

# **STATEMENT**

to

## **THE SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE**

on

### **THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN, ETHNIC MINORITIES AND DISABLED PEOPLE IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, AND ASSOCIATED MATTERS**

## **THE MARANATHA COMMUNITY**

21 January 2009

This submission has been prepared in response to the House of Commons' decision on 12 November 2008 that a Speaker's Conference "shall consider and make recommendations for rectifying the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large; and may agree to consider other associated matters."

It is addressed to The Joint Secretaries, The Speaker's Conference, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. A copy is being sent by e-mail to [spconference@parliament.uk](mailto:spconference@parliament.uk).

The Maranatha Community is a nationwide movement and network of Christians in all denominations. Comprising thousands of active members of churches of all traditions, it is committed to healing, unity and renewal of faith. Formed 28 years ago, its members have been very deeply involved in care and relief work, and it has also taken the initiative in broad areas of national concern both in Parliament and throughout the country.

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## SUMMARY

- The convening of the Speaker's Conference is based on the premise that various groups of people should be represented in the House of Commons by a number of MPs in proportion to those groups' presence in the UK population.
- We do not consider that the present "disconnection" between many of the electorate and Parliament is attributable to particular groups being insufficiently represented. Rather, we believe it is attributable to what is widely perceived as a lack of integrity of Government and of politicians as a group, and to loss of confidence in the Civil Service.
- We consider that:
  - Any person appointed to a public position or task should be the best suited of those available, subject as necessary to citizenship and residence.
  - The determination of suitability should take account of motivation and personal or group objectives.
- We consider that the biasing or restriction of selection lists would limit the ability of voters to select as their representatives those whose suitability, in their view, surpassed that of other candidates.
- We consider that people fit to be elected as MPs should, by definition, be able to represent the concerns of minority groups within their constituencies. We do not, therefore, consider that the non-proportionate presence among MPs of particular groups causes, per se, any problems in the governmental process. Moreover, the acceptance of "group" candidates would almost certainly favour skilled and well funded campaigning groups at the expense of quiet "suffering" groups and those less able to campaign effectively.
- We consider that introducing proportionate presence in Parliament for specific groups would be therefore be fraught with danger, and could easily lead to effective disenfranchisement of the "silent majority" of the UK population.
- Overall, we therefore consider that the premise upon which the Speaker's Conference is based is fundamentally flawed, misconceived and inappropriate, and threatens the very concept of Parliamentary democracy itself.

## **1. SITUATION**

- 1.1. The convening of the Speaker's Conference is based on the premise that various groups of people should be represented in the House of Commons by numbers of MPs in proportion to those groups' presence in the UK population.
  - 1.1.1. This implies that MPs cannot properly represent members of groups to which they themselves do not belong.
  - 1.1.2. It further implies that all groups of the population are equally well able to represent themselves.
  - 1.1.3. Moreover, its implementation would depend upon choosing which groups should be proportionately represented in the House of Commons and which should not. It would also depend upon the accurate measurement of the proportion of the population belonging to the privileged groups.

## **2. REPRESENTATION AND VOTERS' ATTITUDES**

- 2.1. There is now a dangerously low level of "connection" between a large proportion of the electorate and politicians. Elected representatives themselves, whether MPs, MEPs or local councillors, are increasingly acknowledging that there is a deep and widening gulf between them and the general public.
- 2.2. The active membership of constituency parties has generally diminished, to the extent that in many cases it may not now be representative of the numbers favouring particular parties' attitudes and policies. Party membership is generally small in comparison with, for example, the thousands of church members in most constituencies.
- 2.3. Altogether, it is beyond question that there is widespread disillusionment with politicians and the political process. This was powerfully illustrated by the low turnout at the last General Election, leading to the Government being elected by barely more than a fifth of the electorate. Inevitably this has led to the passing of legislation which is widely unpopular and which, in some instances, may be opposed by the majority of the electorate.
- 2.4. In recent years there have been many indicators that the gap between people and politicians is increasingly becoming actual alienation. For example, the proliferation of powerful quangos has done much harm to the democratic process. In addition to this there is widespread unease about the inhibition of free, democratic voting procedures through the heavy imposition of the party whip system.
- 2.5. Moreover, denying people the opportunity to express themselves, whether the issue is the Lisbon Treaty or Parliamentary approval of a third runway at Heathrow, gives an oppressive tone to government. In addition, failure to uphold sound principles and moral standards in Parliament has contributed to the growth of a generation or more of young people who are confused about what is right and wrong or true and false. Many of these young people have no strong and reliable framework upon which to build their lives, no clear appreciation of the demands and boundaries of

responsible citizenship, and no sense of why they should have anything to do with our processes of government or wish to do so.

- 2.6. We do not consider that this disillusionment, disconnection and alienation, extending as it does not only to the young or to people with radical points of view, but also to many of the thoughtful and moderate majority of our people, stems primarily or even significantly from the non-proportional presence in Parliament of different groups. We consider that it results primarily from a loss of trust and confidence in MPs and the parliamentary process, attributable to:
  - 2.6.1. The perceived lack of integrity of many politicians.
  - 2.6.2. The perceived arrogance, unwillingness to listen, or lack of genuine interest in the voter's problems, of many politicians.
  - 2.6.3. The perceived willingness of those in power to use a Parliamentary majority to push through measures for which they have no mandate and/or which do not have public support.
  - 2.6.4. The perceived unwillingness of many MPs to accept reasonable and proper levels of accountability to the Nation.
  - 2.6.5. A loss of confidence in the Civil Service to act dispassionately in the public interest under the direction of the Monarch in Parliament, consequent upon the recent considerable politicization of the Service.
- 2.7. Since the main roots of the widespread sense of helplessness, distrust, or de facto disenfranchisement do not lie in the non-proportional presence of particular groups among MPs, these problems will not be ameliorated by measures to bias representation towards members of those groups. Indeed, if voters who are already disenchanted with Parliament began to perceive that elections were being "fixed" in this way, their attitudes to politicians would only become even more negative. Their trust in Parliament and their willingness to become involved in the national or local government process, even by turning out to vote, would be further diminished rather than improved.
- 2.8. The true route to restoring healthy engagement between people and Parliament is to enable men and women to be elected as MPs who are people of integrity, genuinely empathise with their constituents' issues, and are willing to do something about those issues and communicate with their people.

### **3. PRINCIPLES**

- 3.1. We take as a first principle that the person elected or otherwise appointed to any post or task in the service of our Nation should be the one best suited to it of those available.
- 3.2. We consider that this principle should normally be applied regardless of ethnic origin, colour, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, wealth, social background or, subject to practicalities, disability.

4. We affirm that in some cases this principle should be qualified in that the person must be a British citizen with the right of residence in the United Kingdom (or who is resident in the UK).

4.1. We further affirm that in addition to intellectual or physical ability, knowledge, experience, etc, “best suited” must necessarily take account of motivation and the suitability of personal or group objectives.

*An extreme example illustrates the point: it would not be appropriate to appoint as Chief of the Defence Staff a person, however able and otherwise suited, whose first loyalty was to a foreign power or who had become a pacifist.*

*Correspondingly, no person should be appointed to a public position who might reasonably be expected to try to exploit public office to further an individual or group objective not openly declared as Government policy prior to a General Election, or contrary to the public interest.*

## **5. SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS APPLICABLE TO MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT**

5.1. The fundamental purpose of having Members of Parliament is that they should represent their constituents. The “best suited” principle therefore calls for voters to have a choice of candidates who are each skilled to represent them, so that they can select the one whose suitability as a representative, in their view, surpasses that of the others.

5.2. This immediately rules out skewed representation brought about by the inappropriate biasing or restriction of selection lists before potential candidates are put to the voters concerned.

5.3. Furthermore, it is not necessary for a candidate to have first-hand experience of everything the constituents do, or share everything that they aspire to, in order to make a good representative. Does an MP for a mining area need to have been a miner, or an MP for Crewe to have worked on the railways?

5.4. We recognize that voters commonly give a high priority to party membership in choosing whom to elect, meaning simply that they put party affiliation at the head of the list of representational attributes they seek.

5.5. This predominance of party over other factors in present-day politics is in our view a regrettable characteristic, preventing, as it does, many people who would make excellent MPs from standing as independents with any hope of success. It alone may often prevent the person who is the best suited to represent a constituency from being elected. (And where party politics rule, of course, the valuable concerns and potential contributions of voters for losing parties in any constituency are almost certain to be neglected or under-represented if they vary from the policy of the winning party.)

5.6. To go beyond those inevitabilities of the present system and introduce, whether by party policy or electoral law, a process that restricted the selection of party candidates to members of particular groups would further increase the likelihood of shutting out potentially admirable MPs.

- 5.7. There is widespread recognition that the present financial crisis engulfing our Nation is not attributable to financial causes alone, nor even primarily to those causes, but has been brought about by an underlying spiritual barrenness and moral malaise. In these circumstances, it is increasingly important for MPs to put national wellbeing above party and group interest. Selecting candidates to stand for Parliament specifically to represent minority interests would run directly contrary to the ethos that is required to bring our Nation back from its present position of great social and structural danger.

## **6. PROPORTIONALITY AND PARLIAMENT**

- 6.1. We take it as a matter of definition that people fit to be elected as MPs should be able to represent, when it is in the constituency or national interest, the concerns of minority groups within their constituencies. We do not, therefore, regard the non-proportionate representation of minority groups as causing, per se, any problems in the governmental process.

*Given the first statement above, we consider the term 'proportionate presence' more suitable than 'proportionate representation' when referring to numbers of MPs from any group.*

*We prefer the term 'non-proportionate' to 'unbalanced', because the latter implies that something is necessarily wrong.*

- 6.2. On the other hand, we foresee substantial problems arising if interest groups were able to claim a right to a proportionate presence in Parliament. For example:
- 6.2.1. Who would determine which groups should qualify for proportionate presence and which should not? How could the impartiality of these arbitrators be ensured?
- 6.2.2. Which categories of groups should be included and which excluded? Where should the boundaries be drawn, and why should they be drawn there? Should dentists, Muslims, the elderly, anti-vivisectionists and the pro-hunting lobby qualify equally for proportionate presence? If not, why not?
- 6.2.3. How would groups be defined and their membership determined? Some interest groups regularly represent themselves as speaking for a much larger number of the population than they do. If proportionality were accepted, who would determine the proportions to represent?
- 6.2.4. Who would ensure that interest groups have objectives in line with the moral health and other best interests of the Nation?
- 6.2.5. How would skilled and well funded campaigning groups be prevented from obtaining a disproportionate Parliamentary presence compared with quiet "suffering" groups and those unskilled in campaigning? The likelihood is that the latter, probably including some of the most vulnerable and already disadvantaged people in our society, would be further disadvantaged and proportionately disenfranchised.

## **7. BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES**

- 7.1. As soon as questions like those above are asked, it becomes evident that introducing proportionate presence in Parliament for specific groups would be fraught with danger.
- 7.2. Who, for example, would speak for the “silent majority” of ethnic English, Scots, Welsh and Irish citizens of our countries who hold to the characteristic values which, in the past, were defining and distinguishing characteristics of our Nation, and which remain the source of some of our greatest strengths?
- 7.3. Further, the concept of proportionality presupposes that all groups are equally able to speak for themselves and to handle constituency tasks, and that outsiders could not or would not adequately represent them. A moment’s consideration shows this proposition to be flawed: children, for example, are not able to speak for themselves as a group or to handle constituency tasks – it devolves upon adults to seek and protect their best interests in Parliament.
- 7.4. Similarly, the concept assumes that members of all groups are equally available to stand for Parliament. This is not so. For example, men and women have different roles in life, especially in relation to parenthood. The feeding and nurturing roles of mothers call for their presence with young children in a manner different from the role-modelling and relationship-building presence of fathers. This, quite apart from any other factor, affects the availability of women for election.
- 7.5. Again, those who care for elderly and disabled members of their families are almost certainly far from proportionately present among MPs. While we would not wish for a moment to suggest that carers should not become MPs if they felt able to do so, in many instances a carer’s relationship with the person they care for uniquely equips them for their caring role. Undoubtedly, a present or former carer speaking in Parliament from experience will carry more weight than most MPs without that experience. But nevertheless we consider that most carers would readily entrust their Parliamentary representation to MPs who do their jobs properly.

## **8. WHY DO MORE WOMEN, PEOPLE FROM ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS AND DISABLED PEOPLE NOT BECOME MPS?**

- 8.1. Some disabilities may make it difficult for an otherwise well suited person to fulfil the responsibilities of an MP. Appropriate specialist help or the provision of specific aids at Westminster might make it possible to reduce these limitations and enable more disabled people to stand for Parliament if they chose. This would obviously be desirable.
- 8.2. More generally, however, we believe this question is best answered by turning it round: why do some people want more women, members of ethnic minority groups and disabled people to become MPs?

- 8.3. We believe that this concern can arise for two main reasons:
  - 8.3.1. Some may be taken in by the apparently natural proposition that everyone is best represented by someone of their own kind. As we have shown, this is a false premise.
  - 8.3.2. Others may be acting from doctrinaire motives not necessarily associated with the best interests of the Nation.

## **9. CONCLUSIONS**

- 9.1. There is clearly a most urgent need to bring new life to the decaying democratic process in the United Kingdom. However, we do not believe it is the responsibility or the prerogative of either Parliament or Government to impose its will, and perhaps its prejudices, upon the electorate by selecting or restricting who may be their representatives.
- 9.2. For the reasons given above, we do not share the view implicit in the terms of the Speaker's Conference that the disparity in the presence of various groups in the House of Commons needs to be "rectified" in every instance. We consider that in many respects it may be perfectly acceptable, and, indeed, in certain areas, highly desirable.
- 9.3. The process of proportionate presence, if it were introduced, would be open to much potential mischief and misuse.
- 9.4. We are very much more concerned that attempts to bias the presence of groups in Parliament in this way could readily lead to the effective disenfranchisement of either:
  - 9.4.1. The natural populace of these islands, or
  - 9.4.2. The ungrouped majority who hold mainstream opinions.
- 9.5. There would be much more to be said in favour of, for example, promoting means of ensuring the election of more independent candidates as MPs, to serve in the same beneficial ways as the cross-benchers in the House of Lords.
- 9.6. Skewing the selection of Parliamentary candidates intrinsically runs contrary to the principle of seeking to ensure that the best suited candidate is elected to serve each constituency.
- 9.7. Indeed, the way the proposals have been advocated in some quarters suggests that they are in truth no more than tool to introduce a privileged level of presence in Parliament for one or more militant activist groups.
- 9.8. We believe, therefore, that the move to secure proportionate presence among MPs of members of selected groups is misconceived and inappropriate. Indeed, we consider that it threatens the very concept of Parliamentary democracy itself.