

REMARKS TO UNHCR FORUM, GENEVA

Anne Begg MP

Many thanks for inviting me to contribute to your Forum's important discussions. I was very much looking forward to being in Geneva to talk to you in person about the work of the United Kingdom Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, of which I am Vice-Chairman. However, I am very sorry that I am unable to join you. I am afraid that I am required to be in London where there is considerable business to transact in Parliament before the current session ends on Thursday evening. I wish your Forum every success.

The Speaker's Conference is made up of 18 Members of Parliament, and is chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons himself – something which indicates the great importance that we attach to it. The thinking behind the Conference is the same as that which underlies article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives”. The UK is an increasingly diverse country, and that should be properly reflected in its Parliament

So the Conference has been asked to look into the reasons why there are not more women, disabled people and people from ethnic minority communities in the House of Commons, which is our elected Chamber of Parliament. The Conference's remit is to:

- identify any particular difficulties people in these groups face in becoming Members of Parliament,
- recommend ways of supporting them; and
- suggest ways of tackling those barriers to their success.

The Conference is also looking at issues of representation relating to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

The Speaker's Conference has the support of all the political parties in the House of Commons, and its membership reflects the representation of the different parties in the House. Fifty per cent of the MPs on the Conference are women; the Conference also includes MPs who are of black or minority ethnic origin and MPs who live with injury, illness or disability (IID). We have visited a number of parts of the UK to take evidence, and recently had an historic oral evidence session with the three main party leaders in the UK Parliament, including the Prime Minister – the first time ever such a session has happened.

In July the Conference produced an interim report, which concluded that, despite recent changes, MPs “remain predominantly white, male, middle-aged and middle class.” It says that “many people will look at MPs in the Commons debating chamber and see very few Members who look as if they have lived a similar life or who can speak for them with the authority of shared experience.”

We identified three main reasons why the House of Commons should better reflect the social characteristics of our society.

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

The second reason is **effectiveness**. The House of Commons will work most effectively if it holds within its membership the same diversity of life experiences as are present in wider society.

The third reason is to enhance **Parliament's legitimacy as an institution**. The absence of a wide cross-section of society in the House of Commons can mean that it suffers from a lack of legitimacy.

We also noted evidence both from the UK and from other countries which suggests that socially diverse parliaments establish different priorities for Government action. For instance in the UK it has been noted that, after 1997, when the percentage of women in the House of Commons rose from 9% to 18% of

the total membership, legislation was enacted on the minimum wage, family-friendly flexible working and violence against women.

But change did not happen purely by chance. A small number of the women who stood as Labour candidates in that election were selected by constituencies from all-women shortlists. All-women shortlists were used again by the Labour party in 2005 and will be used for the forthcoming General Election. The Report acknowledges that such measures remain contentious, but goes on to say that “using them ... helped to make the 1997 Parliament very different from its predecessors.”

The Report also notes that all of the main political parties agree that Parliament should be more diverse, and that all have taken some measures to support their commitment to greater diversity and openness in public life. This has resulted in wider diversity of candidates in all parties.

Nevertheless the Conference believed that this was not enough, and that further action to widen diversity should be taken now.

One reason for urgent change was the unprecedented public anger about the financial allowances that have been claimed by some Members of Parliament. Fairly or unfairly, trust in politicians and political parties in the UK has slumped. Data for May 2009 indicates that when participants were asked to rate their trust in the political parties on a scale of 0 to 10, 85.8% gave a rating between 0 and 5; 91.6% gave a rating between 0 and 5 for their trust in politicians.

We said that there was a real danger that, in this furore about allowances, people would lose sight of the importance of democracy. The report urged everyone to “take a step back and consider the fundamental value and importance of Parliament.” Steps needed to be taken to “transform the House of Commons and reassert its legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness as a representative body.”

There are enduring barriers to parliamentary diversity, including a reluctance on the part of parties to nominate women, ethnic minorities and disabled people as candidates for seats which the party either holds, or has a reasonable chance of winning. There is a significant opportunity to make change happen, we said, as substantial numbers of current Members of the House are announcing their intentions to retire before the next general election - to be held before June 2010. The political parties should ensure that the current round of selections for vacant seats results in a diverse list of candidates.

We therefore made a number of specific recommendations about cases where the sitting MP will not contest the general election, including urging all the political parties to commit themselves to:

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

We are continuing to monitor the results of the candidate selection process and are working on a final report, due around the end of the year.

