

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Proxy voting: review of pilot arrangements, HC 10

Wednesday 11 March 2020

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Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Jack Brereton; Bambos Charalambous; Chris Elmore; Andrew Griffith; Kate Hollern; Anthony Mangnall; Nigel Mills; Gary Sambrook; James Sunderland.

Questions 1-21

Witnesses

[I](#): Rt Hon. and learned Ms Harriet Harman MP, and Darren Jones MP, a user of proxy voting.

[II](#): Professor Sarah Childs, Professor of Politics and Gender, Birkbeck, University of London, Sam Smethers, Chief Executive, Fawcett Society, and Rt. Hon. Mrs Maria Miller MP, former member of the Commons Reference Group.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ms Harriet Harman MP and Darren Jones MP.

Chair: Thank you very much for being here. One of our witnesses is not here at the moment. Chloe Smith may be able to join us later, but has an unavoidable issue she must deal with. Before we get into any questions, do any members of the Committee have any interests in proxy voting that they wish to put on the record?

Nigel Mills: Yes, I am going on proxy voting leave straight after Easter.

Bambos Charalambous: I am currently Ellie Reeves's proxy.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Harriet, you were integral to getting proxy voting introduced. Darren, you have benefited from proxy voting. Before we go into questions from the Committee, will you set out your views of how the pilot operated and any thoughts that you might want to share with the Committee about it?

Ms Harman: In fact, Darren was one of the people who really helped to push for proxy voting, as well as taking advantage of it. I also want to place on the record what an important role the Procedure Committee played. Without you having gone through all of it—taken evidence, groomed up Standing Orders—it would not have happened. That was very important work, which has made an enormous difference.

Proxy voting has helped MPs do the job that they were elected, and want, to do, and that their constituents want them to do. It has enabled them to vote when otherwise they would not be able to vote. It has helped family life as well, but it has also helped MPs to do their job, so it is a double benefit. Certainly, it has got rid of the problem of MPs thinking that they are letting down either their job or their family. That used to be a constant refrain: "I've come back to vote, but I feel absolutely terrible, because I've left a newborn baby," or, "I'm not voting, but I feel terrible because I was elected and my constituents can't see me voting." It has done that which it set out to do.

Proxy voting has been good for Parliament's reputation, and it has set a good example of being family-friendly for other workplaces. Sometimes when we do that, we take a bit of a risk, because people say, "Oh, you're feathering your own nest," or, "It's all right for you," but there has been zero criticism of Parliament for doing this. It has not in any way undermined Parliament's reputation. Anytime we do things, we always have to think about our reputation, our legitimacy, our credibility—the reputation of Parliament is always on a bit of a knife edge. Therefore, it is very gratifying that this move has been made and it has not attracted attention from the normal people who love to slag off Parliament.

The other thing to mention is that this will be followed in Parliaments abroad. I am just back from Canada—I was at a conference of parliamentarians there—where I went to see their Procedure Committee, their Speaker and their Women and Equalities Committee. They have got a



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very young, diverse Parliament, and they are trying to work out how they deal with MPs having babies, especially with an enormous land size—sometimes it takes a day and a half to get from the Northwest Territories over to Ottawa. It is going to be followed by other Parliaments. I shared copies of our Standing Orders and the Procedure Committee report, and they all fell upon them. Who knew the Procedure Committee was so exciting?

I very much hope that, whatever you do in your deliberations, you do not suggest any retreat or going back. I do not think that there are any grounds for it. I think that it would not be welcome in this country. I think it would be a very bad thing, send a very bad signal, and just be bad. If you are thinking of altering it, you should always think about the public reputation, because when we have a gain, which we do, do not undermine it by doing something that gets into trouble and brings the whole thing into disrepute.

I looked at some figures before I came here today: 25 MPs have used proxy voting for baby leave since it was introduced on 29 January, including Mark Pritchard who used it twice. The party breakdown is encouraging, since it has been used across the parties: 13 Conservative MPs, nine Labour MPs, two SNP MPs and one Change UK MP, which was Luciana Berger.

This was basically, aside from excellent people like Darren, something that was pushed for by women in the House. Maria Miller really pushed for it with me. Andrea Leadsom did, as did Tulip Siddiq and a number of others, and 11 women have used the proxy voting—but 14 men have benefited from our endeavours. Well, there's a thing. We push for it and get it, and we are so glad that men are able to take advantage of it.

All the women have used the proxy vote for the whole six months, except for Holly Lynch whose proxy voting was interrupted by the general election. Two thirds of the men have used theirs for two whole weeks, and the others have taken a smaller number of days. As you know, some of them interrupted their proxy voting in order to come back to vote for a general election, so some have used the flexibility that you put in to interrupt it. So far, all MPs have chosen MPs in their own party to exercise their proxy.

Two Ministers used proxy voting: Chloe Smith and Chris Skidmore. One thing that is incredibly encouraging is that, back in the day, having a baby was curtains for your career. That meant that you kept your pregnancy a secret for as long as possible, and when you came back to work you pretended that you had not been away for anything and that you were childless, in order not to kibosh your career. I therefore think that it is incredibly encouraging that Suella Braverman took proxy voting and baby leave, and has been rewarded not by seeing her career fizzle away but by being put in the Cabinet. That is an incredibly important message that taking time with your baby does not mean that you have given up on ambition and the world outside the home.



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Chair: It is worth adding that Chloe Smith was promoted from Parliamentary Under-Secretary to Minister of State, so there are two examples.

Ms Harman: Absolutely—and Kemi Badenoch. I think it is more encouraging than the people who appointed them probably realised, but it is very good news indeed. Thank you very much. So far, so excellent—we just have to not screw it up.

Q2 **Chair:** Darren, do you have anything to add?

Darren Jones: Thank you, Chair. I want to thank Harriet and everybody involved—they have been working on this issue for much longer than I have been a Member of the House of Commons. As Harriet said, I was able to benefit. In my short period here, my wife and I have been quite efficient. I managed to have a baby before the proxy system came in and after, so I have experienced both sides of the procedure.

Ms Harman: A controlled experiment.

Darren Jones: Indeed. Two key themes come from that, which I think are important to highlight. The first is about how Parliament sets the standard for what we expect across the country. The second is about what type of Parliament we end up with in terms of people putting themselves forward to be Members of Parliament.

Certainly in my experience before I was a Member of Parliament, I absolutely would have expected, as right, time off to spend with my wife and children, and to have access to shared parental leave should my wife have wanted to return to work slightly earlier. I then could have helped over a slightly longer period of time. That may be a point that we wish to discuss later.

The second point is how this place appeals to the type of people we want to put themselves forward to be Members of Parliament. I can tell you that before proxy voting there was a pressure, whether you were a mum or a dad—but more importantly for women MPs—that you wanted to be here to vote. Certainly in the last Parliament, when every single vote was so close and constituents were so interested in the outcome of every vote, you wanted to be able to be part of that and to explain it and show that your constituents were being adequately represented.

That meant that when my first daughter, Ophelia, was born, I was coming back and forth to vote in key Brexit Divisions. However, when Edie, my second daughter, was born, I was able to have my colleague from Bristol East, Kerry McCarthy, vote on my behalf, and I could still explain to my constituents through my office and from home why I had asked Kerry to vote on my behalf in that way. It worked perfectly well. I am grateful for the many hours, months and years spent bringing this procedure into place, and I would encourage it to stay.

Q3 **Anthony Mangnall:** I am very interested in hearing your experience of the process of applying for a proxy vote, how it was then used by your



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proxy, and what sorts of conversations you had about how it was working. In the reports we have read, there have been concerns about the 24-hour notice period, Prorogation and a whole host of other issues. Even swearing-in was mentioned in a previous session. I am interested in hearing from you both about how you found the process.

Ms Harman: Unfortunately, it is 30 years too late for me, so I can't give you any lived experience on this.

Darren Jones: I am happy to share that. Proxy voting had just started at the point it became relevant to me. I actually did not know at that point what the procedure was; I went via my Whips Office. I thought I was going to have to come back here from the maternity ward to fill out a form, but I was pleased to hear I could do it by email. That was a very good point. In those types of situations, where the timing or location is difficult, you need the procedure to be available quickly and electronically without following too onerous a paper-based procedure. I was able just to email the Speaker's Office to tell them the situation, the times and dates that I wanted a proxy vote, and who my proxy was going to be, and they accepted that over email.

For those of us who were on my side of the debate at that time, that was helpful, because it was the day before Yvette Cooper's amendment on Brexit won by a majority of one vote. I was grateful for the efficiency of that system at the time. That probably works quite well, because it gives you that flexibility and means you can go through the process quite efficiently.

Q4 **Bambos Charalambous:** In her evidence, Ellie Reeves said that her leave was interrupted by the general election, so in effect she will only get four and a half months instead of the six months that she would have hoped for. That seems to be a flaw in the system. Do you see any other difficulties? Are there any other things that you found were problematic with the way the proxy voting system worked?

Darren Jones: I have one point, which I think I raised in my written evidence. I am speaking here on behalf of women Members rather than male Members. One observation from some of our colleagues who were pregnant was that, of course, proxy voting applies only at the point at which you have given birth, whereas in the real world you can negotiate with your employer to take time off in the run-up, just in case you deliver early or you need to prepare for the delivery. That is something we should consider as a House, because women ought to be able to take a few weeks off, in the normal way, before the due date.

Q5 **Bambos Charalambous:** Are you suggesting that it should be extended, or do you think six months is long enough?

Darren Jones: My view, going back to my first point, is that it should reflect the real world and what we expect from employers outside Parliament as much as possible. In the private sector, it is quite common that you can take a six-month block plus a period before delivery, and that



you are able to negotiate that in the right way with your employer. Certainly, I think that is the way it should work here.

Ms Harman: There is a choice: you can either have a block and then the MP concerned can choose when to start the clock running, or you can put some extra on the clock for ahead of time. Some people, before the baby comes, just become too big and too exhausted, and travelling—especially if you have to go miles—becomes impossible. Others are just down the road and want to show up as much as they possibly can before they have the baby. You can either extend it or give more flexibility within the same six-month block.

Q6 **Gary Sambrook:** My question is about parity with the outside world. What are your views about the extension for mothers from six months to 12 months, and about shared parental leave between parents? Harriet, you warned against undermining the proxy system by making any decisions that may undermine it. Is there anything in particular that you are thinking about that may undermine it that we could avoid?

Ms Harman: In terms of the outside world, it depends where you get your comparators from. Obviously, you can look at a whole range of different ones. There is an argument for looking at the civil service. I think they get a year on full pay at senior levels of the civil service. That would leave a very big gap between us and our constituents. That is just a thought, but it is worth looking at comparators.

The thing about proxy voting that enabled it to be successful was the fact that there is nothing complex or untransparent about somebody, a man or a woman, having a baby or adopting. The difficulty about extending into issues such as those who are caring for elderly relatives, which many of us have done or are doing, or being off sick with either mental or physical illness, is that you get into a situation where it is much more discretionary and much more subject to the Whips refusing it to enhance their powers or granting it to enhance your sense of obligation. The joy about proxy voting in relation to baby leave is that it was completely free of any of that. It was helpful for the public and it did not get people obligated. That is just a thought.

There are a lot of colleagues in the House who want there to be proxy voting for looking after older relatives. Along with my three sisters, I started looking after my mum because she was ageing. She lived to 100. We started thinking of looking after her when she was about 90. That would have been 10 years' worth of proxy voting. It is a kind of indeterminate thing. It is just more anxious. That is all I would say.

You do not have 10 years of pregnancy—although, Lord knows, it often feels like that. I do not want the public to think that we have got ourselves elected and then we are not turning up and are just scratching one another's backs to loll about. I do not feel dug in about it, but I just want to send a bit of a warning. That is why I have not actually argued for it. My argument was about the parents, so I am happy.



Darren Jones: On shared parental leave, which is something that I support as a legislative measure in the country at large, we know from the world outside this place that it is not utilised very well. We know that there are employers that discourage dads from taking it, even though dads increasingly want to take it, and that dads are starting to suffer what mums have suffered for a long time, where they realise that there may be an impact on their career progression, pay or bonus opportunities around that stuff. To go back to my first point, I want Parliament to say, "Actually, this is the type of culture that we want parents and families to live in in this country." I think we should have a shared parental leave option here, but provide the flexibility for Members to decide how that works for their family and for how long they wish to do it within the longstop dates.

Certainly, as an MP, I would have been perfectly comfortable to share some of the six months of parental leave with my wife so that, if she wanted to, she could go back to work early and I could continue to have the office here work on my behalf and vote by proxy. I think that would have worked reasonably well.

Ms Harman: Of course, the Prime Minister is possibly going to be in this situation. I do not know when the baby is due and whether it is due before the House rises—it sounds like it will be. It is really important that he takes his two weeks and votes by proxy. If anybody has channels of communication to him, that would set a really good example.

One of the problems in terms of the low take-up of paternity leave is that people cannot afford it. Low-income households just cannot afford, when there are more expenses, to have their income fall. Fortunately, we are not in that situation, and nor is the Prime Minister, but it would still send a very good message if he took it.

Chair: I am conscious that we need to get you away by 2.55 pm, so I am watching the clock, don't worry. Kate, Chris, Anthony, James and Jack, can we keep the questions quite short?

Anthony Mangnall: You can take me off the list.

Chair: Okay. We have more witnesses so you can ask your questions later.

Q7 **Kate Hollern:** I have two points. To pick up on what Harriet said, we really need to look in future at other issues for which people may need to be excused with proxy voting. I remember the night we triggered article 50—John was down with cancer and I had to get a train down and back up. Going forward, we need to look at some reasonable measures to assist people.

I am concerned that six months and two weeks are very short periods of time, because things happen when babies are born. I remind people that even though someone has a proxy vote, quite often they are still working in the constituency. It is not as if you have a proxy and you do nothing; people gently ease themselves back in. What do you think would be a reasonable time—flexible or otherwise—for parents to have proxy-voting leave?



Darren Jones: That is a difficult one, because of course every baby and every family is different. On Harriet's earlier point, you would not want to build a scheme that is gold-plated compared with what our constituents receive. For many of our constituents, even having six months is a luxury because they cannot afford, beyond maybe a one or two-month period of full pay, to drop to statutory maternity pay, so they go back after a time even shorter than six months. I would be nervous about an extension of time, but we do need to take a position that says, "This is what we expect to be normal in this country."

On the issue of working while on proxy leave, you are right. You will all know as well as us that you never really stop working as a Member of Parliament. Stella Creasy has been doing work with IPSA on having some additional capacity to help—certainly with the constituency side of engagement—when she cannot be out and about every day because she is at home with her child. She has put forward an interesting model and you might want to consider it in more detail.

Q8 Chris Elmore: I want to ask about the physical workings of a proxy vote. There was huge confusion at the beginning—it is in the evidence of most of those who were proxies—first of all about Clerks' understanding of how the proxy worked, and about Tellers being able to count. There was a particular incident, when the Opposition parties won a vote by one, over there being a row about someone declaring their proxy when they came through the Lobby. I know that because I was the Whip in charge. I wonder what you both think about how we can make the physical process of proxy voting better for the person who is the proxy. Chris Leslie, our former colleague, had a physical picture, while another Member—a Government Member, I think—had just their name as they went through. Those physical aides seemed to actually help. I wonder would you think could be done to improve that process.

Chair: Can I have the questions from James and Jack so that we have a chance to hear full answers before we have to let Harriet go?

James Sunderland: I want to go back to the issue of discretionary period versus prescriptive period. An MP will have a relationship with his constituents. Some might live closer, some further away. Would you prefer a prescriptive period or for the measure that we might enforce or recommend to the House authorities to have a more discretionary element?

Jack Brereton: My point links on to what Kate was saying. Obviously, proxy voting is only one part of this. Are there other things, maybe procedural things, that we could do to help ease that burden for new and expectant parents?

Ms Harman: I think declaring the business in advance is incredibly important, not just for family life but for constituency responsibilities. It is very difficult to plan things if everything is crammed in on a Friday. Sometimes even Fridays were not predictable previously. The last thing you want to do is set up a meeting in your constituency and then cancel it. One of the things that I think is long overdue is the proper announcing of



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business in advance. I have been Leader of the House and know that it is perfectly possible for business to be announced in advance. You always have the opportunity to change it if something genuinely unforeseen happens, but it is in the Government's interest and the Whips' interest to keep everybody on their toes. It is completely unjustifiable. For family reasons and for constituency reasons, they should announce the business a month in advance. The Government have just got to get their act together on what Bills they are bringing forward. There is no reason why they should not.

On the Clerks and Tellers, Chris, it would be a good idea to think about that and for you to look into it, because it just undermines things if there is any confusion.

Kate, I remember how absolutely awful that was for you, and I am so sorry for your loss. What a nightmare it was. The key is that this needs to be transparent so that constituents know about it and can trust it, but at one and the same time it must not be invasive of your privacy at a very difficult time. Very serious or terminal illness is absolutely traumatic at the best of times, without your having to handle the issue in the public domain. Mental ill health is obviously very difficult, without your having to handle it in the public domain. The thing about having a baby is that it is privately traumatic, but publicly everybody seems to think it is perfectly fine. That is the only thing I would mention about it.

Isn't it right to have discretion within a maximum, which is what we have at the moment? I don't think there should be discretion beyond the maximum, because the Whips would give a proxy to people they don't want to see too much and who they don't want around stirring things up—although they can put up with them voting—so that they make themselves scarce. Trust me, James, they get up to all sorts of things. We do not want our procedures sullied by any of that, so I would say there should be a transparent maximum, with people able to take discretion within that.

Q9 Chair: Harriet, may I suggest that you may want to leave? Harriet has to go to chair the Joint Committee on Human Rights. Thank you very much for coming. Darren, do you have any comments to add before we finish this particular session?

Darren Jones: I agree with everything Harriet said. On Jack's logistical point about booking childcare, if you know when the business and votes are going to be, it is much easier to anticipate that.

On how proxy voting actually works, clearly I haven't done it because Kerry did it for me. I say this with the knowledge that Chris was a Whip at that time: Kerry and I would often rebel on the same issues, so it was a calculated proxy decision.

Chris Elmore: That wasn't my question! *[Laughter.]*

Darren Jones: What I don't know the answer to is: how would it work if I wanted to rebel and my proxy did not? Would they have to move at speed between Lobbies? How would they be counted, in distinction from their

proxy, and how would that be done accurately? I don't know the answer to that question, but on procedure that is something that you might want to consider.

Chair: I think that will also be true of matters of conscience, where you may have a political agreement with your proxy but you may not agree on particular matters of conscience. That is something we certainly need to consider.

If you do not have anything further to say, I thank you very much for your time. We appreciate your giving the time to come and speak to us. It will certainly help to inform the report that we will present to Parliament before the summer, so that we can determine what to do next with the pilot scheme and how it might transform.

Darren Jones: My pleasure. Thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Sarah Childs, Sam Smethers and Mrs Maria Miller MP.

Q10 **Chair:** Could the witnesses please introduce themselves and perhaps give an opening statement about their views on the proxy voting pilot and how it has worked so far?

Professor Childs: Hello and thank you for inviting me. My name is Sarah Childs and I am professor of politics and gender at Birkbeck, soon moving to Royal Holloway. I was the author of "The Good Parliament" report in 2016, which was an independent report. I rather rudely invited myself into this institution to offer you a menu of reforms that would make this institution more diversity sensitive, and the question of proxy voting and a statement on baby leave was one of my recommendations.

In terms of my thoughts on what has happened since, I congratulate the House on having a pilot scheme and thank the previous Procedure Committee for setting it up. I think we have made ourselves a showcase Parliament. Other Parliaments elsewhere want to know what we are up to, how well it is working and what they might copy from us.

I think that the pilot absolutely must be extended for baby leave. I understand that there are other questions about other categories of individuals and about timing and how it works on the ground, but it would be an absolute error of the institution to walk away from proxy voting for baby leave. I would be very happy to talk more about those other aspects during questions.

Mrs Miller: I am Maria Miller, Member of Parliament for Basingstoke. The reason I am here is that I was a member of the Commons Reference Group that the previous Speaker established to consider Professor Childs's

recommendations. We also particularly considered the issue of proxy voting.

Has it worked well so far? I think it has worked. There are some practical issues that I hope the Committee will delve into a little more in your questioning. Certainly, the feedback I have had from those who have been proxies and those who have been proxied for includes comments on how it could work better.

I have to say, Mrs Bradley—or should I say Karen, or Chair?

Chair: Karen is fine.

Mrs Miller: As a member of the Administration Committee, I think there are opportunities to look at this in a far broader context, so that we as Members of Parliament actually set an agenda for how this place is run, rather than necessarily having to do things either in a piecemeal way or in a way that reacts to the strategies and plans of the officials who run the House of Commons on our behalf. At the moment, as Members we could be doing a lot more to take control of this, so that this place really does work in a way that we need it to, not only in terms of proxy voting but in many other things, particularly regarding the needs of Members who have caring responsibilities, and other matters.

Sam Smethers: I'm Sam Smethers, chief executive of the Fawcett Society, a gender equality campaigning charity for women's rights. We have long been championing the cause of baby leave in Parliament and in local government, too—there has been a bit of progress there as well. I think it is really positive that the House took the step to pilot it. We were pleased and delighted that you did.

I would echo what Sarah and Maria have said. It is really about addressing some of the practicalities now, how we build on the progress that has already been made, and not being afraid to see this as about opening up Parliament and normalising some of these things. I don't think constituents in the world outside would throw up their hands in horror at that. I think that is the expectation and the more we embrace that, the better, in terms of connectedness and the relevance of Parliament to the outside world, as well as the diversity and gender balance within the House.

Chair: Thank you very much. I know you will have heard some of the earlier questions, but we have others for you as well, while repeating some of the previous ones.

- Q11 **Chris Elmore:** Professor Childs and another organisation submitted evidence on the 52-week issue, which has been raised by my colleague Ellie Reeves. I'm not sure if you heard it, but we asked Darren and Harriet about this in the previous session. Although 52 weeks is the norm under law, the reality is that many women do not receive that in most workplaces. To be clear, I'm not saying that is right, but Government legislation states that statutory sick pay can often start after six months, where you have it for three months and then three months after that is



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unpaid. Equally, if you are in the teaching profession, your maternity leave is reduced significantly after a shorter period of time.

Would it, therefore, be normal practice for Members of the House to have 52 weeks' maternity pay, when the reality is that that is not what the law sets out and it would put us out of step with many of our constituents? I am not saying that is right; I am just asking the question because this would not fit with many women and men in the workplace who adopt or have children.

Professor Childs: My response is slightly complicated in some ways because proxy voting as a Member does not mean that you are not working.

Chris Elmore: No, indeed.

Professor Childs: So I think there is a distinction. It may be a difficult one to transmit, but it is one that could be made. I also think that, in many ways, if there is a disjuncture between what happens outside and what happens inside, that might make the case for reconsidering what does happen outside, and I think that Parliament does have a role to play. It might not be at this time, but it might have a role to showcase best practice. Although it could be considered gold-plating, it might also be demonstrating equality between men and women, for example, on parental, maternal and paternity leave. There are those kinds of considerations, too, but I am fully aware that there is concern among Members about looking like they are making their lives easier. It is very important that one resists that and talks about why this is important. It is important to make our institution diverse. It means we get better policy and we speak to different kinds of people. Those kinds of arguments perhaps need to be, and can be, made.

In one piece of evidence that I looked over that came in before Christmas, which I think was from Tulip, she said that her constituents were not terribly clear about how it works. Maybe we need extra efforts to show that this is something that the House is both proud of and can defend against some critics.

Mrs Miller: It is really important to acknowledge that we are not employees; we are office holders. We all know that we can never be off duty, and it can be difficult for others who are not elected to understand that. Even if you are in the delivery room, you are clearly still a Member of Parliament. It is really important that we do not treat ourselves like we are employees, either. We have to be cognisant of the realities of our constituents' lives, which is certainly not 52 weeks' full pay. I think that would be extremely counterproductive. It has to be reflective of what happens to our constituents, and frankly it may not be best practice. We may wish our constituents received more, but they do not, so we cannot gild the lily.

It has to be a hybrid, and my input would be that we have got to look much more closely at what we are doing for fathers. The challenges of being a father in this place are significant and the current proxy voting



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scheme does not take adequate notice of that. I would make a final comment: we are awfully good at collecting evidence—I used to sit as a Chair of a Committee—and not as good at collecting quantitative research. I urge your Committee to think about how perhaps other Committees could work with you to gather quantified research on what this cohort of Members wants, not what officials think we want or what Committees think we want. At the moment, we do not do that.

Sam Smethers: I see Parliament as effectively having a conversation with the world outside. The question of parental leave for mothers, fathers, adoptive parents and so on is a live question that is subject to consultation and potential reform—it is on the agenda, in any case. When we think about what is going on in this place, it would be really positive to think about how we can also improve it for your constituents outside of this House. That is overdue. Shared parental leave has been positive but it has not gone far enough. I echo what Maria said on fathers. Fathers outside of this House definitely need longer, better-paid periods of leave so they can spend time caring for their children, and that is absolutely true, too, of fathers inside this House. As we do more to modernise those provisions here, I think we will also speed up the pace of change outside. It is about that virtuous circle of modernisation and transformation.

I completely echo the point about data, which is really important. But the other people we should think about are the people who are not here yet. Who would like to be in this House but is not here yet? What is putting them off? We have to engage with that and bring down those barriers. Reforming this place is absolutely about speaking to those people and getting more diverse candidates into this House.

Q12 **Bambos Charalambous:** Just picking up Professor Childs's point about publicity and how proxy voting is perceived by the public, what can be done to explain it better? One of the reasons it came about was some negative publicity about MPs being lazy when in fact they were caring for their child. What do you think about that?

Secondly, is six months long enough? How can that be spread out better? I am the proxy for Ellie Reeves; Ellie's proxy leave got interrupted by a general election, so it may mean she gets a shorter time than before. Another of my colleagues had a difficult pregnancy, so I think she might have benefited from having proxy leave earlier, but then she would have had less time afterwards. What are your thoughts on that?

Sam Smethers: Shall I kick off? There are certainly arguments for making it longer than six months. Again, it is nine months' paid outside for most employees—I know we are not employees in here, but I still think there is a legitimate question about why not nine months' paid here. Where you have particular circumstances such as those, a case should be made and there should be some discretion and flexibility within the system. It is just having a human system that cares for the people using it. I think that is reasonable.



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Mrs Miller: We are all a little bit like small businesspeople, aren't we? We run our own offices in different ways. I think flexibility is important, but there is flexibility outside the six months' proxy voting. I have spoken to the Conservative Whips about this, and they are incredibly flexible. However, I absolutely understand and endorse the need to have proxy voting standing alone from any Whips' favours or Whips' dispensations that you might have. There is flexibility already.

Explaining it better to the public is absolutely right. I think it was TheyWorkForYou that put forward absences as if they were absences, when they were absences for very good reasons. The same can be said for people who are on sickness leave, but I would echo what Harriet said: sometimes people want that to be dealt with privately. I advocate for us all to treat one another like adults and give each other the flexibility to be able to deal with these things in the way we want to.

To add one bit, just in case we don't get to it, in terms of communication: the feedback I have had is that there needs to be better communication from IPSA. Individuals who have called IPSA to ask what support they get because they are going on maternity leave have had the response, "I need to call back, because I'll have to ask somebody else." It is no longer abnormal for somebody to be going off on maternity or paternity leave, so why on earth is IPSA not keeping up with the pace? It is concerning to hear that Members are not being given a straight answer.

Professor Childs: Or the same answer, just to jump on the back of that, because I think there is inconsistency. In terms of communicating how the scheme works and what it means in practice and for them as constituents, I would want to ask Parliamentary Outreach, because one thing this Parliament has done very effectively over the past couple of years is to put effort into videos, the website and so on. It could do some vlogs—or whatever they are called—and have something that feels very real, with people talking about their experiences. Anybody who reads some of the evidence that has been submitted would get a very real sense of how it has worked and the benefits.

If we can get those on the record in nice, short clips with evidence, it would change how people thought. Obviously, people would have to find them, but Parliament has increasingly become quite skilled in outreach and it would be up to them to decide precisely how to do it. I am no expert in how to communicate, but we have that in-house and efforts could be undertaken to get that message across in a way that is regarded as having been done well by constituents and the public more broadly.

- Q13 **Jack Brereton:** I particularly thank you for the comments you have just made about fathers. With a two-year-old at home, I know that is an issue, particularly for my wife, who is left there half the week on her own looking after our son. Similar to what I asked the previous panel, I wanted to ask what other procedural things could be done to help to support new and expectant parents. Maria, since you mentioned there have been issues with some of the practicalities of how the system is working, could you possibly go into a bit more detail? What things do you



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think could be improved?

Mrs Miller: There are two questions there, one of which is about other procedure things that we could do. I have to say that this Government are being a lot better on certainty about the term times during which we sit, mainly because they have more certainty and it is easier if you do not have the impending issue of EU exiting.

I would like to pick up on an issue that was raised in “The Good Parliament” report about voting times, which Members sitting here will know about, and about giving more certainty on a regular basis. I feel like I may have been here longer than anybody else—oh dear. The certainty of voting at certain times is important, but it is not very helpful if it is at 7 o’clock in the evening and you have a six-month-old baby, who really shouldn’t be in the Palace of Westminster at 6 or 7 o’clock in the evening.

One sensible suggestion—which I think reflects the Scottish Parliament?—is to potentially have a voting hour, maybe from 5pm until 6pm when all the votes can be done at the same time. That still gives colleagues the opportunity to see each other, which I know is hugely valuable to us, particularly for Back Benchers, but it also gives some certainty that that is the point of the day after which you will no longer be needed in the House. However, the House can continue to sit until midnight, if the House decides that is a sensible thing to do—I hope it would not—but it would mean that those with caring responsibilities would be able to plan accordingly and have more of a 9 to 5 day. Looking at the point that has been made about trying to get new people to think about coming into Parliament, then more regular working hours in this place would go a long way towards addressing those issues.

On the other question about particular issues, I am going to refer to my notes because there were some extremely important and pertinent issues raised on the practical ways in which this has worked, as those who are proxies themselves will already know. If it is okay, Chair, I won’t give the names of the people who have given this input, but I thank them for doing so. If you are a proxy, working on behalf of somebody else, having to go into two different queues if you don’t have the same surname is a particular problem. I don’t think it is beyond the wit of man to be able to work out how we could deal with that. There is potential for it to go very wrong and to confuse the Tellers.

Chris Elmore: Yes.

Mrs Miller: It sounds like that is an issue that you are already alive to, but I underline it as something that came up.

Another individual who had been away on proxy leave asked the Committee to reconsider the disapplication of the provisions around the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 and there not being a reason why it couldn’t apply to those sorts of notions as well. I know the Chief Clerk said that allowing proxy voting on a Fixed-term Parliaments Act would open up Parliament to having a judicial review. I am not sure why it would be more



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likely on that than on anything else, but I am not a lawyer so I will not prophesise on that.

Other than the dads' leave, which I have already mentioned and which people said should be more reflective of the real needs of fathers rather than just being two weeks, the final issue that people brought up is the fact that it doesn't apply to people who have either severe illnesses or other caring needs. One individual—who may possibly have been a Whip—brought up the need to bring back people who are undergoing chemotherapy into an environment that cannot be right for them. Individuals who were on baby leave were able to go about their normal business, but those who were having chemotherapy and were very sick indeed had to come back into the Palace of Westminster.

The Committee needs to consider what other categories should be included in this. As somebody from the sandwich generation, I would certainly suggest that the needs of people who have caring responsibilities for older people should also be taken seriously by the Committee.

Professor Childs: I would reiterate much of what Maria has said, which may relate to the fact that we worked together quite closely on the Commons Reference Group. There is a whole series of recommendations in the report that would help the parent or the caring Member of Parliament that are yet to be addressed.

When it comes to predictability, we often think about increasing the diversity of people here, but it is also about how effective they can be when they are here. I want to link that, rather facetiously, to one of my concerns last week, which is that we have an all-male Committee and a Committee of this House that has one woman on it, and one of the characteristics of both is that they may do rather a lot of overseas trips, so I wonder whether we have a parental gap on those Committees. I put that to you as a question, which perhaps needs looking into. Are we not enabling people with those additional responsibilities to take a full part in the activities—the scrutiny, the interest representation—of this House? If that is the case, that is rather problematic. There is a lot on which I agree with Maria, in terms of recesses, knowing the day, knowing the business and Division times. That should be looked into and taken seriously.

Perhaps I can say this because I am not a Member, but I also feel that people have perhaps shied away from IPSA and the extent to which it is supporting Members to go about their business, in terms of their work-life balance and working in two places, not just working in one and living in the other, which I think sometimes the public—or rather, which my own father did not ever understand.

I would also support the additional provision of creche facilities, as well as the nursery, recognising that different parents in this place might have different needs and that they are not always the same. It is about looking at this place in the round and recognising that the odd change here or there can be very symbolic, very substantive or practical for individuals, but it is about making this House work most effectively. There is lots still



to be done. What concerns me is the extent to which there is a driver of this kind of change that needs to happen, but this is absolutely about thinking about how the day is run and how one can manage their time.

Going back to the debate about extending to six months, there was also a suggestion in one of the pieces of evidence that perhaps you could have a proxy that kicked in after a certain amount of time—as in, during the evening, so that you might be able to do your full day, if you are not going to extend the whole period, but in the evening you might be able to use the proxy. This is about recognising that maternity leave does not have to be the same throughout your own maternity leave, so you might do much less in the first month or two, do a little bit more, and then maybe, if that child needs feeding still at the six-month-and-beyond period, you would have that possibility. Of course, that requires procedures that are tight and that, as much as possible, or completely, it is not possible to mess up. There could be greater flexibility in that sense as well.

Sam Smethers: I have a couple of quick points. One question that was raised with me was about the swearing in process and having to be there even after just giving birth—otherwise you would not be sworn in as an MP, even though you have got, in theory, proxy arrangements. There is a question there about “Do we have to maintain that procedure?” I don’t know.

Then there is the locum. I know that that has been very useful from Stella Creasy’s perspective, but I do not think the process of securing it was very straightforward. Having that clarity about the cover you can expect, to help with constituency work as well, would be really helpful, with IPSA supporting that as best they can.

Chair: I am going to bring in Chris, and if anyone else has any questions, they can catch my eye quickly.

- Q14 **Chris Elmore:** This is an issue about the business management and the managing of the day. Maria is a former long-serving Minister and Secretary of State, so she understands matters of how Governments of all colours manage the business of the House. One of my concerns, when everyone has mentioned how the day could function, is that that is in the gift of the Government. I remember the row about getting proxy voting on to the Floor of the House. It was Andrea Leadsom, to give her credit, as Leader of the House, who was willing to take it forward and convince the Prime Minister of the day and others that this should be part of that work. I suppose my question on that is this. We would need to convince the Government about the management of the day and the running of the House, because they are, in essence, in control of it. We were in a position in the last Parliament where the Leader of the House was giving us two days’ business at any one time, but the Government now have a majority of 80. However, that is not to say that in the next Parliament there will not be a hung Parliament or a very small majority, one way or the other, so this is almost about getting parties to commit to that, from a Government point of view.



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The other thing I wanted to raise was about the practicalities. What do you think about how the proxy has worked practically? There has been confusion. Some votes have been tied or won by one or two votes, after significant arguments in the Lobby by Whips about whether someone had counted or not counted their vote.

The final thing I will say, which might not be very popular, is that swearing in is a matter of law, and I do not think you cannot swear in as a Member. We have long-standing issues in Northern Ireland about Members not taking their seats, so that would need to be considered, and that is a much more complicated settlement in Northern Ireland. Equally, if you are not sworn in as a matter of law, you are not a Member of Parliament and you are not paid, so there is another practical element to how that works.

Chair: We touched on this with the previous witnesses, but there are issues to do with wanting to vote differently from your proxy. How would that be managed? Do you have any thoughts about that, in particular on matters of conscience, which are a matter for the individual? Do you have any thoughts how, practically, we could deal with that?

Mrs Miller: I want to tackle this "It's the Government" issue. All of us MPs get away with a lot by saying, "It's all the Government's fault, isn't it?" This is our place of work. Parliament is about scrutiny by the legislature. I think there is some oddness about the Leader of the House having the role that they do—it is a very difficult role, because they have an obligation to Parliament and to the Government. However, it is clear that their obligation to Parliament comes first. We as Members of Parliament, whether on the Back Benches or not, should wake up and start to take control of this place. For too long, we have allowed to be said, "Oh, it's all down to the Government", but perhaps it is just easier that way.

The answer is that it does not have to be that way. We have no strategy for how we want Parliament run, and we have no culture or statement of purpose. The officials do—the officials of this place have a clear strategy. I do not particularly agree with all of it, and I certainly do not think that they go far enough in defining their culture and purpose. There is an opportunity for MPs to take far more control of how this place is run and, more importantly, of the culture of this place.

This is straying a little, Chair, but it is pertinent to our discussion: since when has it been a good idea for a legislature to be allowing large corporates in, paying big bucks to rent our rooms, when Back Benchers cannot get a meeting room? We have lost our way in terms of our culture, and that is pertinent to this debate. If we were in control of our own culture and knew what Back Benchers wanted in each new Session, we would have got these sorts of things—like proxy or baby leave—and done them a lot earlier. We are not taking control of our working conditions or where we work, and we only have ourselves to blame. This is an opportunity to change that.



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I will make one recommendation and then be quiet: there is a real opportunity to bring together your Committee, the Administration Committee and the Finance Committee, perhaps into a Sub-Committee, to look at this in particular—a coherent strategy and culture. We could then make some strong recommendations to the Commission of what Members want, maybe based on some research.

Professor Childs: The first point that I will make is that there are always errors in the recording of votes—they are historically noted—so the potential for errors in the Division Lobbies is a function of very small Lobbies, very short periods of time and lots of people cramming through. That is particularly problematic when there are small majorities or big rebellions. I would not want the story to be, “This is a problem just to do with proxy voting”—

- Q15 **Chris Elmore:** I’m sorry—just to be clear, because I don’t want anything I said to be misinterpreted, I was an early advocate of this on this Committee, took flack for supporting it in the Chamber and was told off for interfering in these issues a number of years ago. I don’t think that is an excuse. I am actually asking for ways to make it practically better. We have had lots of evidence on that. I am looking for a better solution, not to reverse anything.

Professor Childs: My reaction to that, though I am not someone who has been through a Division Lobby—

Chris Elmore: It’s joyful. *[Laughter.]*

Professor Childs: When I saw some of those pictures, it didn’t look that nice, to be honest. That may raise some other questions about other things—R and R, and all sorts of things—which I will not open up but could at some other point, if you’re interested.

It is about asking the Clerks, who are involved, perhaps to get their view of what they find particularly difficult and stressful. With a majority of 80, I wonder if it is a time to trial different ways of doing it, perhaps. Why not try doing it one way for a couple of months, whether that is with a picture or going back to using some kind of electronic voting but within the Division Lobbies, so that people are not having to run through or do other things? I do not know the answers, but I am suggesting that we have an opportunity, while we perhaps have less frantic votes, to try different ways so that a system organically emerges as the most reliable.

On conscience votes, I think this goes back to trusting your proxy. It seems to me that one would probably normally choose a proxy with whom one was ideologically aligned, but of course on conscience issues may differ. I had to vote for my little brother in the last election. He had to trust me. Now, he trusts me, and I went in and voted the way he wanted me to. Again, we have had at least one piece of evidence of a Whip, I believe, rebelling for a Member. We have to work with the notion of confidence. We can never really know that our proxy is doing what we

want, but that is for Members to determine and to trust. I do not see how we deal with that other than on the basis of trust.

- Q16 **Chair:** It wasn't so much about trust; it was more about the practicalities of getting through two Division Lobbies in a very short period of time. That is the bigger issue.

Professor Childs: Yes. For me, I suppose that throws up the question whether the Lobbies themselves are a slightly problematic way of trying to get hundreds of people through in a very short period of time. That is a very difficult one. Perhaps it is because we are ticking off.

Sam Smethers: I think that is true. When you reform one bit of the system, it throws up the bits of the system that are looking a bit more archaic and old-fashioned than perhaps they were before you changed this part. I think that is part of what you are experiencing. It is a bit like decorating your house: you have one shiny new room and the rest of it looks a bit old.

On swearing in, I just wonder whether there is any flexibility with location or timing. I completely get that it is a matter of law, but I just think that if someone is very ill, has just had a caesarean or whatever, it is about flexibility in timing and whether there is flexibility on location. I think it is a fair enough question to ask in terms of the process as part of considering how we make this procedure work better for everybody.

Mrs Miller: On the voting side, I was never totally convinced that it shouldn't be the Whips who voted on your behalf. Other Parliaments do it that way. I know that is a slightly controversial thing to say, but of course if you want to come in and vote yourself, you can do that. If the Whips were to hold the proxy votes, it would become the same as nodding through: at the end of the voting session, the Whip simply goes to the Tellers and reads out a list of names of people who are proxied. Certainly, when I have seen that happen, it has happened very clearly and been very fluid. That might be a way of solving it. I understand the weaknesses, but it might be a way of solving it.

I have to say that I think we play with swearing in at our peril. It is an incredibly important part of the beginning of the parliamentary term. Without that swearing in—swearing allegiance to the Queen—we are in uncharted waters.

- Q17 **Anthony Mangnall:** Forgive me, because your experience on this is far more extensive than mine, as a newbie, but in my three months I have already become somewhat of a traditionalist. I feel that, as a Back Bencher, the only opportunity I will ever have to spend time with and talk to Ministers is in those voting Lobbies. I think any electronic form of voting in those Lobbies would be a terrible idea. Even if there is a wait and a rush to get there, it is very important for us to be able to have that contact.

I am actually very in favour of what the proxy system seems to have done, and the evidence that has been produced is extremely useful. I



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would be interested in hearing whether you think the slipping process, or the pairing system, in terms of restoring trust between parties, may be a useful thing to bulk up and focus on.

Mrs Miller: Slipping and pairing work really well when you have an 80 majority. It worked a lot less well for a lot of colleagues when we had no majority, and I felt greatly for a number of colleagues who were in a very difficult position as a result of that. We have to have a system that works for Governments of large majorities, of no majorities at all and everything in between. I do not think anything you are talking about with regards to proxy voting at all undermines the ability of any Member to go to their Whip and say, "Actually, I don't want to do a proxy vote; I'll just be paired"—or slipped; whatever you want to call it. There is nothing that should stop that happening. We should respect Members as autonomous and able to make that decision themselves.

For clarity, any mention I made of a voting hour would do nothing but strengthen Back Benchers' opportunities to speak to Ministers. If we had that earlier in the day, before Ministers were off doing what Ministers do, flying round the world and goodness knows what, and it was always at the same time, you would be more, not less, likely to be able to do what is necessary, which is to have those really important conversations.

- Q18 **Anthony Mangnall:** One concern I would have with that is that the legislative process is messy, as far as I can make out so far. With the passion in a debate, if it is to be immediately voted on afterwards, that allows you to formulate your opinion in those debates and then go in. If you're trying to extend or isolate the period for when you might vote, you slightly lose the objective of having a debate in the Chamber, because you could just turn up at five o'clock and vote. Do you see where I'm heading? Do you think that is a risk in your suggestion?

Mrs Miller: I understand the point you're making, but would understand it more if, for the majority of debates, the Chamber was a little fuller than it tends to be, because the reality is that many of us, I am sure, would be at our desks listening to the debate, doing some signing or whatever, and then would come down to vote.

Being in the cut and thrust of the Chamber is not necessarily usual business for MPs. Again, let's be very clear, the vast majority of votes are heavily whipped. However, there will be moments of conscience or declarations of war—whatever it might be—where that would be overridden. I think, again, that that is in our gift as Members of Parliament.

For the most part—I am now trying to think of an innocuous Bill but can't think of one. The vast majority of the work we do here is very much whipped and, therefore, I am not sure that the problems you identify would happen that often.

- Q19 **Anthony Mangnall:** Having rebelled yesterday, I feel that, if you were to isolate the Government to vote at a certain time, it would only give the Whips more time to find me. I suspect that might not be a very



persuasive argument.

Professor Childs: My response to what Maria just said is that the two sides of the argument are precisely why we need to take the question seriously and do some work on it, because what we are getting are people's preferences and anecdotes. They are all part of the story, but they are not necessarily the whole picture.

That is precisely why these issues need to be dealt with properly, with an inquiry perhaps of its own, to think about how this would work, to what extent your fears would be realised or whether other people's advocacy would be constrained or mediated by counter arguments.

Periodically, these questions arise but they are not really treated seriously enough or really investigated. Of course, there are means to ensure that particular votes and debates that are seen to be, by the House, absolutely critical would not be affected. We have programming and all that kind of thing. If we just keep talking at the level of preferences, I am not sure that we get terribly far.

Again, in terms of pairing and slipping, I think there is nothing in what I advocated—or from the reference group and the collaborations involved in that—that undermined that. I would be very concerned about anything that takes decisions back to the private, where it is individual people asking. You mustn't infantilise the mother or father MP—"Please may I have some time off?" These are grown adults, Members of Parliament. As for the idea of behind the scenes, if that's not what Members want to do, I would find taking it back to Whips hugely problematic.

Sam Smethers: The big step forward was the entitlement. That was fundamentally important, and I completely agree with that. We have never argued against the pairing system. We completely get that it has a role. It has always had an important role in Parliament. There have been times when it has worked very well and when it hasn't.

As Maria said, it is up to individual Members to decide. Having that power to say, "I'd like to use my right to baby leave," as a father or mother in this House is really powerful and important. All I would say about the voting hours is to pilot it and try it out. Why not? We have demonstrated that pilots can work. It would be really good to try something else.

Chair: I am conscious that we have kept you quite long, but Andrew Griffith has a question and then I'm going to wrap things up.

Q20 **Andrew Griffith:** It is a proposition that I would particularly like to get Maria's reaction to. I come to this House from a modern, progressive employer; I am almost struggling to understand what we are debating about here, because it seems so obvious in many respects, although I suspect that many people who have gone before us have fought tough battles on this. That said, the question before us is not revolution but evolution; having established it in one domain, where else might we move? It seems to me there are a number of objective conditions. If you are having chemotherapy, that is a binary objective condition. The



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imminent death of a relative is a little bit more subjective, but we manage those in many other parts of life. Am I missing something? If we are thinking about where to extend this right next—by the way, I don't think we think that Members of Parliament sit here to do anything other than diligently represent their constituents, so we should have faith and trust in them—are those the right places to push into, Maria?

Mrs Miller: I would say that part of the reason we are here, and you are slightly perplexed as to why we are here, is that there is no system to regularly review what Members want. It relies on the tenacity of individuals, sometimes at their own heavy personal cost, to raise issues that may not be popular or may not be seen to be popular, or on individuals coming from outside to advise us and try to prompt change. Rather than saying, "There is this area or that area," we really need a systematic way of addressing the modernisation of the Parliament as and when we get a new set of parliamentarians.

I am speaking as the greybeard who has been here since 2005. Just think about that—that is a really short period of time, yet within my party there are only three women who have been in Parliament for longer than I have. Another issue this Committee should think about is the lack of retention, particularly of certain groups of MPs. But if we had a way of systematically talking to MPs about what they want from Parliament and then putting it into practice, not as some subversive element but as something that is regularly done, I think we would identify what it is that would not only make this a great place for everybody who is currently here, and hopefully get them to stay for longer, but attract more diversity in the long term.

Chair: Before I bring the others in, James wants to come in at this point.

Q21 **James Sunderland:** Following on from Andrew's question, we both had previous careers before coming here, and my thinking, like his, is probably quite disruptive, but in a positive way. Can I quickly seize on something you said, Maria, about Parliament better working for its Members, and modernisation? The bottom line on the utility of this Committee is that I can't think of a Committee that is better able to make recommendations for how we should be modernising. This could be what sets this Committee apart over the next five years, and I hope it does. Having served with the Armed Forces, if we are exempting women from going on deployment because they are pregnant or on maternity leave, surely we can allow proxy votes as a matter of course in this House. My question is this, and it is similar to Andrew's: because people see Parliament as antiquated, what are the barriers to change?

Mrs Miller: Can I also point out that modernising things from the procedural point of view would not be enough? Part of the flaw in the way these Committees work is that Procedure and Administration are separated. That might be deliberate—who knows?—but if you want to modernise this place, you need to have things that change in terms of the facilities and services on offer, the way they are offered, and the procedure of the House, which is within your gift. I reiterate that getting



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the two Committees maybe to have a sub-committee to look at some of these issues might be a really good idea.

I think your real question was what is stopping us modernising. It is only ourselves. We are in charge—ultimately the House of Commons is for Members—but we have to find a mechanism to be able to galvanise our views in a sensible, coherent, research-based fashion and get them put into action. So far we have not really had the right structures to do that, and that is why we are so grateful to be able to come before the Committee today.

Chair: Sarah, Sam—I don't know who wants to go first.

Professor Childs: I think I need a gin and tonic on that one. There are dinosaurs—people who wish to keep this place as it is, because that is their preference and not necessarily because it is good for the institution. That is what I have learned over the last few years. There is a lack of a single institution that can trigger change. To reinforce what Maria says, it is left to individuals and piecemeal reactions and often requires a lot of political will. We have problems with Executive-legislature relations, which get in the way. We have both Front Benches imagining that they will be the next Government, so they do not want to do anything that will take their power away. We have to talk about power; that is what gets in the way.

It is unlike a CEO of an organisation with a single aim for that company. There are competing power bases and competing goals, which very much get in the way. We have plenty of reforms that could benefit the House; it is not that we lack those. We lack the ability to introduce them and to institutionalise them. I feel very strongly that the Commons Reference Group drove that forward. The absence of such an institution—it does not have to be that one—gives the ability to those who are against some of these reforms to turn the clocks backwards and makes it much harder to comprehensively consider what needs to change in this institution.

Sam Smethers: I will just add very briefly that the prevailing cultural norms in this place are very strong and powerful. There is a real legacy of that; that history is felt very powerfully. When we first started talking about baby leave, the instant reaction of two Members who were strong advocates for it was: "But will Parliament wear it? Can we get it through?" There were real doubts about whether that was possible. We kept saying that it can be done and that things can change. The message that they can change this institution—to Maria especially; it is your institution—was really important, but we had to keep saying it, over and again, because the prevailing norm was that the club would not wear it. I really think that that needs a strong pushback, and using institutions like this Committee, which has been incredibly helpful so far in getting to where we are on proxy voting, is really important.

Professor Childs: If I could just add one final comment, we often need rule change. We like the idea that cultures will change organically, whereas there is sufficient resistance to make that very hard. The reason



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why there are women among the Speakers is because of the rule that says that there has to be mixed genders among the deputy Speakers and Speaker. The reason why we have a single-sex Committee is because we have not introduced a rule that there cannot be a single-sex Committee. I feel very strongly that, in the absence of people monitoring and having the data and being held to account, these changes simply will not happen quickly enough.

Mrs Miller: On the Commons Reference Group, I add one note of dissent: although it was a very nice group of people, it was not within the structures of this place, and it was therefore ineffective. This Committee and others, which are part of the structure, have to find the solution, not ad hoc, unaccountable groups.

Chair: I thank you very much. I know we have kept you for quite a lot longer than you were expecting. Your answers have been very comprehensive and will certainly inform our future work and the review that we are required to give back to Parliament. Thank you very much.