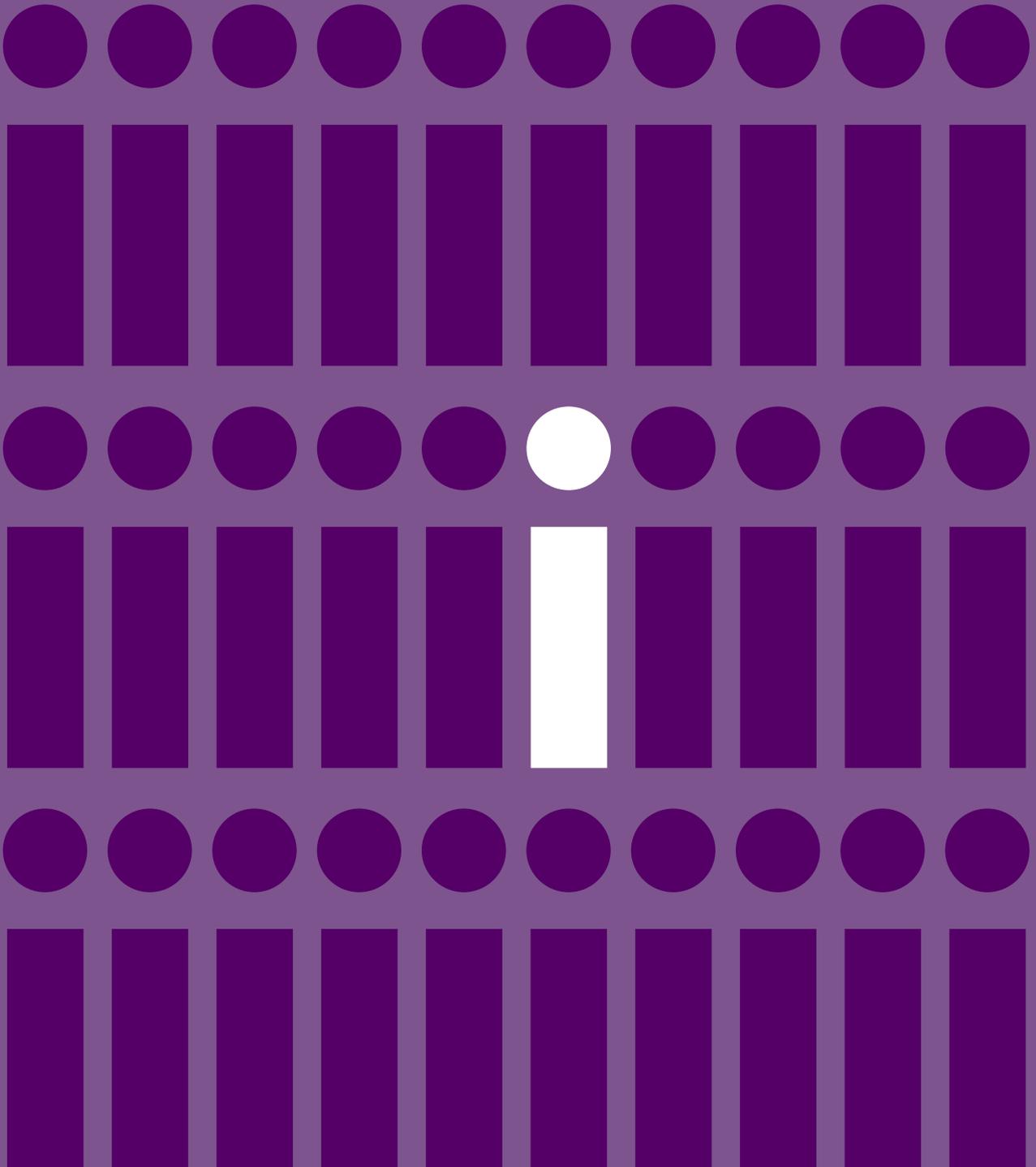


by Peter Riddell

Candidate selection

The report of the commission on candidate selection



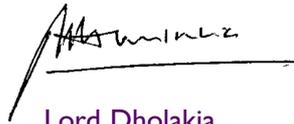
Contents

3	Foreword	
4	Chairman's introduction	
5	Introduction	
		Chapter 1
8	Why candidate selection matters	
		Chapter 2
11	Why does anyone want to be involved in party politics?	
		Chapter 3
13	The meaning of representation	
		Chapter 4
15	Attitudes to representation	
		Chapter 5
17	Candidate selection now	
		Chapter 6
22	The scale of the challenge	
		Chapter 7
31	Local government	
		Chapter 8
33	The way forward	
		Chapter 9
36	Conclusions and recommendations	
42	Principles for candidate selection	
43	From principle to practice	
	Candidate selection guidelines	
	Appendix A	
45	The decline of party membership	
	Appendix B	
47	Recommendations of recent reports	

Foreword

Candidate selection is a vital part of our democratic process – it determines the choice we offer to electors, it affects the representativeness of our institutions and it is a gateway through which our future political leaders must pass. Although all of our parties have made strenuous efforts to improve our candidate selection procedures, we also know that there remains room for improvement.

We therefore welcome this Report. The Commission on Candidate Selection has brought together people of different political views, but with a common interest in making our democracy work effectively. The Report recognises the debates and the different views our parties hold, but it also recognises our common concerns and aspirations. Even if none of us can endorse every proposal the Commission has made, we nevertheless appreciate the thought-provoking contribution it has made to the debate.



Lord Dholakia
President, Liberal Democrat Party



John Dixon
Chair, Plaid Cymru



Dr Winifred Ewing
President, Scottish National Party



Rt Hon Ian McCartney MP
Chairman, Labour Party



Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Chairman, Conservative Party

Chairman's introduction

This report addresses one of the central questions in British politics – the choice of candidates to represent us. There is almost universal agreement that the current range of representatives at all levels is too narrow. This is partly a matter of gender and ethnic background, but as important are occupation, social background and age. The parties are themselves keen to broaden the choice. There is no lack of will or good intentions. But the performance has been patchy. The Commission on Candidate Selection has been examining the reasons why. The experience of those serving on the commission covered service on a local council, leading a major local authority, an elected party officeholder, a parliamentary candidate and service for two decades in the House of Commons. The members included a leading academic on the selection of candidates, the head of a major think tank and a leading opinion pollster. We held a number of seminars with people from all the main parties to discuss problems and possible ways forward.

The report offers a number of principles and practical guidelines which the parties could adopt to assist in broadening the range of candidates. Some proposals involve changes in procedure: others require increases in resources, both to help the parties train and assist candidates and for candidates themselves. Some of the money should come from the taxpayer via the Electoral Commission. But the amounts involved are likely to be relatively modest, certainly given the importance of selecting a wider range of candidates. It is now up to the parties themselves to decide how far they want to take forward these ideas. For unavoidable reasons to do with changes in the secretariat and other calls on the time of myself and other members of the Commission, the process of discussing and drafting the final report has taken much longer than we would have liked. Because of this length of time, some members have had to drop out; for instance, David Lammy was appointed a minister in May 2002, and Meg Russell left us to join the office of the Leader of the House.

Consequently, the best way forward seemed to be to have a chairman's draft. This has been circulated to all members of the Commission. Most back both the thrust and the specific recommendations, others have reservations, but none are committed to the details.

Although the following report is under my name, others have played as large a part in the drafting – notably David Baker, the first secretary to the Commission, and, more recently, Lewis Baston who is largely responsible for pulling together the final version. At an earlier stage, Nigel Forman, a member of the Commission, wrote a draft, for which I am particularly grateful.

The Commission as a whole is very grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which supported much of its work. My thanks go to David Lammy MP and Meg Russell for their work. I am grateful to Ken Ritchie of the Electoral Reform Society for the research and organisation that took place under his auspices, and to everyone who provided information and ideas, from inside and outside the political parties. Dominic Craddock and Ken Ritchie spoke to representatives of parties in other countries, including representatives of the PS and CDH (Belgium), PS and UDF (France), CDA, WVD and PvdA (Netherlands), National and Labour (New Zealand) and CDU and SPD (Germany).

Most of all, I would like to thank all my fellow members of the Commission, namely:

Simon Atkinson
 Martin Bell
 Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart
 Nigel Forman
 Diana Jeuda
 Baroness Maddock
 Professor Patrick Seyd
 Matthew Taylor
 Ed Vaizey

Peter Riddell
 August 2003.

Introduction

The selection of candidates has become a major subject of debate in every political party. The question goes to the heart of the basic character of political parties, the balance between central leadership and control and local democracy and autonomy. Everyone is, of course, legally and constitutionally represented. But do we select and elect the best people? And is it possible to define best? The present system is unsatisfactory and produces too narrow a range of candidates. Each of the main parties has debated possible changes and a number of reports have already appeared from the Fawcett Society, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Institute for Public Policy Research, as well as from individual MPs- addressing candidate selection, notably the continued under-representation of women and of ethnic minorities. Legislation went through both Houses of Parliament in the 2001-02 session; and the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act allows parties to discriminate positively in favour of women candidates, via all-women short-lists and the like. The selection of more women candidates has become a high priority as all the main parties start the selection of candidates for the next general election- though with mixed results so far.

The Commission on Candidate Selection has sought to add to the debate. We discuss wider questions of representation and the declining reach of political parties, which are central to candidate selection. Our report follows a series of seminars with representatives from the main national parties, as well as more informal contacts with those interested and involved.

The need for both this debate and for the Commission's work is illustrated by some stark statistics:

- Just 17.9 per cent of MPs are women. Even after the big increase in 1997, this is much less than in Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and all the Scandinavian countries.

- Just 1.8 per cent of MPs are from the ethnic minorities (against a 7 per cent proportion in the population as a whole).
- Just 8 per cent of MPs, and only 12 per cent of Labour MPs, had a manual working-class occupation before being elected
- Less than 1 per cent of MPs were younger than 30 at the 2001 election, and just 11 per cent were older than 60.
- Conversely, 82.1 per cent of MPs are men, 98.2 per cent are white, 42 per cent previously worked in the professions, and 10 per cent were previously political organisers or advisers.
- Just over 1 per cent of the total population, and 1.5 per cent of the electorate, are members of the three main national political parties.
- Only 32 per cent of the public strongly or fairly strongly identifies with the main parties, down from 46 per cent in 1987.
- Just 59.4 per cent of the registered electorate voted in the 2001 general election, down 12 percentage points from 1997.

These figures add up to a picture of a narrow group of representatives selected by a tiny proportion of the population belonging to parties, for which ever fewer members of the public vote and for whom even fewer people have any feelings of attachment.

One of the main reasons why the candidates selected are still unrepresentative is that the main parties now attract a narrower range and smaller number of members than in the past. This has been recognised by the parties themselves as they have discussed how to attract support in new ways.

The difficulties are not just about gender and ethnic background but also, often inter-linked, social class and occupation. Not only do women find it hard to get selected for safe seats but the difficulties are multiplied if the women are working-class, or Muslim or Afro-Caribbean by background. While much discussion of equal opportunities tends to

concentrate on women and ethnic minorities, we also realise that disabled people, retired people, the young and those who have been disadvantaged in terms of formal education also face formidable barriers to selection as candidates.

Most of the debate has been about broad social groups, but equally important is whether people of wide experience and achievement in all walks of life, all social groups and ages are now deterred both from joining parties and from putting themselves forward as candidates. The reasons for this pattern owe their origins partly to the poor image of party politics, but also to changes in working patterns. How can a poorly paid person, juggling work and family commitments, accumulate enough experience as a party activist to be considered? How can senior executives, with all the pressures of their jobs and the possibility of international relocation, contribute their abilities to the political process? In short, are enough talented people putting themselves forward, and being considered, as candidates?

These problems require a wide range of solutions. Controversial questions arise about national targets and central intervention versus local autonomy and decentralisation. More women, but not yet more ethnic minorities, have been selected for the new devolved assemblies and for the European Parliament. But the devolved bodies were entirely new in 1999 and the electoral system for the European Parliament was changed then also. Starting afresh, and the changed climate in the parties, appears to have been more important in the election of more women than the particular method of election by proportional representation ('PR'). It has proved much harder to broaden the base of selection for the House of Commons, and for local council elections – though this may be more because turnover is low and there are relatively few vacancies than because of the existence of the first-past-the-post system. A conflict of objectives can often arise in pursuing a broader base of representation: not just between centrally driven targets to achieve

increased female and ethnic minority representation and the autonomy of local constituency parties, but also in the need to ensure that pursuit of one goal is not interfering with achievement of another.

We are not seeking to criticise parties for the problems we identify. Most politicians are fully aware of these difficulties and would dearly like to find solutions. Political parties in Britain have taken the lead in reforming their practices and have results to show for their efforts. We believe that a discussion of the issues involved in candidate selection will serve to clarify some of the principles and serve as a starting point for further reforms. We argue strongly that good practice deserves wider support and recognition and that outside financial and practical support should be made available to encourage it.

Our main focus is on the three main national parties: the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The Commission recognises that the nationalist parties, the SNP and Plaid Cymru – as well as the smaller national parties, such as the Greens, have many of the same problems. An over-rigid or over-ambitious set of proposals would, however, be wholly unrealistic for all parties and our recommendations are intended to be flexible enough to cater for them, particularly in Scotland and Wales where nationalist parties form the principal challengers to Labour. In particular, our suggestions for state financed help for training of candidates could help smaller, and financially stretched, parties, as well as the three main national parties.

Politics in Britain depends on the enthusiasm and commitment of a dwindling band of volunteers. The main parties themselves accept the need to broaden their bases of support and the range of candidates standing in their names. They have launched a number of initiatives to increase memberships, with only partial success. But they are constrained by a lack of resources and by social and other changes which discourage mass involvement in party politics.

The Commission discussed at length some of the reasons why people are deterred from joining parties and from putting themselves forward to become candidates. We do not pretend that there is a single or easy solution, or solutions. What we suggest, rather, is a series of proposals intended to help parties and to encourage a wider range of candidates – as part of the wider debate about the reinvigoration of politics. We recognise that there are deep philosophical and ideological differences about some solutions. Members of the Commission, coming as they do from widely differing backgrounds, strongly disagree on questions such as women only short-lists and on the merits of proportional representation. Labour members of the Commission argue not only that women-only short-lists have produced a big increase in the number of women candidates, and MPs, but also that the evidence shows that they are the only means to achieve such a large rise. Conservative members reject this approach as a matter of principle. For them, the priority is finding the best candidate, regardless of his or her background, and seeking to achieve increased female and ethnic minority representation by other means, including training, development and encouragement. But, as discussed below, a minority of Tories believe that the party will have to accept more prescriptive forms of positive discrimination.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 has changed the context in which selection occurs. But it is a permissive step and the key decisions still lie with parties about how far to go down the route of positive discrimination. These arguments are highly charged with tensions between the desire of national leaderships to broaden the base of candidate selection and the frequent resentment of local parties at central interference, allied to the desire of some white, male candidates not to be pushed out by these changes. Despite these disagreements, we believe progress can be made if all parties signed up to a voluntary code of practice for candidate selection.

The report discusses the impact of women only short-lists and PR in broadening the selection of candidates, and increasing the number of women picked – though, as noted above, the role of PR can be much exaggerated compared to changes in culture and attitudes within the main parties. But this is not intended as a collective endorsement of either approach. We set out a linked range of partially overlapping optional solutions starting with exhortation and persuasion and moving via financial incentives, and a suggested code of candidate selection guidelines (incorporating current good practice) to be adopted by all parties, to permissive legislation, and, finally and most controversially, to imposed quotas. Some people, in all parties, would object to the latter, so we accept the parties will follow different approaches. Parties now have a more formal legal status and are subject to a wide range of official regulations. But they remain private organisations and it is up to each party to decide how far it wishes to go. **The Commission believes that a mixture of these methods provides the best way forward. What matters is not so much legal changes, or electoral systems, but the attitudes and practices of the parties themselves. The ultimate verdict lies with voters since, if parties do not select the type of candidates that the public wants, they will wither on the vine. ●**

Chapter I

Why candidate selection matters

The selection of candidates is central to the working of our representative democracy. Candidates are not only the public faces of their parties and the main link in the representative chain between voters and those in power. Candidates selected, and later elected as members of the Commons, as members of devolved parliaments and assemblies, also make laws on our behalf, and provide the ministers in national and sub-national governments. Selection as a candidate is the necessary first step towards being elected to the House of Commons and these other elected bodies. Representative bodies at whatever level need to recruit talented people from all sections of society and all walks of life, rather than from a narrow range of middle aged, mainly white male and middle class professionals, as is predominantly the case today. If a broader range of high quality people from all sections of the community can be selected, and elected, then public respect for our political system may recover and satisfaction with what government does may also revive. Even though both Houses rejected direct election to a reformed House of Lords in votes in February 2003, it is common ground that the alternative of appointment (or, even, indirect election from devolved bodies) should aim for a much wider gender, ethnic and regional balance than at present.

Moreover, the methods used to select candidates also determine the relationship between parties and the electorate. In most cases, as will be seen, selection is in the hands of parties and their relatively small groups of members. Voters themselves have to choose between candidates picked by these small groups, and, under the first-past-the-post system, the outcome in the vast majority of constituencies is a foregone conclusion. Only in certain versions of open list proportional representation, or where primary ballots are used to pick candidates, does a wider group of voters have a real influence- in turn weakening the say of the inner core of party activists.

The selection of candidates is one of the main opportunities for individual party members to make choices with a decisive and lasting political impact. The choice of candidate can determine who represents a constituency for two decades or more, and who has a chance to make a career in the House of Commons. Yet, in practice, the choice of candidates offered to local party members is often very limited. Differ though they do on possible solutions, the parties all agree that there are significant and intractable weaknesses in the ways in which they select their candidates. Attempts to increase the number of women candidates stalled at the 2001 general election after the big advance in 1997, while the number of candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds selected, let alone elected, remains tiny.

Moreover, concerns about the health of our party system, and hence of our democracy, were reinforced by the sharp drop in turnout in the 2001 general election to the lowest level since the arrival of the mass franchise in 1918. This decline cannot simply be explained by the fact that the outcome of the election was a foregone conclusion. Candidates from all parties reported a broader disillusionment with conventional party politics, particularly among young people, and among those involved in various single issue groups on the environment and against globalisation. The low turnout- reflected also in the 1999 European elections and in local council elections- raised questions about the democratic legitimacy of those elected.

MORI polls have shown that three-quarters of the public do not trust politicians in general. But people who have direct experience of dealing with their local MP tend to rate him or her as a constituency MP higher than politicians or MPs generally. The annual British Social Attitudes survey has also recorded not only a decline in the numbers strongly identifying with the main parties, but also a low level of trust in government and politicians. Roughly a quarter of the public believes that parties are

only interested in peoples' votes, not in their opinions and think that 'generally speaking, those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly'. Both proportions have remained stable since the mid-1990s.

Membership of political parties has declined steadily since the 1950s and 1960s. Attempts by the parties to attract new members have only had a limited success, despite changes to involve members in party decisions and in ballots over the choice of party leaders. Recruiting drives by both the Conservative and Labour parties over the past decade have produced only short-term gains, well short of published targets. These increases have soon petered out and, particularly in the case of Labour, have been reversed. This has left the memberships of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties combined equivalent to about 1.5 per cent of the total electorate. Even fewer people usually take part in the selection of candidates. Party memberships consisting of just over one elector in a hundred are unlikely to be representative of the population as a whole. Consequently, candidates are selected by a narrow and unrepresentative base of people, and this is reflected in the type of candidates selected. The increasing demands put upon people at work make it harder to make the transition into elected office and full-time politics. So the central questions for the Commission have been: is there a sufficient range and quality of elected representatives at all levels and, if not, what practical steps can be done to improve the situation?

This immediately raises questions about the traditional freedom of political parties to set their own internal rules and procedures. These rights have traditionally overridden any broader notion of the wider public interest, however defined. But increasing concerns about the health of our democracy may now outweigh the private interests of the parties. This line has already been crossed with the formal registration of parties for the first time and, in

particular, by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA) of 2000. PERA greatly extended state regulation of the activities of parties, particularly during elections, as well as over their revenue raising and expenditure. So the main national parties are no longer voluntary bodies unrecognised in the law and not subject to regulations and controls. However, this needs to be balanced against the danger of excessive government control and interference, of parties being appropriated by the state, not as crudely as in totalitarian countries but through a creeping co-ordination emanating from Whitehall.

The Commission has had to consider whether the ways in which candidates are selected should any longer be regarded as purely internal matters of no concern to the wider public. After all, the decisions of local parties have a significant, lasting impact on the membership of the Commons, and, hence, on the composition of ministerial and shadow ministerial teams. Since a majority of seats remain "safe" for the incumbent party, the party selectorates, rather than the constituency electorates, effectively determine the composition of much of the House of Commons. The choice for voters is only from among a narrow range of candidates chosen by small groups of party members. In the first-past-the-post system for election to the House of Commons selection is tantamount to election in a majority of constituencies. The Commission was also aware that practice on the ground may differ in important respects from the procedural fairness that is laid down in party rulebooks nationally. The procedure itself may be modified to promote or impede the chances of obtaining a particular outcome – as, for instance, it was in the Labour selection of the 2000 candidate for London mayor. It is impossible to go for long in politics without hearing tell of 'stitch-ups' and rule-bending in candidate selection, some well-publicised and some remaining behind the scenes.

A key distinction is between formal procedures and outcomes. The former can be fair but are seen as

producing unfair and unrepresentative outcomes. The Commission did not only discuss whether candidate selection procedures are fair in themselves. An equally pertinent question is whether the outcomes are representative. Does it matter if our legislators are insufficiently representative of the general public- of women, ethnic minorities, the disabled, the non-middle-aged and people in low paid or part-time jobs? In terms of individual constituencies, clearly women can be effectively represented by men, white people by a black MP, and a 25-year old MP can speak for pensioner constituents. The constituency system indeed depends on this general concept of representation. But what may in individual constituencies be fair and rational can produce an overall outcome which, in aggregate, results in the under-representation of important groups. Parliament corporately represents the nation as a whole, as well as an aggregation of constituencies, and when it presents this face it is not unreasonable for it to 'look like Britain'. An unrepresentative parliament in this sense sends a message that neglected groups are excluded from society, not taken seriously as leadership figures. It therefore contributes to political alienation and possibly more general disaffection. The Labour Representation Committee was formed in 1900 to put working men into parliament, because no matter how sympathetic middle and upper class MPs of the other parties might be, there was a valid feeling that something was lacking in parliament and that the working class deserved the dignity of direct representation. The same claim can be advanced by several groups – including, once again, manual workers – today. Lack of diverse representation may also result in policy and debates suffering from a narrowing of horizons. Public policy benefits from taking into account all the relevant criteria there may be, and in broadening the social and occupational base in parliament. But several social groups are at a disadvantage in entering and winning individual selection battles, which require contacts, energy, time and financial resources. There are also cultural and social barriers which may deter all but the

most dedicated from having the commitment to go through the endurance test of selection. The very people who may have most to offer as political representatives, such as community leaders and activists, may not be prepared to devote the time and energy a selection contest requires, whether or not they receive the encouragement of local parties. Squaring the circle involves combining procedural fairness so that the best can come through, whoever they are, with an aggregate outcome that is fair to all in society.

Party selectorates often expect candidates to have gone through traditional hoops (almost rites of passage)- length of party service, door-to-door campaigning, service as a local councillor and fighting a "hopeless" seat. These are commonly seen as a prerequisite for selection as a candidate in a winnable seat. Such criteria- and evidence of personal commitment and party loyalty- are important. But they should not be the sole criteria, especially if they discourage people with local credentials and a background outside mainstream party politics from becoming candidates. Labour's handbook for aspiring candidates refers to the importance of getting to know "key opinion leaders in local community organisations". Parties, however, need to see local opinion leaders not just as sources of support, but also as potential candidates in their own right. A wide range of personalities, characters and interests exists at Westminster and in other elected bodies: and a good thing too. Uniformity of background or opinion is undesirable. But existing party procedures do not deliver a broad enough range of representation. Would, for example, a change in the electoral system produce a more representative range of candidates from which voters could choose? How could party structures and procedures be reformed to attract a wider range and higher calibre of candidates? **In time, the shortcomings in the present system of candidate selection may exacerbate existing public doubts about our representative institutions, and about British political life as a whole. ●**

Chapter 2

Why does anyone want to be involved in party politics?

The question of why anyone should want to be a political candidate is inextricably tied to the prior issue of why anyone wants to be involved in party politics at all. This is as important as improving the procedures for improving candidate selection, but admits of even fewer easy answers.

Within memory the political parties were mass membership organisations with a pervasive influence on social and community life in many parts of the country. The two big parties numbered their membership in millions. Total membership of the three main national parties in Britain is now less than 700,000 and efforts to reverse the decline have struggled even to slow the trend except in the short term. As a percentage of the electorate, this share of around 1.5 per cent is at the bottom end of the European range. It is slightly higher than in France and half the proportion in Germany and Spain but well below the 6 per cent in Sweden, 7 per cent in Belgium and the 18 per cent in Austria. There are a variety of explanations for the long-run fall in membership of the main parties in Britain and elsewhere, which we note here briefly but explore in more depth in Appendix A.

Among the factors which have undermined party membership are:

- **Social diversity** – the single-class, closely knit communities that bred strong party ties have become rare.
- **Competition for leisure time** from an increasingly broad range of pursuits
- Increasingly onerous and unpredictable **demands on time from employment**, which prevent potential activists from committing themselves to voluntary local party office.
- **Weaker partisan feelings** in the electorate at large – the proportion of people who identify strongly with a party has fallen below one third, having been nearly half even in the 1980s.
- **Single issue politics** competes for political energies; it speaks to issues that the parties do not,

and reflects the passionate but transient nature of many people's enthusiasms better than the long haul of party activism.

- Party politics has an **image problem** – allegedly boring and faction-ridden at local level, and blinkered and point-scoring nationally.
- **Media coverage** has tended to belittle and trivialise the activities of the parties.
- Many people believe that **global trends** have rendered old-style political activity increasingly powerless and irrelevant.
- **Modern campaigning** increasingly depends on national media strategies, polling and even telephone canvassing banks, and activists feel powerless and neglected.
- **Local government**, which is the traditional focus of local party organisation, has declined in power and significance.

Political involvement is a voluntary activity without obvious or immediate rewards or benefits to the individual, as it was not necessarily in the age of mass parties when they had a prominent social, community and even economic role. To a large extent, therefore, party membership depends upon people being prepared to act for altruistic motives. Most party members are people who recognise that their own contributions to a party's success or failure are negligible; but who become involved out of a sense of tribal loyalty, emotional attachment or idealistic conviction in the belief/hope that they can make a difference, particularly at a local level. Some among them enjoy the process of politics – enjoyment of political debate and discussion, meeting like-minded people, feeling part of a larger cause and campaigning. Rather more unusually, but still an increasing element, involve themselves in party politics because they regard it as the beginning of a professional career in politics, although this mainly applies to a relatively small group of political groupies who have started out in student politics. Motives, as in most endeavours, are mixed – idealism, ambition, and self-interest all play a part. But can party politics still inspire and attract enough

people to work altruistically for such causes via political parties, as opposed to single issue and community groups?

The Conservative Party has taken steps to give supporters more incentives to become and remain members. Members now have the right to be involved in ranking candidates for the European Parliament, selecting their candidate for London Mayor and, above all, voting in the ballot for the election of the party leader (as 80 per cent of them did in September 2001). However, ambitions to achieve a membership of 1 million, as William Hague had hoped, have fallen far short and the party only has something like 330,000 members. The failure to boost membership is even more striking in the Labour Party. In the first flush of New Labour the total rose to a peak of 400,000 in 1996, but it is now less than 270,000. Even those members who have been recruited have been different from existing activists. Patrick Seyd of the University of Sheffield has shown how since 1994 the Labour Party has recruited a new type of member, willing to identify with and give money to the party, yet happy to let others take care of the routine chores.

British parties are not the only ones in Europe to have experienced declining party memberships. Only Sweden, Belgium and Austria stand out with significantly higher levels of party membership. But that can be explained largely by the social cohesion produced by the corporatism of their societies in which party membership is closely tied to patronage and jobs, and promotion, in the public sector. This means of shoring up party membership runs the risk, as in Belgium and Austria, of fostering an even more corrosive public cynicism about the political process than exists in Britain.

However, despite all the problems that exist, parties remain a central feature of the political landscape, and vital for the functioning of representative democracy. Any thought of dismissing them as

anachronisms is misplaced. The absence of parties, or weak parties, would produce even greater problems. The cohesion that parties produce is essential, however much they are supplemented by newer mechanisms of direct democracy such as referendums and citizens' juries. In our parliamentary system, no Government could pursue a sustained and sensible line of policy, especially one which was unpopular, without the backing of effective party discipline. The large parties prevent politics from degenerating into a mere competition of sectional interests. Strong parties are essential to deliver on the agenda of increased representation for women, people from ethnic minorities and the socially excluded. At local level, parties can be crucial mobilisers of public opinion on issues of common concern and their efforts can increase participation. As Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley have argued, local members provide channels of communication between political leaders and voters by helping to mobilise the vote at elections and helping to recruit and train future political leaders- whether councillors, school governors or magistrates, as well as MPs. In many cases, local party members are the first point of contact to the activists and candidates of the future. The voluntary activities of local members are vital for the functioning of democracy.

Political parties cannot be left to wither away. It is up to the parties to justify their essential and powerful position by putting their own houses in order and by reforming their structures and procedures to improve the breadth and quality of candidates that they select. But it is also up to opinion formers, the government and society in general to recognise and support the role of parties within the political system in general. **Consequently, reforming the procedures and operations of parties is central to the functioning and health of our democracy. Making membership of parties more attractive is a necessary pre-condition for improving and broadening the selection of candidates. ●**

Chapter 3

The meaning of representation

There is no consensus about the nature of representation. Selection procedures vary enormously between countries – some very centralised and some localised – because of different theories of representation. Many of the participants on selection committees, and candidates themselves, operate more on the basis of habit, instinct and tradition than clearly thought out views of what representation entails. The contrasting, and often conflicting, views contribute greatly to the confusion and shortcomings in the ways that candidates are selected. This chapter discusses the various theories which underlie the practice of representation.

In Britain, a candidate is elected to represent all the people in a constituency or ward- whether or not such people bothered to vote and regardless of whether they backed the person elected. This has become a cardinal principle of our system, making a representative not only a party figure but also a non-partisan one in speaking for the whole constituency. MPs can often be heard of speaking of “my” constituency, as if they had a freehold rather than a leasehold on representation. While lacking in due humility, this language reflects a widespread sense of what representation means. Occasionally, there are complaints of exclusion from constituents, but these are unusual. However, in Scotland and Wales these conventions have splintered, as people in any area are represented by both constituency and regional list members, drawn from several different parties. This creates the opportunity for other forms of diversity. The existence of PR gives parties a powerful incentive to present more balanced slates of candidates in a deliberate effort to broaden their appeal. This Commission has not been concerned with the pros and cons of PR, on which we have different views. But elections under almost all the many variants of PR have produced a wider variety of candidates, particularly more women as international comparisons demonstrate.

There are two main approaches to political representation:

First, the House of Commons and other elected assemblies exist to sustain, criticise and control the party or parties elected to form the government. This is the classic Whig **governmental** view, dating back to the constitutional debates of the 17th and 18th centuries. There is an implicit contract between government and people whereby MPs and councillors act as intermediaries to deliberate on behalf of the public.

Second, elected bodies exist to reflect the balance of various groups and interests in society. This **representative** view is that any elected assembly exists to represent and reflect public interests and opinions in proportion (ideally in exact proportion) to the composition of society. This implies that governments should be coalitions, since the House of Commons and other elected bodies would consist of a rainbow coalition, representing every section of society in proportion to their size. On this view, the prime role of elected representatives should be as tribunes of their constituents.

The former view is naturally attractive to the leadership of large parties that can aspire to steer the ship of state. It has also tended to be associated with support for the first-past-the-post electoral system which, it is argued, produces strong and accountable government. The latter view has been more the province of smaller parties and external commentators, although it has sympathy among the large parties that goes beyond the ‘awkward squad’. In its internal logic it has much in common with arguments for electoral reform. But paradoxically, several proportional systems involve very centralised selection procedures controlled by party professionals while first-past-the-post can give local parties considerable autonomy. In practice, there has been a mixture of the two views since the franchise started to be extended in the 19th century, and striking a balance between them is an

assumption in most discussions of the role of parliament.

It is not necessary to move to a form of PR for Westminster and local government elections to achieve a more representative House of Commons and more representative council chambers. Much can be achieved under a first-past-the-post system if parties change their attitudes and procedures and broaden the bases of their memberships and of candidate selection- and the recommendations in this report are directed to these ends.

There are a number of different aspects of representation which voters expect MPs and councillors to fulfil. "Party political" representation is valued most by local parties and is usually uppermost in the minds of electors at election time, but is not valued by those who did not vote for the candidate. The claim that a representative is putting party interests before those of the constituency as a whole is a damaging one. MPs also get involved in taking up interests or causes because they are persuaded of their merits, rather than because of any big local interest or previous association. This "virtual" representation is distinct from "functional" representation when a politician who has been a trade unionist or landowner advances these interests. These include the "symbolic" function where an elected person represents an entire community at a funeral or ceremonial occasion, like the opening of a new school or hospital. A linked category is "sympathetic" representation, when a politician publicly associates himself or herself with a charity or other campaigning group by becoming a patron or honorary vice president. Then, there is "official" representation when an MP, councillor or minister represents their country at an international conference or national conference. The most familiar is "territorial" representation where an MP or councillor represents all their constituents, often working in conjunction with neighbouring MPs or councillors, sometimes from different parties over, say, a factory closure or new inward investment.

During a political career- or even a single week- an elected politician is likely to fulfil most or all of these roles, often simultaneously. Such is the multiplicity of representation. Because the UK does not have a formal separation of powers, ministers have to combine the often conflicting roles of representing their constituents and deciding issues in the interests of the whole country. This is one of the reasons why political representation is so difficult and candidate selection is so important. This multiplicity of roles is unlike, say, France where ministers stand down from the *Assemblée nationale* once they are appointed to executive office and the USA where no member of the Senate or House of Representatives can simultaneously be a member of the administration. The concept of separation of powers has been brought into local authority governance with the Local Government Act 2000, which created a formal distinction between a minority of executive and a majority of representative councillors. The majority acting solely as representatives look after their constituents' interests, raise their grievances and hold their executive colleagues (who have their own representative role too) to account. There is a lot of evidence that this bifurcation of roles has not worked entirely satisfactorily.

A distinction exists in the House of Commons between frontbenchers and backbenchers, though the former still, of course, represent their constituents. Yet, for all the increased workload, most British ministers still value the constituency link to remind them of the immediate concerns of the public. This is not just a reminder of political mortality but also a recognition that MPs go through a range of roles in their time in the Commons, combining time on the back benches, involvement on standing committees and, then perhaps, time on select committees or government office. This is of direct relevance to selection since, while prospective candidates may differ in their potential, they are not being selected solely for one role or another since they are likely to have to perform each and every one at some stage. ●

Chapter 4

Attitudes to representation

The public's views on representation are not clear cut. Voters themselves do not have strong views about the way candidates are chosen, but they do have views about what they want their representatives to be like. According to MORI polls over several years, the public distinguishes between Parliament as an institution, and politicians in general, and their own local MP or councillor. The latter are more highly rated than the former. The public believes there is scope for improving the way that we are governed, but takes a more favourable view of representatives individually.

When people are asked to rank the characteristics they value in their elected representatives, honesty is rated highest, followed by trustworthiness, accessibility and competence. Fewer than a quarter cite experience as one of the three most important attributes in an elected politician, which suggests that the long apprenticeships valued by many party activists do not make much of an impact on voters. Other desirable attributes include independence, understanding, personality, intelligence, availability and integrity. Saints, please apply.

The public is much more interested in having effective representatives with integrity who can deliver outcomes of which people approve than enthusiasts for the processes of politics. The games of Westminster baffle and bore voters. This can be described as a pragmatic attitude – not in fact too dissimilar from the factors which weigh heavily with most party activists when selecting a candidate.

Ordinary people not involved in politics are either indifferent to internal party feuds or can react negatively to the priority which politicians and activists place upon party loyalty. It is loyalty to the constituency as a whole that the public wants to see in candidates and, in that context, the choice of a genuinely local candidate with authentic local roots is nearly always astute politics as well. In recent local government elections, particularly for executive mayors, independent candidates and locally based

political organisations have enjoyed remarkable success. Local politics in previously solid Labour areas like Mansfield and Stoke-on-Trent has never been so interesting. Nor is it a revolt against one-party dominance, as the independent victory in the mayoral election in three-way marginal Bedford has shown. These trends have been strongest in local government elections, but have started to be apparent in elections for the Westminster Parliament (Wyre Forest, 2001) and the Scottish Parliament (Strathkelvin & Bearsden, 2003). But there is still a considerable distinction between electing a local mayor and a national representative.

One of the common fallacies of elected representation in a large democracy is that people could, or should, expect to choose as their candidate “someone like me”. On the one hand, this instinct underlines the natural human desire to be represented by someone to whom one can easily relate and whose personal experience has been similar to one's own. On the other hand, both opinion poll and anecdotal evidence suggests that people are looking for someone who can credibly promise to get things done for the locality. Neither voters generally nor party members any longer defer to their councillor or MP.

The public's ideal of representation, if seldom articulated clearly, can differ from that of the parties and political professionals. Voters seem to prefer candidates who are prepared to adopt a consensual approach to political behaviour in Parliament, the council chamber and media studios while selectorates and party professionals are more attached to an adversarial approach. For instance, William Hague was widely praised by his own MPs and by Tory activists by his combative performances against Tony Blair in the Commons. But there is little evidence that such battling partisan combats went down well with the less committed voters whom the Tories needed to attract. As Mr Hague acknowledged in July 2001 before he stood down as Conservative leader, these parliamentary per-

performances had done him little good. At a local level, any experienced MP knows that the key to success in their constituencies is appearing non-partisan and almost apolitical between election campaigns.

There is already some evidence from focus groups organised by the Fawcett Society suggesting that in Scotland and Wales women voters were pleased that a significant number of women had been elected as MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) and AMs (Welsh Assembly Members), and hoped that they might help to change the style of political debate in the devolved assemblies. A MORI poll in April 2002 for the British Council showed that a third of the public think female politicians are more effective than male ones in improving the lives of women, though more than half think female and male politicians are about the same. Of those saying that women are more effective, two-thirds mention that women are more in line with female thinking, their maternal instincts and what women want. At Westminster, surveys of the sizeable new intake of women Labour MPs in 1997 showed that many felt that their presence had helped to raise the profile of issues such as child poverty, reform of the Child Support Agency, child care and maternity grants. Moreover, a third of women MPs surveyed said that in their experience women constituents had raised issues with them which they would not have felt confident doing with a male MP.

There is no real consensus about what constitutes an effective political representative, particularly in the House of Commons. This is partly because there is no agreed job description of what an MP does, while the role can, and does, vary between individual members and during a career in the Commons. Voters may like and approve of part of what their MP does, but not the rest. So there is bound to be confusion about the nature of representation. ●

Chapter 5

Candidate selection now

The three main national parties each have their own distinctive procedures for selecting candidates. But the broad similarities are more striking than the detailed contrasts- with the notable exception of policies on the selection of women candidates (as set out in Chapter 6 and the summary of the Fawcett report in Appendix B). Otherwise, there has been a significant degree of convergence between selection procedures which all now combine national lists of centrally approved candidates with considerable local autonomy in the final choice of candidate. Final choices in parliamentary elections are now made on a one member-one vote basis, as Labour has eliminated the trade union block vote in local selections, though the unions often retain a key influence in nominations. Each party has experienced tensions between central preferences and local pressures. However, for the devolved assemblies procedures for picking candidates for the party lists have varied considerably.

The two key stages in the process are, first, the drawing up of a centrally approved list of candidates, and, second, selection by local constituency parties, or larger party groups in the case of elections involving PR where a ranking of candidates for party lists is required. To a considerable extent the two stages outlined above are in tension. The central list is intended both to be inclusive (for instance, more women, people from ethnic minorities and those with careers outside politics) and to be exclusive (of those whom the national leadership regards as lacking the necessary abilities, or more controversially as being "extreme" or "unreliable"). In both cases the national list is often meant to offset the tendency of local parties not to pick those whom the national leadership have included and to like some of those whom the centre would rather exclude.

An important question is: can or should national parties instruct and/or require, as opposed to just advise or encourage, local constituency associations to select a broader range of candidates? Is having a

broader list of approved candidates, of whom a half, say, are women, enough? But it is necessary to go back a step and look at why some people want to become candidates in the first place.

Candidates are, by definition, unusual, with atypical motives and expectations. Many are more ideologically driven compared with the public generally. In an era when the life of politics has become more full time and professional, they are likely to be very ambitious personally (despite all their declarations of public service). Many have an unusual level of personal self-confidence and self-belief, which some would describe as vanity and self-importance. A surprising number come from political families or dynasties (the Benns, the Cryers, the Bottomleys, the Cecils, the Hurds and others). No doubt this is partly because such people find it easier to make political contacts, and therefore gravitate towards the world of representative politics.

Many aspiring candidates are highly motivated individuals who see themselves embarking upon a path which, they hope, may lead to the House of Commons, even one day ministerial office, as a way to influence events, to make a positive difference, and to achieve policy goals. A commitment to public service should also not be under-rated. Usually, it is a mixture of all these motives. Political candidates are not like other people and not even necessarily like members of the selection committees that choose them. There is familiar progression for the keen, and the willing, from branch or ward office, to standing as a councillor. The next big step is seeking to get on the centrally approved list and fighting a hopeless seat. After that it becomes much trickier and this is the critical stage when many promising potential candidates (particularly women and ethnic minorities) are often rejected and lose heart. In contrast, there also seems to be a fast track that leads straight from a position as a protégé of the existing leadership or (in the Labour Party) a powerful trade union to a safe seat without the intervening stages of struggle and rejection.

All three main parties offer training and encouragement to women and ethnic minority members who show interest in becoming candidates, particularly those who get on to the approved list of candidates. But several party officials and candidates told the Commission about problems over lack of resources, only partly offset by networking organisations like Emily's List. This is an important area where additional help could be provided (see Appendix B on the Fawcett Society's findings in this area).

There appears to be less effort to recruit poorer people who find it harder to be involved, and a corresponding trend in the pattern of representation. Now only one in eight Labour MPs are drawn from manual occupations, virtually the same as former school teachers, with those classified as career politicians or political organisers not far behind, according to the authoritative studies of Byron Criddle.

Part of the reason for the concentration of the shrinking pool of candidates in particular occupations is simply that these jobs allow time and flexibility to enable people to participate. While the parties need to examine how to make themselves more attractive and relevant to members of the public, enabling participation in the democratic process is a neglected aspect of corporate social responsibility. Even within the public sector there are examples of organisations deliberately making it difficult for employees to serve on local authorities.

Another part of the reason is that party political activity, like any other form of social interaction, has its own distinctive culture, and local party organisations all have their own idiosyncratic cultures and practices. Some of their practices, particularly formality, jargon and discussion of abstruse local issues, can be off-putting for newcomers or for those who wish to join them, even for those transferring from another branch of the same party outside the local area. The days of aspirant members of inner city constituency Labour parties being told that the membership list was 'full' are over, but many local

parties still give the impression of being inward looking and comfortable with routines. So despite good intentions at a national level about being open and inclusive, the reality can be the opposite. Members can rapidly be put off, or feel that they have to understand every nuance of 'the way we do things here' to participate in candidate selection. Despite the change in procedures in all three main parties towards one member-one vote, often only a minority of party members, let alone constituents, are present either at hustings or the final selection meeting to hear the candidates speak and answer questions.

The culture of local parties, and their domination by a minority of enthusiasts, can, in practice, undermine the formal openness of one member/one vote principles. Formal requirements to be a candidate may not seem restrictive: for instance, a minimal period of membership of the party. But, in practice, local selection committees may- and often- have more demanding informal requirements, such as evidence of party activism or links to a particular faction or ideological position. But these informal criteria may exclude a large number of people with considerable experience of public life outside the mainstream parties in local campaigning and issues such as poverty and the environment, and in voluntary bodies. There is a strong case for some form of strategic vision, emanating from the centre, to co-ordinate local selections.

However, intervention by the central party organisation in the mechanisms of local choice has long been a cause of friction within political parties and can often backfire on what is seen as a 'control-freak' party headquarters. There was controversy in Scotland in 1999 over the exclusion of Dennis Canavan, then a Westminster MP, from the list of approved Labour candidates for the Scottish Parliament. He then stood as an independent and won by a big margin. The criteria by which Canavan was allegedly unsuitable to stand for Labour in the Scottish Parliament election were far from clear

and the procedure gave the impression of being driven by a covert agenda against an MP who had distinguished himself as awkward and independent. The spirit if not also the letter of the prescribed procedure was not followed. In the London mayoral election of 2000, the Labour selection procedure itself was designed with an outcome in mind – the defeat of Ken Livingstone, who had earlier been the target of an effort to exclude him altogether, despite his high level of support from London Labour Party members. The contrast between the Labour government's agenda of devolving power, and the party leadership's centralising behaviour, has been much noted.

The case of John Marek in 2003 was different. Marek was deselected as Labour AM for Wrexham because of a conflict that had developed with some members of his local constituency party. There have been similar cases in the past; in some of them, like Frank Field in Birkenhead or Liz Davies in Leeds, the local party's choice has been overridden, but in rather more it has been upheld. In general, at least ostensibly, decisions on appeals are made on procedural rather than personal or political grounds.

Selection procedure has always been a contested area within the Labour Party and there are frequent complaints that what goes on at ground level is very different from the ideal picture prescribed in the party rules. Favouritism and machine politics can rule locally – municipal, personal, ideological or trade union interests can all form combinations with an interest in promoting one candidate over others who may be better qualified. Particularly when a favourite has his (rarely her) feet already under the table, undesirable practices like making membership lists available only selectively to aspirants have been known to take place. It is often felt that the provisions requiring shortlists to contain a woman or a member of an ethnic minority are subverted by placing a deliberately weak token candidate, deprived of assistance, to face more favoured white men in the final round.

Nevertheless, the Labour Party nationally (and in many localities) has tried hard to combat unfair selection practices such as these, and does tend to plug loopholes when they are noticed. One such technique has been last-minute selection after an MP stands down just before an election; previously a means by which a favourite son could be fast-tracked into Parliament, this situation now leads to a women only short list. Labour cannot afford to be complacent. There is a risk, having done so well on gender equality for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, that the process/ outcome dichotomy will work the other way; that while the overall outcome may be fair, it may be the product of local processes that do not bear close inspection.

The way the Conservative Party has classically operated underlines the conflict between formal procedures and actual outcomes. The former may be fair, but there have been widespread complaints that the procedures tend to favour "successful middle-aged white men with presentable wives". Several witnesses criticised the Conservative Party's Parliamentary Selection Board which decides whether someone gets onto the national list of approved candidates. Some felt that the procedures at country-house or hotel weekends were too focussed on debating skills and the traditional techniques of adversarial politics. This process was originally based on selection procedures for army officers which were intended to test character, attitudes and steadiness under fire, so it is perhaps not surprising that public school educated males have done well over the years.

Since the 2001 election in particular, the Conservative Party under its Chairman Theresa May has changed the way that its candidate selection procedure is organised. The central Parliamentary Selection Board now uses an occupational psychologist to measure prospective candidates' ability at public speaking, as well as inter-personal, listening and campaigning skills. According to Mrs May, the aim has to been to ask; "What is the

job of being an MP? What skills do you need to have in order to do that job? And, let's assess people against their skills". Candidates are assessed on six core competences: communication skills, intellectual skills, relating to people, leading and motivating, resilience, and drive and political conviction. Individuals are put through a number of exercises based upon these skills, including an interview, a public-speaking assessment and psychometric tests. Parties have traditionally been resistant to such tests because they have felt political life is so different from business or other jobs and that nothing could usefully be learnt from vocational testing.

At constituency level in the Conservative Party, there is often little opportunity for short-listed candidates to get to know party members and demonstrate the abilities that got him or her on the central list in the first place. Most of the emphasis is on the candidate's speech and answers to questions at a selection meeting; a strong performance there can give a lucky candidate a job for life, sometimes much to the regret of their constituency party in calmer moments. There is a premium on fluency, and on meeting the most superficial expectations of the active membership, who may have a self-fulfilling view that the next MP should be pretty similar to the previous one. The majority of local party members have had difficulties accepting the selection of female, single, ethnic minority or working class candidates in winnable seats. Public school and Oxbridge educated men are still massively over-represented in the Conservative Parliamentary Party. Further, a Tory Reform Group analysis has shown that an increasing proportion of candidates picked for existing Conservative seats are or were employed in a political occupation; in 1997 half of new Tory MPs had worked in a political job such as party official, assistant to an MP or adviser.

The rules were overhauled somewhat in 2000 and new training materials were sent to selection committees. It was recommended that constituency

associations should interview at least as many women as the proportion of women applying for the seat. While about 16 per cent of candidates selected were women, broadly reflecting the proportion on the candidates' list, no women were picked for Conservative held seats. Some such as Andrew Lansley have suggested making local parties in winnable seats select from among a centrally maintained panel which would be 50 per cent women and representative of ethnic minorities, although other possibilities are in the air. In her Hansard Lecture in June 2003 Mrs May addressed local selection procedures. Local parties were offered several new choices of selection methods, including closed and open primaries, opening selection committees to non-party members and allowing party members to use a postal ballot rather than attending a special general meeting.

It remains to be seen how many local Conservative Associations decide to take up these progressive possibilities, and whether the outcome is measurably different from that under the accustomed system. For the outcome to change there needs to be a broader cultural change within the party; a need to look past the superficial. Mrs May has suggested that 'competency-based exercises' might supplement traditional interviews at constituency level as well.

In the Liberal Democrat party, the main problems are to do with size and lack of resources, and until recently, very few seats which could be regarded as safe. Very few aspiring Liberal Democrat MPs can go round the country looking for seats to pick up from retiring MPs. They have to be fought and won - the recipe that has worked so successfully for the party at a local government level over the past twenty years. It is difficult to generalise because the party is locally concentrated and much stronger in some areas of Britain than others. Local Liberal Democrat associations tend to be very independent, not only out of temperament, but also because of the party's federal structure. The party has made

efforts to give its regional structures responsibility for candidate approval and training.

Reselection

Seats where there is no incumbent have naturally been the main focus of attention when candidate selection is discussed. Discontinuities in incumbency, caused by the creation of a new elected institution, a dramatic shift in the party balance, or even just boundary changes, are the prime opportunities for change to take place. However, in examining the system of candidate selection the position of incumbents is important. They, after all, are the majority of successful candidates in nearly all elections. Now that the devolved bodies have been established, changes are going to be more gradual, and the common practice of giving constituency candidates the insurance policy of a place on the list makes this even more so.

Given that selection is an issue of public interest, reselection must be as well. Having navigated the selection procedure, the candidate in a safe seat should not automatically feel assured of a job for life regardless of subsequent performance. MPs should maintain a sense of humility – that they are in parliament by consent of the voters of the constituency, and that their position there (with a few exceptions) is more to do with their party label than their own personal qualities. It is undesirable that someone can bypass a proper examination of their credentials simply by virtue of being there, and expect to coast through on the efforts of their local and national party. Parties have a legitimate interest in removing incumbents whose activities (or lack thereof) are bringing the party into disrepute or giving constituents poor service; those whose views are in fundamental conflict with the party's aims and values; or where there are genuinely irreconcilable personal differences.

Nevertheless, there are dangers in making deselection too easy. It risks allowing small and unrepresentative local parties to override the wishes of the

electorate at large, and enforcing ideological conformity at the expense of independent judgement or the cohesion of the parliamentary parties. At the very least, it risks an outbreak of grandstanding every time the reselection calendar rolls round. Mandatory reselection was a deeply divisive issue in the Labour Party in the early 1980s before and during its introduction, although it did not live up to the hopes of its advocates or the fears of its opponents. The procedure has been revised to make deselection more difficult, so that unless there is substantial local opposition apparent at an early stage reselection can take place through a fast track procedure. There is also a deselection mechanism in the Conservative Party, which is supposed to be used in cases where there is malfeasance of some sort but is occasionally used for political reasons. There have been sporadic attempts, notably with the unsuccessful move against Ian Taylor in Esher & Walton in 2000, to apply a Eurosceptic litmus test to candidates.

At one time deselection was a political death sentence. The exclusion of Dennis Canavan MP from the approved list for the Scottish Parliament in 1999, and the deselection of John Marek AM in 2003, have both rebounded against the Labour Party that rejected them as Canavan and Marek won election as Independents. While the constituency seats under the form of PR used in Scotland and Wales are probably most propitious for such rebellions, the cases are still a reminder to the parties that it is the electorate who have the final say over who represents them.

Nevertheless, reselection should be kept under review. In most constituencies it is reselection that determines who is elected, rather than fresh selection. The procedure by which this is done is therefore intrinsically important. Incumbency is also an important factor in slowing down changes towards a more representative elected body. ●

Chapter 6

The scale of the challenge

The previous chapter underlined the main challenges for the parties. There are too few women, too few from ethnic minorities, too few from outside a fairly narrow band of the professional middle classes, too few with business experience, too few who have worked for the minimum wage except during university vacations – as well as too few from either end of the age range and from those with unconventional life-styles. We are not advocating some kind of exact formula in which the membership of the House of Commons and local authorities is required to reflect the social make-up of the country. That would be both wrong and unworkable- leaving aside the endless arguments over what the right balance should be. Our priority is different: to suggest ways in which a fairer and more effective balance could be achieved.

Women

The most discussed problem has been the under-representation of women, the easiest category to define. Women make up 52 per cent of the population but only 17.9 per cent of the House of Commons. Admittedly, this is well up on the pre-1987 level which never rose above 5 per cent, but it is slightly down from 18.2 per cent in 1997. Raising female representation in elected assemblies is an international concern. Even after the big increase in the number of women MPs in 1997, the UK proportion of 17.9 per cent after the 2001 election is less than in Sweden (45 per cent), Denmark (38 per cent), the Netherlands (34 per cent), Germany (32 per cent) and Spain (28 per cent), but higher than France, Italy and Ireland (all in the 10 to 13 per cent range). Of course, the existence of Proportional Representation makes it easier to have balanced tickets, with more women, but it is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition as these figures suggest. The political culture of a country is even more important in determining whether there are more women representatives. After all, Ireland has one of the purest systems of PR, election by single transferable vote, but one of the lowest proportion of women legislators.

At other levels of UK government, the picture is less clear-cut. Women are only 14 per cent in the Northern Ireland Assembly elected in 1998, 24 per cent of British MEPs and fewer than one in three councillors. However, elected bodies created since 1999 present a different picture: the proportions are 40 per cent in the Scottish Parliament, 44 per cent in the Greater London Assembly and 50 per cent in the National Assembly of Wales, the first national-level elected body in the world to attain gender parity. As well as being new, all these bodies are elected under variants of proportional representation. By party, Labour and the nationalist parties have the highest number of female candidates and representatives- though half the Liberal Democrat MEPs are women.

The Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Greater London Assembly were seen by many as opportunities to create new structures and cultures in politics which would be more welcoming for women. The debates about devolution created pressure for changes in candidate selection, aided, of course, by the PR system of election which in principle made it easier to have more balanced representation of the sexes. More important though than the adoption of PR was the growing campaign by women's groups within Labour and the Liberal Democrats to increase female representation. Labour required women to be selected rather than simply encouraged women to stand. Its positive discrimination involved twinning whereby neighbouring constituencies would select one male and one female candidate between them. This was, of course, easier to achieve with brand new assemblies and no incumbents. After the 2003 elections, the Labour delegations at Cardiff and Holyrood were majority female – 63 per cent in Wales, 56 per cent in Scotland. This was entirely because more women were adopted for winnable seats at constituency level. The high overall levels of women's representation in these bodies owes much to the efforts of the parties – the Labour Party in particular – in taking positive action, as there was no sudden influx of

female aspirants. Labour in 2003 was able to consolidate its progress by favouring women in vacant seats and protecting vulnerable incumbents by putting them at the top of party lists.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly, Sinn Fein proved to be the pioneers in female representation, together with the two representatives of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Political culture in Northern Ireland has been consistently inimical to women's representation. No woman won an election to Westminster from the province between Bernadette Devlin's second term in 1970 and the election of Lady Hermon for the UUP, Michelle Gildernew for Sinn Fein and Iris Robinson

for the DUP all at once in 2001. The Northern Ireland Assembly elected in 1998 was only 14 per cent female.

The experience of the first sets of elections to the devolved assemblies underlines the four main reasons for the progress made in selecting and electing more women candidates:

- There were **no incumbents**, so there was maximum freedom of manoeuvre.
- Advocates of more women candidates mounted **effective campaigns** aimed at the parties to persuade them to adopt measures of positive discrimination.

	Constituency members		List members		Total	Total women	Women share %
	Women	Men	Women	Men			
Scotland	32	41	19	37	56	51	40
Lab	26	20	2	2	50	28	56
SNP	3	6	6	12	27	9	33
Con	0	3	4	11	18	4	22
LD	2	11	0	4	17	2	12
Green	0	0	2	5	7	2	29
SSP	0	0	4	2	6	4	67
Others	1	1	1	1	4	2	
Wales	22	18	8	12	60	30	50
Lab	19	11	0	0	30	19	63
Plaid	1	4	5	2	12	6	50
Con	0	1	2	8	11	2	18
LD	2	1	1	2	6	3	50
Others	0	1	0	0	1	0	
London	5	9	6	5	11	14	44
Lab	3	3	3	0	9	6	67
Con	2	6	0	1	9	2	22
LD	0	0	2	2	4	2	50
Green	0	0	1	2	3	1	33

- The practice of **twinning** was used by some parties.
- The electoral systems were **more proportional** than those in use at Westminster and in local authorities.

The generally slow replacement of incumbents means that a step change in representation at Westminster to the more equal levels in Holyrood and Cardiff is most unlikely to take place overnight. In order to change the situation it is necessary to examine both the supply and demand side of the problems facing female representation.

In many cases, these are the same difficulties faced by less advantaged men but magnified in the case of women; the difficulties of combining a political career with raising a family. It can take about a decade from the day when someone decides that he or she would like to become a parliamentary candidate to the day when he or she can realistically hope to become an MP. Obviously, there is no rigid timetable, and both decisions and opportunities vary with chance and circumstance. But this period often coincides with the most highly pressurised time in women's lives if they have families. Moreover, many women say they are put off politics by the image (and too often the reality) of the House of Commons and council chambers as being male dominated clubs, where confrontation rather than co-operation seems to be the order of the day and where participants have to sacrifice privacy and normal family life. MORI research for the Equal Opportunities Commission reported that eight out of ten Conservative women who have tried to become parliamentary candidates believe the party favours men and is reluctant to trust women. One in five women report being asked inappropriate questions- about their family lives- when appearing before "old guard" selection boards. Potential women candidates were of equal professional status to their male counterparts and had almost the same experience of politics and public life. The claim often made by the parties that not enough women were coming forward has also been refuted.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 (see 'All Women Shortlists, Labour and the Law') allows the parties to discriminate in favour of women candidates. The key word here is 'allow'. During the debates in both Houses on the bill, speakers from all the main parties agreed that it would be wrong to require parties to discriminate in favour of women candidates, rather than allow them to do so if they wished. This legislation – and the associated debates within the parties over representation of women and ethnic minorities- has revealed sharp dividing lines, both within and between the parties. The Labour Party intends to make use of the ability to use 'positive action' and restore the pre-1996 practice of imposing all-women shortlists in some parliamentary selections. The other parties do not intend to follow, and often have objections in principle to this form of positive discrimination.

After the passage of the legislation, the Labour Party decided to set a target that 35 per cent of its MPs should be women after the next general election, compared with 23 per cent after the 2001 general election. An earlier target of 50 per cent was dropped since it is highly unlikely that there would be enough vacancies- through either death or retirement- to reach that level in one stage, and even 35 per cent is a difficult target. The implications became clear in January 2003 when the Labour leadership decided that there would be all women short-lists in ten out of thirteen constituencies where the sitting Labour MP had already announced his or her intention of retiring. In all but two of these seats, the retiring MP is male. And since the majority of these seats have sizeable Labour majorities, and were held even during the 1980s, the likelihood is that there will be an increase in the number of women Labour MPs after the next election.

The need to concentrate progress towards greater female representation on a relatively small number of vacant seats has made this a difficult selection

All women shortlists, Labour and the law

The adoption of all women short-lists within the Labour Party for the selection of some parliamentary candidates for the 1997 general election followed, and was accompanied by a fraught debate and recourse to the courts. The long battles within the Labour Party during the 1980s and 1990s are, to some extent, being emulated in both the Conservative and the Liberal Democrat parties today. Greatly to simplify a lengthy debate, the pressures for change arose out of both frustration with the very slow progress in getting more women candidates selected, and women MPs elected, and a change in the public debate about rights and representation. This eventually led to the agreement at the 1993 Labour Party conference, reaffirmed the following year, on the adoption of women only shortlists in 50 per cent of marginal seats winnable on a 6 per cent swing, and in 50 per cent of all vacant Labour held seats. The choice of seats was to be determined by regional meetings between national officials and local parties: an often difficult process in Labour heartland seats, particularly in the north of England.

The adoption of all-women shortlists led to complaints about central interference with local wishes, while some older MPs delayed their retirements in the hope of preventing their successors being selected in this way. Two "excluded" male candidates went to an Industrial Tribunal claiming that the all-women shortlists were in breach of the Sex Discrimination Act and won their case in January 1996. In order not to delay candidate selection, the Labour Party accepted the verdict and decided not to appeal. But, by that point, Labour had selected 39 women candidates from women-only shortlists, of which 34 were in 'winnable' seats. There were complaints that women picked in all women short-lists would be seen as second best candidates, and there were rumblings of male chauvinist protests against feminism. But there also appeared to be a cultural shift in favour of women since 19 were picked in open competition in target or winnable seats. In addition, the Labour Women's Network, set up in 1988, and Emily's List, established in 1993, both campaigned for more women candidates and assisted aspiring women candidates via training, networking and limited financial assistance. The scale of the swing in May 1997 ensured that a further 11 women MPs were elected in seats presumed unwinnable, helping to produce a dramatic transformation in the composition of the Parliamentary Labour Party. But, without women-only shortlists, there was no progress, even a slight decline, in the 1992-97 parliament in the number of women candidates. In the absence of all-women shortlists, all wards or affiliated bodies had to nominate both a man and a woman, and all shortlists had to have equal numbers of men and women. Only four women were selected in 40 seats from which sitting Labour MPs, including six women, were retiring. And with some women MPs being among the handful to be defeated, the number of Labour women MPs declined from 101 in 1997, and 100 at the dissolution of parliament, to 95 after the 2001 election. The problems faced by women in getting selected convinced many male, as well as female, Labour politicians that further progress could only be made if there were women-only shortlists again, although this would require a change in the law. This was included in the 2001 Labour manifesto and duly enacted.

round for male Labour aspirants, even if they are from an ethnic minority. The decision to impose an all women short-list in Burnley has blocked the parliamentary ambitions in the constituency of Shahid Malik, the only ethnic minority member of Labour's National Executive Committee, who is himself a strong supporter of all women short-lists. Simon Woolley, national co-ordinator for Operation Black Vote alleged in January 2003 that this episode showed that: "Labour's equality agenda shoves blacks and Asians to the back of the queue." But the conflict of objectives should not be overdone. Ethnic minority women can face discriminatory assumptions on all fronts but can at least be given the opportunity of a fair hearing by positive action on either ethnic or gender lines. There is nothing to stop any Labour constituency with an all-women short list, in any sort of seat, from choosing a member of an ethnic minority.

The Conservatives have traditionally opposed mandatory schemes of positive discrimination, such as women only short-lists, as opposed to voluntary changes in practice. The Conservative leadership remains opposed to any mandatory quotas and still rely on guidance, exhortation and encouragement. William Hague proposed in 1998 that final selection short lists should have at least 25 per cent of women on them but this was rejected by the Conservative Central Council. Other 'modernisers' like Andrew Lansley and Theresa May have proposed schemes to improve the supply of women candidates and manage the approved list, while stopping short of dictating to local parties. Several ideas have failed to win support on the grounds that what matters is a "good" candidate, regardless of background, and there should be no positive discrimination. The Conservative record in its initial batch of selections after the 2001 election has been patchy, to the evident disappointment of Theresa May as party chairman. Only nine women, and one man from an ethnic minority background, were picked in the first 60 selections in "winnable" seats. While higher than at the same stage of the

last parliament, these selections are from a pool of 700 candidates, of whom 154 were women. This trend led to complaints at the Conservative Women's Conference in November 2002 and pressure for further reform.

For the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, the Liberal Democrats were short of women applicants for certain constituencies, particularly in south Wales. On the other hand, in the European Parliament election of 1999 the party was the first in the UK to adopt the technique of 'zipping'. Zipping is simply the allocation of alternating places on the closed party lists to men and women in turn. In 1999 it produced an equal number of male and female MEPs, and it is an effective way of guaranteeing nearly exactly balanced representation. The order in which individuals appear on the list is determined by party members. The Liberal Democrats have debated the introduction of all-women short-lists for parliamentary candidates, but deep divisions led to a stalemate at the party's 2001 conference. This reflected tensions over the local autonomy of constituency parties in candidate selection. But the party agreed to set up a Gender Balance Task Force and then set a target of women candidates in 40 per cent of existing seats (where the incumbent Liberal Democrat MP is retiring), and in the same proportion of winnable seats (i.e. those where a swing of less than 7.5 per cent is required).

Ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities remain under-represented at all levels. Not only is this important on general representative grounds, but if people from ethnic minorities find it hard to identify with Parliament and other bodies because there are too few black or Asian members, then there is a real danger of apathy and alienation.

The 2001 election saw the arrival in the Commons of just two more ethnic minority MPs, increasing the number from 10 to 12 (a mere 1.8 per cent of

the total). This compares adversely to the 7 per cent proportion of ethnic minorities in the population as a whole, which would be equivalent to 46 MPs. All but two of the current ethnic minority MPs represent constituencies with substantial black and Asian populations. The exceptions are Ashok Kumar in Middlesbrough South and Parmjit Dhanda in Gloucester. All these MPs are Labour. In the Greater London Assembly (GLA), there are only two members from ethnic minorities, both of whom were on Labour's proportional top-up list, even though 29 per cent of the London population now comes from a variety of ethnic minorities according to the 2001 census. There are 4 ethnic minority UK MEPs out of 87; two Labour and two Conservative. There were no ethnic minority representatives elected in 1999 or 2003 to either the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly.

In local government, the IPPR reported in 2002 that there were 530 ethnic minority councillors, about a third of the level of their representation in the general population. This masks considerable local variation. In Tower Hamlets, where 48 per cent of the population is from ethnic minorities, they account for 30 out of 51 councillors; in neighbouring Newham, 61 per cent minority population has 26 out of 63 councillors; while in Lambeth a 34 per cent minority population has fewer than 10 per cent of the councillors. Much depends on the particular form local politics takes; there seems to be a point at which critical mass is attained and the local parties realise that they cannot afford not to select more candidates from ethnic minorities.

Ethnic minorities are younger on average than the majority white population. For example, 43 per cent of people of Bangladeshi origin were under 16 in 1998-99, compared with 20 per cent of the white population. Ethnic background and the young age profile reinforce each other in making many ethnic minority people disengaged and even alienated from our political institutions and processes.

Under the first-past-the-post system, ethnic minority candidates have found it hard to be selected for all kinds of seats- particularly those without very large ethnic minority electorates. They have lacked the resources and connections to make progress in a very competitive environment. This is aside from chauvinism and racial prejudices which may be consciously or unconsciously present in many voters and in party selectorates. Although people from ethnic minorities are increasingly prominent in community and campaigning work in the voluntary sector, this does not necessarily help them with local party selection committees. There is also marked fragmentation and factionalism among many Asian groups which are active in local parties, which hampers efforts to gain selection.

No one disputes that increasing the number of MPs and councillors from among ethnic minority groups is desirable. There is, of course, no necessary connection between such an increase and the handling of racial issues- though questions of interest to ethnic minorities are more likely to be raised. MPs are, after all, elected to represent all their constituents which is a constraint, though not necessarily an absolute barrier, on ethnic minority MPs acting as spokesmen or virtual representatives for minority communities. As with the big increase in the number of women MPs at the 1997 election, much depends on a critical mass of ethnic minority MPs being elected. Nonetheless, the experience of these women MPs after 1997 suggests that a sizeable rise in the number of ethnic minority MPs might persuade some, if not all, in the ethnic minority communities that their voice was being heard at the top of politics.

The parallels between female and ethnic minority representation should not be exaggerated, not least because of the many differences between ethnic groups. At present, many ethnic minority spokesmen oppose any kind of positive discrimination along the lines adopted for women, and all-black short-lists would be illegal under current law. The

best way forward may be for each party to consider the introduction of informal guidelines or even targets for the numbers of ethnic minority people in leading and influential positions within the parties. It might then be possible to move towards targets for greater ethnic minority representation among candidates, leading eventually to more MPs. Labour has, for example, been considering target-setting on a regional basis, related to the ethnic proportions in the region, to increase the number of ethnic minority MPs. At the outset, such goals could be set in the light of Candidate Selection Guidelines or a code to which all parties could be expected to subscribe.

Class

There has been much less debate about the under-representation of other groups. For instance, there has been a steady decline in the number of candidates and MPs who have previously been manual workers. It is also hard for the growing number of people in part-time jobs in call centres and similar service sector posts, particularly those doing two or three such jobs, or for the self-employed, to have the time to seek a candidacy. Consequently, the House of Commons is increasingly dominated by middle-class professionals.

At the same time, all main parties are seeking to appeal to the growing middle class and aspiring middle class. This definition of Middle England excludes a large proportion of the electorate, who are therefore under-represented. This sense of social, as well as gender and ethnic, exclusion reinforces the public's impression of a cut-off, exclusive set of professional politicians who do not really understand ordinary peoples' concerns. This may have contributed to the fall in turnout in the 2001 election.

Trade unions have made a deliberate effort to push union candidates, particularly in safe seats, in reaction to the growing number of special advisers and middle class professionals who have been picked.

This was shown at the 2001 general election when about a fifth of Labour's 38 new MPs were union officials, notably in several of the party's rock solid safe seats in the Midlands, northern England, Wales and Scotland. But there were still quite a few former special advisers (notably David Miliband and James Purnell from the Downing Street Policy Unit) and a third of new members were former full-time councillors. People with ambitions for a career in elected politics are increasingly being drawn into these sorts of political jobs. The increase in new MPs with union links should be heavily qualified. These were virtually all officials, and there were only four former manual workers (of whom two had become union officers or councillors).

However, in considering this matter it may be noted that class is a more complex concept than it was in 1900. Then, there was hardly any opportunity for working class people to obtain higher education and thence make their way into the middle class professions. Now, although far from perfect, the educational system provides incomparably greater opportunities. Class, origins and life experience are elusive concepts and it is difficult to see how any prescriptive procedure could hope to capture the essence of social diversity. One can only make a plea for a broad-minded recognition of talent, wherever it may manifest itself.

The young and the old

There is an important respect in which the House of Commons has become less representative in recent years; while the broad trends in female and ethnic minority representation are towards greater equality, representation according to age has reinforced an existing pattern of disadvantage. The Commons has an increasingly prominent case of middle age spread – a bulge in representation for people aged between 40 and 60. As the table shows, since 1952 the representation of people in this age group has expanded, largely at the expense of younger Tories and older Labour MPs. While a reversal of electoral fortune would probably cause

	1952				2002			
	Con		Lab		Con		Lab	
Under 40	75	23.4%	38	12.9%	26	15.7%	43	10.4%
40-60	208	64.8%	176	59.7%	121	72.9%	317	76.9%
Over 60	38	11.8%	81	27.5%	19	11.4%	52	12.6%

a significant shift back towards younger Tories, a strong trend affecting all parties has been taking place.

There has been increasing recognition of the extent of talent wasted because of negative attitudes towards older people. Since 1999 the government has supported the 'Age Positive' voluntary code of conduct which asks employers to take decisions based on ability and suitability for a job rather than age. There is official recognition that 'age-diversity' is a positive quality in a workplace. It would also enhance the functioning and representativeness of elected bodies if the parties provided for age diversity in candidate selection.

Many barriers to the selection of older people are simply prejudices, which somehow seem more socially acceptable than other forms of prejudice. Older people should be considered on their own merits rather than properties attributed to the group to which they belong. Politics outside the parties has seen an increasingly active and outspoken lobby developing among older people, including Jack Jones and the late Baroness Castle and many others. Older people are also stalwarts of many community and voluntary groups not directly concerned with age issues. There is no lack of potential for more political involvement. Some attitudes seem superficially rational but are in fact based on false premises, such as the fear that older candidates are more likely to die and cause by-elections. In fact, the oldest MP to die during the 1997-2001 parliament was 61. Increasing general life expectancy means that this is hardly a consider-

ation until the age of 75 – and even then there are many people aged over 75 who are capable of making a considerable contribution. Health problems can strike at any stage of life, and by-elections are also caused by appointment to positions incompatible with membership of the House which are more likely to affect MPs in late middle age. Fear of by-elections is particularly not an issue under list PR systems, where vacancies are filled from lower down the incumbent party's list.

The issues regarding youth are less clear cut – after all, even MPs were all young once. There is even criticism of the young MPs we do have on the grounds that they have never had a proper job and lack experience of the 'real world'. Many MPs elected in their 20s have had the benefit of dynastic connections (Alec Douglas-Home, Tony Benn and Paul Channon were all elected very young), or a long history of party involvement like Watford's Claire Ward, and can be regarded as not typical of their colleagues. Nevertheless, there are issues where young people have something distinctive to say and, not unreasonably, feel that the political system is not representing their views. Parliamentary debates on issues such as education, training, technology, the environment, sexual issues and drugs all seem to lack an important dimension. It is not surprising that the collapse in turnout has been worst among young people, despite the abundant evidence that there is still considerable political passion and campaigning zeal among young people today. Greater representation of young people should be a by-product of other desirable reforms in the candidate selection process, namely reducing

the significance of a long partisan apprenticeship or dynastic connections and looking instead at competences and potential that can be developed. Citizenship education should teach that politics is not simply for middle aged, well-off men in suits – that each person, should they wish, has the chance to participate by standing for election.

Disability and health

It is generally recognised that disabled individuals have made powerful contributions to elective politics; David Blunkett as Cabinet Minister and local government leader is an example, as is Jack Ashley. Perhaps the very success of such politicians has given the parties a false sense of security that they need do no more to open representation to people with disabilities. But how many selection meetings take place in upstairs rooms with no lifts – literally and metaphorically? Disabled aspirants, too, should be free from discriminatory questioning during the selection process and reasonable steps should be taken to enable them to compete fairly. As with other aspects of equality, what is prescribed as good practice for employers should be taken to heart in the candidate selection process.

In the past there have also been notable individuals who have contributed greatly despite long-term health problems short of disability, such as Iain Macleod. There seems no reason to disbar people with such problems (such as, for instance, people who are HIV positive) as long as they are capable of doing the job of representation.

The nature of the challenge

The parties' poor performance in achieving social inclusion in their choice of candidates for winnable seats is partly a function of their desire to play safe. Were the electoral ground rule to be changed for the House of Commons and for local authorities – as they have been at other level of representation – then a wider range of sometimes unorthodox individuals might be picked. But this comes back not just to selection procedures but

also to the type and range of people who join parties in the first place. Many of the groups under-represented as candidates are also under-represented as party members. Broadening the appeal of parties is a pre-condition for broadening the range of candidates selected. ●

Chapter 7

Local government

Local party activity is often concerned with local government – fighting elections, campaigning, running the council. A senior Tory agent in the 1930s said that if local elections did not exist it would be necessary to invent them in order to keep the party organisation in trim. The decline in the status and significance of local government is an important, and specifically British, factor in the problems affecting the political parties. The centralising actions of successive national governments over the past 25 years have sapped the roots of party activity. In Scotland and Wales, ironically, local authorities have also been overshadowed by the devolved institutions. While a spell on the council might be a step on the ladder for someone wishing to become an MP, most councillors never advance beyond this stage – or want to. No one can pretend that council work is particularly satisfying or rewarding for most of the politically interested or ambitious. The recent reorganisation of local government has underlined this dilemma. While service on the executive or as an elected mayor is attractive, there are considerable problems in recruiting people to serve as “representative” councillors. All the main parties report difficulties in recruiting candidates, particularly high quality young ones, to stand in local elections.

Local government is not only important in itself but also provides a valuable training ground for those who go on to seek election to the Commons, to regional or devolved bodies or to the European Parliament. Several times more people are elected as local councillors than ever hope to become parliamentary candidates or can become MPs. Service as a councillor is obviously important in its own right as well as a route for some people to a parliamentary candidacy. A survey of candidates at the 2001 election showed that 65 per cent of Labour candidates, 44 per cent of Conservatives and 63 per cent of Liberal Democrats had at some stage been local councillors. But all parties report increasing difficulty in recruiting candidates to stand

in local elections. In spring 2003, the Conservatives had to admit problems in finding candidates to come forward for the May local elections, particularly in large industrial cities. The Tories' problems were far from unique. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have had similar difficulties and in fact contested fewer seats than the Conservatives managed in the May 2003 local elections.

The Local Government Association has recognised that problems in recruiting a wider range of candidates, more fully representative of local communities, do not lie simply in party selection procedures. This reflects the general lack of respect for, and interest in, the processes and personalities of local government. Local government has a bad popular image, in large part because its powers and role have been steadily reduced by governments of all parties for the past 30 years. Consequently, elected local politics looks unattractive to the busy and ambitious who might otherwise consider standing as candidates.

A study of local councillors in 1997 showed that women, young people and ethnic minorities were under-represented. 97 per cent of councillors in England and Wales were white, 73 per cent were male, 66 per cent did not have caring responsibilities, 53 per cent had a degree of professional qualification, 47 per cent were not in employment (many of whom were retired or self-employed), 44 per cent had a public sector background and fewer than 5 per cent were under 35 years of age. Further cause for concern was that an increasing number of councillors stood down within, or at the end of, their first terms of office. Another survey in 2001 suggested that the underlying situation had changed very little with women and ethnic minorities significantly under-represented in local government.

The Fawcett Society has identified various reasons why it is hard to recruit more women to become councillors, and then MPs. The practical problems of

combining council commitments with work and family, especially for women with young children, can pose insuperable obstacles to becoming, or remaining, local councillors. The voluntary nature of council work with no more than modest attendance allowances to defray expenses) means that those on low incomes or without other financial support are very unlikely to become candidates, and then councillors. Changing this not only involves making council service more family friendly but also a deliberate campaign to encourage and develop local council candidates. Recognising these problems, Patricia Hewitt argued that the next stage in increasing women's representation should be extending all women short-lists to council selections. The Labour Party has decided to use the upcoming 2004 elections on new boundaries in metropolitan boroughs and some unitary authorities to impose action on the Labour groups with the lowest percentages of women members.

Ministers have been well aware of the problems affecting council elections. The government has produced various proposals intended to promote new models of local authority governance, in order both to attract a higher calibre of people into councils and to stimulate greater public interest- including higher turnout at elections. The Local Government Act of 2000 gave councils a new positive duty to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas, which might in time open up new possibilities. Councils had to adopt a new binary model of local governance based upon a clear split between a minority of executive councillors and the representative majority of backbench councillors, who would act as champions of their constituents and scrutinise their executive colleagues. While some changes to electoral procedure have increased voter turnout, there has been no evidence of an increase in the supply of people willing to serve as councillors. And a variety of reports, not least from councillors themselves, showed a wide degree of unhappiness with the operation of this binary model.

More flexible selection procedures for council candidates might lead to the recruitment of a wider range of community activists into parties –

people who might have a high standing in their local areas. This has been one of the arguments for the election of local mayors. Although only voters in a minority of mainly Labour controlled authorities have opted for directly elected mayors, the results have shown that voters prefer well-known local people, from a non-party background, to party candidates. The best known example is Ray Mallon, a controversial former police officer, who was elected mayor of Middlesbrough. More generally, all the main parties have been looking outside their traditional activist ranks to find candidates for council elections. A leaked internal Tory document in February 2003, reported in *The Guardian*, suggested that the party locally should try to persuade parish councillors and school governors who are not party members and who are not supporters of other parties to stand for the Conservatives. The other parties have similarly been spreading their nets.

In practice, the parties have abandoned the pretence that they are able to put up candidates for all seats in all council elections. In elections for 'representative' councillors in particular, they could make a virtue out of necessity and consider a more pluralistic approach to local politics. Rather than attempting to squash local independents and groups, they might give tacit or open support to some such candidates in certain circumstances. The decision not to put forward a candidate can be presented as a positive step rather than just an admission that the party cannot present a suitable candidate. ●

Chapter 8

The way forward

The previous chapters demonstrate that the present system of candidate selection is deficient. The breadth and quality of candidates chosen is unsatisfactory. Our recommendations are intended to recognise the realities of the world in which political parties operate and to make practical recommendations that would remedy some of the defects we have identified.

There are several prerequisites for success in reforming candidate selection. These involve changing the internal structures of parties to encourage them to attract and retain more young people; increased, more stable, and more publicly acceptable, funding of political parties; reforming the workings of Parliament to make the Commons more effective and improve the image of MPs; a more balanced media debate about the role of politicians; a greater willingness by Westminster politicians to learn from what happens elsewhere in the UK, notably in the new devolved legislatures and assemblies; and a willingness to consider new methods of selection and election.

The public statements of the leaderships of all the main national parties are in tune with the thrust of our report. Each of the main national parties is debating various ways both to increase their memberships and to broaden the range of candidates selected. We do not wish to prescribe or preach. We seek to put forward a variety of recommendations that should help revive parties and improve candidate selection. This discussion links with the growing debate about party funding, which is being conducted by the Electoral Commission. Assisting currently under-represented candidates requires money for training. Some of this money will probably have to come from the taxpayer.

There is already a precedent both in the “Short” money which goes to parties represented in the Commons for their parliamentary activities (broadly interpreted to cover all sorts of political research), and in the power of the Electoral

Commission to allocate “policy development grants” to registered parties. It should be possible to build on these foundations to provide assistance for candidate training. This is as important for the long-term health of our democracy as policymaking, and it was one of the most consistent and strongly argued points made in our discussions.

The willingness of people to put themselves forward as potential candidates also depends on whether they think it is worthwhile becoming a councillor or Member of Parliament. Much rests on the longer term effect of reforming the working practices and procedures of the Commons, including strengthening the scrutiny role of select committees. A good deal has already happened since 1997 with many fewer late night sittings and a more predictable pattern to the parliamentary year to suit members with children of school age. If Parliament is seen as holding the executive to account, then it may make elected membership of the Commons more attractive to new candidates and thus help encourage a wider range, and higher quality, of applicants. **The objective would be a virtuous circle in which Parliament works better, and is seen as more socially inclusive – thus encouraging a wider variety of people to put themselves forward.** That is also dependent on a more mature debate in the media and elsewhere about the role of politicians. The strident, hostile and intrusive nature of reporting and editorialising in some newspapers about politicians, and their private lives, turns many voters off politics and discourages talented people from putting themselves forward as candidates.

Progress might be made if Westminster politicians paid more attention to what happens elsewhere in the UK, notably in Scotland and Wales, where representative institutions have been created from scratch. Other countries have also wrestled with the same issues of representation, some with conspicuously more success at broadening the base of older-established democratic institutions. Nine out

Statutory quotas in France and Belgium

Two of Britain's neighbours have used statutory intervention to attempt to improve the gender balance in their elected institutions, with mixed results. Belgium legislated for a 25 per cent quota, increasing over time, in 1994. Lists that fail to offer sufficiently balanced slates are not permitted to take up seats allocated to them that would break the quota. The Belgian political parties reported difficulties in finding, without the benefit of a prior training programme, female candidates in the quantity and quality that was required. Some parties (such as the francophone liberal CDH) allowed women candidates to bypass stages of the selection procedure in order to fulfil the quota in the time available. It is not surprising that traditional criticisms of the calibre of representatives under quotas have been heard with redoubled force.

In France a law was passed in June 2000 that mandated an equal number of men and women run for elected office and attempted to legislate for an equal outcome as well. In the local elections of 2001 the parties endeavoured to change, aided by the block vote system used in electing local councils. The rule was tightly enforced, with unequal lists being refused access to the ballot. The proportion of women elected to local posts jumped overnight from 21 per cent to 48 per cent. But in the Assemblée nationale election in June 2002 the proportion of women rose only marginally. Enforcement was significantly harder because of the constituency system of election and the fact that the penalty for non-compliance was a reduction in public funding related to the degree of inequality in the party's slate. The Socialist Party, who had introduced the law, ran a 37 per cent female slate and the opposition UMP only 20 per cent. Small parties heavily dependent on state funding, but with less chance of winning election, were more inclined to observe the rule. This combination of statutory control and financial sanctions is enabled by state funding of political parties; but even with an increasing role for public funding most British parties would be unwilling to accept a system with such strings attached.

of fifteen EU countries have a higher proportion of women representatives than the UK, with Sweden having the highest proportion (45 per cent) in a sovereign state parliament. While quotas (including even statutory quotas in Belgium and France) have gained wider acceptance in northern Europe than in the UK, there are other factors. National parliaments in these countries tend to be more businesslike and calm than the prevailing atmosphere in Westminster. We do not imagine that there are solutions available for import off the shelf, but nor do we hold that there is nothing to be learned. We

refer at several points to particular techniques foreign parties have used to achieve the objectives we support.

The remit of the Commission has not been concerned with the merits of various electoral systems. But under the various forms of proportional representation adopted since 1997 in the UK, there has emerged a broader and more representative range of political candidates. This has largely been because the new systems have started at a time when there has been strong pressure to achieve increased

female representation, and the new bodies were, of course, set up from scratch with no incumbents. But the existence of PR systems for the elections to the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Greater London Assembly has made it easier to broaden representation. Nevertheless, differences in levels of female representation between the parties in these bodies shows that the form of the electoral system matters less than the culture and attitudes of the parties themselves.

However, we believe that progress is possible under the existing first-past-the-post system for electing the House of Commons. The Commission examined various ways in which the parties could make progress towards the linked goals of a broader range and higher quality of candidates for elected office. A variety of approaches should be considered. Different members of the Commission expressed different views about the effectiveness of the first few methods, and the desirability of the fourth step on the list:

First, **exhortation and persuasion** could induce the parties to take up some of the suggestions made in this and other reports and put them into action voluntarily. Changes in attitudes are crucial, but there is abundant evidence that good intentions produce only very slow progress. The national leaderships of parties may say how desirable it is to have more women and ethnic minority candidates—as they all have— but such exhortation often cuts little ice on the ground in face of the ingrained attitudes of some local party members. This has been true of both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties and was true of Labour before the adoption of all women shortlists a decade ago.

Second, **financial incentives** might be used to encourage parties to improve their candidate selection procedures and to provide support and training for aspiring candidates. Such support might be channelled via the Electoral Commission since it is

clearly in the public interest to encourage the development and selection of more diverse and more talented candidates.

Third, we strongly recommend the introduction of a **code of good practice** for parties which could be applied to candidate selection at all levels. The parties would be encouraged to make regular reports about their parliamentary panels and who gets elected at various levels.

Fourth, the passage of **permissive legislation** could be considered, along the lines of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act to allow parties to engage in positive discrimination in favour of a particular category of candidates. Labour is much keener on such an approach than the Conservatives, but all main parties agree that such legislation should be permissive, and enabling, rather than mandatory.

Fifth, the most interventionist method would be to use legislation **to impose minimum quotas** for women, people from ethnic minorities, the disabled or any other identifiable category. However, such statutory compulsion is, at present, unacceptable to any of the main parties and experience of this method in France and Belgium has showed some limitations. Such a commitment would probably require the introduction of proportional representation for the House of Commons and elections to local authorities.

The Commission believes a mixture of the first four methods (exhortation, financial incentives, a code of good practice and permissive legislation) should be adopted, though it is up to each political party to decide how far it wants to go down these routes. Whatever mix is adopted, we believe that action is urgently needed both to broaden the appeal and social bases of parties and to improve the processes of candidate selection. ●

Chapter 9

Conclusions and recommendations

The present system of candidate selection by the main political parties is deeply flawed and widely seen as producing too narrow a range of candidates at all levels of our democracy. We have identified a number of obvious defects in the methods of selection and, as important, barriers which deter desirable candidates from overcoming all the obstacles involved in selection. These problems are recognised by the parties and there is now a greater desire to find solutions.

Each of the three national parties has had difficult and divisive internal debates, particularly about how to increase the number of women candidates and MPs. More exhortation has not so far produced much in the way of results. But the main alternative of all-women short-lists is unacceptable to many. Moreover, the issue of representation is broader than either gender or ethnicity and covers the socially excluded as well. These problems reinforce each other.

The main political parties have become unrepresentative of the communities they claim to represent. Not only are candidates selected from a narrow group of the already politically committed, but the people who select them are also atypical. Our representative democracy rests on too narrow a social base. No wonder a growing number of people, especially the young, feel alienated from mainstream politics.

The more the Commission debated these issues, the more we concluded that the solutions do not lie primarily in legislation or even procedural changes within the parties – necessary though these may be – but in changing the nature of the parties themselves. At the heart of our recommendations is the need for parties to broaden their recruitment- as they themselves recognise – both of members and supporters and of potential candidates.

What types of candidates?

The most difficult and intractable factor in candidate selection is often the presence (or, often) absence of sheer human quality and ability in the field from which selection committees have to choose. The Commission believes that the parties should establish clear and improved criteria to guide their members in the selection of candidates. Among the factors which selection committees should consider are the following.

Local links. A candidate's knowledge of the area which he or she seeks to represent is important for their hopes of relating to, and representing, their constituents. But this factor should not be over-emphasised if it means discrimination against other strong candidates, perhaps women or ethnic minority candidates, who would not normally have a realistic chance of selection in their own areas and therefore have to look further afield for opportunities. We therefore recommend that local parties should assess all potential candidates on their ability to represent local people and not simply on the strength of their established local connections.

Party experience. The Commission believes that, while selection committees will naturally seek evidence of commitment to the aims and values of the party, they should recognise that some aspiring, and potentially excellent, candidates may not have as much length of service or record of party activity as others. Such people might nevertheless make more successful elected representatives. We therefore recommend that the value of long, past experience should not be over-emphasised in the selection of candidates at any level.

Quality of candidates. The most difficult, and controversial, issue is judging who would make a good elected representative. Our report suggests ways in which both the quality and breadth of candidates could be improved. But there is no single template for an ideal candidate. The whole thrust of our report is against uniformity of candidates and in

favour of diversity. Quality can take many different forms in a political context. If we wish candidates to be truly representative of the communities they are elected to serve, we must recognise that there will (and should) be all sorts of candidates with a wide variety of backgrounds.

Selection procedures

The Commission does not believe that the law should lay down formal statutory requirements as to how parties build up their memberships or select their candidates. A permissive approach is preferable by removing legal obstacles in the way of parties voluntarily taking positive action to broaden their range of candidates.

Parties need to be more open, accountable and representative. This involves rethinking their definitions of membership to encourage more people to become involved, particularly people who may have neither the time nor the inclination to participate in the traditional pattern of party activities. Parties should create more incentives for people to join them, though they have already given members a say in electing leaders and, in varying ways, over policymaking. In financial terms, the more that parties do for their members, the more expensive they become, and the higher the subscription fee has to be to make it worthwhile for parties to recruit more members. The marginal costs are in danger of exceeding the marginal revenues gained from having extra members. Recent experience suggests that there are limits to what can be achieved by membership drives in an age when people have many other competing demands on their time. So the parties need to concentrate upon reaching out to a wider range of people and organisations in their local areas. Party politics needs to be less exclusive. Parties need to be more imaginative in trying to work with non-party groups engaged in voluntary and community activities. Local parties should try to act as catalysts for all sorts of activity in their communities and be willing to work with those who share similar interests, values or goals.

These attempts are complementary to efforts to widen the range of potential candidates in local government. One problem is that local community activists often achieve prominence and leadership roles by opposing local party hierarchies on the local council and are therefore instinctively hostile to party operations. The appeal of such non-party local figures is highlighted by the victories of well-known local personalities in the May 2002 mayoral elections, such as former policeman Ray Mallon in Middlesbrough and Stuart Drummond, the former monkey mascot of the local football club, in Hartlepool. Established parties should try to understand these victories, rather than deplore them. No longer should parties require a lengthy apprenticeship of membership and political activity before a person can be considered for selection as a candidate.

The Commission therefore recommends that the national party leaderships should encourage local parties to recruit as candidates people who share their values and have demonstrated leadership qualities but who may not have a lengthy record of party activity.

During its considerations the Commission considered a more active approach of 'headhunting' candidates. **Many responsible jobs are filled by an active seeking process rather than by sitting back and waiting for applications to roll in.** In the Netherlands the Labour Party (PvdA) has developed a 'talent scout' system to identify talented and sympathetic individuals and invite them to participate in the party's electoral lists at national and local level. In the British context this approach could be tried at local government level and possibly for the list members sent to Cardiff, Holyrood and Strasbourg. Patricia Hewitt, the Minister for Women, suggested in March 2003 that it was a suitable approach in local government, which would seem a good place to start.

If the parties are to be encouraged to adopt a more pluralistic mode of operation, it is incumbent

on the media to respond accordingly. Expression of divergent views, particularly by those speaking on behalf of particular local communities which they have been elected to represent, should be regarded with tolerance rather than blown up into a 'gaffe' at any opportunity. This is a concomitant of relaxing strict party discipline of the old style.

We believe that good local links remain vital to the legitimacy of elected representatives. Consequently, local party members must continue to play the key role in selection of candidates. But so important are their choices, we think that such selections should be organised on a more systematic basis, as any other appointment of comparable importance would be. Selection panels should discuss beforehand the characteristics they are seeking and assess potential candidates in a more systematic way, rather than just rely on the impressionistic performance of a few speeches and answers to questions.

The Commission also recommends that members of party panels considering the suitability of potential candidates should also receive basic training in interview and assessment techniques. No major private sector company or public sector institution would entrust the recruitment of key staff to people unversed in good selection practice. Parties should approach the selection of their candidates in a similar way with clear and open procedures. We also suggest that local party members should be provided with brief notes advising them on what their parties nationally are looking for in their candidates.

Primaries

The Commission discussed ways of increasing the number of people involved in selection decisions in order to strengthen the popular legitimacy of candidates. The more people who are involved in selection decisions, the stronger should be the subsequent position of the chosen candidate.

One option would be the use of primaries, as in the USA, where, depending upon the law in individ-

ual states, all registered voters or declared supporters of a party are allowed to participate in choosing the candidate. However, there are fears that primaries would allow political opponents to masquerade as supporters of the party holding the primary and then cast their votes for whichever candidate they considered to be the weakest and so defeat the whole purpose of the exercise. The parties are understandably nervous about the dangers of entryism from extremists, in view of their relatively low membership levels. We recognise that the parties have legitimate reservations about primaries, not all members of the Commission agree, and we would not wish to prescribe this approach.

However, there is nothing in the law to prevent a party from experimenting with primaries and we note with approval the comments of Theresa May, Chairman of the Conservative Party, in her Hansard Lecture of June 2003, on this subject. She stated that local Conservative Associations will be offered the option of selecting a candidate through a primary of 'every registered Conservative voter in the constituency – or even all electors regardless of party affiliation'. We regard this as an interesting and important experiment and urge the other parties not to interfere with any 'open' primaries that take place, and for all parties to evaluate the experience of any Conservative primaries. A more thoroughly developed system of primaries might well entail the involvement of local authorities in administering elections and perhaps maintaining a register of party supporters entitled to vote in primaries. It would almost certainly require a change in the law even to run a pilot project, but **if the first Conservative primaries prove successful and a local authority wishes, backed by a local consensus, to conduct an all-party primary then any obstacles should be removed.**

Alternative electoral systems

The pluses and minuses of alternative electoral systems were outside the Commission's remit, and, anyway, members of the Commission have very dif-

ferent views on this issue. However, we note that proportional systems, involving the selection of several candidates for a constituency, offer the parties the opportunity to present to the electorate lists of candidates which are more balanced in terms of gender, class, age and ethnic background. Supporters of electoral reform argue that in such systems parties have an incentive to provide a diverse list of candidates to increase their electoral appeal to all sections of the population. The same argument applies to multi-member wards in local government.

Where proportional or semi-proportional systems are used in the UK and in multi-member wards in local government, we recommend that parties select at least one woman and aim for as much gender balance as possible. It is wrong to be prescriptive but, where possible and appropriate, parties should include a candidate or candidates from the ethnic minorities and other under-represented groups. These suggestions are put forward as examples of good practice, and feature in our recommended Candidate Selection Guidelines.

The Commission also notes that, under proportional representation, some democracies have legislated to require the election of a certain minimum percentage of women. We do not recommend the use of such legal quotas and we prefer other voluntary methods of broadening representation.

Positive discrimination

The Commission considered procedural and legal issues to do with candidate selection. Parties are no longer purely private bodies and are subject to regulation. But we do not believe that new legislation imposing further regulation is the best way forward or would be acceptable to most party members. The Commission believes that positive action needs to be taken to encourage people from under-represented groups to join political parties and offer themselves as candidates, including special measures to provide initial training and assistance.

One of the most anguished debates within the three main parties has been whether there should be positive discrimination. Differences of principle exist both between and within the main national parties. The Commission discussed at length the experience of parties with trying to increase the number of women candidates in winnable seats. The strongly held view of most people from the Labour Party from whom we heard at our seminars was that the use of women only short lists in at least a proportion of the party's safe seats is the only effective way of producing a significant increase in the number of women MPs. On the other hand, the Liberal Democrats are divided on the issue of positive discrimination in favour of women and ethnic minorities, and most Conservatives disagree as a matter of principle. These divisions were reflected among the members of the Commission.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act of 2002 clarified the law and allowed parties to introduce all women short lists without requiring the parties to do so. We agree with this permissive approach in view of the sharp differences which exist on this issue. The Commission notes, however, that some parties in their own rules require local selection panels to include women and others from under-represented groups on their short lists. **We recommend that all parties should adopt such rules for the selection of candidates for all levels.**

The Commission notes various other mechanisms for increasing the number of women and candidates and MP, such as the so-called "zipping procedure" used successfully by the Liberal Democrats to select equal numbers of male and female candidates for the European Parliament elections in 1999. This procedure can work well when elections involve candidates being listed in a pre-determined order by the parties under a PR system. It need not involve excessive centralisation, as the order in which individuals appear on a 'zipped' list can be determined by the party members, as well as by party headquar-

ters. **We believe that all parties should consider this approach since it offers an opportunity to achieve a more even gender balance in elections to the devolved bodies and the European Parliament.**

The Commission also notes that the “twinning” of neighbouring constituencies allowed Labour to achieve more even gender balance in its candidates for the Welsh Assembly. Although such twinning involves women-only short-lists, it does not deny opportunities for selection to strong male candidates and addresses some of the arguments against women-only short lists.

Candidate support: a public good

There is an apparent tension in much of this report between two desirable objectives. First, we are arguing for a more professional approach to candidate selection, a more functional attitude to selecting people on the basis of how well they can perform the tasks associated with representation. Secondly, we are advocating a more democratic approach – a more diverse outcome and a more permeable process. How can one professionalise and democratise at the same time, particularly when fluency, political experience, time and money are unequally distributed?

The Commission believes that the solution to this apparent problem lies in the provision of training and support for candidates and aspirants. We welcome the training that some parties now offer aspiring candidates for Parliament and believe this should be extended to local government candidates as well. **We recommend that parties should develop their training programmes to assist those candidates who, by dint of their educational, social or family backgrounds, might not have the same opportunity as others to develop the presentational and political skills needed to win selection as a candidate for a winnable seat.**

Many more initiatives could be launched- such as increased training for aspiring female candidates

and the encouragement of ethnic minority candidates. The liberal party in the Netherlands (VVD) has established its own training programme for candidates. Regional boards identify active party members with potential to become candidates and the annual programme includes interviews, formal presentations, debating, writing and article and communication skills. Dutch law regards the training programme as having a monetary value of EUR5000, the cost of which is divided equally between the party and the prospective candidate. But one does not even have to look across the North Sea. Valuable work has been done by various taxpayer funded bodies, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and by British party representatives in providing advice and guidance to parties in the emerging democracies overseas. But, in the UK, different priorities and constraints upon party budgets have discouraged similar efforts here.

Issues relating to candidate selection are no longer solely internal matters for the parties themselves. Parties control entry, promotion and voice in the democratic process. The candidates they choose are the people from whom governments are formed and who comprise the parliaments that pass the laws that affect us all. Moreover, recent legislation has given political parties a formal legal status and various legal obligations. Their activities and funding are now regulated by an independent Electoral Commission, which has recently provided money to the main parties for policy development, while Opposition parties in the Commons receive “Short” money from taxpayers for their political activities. So the conduct of parties is a matter of legitimate public interest.

And yet, political parties are private organisations dependent to a large extent on the unrewarded and barely recognised efforts of volunteers. There is a limit on how much the parties can be expected to organise and fund themselves unaided. Candidate training is a long-term investment made

by the parties, some of whose benefit accrues to the parties and individuals involved and some of which is a public good in the economic sense. Left to themselves, parties would understandably concentrate on the aspect of training that produces the quickest and most direct returns, namely in campaigning techniques, rather than the long haul of representation.

The Commission therefore recommends that a fund should be established on the model of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to provide public money to political parties for projects aimed at improving the recruitment, training and selection of candidates. This should be a relatively small amount of ring-fenced money for the specific purpose of attracting a higher quality and more diverse range of candidates in all parties. The projects would be devised and implemented by the parties themselves. The fund could be supervised, and possibly come within the budget of, the Electoral Commission in a way comparable to its programme for encouraging experiments in the timing and methods of voting to raise turnout in local council elections.

Successive governments and the main parties have been understandably cautious about expanding state funding because of fears that such measures would be unpopular with voters and the media. The risk is that state funding in this way might make parties little more than arms of the state. Nevertheless, we believe that parties are vital to the working of our democratic institutions, so their role in recruiting and training future local and national leaders should be recognised and supported by taxpayers, who are, after all, also voters, in the cause of improving democracy.

Postscript

The aim of all our recommendations is to strengthen both the representative quality and legitimacy of candidates chosen to contest the elections for Parliament at Westminster; the devolved assemblies

and local government. We recognise that this involves changes in the way that parties operate locally, as well as in the way that candidates are picked. Both sets of changes are directly related. Only if the parties succeed in broadening their bases of support and become much less exclusive will the candidates they choose have greater public respect and democratic legitimacy. Our recommendations will have the desired effect if more people join or become involved with political parties and if there is higher turnout at all elections.

Our argument has been much broader than simply promoting more female or ethnic minority candidates- desirable and urgent though these objectives are. The report is about how parties conduct themselves and how politics is seen by the public. This involves change in our representative institutions at all levels as well in our parties. Our politics needs to become less exclusive and more welcoming to all our fellow citizens. ●

Principles of candidate selection

Inclusiveness

Parties should all adopt and publish policies to encourage the selection of a broad range of candidates for all levels of elected representation.

Diversity

When drawing up their central lists of approved candidates, and in encouraging applications for winnable seats, the national parties should aim to include a balance of gender, ages, ethnic groups and occupations to broaden the choice.

Community activity

Parties should aim to recruit where possible candidates who are active in localities in schools', residents', neighbourhood, amenity and voluntary groups.

Transparency

In interviewing for central lists, parties should adopt a professional approach to candidate selection that specifies the skills sought and describes the responsibilities expected of the elected representative

Suitability

The parties should look beyond political activity to the skills (such as the ability to communicate, lead and motivate) needed to hold elected office and give effective representation to constituents.

Collegiality

Parties should continue to offer all candidates, both those on the central approved list and those who have been selected, formal support and training in the representative role.

Participation

Parties should give a priority to enabling as many party members as possible to participate in the selection process. ●

From principle to practice

Candidate selection guidelines

We hope that these principles will prove easy for the major political parties to endorse. They are, to a large extent, already common ground. The difficulty lies in making them operational. We urge the parties to consider the following steps towards realising these principles.

Inclusiveness

Party standing orders should prohibit discriminatory personal questions, for instance about family responsibilities, marital status, sexual orientation or ethnic origin from being asked during the selection process.

Diversity

1. The parties should review the Commission for Racial Equality good practice guidelines for employers and the extent to which current selection procedures should be altered to conform to the guidelines.
2. The parties nationally should collect, and publish annually, details of their approved list and the people whom they have selected as parliamentary candidates. Information should be provided in categories such as sex, age, ethnic background, occupation and previous political experience.
3. The parties should ensure that members of under-represented groups are given a fair chance to be heard. One method of achieving this would be to require election panels to ensure that half the members of short-lists are women, and that at least one person from an under-represented group is also included.
4. Where the selection is for multi-member wards or for lists of candidates under proportional systems of election, parties should specifically aim to select at least a stated minimum proportion of women, and, where possible and appropriate, candidates from other under-represented groups.

Community activity

1. We recognise that the parties often, in practice, value and seek out as members people who are active locally, and that parties themselves can

serve as a gateway to community activism.

However, we urge them to examine procedures with a view to removing barriers (such as length of party membership) placed in the way of considering such candidates for selection.

2. The parties should note that in practice they do not contest every seat in local elections, but this is often through lack of resources rather than political strategy. They should consider a cultural change towards a more tolerant and pluralistic attitude towards non-party community candidates, particularly given the main functions of backbench councillors in the new structures of local government.

Transparency

1. Each party should develop its own set of published criteria for consideration for the candidates' list. We urge that these should include abilities not directly related to party political activities or attitudes, but reflecting the work skills required for the task of representation.
2. The same principle of asking for specific, relevant attributes for the representative role should be applied to candidates for all elected public bodies.
3. Potential candidates not approved for the national list should be entitled to a statement of the reasons for refusal. Candidates from under-represented groups who have some but not all of the necessary qualities should be offered support for future attempts.

Suitability

1. Party officers and members involved in drawing up shortlists at a local level should be made aware of the general principles of transparency, and professional selection methods.
2. While we recognise that no political selection procedure can ignore questions such as ideology or personal differences, we would urge parties to include a job description among the candidate statements when these are distributed to party members. We envisage that this would encourage potential candidates to explain how they are suitable for the role, in addition to traditional criteria.

Collegiality

1. Parties should devise training and support programmes specially designed to encourage currently under-represented groups, and target their candidate training to assist more diverse representation.
2. The government should recognise that candidate selection is a legitimate sphere of public policy, in the same way that organised opposition in the House of Commons is in the public interest. Candidate training and development is a suitable object for support from public funds, given the financial constraints under which the parties operate. The Electoral Commission review of state funding for political parties, which commenced in May 2003, should consider the case for specific support for training and development.

Participation

1. We are not convinced that the adoption of American-style primaries is the best way to encourage wider participation in selections. However, if a local party (or, even better, the various local parties in one particular area) wish to conduct an experiment this is permitted under current law. The Electoral Commission may wish to examine whether local authorities should be permitted to administer primary elections and compile a register of supporters, provided that there is a local consensus for such a pilot project.
2. Parties should use postal balloting for candidate selection at a local level, rather than relying on attendance at a single meeting. They should also devise a verification procedure to minimise fraud in the new process. ●

Appendix A

The decline of party membership

Within memory the political parties were mass membership organisations with a pervasive influence on social and community life in many parts of the country. In the inter-war and immediate post-war periods, peaking perhaps during the short parliament between the 1950 and 1951 elections, they were part of the fabric of society and commanded great loyalty and enthusiasm. The Labour Party, and labour movement institutions, were at the centre of many communities, particularly in mining and industrial areas. Similarly, the act of joining a local Conservative Association was once seen as a mark of entry into the middle class and the local social and business elite. The parties and social events of local Conservative branches in many suburbs, small towns and rural areas were central to many middle class peoples' lives. Tony Hancock's remark in "The Blood Donor" more than 40 years ago that he did not want to join the Young Conservatives because he did not want a wife or a game of table tennis shows that the parties offered a lot more than political discussion. The best-organised constituency parties could claim memberships as high as 14,000 – that is, 20 per cent of the electorate. Now the number of constituency party organisations that can boast more than 1,000 members is small indeed.

The social basis of the mass parties has eroded, increasingly rapidly, during the last fifty years. In a broad sense, the type of community that bred strong party organisation has become increasingly uncommon. Where now is the working-class town with a strong sense of identity dependent on a single, highly unionised industry such as mining, in which all the social norms work towards an affinity for Labour? Or for that matter the all-white 'respectable' suburb, where Conservatism was synonymous with having made it, and pride in keeping up standards? Now, for most people, the signs do not all point in the same direction, and belonging to a party is no longer closely related to 'belonging' in a community. When parties represented clearly defined social classes, the idea of making a political

commitment by joining a party seemed useful, natural and ideologically desirable.

The clearer-sighted among party agents could see even in the early 1950s that television was a formidable competitor for the attention of party members, and as leisure choices have multiplied the charms of traditional party activism have been squeezed out. As leisure has changed, so has work. Many jobs, at all levels of income and status, impose greater demands on people: longer hours, unpredictable losses of evenings from working late, moving to a different area or even a different country. These have all disrupted the ability, even of the enthusiast, to participate to the full in party activity. Joining a political party no longer seems to fit into the patterns of modern life for many people.

There are also decreasing numbers of enthusiasts who have strong feelings of identification with a political party (now only about a third of voters according to the British Social Attitudes survey). With such declining partisan feelings among the population, and the erosion of class as a basis for political allegiance without any similar all-encompassing identity taking its place, fewer will want to become or remain party members. Many people now feel strongly about issues that the parties avoid, or are divided on, or seem to have little to say about: HIV/AIDS, family structures, drugs, global poverty... There is competition, too, for people's political energies with the rise of single issue pressure groups and other new social movements which many people find more satisfying than membership of a conventional political party. Moreover, as the sharply fluctuating memberships of some single issue groups shows, people tend to be birds of passage: to get involved for a brief period and then lose interest and move on. Long-term membership of a party, and particularly commitment of time to campaigning, does not fit into this new pattern.

Party activity has not often presented an attractive face to the public. The traditional, though generally

misleading, picture is of infighting among small groups, door-to-door canvassing on wet (never sunny!) evenings, and interminable meetings about trivial issues. Repeated polls and survey research suggest that those not already committed to, or obsessed by, the party battle are put off from joining, even if they are interested in political issues. The television image of politicians jeering or scoring points off each other in the Commons, or dodging questions in broadcasting studios does not encourage involvement and reduces public trust. Media coverage of politics (itself much reduced in scale and trivialised) often portrays a game played at Westminster over the heads of the electorate, who seem powerless to do much to affect what happens.

This sense of powerlessness has grown as critiques of national political structures in the face of global financial, corporate, media and scientific trends have gained increasing acceptance. Even the parties themselves seem to have downgraded activism. In a development that is part symptom and part cause of the decline in local party organisation, the national parties place increasing reliance upon centrally employed opinion pollsters, spin-doctors, think tanks and research bodies to conduct campaigns rather than party members. Door-to-door canvassing, increasingly unproductive in modern society, has tended to be replaced by telephone banks which can be sited anywhere. In the Labour Party, the role of activists has been systematically reduced, and some have responded by refusing to renew their membership. The sense of being able to affect national political developments by one's actions has been decreasing. However, many political scientists still stress the importance of local activism in boosting turnout and mobilising local supporters, both in council and parliamentary elections.

There is an apparent paradox that people feel less and less affinity with conventional party politics, yet many of their most important concerns remain very political. Organisations other than parties have sometimes been better able to respond to the pub-

lic's wishes on particular local issues such as new developments, road safety and crime. Any local paper shows many active voluntary, community and amenity groups, churches and faith groups, and tenants' and residents' associations. A Citizen Audit of 12,000 people conducted in 2001 found that just under half of people (46 per cent) are involved in a voluntary organisation of some kind and nearly three-quarters have engaged in some form of political activity, from contacting a local councillor or MP, to signing a petition, or joining in a protest. However, this usually does not involve active, and continuing participation, in a mainstream political party. Local parties have been losing out to such bodies for the public's attention and, above all, time. Local parties have, despite good intentions, not been effective at co-opting or co-operating with energetic and active citizens. Grass roots campaigners often have a tense relationship with local parties as part of the establishment which they are challenging. As Matthew Taylor of the IPPR has argued: 'at a local level the involvement of parties is likely to endanger the claim of activists to represent the whole community- parties at a local level are therefore regarded as irrelevant or divisive'. Of course, there have been exceptions and in particular some local Liberal Democrats have succeeded in forging links with community groups. We have plenty of active citizens, but few active party members. ●

Appendix B

Recommendations of recent reports

Since the Commission on Candidate Selection started its work, important reports have been produced by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) on equality for ethnic minorities and the Fawcett Society on gender equality, both of which have made recommendations on candidate selection. Some of their recommendations are along similar lines to those in our own report, but others are not and this Appendix certainly does not amount to an endorsement of each and every proposition in these reports.

The interested reader should also consult these reports for the detailed research in their areas of inquiry, including particularly the illuminating extracts of interviews with candidates of all parties that reveal the depths of some of the problems facing women and ethnic minorities in achieving fair representation.

Women and Candidate Selection

Laura Shepherd-Robinson and Joni Lovenduski, Fawcett Society, 2002

Some recommendations common to all parties:

- need to address culture of discrimination
- women's officers and organisations need to be better resourced
- selectors and members involved in ballots need equal opportunities guidance and training
- assistance for candidates with financial needs and recognition of caring responsibilities (for the Labour Party, there was a suggestion that there should a spending limit in selection campaigns)

Parties should:

- make equality a goal
- set and monitor targets of women's representation in party structure and elected office, and publish reports on progress
- educate members and officials in equal opportunities
- ensure procedures do not have explicit or implicit barriers to women

- act to eliminate sexual harassment
- learn from example with appointments and nominations to internal and external office

Additional recommendations:

Labour

- Trade unions to do more to support their women members going for selection – party leadership at national and local level to avoid supporting individual candidates.
- Procedure secretary, independent of selecting constituency secretary, should oversee each selection.
- Need for adequate and transparent complaints procedure
- Membership lists to be made available to all interested candidates on application.
- Postal voting should be investigated and reformed.
- Independent scrutiny of constituency selections.

Conservative

- recruit a more diverse and younger membership
- rules needed to ensure impartiality of those overseeing selections to ensure favourite sons do not get advantages.
- need for intervention from the centre
- The report notes that the party has “proportionately far less women coming forward as aspiring candidates than the other parties”, but “If the demand for women candidates is low, then women are less likely to put themselves through a long and difficult selection process.”

Liberal Democrats

- increased efforts by leadership to combat myth that women less attractive to electorate
- preferences for local candidates can disadvantage women

Recommendations for the government

The government should, as well as ensuring there are no legal obstacles and setting a good example,

- fund all parties to maintain women's sections
- fund the research and monitoring of women's representation

Our house? Race and representation in British politics

Rushanara Ali and Colm O'Connell, IPPR, 2002

Parties should

- initiate political education and awareness campaigns which challenge assumption that ethnic minority candidates are electoral liabilities – and “sensitise” selectors and party activists of need to avoid discrimination;
- provide clear guidance about why important to increase number of ethnic minorities candidates at every level;
- ensure “last minute” selections fair and transparent and that qualified ethnic candidates “genuinely encouraged to stand” – consideration to be given to targets for last-minute seats
- Lab and Lib Dems should establish special equality units – Cons' Cultural Unit should do more to get ethnic minorities selected and elected – equality units should monitor ethnic minority membership, voter participation and registration and oversee selection procedures.
- Parties should designate staff member with responsibility for ethnic minorities candidates – role should include “conducting outreach work to identify talented people who are potential candidates for selection”.
- Parties should appoint a senior party official and political figure accountable to leadership for implementing change.

Supply side issues

- Parties should consider mentoring programmes to attract and support candidates.
- In assessing candidate qualifications, greater recognition should be given to political and community activities outside party structures
- All parties should “take more active steps” to increase number of ethnic minority employees

- and members of national and local executives.
- Government to consider state funding for “a prestigious cross-party leadership programme to ensure there is a continued supply of successful and suitable candidates. This programme need not be restricted to political leadership and could include other areas of public life.”
- All parties to consider developing financial support for minority candidates, similar to Emily's List.
- Trade unions to take more pro-active steps to encourage and support ethnic minority candidates and to consider a special fund to support them.
- Parties to identify most talented ethnic minority candidates for appointment to Lords and use appointments to ensure ethnic min representation in Lords proportionate to population.

Policy and legal options

Among other options, the report states that:

- “There should be a greater level of party consultation with the CRE and relevant ethnic minority organisations. The CRE should if willing be asked to carry out formal investigations and accompanying review of selection procedures for all of the major parties for all types of elections, and to assist in their own reviews of procedures.”
- In PR elections parties should make more use of party lists to increase number of ethnic minority candidates in winnable positions. The report accepts that this is more difficult for Liberal Democrats and Conservatives as their lists are based on membership ballots, but argues that if their memberships do not produce more ethnic minority candidates, they should consider changing their procedures.
- “Parties should implement rigorous targets for minority representation ... If local goodwill is ultimately not forthcoming in reaching target requirements, then national parties may be empowered as a last resort to override local selections ...” ●

Candidate selection

The report of the commission on candidate selection

The process of candidate selection in Britain has failed to produce a representative parliament, and is part of the reason for the growing alienation of the public from party politics.

- A mere 17.9 per cent of MPs are women.
- Just 1.8 per cent of MPs are from the ethnic minorities (against a 7 per cent proportion in the population as a whole).
- Only 8 per cent of MPs had a manual working-class occupation before being elected
- Less than 1 per cent of MPs were younger than 30 at the 2001 election, and just 11 per cent were older than 60.
- Just over 1 per cent of the total population, and 1.5 per cent of the electorate, are members of the three main national political parties.
- Only 32 per cent of the public strongly or fairly strongly identifies with the main parties, down from 46 per cent in 1987.
- Just 59.4 per cent of the registered electorate voted in the 2001 general election, down 12 percentage points from 1997.

The Commission on Candidate Selection has considered how the process of selecting candidates might be made more democratic, representative and open to talented people. This report, the work of its Chairman, Peter Riddell of the Times, draws together its analysis and its conclusions.

The report recommends principles and guidelines for the parties to apply to their procedures to make them more modern, professional and fair, and points the way to a more representative outcome.

The report regards training and support for candidates as the key to changing the selection process, and recognises that the parties alone cannot achieve this on their limited budgets. It recommends that the government should offer financial support for candidate training.

The Commission on Candidate Selection:

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Nigel Forman
Diana Jeuda
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