

Strong Leadership from Political Parties is Vital Article for the New Politics Network, May 2004

The need to achieve greater numbers of BME councillors, MSPs, GLA members, MEPs and MPs is important for a whole range of reasons.

As one of the first Asian MEPs elected to the European parliament and London's first Black or Asian MEP I have seen both the barriers and opportunities for Black and Asian people hoping to go into elected office.

The importance of greater numbers can be seen at a number of levels. Most often quoted is the need for the number of MPs to reflect the 9% of the UK's population which is from an ethnic minority. Yet the stark problems of under representation can also be seen in our devolved institutions – the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly are for the second mandates, entirely white in composition. Given the need for basic representation in areas of high concentration of ethnic minorities, there are still too few ethnic minority councillors. The GLA lacks sufficient black representation in a city where 1 in 5 people are non-white.

What should be done? The Scottish and Welsh examples show lack of real political will to improve the situation. A strong signal from the leadership of political parties is vital, but often such statements are ignored by regional organisations and party activists. It is here that the position must be monitored.

One example of how political parties can take action was illustrated in the last European Elections. Using the opportunity of the list system, all the parties had the opportunity to produce gender balanced lists with ethnic minority candidates in "winnable positions". Both the Labour and Conservative parties achieved better representation – the Liberal Democrats managed to produce all white lists in every part of the country. This is an example of how good intentions by leaderships often do not translate into actual selections by regional party organisations and individual members.

For a range of reasons, ethnic representation and gender representation operate very differently. To try and produce "all black" shortlists in the way that the Labour party has successfully introduced all women shortlists would mean running into legal and other difficulties. Where would such shortlists operate – in "ethnically diverse" seats? What about black representation in seats with few ethnic minorities?

Without legal solutions, the political will of the national and regional leadership and the grassroots members of all political parties becomes critical. So far progress has, in the case of Scotland and Wales, been non-existent. For the House of Commons and London Assembly progress has been slow.