

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Written Submission from the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights

The Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER) is a Scottish strategic anti-racism charity which focuses on helping to eliminate racial discrimination and harassment and promote racial justice. Our key mission is to: 1) protect, enhance, and promote the rights of minority ethnic communities across all areas of life in Scotland and 2) empower minority ethnic communities to strengthen their social, economic, and political capital.

We welcome the opportunity to give evidence to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform on the issue of diversity and inclusion within the Scottish Parliament. While some of our considerations raised may be beyond the current scope of the Commission, we believe it is important to contemplate a variety of proposals and initiatives to increase the diversity and scrutiny powers of the Scottish Parliament.

Issues¹

Under-representation

Firstly, CRER recognises the significant under-representation of Black / minority ethnic (BME) individuals within the Scottish Parliament. While BME groups account for 4% of Scotland's population, only 1.6% of MSPs have a BME background, unchanged since the 2011 election. The first BME MSP was elected in 2007.

This under-representation is not limited to elected office. In March 2016, 1.2% of parliamentary staff listed their ethnicity as "other than white" (with 135 nil responses). There were no staff members from a BME background at grades 6 and above. There were also no internal BME applications for posts. The percentage of applications from BME people was 10%, with 8% of BME applications moving to interview stage, and 11% passing the interview. However, no BME applicants were appointed in the 2015-2016 reporting year.

These figures do not include MSP staff, which we believe from anecdotal evidence to be very low. This is due to a lack of openness in recruiting, with many posts being made within parties themselves. As such, if party membership is not diverse, parliamentary staff will not be diverse.

Interest

This has a knock-on effect throughout the Scottish Parliament. There has never been a BME MSP on the Equal Opportunities Committee (now the Equalities and Human Rights Committee) and race is a subject rarely addressed during parliamentary debates, questions, and motions. Indeed, a majority of parliamentary questions addressing race in 2016 were the direct result of CRER intervention. In 2013, it was reported that only 2.3% of events hosted by external groups were coordinated by organisations/groups with a focus on race.

Without BME voices and voices articulating racial equality issues in elected office, the work of keeping race on the agenda falls to third sector organisations and external pressure. While the parliament should be responsive to this pressure, it is often not enough.

Expertise

While having a BME background does not necessarily make one an expert on racial equality issues, it does provide a unique perspective which is all too often not expressed in the Scottish Parliament. In our work, CRER finds that there is often a lack of expertise in race equality issues amongst some elected officials.

¹ Citations are available upon request.

While MSPs cannot be expected to be proficient on all issues and inequalities, we believe equalities training could improve understanding and awareness, and, therefore, improve policy and scrutiny.

In summation, under-representation, low levels of interest, and a general lack of equalities expertise persist across the Scottish Parliament, which, we believe, severely limits the parliament's ability to be inclusive and respond appropriately to issues affecting under-represented communities. Without a concerted effort, this will not change and BME voices and issues relating to racial equality will continue to be excluded from the Scottish Parliament.

Opportunities

CRER acknowledges that efforts to see the Scottish Parliament fully reflective – both in participation and in issues discussed - of the people of Scotland will be a long-term effort. Simply raising awareness of opportunities to participate and engage will not be enough; the structures, practices, and procedures of the parliament must undergo purposeful change backed by institutional will until such a time that race equality in the Scottish Parliament is a natural occurrence. Furthermore, commitment from political parties to increase their diversity is needed – if there are few minority ethnic individuals in the pipeline, few will go on to being active in the Scottish Parliament.

To this aim, the Commission must take a wider scope, examining all aspects of the Scottish Parliament from events, to parliamentary questions, to committees, to debates, to scrutiny of legislation, to parliamentary and MSP staff. This Commission must focus on structural issues that limit engagement in the parliament rather than issues of national dress, language, or art, which, while perhaps relevant and important, can sometimes detract from wider institutional problems.

As the parliament is not representative of the people of Scotland in terms of ethnicity, the emphasis should be on widening diverse participation with a focus on obtaining expertise on equalities issues.

Regarding “The Good Parliament,” we suggest that, while some of the issues raised may not neatly apply to Holyrood, others could be seen as priorities for discussion for this Commission, including:

- The Speaker's Office [Presiding Officer's Office] to **monitor and report on the parliamentary activities** of MPs by major characteristics (2)
- Targets for a **representative parliamentary press gallery and distribution of lobby passes** (4)
- Engagement in parliamentary and other activities (including by political parties themselves) to enhance the **supply of and demand for diverse parliamentary candidates** (7) (43)
- A requirement of the House Service [SPBC] to provide **comprehensive and systematic diversity data in respect of committee witnesses** and establish annual rolling targets (28)
- Introduction of permissive legislation allowing for **party quotas for under-represented groups** (9)²
- Commencement of **Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010** (22) (24)³

In addition to these, CRER also offers the Commission the following areas for consideration:

- **Conducting a bespoke parliament-wide quantitative and qualitative equality audit to identify issues**
- **Establishing and resourcing an equivalent to the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion** to offer political direction and leadership to the Scottish Parliament

² While the power to address this issue lies with Westminster, we believe it still merits discussion by the Commission.

³ Ibid.

- **Monitoring and publication of MSP staff appointments, parliamentary party staff, and backroom staff** by protected characteristics to examine levels of under-representation
- **Monitoring responses to legislative consultations** for equality and diversity information
- **Allowing expert non-voting, non-MSP members on Committees** to address any lack of diversity or sector expertise
- **Designating MSP Equalities Reporters**, or even specific race equality reporters, in the manner of European Union Reporters to provide equalities perspective in all Committees
- **Placing independent expert consultants on Committees** to provide equality and diversity perspective
- **Considering changes to improve scrutiny by Committees**, including in-depth inquiry of witnesses, allowing witnesses to question each other, and clarification on the scope of Committee evidence sessions
- **Considering changes to the structure of debates** to identify whether scrutiny of legislation and policy could become more robust and responsive to concerns
- **Increasing the role of SPICe**, requiring the production and publication of reports on all issues being scrutinised by committees and chamber debates
- **Requiring Equality Impact Assessments** to be conducted early in the legislative process to allow Committees to consider relevant issues
- **Improving scrutiny measures for parliamentary questions**, including allowing external organisations/groups to lodge questions themselves, public calls for questions, and holding Ministers to account when questions are not fully answered
- **Introducing robust equalities training for MSPs** to increase awareness and understanding of equalities issues
- **Working with political parties to increase their diversity** through measures such as auditing and monitoring the diversity of party members at all levels, setting targets where there is under-representation, and addressing barriers to participation in party activities
- **Supporting a BME political mentoring scheme** which involves both political parties and elected officials to further engage politically active minority ethnic individuals in the political arena

Contacts

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