

Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System: Volume 2

Submissions from representative / campaigning groups

Fawcett Society

11 March 1998

Lord Jenkins of Hillhead
Chair
Independent Commission on Voting Systems
6th Floor
Clive House
Petty France
London
SW1H 9HD



Dear Lord Jenkins

Please find enclosed Fawcett's submission to the Independent Commission on Voting Systems.

Fawcett welcomes the Commission's desire to hear from as wide a range of people as possible. A change in the voting system offers the opportunity to transform political culture in the UK. It is important that the process of change is as open and inclusive as possible. We are concerned that large numbers of women, and many women's organisations, who support the need for change in the culture of politics may not be used to engaging with debates around voting reform, and may therefore not approach the Commission to give their views.

We hope that the Commission will positively encourage women to come forward and actively solicit the views of women's organisations. Fawcett would be happy to help facilitate meetings between the Commission and women's organisations if this would be useful.

If you would like to discuss this, or would like more detailed information on the views contained in our submission, please contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Shelagh Diplock".

Shelagh Diplock
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Commission on Voting Systems

Written evidence from the Fawcett Society

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fawcett

Fawcett submission to the Commission on Voting Systems

The Fawcett society is the leading organisation campaigning for equality between women and men in the UK. Throughout our 130 year history, since early campaigns for votes for women, we have been concerned to improve women's ability to play a full role in public life. Fawcett has developed considerable expertise on women's voting patterns, political priorities and attitudes to politics and the reasons for the lack of women in elected office and strategies to overcome these. Fawcett is the only women's organisation represented on the management committee of the Voting Reform Group and is active in encouraging other women's organisations to join the debate on voting reform.

Fawcett welcomes the establishment of the Commission on Voting Systems.

Fawcett does not recommend a particular voting system. All systems have their advantages and disadvantages. We support the broad principles agreed by the Voting Reform Group which should underlie any voting system for the House of Commons. These principles are:

- The maintenance of geographic constituencies represented by MPs
- Broad proportionality
- The right to demonstrate support for particular candidates wherever possible
- Social representativeness in that the voting system chosen encourages as much as possible the representation in parliament of all sections of society.

In line with these principles we do not believe that the Commission should consider the Alternative Vote as a possible alternative to first past the post. We support the VRG position that the Alternative Vote is not a proportional voting system. In addition, the Alternative Vote continues the pattern of single member constituencies which is a key factor in the low proportion of women in the UK parliament. (see below)

Our particular areas of concern are:

Women's representation in parliament

Despite the increase in the number of women MPs at the last election to 120, 82% of MPs are men. There are many factors which contribute to the relatively low numbers of women in parliament including a political culture that many women find off putting and the difficulty of combining a political career with primary responsibility for childcare. However these problems are not restricted to women in the UK, other European countries manage to return a far higher proportion of women MPs.

Although the numbers of women standing for selection have increased steadily since 1945, until the 1997 election the proportion elected remained

relatively low. This is not because women candidates are less popular with voters than male candidates, rather, with the exception of women selected by Labour from all women shortlists, the vast majority of women candidates are selected for seats that they are unlikely to win.

In the 1992 general election, for example women were 18.3% of all candidates, (366 out of a total of 2003), but only 9.2% of those elected.

In a Fawcett survey carried out after the 1997 election, women MPs were more likely to name discrimination by selection committees than any other reason for the low number of women in parliament. There is extensive anecdotal evidence of direct discrimination by selection committees in some areas

The first past the post voting system has been recognised as a major barrier to the selection of women candidates.¹ Internationally countries with proportional voting systems return on average twice as many women representatives to their lower house than countries with majoritarian systems². The European countries with the highest proportion of women MPs all use some form of proportional representation.

Number of women in the Lower or Single Houses of National Parliaments of the European Union, and the type of Electoral System

Country	% of women	Electoral system
Sweden	40.4	party list
Finland	33.5	party list
Denmark	33	party list
Netherlands	31.3	party list
Austria	26.8	party list
Germany	26.2	additional member
Spain	24.6	party list
Luxemburg	20	party list
UK	18.2	FPTP
Ireland	13.9	STV
Portugal	13	party list
Belgium	12	party list
Italy	11.1	mixed
France	10.9	two ballot
Greece	6.3	mixed

Figures from: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997

Under first past the post, or any other voting system with single member constituencies, local parties only have to select one candidate. This encourages the concept of the "best man for the job", the ideal candidate who is judged on a narrow range of criteria of what makes a successful candidate. Selection committees in this situation tend to "play safe". In safe seats they may not have selected a candidate for 20 or 30 years, and may think no further than reproducing the MP they have lost. In marginal seats they are more likely to select women, but often still do not want to risk losing the seat.

As one Conservative MP put it. "They're faced with the prospect of replacing someone who was a very powerful image in their world, because they were engaged in politics, and their image of politics was the MP, so they naturally relate to that image.. what they are looking for is a younger version.... of what they had before"³

Considering the current make up of parliament it is perhaps not surprising that selection committees looking for someone who looks as much like an MP as possible so often chose a white middle class man.

Under proportional voting systems where parties have to select a number of candidates to contest a larger constituency, or a list to contest a region there is greater pressure to select a range of different candidates to appeal to as many different sections of the electorate as possible. Candidates can be chosen because they bring different and complimentary skills and knowledge to the party's list.

A 1997 study by the European Parliament argued:

"The majoritarian system is seen to be unfair to women because with such an electoral practice, the success of the party heavily depends on the individual criteria it selects. This candidate will have been selected on tightly defined criteria, as part of what makes a "successful" nominee; the selection process has been criticised for the emphasis given to "male" characteristics..... However in proportional systems..... most important (factor) is the party's wish to appeal to as many voters as possible, which includes listing female candidates, as the absence, or small number, of women on a national electoral list could be a negative factor for some of the electorate".⁴

The significance of the voting system in the proportion of women elected can be seen clearly in the case of Germany. Under the German Additional Member System half of representatives are elected by first past the post, and half from party lists. 80% of German women parliamentary representatives are elected via the party lists and only 20% from single member constituencies.

Besides encouraging selection committees to select more women for winnable seats, voting systems that involve selecting a number of candidates for a region create new opportunities for parties to take positive action to ensure equal treatment of men and women.

Following the industrial tribunal decision in the Jepson case that Labour's policy of all women shortlists was counter to the Sex Discrimination Act, and the Labour Party's decision not to appeal, the law relating to positive action and the SDA remains unclear. The recent European Court ruling in the Marshall case suggests that so long as men and women are treated equally positive action can be lawful under the European Equal Treatment Directive. Voting systems that involve selecting a number of candidates allow parties to

enforce quotas that ensure men and women have an equal chance of being selected for a region, rather than needing to impose all women shortlists as is the case with single member constituencies.

All three main proportional voting systems, STV, AMS and Party Lists involve the selection of more than one candidate for a region. The more candidates a party has to select for a region, the more likely they are to select women. Because of the continued discrimination against women candidates, it is likely that in most regions most parties will continue to place a male candidate at the top of their list. Therefore if women candidates are to be elected in reasonable numbers, regions must be large enough to give parties a good chance of getting their second candidate elected.

Women's participation in democracy

Women are more likely to be floating voters than men. In March 1997, just over a month before the General Election around one in three women had yet to decide which party they would vote for.⁵

Fawcett focus group research with women floating voters suggests that these women were deeply concerned with a wide range of political issues but either felt that their preferred party had little chance of being elected in their constituency and were deciding whether to vote tactically for another party or felt alienated from party politics altogether.⁶ Younger women and women from ethnic minorities were particularly likely to feel disconnected from mainstream politics and were less likely to vote than any other group.

Women are often alienated from politics because they don't trust any of the political parties to pay attention to the issues that are important to them.⁷ Research by MORI for Fawcett showed that over 60% of women did not feel that any of the parties would pay enough attention to the issues that were important to them in the general election. Women floating voters were more likely to feel this than any other group.

A voting system that would ensure that the number of seats won was in proportion to the votes cast could help re-connect women, particularly younger and ethnic minority women, with the political process. International comparisons show that voter turn out is higher in countries with proportional voting systems⁸

Voter choice

Focus group research with women voters after the election suggests that women in safe seats felt that their MP had no incentive to pay attention to their concerns. Closed party lists would create another type of "safe seat" - the position at the top of the list which will virtually guarantee a place in parliament. An MP in this situation would become completely accountable to their party who would decide their position on the list, but not at all accountable to the voters in the region.

Open lists allow voters greater choice over who represents them. Except in exceptional circumstances voters may never re-order a list in sufficiently large numbers to remove someone from the top of the list, but they would be in a position to send a strong signal to the party about the relative popularity of different candidates.

It is sometimes argued that closed lists enable parties to ensure that equal numbers of men and women are elected by creating balanced lists which the voters cannot alter. This assumes firstly that it is voters disinclination to vote for women that leads to women's low representation and secondly that political parties have the will to ensure balanced lists. However there is little evidence that women candidates suffer a disadvantage with the voters compared to men, while there is plenty of evidence that party selection committees discriminate against women.

Although there will be greater incentive for parties selecting a number of candidates to select higher numbers of women than at present it cannot be assumed that this would happen in all parties in all regions. Local parties in some areas might select women for unwinnable positions on the list, just as they now select women for unwinnable seats. With closed lists there would be little voters could do except not vote for that party.

Some women may chose not to vote for their preferred party if that party does not place women in sufficient numbers in winnable places on their lists. However, many women may prefer to have the option to register support for a particular party while at the same time registering support for particular women candidates. This would require "open" lists.

Consultation

Fawcett welcomes the decision of the Commission to hold regional meetings in order to consult with as wide a range of people as possible. We are concerned, however, that many women and local women's organisations may not consider attending these meetings because they assume that they lack the necessary expertise in the details of different voting systems to take part.

A change in the voting system offers an opportunity to tranform the culture of UK politics. It is important that such an important decision takes into account the opinions of the vast majority of voters who are not curently engaged in debates around electoral reform.

Fawcett focus group research among women voters shows that large numbers of women are concerned about the number of women in parliament and the culture of politics⁹. Few of these women are used to discussing these concerns in the context of different voting systems. Neither are they normally involved in giving evidence to government commissions. Therefore it is important that the Commission finds ways of gauging the views of people outside the normal political process.

Conclusions

Whichever system is finally proposed we would suggest that:

- With STV, constituencies return a minimum of five or six members
- With AMS, the highest possible number of MPs are returned via the party list element, i.e. 50:50 directly elected and additional members rather than 75:25. Lists should be open rather than closed.
- With party lists constituencies return a minimum of five or six members. Lists should be open rather than closed.

The alternative vote should not be considered as it is not a proportional system and would do nothing to improve women's representation.

The process of consultation should be as inclusive as possible.

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March 1998

Footnotes

¹ See for example, Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, *Gender and Party Politics*, Sage, London 1993;

² Norris P. Choosing Electoral Systems, Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems, *International Political Science Review* Vol 18(3), July 1997

³ Quoted in Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, *Political Recruitment, Gender Race and Class in the UK Parliament*, London 1995

⁴ Differential Impact of the Electoral Systems on Female Political Representation, European Parliament Directorate General for Research working paper, 1997

⁵ MORI/Times polls, March 1997 from It's not like picking a football team: women floating voters and the 1997 election, Fawcett 1997

⁶ It's not like picking a football team: women floating voters and the 1997 election, Fawcett 1997

⁷ *Winning Women's Votes: the gender gap in voting patterns and priorities*, Fawcett 1996

⁸ Choosing electoral systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems, Pippa Norris, *International Political and Science Review*, Vol 18 (3), July 1997

⁹ Focus group research carried out for *Women and the 1997 Election* to be published May 1998

THE
INDEPENDENT COMMISSION
ON THE VOTING SYSTEM

The Rt. Hon Lord Jenkins of Hillhead OM (Chairman)
Lord Alexander of Weedon QC
Baroness Gould of Potternewton
Sir John Chilcot GCB
David Lipsey Esq

Shelagh Diplock
The Fawcett Society
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24 April 1998

Dear Ms Diplock

I would like to thank you for your submission and to apologise for the delay in acknowledging receipt. I can confirm that your work has been circulated to the Commission.

The Commission has had an excellent response to its invitation for submissions on an alternative voting system. Thank you again for your interesting contribution.

Yours sincerely

Belinda Kay
Secretariat