



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Gender Sensitive Parliament, HC 131

Wednesday 9 June 2021

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Lee Anderson; Elliot Colburn; Alex Davies-Jones; Kim Johnson; Anne McLaughlin; Kate Osborne.

Questions 1 - 46

Witnesses

I: Professor Sarah Childs, Professor of Politics and Gender, London University Royal Holloway College; Dr Alexandra Meakin, Research Associate, University of Manchester; and Ken Gall, President, House of Commons Trade Union Side, UK Parliament.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Sarah Childs, Dr Alexandra Meakin and Ken Gall.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this afternoon's session of the Women and Equalities Select Committee and the first evidence session in our inquiry into gender sensitive Parliament. Our witnesses this afternoon are Professor Sarah Childs, Dr Alexandra Meakin and Ken Gall. I will start by asking each of you to just very briefly—no more than two minutes max—introduce yourselves to the Committee and give us a very brief insight into what you do.

Ken Gall: I am the President of the House of Commons Trade Union Side, which is a rather bumptious title for the Chair of the Trade Union Committee, which consists of the four recognised unions within the House of Commons, which is Prospect, FDA, the PCS and GMB. We represent around 1,600 employees of the parliamentary service.

Dr Meakin: Thank you to the Committee for the invitation. I am a Research Associate at the University of Manchester and I research parliamentary buildings, the effect on staff, Members and the public who experience them and come to visit them. I completed my PhD at the University of Sheffield on the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster.

Professor Childs: I also thank you for this invitation for today. I am a Professor of Politics and Gender at Royal Holloway, University of London. In 2015 I was seconded—invited myself in—to the House of Commons and I wrote "The Good Parliament" report. In recent years I have worked with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and UN Women on updating gender sensitive parliament work, particularly in the context of Covid. One of the recommendations from my "The Good Parliament" report was that Parliament undertakes an IPU gender sensitive parliament audit. This is the second time that the Women and Equalities Committee is updating that analysis, so thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. The first set of questions this afternoon are going to come from Anne McLaughlin.

Q2 Anne McLaughlin: Thank you to each of you for giving up your time this afternoon. This is going to be a very interesting session. I will ask all of you in your opinion how gender sensitive is the House of Commons at present? You could say, "You all know", but it is easier sometimes to be looking from the outside in. How gender sensitive would you say it is just now and how much progress has been made since the publication of "The Good Parliament" report in 2016?

Professor Childs: I will start by saying that I think Parliament has improved significantly over the last two decades but also in the last few years. There quite clearly was a commitment, if we think back to 2010 and the Speaker's conference, to improve diversity of those who participate and come into the House of Commons.



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What “The Good Parliament” report documented was just how gender insensitive the institution is and I should add that although much of the international norm is around gender insensitivities and trying to gender sensitise parliaments, in that report I moved to a diversity insensitivity or diversity sensitising approach to recognise that women are not the only underrepresented groups in our Parliament.

That report made 43 numbered recommendations. I inelegantly, or elegantly, slipped in a couple of others. Since that time 18 of those 40-odd have been addressed. I think it is quite clear that if we take an understanding of gender sensitive parliaments or diversity sensitive parliaments of having four dimensions—quality of participation, infrastructure, culture and gender equality and what we might also often call women’s substantive representation—the House has a long way to go. Even if we look at numbers, we are not at parity. We do not have equal numbers of women and men and we also might want to think about which women and men are able to participate.

Infrastructure-wise, there is lots to be done. I know Alexandra will talk a lot more about restoration and renewal but I think there is very much more that needs to be done. The hybrid Parliament has also shown the abilities of some people to participate and not others.

What I think needs to happen at this point is to have another analysis of where we are. In the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association guidelines from 2020 there is a checklist that would enable Parliament to get a sense of how well it is doing relative to those international standards. Parliament was doing very well. I am concerned that in recent years the leadership and the capacity of the institution to work very pointedly together through a particular institution tasked with the job of diversity sensitising a Parliament has declined, given that the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion ceased operating in 2018. That is a real institutional deficit that means it is much harder for the House, as an institution, to reform itself in a coherent, planned, accountable and transparent fashion.

Dr Meakin: I agree with Sarah hugely. Great progress has been made over the last few years, particularly since “The Good Parliament” report. I particularly point to the work of the Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art and the review it is doing on the artwork on the parliamentary estate.

From speaking to MPs, staff, peers and my own experience of the parliamentary estate, it is clear that many women still feel unwelcome on the parliamentary estate. One female MP told me that she felt put in her place by the artwork, the décor and the layout of the Palace of Westminster. While much progress has been made, there is a long way to go and we are at a critical point now. Decisions are being made about the decant accommodation if MPs and peers move out during restoration and renewal, the place that they will sit in for possibly five years during that



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time and then the rebuilt Palace of Westminster. Decisions are being taken now about what that should look like and the kind of Parliament that we want for the future. It is the right time for the Committee to be considering these issues.

Anne McLaughlin: And Ken?

Ken Gall: It is a bit sobering when the two previous witnesses are listed as Professor and Doctor and I just get Ken.

Anne McLaughlin: Okay, Mr Gall in that case.

Ken Gall: That's better. I joined the House Service in the previous century, which makes me sound like Methuselah, but since I joined there have been huge steps forward, particularly on the side of the House Service in moving away from the male and pale culture and leadership that was in place in the 1990s. We now have a big proportion of the senior executive board of the House Service that is female. The House Service itself, the House administration, is certainly publicly and privately committed to making sure its female employees have the best possible opportunities to work their way through the parliamentary system.

The concern for me is that we need to be sure, we need to be careful, that some of the latent cultures will not reassert themselves. I fear there is a danger in that. There are two examples that I hope to go into a little later on in the session. One of those is the common narrative that Parliament functions best when it is in Westminster. I fear this is an example that the latent culture may be starting to reassert itself. The other is the way in which Parliament as an institution can deal with MPs who are under investigation for serious offences. Those are two examples that I would like to refer to later that concern me and take away from an overall positive picture, or potentially take away from a picture that is, in my view, much improved over the time I have been employed here.

Q3 **Anne McLaughlin:** I think we probably are going to be coming back to that sort of thing.

A question for Professor Childs. You said in your submission that gender sensitive parliaments do not just happen; they require sustained individual, institutional, political and administrative will. Do you see that sustained will in the House of Commons?

Professor Childs: There are clearly individuals who are very concerned on both the administrative and political side, but what really worries me is the lack of a body that takes hold of this agenda and works week in, week out with staff and Members to prioritise and create what I think of as an equality plan. If we look at best practice, somewhere like Sweden, you have an advisory group to the Speaker but also a very clear plan to which people can be held to account.

There was a very great momentum a few years ago and, of course, one of the huge successes has been proxy voting for baby leave but that



required a very particular set of combination of actors and a movement. We had the reference group, the Speaker and the Mother of the House. There was clearly mobilisation among predominantly mothers, but also new fathers too, who worked together to reform what six months previously had been felt to be not a problem for the House. We did not need to worry; it was dealt with informally.

To your question, it is not clear that there is a systemic, comprehensive approach that one can clearly identify. Of course Parliament is very difficult; it is not like an organisation with one chief executive who can just flick the switch. That makes it even more important that there is an institutional body of some sort—and in my submission I suggested some possibilities—that takes hold of that agenda and commits to delivering recommendations and reforms and holds other to account who may be those with the institutional position or power to bring about change.

Q4 **Anne McLaughlin:** You mentioned Sweden and I want to come back to you on international models but, Dr Meakin and Mr Gall, where do you think the institutional leadership and accountability in the House of Commons is for creating such a gender sensitive Parliament? Where are the gaps in other words?

Ken Gall: I agree very much with Sarah that there is a requirement for a replacement or an update or a refresh of the Speaker's Reference Group. The current Speaker has been very good about allowing staff representation at the commission. I go to the commission once a month, I am invited along with other staff representatives. However, that is a brief appearance at which I am expected to give a brief staff update about issues of pay, Covid, not simply about the culture or about gender. We previously had the reference group, which involved unions, staff, experts such as Sarah and others, who were able to say, "This is what is happening elsewhere, these are the areas that you need to be careful about", and that has gone for the time being. I think that is a gap that we could do with filling.

Dr Meakin: I agree with Ken and Sarah on this point. The loss of the reference group leaves a gap in ensuring accountability and driving this agenda forward. Specifically on restoration and renewal there is a danger that the scrutiny and accountability from the Commons and the Lords focuses solely on value for money, which is absolutely hugely important but it may not look at the whole picture. We may be losing opportunities to change ways of working that deliver huge benefits, wide cultural benefits as well as possibly providing better value for money than continuing with the status quo. At the moment there is no mechanism to ensure that the gender sensitive or diversity sensitive issues are being raised through to the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body or internally in the Commons.

Q5 **Anne McLaughlin:** That is really helpful, thank you so much. Professor Childs, you mentioned Sweden. What are the international models of best practice when it comes to institutionalising accountability effectively?



Professor Childs: There is a number of ways that institutionalisation can happen. It could be through a speaker's advisory group, and I will just clarify that the previous House of Commons body was called the Commons Reference Group, so although the Speaker was the chair of that body it was not designed for him necessarily to be the chair; it was a House body and that perhaps raises those questions about who owns the body.

There are Speaker's advisory groups in some countries; there are women's caucuses elsewhere; there may be committees that do this. I do not think there is one particular model but it is about where you have set out very clearly a programme of work to redress the insensitivities. One of the things that the CPA guidelines, Commonwealth parliamentarians guidelines, do is suggest that there is an audit, that first snapshot of where a Parliament is, an evaluation in the light of a set of standards that all Commonwealth Parliaments can aspire to. What you must then create is a programme of work, a gender equality plan, a diversity sensitivity plan that enables and requires people to deliver on those responses.

One of the other benefits of a reference group of some sort is that you can call in evidence, you can learn from other parliaments more systematically and enable this Parliament to make the decisions that work best for it, but none the less sharing best practice. One of the things I have found recently in working through the CPA and the CWP is hearing about parliaments all around the world that have many procedures or infrastructures in place that perhaps we do not have. That is fascinating too. We can learn from other parliaments for sure.

Q6 **Anne McLaughlin:** Chair, do I have time for one more quick question? I am aware I have taken up a bit of time. To all the panel, in your opinion how appropriate is the term "gender sensitive Parliament" and how can gender sensitivity be embedded with wider work on diversity? Sarah, you said that you had changed the report that you were doing to bring in other aspects. How appropriate is that term?

Professor Childs: Internationally it is the dominant term. It has huge international purchase and the redress of women's lack of good representation, whether that is number or the outputs of our parliaments, is something that can never be forgotten. We have very few parity parliaments so women must not be lost from the picture.

I adopted diversity sensitivity for two reasons. The first was that sometimes there is a sense in which gender is interpreted as only meaning women. When we are thinking about gender sensitivity we might want to think also about some of the inequalities that are experienced by men, for example around the dress code, which is the one of the recommendation in "The Good Parliament" report. Baby leave might be another unequal but none the less important change that has happened.



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Also I think diversity sensitivity signals to other groups that there are wider concerns. Internationally that may be less sensitive or a less appropriate term because in some places diversity sensitivity gets wrapped up in sexuality and that can cause issues. Whether you call it gender or diversity sensitivity should be appropriate for your context. If you are using gender sensitivity it should be an intersectional gender sensitivity approach to recognise that women are diverse and have different needs and to recognise the same for men.

Dr Meakin: I agree with Sarah on that point. The way people experience parliamentary buildings is affected by far more than just their gender but obviously their background, their race, their class, their level of disability. There is certainly value in a diversity sensitive approach using that terminology as long as the gender aspect is not lost within it.

Ken Gall: I agree with Alex and Sarah. It seems to me that gender sensitivity is the appropriate term depending on the questions that you are asking and the answers that you want to get from those questions. Clearly there are any number of issues around that that we need to address. I agree very much with Sarah and Alex.

Anne McLaughlin: Thank you so much, all three of you.

Q7 **Kim Johnson:** Good afternoon, panel. It is very nice seeing you here this afternoon. I have two questions on representation and they are both for Sarah. You have mentioned and spoken in the previous session about approaching representation through a diversity lens is really useful and recognising that there is intersectionality. Before 2010 Diane Abbott and Dawn Butler were the only black women MPs. Can you say how representative the House of Commons is at present and what steps do you think need to be taken to make it more so?

Professor Childs: Counting bodies is one way to understand how representative our Parliament is. We often just count on one identity. In academia it is called single axis. We count the numbers of women and we compare them against the number of men and the wider population and then we might do that for people of colour.

It is often very difficult to get data on other identities. Sometimes that is because definitions are difficult to agree upon, sometimes it is not always obvious what kind of identities people identify with or experience. We do not have all of the data that we need for quantifying, but what we need to recognise on some of those very root numbers is that they are not representative of the population around sex and gender. Every time there is an election somebody says there is an unprecedented number of women in the British House of Commons, even if it only goes up by a handful because there were a few more than last time.

I think we should be demanding parity, equality of representation. It is as simple as that. Until we get there I will not stop calling out the underrepresentation of women. I think that is true for black and minority



ethnic communities as well. As far as we are aware on sexuality, it looks as though it might be broadly representative but I think disability is a significant identity that we know very little of. It will be very interesting to see some new research that I am awaiting from colleagues that will hopefully be published by the GEO at some point.

We need to recognise that if we look at what works, if we go for evidence-based policy—and this will not be terribly popular—quotas in politics is what is delivered in many places around the world, including the UK significant improvements in the representation of women. I also suggest, as I did in “The Good Parliament” report, that the Equality Act 2010—sorry, this is going to get a little bit geeky—has section 106 that requires diversity candidates data for political parties. That just needs to be enacted and I cannot understand why that has not been enacted since 2010. That would enable the public to hold political parties to account for who they select in a timely fashion so that parties might respond to the potential of concern about how diverse they are and improve their candidate selection.

Quotas globally are demonstrably a very effective and efficient way of getting more women into politics. They need to be well designed, they need to have good incentives and they need to have some punishments, but we really need to campaign for quotas, because they are very effective, but also for some of these lower level activities we have to have the data. Until mid-2010s we did not know that there was a motherhood gap in Parliament. We need that data to be collected.

For me it is about data collection and then recognising for different groups there may well need to be different solutions, but that we should look at all of those and the Government will need to act where legislation is necessary. The first thing that can do is in section 106.

Q8 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you so much for your response to that question. Some useful tips and pointers there, Sarah. The UK is the 38th globally for the proportion of women in the lower House of Parliament. Why do you think they are so far down the rankings? How have other jurisdictions succeeded in achieving greater or equal parity of male and female elected representatives? You have just mentioned quotas. Are there any other examples that you think we could be using to increase that representation?

Professor Childs: When we look at the countries that populate the top end of that IPU table, it is predominantly what we call fast-track countries, countries that have adopted quotas. In post-conflict societies, post-transition societies it has proven a very efficient way of getting more women. We can see that in South Africa where the ANC instituted quotas, in the diffusion of quotas throughout Latin America, and also increasing over time the percentage on a quota. You might start quite low but then you increase it because there is a risk sometimes that you create a ceiling.



You are absolutely right that we think about who gets into our Parliament as supply and demand side theories. We need to create a supply of women. One of the things that quotas does is not only enable those women who are already keen to be politicians, already active in parties, to effectively negotiate the gatekeeping in their political party's electorates, so doing the selecting, but it also tells women out there that they can be and should be part of politics. On the supply side, there is enabling women to have the right kind of resources, whether that is training or covering childcare. The regulation of political parties is another way to do that. There are some fantastic examples globally of where additional funding might be provided to political parties that select a certain percentage of women candidates. They might be in receipt of an extra party political broadcast. Often it is not considered state funding. Other places might provide winning candidates with transport, such as bicycles. Globally, there are lots of things that can be done.

I suggest that political parties also need to be subjected to a gender sensitive parliament-type assessment to make sure that what they do is inclusive and diverse—things like having all your meetings in a pub at 7.00 pm on a Friday, or the good party worker being one who can spend every Saturday morning delivering leaflets when you might have two children to take to swimming lessons. It requires a proper audit to determine where everything is wrong because too often the practices that we accept in politics are normalised and not considered to be inclusionary when they may well be.

Q9 **Kim Johnson:** I hear what you are saying. Thank so much for that. How well represented are ethnic minority women in the House of Commons and what more can or should be done to improve representation in this regard? That might flow into what you have just said around those issues in the previous question.

Professor Childs: There are currently 37—I got this figures because I thought you may ask—ethnic minority women in the House of Commons following the 2019 general election. That is 16.8% of women MPs. We need to recognise that it should be happening automatically. Historically there was some concern that mechanisms like a women's shortlist had disproportionately brought in elite white women. That has changed. It is also the case that parties that might be concerned about an electoral backlash can make choices about where they select their minority ethnic candidates, both female and male.

We might also want to think about party differences here. I know that is sometimes a bit uncomfortable but when we think about the overall percentage of any group within Parliament, there is a national level figure, 33% or 34% in the House of Commons overall, but we will see differences. We will see that Labour is over 50% female and the Conservative Party around a quarter. We need to think about party-specific strategies and the implications of different parties adopting different measures because they will translate into different outcomes.



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In the context of debates around boundaries and the drawing of constituency boundaries, it is very important that we do not lose any of our underrepresented MPs in the process of boundary reform. There is sometimes an assumption that the story is always a positive upward one and that is absolutely not the case unless measures are put in place.

Kim Johnson: That is a very valid point. I am also interested to find out—and you could maybe send some information to the Committee—about the roles that women play in the structure of Government, whether it is the Chair of Select Committees or in senior roles, Sarah. If you could send that information on to the Committee, that would be great. Thank you very much for responding to my questions this afternoon.

Q10 **Chair:** I will pick up on something that Sarah said. Is it really your suggestion that we should be gerrymandering boundaries to advantage female sitting MPs?

Professor Childs: No, it is to suggest that where there are new boundaries parties might want to decide to have a quota in a region. Say you lose a few seats, you might decide that two of the four seats that have been redrawn might have an all-women shortlist, for example. It would not be saying this seat must be protected because it has a woman MP. It is saying: what are the implications for the gender or the minority ethnic composition of the House were these boundaries to go forward, and what will we as a party do to ensure that our representation does not decline? Is that clear enough?

Q11 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Thank you to our witnesses for joining us this afternoon. Professor Childs, I will come to you first. When I was first elected to this place in 2019 my son was just eight months old and I had to navigate becoming a new MP as well as becoming a relatively new first-time mum. What are your assessments of the recent changes to support parent MPs, such as the proxy voting for new parents?

Professor Childs: I should admit a conflict of interest. I was involved behind the scenes in my role as adviser of the reference group and working with colleagues such as the mother of the House, Maria Miller, and others to bring that in. I think it was a really important intervention. Something had to be done. There was a risk to the reputation of women MPs from the media and other critics who consider those who take some time off when their babies are first born are lazy MPs and not working, so there was an individual risk to the MP. There was a huge concern and there should have been a bigger concern that your constituency was not represented, given that you were unable to participate while caring for children.

What was notable about that change was the arguments and the form it took in the first instance to get it passed was quite modest. On one level it was a huge, dramatic change to Standing Orders, but on another reading it is quite modest in its provisions, and we have seen subsequently that there are concerns around the constituency role. We



have seen Stella Creasy and the ad hoc arrangements put in place for her. We have managed to introduce initially with baby leave something symbolic that had good, substantive effects for MPs so they could take time off and still represent their constituents while they were on baby leave.

I think the bigger issue needs to be addressed. More needs to be done and I submitted some evidence to IPSA around it. Now that we have opened up the possibility and created the right of parent MPs to take baby leave, we need to have a fuller discussion on how best to get the whole role captured in that way.

Q12 Alex Davies-Jones: You mentioned that more needs to be done and you have submitted proposals to IPSA. Are you able to outline some of those plans for the Committee?

Professor Childs: I will get my papers, because they were quite specific. One thing I have spoken about immediately is the question of the differential leave given to the new father and the new mother MP. What was interesting, if I can speak to the politics of the introduction of baby leave, was the real concern that I fear may well be revised somewhat, that there was opposition to the introduction of baby leave. Therefore, we were modest in asking for particularly the amount of time for the mother and less time for the father. As an institution that I think should be a role model, Parliament should provide parity of leave for the mother and father MP. That is one thing I think should be considered as an additional reform, not to have an imbalance in the possibility of baby leave between male and female MPs, because that sends the wrong kind of signal. It sends a gender unequal signal to society about how the House thinks of women and men's role vis-à-vis caring for young children. I think the House of Commons should be ahead of society and showcase these provisions are gender equal for baby leave.

Q13 Alex Davies-Jones: I have some questions for Mr Gall and Dr Meakin, so I will ask them while we are waiting for Professor Childs to fix her audio. Ken, over the past year we have all adapted to the huge change in how Parliament has operated as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, from virtual participation to proxy votes. Do you think there will be ways to continue some of these innovations to support parent MPs?

Ken Gall: There should be ways of doing that, most certainly. Covid-19 has opened the door a wee bit and let us glimpse how a future Parliament might be for remote participation in debates, Select Committees, remote voting and so on. Unfortunately, it seems likely that that door will be closed again and I think that would be regrettable.

The narrative I mentioned earlier that comes from the Leader of the House, and probably most of the Government, is Parliament functions best when people are in Westminster. If we are to reduce the means that people can contribute to Parliament as MPs by closing down virtual participation and other aspects of the hybrid Parliament, we have to face



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the possibility that in the future we will exclude from participation as MPs the very groups we want to attract. For example, let us imagine a single mother in the north of England, the red wall, who may be passionate about politics, who may feel she has something to offer to her community, who may have seen virtual and remote participation as a means by which she could square the circle of contributing to her community as an MP and dealing with her family. It appears that door will be reduced.

The danger there is we end up, not intentionally, more in a culture in which certain groups of people, including the disabled, who are scandalously underrepresented across Parliament, are simply given a message that it is not really for them because they have to travel to Westminster, have to be onsite to vote or they cannot participate from their own constituency offices. It would be extremely regrettable, for the reasons that you know way more than I ever will, if we simply turned off a lot of these opportunities that Covid-19 provided to us, although it is one of the few benefits that Covid-19 has probably provided.

Q14 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Professor Childs, if I could come back to you, you were telling the Committee about some new ways of working that you have submitted to IPSA to help new parents.

Professor Childs: My apologies, I am not sure what happened there. I think it is important to reconsider the extensiveness of the current arrangements and the inequality between men and women. There is also the question of covering the work in the constituency. Currently you are able to participate through your proxy and parliamentary procedure, at least vote but not other aspects, but there is also the constituency work. I have always been concerned with IPSA about the cost of childcare provision for Members of Parliament.

Those are the main points I would make, but I heard Ken's points on the benefits to Parliament of Covid-19. I endorse what he said and refer to a report on a remotely representative House that a colleague of mine, Dr Jessica Smith, led on. It starts from the principle that unless one can evidence significant detriment to the House, participating remotely should be a principle that the House is open to.

Many MPs may participate remotely infrequently but for some it may make the difference between being able to do their job properly for periods of time while they are an MP. Given there is no job description and MPs are ultimately sanctioned by the electoral mandate, we could work on the basis that if your constituents are unhappy with the way you are participating—and the assumption here is you are participating remotely too much—they will tell you. I would work from the other way round. Rather than having to make the positive case, I would say why would this not be okay and let the Member decide and ultimately let the public decide.



I am concerned too, like Ken, about the opportunities. Parliament as an institution has made huge strides in its ability to undertake remote participation. I know there has been a huge effort by parliamentary staff and if you can facilitate participation, why would you wish to close that down? I think that raises questions around executives, governments, party management of all parties. I would like to see Members having the choice of how they participate.

Ken Gall: Can I make one more point on that? From a trade union perspective, as someone who represents a lot of House of Commons employees, the closing of the door of remote participation and new ways of working will have the danger of filtering through into the people I represent and staff of the House. If the ethos of the narrative is presenteeism, that one has to be in Westminster on the estate for it to be counted as real work, which is a bit of a glib way of putting it, it is a point that will filter through into the House of Commons service and the same principles will apply. Members of the House of Commons service who feel that remote working will give them an opportunity to be with their kids and elderly parents might find those opportunities are restricted, so it feeds through into House of Commons employees.

Q15 **Alex Davies-Jones:** That is a very important point to make. My final question is to you all and I would appreciate comments. I have spoken previously quite openly about my experiences as a new MP, a new mother and a breastfeeding mother, because I was breastfeeding when I was first elected to this place. I have spoken about the challenges that brought with it: finding time to pump, especially pre-Covid when we had to be in the Chamber for the duration of debates and for quite lengthy times. I was pleased with the response I received from the Speaker when I met him and he confirmed to me that if it was needed, breastfeeding mothers could breastfeed in the chamber if they chose to do so. Are there any other changes you think could be implemented to help breastfeeding mothers in Parliament?

Professor Childs: The obvious ones are, as you say, the assumption should be that when it is necessary, where it is appropriate, it is fine. It is also about ensuring the kind of facilities you might need are available. It would be very simple for there to be a survey, a conversation with Members and staff to find out what is necessary. This is precisely the kind of activity that the Commons Reference Group would have been able to do.

We did this kind of thing. We consulted new parents before we embarked on the baby leave work and it is precisely what is lacking that somebody having an agenda, having capacity, having staff resourcing to facilitate some conversations—focus group is a posh way of putting having a meeting with those who have these concerns—and gathering the needs, requirements and interests of those who have children within the House. This is something that institutions and organisations up and down the country would do. We can learn from best practice. It is an example of



those earlier questions about leadership, capacity and where perhaps the House may currently be lacking.

It is you as an individual, if I may put words into your mouth, going to ask for this provision rather than the organisation by default providing those on the parliamentary estate with the facilities they need, and I think that is the wrong way round. I do not think new mothers should be—and I put this very emotively for exaggerated effect—begging for access to rooms to pump in. These should be provided automatically in a good institution that should be showcasing the compatibility between work, being a parliamentarian, being a mother and all those things. To me, it is the wrong way round that you have to ask. It should be provided. For the House to get the right facilities they need to consult Members to identify those facilities but also bring in other expertise and look at other practices.

Dr Meakin: I completely agree with Sarah on this point. The House needs to talk to Members to find out what they need. It is crucial that this is done now, while the planning is done for the decant accommodation for the rebuild of the Palace of Westminster—what kind of facilities do mothers want in the building; what is most suitable; where should it be located?—in addition to changing rules around breastfeeding in the Chamber and making sure that is acceptable.

Can I also say a huge thank you to the Committee for holding this session remotely? To go back to the earlier point about what should be kept post-pandemic for remote participation, I am the mother of a toddler and it has been made much easier to be able to do this session remotely from Sheffield rather than coming all the way down to London. It has given me my voice and the ability to share my expertise with the Committee. If this session had taken place a year ago, when I was still breastfeeding my child, it would have been much more challenging to be a witness to the Committee. A point made in “The Good Parliament” report was the lack of a creche or childcare facilities for anybody visiting Parliament. If people want to come to give evidence to a committee there is nowhere for them to leave their child, and similarly, for breastfeeding facilities for visitors. How can we make the building as welcome as possible to a large range of people and people with different needs?

Q16 **Chair:** Can I ask a question to all the panel? Do you think we make a mistake by portraying remote learning and remote working and all we have learned through the pandemic as a gender issue? In fact, do we have any evidence that male MPs have also not found it more convenient?

Ken Gall: I go back to the point I made a little while ago. If we start from the premise that being in Westminster is what is required for Parliament to function at its best, and if we follow on from that that hybrid working is somehow less satisfactory, we are in danger of excluding or disenfranchising quite a few groups. Women are among the most likely to be affected because, as you know better than me, the



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burden of the domestic duties of parental responsibilities and looking after elderly relatives falls upon women. It is an unfortunate consequence of the fetishising of Westminster. That may be a bit strong, but the idea that only attendance at Westminster is real work for parliamentarians will have those consequences.

Q17 **Chair:** Specifically, there is no evidence that men have not also benefited?

Ken Gall: No.

Q18 **Chair:** Alexandra, do you have anything you want to add to that?

Dr Meakin: The benefits of participating remotely are not just restricted to gender. There may be specific benefits for women but particularly for MPs who have been shielding, for those who have been particularly vulnerable during the pandemic and MPs with disabilities. This is why a diversity-sensitive approach is helpful if we can consider the full range of reasons why people want to work remotely and enabling their participation.

Professor Childs: I agree with my colleagues, but I would also look at something a bit differently. Some men have realised the benefits of working remotely and have recognised that some of their work can be done remotely. There may be a group of people who might never have thought about the benefits of remote working and have enjoyed it, and that opens up the opportunity to mobilise and harness their desire to keep hold of some of these approaches. That is true for male MPs and it is also true for what I am hearing from male members of staff who recognise they can competently do their jobs and do not always need to be present.

I think Ken is absolutely right about the concern around presenteeism. I think it is gendered but it does not mean it is only gendered and we sometimes see these as opposites. You either think it is gendered or not gendered. It can be gendered but it can also be racialised and about class and geography and all the other intercepting identities that affect how we live our lives. It is a mistake to put it as either gendered or not gendered in that way.

Q19 **Kate Osborne:** We have talked a lot about the importance of hybrid working over the last year or so, particularly for new parents and nursing mothers. We have just touched on it further there. Do you think overall the gender sensitivity of Parliament has increased with the introduction of hybrid working? That has been pretty much said but is there anything else that the witnesses would like to add to that?

Professor Childs: I would like to add—and this comes out of United Nations Women—that Covid-19 gender sensitive parliaments work, which is really good. What needs to happen, and this is one of the checklist components in that report, is that parliaments need to take seriously evaluating the effect of some of the Covid-19 practices and procedures



they adopted. The concern—and Ken intimated this before—is that we move back without having taken stock and looked for evidence about how and why we might continue particular practices.

It goes back to the idea that were there an advisory group of some kind in the House looking at diversity sensitivity or gender sensitivity, it would have taken the opportunity to undertake this kind of analysis that would give us evidence upon which we could make recommendations about what should be kept and what should not. It goes back to the institutional capacity to provide proper, comprehensive, systematic evaluation of the changes and see who they have benefited and who they have not. I think Covid-19 revealed how much MPs are just like other people, but you were able to hide so much of your frailties or your experiences. Like other workers, your organisation needs to enable you to participate in your diversity.

Q20 **Kate Osborne:** Thank you, and you have done well in pre-empting my next question, which was around UN Women calling for this report. Has this review taken place, to your knowledge?

Professor Childs: You found in 2020 that many organisations, because with gender sensitivities we have SDGs and commitments, a number of international organisations have produced gender sensitive parliament frameworks, guidelines and checklists, and it is then up to the organisations to take on board those approaches. The House of Commons to date has worked with the IPU. The IPU gender sensitive parliament audit in 2018 was through the IPU. I think we need to consolidate these different approaches and re-analyse the state of the House of Commons in a consolidated fashion.

You have standards, guidelines and checklists and we need to move beyond that stage and have a plan. Many countries will undertake their own gender sensitive parliament audits. The IPU has worked with a good number of countries, and the CPA is currently trying to encourage this. I have done round tables with six or seven regions now. It is clearly on the agenda of international organisations.

Q21 **Kate Osborne:** I will ask Ken my next question. How do changes in the way MPs conduct their business impact or affect their parliamentary staff?

Ken Gall: That is quite a wide-ranging question. The factors are, and this is a very long-standing point: the location of Parliament, the sitting hours, the building, which Alex will be able to talk about more eloquently than me—is it an attractive package for everyone? Does a young woman who wants to work in Parliament but does not want to go home at midnight encouraged or discouraged by the sitting hours? For example, is a young single mother in the north of England or a disabled person in rural Wales encouraged or discouraged by the sitting hours and location of Parliament, if location is everything? The way MPs work will transmit across to staff. Forgive me for repeating myself but if the narrative is Westminster is everything, remote participation will be closed off, and I



fear some young women and men who work in Parliament and who want to start a family are going to be more discouraged than encouraged that they will be able to combine both of them in the way they would like if some form of hybrid or remote participation were available to them. I hope that is helpful.

Kate Osborne: Does any other witness want to comment on that? If not, I will hand back to the Chair.

Q22 **Lee Anderson:** The first question is for Sarah and Alexandra. We will discuss the restoration and renewal later in the session, but can you tell us more generally what evidence there is for the impact of parliamentary buildings and facilities on the inclusivity for different groups of MPs?

Dr Meakin: There is quite a lot of evidence that parliamentary buildings matter. While they do not determine what happens inside, they can shape it by creating an atmosphere and culture, what Charles Goodsell described as conditioning the future. Some MPs like this effect. Sir Winston Churchill in 1943 famously said, “We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us”. Other MPs do not. Nancy Astor, the first woman MP to take her seat, responded to Churchill in the same debate—this was after the air raid damage to the Commons Chamber—“That is very true but do they shape us so very well?”

This was a debate about whether you rebuild the Commons exactly as is and it shows there is a gender divide about the effect of the building. Members, staff and the public all experience the Palace of Westminster—the parliamentary building—in different ways. Some MPs feel comfortable in the Palace on day one and others do not. The parliamentary building has an effect and it is a gendered effect.

Professor Childs: I will make two comments. Firstly, I draw attention to the lack of seats in the Chamber. I realise the Chamber is very hallowed, but not providing everybody with their own little space has huge implications around gender sensitivity. Where else would you be in such close bodily contact to other members of your staff or organisation? University lecture halls are not like that. You would not have a room where there were not enough seats for everybody. If you compare that to—I do not mean necessarily the Scottish Parliament, where you have your own seat and your own desk; it is about not even having your own space. I think that is hugely problematic.

I would also recall an event—and I did not talk about this when I wrote “The Good Parliament” report because I thought it was not politically appropriate for me to do so—going before the commission. You are in a small room around a square table and you are presenting. Most of the people presenting to the House of Commons Commission were presenting to their line managers, perhaps from the administrative side of the House, presenting to their senior staff but also political leadership of the House. You are presenting in an atmosphere and a physical space unlike



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any other where the person sitting next to you can read your notes because you are all sitting around a table.

I think sometimes the places in Parliament are not equivalent to the professional standards you might expect in another organisation. If you wanted the best from a colleague, you would enable them to present at some distance so there was privacy and they could see their notes, so they were not surrounded, where there are not some people sitting off to the side on a different table.

We must think about the layout of some of our rooms. If you contrast the grandeur of some of the committee rooms in the Palace to the different feel in Portcullis House and think about where you might produce the best kind of evidence-giving, I think sometimes we can underestimate. We can get used to working in very grand places, including, for example, a university building, and we forget what they might feel and look like to people who do not normally work in those kinds of places.

I think that is quite important and I suggest sometimes where we take our evidence from different kinds of people might matter to how confident they feel about participating. I think that also ties into the remote participation where you might find people feel more comfortable presenting from home than they might do in the rather awe-inspiring atmosphere of some of the rooms of the Palace of Westminster.

Q23 Lee Anderson: Bearing in mind the historic nature of the Palace of Westminster and particularly the design of the building, it has been said by some people that they can feel either unsafe or vulnerable. Can all this be blamed on the design of the building or should we look at some of the people who work here, especially MPs, to create a more inclusive environment?

Professor Childs: Both those things are true. It is very clear that one can feel unsafe because a building is badly lit, because it can be difficult to navigate—you might not always know where you can be or where you can't be—but I think we also have to focus on collective behaviour, and particularly create norms of behaviour where people will feel safe and are safe. There are some huge issues around how we, in Parliament, create an atmosphere of respect.

I want to talk a little bit here about some of the administrative staff, particularly younger administrative staff, perhaps those from minority ethnic backgrounds, whose presence in certain parts of the building can be problematised. We know that is true also of some MPs, so I should add that.

I don't think it is an either/or. There has been some progress around the behaviour of Members, both among each other and with staff, but it seems that we still lack a very clear sense of appropriate behaviour. Some of that is to do with the wider political culture and the nature of the kind of institution that is 24/7. Some of that can be addressed through



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practical interventions with buildings and lighting and some of it is about who is there, how they behave and how they are held to account.

Q24 **Lee Anderson:** Thank you, Sarah, and the same question to Alexandra Meakin, please.

Dr Meakin: I agree with Sarah that both factors are the case. A report carried out by the QC Naomi Ellenbogen on the House of Lords pointed to the design of the building as a factor in bullying and sexual harassment, saying that it is not a building for modern working and safe working. Obviously it is about the people but it is the building as well; the design and layout are factors.

Q25 **Lee Anderson:** My next question is to all the witnesses. Is the House of Commons a welcoming and inclusive environment to work in and visit for both women and men?

Dr Meakin: The evidence from some female staff and members of the public so far suggests that they do not feel welcome or at home; they do not feel comfortable in the Palace. I would call for more work to be done. Are we asking the people who come to the Palace, and not just people on official tours but people who come to visit you, your constituents, your schoolchildren? Are we asking staff how they feel on the estate? Do they feel safe? Do they feel welcome? Do they feel at home? What changes would they want? We do need more data, because the evidence so far reflects that not everybody feels safe and comfortable in the building.

Professor Childs: I am very happy to support everything that Alexandra said. I think she is right. I do not need to add to it.

Ken Gall: I agree with Alexandra as well. The hierarchies of the place—the Government, the Cabinet, MPs as a whole—can be quite intimidating for people who work there or visit. The building is part of it, because of its history. The very nature of the place can assist in that as well.

Q26 **Lee Anderson:** Could you please explain to me how the House of Commons could make people from minority ethnic backgrounds, black parliamentarians, disabled parliamentarians, feel excluded?

Ken Gall: Did you say excluded or included?

Lee Anderson: I said excluded, but you could answer on both.

Ken Gall: The fact that some black female Members of Parliament have been stalked and asked whether they should be where they are is pretty scandalous. I think the House has recognised that mistakes have been made in that area and have taken steps to try to make improvements. Checking passes, security, making the place safe for everyone, and so on, is crucial, but mistakes that have been made show a kind of latent mindset that we all need to work on. That applies to the parties as much as it does to the staff in House. We need to make sure we do not immediately switch into some kind of latent mindset of, "Why are you here? You don't look like you belong here". That seems to be something



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from the past that I think the House has taken steps to eradicate, but it is regrettable and worrying that such things have happened recently.

Lee Anderson: Thank you. On the point about not being made to feel welcome, or “you don’t belong here”, I have had that myself. But I will move on to Sarah Childs on that question.

Professor Childs: I think it is about how the House tells stories about itself and how it represents itself visually. That might be on its website and it will be about how you first interact when you are walking up to Parliament. Are entrances sufficiently well identified? I was daunted, when I didn’t have a pass, when I had to account for where I was going, who I was seeing. Of course those questions do need to be asked but if you are not used to entering institutions, it can be very off-putting. You have to negotiate police officers, be confident, be able to speak when someone says, “Where are you going?” and you suddenly forget that you are going to Committee Room 33, or whatever. Those things are very important.

The House has made a lot of effort in outreach and it is worth saying how much has been done, but I think you may be talking to the wrong people. I think I would want to be talking to young people from different backgrounds, asking, “What do we need to do so that you want to come here, so that you want to see what is going on, so that you want to be giving evidence?” Sometimes we need to speak to those who feel excluded to understand the basis of the exclusion.

When I was part of the Speaker’s conference, having a meeting in, I think, Leeds at the town hall, which has massive steps, I remember a woman saying, “If I had known it was here, I wouldn’t have come”. I couldn’t have made it up. It was the best evidence I have had about the importance of buildings. The entrance to that building was intimidating for her, and yet we wanted to hear from her as part of our evidence gathering. We need to know what is off-putting and, therefore, what can be done to make people feel that the institution is more approachable and welcoming.

Dr Meakin: I endorse everything that Ken and Sarah have said. It is hugely important to talk to people, to understand why the building does make some people, from all sorts of backgrounds, feel unwelcome. However, it is important that there is a culture of acting on what we hear and leadership to take these lessons forward. The public engagement team in Parliament does fantastic work in reaching out, but we need to make sure what they learn is fed through at all levels and when decisions are being taken for the future, particularly on disability access. We are already hearing discussions about what compromises will have to be made in the restoration and renewal programme for the new Palace of Westminster, and that the last bit of disability access is the most expensive. We are already talking about putting up barriers to who will be able to get to all parts of the Palace, which would stop people from doing certain jobs. We are already saying, “Maybe it is not essential for



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wheelchair users to be in the press gallery”, which has been a long-running issue in access for the disabled to Parliament.

You need to listen to people, to what they are saying, hear what the barriers are, and then you need leadership to act and put in a culture where everybody feels welcome.

Lee Anderson: Thank you, witnesses. I will pass back to the Chair now.

Q27 **Chair:** I will follow up on something that Lee Anderson asked Ken Gall. What are the trade unions doing to collect data on staff who feel unsafe?

Ken Gall: We have regular branch committee meetings at which we try to take evidence from people of all backgrounds about all the issues that affect them in their parliamentary working lives. People also come to us frequently with as many queries as you can imagine about working in Parliament, including safety on the estate, their hours and all kinds of things.

Q28 **Chair:** It is quite a serious comment, isn't it, that people come here to work and feel unsafe? Beyond your branch committee meetings where people might raise this, you are not going out to your membership to collect data to understand the extent of the problem?

Ken Gall: We have done in the past, yes. We have done surveys. The House itself does a lot of surveys. The union's role is to encourage our members to contribute as fully as possible to the House surveys because we think that is probably the best way to get the data that we can use. Our aim has always been to encourage members to contribute to the House surveys, which we then use. The House has responded very promptly and very properly on a number of occasions to what has emerged from staff surveys.

Q29 **Chair:** But the union set up to serve its members is not looking specifically at the safety data to understand whether the situation is improving, whether it is getting worse, and what is changing?

Ken Gall: No. We take from the data that is collected by the House.

Q30 **Chair:** You do it from the staff surveys. Thank you for that. A follow-up question for Sarah and Alexandra about not so much accessibility but about the entrances to Parliament and how we make the entrances welcoming, making them places that people want to come in to. How do you balance that against the very real need to keep staff, Members of Parliament and the security officers who look after us here safe? I am conscious that we have had the most enormous set of gates go in at the Carriage Gates, quite rightly, because we do not wish to see a repeat of what happened when the police office was tragically murdered. How do you strike that balance? I will ask Alexandra first.

Dr Meakin: I think you can strike that balance by being a bit more ambitious about what we want to do for the external perimeter of the Palace and of the parliamentary estate. Why are we not looking at



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making Parliament more secure by pedestrianising around Parliament Square so we are not having vehicles going right up to the building as happens now? We could make a much more secure area, make more of the UNESCO world heritage site and improve security but improve accessibility at the same time, bringing in the Abbey and the Supreme Court, so that people can feel welcome but the area is much more secure, away from the traffic. You would have more space and a more secure area.

Q31 Chair: How would that help disabled Members of Parliament and Members of Parliament with young children to access their workplace?

Dr Meakin: Because of car-parking issues?

Chair: Yes.

Dr Meakin: That is something that would have to be thought through. I know that the car park is valued by Members with disabilities, particularly by Members of the House of Lords, but I think there could be an imaginative way of looking at using the whole of the Parliament Square area to make the building safer.

Q32 Chair: Thank you. Sarah, do you have any thoughts on that?

Professor Childs: I will give you a procedural answer on the grounds that we can work with principles but clearly you need security experts and design experts to come up with the practical solutions. For me, the first principle is that if the parliamentary estate is perceived to be somewhere that is exclusionary, we need to identify that and then we need to recruit or be informed by those who can come up with the technical security and access solutions.

It is a bit like the point that was made about disability. I can't design a part of the Chamber of the House of Commons that can be removed were we to have three MPs in wheelchairs but I would like to think that there is a designer out there who can create something that looks like the current Chamber but has the ability to remove some seats. If there were a number of MPs in wheelchairs, they could be accommodated other than by lining them up down the middle of the Chamber, which I think would be just horrific. It is a combination of the principles we are working towards and the expertise to enable those principles to be operationalised and put into place. Some of those bigger ambitions around R&R must open up that opportunity to create new designs, and new ways of thinking, that work for those at times competing principles of security, comfort, access and inclusion, gender and diversity.

Q33 Chair: Thank you. Alexandra, turning to you. I think that restoration and renewal is a brilliant opportunity to turn Parliament into a workplace fit for the 21st century. I don't think that we should miss out on that. Clearly a significant part of it has to be about making it accessible for disabled staff and Members, making it a place that women want to work in, and I think there is still a problem around that. Why do you say that



too little attention so far has been given to diversity and inclusion?

Dr Meakin: That really has been the case. From the start of restoration and renewal, back in 2012, gender and diversity sensitive aspects have not been on the table where decisions have been taken. It has been treated as a building project, and it is a huge building project. The vast majority of the cost of R&R—75%—will go on just replacing the mechanical and electrical services, fixing the wires, the pipes and the cables.

When decisions have been taken, the focus has been on the substantial risk to the building, which is absolutely right but decisions have also been taken in a very closed manner. Back in 2012, the House of Commons Commission ruled out the possibility of a new parliamentary building. That decision was taken by just six MPs. It was not opened up on the Floor of the House, let alone to a public consultation where people could have their say about what they wanted, what would a parliament building fit for the 21st century look like. Then in 2018, the House of Commons Commission again took the decision that the decant accommodation, which at the time was planned for Richmond House, would be a like-for-like Commons Chamber. Again, no opportunity to trial new ways of working or making a workplace fit for the 21st century. Again, that decision was taken without consultation with the rest of the House, let alone the public.

Thinking about the opportunities from restoration and renewal has not been part of the conversation at all. While the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body is doing some great public engagement work, for it to be meaningful it needs Members to get involved and to say, “We are open to listening to the public, we are open to listening to how things could be done differently and taking it on board”, thus opening up the decision-making process.

Q34 **Chair:** How do you feel about the latest round of consultation that was released, I think on Monday?

Dr Meakin: Again it is great that the sponsor body is reaching out to Members. This is good work and I encourage Members to get involved in the decision-making process. You have legislated to give the power to the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body. They are the intelligent client for the project. They are setting the strategic direction, but they need political authority. They need MPs to say, “We want you to think about what could be done differently. We want you to think about a 21st century workplace. We want you to be imaginative. This is what our constituents are telling us. When our schoolchildren come and visit Parliament, this is the kind of Parliament that they might sit in one day. What can we think about for the Parliament of 2050 or 2070? What should it look like?” The sponsor body is doing great work and I encourage Members to get involved because the body needs to hear from you, to have the political authority to make these decisions to set the strategic direction of the work.



Q35 **Chair:** In 11 years not a single constituent has ever raised with me what they think the House of Commons Chamber should look like. Maybe that is because *too few* of my constituents who only live an hour and a half from Westminster have been here.

Sarah, can I talk to you about which key bodies should have been included, should have been involved, and have not been? Do you think it is now too late in the process to include different people and different bodies to give their views on how the R&R project could be more inclusive?

Professor Childs: It might be worth bringing Alex back in on this after I have put my two pennyworth in. Had we still had a reference group of some sort, or some other body, it would have been regularly consulted and reviewing what the sponsor body is doing and reporting on it. The idea that you can have an R&R to create an institution that is not gender or diversity sensitive just seems incredible. It should not be permitted. You need accountability. Had that institution—what I call the institution, the reference group—still been in place, I would have expected it to have taken a considered role in keeping an eye on what the sponsor body was up to and creating regular audits of what it was doing and how well it was doing. It seems to me that the absence of a reference group is another deficit and, therefore, the issue of creating a gender and diversity sensitive restored institution can easily be dropped.

I will also add, before I hand back to Alex on this, that in so many ways the politics of R&R are what has prevented much of the gender and diversity sensitive concerns being part of it. When I was writing “The Good Parliament” report, I had to pull my punches because at that time Parliament had not even voted for moving forward. On some occasions one was unable to put gender sensitive demands forward—the sponsor body did not exist at the time but to whatever was in place at that time—because if you did that, you would be missing the principle of it being something that would happen. There is a failure to recognise just how political the R&R project is and the role of a gender sensitive Parliament within it. It has foreclosed conversations that should have been had a long time ago.

I think Alex might be better placed than I am about some of that.

Q36 **Chair:** Before Alexandra comes in, can I follow up about the politics of R&R? Do you think that that is too driven by cost, by tradition, or what?

Professor Childs: I am afraid I think it is driven by MPs’ preferences and the preferences of MPs who are currently here. I think there is a desire to remain within the institution. The cost-effective outcome is to decant properly, quickly and to do the works, but that would require you all decanting to a building that is not as grand and perhaps is not as integrated as currently is the case.

The way I would like to approach it is to think that you are all temporary inhabitants—excuse me—of this institution, but the institution is



permanent, and sometimes the conflict between the immediate interests of those who currently work in a place may not be the interests of the institution in the medium and long term. I have sometimes felt that MPs talk to me about what should happen, about how things should be happening, and it is their preferences rather than what does work or what might work or what could be tried. Sometimes that is not recognised.

Q37 Chair: Do you see any conflict between what you have just said about MPs' preferences and us wanting to stay in this building—that is an assumption that you have made—as opposed to what Alexandra said, that MPs need to be consulted more? If MPs are consulted more, do you not run the risk that you are told, “We love it exactly as it is; set it in aspic”?

Professor Childs: No. I would like to see greater engagement with the possibilities and the mechanics of R&R rather than the principle of do we leave or do we not leave. The conversation has not been big enough because, as Alex said, of that concentration on cost. If you follow the evidence, MPs' decisions seem a bit strange, because the most cost effective would be to go and get it done straightaway.

Yes, I can see the apparent conflict between those two positions. We want to bring you in more but also be concerned about your preferences dominating the conversation. But I believe in the value of deliberation, of having more information, and of discussing, and of trying to work out the best outcome. Those two points can be reconciled through conversation and information and preferences may change. I believe in the capacity for preference transformation.

Q38 Chair: Thank you. I will bring Alexandra in now, but that preference transformation feels as if you think we can be persuaded to a different mindset.

Dr Meakin: To follow on that point exactly, I think one of the reasons for talking more to MPs is that so many MPs have not been involved in the discussions around restoration and renewal and we do not know a lot of their views. A lot of the time, the debate has been dominated by only a few MPs who feel very strongly about the matter.

Chair, you mentioned your constituents, who have not really been interested in the layout of the House of Commons Chamber. I would call for MPs to connect the public engagement work being done by the sponsor body with their own constituents. In 20 years' time they might say, “But you have just spent £4 billion, £5 billion, on this; we did not have a say”, or, “We want things to be a bit different”. The time to say, “How would you do things differently?” is now. MPs are in such a great position. You talk to your constituents all the time. You are out on their doorsteps and holding surgeries. You are in a great position to be able to feed that into the restoration and renewal project. The way the project is set up, because of the absence of the Commons Reference Group or any other body that represents the points about gender and diversity, it is up



to MPs at the moment. They have to be making these points directly to the sponsor body. That is another reason for why it is important to hear directly from MPs.

I go back to the point that in 2018, when the Commons did consider R&R—the only time the Commons voted on it—they voted to move out entirely. It was a surprise at the time. The debate has often been dominated by a few MPs who are concerned about moving out but the silent, or the quieter, majority at the time was saying, “Let’s get this done if it is the cheapest and quickest way to do it”. If we are talking about the Commons as a whole, the conflict might not be there.

Chair: I think it is fascinating that the one chance we have had to vote on it, we voted to decant, yet Sarah was making the argument that we would not do that, that MPs want to stay and that we are stuck in our ways.

Dr Meakin: The dominant voices, Caroline, the dominant voices that we hear.

Q39 **Chair:** I think there is a difference between dominant and majority; being the loud voices does not necessarily mean that they get their way. Thank you for that. Is there anything that either of you would like to add about how external expertise could, and indeed should, have been used to date and how that could bring gender equality into the programme?

Dr Meakin: These decisions are being taken at the moment and millions of pounds are being spent, billions of pounds will be spent, and decisions will be taken by default. That is why it is crucial that discussions are opened up and that the sponsor body is held to account by Members, particularly on the issues of gender and diversity sensitivity. If not, in a few years’ time we are going to say, “We have spent millions and billions of pounds and everything looks exactly as it was and we have lost any chance of having those potential benefits”. We cannot change what has happened in the past but we can open up these discussions now and bring in the expertise, bring in different viewpoints, bring in the views of your constituents, and then hopefully that money will be realised in the best possible way and the benefits will be achieved.

Q40 **Chair:** Where does the balance sit: with the external experts, constituents, MPs or the design experts that Sarah referenced earlier to solve all the security issues? Who should decide ultimately?

Dr Meakin: That is the lucky job of the sponsor body, which has to take in the conflicting views, the design expertise, and the security advice. That is why people need to share their views with the sponsor body. It will be an incredibly difficult job. How do you look to what a 21st century parliament should look like while protecting the heritage, improving accessibility and public engagement, and look to the future while also keeping the MPs who are in charge at the moment happy, keeping the Lords happy and keeping Treasury happy, because it is going to be expensive? It is a very difficult job. The sponsor body is going to try to do



it but it will need as much input as possible to make an informed decision.

Ken Gall: It seems to me that where we are currently with R&R, one of the main problems is that there is no political champion for the project. There is no political, accountable person at all. I see debates in the Chamber and I think it is as if we are all discussing something that happened a while ago and no one is responsible for it anymore. The fact that there is no obvious political champion means that the debate goes in all sorts of directions at once and it is very hard for anybody to coalesce. That is my take on it.

Chair: You will have to excuse me laughing. I think my parliamentary neighbour in the office next door, Damian Hinds, is supposed to be the political champion. He might take that badly.

Ken Gall: Forgive me then. I will apologise to him if I see him.

Q41 **Elliot Colburn:** My questions are about behaviour and culture change within the House. Ken and Sarah, my questions are going to be directed mainly to you but, Alexandra, if you want to come in on anything, wave at me and I will try to bring you in.

Ken, could I start with you and ask about the Dame Laura Cox's "Report on the Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff", which was published in 2018? Significant work to create a more positive culture has gone on since that point. How much of a tangible change do you think has occurred since the publication of that report?

Ken Gall: A huge change, undoubtedly a huge change. We have moved from a culture where making a complaint about conduct and behaviour against an MP was not impossible, but there were so many obstacles, perceived and literal, placed in front of it as to make the process worthless. It was almost inevitable that a complaint by a member of staff or a member of the MP's staff about the behaviour or conduct of an MP would end up going almost nowhere because there was no institutional means of starting a process and that process coming to a conclusion. Dame Laura Cox quite clearly identified that.

We now have a process, which as we have seen over the past couple of weeks with the reports into one current sitting Member and one former Member, where MPs' staff and parliamentary staff have made a complaint. That complaint has been investigated independently and a proposed sanction has been reached entirely independently and that sanction in the case of the sitting Member was approved by the House the other day. The change there is something that we should congratulate parliamentarians and the House Service and Dame Laura Cox on doing because it is undoubtedly a huge step in the right direction.

But for me there is still one outstanding area that I think would be useful, if you allow me to talk about it in a little bit of detail, and it is something that I would like this Committee to consider, which is how Parliament



deals with MPs who are the subject of investigations of sexual misconduct. Unfortunately we have had a few incidents over the past couple of years where people who work in or for Parliament have made allegations of sexual misconduct against Members of Parliament and they have been investigated by the ICGS, in some cases the police, in others under parties, and some MPs have had their whip removed or they have been suspended. We had a former Member who is in prison. We had a former Minister who was arrested but not charged with rape.

There have been a variety of outcomes of all those investigations, but the one constant thing is that from the point that those investigations commenced, all of those Members of Parliament were permitted or were not excluded from attending Parliament, attending Westminster and interacting with female and male members of staff, your own staff and other MPs. These allegations have been made by people who work on the estate and, as we saw in one of the reports the other week, some of the allegations that were upheld took place on the estate. We need to start considering seriously whether some form of exclusion from the estate, not suspension as an MP but exclusion from the estate during the investigation, strictly for sexual misconduct, is something that we might want to bring in. It feels to me like a bit of a throwback to the previous culture that the MP's rights to attend unencumbered seem to take precedence over what in a normal workplace would result in a suspension. That is a rather full answer to your initial question.

Q42 Elliot Colburn: That is really helpful, Ken. Before I bring in Sarah, I did take advice from the clerks earlier today about what we were and were not permitted to bring up as part of this questioning about investigation into Members. I am happy to be corrected but I believe we are safe to mention those specific cases because they have been concluded. I believe, Ken, you were referring to the Member for Delyn and the former Member for Aberdeen South, two of which are cases I think that—

Ken Gall: Hartlepool was the—

Elliot Colburn: I want to come back to some of those examples in a bit. I am happy to be corrected by any of the clerks if they want to jump in and tell me that we should not be having that discussion. Sarah, if I can bring you in.

Professor Childs: I fully support what Ken has said. I think it is really important that in those situations care is taken for those on the estate. I think Ken is suggesting that the Committee takes his request seriously and considers whether changes need to be made that in certain circumstances the exclusion that he suggested might come into force. I want to second that. I think it is absolutely fundamental that the workplace is safe and those who are subject to serious allegations of the kind being discussed are treated differently than they currently are, but I am not an expert in that area.

Q43 Elliot Colburn: Thank you, Sarah. I have just had a message that clears



us to continue with this discussion unlimited, so that is fantastic.

If I can move on to the effectiveness of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme. Touching on some of these cases, if I pick out the case of the Member for Delyn and the former Member for Aberdeen South, both of which are very different but took up to a year, over a year to come to a conclusion. In that time the former Member for Aberdeen South's career effectively ended because we had a general election and this was overhanging it. While he has now been cleared by that investigation, the length of time has had a huge impact on his career. On the flipside, because of the length of time it has taken to investigate the Member for Delyn, the victims in this case have had to deal with the stress and the concerns of being on the estate at the same time.

While I am pleased to hear, particularly from you, Ken, that there has been a tangible change, is it still not the case that we have a lot more to do? Is it really acceptable that this process takes so long to conclude its reports? If you compare it to the private sector or any other workplace, is that comparable? Would that take place?

Ken Gall: No, clearly it is not acceptable and we do have further to go. The problem, Elliot, is that in the private sector and in the public sector if we are talking about employees it is clear who the employer is, where jurisdiction is and who has leverage and power to bring investigations to a conclusion. That simply does not exist in the same way for Members of Parliament and never has. Only Parliament could really vote to say, "No investigation can last longer than six months" but I think it is unlikely that Parliament would do that because parliamentarians might say, "That is restricting me. I could have health issues, I could have a constituency caseload that prevents me from doing so".

The problem has always been the same, the lack of an employer for an MP. The Whips have got a bit of leeway over them but not like it used to be. The constituents have that leeway but there is nothing that they can do externally to force an investigation to be concluded quicker. What we have to try to do at the outset of an ICGS investigation is for the investigator to give both parties—and this applies to staff as well—an outline timetable, "I expect to have concluded witness statements by X, I expect to have concluded my report by Y" and to try to get everyone to adhere to that. The problem is if an MP does not adhere to that, then what? It seems to me that our ability to force an MP to do anything is limited at best, but what we are going to try to do, through the ICGS team, with the ICGS team, is to get timetables in that we hope, and we strongly encourage, everyone will adhere to. It is unacceptable, there is no doubt about it. A year is too long, way too long.

Q44 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you for that, Ken. Sarah, can I bring you in on the same question about how effective the ICGS is at dealing with harmful behaviour?



Professor Childs: I am not sufficiently well positioned to answer that question. I am not an expert on the ICGS, so I would rather not, thank you.

Q45 **Elliot Colburn:** That is absolutely fine. Thank you for that, Sarah. In which case, unless Alexandra wants to come in, the final question, which I think we have touched on this a bit, is to see if there is anything you want to add about what needs to happen next to improve culture and behaviour in the House of Commons. Ken, I will start with you.

Ken Gall: When I started in the Commons, MPs were almost immune from the kind of controls and scrutiny that every other employee in the country had with their expenses, their conduct, hours they worked, there were bars all over the workplace. Over time, probably exposure and a changing culture has stripped away a lot of that. I think that the culture is moving in line with the culture outside. Some of the stuff we have been talking about on remote working, the building itself and the way Parliament treats MPs who are being investigated for serious allegations, appear to me to be the next realistic and pragmatic steps that we can take to improve culture. I think it is improving but clearly there is more to be done. There always will be more to be done.

Q46 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you very much, Ken. Sarah and Alexandra, wave at me if there is anything you want to add on to this. Sarah, I will bring you in first.

Professor Childs: I want to restate the point that institutional change does not just happen. It has to be made to happen, particularly with culture. You don't just decide to behave better or differently. Often it has to follow rule change and it has to happen, showcasing and training. I think there are some very particular interventions. If I go back to the successes of Parliament in recent years, it was because there was some institutional leadership.

The first request I have is that WEC could ask Mr Speaker whether now that perhaps Covid-19 is slightly less of an issue, we hope at least, he is minded to act to re-establish an advisory group or a group of some kind that can take forward this agenda. Without that, it will be piecemeal, ad hoc, reactive and unco-ordinated and we will not get the same change. We need to reaudit the institution to get the data and then think about the consolidated standards of a diversity and gender sensitive Parliament and work out what still needs to be done.

While we may have had 18 of the 40-odd reforms that were identified in 2016 in place, there is a lot still left to be done. Of course things change, new issues come up. It seems to me that there should be a new work programme and that requires a gender equality plan or a diversity and sensitivity equality plan, it needs resourcing. Were Mr Speaker minded to create a new advisory group or some other body or were WEC to create a sub-committee—and I put this in my written paperwork—that would enable parliamentarians to take ownership of this agenda again to feed in



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their concerns, their interests, and they could then decide which reforms they wanted to prioritise, create a plan and then hold other actors to account for their failure or their success in redressing the diversity and sensitivities.

There is a very obvious series of steps that need to happen in the British House of Commons to make sure that it continues to improve itself in the next five and 10 years. That, however, does require some institutional leadership on both the political and administrative sides.

Dr Meakin: I completely agree with Sarah that institutional leadership and accountability are key, absolutely. One thing that the WEC could do, if it was minded to, is ask the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body to do an annual audit of the work it is doing to create a more diversity sensitive, gender sensitive decant accommodation or, when they are looking to the rebuilt parts of Westminster, the work that is being undertaken. If you can hold them to account for that, we know that hopefully the work will be undertaken and it will also be meaningful, because they know that it will be going somewhere—that MPs are listening and taking it all into account. I think there are some practical steps that you can do because, as Sarah said, institutional change does not just occur on its own.

Elliot Colburn: Thank you to all of the witnesses.

Chair: Can I check with members of the Committee whether anyone wants to ask our witnesses any additional questions; a bit of a speak now or forever hold your peace? To our witnesses, thank you very much for your contributions this afternoon. If any of you have any final points, we have a couple of minutes left, please let me know. I am not seeing any of you waving at me, so I assume that you don't. It just falls to me to thank you for your contributions today—they have been incredibly helpful and informative—and to draw the meeting to a close.