The unrepresentative House
The inconvenient truth about Members of Parliament

By Daniel Ozarow

Purpose – *Argues that the British House of Commons is acutely unrepresentative of the population that it serves. A range of party leadership interventions that have sought to increase the possibilities for women and those from minority groups to become MPs are evaluated, but regulating in this way is found to have largely failed. Alternative policy solutions are proposed that seek to increase the "supply" of candidates from such backgrounds.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Conducts document analysis of political parties' equality and diversity policies and assesses their impact upon their proportion of MPs or parliamentary candidates from minority backgrounds is assessed.*

Findings – *Argues that the real problem lies in the lack of engagement in the political process and a shortage of candidates from such backgrounds putting themselves forward for nomination in the first place. Thus authentic parliamentary diversity cannot be created through enforcement but needs to be fostered organically through supportive longer-term measures alongside electoral reform.*

Practical implications – *Advances the view that greater diversity is required for parliamentary legitimacy but top-down interventions have been counter-productive; barely improving the proportion of MPs from minority backgrounds and actually presenting threats to party autonomy and quality of democracy.*

Social implications – *Shows how structural problems complicate the ease with which women and those from working-class, ethnic minority and disability backgrounds can engage with the political process and then successfully become parliamentary candidates. Reforming the political culture and targeted policies aimed at reversing the barriers to entry may create a more level playing field by encouraging them to stand.*

Originality/value – *Offers a timely case study of the neglected and longstanding lack of representation in Parliament that is uniquely interrogated from an HRM perspective.*

Article type: General review

Keyword(s): *Members of Parliament; Selection; Democracy; Affirmative action*

The selection procedure that Members of Parliament undergo when seeking employment is unique among UK employers. While candidates are usually recruited and later nominated to stand by local or national political parties, they are elected by the public. Yet despite improvements in recent years, the House of Commons remains acutely unrepresentative of the British population it serves. In 2010, only 142 of the 650 MPs elected were women (22 percent of the total), meaning that the UK languishes 56th out of 141 countries internationally (below Rwanda, Nicaragua, Algeria and Kyrgyzstan) for gender diversity. Worse still, just 26 (4 percent) were from ethnic minorities – a third of their proportion of the national population. Only a handful had a registered disability.

In the wake of the recent 2015 General Election, this article asks whether the lack of parliamentary diversity means that the British electorate is among the most prejudiced "employers" around. It outlines why it is important that the Commons becomes more diverse for its democratic legitimacy and evaluates some of the solutions that the political parties have implemented to overcome the problem of underrepresentation. Finally, given that these have only achieved limited success, alternative policies are proposed for consideration.

The British electorate as a prejudiced selection panel?

There is no evidence that the British public acts as an instinctively prejudiced selection panel. Indeed there are four principal reasons why the electorate's choice of MP is skewed towards being a white male over the age of 40 (as 62 percent of MPs are) before they even cast their vote.

First the UK's inherently undemocratic and arcane voting system means that nearly two-thirds of MPs are elected in "safe seats". Thus it is how *parties* select their candidates –especially in these constituencies– that heavily influences who does and does not become and MP.

Secondly, until recently, internal selection procedures to determine who stands as a parliamentary candidate have been restricted to local party members. Although the Green Party, Scottish National Party and UK Independence Party have bucked the trend with soaring membership in recent years, the three political parties with the greatest representation in Westminster (Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats) have been haemorrhaging members since the 1970s. As a result, candidates are usually selected by a handful of local party activists who themselves may either not be especially representative of the general population or not consider diversity to be a key criterion for candidate nomination.

The third underlying problem pertains to social class. Some 90 percent of MPs elected in 2010 were university graduates (a third of whom were Oxbridge educated) compared with 20 percent of the adult population. Furthermore, one-third of MPs

attended fee-paying schools, compared to 10 percent of the population. Such schools have traditionally taught students how to be confident and successful at public speaking, an important skill for many top jobs, including political positions, to the detriment of aspiring candidates from less privileged backgrounds. A similar story is witnessed in terms of MPs' occupations. Some 60 percent hail from the professions or business, whereas the proportion of manual workers or farmers fell from 20 percent just 5 percent between 1979-2010. Those with middle-class backgrounds are better equipped to exploit networking opportunities and traverse the necessary political terrain in party infrastructures to both be nominated as a candidate and then achieve power.

Diversity is also negatively impacted in other ways. For instance, working-class people tend to feel more estranged from the *bourgeois* political process, so are increasingly unlikely to join political parties, let alone become parliamentary candidates. Meanwhile, Black Caribbean men are significantly underrepresented among the UK university population and on average come from less affluent backgrounds, so face disadvantages in terms of their chances of gaining nomination.

Fourth and finally, levels of political engagement are also far lower among minority groups. Although eligible ethnic minority citizens are just as likely to vote as their white counterparts, they are less likely to join political parties. In the 2010 election a million fewer women voted than men. If fewer women and BME citizens are politically active in the first place they will be less likely to be candidates.

Diversity: a vote-winner and more rounded decision-making

A recent report revealed that rising political disaffection is being fuelled by "spin" and a perceived lack of accountability in the British political system. However a secondary finding was that confidence would increase if MPs appeared to be more like the people who elected them, that they are from more diverse backgrounds.

HRM theorists argue that diverse teams and the independent thinking that different perspectives bring, lead to better decision-making. Parliament is no different and concerns have led to two major innovations in recent years. First, since 1993 Labour has been using all-women shortlists, a form of "affirmative action" which is permitted under the Equalities Act (2010) in order to address Parliament's gender imbalance. However the policy did nothing for ethnic under-representation and in the 1997 Parliamentary intake, all of the MPs selected using all women shortlists were White. Another criticism is that the policy is "undemocratic", and is a "form of discrimination against men" because it ignores the merit principle. This has generated internal tensions within parties.

The second important change was the Conservatives' use of open-primary ballots in which party members were joined by non-members from the public to elect its

candidates for the 2010 general election. They also introduced an "A-list" in 2005 whereby its central office selected candidates from minority groups and women in top target seats as a means to increase its MPs from those backgrounds. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats' "leadership program" provides mentoring and support to candidates from under-represented groups.

Organic versus enforced diversity

Although these top-down initiatives have improved its diversity during the past decade, they have failed to achieve a House of Commons that looks anything like the general population. Following the 2010 General Election, only 33 percent of the Labour MPs returned were women, compared to 16 percent of Conservatives, and just 13 percent of Liberal Democrats. In terms of BME MPs, the failure was even more marked, with Labour having just 16, the Tories 11 and the Lib Dems none.

These policies have not worked because there has been a shortage of women or those from minority backgrounds putting themselves forward as candidates.

The case of the Green Party also suggests factors other than leadership intervention are at play in fostering diversity. The Greens achieved the highest proportion of female parliamentary candidates for the 2015 General Election despite the fact that they are selected purely by local party members and without the need for quotas or central office interference. The stipulation is that a woman must appear as a nominee for the ballot to take place. It is also the only party with a BME deputy leader - Shahrar Ali (the Party has two, one of which must be a woman). This suggests that attitudinal tendencies among members of different parties, varying degrees of internal party democracy and supportive cultures or structures may have more explanatory power in organically promoting the emergence of such candidates than "quota regulation", especially where gender is concerned.

Intervention by party leaders may also come at the expense of local party autonomy and cause conflict with local activists. Open-primary elections act as a disincentive for party-based involvement and also leave the process greatly exposed to entryist tactics by well-financed pressure groups that may (legitimately or illegitimately) flood such meetings with their own supporters to vote-in their preferred candidate. The coalition government 2010-15 abandoned its original idea of state-funded primaries in 2010, surely aware of the potential threats to democracy of a descent into clientelist politics.

Instead, encouraging greater diversity of "supply" among candidates from non-traditional backgrounds must be the policy focus. Practices must aim to stimulate the involvement of such groups in the political process and reduce their barriers to standing in elections. "Short money" (annual state funding to Opposition parties for organizing costs) should be extended to also specifically fund their women's, BME,

disability and LGBT caucus groups, with similar allocations made to the ruling party's respective groups. Grants should also be made available to organizations that promote the political empowerment of minorities that operate outside the party system, especially those that work with young people.

Political parties also need to radically rethink how they might attract a diverse range members. Biases in their selection process towards people with a narrow range of professional backgrounds can be reduced through assessment processes that identify those with the *potential* to become a successful MP, then providing them with the necessary training and support. The cost of standing for Parliament (in terms of forfeited income and direct expenses) also deters poorer candidates. Women, people with disabilities and those without a privileged education are disproportionately affected as they tend to have lower incomes or face greater child-care or personal-support costs. The Speaker's commission on parliamentary representation recently recommended that means-tested bursaries should be offered to parliamentary candidates to enable a wider range of people to come forward.

Finally, fundamental electoral reform is necessary to end the prominence of white, male, middle-class and older candidates being re-elected in safe seats under the first-past-the-post system. The British electorate, not parties, should have a greater say in who their MPs are. Electoral systems such as proportional representation or additional-member voting are more democratic and promote a multi- rather than bi-party political agenda. Such systems will also establish much needed ideological diversity as opposed to the current Westminster consensus around the need to deepen neo-liberalism and austerity, which is itself fostering powerlessness and disaffection and must urgently be overcome.

Note

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