one of the projects I mentioned to you before, the New Generation project, which has got handpicked folk from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities to really give them the mentoring and support and that then joins together with local democracy. I think neutering local democracy is a shortcut. It might create a temporary, one-off shot in the arm, but do I think it creates a sustainable solution to why we in this Parliament are so woefully unrepresentative of modern Britain, I think it is a tempting shortcut but I do not think it would work.

Q467 Mrs Williams: In your answers to Diane Abbott and Andrew George you talked about your success, or lack of success, at local and national levels. Are you saying to us this morning that under your leadership your party needs to take a different approach to the local, regional and national levels?

Mr Clegg: What I was trying to illustrate was that by the measures that we have taken over the last few years we have made significant progress, as I say, in having candidates approved and selected from black, Asian, minority ethnic backgrounds, women candidates and about five per cent of all selected candidates with disabilities, many of whom are now in seats which are winnable. That is a big, big sea change in the way the Liberal Democrats have selected candidates and the way in which we will be more representative of Britain after the next General Election. Do I wish we could have started earlier was the specific point I was making, particularly in those months after the last General Election to then put in place some of the rules we have now got in place, changing the approval process, insisting on balanced shortlists and so on, yes of course I do because that would have been the period of time during which we could have made even more progress. We have made real progress. Some of the indicators I have given to you: two-thirds of the constituencies where there are approved women candidates on the shortlist, they get selected; of the half a dozen MPs who have stood down, four of them have been replaced by women candidates. That is really good progress in the right direction.

Q468 Miss Kirkbride: Are you happy to sign the Liberal Democrats up to openly reporting the candidates who have been selected in all the seats on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, whether they have a declared disability and also if they are forthcoming about their sexual orientation?

Mr Clegg: Yes. We already publish very full reports which we provide to our party Conferences twice every year. I think we have conveyed a lot of those statistics to you already and we would be very happy to make that public.

Chairman: We have got time for a very short last question and a short last answer, if there is such a question.

Q469 Mrs Williams: You talked to us about your targets for the 2010 General Election but have you looked further and do you have targets for 2015 and perhaps 2020?

Mr Clegg: As I say, for example we have got what we call the New Generation project where we have got a cohort, a big group of people, from black, Asian, minority ethnic backgrounds who do not feel that their time is quite right now to jump into the political ring but want to. We have created a fund, a whole system of training, of mentoring, working with them on a one-to-one basis, and we have got fully paid-up staff in a diversity unit in our headquarters here in London. That is really trying to create this new generation, if you like, who will I hope be the place to be leading candidates for us at the election after next and beyond.

Chairman: Nick, thank you for your time and your evidence. Indeed, as our time is now up I would like to reiterate on behalf of the Conference our thanks to all three witnesses - the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the Liberal Democrats - for their time and evidence today. The uncorrected transcript of this meeting will be published on the parliamentary website tomorrow. It might be of interest to people to know that the Conference hopes to publish its final report at the end of the year. Thank you once again. Huge thanks also to those who have taken an interest, whether from the media or the public. Thank you.
