

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 62 – 102

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

Witnesses: Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Chair: Can I take this opportunity to thank you for coming to give us evidence in this second evidence session into a gender-sensitive Parliament? I am going to hand over straightaway to Anne McLaughlin, who is going to ask you the first set of questions.

Q62 **Anne McLaughlin:** Before asking my question, I would like to pay tribute to Emma Ritch, who died unexpectedly on Friday. Emma was the executive director of Engender, Scotland's feminist membership organisation. Emma engaged with the Scottish and UK Governments and internationally with the United Nations and the EU. She sat on boards and engaged with many other organisations that have appeared at this Committee. These organisations recognised her expertise and dedication to equality and would also talk about her kindness, wit and the importance she placed on reaching out to others who might not share your position in the sometimes fraught world of gender politics.

All of her work was important to her, but her association with CEDAW is something that many are now reflecting upon as being especially close to her heart. I hope we can continue to work on gender mainstreaming, as it would be a fitting legacy to Emma Ritch's work. Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to say a few words about her. I did not know her well, but, from what I know, I think she would want me to get on with the questions now.

Thank you, Leader. I do not know whether you heard the earlier session. We have been speaking a little about where the UK Parliament is currently in terms of gender sensitivity. I wonder whether we could have a brief assessment of that position from yourself. Where do you think the institutional focus driving this is coming from?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Things have been getting better. Some 34% of the Members of Parliament in the House of Commons are women. It has been a very long haul. It is just over 100 years since women got the vote, so it has not happened fast enough and it still is not a completed process.

The issue with the selection of candidates is primarily one for parties. They have looked at increasing the numbers in different ways, but all parties have increased the proportion of women who are involved. That is fundamental, because it is at the early level, at the selection level, that efforts to get women involved are so crucial. From a Conservative point of view, I particularly pay tribute to Baroness Jenkin and all the work she has done for Women2Win. It is partly about persuading women that they ought to put their names forward.

Within Parliament itself, making Parliament generally more family-friendly has been helpful. The creche and nursery facilities and so on that are



available have been helpful, but I would not say that it is a completed work.

Q63 **Anne McLaughlin:** Where do you think the driving force for a gender-sensitive Parliament is coming from within the House of Commons? Where should it come from?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is societal. There has been a most enormous change in society over recent decades. Parliament reflects and works with that. What has happened outside Parliament is as important as what is happening inside Parliament.

Q64 **Anne McLaughlin:** I wanted to ask about the equal representation of women and men. You have talked about the increased numbers of women who are now MPs. Achieving equal representation will not happen without specific measures. That is what we have been hearing. I really wanted to ask this what action your party and the Government are taking to increase the number of women MPs and also to retain them.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, it is primarily a party matter. I do not know whether you have taken evidence from the chairman of the Conservative party or indeed from Baroness Jenkin, who has done an enormous amount for the Conservative party. She has been a real champion of improving the number of women MPs within the Conservative party. What has Women2Win done? It has offered support for women who are interested in standing for Parliament, it has offered training and it has offered encouragement.

For everybody, standing for Parliament is quite a daunting thing to do, for men and for women. It is really important to say to people, "Please do stand for Parliament", so that you get over the natural diffidence that people have about putting their name forward for legislating for their fellow citizens. Women2Win has done a great deal of good work in that regard, hence the increase in numbers within the Conservative party from very low levels, as you know.

Q65 **Anne McLaughlin:** Do the Government have a role in increasing the number of women MPs or is it solely something that individual parties should be concerned with?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is the point at which differentiating between the Government and the political parties becomes quite difficult, because any Government is made up of a particular political party. Inevitably in our system you then differentiate some of the activities between what is party political and what is governmental.

The Labour party made great efforts in this regard and indeed has had great success at increasing its number of women MPs. It is not for the Government to tell other parties how to select their candidates. The party of Government is also a political party, so I would say that the Government are therefore associated with what the political parties do. Governments have to be very careful not to trespass on what is the



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territory of the political parties, because that would not necessarily be a helpful way of doing it.

Q66 **Anne McLaughlin:** One of the things that some of the witnesses in our inquiry suggested would help would be enacting section 106 of the Equality Act so that political parties have to publish their diversity data in terms of their candidates. What is your view on that? Will you consider enacting it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government's view on section 106 is that it, along with any other uncommenced provisions, is kept under review.

Q67 **Anne McLaughlin:** Does that mean you are considering enacting it? Are you reviewing whether or not to enact it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is under review by the Government, but it is not a responsibility of mine as Leader of the House. As you know, the Government speak with one voice. Speaking for the Government as a whole, that section is, along with other uncommenced provisions, under review, but it would not be my ministerial responsibility.

Q68 **Anne McLaughlin:** My last question is about the boundary changes. What will your party do—it is party this time, not the Government—to assess the likely impact of boundary changes on the representation of women or ethnic minority MPs? How will you address any risk of decline?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is all about the overall selection of candidates, and that is true at all elections regardless of boundary changes. Boundary changes do not specifically make a difference to how you view selections. If you think of the new entrants into Parliament both in 2010 and 2019, 2010 was in fact on new boundaries and 2019 was not. You had a very large turnover in Members, and therefore you can have a big effect on the representation and the diversity of representation in any election.

As I said earlier, it is something that the Conservative party has worked very hard on. Women2Win has been important, and the party has also been successful at increasing the diverse nature of its membership at Parliament, but that is work for all elections regardless of whether there are boundary changes.

Q69 **Chair:** We heard earlier from the Chairs of the Administration Committee, the Committee on Standards and the Procedure Committee about the importance of the Leader of the House and the Speaker working together to drive changes that would make Parliament a better place to work for women. How is the relationship going between you and the current Speaker of the House, to make sure that you are having those regular conversations about how you can improve the working environment for women in the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would actually broaden it out, because the House of Commons as an organisation is run by the House of Commons Commission. Of course, that includes the Shadow Leader and other MP



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representatives. It is not just about MP representation; it is also about the senior staff within the House of Commons.

You will probably know that Marianne Cwynarski has been selected as the new director general of operations at the House. The second-most senior post within the service of the House of Commons is now held by a woman, an extraordinarily capable individual who has done really remarkable work in keeping Parliament going during the course of the pandemic. That was ultimately a Commission decision, but I can assure the Committee that she was chosen completely on merit. She was just an outstanding candidate.

Q70 **Chair:** Do you feel that there is an institutional drive towards greater gender sensitivity?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House is very conscious of the need to be as good an employer as anyone else in the country and to ensure, both as a Government and as a Parliament, we attract the highest-calibre individuals to serve in Parliament. That means ensuring that it is a place that women are comfortable working in, and therefore they will be well represented in and increasingly well represented in. This is work that continues. It is not one-off work, partly because societal needs and expectations evolve.

Q71 **Chair:** Do you feel that there is an institutional drive to ensure that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is something that the institution of Parliament is very conscious of. Your Committee is part—if I may say, a very important part—of ensuring that gender sensitivity is something that the House as a whole and politics as a whole is aware of. My answer to your question is, yes, this is at the forefront of people's minds.

Q72 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I have some questions about the Government's role in preventing abuse and harassment towards women MPs. We have heard that women are deterred from standing for election because of the abuse that women politicians receive. Many women MPs cited this as a reason for standing down at the last election. What are the Government and your party doing to prevent this and support women who are targeted in this way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First of all, you are absolutely right to highlight this concern. It is really noticeable that women get much more abuse on social media than men, and women from ethnic minorities get the most abuse of all. This shows something very unpleasant about social media, the way it operates and the effect that it has on our politics.

What are the Government doing? As it happens, as you probably heard in Prime Minister's Questions, the Prime Minister had a meeting about the racism element of this with the social media companies yesterday. He warned them of the legislative measures that can be taken and also reminded them of their responsibilities. Their algorithms are remarkably adept at finding things that they want to find and finding precise things to



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advertise to us. If they can find precise things to advertise to us, surely they can also find abuse of people in public life—particularly abuse of women and racist abuse.

That is part of what the Government are doing, but there is also the Elections Bill and Online Safety Bill. The Online Safety Bill will be going out for pre-legislative scrutiny very soon. A Joint Committee has been broadly agreed—we will need a motion in the House to confirm that, but it is near to completion. That will be a way of protecting people from online abuse. The Elections Bill will have a specific protection against intimidation and an electoral sanction against intimidation in elections. The Prime Minister also has a defending democracy programme, which is an initiative led by the Cabinet Office, to try to protect people from abuse.

There are a number of steps being taken to try to stop this. As I said at the beginning of my answer, it is widely recognised what a very serious problem this is. All politicians get criticised, and that is freedom of speech. I probably get criticised as much as anybody, but it is very interesting that male politicians simply do not get the level of violent and personal abuse that women get. This is, therefore, a problem that needs to be tackled.

Q73 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: You touched on reports about black and minority ethnic female politicians particularly being targeted for abuse. In the 2017 general election, it was found that Diane Abbott received almost half of all of the abusive tweets sent to female MPs.

I was wondering if you were aware that Members of Parliament, two black Member of Parliaments in particular, Diane Abbott and Dawn Butler, have had their security travel funding removed? That is provided by the House through the Metropolitan Police. That is quite strange, given the situation that they face continually in terms of abuse and threats, including death threats, for example. Is this something that the Government support? What are you doing to support specifically black, Asian and minority ethnic women politicians who are particularly targeted for abuse?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be wrong of me to comment on individuals and their security relationship, because, first, I do not know the details, and, secondly, if I did know the details, it would be wrong to discuss them in public. I am deeply concerned that there should be the proper security for Members of Parliament.

It was Mr Speaker, as Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means, who made efforts to ensure that every MP had an extra budget facility for their security. There is Operation Bridger to try to co-ordinate security between parliamentary authorities and people's local police force. As you have mentioned two specific MPs to me as Leader of the House, I will take that up privately after this meeting with Mr Speaker and with the House authorities to see what the situation is.



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It is really important that MPs have the security they need and that they feel safe going about their work. This is fundamental to making our democracy work. We all need to be safe in the job that we are doing. There is, of course, a greater risk to higher-profile MPs. They probably need more security.

Q74 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I certainly agree with you there. In February, it was reported that the Prime Minister was launching a review into the sexist abuse of women MPs. Could you provide us with an update on this review?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is part of the defending democracy programme that I mentioned, which is work being led by the Cabinet Office.

Q75 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: There has been no further update on what it has found or what is happening specifically.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It has been feeding in to the legislative processes that are being proposed. There was a written statement in March 2021 by the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution, which covered threats to MPs and guidance to MPs and other issues. It is work that continues. It is not a one-off. It is not, "This is what is going to be done and that is it." It is a succession of events, some of which I have outlined.

Q76 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Does that include the Government's plans to introduce a new offence in electoral law for intimidating parliamentary candidates and other party campaigners?

Mr Rees-Mogg: An important part of it is to have this specific offence of intimidation. That will be in the Election Bill, which has already been published. I do not as yet have a date for Second Reading, but it has had its First Reading.

Q77 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Are there any other measures that the Government could take to protect black, Asian and minority ethnic women MPs as they go about their work?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Online Safety Bill should be an important part of this. It is noticeable how much of the abuse is online abuse. That is particularly concerning, because it is very intimidatory. There is also always the risk that it escalates from online abuse to a higher level of abuse.

This is where pre-legislative scrutiny is so important, because we have to get the balance right between making an environment where everybody—yes, women and ethnic minorities, but all of us—feels safe in their work without stopping freedom of speech. The dividing lines are relatively straightforward. When somebody is making threats of violence or stirring up racial hatred, that is not freedom of speech. That is illegal under normal laws. An SNP MSP has said that I shall burn in hell for all the terrible things I have said. That is the normal flow of political abuse;



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that is not threatening violence. Therefore, the balance is relatively straightforward, but it is crucial to get it right.

We do not want to undermine freedom of speech, but, at the same time, we have to protect people and make them feel comfortable in the work they are doing. We have a duty of care to our fellow Members of Parliament

Q78 Chair: Can I just follow up? You described the Prime Minister's review into the sexist abuse of women MPs as "feeding in to the legislative processes". We heard from the Chairs of the three Committees that it is you who controls the Order Paper and therefore the legislative processes. Can you envisage a scenario in the not-too-distant future where this review indeed ends up with legislation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: You are already beginning to see the fruits of that legislation. The Online Safety Bill is going to have pre-legislative scrutiny. That is really important, because it is going to be an opportunity for parliamentarians to say, "We need to improve the protections in this area." It may be that your Committee may wish to give evidence to the Joint Committee that will be examining the Bill. It is all feeding in to the Government programme.

You flatter me by saying that I have this complete control of the Government's agenda. I am the servant of others in so many ways.

Q79 Chair: When the Prime Minister spoke about his review into the online abuse of female MPs, the only piece of legislation that you see emanating from that is the Online Safety Bill, which is not aimed at female MPs at all but is much wider than that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is covering the whole issue of online safety. As we have just been discussing, the abuse of female and ethnic minority MPs is much greater than that of male MPs. Indeed, it is a broad and wide Bill, but it covers this specific area. That Bill is going through pre-legislative scrutiny now, so this is exactly the time for both governmental programmes and thoughts and other people's thoughts to be fed into it. That is the virtue, as you know, of pre-legislative scrutiny. It is very important. The focus of what it does and who it helps will in reality be, inevitably, those who are most at risk from online abuse. It will make much less difference to those who do not get online abuse.

Q80 Chair: Can I just very quickly follow up on that? We heard from Chris Bryant and Charles Walker about not online abuse but the verbal intimidation and harassment of Kim Leadbeater, the newest Member of the House, in the seat where her sister was killed. Are the Government only concerned with the online abuse of female MPs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is the intimidation part of the Elections Bill. Intimidation in elections will be an election offence. There will be an electoral sanction against intimidation, and that is important.



No, of course the Government are not only concerned with the online abuse of female MPs. That is where Operation Bridger, the protection and security for MPs, also ties in to this. Through your Committee, it may be useful to highlight to the MPs on your Committee and any others that there is a very considerable programme of support from the House authorities to ensure the safety of your home, the safety of your office and the safety of wherever you live in London. They can also give you advice on personal safety. They can give you a wide variety of pieces of assistance. In a public forum, I probably ought not to go into the details of what is available, but there is support. It may be that people do not know enough about this and therefore have not all taken it up. It needs people like me to advertise it a bit more.

Q81 Alex Davies-Jones: I would like to use this opportunity today to ask the Leader of the House about the return of the Member of Parliament for Delyn, Rob Roberts, to the estate today. Leader, you mentioned that you have a duty of care to MPs, but we also have a duty of care to all staff working on the parliamentary estate. I would be interested to know specifically what steps the Leader of the House feels are appropriate for the House, Parliament or him to take before, at or after the return to the estate of an MP who has been found by the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme to have harassed, bullied or otherwise mistreated staff?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, there are two parts to that. One is in relation to the House staff and the people who do not work directly for a Member in this circumstance, and then there are the Member's own staff. With the first category, there have been discussions with senior figures within Parliament about what issues need to be faced. It is harder with an MP's own staff, because they are directly employed by the Member of Parliament; they are not employed by anybody else. Therefore, you need to try to think about what can be done to provide additional protections.

It is a little unfair to talk about an individual specific case. I ought to stick to generalities. It is obviously a matter of concern to the House authorities to protect people who may have concerns.

Q82 Alex Davies-Jones: In instances like this case, are there risk assessments and management plans in place for the return of MPs who have been found by the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme to have harassed, bullied or otherwise mistreated staff?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House authorities have a responsibility for the House staff. That is something that has been discussed with the House authorities. They consider what is necessary. That is really a matter for the Commission rather than for me as Leader.

Q83 Alex Davies-Jones: As the Leader of the House, are you aware of any risk assessments or management plans that have been put in place for the return of—



Mr Rees-Mogg: I know that the management is considering this very seriously.

Q84 **Alex Davies-Jones:** With all due respect, Leader of the House, the Member returned to the estate today, so it is a bit late if these measures have not been put in place already.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am aware of that, but you are asking me to say what has been done on areas that are not my responsibility. The rules for House staff are a matter for the Commission. I am a member of the Commission, but I do not have that particular responsibility. The accounting officer, and therefore the legally responsible person, is the Clerk. These are matters that you may wish to raise with him, but it would not be right of me to answer on his behalf.

Q85 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Thank you; I appreciate your honesty there. Moving on, I would be really keen to find out what your assessment is of the recent locum MP pilot that the Member for Walthamstow participated in. Is there scope for that pilot to be developed in the future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes. The idea of having a locum who can operate for the Member of Parliament in the constituency is a very good one. It worked well in the pilot, and IPSA has now confirmed that there will be future funding. It is really important to ensure that our constituents continue to be represented.

Q86 **Alex Davies-Jones:** What are your thoughts about the fairness of the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021? It is important to support maternity leave, but surely the same courtesy should be granted for backbench MPs as well as Ministers.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Backbench MPs can take a leave of absence for maternity and paternity leave and will continue to be paid during that period. That is similar to what is being done for ministerial leave.

Q87 **Alex Davies-Jones:** We have heard evidence that recent reforms to support parent MPs are not sufficient to ensure that the House is a modern workplace for parent MPs. What more can the Government and the House authorities do to support parent MPs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Parent MPs do have considerable support. There is a nursery facility available. Leave can be taken, and it is fully paid leave—unlike in other areas, where statutory maternity pay may kick in, that does not apply to Members of Parliament. IPSA has come forward with support for people who are on maternity leave, as you mentioned earlier, with the idea of a locum. There is a considerable amount of support available. What else do you think would be useful? Everyone is very open to proposals that would make Parliament a more friendly environment to parents.

Q88 **Alex Davies-Jones:** I am glad you have asked that question, because one of the things that has shown to be most useful is the hybrid working



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arrangements during the pandemic in terms of the effect that has had not just on gender sensitivity but on parent MPs. Will the positive impacts of this hybrid working arrangement be retained post pandemic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This becomes a matter of balance about how you best run a democracy and how constituents are best represented. I think that constituents are best represented face to face. There is an important part of the role that requires meeting people, talking to people, seeing people and having genuine debates rather than speeches read into the record.

The Government have not been effectively scrutinised during the hybrid proceedings. It has been better than nothing, but it has made the role of Government Ministers much easier because the level of scrutiny has been less. It is really important that we remember why we are fundamentally here. We are fundamentally here to represent our constituents, to seek redress of grievances, to hold the Government to account and to legislate. We must never lose sight of that.

Q89 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Based on that answer, is it the assumption that there no hybrid working will be retained post pandemic to help not just parent MPs but MPs with caring responsibilities, for example?

Mr Rees-Mogg: MPs have a job of work to do. They are expected to be in Westminster for three and a half days a week for 35 weeks of the year. They have a really important job to represent their constituents and to be physically present to do that. Within that, the role should be supported as well as possible. As we have discussed, a number of steps have already been taken to do that.

Proxy voting has been made permanent by the House for maternity and paternity leave. That seems to me to be a very reasonable step to have taken. When people are not on formal leave, like people in other jobs up and down the country, they will need to come in to their place of work. That is not unreasonable.

Q90 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Has an equality impact assessment on the decision to end hybrid proceedings been carried out, to your knowledge?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That would not be relevant, because we are simply returning to the status quo.

Q91 **Chair:** Can I just ask a quick question on practical measures that could help parents? Has any consideration been given to installing parent parking spaces, either in Speakers Court or elsewhere, so that they would not have to navigate those stairs down to the car park with a buggy or a toddler?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Let me let you in to a little secret. A Member of Parliament can park anywhere on the parliamentary estate.

Q92 **Chair:** Is it adequate for that to be a little secret? Should it be made apparent to Members with childcare responsibilities? They could park in designated bays, perhaps, for parents and children.



Mr Rees-Mogg: You can park wherever you like. It is not reserved for ministerial limos.

Q93 **Chair:** Should that be made known to Members?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Ask. You have asked, and I have told you. Sometimes MPs forget that Parliament is here for them. When you drive in to the parliamentary estate, you can park your car. By and large, if I am going to be moving my car fairly soon, I park wherever is most convenient. If I am going to be leaving it for a day or so, I put it in the car park. This is not because I am Leader of the House. There are no traffic wardens in the Palace of Westminster. There is nobody to tell you where you are allowed or not allowed to park. You are a Member of Parliament. You have right of access, and convenient access, to the Palace of Westminster. I do not know why people have applied these rules to themselves, because they do not exist.

Q94 **Chair:** Disabled members have designated parking bays. Should there be designated bays for parents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There are lots of bays. I have brought my children into Parliament on a number of occasions, and I have just parked conveniently and gotten out. I would not have dreamt of taking them down to the car park.

Q95 **Kate Osborne:** Before I move on to my section, can I just ask you one question regarding parent MPs under the current section we have been looking at? Last night, I was looking at the recess dates that we have for September and October. The three-week recess for the conference season ends with Parliament returning on the day that schools are due to break up.

How does this fit in with supporting parent MPs, particularly women, who often have caring responsibility? Would it not be more parent MP-friendly to align these periods or indeed other recess periods in a similar way, so that parent MPs can spend time with their children even if it means taking them to conferences, as I have done before entering this place? Are these things considered when setting recess dates?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I am a father of six, all of school age from September—the youngest will go to school in September—I have a personal and vested interest in recesses coinciding with school holidays. The recesses do normally coincide with half term in the period before Easter and the period around Whitsun.

The difficulty in October is the requirements of party conferences. There are competing requirements to facilitate the party conferences and, now that the SNP are the third party, to try to facilitate the SNP in the normal week of their conference, though this year it has actually been changed. It is not as easy as it sounds, because, as you know, Scottish school holidays are different from English school holidays. We are a United Kingdom Parliament, so we ought to try to facilitate everybody. Yes, it is



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very much taken into account, but it is not always possible to do everything.

Q96 Kate Osborne: Witnesses at our last evidence session described the huge progress that has been made on culture and behaviour, particularly since the Laura Cox report and the establishment of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme. What is your assessment on progress on changing cultures and behaviour in the House, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is of fundamental importance. It is a reflection of where society is but also where Parliament ought to be. Parliament ought to be a workplace that is safe for everybody and it should have a culture of good manners and civility. This is really important.

In terms of the ICGS, we had the review by Alison Stanley and some specific recommendations made after 18 months. We have had the beginnings of a flow of reports from the ICGS and the IEP. I am very impressed by the standard of the people we have appointed to the IEP. My view is that confidence will build as we see the system working, and behaviour and culture will progressively change as people see the consequences of not changing their behaviour and as culture becomes inbuilt within us, as people think, "This is the way that people behave in Parliament", and that MPs do not behave in an entitled, bruising or aggressive way to the people they are working with.

This is of fundamental importance. It is important in all working environments, but most particularly in Parliament, where we represent the nation. When things go wrong, this is an embarrassment for the whole nation; it is not just an embarrassment for Parliament.

Q97 Kate Osborne: In terms of addressing negative cultures, what are the Government, and indeed your party, doing to address negative cultures and behaviours in the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: To some extent, they are trying to lead by example and showing people how behaviour ought to be conducted. It is about ensuring that the standards are well known, and it is about norms of behaviour becoming socialised. The key in this is that it is culture change, and that requires people, when they come into Parliament, to realise that this is how Parliament operates and that this is the way of behaving that they must fit in with. From the Prime Minister down, the Government are very committed to this.

Q98 Kate Osborne: My next question links in with what Alex was asking earlier. Trade unions in Parliament have proposed that it should be possible for an MP under investigation for sexual misconduct to be excluded from the parliamentary estate, similar to other workplaces. Should it continue to be a voluntary matter for the parties or Members themselves, or is a rule change necessary?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would require a change in the law. It would require statute to stop Members of Parliament coming on to the parliamentary



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estate. It is of fundamental constitutional importance that MPs are able to come in and represent their constituents. MPs are not employees of Parliament; they are office-holders, and therefore they are not in the same position as if they are working for HSBC.

We also have a strong principle in this country of people being innocent until proved guilty. That is one of our great constitutional strengths, and one of the great strengths of the rule of law in this country. Somebody who is under investigation is at that point innocent, and once you start saying which MP may or may not attend Parliament, you are entering quite tricky ground, because you may find that there is a Parliament where there is no overall majority, and one vote could determine whether that Government stayed in office or fell. You would not want somebody excluded because of a charge that then turned out to be incorrect.

I see the difficulties and I am not unsympathetic to what the unions are requesting, but you have to think through the constitutional implications of this and the implications not just in a circumstance where there is a majority of 80 and one or two Members not turning up does not particularly matter, but where we were in the last Parliament, where one or two Members not turning up could change the course of the nation's history.

Q99 **Kate Osborne:** I understand the constitutional issues, but should that right of access continue regardless of whether there could be harm to another, or indeed more than one person?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right is very strong, but it is not absolute. The right dates back to 1340. One of the oldest rights we have as Members of Parliament is to attend Parliament. If the alleged crime was of such seriousness that the Member of Parliament were held on remand, the right of attendance would be overtaken by the being held on remand. If in the view of the police and the magistrate's court it was an offence worthy of remand, that protection would be there.

If it is a bailable offence, then of course, the courts can set bail conditions. They are entitled to do that. If it is at the investigative stage, that is a fairly early stage, and at that point, you have to put great weight on the assumption of innocent until proved guilty.

Q100 **Kate Osborne:** If workplaces have protective measures that are not about pre-judging the outcome, does this mean that there are lower standards of protection in Parliament?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, I do not think that is right. The constitutional role of Parliament is simply different, and the fundamental right of MPs to attend Parliament is very important constitutionally. Bear in mind that MPs do not have these rights of themselves, or for themselves. They have them because of the 70,000 people that they represent. You are suggesting that, on the basis of an allegation, 70,000 people should be unrepresented, but the allegation may not in the end be proved. The



concept of innocent until proved guilty is one we should not overlook, and the need to maintain representation is equally important.

Q101 **Elliot Colburn:** Moving on to restoration and renewal, we received evidence from Dr Alexandra Meakin, who told us of her serious concern that “without political direction, the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body will not feel able to consider how the building and facilities can support a gender-sensitive House of Commons”. What are your priorities for gender sensitivity as part of the restoration and renewal programme?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The main activity of restoration and renewal is not remodelling the Palace of Westminster but is replacing the wiring, plumbing and central heating. That is a functional activity. It is not about changing the design or the appearance of the Palace of Westminster, which would be very difficult to do considering it is a listed building and indeed a world heritage site.

There are then issues of accessibility and disabled access. As the Chair said, there is some provision for parking for disabled Members and designated spots, but it is about much more than that. It is about ensuring that disabled visitors have easy access to the committee room floors and to the Chamber so that they can exercise their democratic rights, and also to the Central Lobby so that they can call upon their Member of Parliament.

We all know the system of lobbying, which is actually one of the glories of our democratic system: that any of our constituents can turn up, except in Covid times, go to the Central Lobby and demand to see his or her Member of Parliament, and we will, if available, turn out and speak to our constituent. That is a really important right, and that should be as easily accessible as possible for all our constituents.

Equally, arrangements need to be made for disabled Members of Parliament so that they can get around the building functionally and easily. That may require some modest modifications—new lifts and things like that—but the structure of the building is not going to be changed because that is not the aim of the R&R project.

Q102 **Elliot Colburn:** Do you see any benefit to working with external advisory groups and experts on gender equality, and indeed other equality issues, when advising the R&R programme?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The R&R programme has a statutory duty to consult and to explain its work. That is within the legislation that set up the sponsor body.

Chair: Can I take this opportunity to thank you for coming and giving evidence? If there is anything we wish to follow up on in writing, I am sure we will do. It is very much appreciated.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you very much for having me.



HOUSE OF COMMONS