

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 106 – 123

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 witness

Witness: Thangam Debbonaire.

Chair: Our next witness is Thangam Debbonaire, the shadow Leader of the House. Welcome to this evidence session of the Women and Equalities Select Committee. We appreciate you giving evidence this afternoon. I am going to pass straight over to Anne McLaughlin for the first questions.

Q106 **Anne McLaughlin:** Hi, Thangam. Thanks very much for doing this. You will know that we are looking at the issue of a gender-sensitive Parliament. How gender-sensitive do you feel the UK Parliament is right now? How much progress do you think has been made since the publication of the *Good Parliament* report five years ago? Where do you think the institutional focus on gender sensitivity within the House of Commons is currently coming from?

Thangam Debbonaire: First of all, it is nice to see you. Thank you for inviting me. I am going to do my best. I am going to work backwards. Where do I think the institutional focus is coming from? In terms of where the institutional drivers are, that can seem very opaque to Members of Parliament, staff and members of the public. If I could make one recommendation from the start, it is that we need something such as a Speaker's conference on gender equality to bring together expertise, views of staff, Members, members of the public, the experiences of other parliaments and of respected and trusted academics, such as Professor Sarah Childs, as well as other stakeholders who could help us to do a piece of work to make this more concrete.

In terms of progress, we could do with a state of progress report each year and a Speaker's conference or some other standing parliamentary Committee, with some resourcing that could at the very least do measurement and a stocktake, but ideally could also commission investigations and inquiries. It would not replace the work of a Select Committee. You have a very broad remit, and it is very important for gender equality and other forms of equality across the piece and across the country.

If we are going to do some work on gender equality in Parliament—I will come back to the word "sensitive" in a minute—we could do with a body that has responsibility for both monitoring and identifying improvements that are needed, consulting widely and developing expertise.

Going backwards again, how much progress do I think we have made? Without such a Speaker's conference or body to measure, we are all only going to be able to give our opinions. Others will be more well informed than I am. I have read Sarah Childs' written evidence; that is a helpful place to be, but it is not as much as we would like, given especially that when Sarah did the *Good Parliament* work, she was able to have much



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more access and resourcing to get on with doing a piece of thorough work. I would like that to not only be restored but enhanced. We have moved on, and there are other considerations. We now have R&R, and we have now had experience of the ICGS actually operating; we can spot some of the ways we might want to change it. We have moved on.

To come to your first question about how gender sensitive it is, caveating the phrase “gender sensitive”, which I will come back to, how equal and welcoming a place for women do I think Parliament is? We have better provision and proxy voting; that is much more embedded now. I get that we all now have a proxy vote, but at least we know that, when that ends, or if that fully ends, there is the facility to keep it there for everybody, but also that it is not going to end for women on maternity leave; fathers can have it, and they have, and it is a really good, functioning way of doing things, which is practical and helpful.

I was listening to the evidence from the Leader of the House just now. There were some really interesting things, such as when Caroline said, “Why do people not know about the car parking. Should we not maybe tell them?” That would be a really good marker, which I think a Speaker’s conference or a standing committee could do, saying, “Have we made progress on this—yes or no? Do Members actually know about the parking?” I know they do not, you know they do not, and I am sure the Leader knows they do not. That was news to me and certainly to the women who have raised it with me, who have said, “I have real difficulty.”

It is difficult to measure progress without somebody whose job it is to measure it. In terms of how gender-sensitive it is, I cannot mark it out of 10, but there are some really critical things that even I can observe. I do not think the family room is well known enough or established as a purely family room. I do not yet think that there is enough understanding of how to use the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, and that obviously needs some work. We know that, and I think the ICGS knows that. It is in place, so that is progress.

We have had the valuing everyone training and the behaviour code. The fact that every toilet I go into, including in the Members’ lobby, has those cards is really helpful. I do not know how much they are being used, how much they are being taken up, how much it is necessary to have on a card or how much people are downloading. Again, I come back to the point that we need an organisational body that has that.

In my view, the institutional knowledge and power to make, measure and recommend changes is a bit too diffuse. As a member of the Commission, I am still coming to grips with what is in the Commission’s purview. I heard the Leader say about certain things, “That is the Commission.” Maybe it is because I am new to the Commission, but that is not clear. It is not clear to me as an interested party, and it certainly was not clear to me as an MP before I was on the Commission. I sometimes ask questions



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about things and I find out that it is not the Commission; it is the Administration Committee or the Procedure Committee.

I think I am relatively knowledgeable about these different bodies, but I am not sure that every MP is. It is probably because I have been a Whip and I have been part of processes. We should not rely on everybody, by osmosis, absorbing all this stuff to know where the levers of power actually are for making institutional changes.

Q107 Anne McLaughlin: Thank you. That was a comprehensive run-round, and very interesting. There is a strong belief that equal representation of men and women in the House will not happen without specific measures being taken. I will turn to the Labour party. How would you describe the actions that the Labour party is taking to increase the number of women MPs, and what are your thoughts on enacting section 106 of the Equality Act?

Thangam Debbonaire: It is about time, if we can just tick that one off straightaway. In terms of my own party, all-women shortlists have taken my party from a flatlining number of women MPs—around 45 at most, for decades. We were the best at it for most of that time, but it flatlined for decades, until a group of women got together in the 1980s and said, “Up with this we will not put,” and came together to form the Labour Women’s Network and to campaign for all-women shortlists.

There was a court case, which unfortunately meant that all-women shortlists were dropped in one election. When they dropped, guess what? The number of women candidates dropped. When they were brought back in, guess what? The number of women candidates went up. I was selected via an all-women shortlist. I am extremely proud that I have helped to contribute to us getting to 50%. We should not be complacent. I have had really interesting comments from people who say, “Do you not feel it would be better if you were selected on merit?” I damn well was, against three other really high-quality women.

Before we had all-women shortlists, people’s mental picture—men and women, by the way—and party members’ mental picture of what an MP looks like was not of one who looks like this. It was not one who was wearing a frock like this. It was a man in a suit. That is not because male and female members of the Labour party or any other political party are inherently sexist. It is just that the world we were living in meant that that was what an MP looked like. When I was a little girl I was very political and I came from a very political family, and even I had internalised the idea that MPs did not look like me, or, more importantly, my grandmother, who would have made an amazing MP. That really bugged a lot of Labour women until we said, “No, we will not have this.” I would defend all-women shortlists to the hilt. If I had not been on an all-women shortlist, I think I would have still been probably one of the stronger candidates, but I am willing to bet my house that I would not have got through. That is not because my party members are sexist. I think it would have just been really difficult.



That matters because not every seat is declared an all-women shortlist. We are not saying that every seat has to be an all-women shortlist, but through the provision of targeting all-women shortlists at so-called vulnerable seats, which is a debatable point, we have raised the number and percentage of women in Parliament in the Labour party to the point where, as a political party, over the course of the last 100 years, we have contributed by far the majority of women MPs. I know other parties have other ways of doing it and I am really interested in them as well, but I would defend to the hilt all-women shortlists.

Q108 Anne McLaughlin: If I was here to give evidence, I would share with you my journey from being completely opposed to them to experiencing them, albeit not personally, and being completely in favour of them, watching women in action; but I am obviously not; I am here to ask questions, and I have one left, which is about the boundary changes. What is the Labour party going to do to assess the impact of boundary changes on the representation of women or ethnic minority MPs? What will you do to assess it, and how will you address any risk of decline?

Thangam Debbonaire: I cannot speak for the details of how the boundary review process will do that, but I have now taken a note that I need to go away and find out. That is a very good question. Our rule on an all-women shortlist will remain. I have not heard of any plans to get rid of it, which will mean that if we end up changing the boundaries, we will continue with the rule of all-women shortlists, which is 50% of so-called vulnerable seats.

That will be tough, because, with all political parties, there is then going to be a process of who is going to lose their seat because it disappears, and how we then manage the process of MPs who are competing for the remaining constituency selection. That is going to be really tough, but we keep that rule. It is part of our standing orders and rules as a Labour party. It is part of our constitution. We are going to keep that. Please do not test me on whether I got the right words there, because I cannot remember if it is in our standing orders or our constitution, but it is a Labour party rule, which we will defend.

Parliament as a whole has a piece of work to do on how it is going to treat MPs whose seats disappear, because at the moment we do not have the provision for redundancy for them in the same way we would if they just lost their seat. There is an issue there as well. We may want to consider at some point what we as a Parliament do about MPs whose seat just stops existing, so they de facto become redundant, with no redundancy pay. I do not think there are protests in the street saying, "What do we want? Redundancy pay for MPs. When do we want it? Now!" but there is an issue of justice here: you could end up with an MP who has served their country and their people very diligently for 20 or 30 years but ends up with nowt. I have always found the redundancy processes to be problematic anyway, but particularly if your seat was just



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erased. By the way, I have no skin in that game because my seat is not going to be erased, so I am not speaking with that bias.

Anne McLaughlin: That is interesting. Thanks very much.

Q109 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Hi, Thangam. I am going to be asking you some questions about abuse of women. We have heard that some women are not standing for election because of the abuse that they see other women politicians receive, and some women have cited this as a reason for standing down. What is the party doing to support women who are targeted in this way?

Thangam Debbonaire: We, as a party and as a Parliament, have a lot to do to support women. As a party, we have to go through quite a process, as I think all political parties have, to make sure that we are doing enough to support women who are experiencing abuse in this way, and that there are processes for MPs to receive support from their Whip, or support for making complaints if the abuse is coming from an identifiable source. When I needed to bring a court case, I had a lot of support and guidance from my Whip, which I really valued.

There is a wider party issue, which is about party membership. There is a complaints process in the Labour party, which has had a real stiffening and improving over the last year, and I am really pleased about that. It has meant that more women who are just party members can make complaints about things about that have happened to them that are sexist or discriminatory. All political parties have more work to do on that.

At this point, I am not speaking on behalf of the Labour party but on behalf of me. We have a job of work to do as women politicians to make sure that we are talking about the full spectrum of our life as an MP. Abuse does not define me as an MP. I refuse to be defined by people who want to hurl abuse at me. I absolutely do not want to do that. That does not mean I am going to deny that that exists, but we also have to make sure that we are giving women who have leadership qualities a full and rounded view of the many and varied experiences that you have as an MP, most of which, in my view, is very hard work but an utter privilege—to be able to represent women and actually do good for women, to be able to change some of those things and pass legislation on hate crime and discrimination.

That is the bonus of being an MP. If you are a woman on the street facing hate crime, you do not get to change the law; you do not get to call for improvements to the police. We do. That gives me great spirit, hope and love of being a woman MP. It is what I can do for other women. We should also be representing that to women candidates, and I try very hard, when I am talking to groups of women. They almost always ask me about the abuse. I mostly will not talk about it because I think it is well documented. What is less well documented and publicised is the amazing amount we can do for women every single day we are in this place.



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I want us to be able to give that rounded picture. I want us to do that as a political party, as women leaders of all political parties, to women who are talking to us about whether or not to stand for Parliament, council or other elected office. Do I think that complaints processes for internal party issues are strong enough? I do not think they have been; they are much better, and I have certainly experienced an improvement, but we still have a way to go. That is if it is an internal party matter.

The women's PLP has been a very supportive group, but I actually wonder whether we should have a women's caucus, which is a cross-party body. Sarah mentioned that, and that might be really helpful for us to do it. I am not quite sure how that would work. I do not mean as an all-party group or a Select Committee, but doing that as a cross-party thing might be quite helpful. We have so much in common, both in terms of our leadership and problems that we face but also in the potential that we have.

It is about the offer that we give to women across the country, particularly young girls. I take that responsibility very seriously. Me showing them that they can be an MP too is a big deal. It is a real honour, and that is part of what women need to be encouraged to see. It is part of the whole palette of what you get to do as a woman MP.

Q110 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: You will know that black, Asian and minority ethnic women politicians in particular are targeted for abuse. In the 2017 election, Diane Abbott received almost 50% of all of the abusive tweets sent to female politicians. I know, for example, that MPs like Diane Abbott and Dawn Butler—there may be some others—are having security funding removed from them. What is your view on that and what the party is doing overall to support black, Asian and minority ethnic women who are targeted for this abuse?

Thangam Debbonaire: If it is a colleague, as the shadow Leader of the House, I will take up on any colleague's behalf. I have not had that reported to me by either of those colleagues. If they want to get in touch with me, I am very happy to take that up with the security staff and support them in any claims that they may be making to hold on to existing funding. I am very happy to do that. I also meet regularly with security staff to review what is on offer in general for women, for all MPs, and also the specifics of different examples, if that is appropriate.

Q111 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: As you will know, the Government are introducing a new offence for intimidating parliamentary candidates and campaigners. What measures would you hope that they might introduce alongside these that would support black, Asian and minority ethnic women MPs as they go about their work?

Thangam Debbonaire: I would like the Government to introduce an offence that applies to all MPs. Along the way, one thing I would like to see more of in legislation is better equality impact assessments that we can call on so that when a piece of legislation is going through, even



though it will have differential impacts for different groups of people and is available to all of us, we actually are more proactively aware of the differential ways it might benefit women in particular, or black and ethnic minority candidates in particular. That would be useful and would enhance our legislative processes in general, in the same way as councils, when they take certain decisions, have to do equality impact assessments. I would like to see greater use of those in legislative processes.

Q112 Alex Davies-Jones: Thank you for joining us this afternoon, Thangam. I am going to ask you the same questions that I asked the Leader of the House, specifically starting on the return of the Member of Parliament for Delyn into the parliamentary estate today. I would be grateful for your view on what steps are appropriate for the House and Parliament to put in place before the return to the estate of any Member who has been found by the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme to have harassed, bullied or otherwise mistreated staff.

Thangam Debbonaire: Some of you may know, although most of you probably do not, that before I was an MP I spent a long time working in the area of domestic violence and, for the previous 10 years, particularly with perpetrators, mostly men but not always, who were using abuse—physical, sexual, and coercive, controlling behaviour, but also harassment. I am drawing on that experience here, and I am also drawing on the fact—I will talk in general terms here; I am not going to talk specifically about that person, because it applies across the board—that if you were in any other place of work and you had any other member of staff found guilty of sexual harassment or harassment of another form of a junior member of staff, there would at the very least have to be a risk assessment done before their return so that there could be a safe return to work.

There would have to be a risk management process then put in place. That would have to be consulted on with staff and trade unions, and there would have to be clear guidance so that staff knew what the limits were, what they were expected to do and what they could refuse to do. Also, that manager, in any place of work, would also know what it was reasonable for them to ask for and what it was no longer reasonable for them to ask for and how they would be able to go about their work. That would make for a better-informed return to work, and that is usually what happens in workplaces I have been in where there is any allegation or someone is found to have carried out harassment.

I would like to see that for MPs but also for anyone else found guilty of sexual or other harassment by the ICGS and the IEP. It is really important that staff on the estate feel that they are treated as they would be by any other employer. Where someone has been found to have done bullying or harassment, there should be a process in place of risk assessment and management, and then support and guidance. Adjustments should be made to working conditions if necessary, but



there should also be consideration given as to whether or not it is appropriate for that person to be in post anymore.

Nobody but the voters can remove a Member of Parliament. If they have committed a criminal offence, that would automatically trigger the Recall of MPs Act. It would automatically trigger the Recall of MPs Act if a parliamentary Committee had suspended a Member for two weeks or more. Because it is independent, which is the right thing for it to be, the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme cannot currently trigger a recall. That should be changed. It is no secret that I have tabled a motion to that effect for the last four working days of Parliament. It is up to the Government to decide whether or not they want to allocate debating time and vote for that.

On Monday, the Commission discussed that prospectively, going forward, that anomaly—I consider it to be a loophole; others call it something else—or whatever we want to call it should be closed. The time has come, because some staff raised concerns about it last year, to be fair, and said they were not sure that they could trust the process; if recall was triggered, they worried about their confidentiality and so on. Now that staff have actually seen the process in action and can see the consequence of a recall not being triggered, it is right that we make sure that actual gap is closed.

That does not mean that MPs automatically lose their jobs. It is a weird and strange job. It is the voters who get to remove you, but those voters in that constituency should get the same right to decide whether or not they want to remove their MP as they would if it had been the parliamentary Committee on Standards that had imposed that sentence.

Q113 Alex Davies-Jones: I will move on to the impact of Parliament on parent MPs. What is your assessment of the impact that hybrid working during the pandemic has had on gender sensitivity in the House of Commons?

Thangam Debbonaire: It is mixed, to be honest. At first glance, you would think it would have made it easier, but I have heard some parents say to me there is an expectation that they would do the parenting at the same time as being the MP. That also happens. It is not straightforward. I do not want to fall into a simple trap of thinking if we can all work from home, that would enable us to be better parents. I am not sure that is true. We might end up women MPs expected to just do a bit childcare on the side and maybe pop down to pick up the kids from school at the same time as being on a Bill Committee.

I am not saying that Parliament should not change, but I am not convinced that just keeping hybrid as a default is the way to achieve gender equality in Parliament. We might end up going down some rabbit holes that we would not like. I would like us to keep the ability to do hybrid stuff, particularly for Committees, as much for witnesses. I think to the before times and I think, "Goodness me!" We used to drag



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witnesses down for Bill Committees and Select Committees, to appear for maybe 20 minutes; we would drag them all the way down from the north of Scotland, and then sometimes it would get cancelled. We never need to do that again. That is important.

For the functioning of a Committee—I have not been on a Select Committee but I have been on lots of Bill Committees—being in the same room is a different quality, which I personally appreciate, but the fact that we have had the ability to be hybrid should be retained because we have not yet evaluated what might and might not work. I do not think we are yet in a position to say what would actually help achieve women's equality in Parliament, because I worry that we then end up with a second-class citizen of MP, who is the woman MP who is expected to go home and collect the kids.

We could then come back to changing Parliament's working hours so that all parents are able to collect their kids from school. I do not know how we would do that for non-London MPs. We could talk about that, but I am not convinced yet that hybrid in and of itself is the answer to women's equality. I just do not want it ditched, because we need to assess it properly.

Q114 Alex Davies-Jones: In the evidence that we received from the Leader of the House before your session, he very much gave the impression that all of the hybrid working would be scrapped going forward post pandemic. He also claimed that because we were returning to normal there would not be an equality impact assessment carried out on the decision to end hybrid proceedings. What do you make of that? Would you like to see an equality impact assessment carried out, and what parts of the hybrid working arrangement would you like us to retain in order to maintain a gender-sensitive Parliament?

Thangam Debbonaire: To be honest, I would like us to retain the ability to do the lot until we decide what we want to keep. The business of being a Member of Parliament does involve being physically here. It does not require it all the time—it is not all the business of being a Member of Parliament—but the quality of debate when we are all in the room together is markedly better. When you are just in a long line of Zoom calls, waiting for your turn, and you are not in the Chamber to be able to intervene on a Minister or really interrupt a Minister and say, "Hang on a minute. What did the Minister say right there?" that is nowhere near as good as what we have at the moment. We are able to do a better job for our constituents when, as a default, we are all debating in the same room.

We should not chuck out the virtual provision, because there will be circumstances. It could be part of a return to work after a maternity leave, for instance. It could be whilst someone is clinically vulnerable but not physically sick. When I had cancer treatment, would I have liked to be able to appear virtually? No, but I know that some people would, and



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some people were able to this year. It gave me the opportunity to think about that.

Retaining the kit is essential. I do not want anybody ripping the wiring out, and I have been assured they are not going to, but we need to be able to evaluate that in a way that is not just clouded by our Covid frame. We need to think about what the outcomes might be. We need to do a bit of modelling and some good-quality research. That is why I come back to having a Speaker's conference or some sort of standing committee that was there to do just that. I would really like us to do that.

You have raised with me something that I will now put to the Commission. I have already said we need to do a proper evaluation of this. I will now write to my fellow Commission members and ask them to include in that a gender impact assessment, because that is absolutely right. I am actually quite ashamed that I did not put that on my list before, Alex, so thank you.

Q115 Alex Davies-Jones: Thank you for taking that forward. That would be really useful. If you could share any response you get with the Committee, that would be really useful for us as well, thank you. This Committee has also heard evidence that recent reforms to support parent MPs are not sufficient for ensuring that the House is a modern workplace for parent MPs. What more could the Government and the House authorities do to support parent MPs?

Thangam Debbonaire: I am not a parent so I feel less qualified than others to comment, but from having talked to parent MPs, I find it really difficult to tussle this one through, because I get completely different views expressed from London parent MPs and non-London MPs. There are those whose children are at an age where they can bring them to London to live here and it is not too disruptive. If you get elected when your children are teenagers, they do not want to be disrupted. They do not want to be moved to London, in my observation. I do not know. This is why we need to hang on to the hybrid facility until we have tussled out what would and would not be helpful there, because I do not want to chuck it out.

There are some practical things. The family room needs to be a family room. I am pretty sure the nursery provision is not adequate, when you add in all the staff who might want it. I do not know, but again a Speaker's conference or a standing Committee could assess that. We need a proper assessment or whether we need greater childcare provision.

We could do with timetabling. For all sorts of reasons, it would help us all, frankly. We would never be able to get over the fact that an Urgent Question is an Urgent Question. The nature of the thing is in the name—it is urgent—and the parliamentary timetable would be put out, but it is not beyond the wit of man or woman to come up with a system that would



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allow us to timetable within a frame that would allow people to be able to book childcare with some sort of certainty of when they will get home.

The issue of bedtimes for young children is a painful and emotional one. I know there are some MPs whose children do not live in London, for whom the answer is, "You get to read bedtime stories on the weekend." For London MPs who have the possibility of going home, it must be really hard not to make it home. As a non-parent, I do not feel adequately qualified to comment on that, but we do not want to make it hard for parents to want to be MPs. We do not want to make it hard for single parents to want to be MPs. I know it is a real struggle for my single-parent colleagues. I have known colleagues, especially in the Brexit years, who just had children sleeping on their desks, waiting for votes to be over. I just felt really heartbroken for them. What did it do to their education? What did it do to their own lives? That just felt really unfair.

It cannot possibly be unreasonable for us to want to look again at timetabling. In the before-before times, MPs used to say, "We must not get rid of all-night sittings. Democracy will end." It didn't though, did it? We now have much more reasonable hours than we used to. Just because they are more reasonable than they used to be, it does not mean that we cannot do a bit of work and make them a bit more reasonable. That would help everyone, by the way. Even if your children live hundreds of miles away, at last you could get to your office to read them a bedtime story on Zoom. At the moment, you could not even plan to do that, and that is shame, because that will put a lot of people off.

Q116 Alex Davies-Jones: I completely agree. What is your assessment of the recent locum MP pilot that our Friend the Member for Walthamstow participated in? Is there scope for that to be developed or expanded in the future?

Thangam Debbonaire: I do not know that it has been evaluated, and that is important. I can give you my opinion, but we are better off with an informed evaluation of that. There are certain tasks that mean that many MPs would say you cannot have a locum MP. Anyone who is not elected by the people cannot vote, cannot stand in the Chamber and cannot go on a Committee or Select Committee. There are certain things that, whether you call it a locum MP or an extra member of staff, they physically cannot do; They are not allowed to. Democratically, they are not allowed to.

Do I think there are other options? I have heard of a legislature—I cannot remember which one it is—where job shares are allowed. If two people put themselves up for a joint election, one could be substituted for the other at different times. I have mixed feelings about that, but I would rather we were better informed by some of the academic research and some consultation. I have mixed feelings about it, because I really hate the idea of second-class MPs, and I worry about whether that would do that.



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Having something that is called a locum MP and actually is not an MP must have been frustrating for the person who held that post. It is extremely reasonable for IPSA to consider funding the provision to have extra staffing to do some of the constituency work, and I believe they have, for a second time. Calling it a locum MP is not completely accurate, given that they cannot vote, they cannot sit on Committees, they cannot do Bills and they cannot speak in debates. It is not the same job. It is still a valuable job, and I totally get the idea that you need another body to do a lot of the stuff that an MP does, but there are certain things they are not going to be able to do because they are not elected.

Q117 **Kate Osborne:** Hi, Thangam. Thank you for coming to give your evidence to us today. I have a couple of questions for you. What is your assessment of progress on changing cultures and behaviours in the House, and what is the Labour party doing to address negative cultures and behaviours in the House?

Thangam Debbonaire: I have only been here six years, and they have been six very odd years.

Kate Osborne: Not as odd as some of us so far.

Thangam Debbonaire: I am not sure what you mean, Kate, sorry.

Kate Osborne: I just meant the last 18 months for the 2019 intake have been rather strange.

Thangam Debbonaire: So were the previous five, I promise you. They were very odd too. I sometimes think this has been odd in a very different way. Politically, the previous five, especially the previous three, were unbelievably odd. I cannot explain if you were not here. They put a completely different slant on just about every single thing. We were living in a hung Parliament, but also a hung Parliament that appeared to be only focusing on one topic. That actually was not true; if you look at the Institute for Government's assessment of what we actually spent time on, it was not all about Brexit, but it dominated the airwaves, it certainly dominated our thoughts, and it definitely dominated our night times, when we were here for very late-night votes all the time on things that really did matter. If one person was in the loo when the Division bell went, it could make all the difference, and differences were indeed made by votes that went down to the wire to one person, or a casting vote from the Speaker.

On change in culture, it is difficult for me to assess. That is a long-winded way of saying I do not know if I can assess that. I have felt both valued and appreciated as an MP by Members of Parliament from different parties. I personally have not felt that I have experienced discrimination in any of the things that I have wanted to try to do. That is my personal experience, and that means that I may be less well qualified than others.

The culture is based on power, and if you are a feminist, which I am, given that we are here to take power and use it, it is quite a journey for



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any woman, over the last 100 years, to have to accept that when we get here we have to accept something that has been defined as male for centuries.

I do not agree with it, and I think we have moved a long way away from where we were even 10 or 20 years ago in the public eye—I can only compare with public culture—but there is still an idea that if you are here to accept and take power, that has an impact on what that says about your feminism. My feminism was always about power to do things—that that was a thing that we should fight for. It was not about the power over other people but the power to do things. Seeking power is a good thing, but it has been given a bad rap, sometimes by other women, often by men and often by institutions of patriarchy.

Is this institution still a patriarchal one? That is really complicated. We have men in key positions of power. We have had women in key positions of power, which has not always translated into massive change for women. We do not have a 50:50 Parliament. I am only the 408th woman ever to have been elected. In terms of numbers, I do not think that there have yet been enough of us for it to be mainstreamed that women and men get to be MPs. That will be a test for me. If I am still here in 20 years' time, I would love it if I went to a school and nobody said, "What is it like being a woman MP?" I will like it when they just say, "What is it like being an MP?" because that is when I will know that it is no longer a thing.

In my experience, I have found this to be a male-dominated environment in terms of numbers. There are certain parts of process that feel very traditionally masculine, but that changes with numbers. There is a critical mass of women now. Once we went over a third, it felt like we were getting somewhere in terms of our sheer numbers and our diversity as well. We do not all agree and we are not all from the same political party. We come from opposite ends of political spectrums within our own parties. We are not all of the same sexuality. That is incredibly rich. By our sheer presence and our ability to bring different topics to the Floor of the House and to committees, we are starting to shift not just the culture of the place but, more importantly, the culture of the country and the nature of the laws on which we legislate.

That is a long answer, given that I cannot give you a firm measurement. Yes, it has changed. That is the short answer. I could have just said that.

Q118 Kate Osborne: Evidence in our inquiry has suggested that MPs under investigation for sexual misconduct could be excluded from the parliamentary estate, as in other workplaces, although you may have heard the Leader suggest otherwise earlier in the session. Should it be a voluntary matter for the parties or Members themselves, or should we consider changing the rules? I will put to you the same point that I put to the Leader. If this is the case, does this mean that there are lower standards of protection in Parliament?



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Thangam Debbonaire: All parties should do their best not to select people who have dubious ethics. All parties should do more due diligence, and I do say all parties. There is no party that can point a finger here. All parties need to be doing better at who they select to stand as candidates, and that includes at snap elections. One of the things that all political parties could do is prevention. The Labour party has had good and bad elections for doing enough due diligence. I would like all political parties to start getting a pool of candidates ready or identifying individual candidates a lot earlier, so that the due diligence can be done away from the heat of an election. That is the first part: I would like there to be prevention.

The second part is that it is voters who get to decide who is here, and that is a problem and a tension. Several times over the last few years, I have felt there is a problem with the fact that because it is voters who get to decide—I do not see a solution to this yet, by the way—that means that it is not a workplace like any other. That is problematic because you are relying on informal networks, where someone says to their network of women, “By the way, do not get in a lift with such-and-such a person.” We all know that happens. That is not satisfactory for safeguarding. It is really is not. It is particularly not satisfactory for safeguarding staff who may find it much harder to be able to say, “Oi, no, back off,” if a certain person comes in the lift with them. It does not appear to be satisfactory.

Does it mean this workplace is not like others? Yes, it definitely does, and that is a function of democracy. I have not yet worked out the solution to that, because the voters should be able to decide who their MP is. If we change the rules on recall, that might open up a different space. As Jacob said, if someone is accused of something, as would apply to any of us if we were accused of something, we would hope that there would be a way of managing that process so we were not putting other people at risk but were still able to represent our constituents, because it is our constituents who matter most.

I am afraid I do not yet have the solution to that. I thought about it a lot in preparation for this meeting. I will just be honest with you. I do not yet know what that solution is, but there should be ways of amending recall so that the scope is wider, certainly for people who have been found to have done something.

Ideally, parties should manage the process, but given that we also expect parties to suspend Members who have done bad things, that means that the influence of the party Whip is then reduced. That is really tricky, but I would hope that all political parties would be doing their bit through their Whips’ offices. What do you do about Members who are independent or who do not have a Whips’ office? If we rely on the usual channels, that leaves anomalies. I am sorry that I do not have a perfect answer.

Q119 **Kate Osborne:** That is absolutely fine. Taking on board what the Leader said, or reminded us of, in terms of law, where someone is innocent until



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proven guilty, does this mean that a Member under investigation for terrorism offences could not be excluded?

Thangam Debbonaire: If you are under an investigation by the police, I think that is slightly different to being under investigation by the Independent Expert Panel. Positing those two as the alternatives, I do not know enough, and I was not prepared for that question; I do not know enough about what the procedure would be if you were under a criminal investigation for a serious crime of violence. My guess would be that would activate the Speaker being able to act in a different way, but I do not know; I am definitely going to find out.

I do not think it is a particularly useful comparison. It is a relevant comparison in that whatever sin they are accused of, we would want there to be an appropriate way of constituents being able to be represented, and staff and other MPs being safeguarded. If someone was under investigation for terrorism, I think they would fail their security clearance, so I do not think their pass would work. I honestly do not think their pass would work, but I might be wrong about that. As a takeaway from this discussion, I will check that out. I want to explore that. Alex is shaking her head at me, so maybe that is not true, but I will certainly check it out.

Q120 **Kate Osborne:** I am not sure myself, I have to say, Thangam. I am thinking back to what the Leader said about people being on bail and at that point still being innocent until proven guilty. It is an interesting one.

Thangam Debbonaire: In a place of work, you could be suspended and put on gardening leave. You are still innocent until proven guilty but taking a precautionary principle to safeguard other staff. The difficult here is that there is nobody to do that to Members. There are only the voters. That is really tricky, and it is one of the things that I found difficult when Anne asked about where the power lies for processes in this institution. It is really complicated and I do not have a handle on all of that yet. I am going to find out about the terrorism offences, because that is a really valid question.

Q121 **Kate Osborne:** It may be for lesser offences, but I am aware that this is also an issue in local authorities, where independents seem at times to be able to behave incredibly badly with no real recourse.

I have one final question for you. What is the family room and where is it? I have been in this place for a fairly short amount of time, so I have not had many opportunities to bring my youngest son in, but have had one or two at the beginning of my time, and I did not know there was a family room, let alone where it is. Maybe you can drop me a note and let me know all about it.

Thangam Debbonaire: Yes.

Chair: It is off the Lower Waiting Hall, but it is pretty dingy.



Thangam Debbonaire: Yes, it is not the best.

Q122 **Elliot Colburn:** We have received evidence from Dr Alexandra Meakin on the issue of restoration and renewal, who has raised concerns that without political direction, the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body will not feel able to consider how the building and the facilities that support this place can support a gender-sensitive House of Commons. What would be your take on that, and what are your priorities for embedding gender equality in the restoration and renewal programme?

Thangam Debbonaire: I heard your question earlier to Jacob about this. I am not convinced that the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body could not commission a gender equality impact assessment. They do a lot of things on initiative, and they present to the Commission, "Here are our views." They then need us to approve them, but they initiate certain things. They presented a paper to us on Monday about certain things that they are building into their design assumptions. They come up with them; we then approve them or question them as appropriate.

Again, I will put that down on my list of things to check, but I see no particular reason why the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body could not commission a gender equality impact assessment. We could ask for one as well. You might want to put that in your recommendations. I can as a commissioner, and I have regular meetings with the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority. I can ask them if that is correct.

As I said, I would like gender impact and gender equality impact assessments to be more mainstreamed into our processes in terms of legislating, but also in terms of how we operate in this place more generally. Again, I know it is a theme, but I would like to come back to the idea that if we had a standing Committee whose responsibility it was, they could be given powers in their standing orders to initiate, request or require such an impact assessment to be undertaken by any relevant body.

Q123 **Elliot Colburn:** I will ask the same question that I asked the Leader. What benefits do you see that might come about from working with an external advisory group or experts on gender equality, or indeed any equality issue, in advising the restoration and renewal programme?

Thangam Debbonaire: There are masses. I am not wanting to insult the restoration and renewal people by saying that they do not already have that expertise; they may already, but having an external advisory body that is full of expertise is useful as a consultative and advisory body. The whole process of R&R is already quite unwieldy. I do not want it to slow down. I want us to get on with it. I want us to get on with the full decant and restoring and renewing. By the way, I disagree with the Leader on this. It is not just about the wiring.



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We have a lot of work to do, and I would like us to get a move on with it. That should not be at the expense of examining the proposals for gender equality. We are not quite at the detailed proposals yet. There is nothing to stop us asking the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body what it thinks and whether it feels it already has that expertise. If it does not, we can ask if it would consider having an external body. We would then have to fund it. I think you would find the Leader would want to know how much it was going to cost. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance and a once-in-a-many-generations opportunity to make Parliament fit for the future. There is so much we would want to do with it, at the same time as enhancing and preserving, that it would be foolish for us not to take advantage of any expertise.

Like some of you may have done, I have met a lot of people involved in R&R who have an enormous amount of expertise. They sometimes feel us politicians just say, "Get on with it," and then we say, "Oh no, hang on a minute. Here is another idea I have just thought of. Oh no, get on with it. Oh no, here is another idea." Eventually we are going to have to let them get on with it, and we will need to be sure that we can back it. If having an external body to advise on equality and diversity is going to help that, I am all in favour. I think it would help.

Chair: If there are no further questions, can I thank Thangam for her evidence and for her patience at the beginning, when I know we kept her waiting for a little while? I call this meeting to a conclusion.