

National Assembly for Wales Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform Consultation: Electing a More Diverse Assembly

Submission from Centenary Action Group

About the Centenary Action Group

The [Centenary Action Group](#) (CAG) is a cross-party campaigning coalition convened by Helen Pankhurst and represents over 100 activists, politicians and women's rights organisations working together to eradicate the barriers that prevent a diverse range of women from taking part in the decisions that affect their lives by. Member's include Fawcett Society, Electoral Reform Society, Muslim Women's Network, WEN Wales, and women's groups from each main political party.

Introduction

Over one hundred years after women first gained the right to stand in elections, they remain hugely underrepresented in leadership roles and face a number of barriers to political representation. The Welsh Assembly, despite achieving gender parity in 2003¹, has now reverted to having a greater number of male Assembly Members (AMs). There are no self-defined disabled AMs and only two coming from a BAME background, both of whom are male, representing 3.3 percent of the Assembly, compared to 4.2 percent of the Welsh population in the 2011 census.

We urgently need a political system that is diverse and reflective of the society it seeks to represent. This is not just because it is the fairest way to proceed but because policies are developed so much better when a wide range of views are taken into account. The Centenary Action Groups recommends that, as a first step, the Welsh Assembly request devolved powers to implement Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010. The Welsh Assembly should look to implementing other practices, including permanent proxy voting, an Access to Elected Office Fund for disabled candidates and childcare expenses for candidates.

1) Diversity of Assembly

1.a) What are the main barriers that may discourage somebody from an underrepresented group from standing for election to the Assembly?

In 2018 the Fawcett Society published a report detailing the barriers women face getting elected at various stages that make up the journey to political office². These included:

- **Money:** The costs of being selected and elected are high and personal financial resources are a necessity for those seeking political office. This can significantly hinder the selection of those from lower socioeconomic groups and can act as a barrier for women and disabled people.
- **Time and Flexibility:** Getting selected, and being a candidate, can be a full-time job, as parties require a significant time and personal commitment. Given the time and financial costs involved in seeking selection, employment flexibility is crucial.
- **Caring responsibilities:** Local dedication, a history of party activism and voluntary experience are key considerations for UK party selectorates. While these criteria are not explicitly in favour of men, it was perceived that they often advantage men indirectly – women are do three times as much unpaid care work as men³, they are therefore disadvantaged in a system that rewards previous voluntary dedication.
- **Personal networks and patronage:** Political parties continue to operate on systems of patronage, rather than merit, with selection based on who, rather than what you know. This

¹ Young, R., 2003. "Welsh Assembly Elections: 1 May 2003". House of Commons Library.

² Fawcett Society (2018) [Strategies for Success Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament](#)

³ UN Women. [Women and COVID-19: Five Things Governments Can Do Now](#). March 2020

was thought to advantage men, who can have greater opportunities to build informal connections. It was also perceived that men tend to support and promote other men.

- **Selectorate bias:** Research participants perceived that party members' "ideal candidate" is not only male but white, middle-class and able-bodied. Female candidates spoke extensively of being asked questions at events and meetings about childcare and their marital status and about their religious status, ethnicity and disability.
- **Abuse and harassment:** Many female candidates and MPs reported experiencing hostility, online abuse, harassment and threats of violence from the media, the public and from members of their own party.

1.b) What are the most important things that could be done to help people from underrepresented groups or who might be concerned about giving up their existing job or profession to stand for election?

- Practices such as unusual and predictable office hours, a lack of maternity leave, and a lack of consideration for the caring responsibilities, which are generally heaped on women, act as a major barrier to women's involvement in political life. Legislative business should be conducted within normal business hours and remote working should be made an available option for those who need it, such as those with caring responsibilities and disabled people.
- Political parties should provide funding to cover expenses such as childcare, which would otherwise stop them from being able to stand for election. The Women's Equality Party have an access fund to address any barriers to women standing for the party, including caring responsibilities, which they make available to all their candidates. This is particularly important for women from low incomes. The importance of financial support for childcare is evidenced by testimony from a London Assembly 2021 Candidate for the Women's Equality Party:

Five years ago, standing for public office was an impossible dream for me, a self-employed lone parent breadwinner for three school-age children. All the politicians I saw in the news either didn't have children, or had a stay-at-home wife or full-time nanny doing all the childcare. I was stunned by the Women's Equality Party's commitment to pay the additional childcare costs I would incur as a candidate. A political party finally understood the significance and cost of childcare in my life. Suddenly, I could afford to stand, and had security my children would be properly cared for when I was out campaigning.

- Disabled people are chronically underrepresented in politics. The Welsh Assembly should introduce an Access to Elected Office Fund to provide financial support for disabled people standing for election to the Welsh Assembly. This would replace the support given by the UK-wide Access to Elected Office Fund which was set up to provide financial support for disabled people standing for election to the UK Parliament, English local and mayoral elections, Greater London Authority elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales. The fund closed in May 2015 and has not been replaced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

2) Publishing data about the diversity of political candidates

One of the major obstacles to achieving a fair share of seats for women is that they are underrepresented among candidates. Currently, we don't know how many women step forward to be selected. We don't know how many candidates from diverse backgrounds hope to stand or if any candidates with disabilities seek election. In fact, there is no public, collated data at all – preventing similarities and differences from being seen. And without the data, sustainable change cannot occur. Open, transparent data drives diversity in politics like it does in every other area of our society.

2.a) If political parties were required to collect and publish anonymised data about the diversity of their Assembly election candidates, would this encourage them to select a more diverse range of people as candidates?

Political parties are the ‘gatekeepers’ to political representation: they are ultimately responsible for attracting members and aspirant candidates, the processes through which candidates are chosen, and their placement in winnable constituencies. As noted by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, it is therefore parties who must take responsibility for increasing diversity amongst their pool of possible candidates.

Parties across the spectrum have made public attempts to increase the diversity of their candidates. The majority of parties, including smaller parties, made a manifesto commitment to enacting section 106 of the Equality Act at the 2019 UK Parliament general election, which reveals that there is a willingness to take action. Nonetheless, there are limits to the success of any internal attempt to drive diversity without knowing the full picture relating to all the stages of the recruitment process. A compulsory system put in place by a central body, such as the Electoral Commission, would therefore benefit parties in the following ways:

- Parties do not currently have sufficient information to take a targeted approach to improving diversity. By monitoring diversity throughout the recruitment process, rather than solely of those candidates selected for seats, trends and problems will be illuminated.
- Publicly available information from all parties would provide a benchmark as to what could be achieved as well as allowing parties to monitor each other’s progress.
- Parties monitor data internally at the very least about selected candidates. The provision of a centralised system, administered by an independent body, reduces the burden on parties to devise their own systems for collating and publishing data.
- Transparency is key to accountability. Parties are motivated by the prospect of winning or losing voters, thus providing a source of information to the public on which they can measure party success, empowers the electorate and encourages parties to act.

The case for the publication of data to drive change and best practice is not new: NHS Choices, the Police Effectiveness and Efficiency Scheme and the publication of appointments to directorship level within the FTSE 100, are all examples of drives to promote high performance. The introduction of mandatory annual reporting on the gender pay gap from 2017 was steered by the same logic: that collecting information promotes transparency which in turn drives change⁴. Such public information can illuminate particular areas of weakness to organisations, thereby incentivising remedial action.

Diversity reporting is commonplace nowadays in workplaces and recruitment practices. Businesses, universities, governmental organisations and trade unions are amongst the examples of organisations in which there is publicly available information in relation to diversity, which has been shown to promote improvements. A few examples are:

- McKinsey & Company have carried out comprehensive research demonstrating the correlation between diversity amongst a business’s employee base and business growth. Their evidence shows that a programme being data driven is one of the key factors in driving its success⁵.
- Ofcom publishes findings from the diversity data gathered during its recruitment processes as a part of its annual diversity reporting. In doing so it clearly sets out its successes and weaknesses, which in the year 2018-2019 included a higher conversion rate of female applicants to accepting job offers, but a fall in the conversion rate of BAME candidates through the recruitment process⁶.
- Linklaters, along with many other law firms, report on their diversity statistics across the firm and within their trainee intake. Whilst it would be more useful to see the diversity statistics

⁴ Government Equalities Office, 2015. “Closing the Gender Pay Gap: Government Consultation”; Deloitte, U.K., 2016. “Trailblazing Transparency: Mending the Gap”, Government Equalities Office.

⁵ Hunt, V. Layton, D., Prince, S., (2015) “Diversity Matters”. McKinsey and Company; Hunt, V. et al., (2018) “Delivering Through Diversity”. McKinsey and Company.

⁶ Ofcom, (2019), “Diversity at Ofcom 2018/2019”.

from throughout the recruitment process to see if there is a drop off point indicating bias, this allows for external monitoring and accountability of their efforts to recruit a diverse cohort of trainees⁷.

- The TUC has carried out diversity monitoring of the composition of membership and elected bodies and trade unions since 2001, reporting that this has enabled unions to look closely at what groups are over- and under-represented, and address any obstacles facing certain individuals. The result has been increased focus on diversity and evidence of more participation and representation from a diverse range of individuals.⁸
- Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh along with most others across the country have developed comprehensive diversity strategies for both students and teaching staff. The strategies are all based on reporting data year on year to monitor improvements⁹.

2.b) What would need to be done to ensure that candidate data was collected and published accurately and responsibly?

The diversity data should be collected, as a minimum, before and after each election. In the future, when data is collected on unsuccessful candidates for nomination¹⁰, this should be done more regularly. Reporting on this basis provides an ongoing incentive to parties to push for increased diversity amongst candidates, whilst providing a practical solution to the uncertainty of polling dates.

There have been suggestions, for example by the Fawcett Society, that parties should only be subject to reporting requirements if they stood candidates in a minimum number of constituencies at the previous election. Conversely, a small party fielding only one candidate would have a very small administrative burden in returning a standard diversity monitoring form. Additional measures to support small parties and ensure that returns were suitably anonymised, considering the small pool of candidates, could be investigated and put in place by a body such as the Electoral Commission.

All parties would submit data in the same, simplified format, allowing for ease of publication and comparison of data by the public. This would make it easy to do at a local or regional level. The vast majority of organisations now undertake diversity reporting during their recruitment processes so this would be seen as a very standard request. The Centenary Action recommends a body such as the Electoral Commission, which currently manages all filings in relation to political parties, should be empowered to collect and publish diversity monitoring data on a dedicated webpage.

4. Other Issues

4.a) What changes could the Assembly introduce to its ways of working to make standing for election more attractive to people from under-represented groups? For example, some people have suggested that having strict limits on the timing of Assembly business, enabling proxy voting, or allowing Assembly Members to attend meetings remotely might encourage a more diverse range of Assembly candidates.

- **Proxy voting:** Legislatures must be accessible to parents. A failure to do so will have a disproportionate impact on women. A formal and transparent system of proxy voting would provide this and would guarantee the right of constituents, and parents, to have their voice and vote recorded in the National Assembly. Centenary Action Group welcomes the fact that previous oral witnesses to the Parliamentary Procedure Committee were hugely supportive of implementing proxy voting in the House of Commons. A formal and transparent system of

⁷ Linklaters, (2019) "Diversity Statistics: 2019".

⁸ Evidence provided to the Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) summarised in paragraph 158 of their final report.

⁹ University of Nottingham, (2018) "Diversity in Recruitment".

¹⁰ Including unsuccessful candidates for selection is an important activity because following individuals through the selection process would show how many times it takes for individuals to be selected. For example, it could be that a large number of BAME women in a party put themselves forward as candidates but very few make it past selection or are placed in winnable seats. Alternatively, it may be that the low number of known disabled members of parliament reflects the number of candidates coming forward. This might reveal that disabled people are discouraged from putting themselves forward. These scenarios would prompt different policy responses, but without the data available to parties to know what action to take, any attempts to increase diversification of candidates can only be a blunt tool.

proxy voting for maternity leave, as recommended in Professor Sarah Childs' *Good Parliament* Report¹¹, would guarantee the right of constituents to have their voice and vote recorded, without putting parents in the unreasonable and unrealistic situation where, in order for their constituency to be represented, they must return to work after very little time following the birth or adoption of their child¹².

- **Locum MPs:** There is currently no parental leave in place for elected representatives to ensure that they access cover for the work that they do outside of the constituency. Parental leave is also essential to ensure that constituents do not have reduced representation whilst an elected representative is on parental leave. Centenary Action Group urges the Welsh Assembly to commence a consultation on automatic access to funding for a locum cover should an AM be taking parental leave.

4.b) Are there examples of measures introduced in other countries which have significantly improved the parliamentary representation of under-represented groups?

- **Proxy voting:** Both New Zealand and Australia have incorporated proxy voting into their respective democracies¹³ and provide excellent examples of how other legislatures can also incorporate proxy voting into their parliamentary systems.
- **Candidate Diversity Data:** Coherent reporting of diversity amongst candidates already takes place in few countries worldwide and has been shown to be effective in focusing efforts towards improvement. Finland, for example, provides regular diversity reporting in relation to parliamentary candidates. The country has secured female representation of 46 percent and has a coalition government made up of five women leaders.

4.c) Should voluntary measures to encourage the selection and election of more candidates from under-represented groups be pursued and exhausted before legislative measures are developed?

In order for parties and campaigners to understand the varied and nuanced reasons why the majority of representatives continue to be male, white, and straight, it is vital that they know where in the recruitment process diverse candidates are falling away. Comprehensive gathering and publication of data about candidates standing for parliament will highlight which policies are successful and where there are particularly weak areas. This data, should it be made widely available, will drive changes in the diversity of our representatives. The lack of diversity and lack of information available demonstrates that the current voluntary system does not work. As the Centenary Action Group has long argued, transparency is key. Parties need to be held to account for their efforts to improve political diversity. Therefore we are calling on the government to enact section 106 of the Equality Act immediately to prevent this problem getting worse.

The 2019 Feminist Scorecard recommended that Welsh Government integrate gender quotas into the electoral system so that all political parties put forward at least 50% women candidates by 2021¹⁴. WEN Wales and Oxfam Cymru recommend that the Welsh Assembly implement legally binding quotas, with sanctions or incentives, to ensure we do not continue to see a reduction in the numbers of women elected to the Welsh Parliament, and the continuation of low numbers of women elected in local councils¹⁵. CAG recommends that the inclusion of quotas in forthcoming legislation on Reform of the Welsh Parliament should be given further consideration.

¹¹ Childs, S., (2016) "The Good Parliament" Available at: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/news/2016/july/20%20Jul%20Prof%20Sarah%20Childs%20The%20Good%20Parliament%20report.pdf>

¹² The Fawcett Society (2019) [Written Submission to Gender Sensitive Parliament \(House of Commons\) Inquiry](#)

¹³ Childs, S., (2016) "The Good Parliament" Available at: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/news/2016/july/20%20Jul%20Prof%20Sarah%20Childs%20The%20Good%20Parliament%20report.pdf>

¹⁴ WEN Wales and Oxfam Cymru (April 2020) [Feminist Scorecard 2019](#)

¹⁵ WEN Wales and Oxfam Cymru (April 2020) [Feminist Scorecard 2020](#)

4.d) Which voluntary or legislative measures to encourage the election of a more diverse Assembly would make the biggest impact, and which measures should be prioritised?

Collecting and publishing diversity data is an effective method of ensuring society is reflected within an organisation. This has been shown time and again in business, civil society and government. A third of FTSE 100 board members are now women, meeting a target set by the government-backed Hampton-Alexander report a year early. The goal of the UK Government's Race Disparity Unit's is the publication of data in order to drive policy change. Gender pay gap reporting has already brought considerable changes to women in the workplace. This is proof, should anymore be needed, that data definitely drives diversity.

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