

# Women and Equalities Committee

## Oral evidence: Gender-sensitive Parliament, HC 131

Wednesday 14 July 2021

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Alex Davies-Jones; Anne McLaughlin; Kate Osborne; Bell Ribeiro-Addy; Nicola Richards.

Questions 47 – 64

### Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Chair, Procedure Committee; Chris Bryant MP, Chair, Committee on Standards; Sir Charles Walker MP, Chair, Administration Committee.

II: Rt Hon Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Leader of the House, House of Commons.

III: Thangam Debbonaire MP, Shadow Leader of the House, House of Commons.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Karen Bradley, Chris Bryant and Sir Charles Walker.

Q47 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's evidence session of the Women and Equalities Select Committee. This is our second oral evidence session in our inquiry into a gender-sensitive Parliament. This afternoon we are joined by Rt Hon Karen Bradley, Chair of the Procedure Committee, Chris Bryant, Chair of the Committee on Standards, and Sir Charles Walker, who is Chair of the Administration Committee.

I will go straight into the questions, but first can I ask each of you at the outset to give a very brief introduction to who you are and the role of your Committee?

**Karen Bradley:** I am Karen Bradley, the MP for Staffordshire Moorlands and Chair of the Commons Procedure Committee. The Commons Procedure Committee has a role in looking at and assessing how the House of Commons manages public business, and by that we mean legislation and debate in the House of Commons, Public Bill Committees and in Westminster Hall.

**Sir Charles Walker:** I am Charles Walker, Chairman of the Administration Committee. We look after or have oversight of in-house services; that could be from HR, focused on supporting Members, through to catering facilities—if you have a little bottle of wine in the tearoom today, that is our latest achievement, getting little bottles of wine back in the tearoom to be taken with food. We are also campaigning at the moment for the introduction of oat milk. It is quite a wide-ranging set of responsibilities, but we take them seriously, and we are trying to make it a better place for colleagues to work.

**Chris Bryant:** I am Chris Bryant. I am the Chair of two committees: the Committee on Standards and the Committee on Privileges. Uniquely, we have lay members on the Committee on Standards as well as Members of Parliament. We have responsibility for the code of conduct regarding MPs and how they perform their functions. We do disciplinary hearings when MPs get into trouble, and we sit alongside the Independent Expert Panel, which looks at complaints of sexual harassment and bullying.

Q48 **Chair:** Can I start with Karen? You will be aware that the IPU definition of a gender-sensitive Parliament is about an institution that is founded on gender equality. Can I ask you for an assessment on how well you think our Parliament is doing in giving men and women the equal right to participation without discrimination?

**Karen Bradley:** I have seen the definition from the IPU. It is a good definition; it sums up what a gender-sensitive Parliament should look like and where we should have equal opportunities for every Member of Parliament.



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I would go back to when we were first looking at Covid and how Parliament might respond to Covid, thinking about how well Parliament currently responds to gender issues, because that was when we first had to address the matter of absolute parity and equality for all Members. We had a number of Members who were simply unable to get to Parliament for health reasons. We had to find ways to make sure that Parliament had absolute parity for those Members who could only attend virtually compared with those Members who were there in person. We managed to do that. It was not an easy thing, but we managed to do it. However, very quickly, Parliament wanted to revert back to losing parity.

The point I am making is that we start off with great intentions to ensure there is parity and equal opportunity for all Members, but we very quickly can, as a Parliament, revert to practices and procedures that do not allow for parity because it is somehow breaking with tradition or is not the way we have always done things. In the case of parity for those attending virtually, because people who were not able to attend physically were not able to do all the things they were able to do physically, it meant stopping people attending virtually so physical participation gained this advantage in terms of being more flexible and allowing for interventions, et cetera. In a way, it is shame that we did go against that principle of parity. It is an interesting challenge as to how we make sure in the future that we allow for parity between all Members when we are back to a fully physical Parliament.

Q49 **Chair:** Covid aside, have you noticed Parliament make progress since the 2016 report from Sarah Childs? That was effectively the last time this was looked at.

**Karen Bradley:** We have done very little since the 2016 report. The only thing we have done is introduce proxy voting for baby leave. That applies to every Member of Parliament who becomes a parent, either an adoptive parent or a birth parent. It also deals with miscarriages, which is exactly the right thing to do. I pay tribute to Charles, who is on the call, who was the Chair of the Procedure Committee when the Procedure Committee first looked at proxy voting. The Committee was able to turn around a report quickly and we were able to introduce proxy voting for baby leave.

That really is the only thing that has changed in terms of our long-term procedures. I am being clear here that this is not including what we did during Covid. That is the only difference that has happened since that report.

Q50 **Chair:** Charles, do you have anything that you would like to add to that?

**Sir Charles Walker:** No. That is a good canter through. No doubt there will be other questions that I will want to come in on, but I am content at the moment.

Q51 **Chair:** Chris, could we have your perspective on, first, how we are doing and, secondly, whether we are making progress?



**Chris Bryant:** Speaking from my Committee's area of responsibility, as it were, one of the most important things that Parliament can do is make sure that it feels like a safe place for anybody to work, regardless of their gender and, for that matter, their sexuality or anything else. We have made significant strides, because we do now have the Independent Expert Panel up and running; it has already adjudicated in several cases. They were only appointed in November last year and they have already dealt with several cases.

It poses a big question in relation to the fact that, if you are suspended from the House for more than 10 days for a misdemeanour over the registration of a financial interest, you are subject to the Recall of MPs Act, which means that your voters could effectively remove you, but that does not apply if you are suspended for more than 10 days by the Independent Expert Panel for sexual harassment. There are quite a few of us who are angry that we have not been able to close that loophole, and that one Member of Parliament is now using that loophole to stay in the House. We have had lots of representations from people saying that this makes them not feel safe at work.

Q52 **Chair:** We heard from witnesses earlier in the inquiry that there is not an adequate, systemic and comprehensive approach to how you could achieve a gender-sensitive Parliament. Does the House have enough of an institutional focus on gender sensitivity?

**Chris Bryant:** In Parliament, the only way you can really drive that is either through the Leader of the House or the Speaker, and preferably through both acting in unison. When we had Andrea Leadsom and John Bercow, whatever views one may have about any of their other views, they undoubtedly worked in unison. That is what helped us get a proper Independent Expert Panel for dealing with sexual harassment cases in place. That applies to everything else as well.

**Karen Bradley:** This comes down to the point about the way we are structured and the management of the House. There is not one body that you can go to if you want things to change. We have the Commission; we have the Leader of the House, who is the only person who can put anything on the Order Paper. If the Leader of the House does not want to put something on the Order Paper, we cannot debate it and we cannot change anything. We have the usual channels of the two Chief Whips, who manage quite a lot of things; and we have Government, which is by definition the Leader making decisions about what is on the Order Paper.

I hear intent from all of the structures. I hear that they are really keen to improve the situation. Without there being just one individual or one body that is entirely responsible and has oversight of this, it is impossible to change things. Chris is right: unless you have a situation where a Speaker and a Leader are working in unison on these matters, even if they are not on other things, you are not going to be able to make progress.



Q53 **Chair:** If we wanted a more determined focus on gender equality, should there be a separate body, or should it just boil down to the Leader and the Speaker?

**Karen Bradley:** It is a difficult one, because there are pros and cons for both. The Leader is a member of the Government, and therefore you are reliant on the Government wishing to push this agenda forward. The Government have many other priorities and they have to deal with collective responsibility. Anyone who has been a Minister knows how long these things can take.

This Speaker is determined to make sure that there is gender equality and to do all that can be done, but it is impossible for just the Speaker to do it. Should there be another body that comes on? Unless they have the power to do these things and unless they have the full backing of the Government and the Leader to put things on the Order Paper, it is just another Select Committee that can make recommendations.

**Chris Bryant:** We had an example of this last year. We were two lay members short on the Committee on Standards. The two names had both been through the House of Commons Commission and had been agreed by the Commission, but the Leader of the House refused to table both names for the House of Commons, because he objected to one of the two names.

I regularly hear Government Ministers say, "This is a matter for the House". I want to say that it is only a matter for the House once the Government have tabled the motion. Nobody else can table the motion. There is an argument for doing two things: first, to elect the Commission, because it is a slightly oddly composed body, although statutory in basis; secondly, to allow any member of the Commission to be able to table a motion that has precedence.

**Sir Charles Walker:** Clearly, things have got better. We all age slowly, so nobody notices people ageing. If you think about female representation in Parliament, that has grown significantly. It is short of where it needs to be, but it has grown significantly over the past 20 years. One of the really key indicators is how long women stay in Parliament for, whether their careers are as long as men's and, if their careers are not as long as men's, is that because they have better things to do with their time or because they find that it does not work for them as well?

It is not just being in Parliament; it is the whole experience of being a Member of Parliament. From talking to female colleagues, my understanding is that the level of misogyny and hatred that they are subjected to can weigh heavily on their sense of well-being. There are all sorts of issues.

It was very sweet of Karen to mention proxy voting and baby leave, because that was something that the Procedure Committee did when I



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was Chair of it. I was very pleased that we did that, and it was a step in the right direction. There is clearly more to be done.

Q54 **Chair:** Charles, just picking up on what you said, is anybody asking the right questions about why female Members are not staying as long as their male counterparts? On average, it is one term less. If people are not looking at that closely enough, who should be? Is it a job for the House or is it a job for the individual political parties?

**Sir Charles Walker:** That is a really good question. It should worry individual political parties, because we lose really good people. I know we had a significant intake of women in 2010, but Caroline, you know that many of your friends and comrades left in 2019. It is something that there should be further academic research into so that we come at it from a basis of fact and knowledge, not gut instinct.

I have noticed that their careers are shorter. If I am noticing it, I am sure other people are noticing it. You seem to have a handle on it on your Committee already. We need to look at the causes behind why people are leaving early. Once we understand why they are leaving early, we can perhaps address those underlying causes and make this a more pleasurable experience than it currently is.

**Karen Bradley:** I was going to make the point about female MPs serving for one Parliament less than their male counterparts. When I saw those statistics, that struck me as being really significant. Charles is right, though: more research is needed as to why so many of our 2010 intake colleagues decided to leave in 2019. Was it a combination of the turmoil that we have been through in that 2017-19 Parliament and the impact social media has on the lives of female MPs?

I am sitting in my home here; you are seeing my home behind me. That is quite an intrusion into the lives of all of us, but maybe we need to find out whether it is more of an intrusion into the lives of women, particularly women with children, who might not want to share that kind of information with the world out of the desire to protect their children. I am sure fathers feel the same, but we need to understand that.

We need some way of looking at this and trying to understand it. There is sometimes oversimplification: "If we just had virtual participation, more women would be involved". I am sure that we will come on to what has happened with virtual participation and the statistics around that, but it is not just about virtual participation, proxy voting or the sitting hours. There is a combination of things, and we need to understand what it is.

**Sir Charles Walker:** Of course, I sit on the Speaker's Committee for IPSA. Chris, I am not sure whether you are still on it. You are, are you not? We cannot separate decisions made around the support and funding of MPs by IPSA from the experience of women, particularly those with children or those who may want to have children. That has a huge impact. Yes, we may be obsessed with giving taxpayers value for money,



but value for money is not just about money; it is about the value of the representation they get and the willingness that the representation is given.

**Chris Bryant:** Jo Cox was murdered. When her sister stood in a by-election, she was subjected to appalling abuse, deliberately orchestrated by some men. Yes, that does not help. Incidentally, I was elected in 2001; none of the women who were elected with me in 2001 are still in Parliament, but some of the men are.

**Chair:** That says a lot, doesn't it?

**Chris Bryant:** Yes.

Q55 **Chair:** That is a really important point about the abuse that is directed at female candidates. We saw a really orchestrated campaign. Charles, did you want to come in?

**Sir Charles Walker:** Yes, I wanted to get this off my chest, because Chris has reminded me. A few years ago there was talk of extending the powers of the Commissioner into our private lives and this, that and the other. The then Commissioner came to the 1922 Committee—Anne Milton chaired it—and I got quite upset, because she started lecturing us on how to behave with upset and angry constituents. Sometimes you have to be robust in pushing back. I lost my temper and I was asked to leave. As I left I said, "You have no idea what it is like, and somebody is going to get killed soon." The death of Jo Cox was a year or two after that.

I get very emotional talking about this, because a lot of colleagues, particularly female colleagues, have a bloody awful time. People need to understand that. They literally get driven out of Parliament. In Jo's case, she was murdered.

Q56 **Chair:** Finally from me, restoration and renewal provides all sorts of opportunities in Parliament. We have heard from witnesses that they do not feel there is enough focus on how Parliament can be made physically a better space for female representatives. Chris, should there be a specific direction around restoration and renewal that would see improvements for diversity across Parliament?

**Chris Bryant:** My biggest anxiety is that restoration and renewal is never going to happen. Nobody is ever going to mix a bucket of cement, because we have gone on and on and on, redefining the brief, and we will keep on doing it forever until the place has burned down. Nobody is content with the last report that was produced, so they insist on another report and another report, and we just waste money all the time.

We must restore the building, because it is a UNESCO world heritage site. We have a responsibility to protect the heritage that is ours. It is a beacon of democracy. It is a place that is identified with human rights around the world. We must do that work, but of course, when we do it, we must make it much more accessible in so many different ways. The



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biggest disability for most people on the parliamentary estate is not being able to see properly because it is so dark everywhere. It means that lots of people cannot read papers and cannot see signs properly. We have never even managed to deal with that.

Yes, we should be taking all of those things into consideration, but that will require somebody deciding that we are actually doing this thing.

**Karen Bradley:** We have been looking at it on the Procedure Committee in terms of the way our procedures work. So much of what we do procedurally is because of the building, the way the building is constructed and how the building fits together. The way we vote is because that is where the Division Lobbies are, but they do not have to be there, as we proved during Covid. There were many different ways that we could have voted and many different rooms we could have voted in, but we vote in those Division Lobbies. That means we conduct business in a certain way.

There is an opportunity under R&R to look at some of these things. Again, this goes back to the point about needing that research and needing that body of evidence about why women do not stay in Parliament as long as men do. Are there things that we do in terms of the way that we conduct ourselves? As an MP, you are expected to spend your time in and around the Chamber. It has been very unusual that we have all been in our offices over the last few months. We probably would not be in our offices in the same way if we were sitting in a fully physical Parliament.

Does the fact that people cannot get from their offices to the Chamber quickly, because of the distances, the way that we vote and the way we carry out business, mean that people tend to spend their lives in and around the Chamber, which then has implications for the different genders in terms of the needs that we have? That could be simple things like needing bathroom facilities, food facilities and everything else that you need to live as a human being. Does the structure of the building have implications on that?

**Sir Charles Walker:** The Administration Committee thinks a lot about this. I do not know whether this has figured before, but there is a lack of loos for women. There are all sorts of things. The family room is tired and very unwelcoming. I understand that there are some rooms for women that have been taken over by coat hangers and all sorts of stuff.

This is our Parliament, in a sense, and it is here to support women as well as men. Some of the facilities that women need to help them fulfil their jobs are not maintained properly or rather regarded as second division and not very good. That needs to be addressed, along with lots of other things, but I could start with that. We are thinking about it a lot; we really are.

**Chair:** I am going to turn to Nicola Richards now. I am conscious that I have used up a lot of time, for which I apologise. Snappy answers would



be appreciated from this point forward, please.

Q57 **Nicola Richards:** Sir Charles and Karen, what more needs to be done to ensure that parent MPs are able to fully participate in Parliament?

**Sir Charles Walker:** I am going to be very brief. We should stop publishing the support available to parents via IPSA. You have parents who are afraid to take on larger accommodation to stay with their children because it makes them look bad and then they are subject to abuse. For crying out loud, everybody needs some space, and we do not give Members of Parliament any space at the moment. We are constantly thrusting them towards conflict.

**Karen Bradley:** I will come in on the procedural side of things, Charles having answered on the administration and way of life things.

Look at just the way we vote and our sitting hours. I came into this job as a parent knowing full well that I would be working late. Whatever job I was going to do, I would end up working late in some way or another, but sitting around until 10 pm waiting for a vote that may or may not happen cannot be an effective use of time and cannot be good for people with children. There must be a better way to do it.

Q58 **Nicola Richards:** Karen, your Committee recommended that the House should revert to pre-pandemic procedure after lockdown restrictions have been lifted, including removing proxy voting for those with caring responsibilities. Given that women are twice as likely to quit their jobs due to caring responsibilities, what impact might this have on women in Parliament?

**Karen Bradley:** A number of colleagues have been in touch with me and are very concerned about this. To be clear, the committee's report was in line with what we had said throughout the pandemic: that all of the measures were temporary measures, and that we should not allow the compromises or innovations—however one might want to think of them—that happened during Covid to set precedents for the future without the chance for the House to debate them properly.

We said that we should go back to everything that we used to do pre-pandemic and then we should review what we did and determine what we should either bring back or leave and say, "That was something that we did that worked because it had to, but it is not something that we can include as a permanent feature."

We are determined, and we have had a commitment from the Prime Minister that we will have time for a debate on this. We are determined that we will review everything and look at the best way to do things. If I may say, while I was supportive of extending proxies because we have no alternative, I would have preferred us to continue to vote by phone, because the proxy was a fudge as opposed to the phone vote, where we were all fully engaged, we all knew what was happening in Parliament and we all had to make a decision on which way to vote. Knowing that



everything was going to end at the end of the pandemic, we could have had voting by phone, keeping Members engaged and making sure that we were all part of it, rather than this very complicated proxy system that we have.

**Q59 Nicola Richards:** To all of you, what is the role of the parliamentary authorities or external bodies like IPSA, which Sir Charles has already mentioned, in achieving a gender-sensitive Parliament?

**Sir Charles Walker:** I have spoken on that. Why does Chris not have a go, as a co-member of SCIPSA?

**Chris Bryant:** I am not a fan of IPSA, not because of the people who work for it but just because it was set up to do two things at the same time. One was to regulate MPs and the other was to support MPs so that they can be good MPs and perform their function of serving their constituents. Those two different roles are fundamentally inimical to one another, which is why I would much prefer to see IPSA become one or the other and then have a separate body to do the other bit.

I am always struck that, when you ask IPSA, "How has your last year has gone?" they will always start by saying, "It has been a great success because we have had 99% compliance." I want to say, "Yes, but shouldn't another criterion of your success be whether you have enabled MPs to be more efficient, effective and able to better serve their constituents?" It just does not feel like that.

I also think that MPs are subject to far too many regulatory bodies now. I was going to say that it is like a smorgasbord, but I like a smorgasbord so it is not a smorgasbord. It is like there is a different firing squad around every corner. That makes life very difficult for an ordinary MP. Yes, occasionally there is a bad apple or two, but in my experience over 20 years as an MP, including with people with whom I fundamentally disagree on every single thing under the sun, I have yet to meet more than four or five who are not entirely devoted to the public cause.

Sometimes it just feels as if politics has become an officially sanctioned crime. We are not criminals. We are not perfect in every moment of our lives, because none of us is perfect. We are all flawed, and I am more flawed than most. We need a more rational set of different institutions so we are not endlessly being tripped up.

**Q60 Nicola Richards:** Chris, what has your Committee's key contribution been to achieving a gender-sensitive Parliament?

**Chris Bryant:** My Committee used to have responsibility for sexual harassment cases; now it does not. That all goes through the Independent Expert Panel. Undoubtedly, over the last 20 or 30 years, many women and female staff working in Parliament have found it to be a place where they have not felt safe to work. Having a system that they feel confident in, where they can make entirely confidential complaints about an individual Member and they can trust that it will be an



independent body that is going to adjudicate on that, has been a really important part of changing that.

I have one interesting point. As I understand it, one of the complainants in one of the cases that have been heard in last couple of years was asked why she did not go through the criminal justice system rather than through our complaints system, and she said it was because she did not trust the criminal justice system to be able to deliver a fair verdict or give her a fair hearing. If we have managed, through the Independent Expert Panel, to give the sense to people that they do have a chance to have a fair hearing, that is a significant step forward.

Q61 **Nicola Richards:** To all of you, how would you assess the effectiveness of the process overall for addressing sexual misconduct and gendered bullying in the House of Commons?

**Karen Bradley:** I have very little to say from the point of view of the Procedure Committee chair, but it has certainly improved in terms of what I have seen from when I entered Parliament in 2010 until now. It is certainly better than it was.

**Chris Bryant:** I will just say one more word. The Committee on Standards is doing a review of the code of conduct at the moment. We want to address some of the issues that we have been talking about. Sexual harassment is not a matter for us now. It is a matter for the Independent Expert Panel. Encouraging training, good behaviours, equal opportunity employment practices and all of that is still a part of our remit.

I am conscious that there is a strange little bit of the rules. Quite rightly, behaviour in the Chamber or in a proceeding in Parliament, including in a Committee, is the sole responsibility of the Speaker or the Chair, who decides on those matters summarily. I do not have a problem with that, except that, if somebody were to sexually harass another Member or, for that matter, a Clerk in a Division Lobby, because that is a proceeding in Parliament, that would be a matter solely for the Speaker. The Speaker does not have the resources or the powers to be able to deal with something like that, and of course it would not be independent in the way that everything else is.

I have spoken to the Speaker about this. My suggestion is that the Speaker, in such a situation, should be able to refer that directly to the Independent Expert Panel so as to be able to navigate around that. They have done that in the House of Lords already; we have not done it in the House of Commons.

**Sir Charles Walker:** The ICGS is still bedding in. There are a few complaints at the serious end of the spectrum. The art of a good apology is much underrated in this place. As I have said in the past—Chris has been in the room—there are 20,000-plus people on the estate and there are probably a million interactions a day. It is impossible to imagine that



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all those million interactions will be successful. For the few that are not successful, there is a lot to be said for sitting someone in a room and saying to them, "This is how your actions made me feel." That person probably said something in the heat of the moment about which they feel mortified and they would apologise and move on.

We need to get better at saying sorry, because it is a pressurised environment for our staff and for ourselves. We are all humans, as Chris said earlier. Sometimes we can snap. It is not necessarily a pattern. We just need to be able to say sorry to each other; we need to have an appreciation of how our actions may have hurt someone and make sure that we behave better next time.

**Chris Bryant:** I fully agree with that. I just want to add one rider to it, which is that, if you do apologise, you need to make sure that you are demonstrably sincere in your apology and that you do not then go out and do radio interviews saying that you have been forced to make the apology and that you did not really believe in it.

Q62 **Nicola Richards:** Chris, if an MP is under investigation for sexual misconduct, should they be denied access to the parliamentary estate in the meantime?

**Chris Bryant:** I have not thought about that one. The only downside that I can think of to that is that you are then effectively explaining why somebody is not available on the parliamentary estate. I know Andrea Leadsom has raised a good point here, which is that when somebody is suspended and unable to perform—

Q63 **Chair:** We have lost Chris temporarily. Karen, is there anything you want to add? We will see whether we can get Chris back.

**Karen Bradley:** Again, I do not know. I can see pros and cons on both sides. There has been a discretion that has been applied by the Whips, who have kept Members away when there are accusations against them. You do not want to be in a situation where someone is named publicly because people know they are away and then find out that there was no case to answer. There is a very difficult balance to be struck on that. It is one that we debate within society about the naming of suspects and the publicity around that. There are pros and cons.

Q64 **Chair:** Can I just add a question? Ideally, this would have gone to Chris, but Chris is not with us at the moment. I am going to ask the other two Chairs whether they can give their perspectives on this. I will start with Karen. Do you get any sense that female complainants are in any way treated differently from male complainants in cases of harassment of bullying?

**Karen Bradley:** I don't have any evidence one way or the other, so it is probably best that I do not speculate on that. I will let someone who has actually seen it in practice make a comment.



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**Chair:** Charles, did you have anything there? No. Clearly, we are struggling now we are devoid of Chris. Can I just check with the Clerks whether they are managing to get him back on? No, I am not hearing from the Clerks.

In which case, that was the final question for the panel. Thank you all for your contributions. That was incredibly helpful. We ended up talking about areas that we perhaps had not originally planned to discuss, but it was really insightful. Thank you very much for that.