

# Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: [Women in the House of Commons](#)  
HC 507

Wednesday 15 November 2017

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Members present: Maria Miller (Chair); Angela Crawley; Philip Davies; Rosie Duffield; Eddie Hughes; Jess Phillips; Gavin Shuker.

Questions 1–120

## Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Ian Blackford MP, Leader, SNP Westminster Group; Dawn Butler MP, Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, Labour Party; Rt Hon Sir Vince Cable MP, Leader of the Liberal Democrats; Amanda Sater, Deputy Chairman, Conservative Party.

## Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Ian Blackford MP, Dawn Butler MP, Sir Vince Cable MP and Amanda Sater.

**Chair:** Good morning. Can I first thank you all for agreeing to come along today for this evidence session? We are welcoming you to give oral evidence to our “Women in the House of Commons” inquiry. Our predecessor Committee held an inquiry on this subject and published a report in January. That report made a number of recommendations to Government and political parties about how to increase the proportion of MPs who are women. At the time, our focus was on an expected general election in 2020, but of course we have had an election since then. We wanted to invite you all back, as representatives of the four main parties, to reflect on how you felt the election went, and the situation as it is now.

I just wanted to say that I know that Jeremy Corbyn was keen to come and give evidence, but the fact that we hold our evidence sessions just before PMQs means he is allowed to bow out. I am very pleased to have Dawn here on behalf of the Labour Party. You know the form. We have colleagues here who are going to ask a number of questions. We want to cover a lot of ground, so if necessary I will be jumping in and speeding things up. To start the questioning, I would like to invite Jess to kick it off.

Q1 **Jess Phillips:** In 2017, the election returned the highest number of women MPs ever, but it was still a relatively small increase of just 12 women. Women still make up only 32% of Members of Parliament, and that is only two percentage points higher than the 30% before the election. I would ask each of you to say whether you feel that that is progress or not.

**Chair:** When you speak for the first time, would you say your name and your position?

**Amanda Sater:** I am Amanda Sater. I am Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party. No, it is not good enough progress. Our figures show that we went backwards. We will put our hands up and say we need to do more, and we want to do more. During that election we had a set of rules that we put together to select candidates quickly, and we produced a list for our associations. Through that process, at every stage, we did look at diversity. It is key for me to say today that diversity and women were very much part of our process at that time.

What we did at this election was increase the percentage of women in our retirement seats by 50%, which was a marked improvement on the last election. We were pleased with that. We also had a small increase in the number of women who fought in this election, but there is still more to do. I will say that we will be working very hard to increase that. There are lots of reasons why the Conservative Party wants to get more women



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through, and we have lots of work in the pipeline to increase that number.

**Sir Vince Cable:** I am Vince Cable. I am leader of the Lib Dems, and I share the starting point that there is a lot of progress still to be made. Within our relatively small parliamentary party we did make some headway. We started with zero and now have a third of our parliamentary party as female MPs, and also the first ethnic minority MP. We have a female deputy leader and president of the party. We ensured this through having all-women shortlists in areas where there was an MP standing down. We also have regional criteria where we judge that there are winnable seats—

Q2 **Jess Phillips:** Was that where there is a woman standing down?

**Sir Vince Cable:** Yes. Where a sitting MP is standing down, there has to be an all-women shortlist.

**Jess Phillips:** A retirement seat.

**Sir Vince Cable:** Yes.

Q3 **Jess Phillips:** Is that only if that person was a woman? Is it generally, or only if that person was a woman?

**Sir Vince Cable:** No. If there is a male MP standing down then there is an all-women shortlist. We have a regional share of vote criteria also for determining whether there should be all-women shortlists. Additionally, there is discretion for local parties. The consequence of that was that half of our winnable strategic seats were contested by females, and 34% of all of our candidates in winnable/unwinnable, which was a 4% increase since 2015. It is some progress with a relatively small parliamentary party, but we have still got a lot to do.

**Dawn Butler:** I am Dawn Butler. I am the Member of Parliament for Brent Central and shadow Women and Equalities Minister. There is always more to do. The aim is to reach 50/50 by 2020. As you know, Labour secured the highest ever number of women elected in 2017. That was 119 women, which is more women than all the other political parties added together. At the last election we had no all-women shortlists, because it was a snap election, but we still managed to achieve 45%, which is the overall target. I think that is to be commended. Labour's shadow Cabinet is also over 50% women, which is also to be commended. There is still a long way to go.

We also achieved diversity in terms of women of colour. It is 8% in the House of Commons, but 12% in the Labour Party and 14% in the country as a whole. We still have further to go on that.

**Ian Blackford:** I am Ian Blackford, the Westminster leader of the Scottish National Party. There is more to do. All of us have a responsibility to make sure that we achieve gender equality. We faced the situation that we had won 56 of 59 Scotland seats in the 2015



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election. Because of the effect of a snap election, any sitting Member of Parliament was automatically reselected, so we had 54 of those MPs who stood again. That meant that we had five seats that were vacant, if I could put it that way. Of those, two were women candidates, two were gay or bisexual and one was male.

If we look at things in a wider context, for my party this is an absolute priority. With the First Minister in Scotland, we have a gender-balanced Cabinet, one of the few in the world. In my own leadership team we are also gender-balanced. I think we are the first party in Westminster whose spokesperson on economic matters is a woman.

The particular factors of the Westminster election, the nature of the snap election, meant that we were hidebound to some extent. However, if I look across all the Parliaments, and indeed if I look at the Scottish Parliament in 2016, there was a considerable improvement from the SNP. The number of female MPs increased from 19 to 27, up from 27.5% to 43%. The same was true this year in the local elections in Scotland, where we made considerable progress in moving towards gender equality in Scottish local councils. For me and my party, it is an absolute priority to make sure that we do get to a gender-balanced position.

Q4 **Jess Phillips:** Dawn mentioned that the Labour Party's target was 45%.

**Dawn Butler:** We achieved 45%.

Q5 **Jess Phillips:** I believe that was the target. Did any of the other parties actually have a target prior to the election?

**Ian Blackford:** In the 2016 Scottish election, where you had a situation where a sitting Member of Parliament was standing down, it was pretty universally all-women shortlists that we had. What we are determined to do is to get to 50/50. We have done that as a Government. We have done that as a leadership team. That is the minimum that we would expect to get, and it is a question of getting there as quickly as we can.

Q6 **Jess Phillips:** Would you say the SNP has a target of getting to 50/50?

**Ian Blackford:** We do not have a specific target, but it is clear that is the emphasis of where we are heading that we want to get to.

Q7 **Jess Phillips:** If it is clear, is there any reason why you have not got a specific target on it?

**Ian Blackford:** What we tend to do is put mechanisms in place for each election. That is set by our national executive.

Q8 **Jess Phillips:** Let us put aside the fact that it was a snap general election and just imagine that we are in normal times. Would you have a target on it?

**Ian Blackford:** The emphasis is that is where we want to get to. The fact that we have had all-women shortlists where MSPs were standing down in 2016 is what we want to achieve. We want to make sure that



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women are encouraged, and we get to gender equality as quickly as we can.

Q9 **Jess Phillips:** Do you think that having a target is one way to encourage them?

**Ian Blackford:** Personally, I think having a target would be beneficial in that regard. It is important that all of us take this matter seriously. We have to do all we can to encourage equal representation for women in all our Parliaments. It has to be a priority, certainly a priority that I would be supportive of.

Q10 **Jess Phillips:** Dawn, I suppose the target is 50/50 by 2020.

**Dawn Butler:** The target is 50/50 by 2020.

Q11 **Jess Phillips:** Is it 2022 now?

**Dawn Butler:** It might be next year.

**Jess Phillips:** It does not sound as good, 50/50 by 2022.

**Dawn Butler:** For the next election, 46 out of our 76 target seats are women. If the Labour Party were to win a general election, the House of Commons would almost certainly be at least 50/50, if not more.

Q12 **Jess Phillips:** Does the Labour Party have any current targets around retirement seats or changing of hands in seats? There is still a boundary issue that could come up. Does the Labour Party have any targets around those that they would have to respect?

**Dawn Butler:** The general rule is that retiring seats are normally all-women shortlists. As you know, it was the Labour Party that brought in all-women shortlists for the 1997 general election. I am pleased to hear that the other parties are now following suit. That was a game-changer in terms of changing the composition of Parliament and ensuring that Parliament has become more equal in terms of representation.

**Sir Vince Cable:** We have a clear objective of 50/50.

Q13 **Jess Phillips:** Would you describe it as a target?

**Sir Vince Cable:** Yes, I would. We had 50/50 for winnable seats. Unfortunately, unless you can help us reform the voting system, we cannot guarantee that we can deliver it, but that is a clear objective.

Q14 **Jess Phillips:** I do not want another referendum. Amanda, would you say that you had a 50/50 target?

**Amanda Sater:** No, we did not have a target at the last election. What we have a target for is getting the best women and the most diverse list we could possibly produce for our membership. Therefore, we are working very hard. We have improved from 2010 to 2015. We obviously got a very good result in our retirement seats. We have a lot of work



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going on, and we will continue to improve. Of course we want more women in Parliament. We are going to work passionately to do that.

Q15 **Jess Phillips:** If you want more women, why is it that you do not want to put a specific target on it?

**Amanda Sater:** We are working hard at all levels in the party to get more women through the grassroots and through local government.

Q16 **Jess Phillips:** The Conservative Government think that businesses work quite hard, but they have put mandates on businesses to have to report on things like equal pay. Do you not think that the Conservative Party needs to do that to itself and maybe put some specific targets on itself to improve? It has been the worst performer in the statistics.

**Amanda Sater:** There is a lot more we can do. There are a lot more boundaries we have to work to. We are breaking down those boundaries. We are working hard to improve what we are doing. Again, I will stress we want more women in Parliament. We are, hopefully, going to improve on our list of how many women actually stand at the next election.

Q17 **Jess Phillips:** Hopefully?

**Amanda Sater:** Yes.

Q18 **Jess Phillips:** Do you think that, as an organisation, you could have more than hope, so you could organise it to happen?

**Amanda Sater:** We will work very hard to produce a bigger figure of women standing in the next election.

**Jess Phillips:** Okay, but you do not want to put a number on it. You would not want to say that the Conservative Party wanted to see 50/50 representation.

**Chair:** I think Patrick did say that last time.

Q19 **Jess Phillips:** I think he did say that. Would you say that by the next election you wanted to see 50/50 women in Parliament?

**Amanda Sater:** We will try to reach the best figure we possibly can.

Q20 **Angela Crawley:** Could I then challenge each of the political parties represented here today? I would say all credit to the Labour Party, who led the way and have definitely come on in strides. In respect of the SNP, it has not been that long since the SNP were winning elections, so we are getting there. In terms of the more established parties, can the Lib Dems and the Conservatives tell me why, in 2017, it is hard to find a female Cabinet member or a female Lib Dem member? Were it not for the snap general election, I sincerely doubt that both the established parties will commit to making the strides that the other political parties, both Labour and the SNP, without doubt, have made a commitment to today. Can I challenge Vince and Amanda to state clearly what you and your party will do to ensure that we have 50/50 by 2020?



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**Sir Vince Cable:** Sorry, I did not totally follow the drift of the question. Why do we not have 50/50 in Cabinet representation?

Q21 **Angela Crawley:** No. I point that directly to the Conservatives, who are the governing party. Despite having two female Prime Ministers, we have yet to have a gender-balanced Cabinet. The current Cabinet is in no way reflective of the political make-up or of the gender balance of this Parliament. I challenge both of you, because unlike Labour and the SNP, who have taken great strides, the Lib Dems and Conservatives, despite being the longest standing and most established parties in this institution, have made the least progress. What I am asking is how will you guarantee progress before 2020 or 2022?

**Sir Vince Cable:** I have already described how, at least at parliamentary level, we have put mechanisms in place to make sure we get 50/50 representation here and through our target seats. As far as going forward, the one area that is under my discretion is our spokespeople. We have a majority who are women. Because of the make-up of the party, we have a lot of peers and relatively few MPs, but combining the two in spokespersonships there is a slight majority of women.

We have a very active policy, which we call the Campaign for Gender Balance. That is not using selection rules but giving positive inducements, in terms of training and support. At the moment, I am looking at how we can extend that to get higher levels of race equality. In terms of gender equality, that has been operating for some years. It explains how we have been successful in significantly raising the number of candidates coming from it.

Q22 **Angela Crawley:** Would you say that the period of 2015 to 2017 was successful for gender balance for the Lib Dems?

**Sir Vince Cable:** We were successful in—

**Chair:** We are starting to stray into the next set of questions. Do you mind if we move into those? Is that okay? We are risking repeating it.

Q23 **Eddie Hughes:** There may still be a degree of repeating. We have covered the use of all-women shortlists for the election we have just had. Looking to the future, what would you see as their use for the next election, providing it is not a snap election and we have some time to prepare?

**Amanda Sater:** For the time being, we will not be considering all-female shortlists. It is around cultural change across the political landscape. It is about a systematic change and not a quick fix. I know that other parties do not take my view, but I think the gender quotas and shortlists ignore and mask the underlying problems in attitudes and in infrastructure. We do have a democratic process where members decide. We have to give them the best possible diverse list of candidates. It is important that that represents society as a whole.



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What we will be doing at the next election and focusing extremely hard on is our pipeline. Our pipeline is where we will have more women coming through the whole political process, from local government through to parliamentary. That is something that we are taking a lot of time and effort in trying to work towards. We are getting more women involved early on in politics and also talking to women early, so that they can look at their career and come through the political process and out the other end.

**Sir Vince Cable:** We agree there is a pipeline issue and are trying to do what we can through the Campaign for Gender Balance, and through supporting women in terms of their professional development. When it comes to an election, we will apply our all-women shortlist policy. If we are successful in winning more seats, there is a good prospect of 50% of them being women.

**Dawn Butler:** I often hear this thing about the best possible candidates or the best man for the job. Sometimes the best man for the job is a woman. Having all-women shortlists or diversity on the panel in terms of colour, disabilities or class does not mean that you do not have the best person for the job. As I say, at the next election, of the Labour Party's 76 target seats, 46 of them are women. We also have a variety of programmes to help with pipeline. We have the Jo Cox programme, which is very new. Even though it is new, we have managed to produce two fantastic MPs. One of them is on your panel, Rosie Duffield from Canterbury, and Preet Gill from Birmingham Edgbaston. That programme is obviously extremely successful.

We also have the Labour Women's Network, which runs a candidacy training programme. We have the Local Government Association, which works with Labour and trade unions to improve candidate diversity. They run a series of programmes. They challenge this notion of combating the imposter syndrome, because often especially women think, "Oh my gosh. I do not belong here. I should not belong here", when it is exactly where they should be.

We have the Next Generation programme, which is for councillors who have the potential to be council leaders et cetera. Jo Platt MP and Preet Gill were both members of the Next Generation programme. We also have the Fabian Women's Network mentoring scheme, which helps women from all walks of life in regards to standing for various positions. That is not just as MPs but within the council, as school governors and all those kinds of things. We also have the new Bernie Grant initiative, which is to help BAME people—people of colour, basically—enter Parliament and other political spheres. We have the trade unions, which have women and black sections.

We also hold women's conference, which is the start of the Labour Party conference. That gives a platform to women and helps build an understanding of the process. It helps them to make speeches et cetera,



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so they can make speeches the next day at the other conference as well. That is a snippet of some of the things that Labour are doing in regards to helping the pipeline, to ensure that we have 50/50 by 2020.

**Ian Blackford:** We have a track record across the last few elections of making sure that we were getting to the right place. We are not there yet, as I have expressed. The party, through its national conference, will put in place mechanisms for future elections. What I should say is that we have now got a women and equalities senior officer of the party—a senior office bearer. We also have equality officers in each of our branches as well. I would argue that the SNP has a long history when it comes to making sure that women are represented. If you consider that 50 years ago we had the election of Winnie Ewing in the by-election of 1967, there is 50 years of SNP representation.

I would argue that if you then went forward to 1973, the election of Margo MacDonald in the Govan by-election really put the SNP on the map. I know it is a long time ago, but it was important at that point that the election of Margo as a young woman, a bold and charismatic character and a working-class woman, made the SNP electable as a political force. That led to the breakthrough that we had in the 1974 election. For many of us, and certainly for me, it is these two women in particular that were inspirational and drove my interest in politics. That is true for many people.

We have a long history of women being successful in the SNP. We must guard that and make sure that we drive that equality. We will have to put in place policies for the next election. I would believe that the principles that we had in the Scottish election and the local elections this year will lead us back to the position that we will have all-women shortlists where existing MPs are standing down. Circumstances will be slightly different, insofar as we now have 35 of the 59 seats in Scotland, which will present an opportunity to make sure that we are at least getting to that 50/50 representation.

Q24 **Eddie Hughes:** Can I ask for a brief synopsis from each of you? I have only just joined the Committee, but it already feels a bit like Groundhog Day. I do not feel we are moving fast enough to get that equality. I am surrounded by brilliant women, not just on this panel but in Parliament on both sides of the Chamber. With an electoral cycle that typically might go every four or five years, let us just crack on with it. Forget your party political perspective. What is the single thing that we could do as a society to make sure we had more representation of women in Parliament?

**Ian Blackford:** Can I say here that in our case we have a gender-balanced Cabinet? It has been commended by the United Nations that we have done that.

**Eddie Hughes:** I said specifically not a party-political perspective. What do we do to get more women in Parliament regardless?



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**Ian Blackford:** We all have to take our responsibilities for this. The fact that we are showing leadership in that matter is important.

**Chair:** So parties taking responsibility.

**Dawn Butler:** Can I say two things? First of all, you have to have the political will and the drive that you really want to do it. All-women shortlists were a game-changer. In 1987, they had 9.1% female MPs. After all-women shortlists, in 2017 we have 45%. That shows a real commitment, so more all-women shortlists are needed.

The other thing, which might sound a bit flippant, is more rubbish women. Women always have to be quite spectacular and driven. We know when we have reached real equality when we have as many rubbish women in Parliament as we have rubbish men.

**Sir Vince Cable:** Once you put in place the institutional things—all-women shortlists and the rest—the next big issue you have to attack is trying to remove the deeper problems of getting women into highly responsible roles. This applies to top jobs in business as it does to politics. This involves tackling things like shared parental leave. I brought in legislation in Government to deal with it, but it has only achieved a modest amount. It is that kind of deeper cultural thing that is currently blocking the aspirations of a lot of women.

**Amanda Sater:** We need to talk about politics as a career for women much earlier on and encourage girls in school to look at politics as a career for them.

Q25 **Chair:** Can I just come in with a couple of supplementaries before we move on to Rosie? Just so I am clear in my mind, Sir Vince, in your party you now have the ability to have all-women shortlists, but when would you trigger using them? I am not clear.

**Sir Vince Cable:** We trigger using them whenever a sitting MP steps down, whether it is a man or a woman. It is triggered automatically. We then have a system where we calculate within particular regions whether there are more than, I think, two seats that have more than 25% of the vote. It is a criterion for identifying winnable seats. In those cases, there have to be all-women shortlists to help us achieve parity.

Q26 **Chair:** Amanda, when you responded you said there needs to be a cultural change, and in fact Vince echoed that just now. Sir Vince said a deeper cultural thing needs to be tackled. What did you mean by cultural change? Sorry, you said “change in culture”.

**Amanda Sater:** It is across the board. I did not mention all the initiatives that we are doing. We are having a very big outreach programme across the country, reaching out to women who have not even thought about going into politics. We have been going into different communities and different occupations, talking to women entrepreneurs, talking to a whole range of women who have not necessarily thought



about going into politics. It is probably around having more women in leadership roles, more women in local government and more women taking up positions in the political landscape as a whole. That is not just in my party but across the board as well.

- Q27 **Rosie Duffield:** We have largely covered a lot of what this section of questions is about. We have heard from Dawn about the Labour Party's initiatives. Are there any more initiatives that we have not heard about from the other parties to get women involved in local government? Maybe you think those are really great ideas and you want to carry them forward for your own party. We are talking about a culture change. Has that made you think that you could adopt those things? We see that the Conservative Party has not moved forward particularly since the last election. I am thinking particularly of the Conservative Party possibly adopting some of the Labour Party's strategies to get women involved.

**Amanda Sater:** As an example, the Conservative Councillors Association are working with women in local government workshops. They are working hard on the ground, at the grassroots level. They are also putting together a bursary scheme, which is going to prioritise funding for certain groups, including female councillors under the age of 35. We have Women2Win, which has been incredibly successful in supporting, mentoring and training women. Training women is important, getting them ready for their selection process. We have a parliamentary assessment board, which has produced to a high standard. We are spending more time with women and men, working with them to make sure they are prepared to go through that process.

The Conservative Women's Association also works nationally to encourage more women to come forward. They have had "Become a councillor" days, which are incredibly successful. For me, it is across the board. It is looking at all areas of women in the political landscape, as I have said, and making sure that we encourage them to come forward and create an environment where they can thrive and have a really fulfilling career.

- Q28 **Rosie Duffield:** Would you reconsider all-women shortlists for the Conservative Party?

**Amanda Sater:** Not for the moment, no.

**Ian Blackford:** There is also the particular issue about the culture of Parliament and the way Westminster works. We saw that last night with the late voting. That does not help, in terms of trying to encourage people with families. One would argue maybe that is not just about women. That has an effect on men as well. There are things that we can learn in Westminster from the way the Scottish Parliament works, for example. It is a nine-to-five Parliament. It is not just the effect on parliamentarians; it is the effect on staff. The staff are having to work unsocial hours in that sense as well.



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We have to bring ourselves into the modern world. We have to look at our working practices and, if I may say so, the fact that we waste so much time going through the voting lobby when we should be pressing a button. We need to reform ourselves and make ourselves more open. We need to make sure it is an environment that women and others can work in in a manner that is acceptable for the modern world.

**Sir Vince Cable:** There is one aspect of your question we have not really dealt with. We have talked quite a bit about parliamentary representation, but local government is—

**Chair:** We are going to come on to that specifically a little later.

**Dawn Butler:** I agree with Ian with regard to how the House operates and voting. There is a lot that can be gained from going through the lobby and voting, but once you have done it once probably it can then move into an electronic system for the rest of the evening, or something like that. Alternatively, we could use deferred voting a lot more or have voting hours where we will vote at a certain time. All of that would help to make Parliament more appealing, not just to women but to modern men as well.

Q29 **Rosie Duffield:** Would the rest of the panel agree with that?

**Sir Vince Cable:** I would strongly endorse it. I came into Parliament 20 years ago. I am not a woman, but I was initially a carer. My wife was terminally ill, and I had exactly those kinds of issues about time sharing. The move to electronic voting and deferred voting began. There was a big move to modernise the House of Commons after 1997, and it made some progress. I agree with Dawn that it has not gone anything like far enough.

Q30 **Angela Crawley:** First of all, I would commend Dawn, Ian and Vince for referring to other aspects of diversity in this House, in terms of working class, colour, sexuality, looking at the age of people and bringing forward young talent, and of course care-givers and carers. This place does not operate to enable those people to come forward. Those are exactly the kinds of people that this place should be truly representative of.

My question is to Ian. The SNP has 34% female MPs, so what changes will you make to make sure that we achieve greater equality in the next election? What evidence do you have that this approach would be effective?

**Ian Blackford:** It has been about the way that we have had all-women shortlists in the previous parliamentary elections that I have talked about, albeit in the other legislatures. We need to go further than that. You are absolutely right: it is not just about women; it is about diversity in a broader sense. 20% of our parliamentarians are gay or bisexual. There is more to be done on that. In terms of the promotion of candidates from ethnic minorities, I am absolutely clear that there is more to be done. In the Scottish Parliament, we have a Cabinet



Secretary who is Asian, but we need to make sure that we become a more inclusive Parliament. There is a responsibility on all of us across the parties to do that. For my part and for our party, that will be something that we will push extensively. We did have an Asian Member of Parliament between 2015 and 2017 who sadly lost her seat, but we need to do more to make sure that all minorities are adequately represented.

**Q31 Angela Crawley:** I am aware of the SNP Women's Academy and the equalities conference. That has caucus groups for BAME, LGBT and disabilities. Since becoming the Westminster leader, have you implemented any approaches yourself to increase the representation of women? I know that you have said that you have championed a balanced leadership team and your spokesperson roles, but can you say a bit more about how you intend to continue to champion women within the SNP in this Parliament?

**Ian Blackford:** For me, it is massively important. The fact that we have a leadership team that is gender-balanced is a key element of that. Also, as the party leader, how you conduct yourself and how you encourage people and how you mentor people is important. In some senses, it goes into the wider agenda that all political parties are looking at, in terms of the respect agenda and what has happened in terms of sexual misconduct, bullying and so on.

We have a responsibility across a broader range to make sure that we are encouraging people and how we are developing people. In our own case, I believe we have a wide range of talent across the parliamentary party. That needs to be fostered and developed. Training is an important aspect of that to make sure you are developing people to their fullest. That goes not just for parliamentarians but beyond that for the staff that work with us.

In my own case, the head of the leader's office, the head of press and the head of research are all women. They are all on leadership development programmes. We are spending our own money making sure that we are doing that, and it is a massive responsibility that we have for women and the other minorities that we are taking that action.

**Q32 Angela Crawley:** Turning to Vince—forgive me, because I know you cannot speak for Tim—last year, Tim Farron told us that the Liberal Democrats had been working to change the culture of the party at the grassroots level, demanding evidence of efforts to reach out to under-represented groups. Do you have any evidence that this approach achieved any results in the 2017 election?

**Sir Vince Cable:** As I said earlier, we can produce tangible and measurable progress in respect of gender balance, but because of the difficulties within the legislation we have to try to use the law as best we can to promote diversity. There is a particular issue with BAME representation in that we are not allowed to have shortlists. We would do



if we were allowed to but we are not, so one has to use other ways of promoting it. There is a lot more to be done.

We have managed to increase the number very substantially—I think we have trebled it—of BAME candidates in winnable seats since 2010, but it does need an active programme. I would personally like to go further than we have done and have an active campaign for racial equality. I personally go to endorse and encourage people coming forward from minority communities, because that is not an area we have been as successful in as getting gender balance.

- Q33 **Angela Crawley:** I am pleased to hear that, Sir Vince Cable, because I do think that you hold an important and statesman-like role within the Lib Dems. If you, as leader, would champion that, I think that should be commended. Since becoming the leader of the party, have you implemented any new approaches to increase the representation of women? You used the term “positive inducement” earlier. Can you explain how you intend to positively induce the outcomes that you are referring to?

**Sir Vince Cable:** The things I have done personally I think I mentioned earlier, which was to try to ensure we had parity and indeed a majority for women in spokespersonship roles. I want to boost the resources available under what we call our leadership programme, which we introduced in 2010. That was to give encouragement to women and minorities emerging particularly in winnable seats, and to give them mentoring, training and things of that kind. I want to get behind that and encourage it.

- Q34 **Angela Crawley:** Is that your positive inducement as a leader? Is that what you guarantee will happen before 2020 or 2022? Can you commit to that?

**Sir Vince Cable:** Yes. The one thing we can do beyond the rule changes is giving inducements, so carrots as well as sticks, within the limited resources that are available to parliamentary parties. We depend on fundraising, as everybody else does. We try to ensure that is channelled in such a way as to encourage diversity in our representation at national and local level.

**Angela Crawley:** I wish you well with that.

- Q35 **Philip Davies:** Vince, it is all very well hearing all this pious stuff about what you are doing personally and everything. However, what you did personally in the last election was stand in Twickenham. Surely, if this is so important to you, Twickenham was clearly a key target seat for the Lib Dems at the last election. You are piously saying what you are doing personally to do this and to do that. If it was such a personal ambition of yours, why did you not stand aside and let an all-women shortlist take place in Twickenham at the last election? That would surely have been the most useful personal thing you could have done, if this agenda was so important to you.



**Sir Vince Cable:** I am conscious of impending age and mortality. No doubt at some point I will stand down. At that point there will be an all-women shortlist in Twickenham.

Q36 **Philip Davies:** So you are not prepared to make any personal sacrifice to see this happen. Women are only allowed once you have decided you have had enough. That is basically what the rule is for the Lib Dems. You have your run and Ed Davey has his run, and once you are all sorted out then it is fine, but you are not prepared to make any personal sacrifice to pursue this agenda.

**Sir Vince Cable:** It was never suggested to me that I should, as it happens. I am very relaxed and positive about the fact that when I do eventually retire there will be an all-women shortlist in my seat. They will inherit a substantial majority, which I think I have helped to create.

Q37 **Angela Crawley:** Turning to everyone on the panel now, our predecessor Committee, the first of its kind, suggested in its report that the parties' strategies for increasing the number of female MPs should be recognised. They suggested parties need to achieve better representation in decision-making bodies within the parties. What actions are your parties taking, if any, to increase female representation within these bodies? Ian and Dawn have touched on it. I would be keen to hear from each of you again on exactly what your party is doing to ensure that the decision-making bodies of your parties are truly reflective.

**Ian Blackford:** It has to be a clear priority. We have a senior office bearer who is there to give responsibility and leadership to woman and equality issues, although it is not just about that person. It is about all of us. We need to make sure that the mechanisms that we had in place for the last elections are there again for future elections, and that we get to at least 50/50. It is also about what we do in terms of women's conference and training the equality officers we have at branch levels. This is a key priority.

**Dawn Butler:** Besides having a women's officer, we also have gender balance within the local parties. The rule is not to have all-male platforms. I also think in Parliament we should not have all-male Committees either. That would help.

**Sir Vince Cable:** I want to concentrate on two things. One of those is building up a better ethnic minority balance, being more forceful and giving stronger leadership on that. The other is in local government, which I think you are going to come to shortly.

**Amanda Sater:** As I mentioned before, it is about getting women in all roles in the political spectrum and ensuring that we make those environments and those areas attractive to women to come forward. It is around training women, giving them opportunities and talent-spotting women.



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Q38 **Angela Crawley:** But you will not commit to female-only shortlists?

**Amanda Sater:** No.

Q39 **Jess Phillips:** Can I have an actual answer to the question that was just asked? The highest decision-making body of the Labour Party is the NEC. I know that is what it is. What is it in your parties, and what is the breakdown of the representation of women?

**Chair:** That is a good question. Starting with Ian, what is your main decision-making body, and what is the representation on it?

**Ian Blackford:** It is the party conference.

**Chair:** What is the percentage of women who are on it?

**Ian Blackford:** My goodness. The party conference is by entitlement from the branches. It is based on the number of members that they have.

Q40 **Chair:** Do you know the answer the question or not?

**Ian Blackford:** I will find the answer, if I can, from the party.

Q41 **Jess Phillips:** Do you have rules that say that the number of people who go to conference has to be 50/50, for example?

**Ian Blackford:** We tend to have an open situation where people can go to conference. I am not aware of many branches that—

**Chair:** You will get back to us with your gender breakdown of your conference.

**Ian Blackford:** Can I just add to that? At the conference we also elect the national executive. I will supply to you in writing the percentage of women on the national executive, but I do not have it at the moment with me.

Q42 **Chair:** That would be helpful. What about for you, Dawn?

**Dawn Butler:** I will get the exact numbers, but the aim is for the national executive committee to be balanced.

Q43 **Chair:** So your national executive committee is your main decision-making body, and you have a rule to make it gender-balanced.

**Dawn Butler:** We have a rule to make it gender-balanced. I will get you the exact numbers. The party conference has to be gender-balanced. The delegates going to party conference have to be gender-balanced. 30% of our CLP chairs are women.

**Sir Vince Cable:** We have a federal board, which has general oversight. To the best of my knowledge, we do not have any specific numbers assigned to it. By observation, it is quite well balanced, but I do not think it is prescribed.

Q44 **Chair:** Could you give us the exact figure?



**Sir Vince Cable:** I could give you numbers if that is helpful.

Q45 **Chair:** Brilliant. Amanda, what is the overall decision-making body of the Conservative Party?

**Amanda Sater:** We have the board of the party, and then we have the national convention. I would probably have to confirm that for you, but on the board of the party we do not have as big a representation as we should have on that board.

Q46 **Jess Phillips:** Are you able to pluck a percentage out of the air?

**Amanda Sater:** I would prefer if I could come back to you on that.

Q47 **Jess Phillips:** Is it 20%, 10%, 5%?

**Amanda Sater:** Less than 20%.

Q48 **Jess Phillips:** Less than 20% of people who make decisions in the Conservative Party are women?

**Chair:** Except for we have a leader who is a woman, if I could remind you.

**Amanda Sater:** Also, that is the board, but decision-making is the National Convention. I do not have that figure.

**Chair:** Would you be able to come back to us on that?

**Amanda Sater:** Can I come back to you on that figure? The national convention is the party body that makes the decisions.

**Jess Phillips:** One can talk a lot about how we like to encourage women and get them into leadership positions.

**Sir Vince Cable:** Can I just add, the apex position in the party as a party, as opposed to in Parliament, is the president in our case, who is a women. She is very committed to this subject.

**Chair:** We make no apologies as a Committee for being really demanding on this, because the structure of political parties is incredibly difficult to understand. It has grown up over generations. We need to drill down and really understand. We understand that you may not always want to reveal all your strategies, for political reasons, but it is our job to press on the questions. Over to Gavin to press on local government.

Q49 **Gavin Shuker:** Sir Vince, you mentioned local government, where less than one in six council leaders are women. Elsewhere in the country, one in five police and crime commissioners are women. Amongst elected mayors there is a clear gender disbalance. Six out of the six directly elected mayors elected in this country this year were men. What is it with the culture of our political parties that makes it so unbelievably dire at bringing women into positions of responsibility outside Westminster?



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**Ian Blackford:** It is not acceptable. In my own case, in my own local authority area I am glad to say that the leader of the SNP group is a woman and the leader of the council of the Highland region is a woman.

**Chair:** Let us keep it general. We want to look generally.

**Ian Blackford:** I am using that as an example. I will stress that we are not where we need to be. I make that absolutely clear. However, as far as the SNP is concerned, we have made enormous strides in the selection where we were able to impose a situation where we had multi-member wards, where an additional candidate was being put forward, that the preference would be that should be a woman. We saw a significant increase of 15 percentage points in our female representation as elected councillors. It increased to 39.2%. The number of women candidates we had was 41%. We have come a long way, given the historic problems that you talk about.

Q50 **Gavin Shuker:** Briefly on that, across the board about a third of councillors are women and about a third of MPs are women. My specific question is around bringing people into more senior leadership roles.

**Ian Blackford:** Within the SNP, it has been the case in our councils that we have had a number of very senior women councillors who have been leaders of councils and leaders of the opposition. My wife was a leader of the opposition for the SNP, so we have walked the walk on this, but there is more to do.

Q51 **Chair:** What is the barrier? Sorry, I do not think you are answering that question.

**Gavin Shuker:** I am after the cultural aspects.

**Ian Blackford:** We are dealing with historic cultural problems.

Q52 **Chair:** Everybody keeps talking about this cultural problem. What is it? Is it that people do not think women are up to it?

**Ian Blackford:** No. For goodness sake, no. I do not think there is any question of that at all.

Q53 **Chair:** Then why are they not getting the jobs?

**Ian Blackford:** That is demonstrated by the success of women here and in local councils as well. Unfortunately, in many cases historically there were barriers to women. In many cases in parts of Scotland, as an example, it would seem—

Q54 **Chair:** Prejudice?

**Ian Blackford:** There was prejudice. There was far too much machismo, and we had to break those barriers down. These barriers are being broken down, but there is more to do. As leaders, we have to make it absolutely crystal-clear that it is not acceptable that these things have happened in the past. We should apologise for the things that happened



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in the past, and I would do so. We have to get to the position that women have at least 50/50 representation.

Q55 **Chair:** Are we still facing a prejudice and sexism in politics, in your estimation?

**Ian Blackford:** I applaud the Prime Minister for pulling the political leaders together last week on the issue of what has happened on harassment and bullying. We have to make it absolutely crystal-clear that for all of us there is a priority around bad behaviour, making sure that we encourage women to come forward. We have to get to equality. Some parties, frankly, have more to do. That has been exposed this morning.

Q56 **Gavin Shuker:** I want to let the others speak, but on that point, last week the party leaders met to discuss this problem in Westminster. That is the key point. I am asking about what it is in our culture outside of Westminster within political parties, which, by the way, is the supply route for many people to come into politics.

**Sir Vince Cable:** I made the point about local government before. It is right to identify the fact that there is less progress there, particularly on gender seniority roles. We have gone backward. We have gone forward in Westminster but backward in local government. We have a third overall, but it is slightly declining.

I went to an event recently organised by the Fawcett Society with the Local Government Commission to try to identify very precisely what the problems were. Of course, party is not specifically in mind. I think we had about 10 concrete recommendations, all of which I endorsed on my party's behalf, except one. They recommended fixed-term limits for councillors, which I thought was not a great idea. All the other proposals they made were about steps helping with leadership to ensure more women take over as leaders of groups, making sure that there is proper provision for young children, and shared parental leave arrangements for councillors, because there are often long, arduous committee meetings at inconvenient times. These are the kinds of practical bread-and-butter things that we need to see happen.

Q57 **Chair:** Could I ask the same question I asked Ian? Vince, do you think women in your party face prejudice because they are women in local government?

**Sir Vince Cable:** Not in general, but we have had cases of bullying and harassment in local government, as occasionally at a national level. It has happened, and we now have stronger disciplinary processes to deal with it. We have had reports of that, without doubt.

Q58 **Gavin Shuker:** Dawn, did you want to say anything?

**Dawn Butler:** Yes, 16% of our Labour council leaders are women. That needs to be higher. We have two police and crime commissioners who



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are women: Jane Kennedy in Merseyside and Vera Baird in Northumbria. The barriers range from everything from how meetings are held, where they are held, the timings of them, to the language that is employed in these meetings. All of these things are barriers to women not only being involved and staying involved, but progressing through the ranks. That is coupled with racism, sexism, misogyny and bullying online. All of these things that come along with being in politics are enough to put people off.

Q59 **Mr Shuker:** Why have we not changed those things within our party?

**Dawn Butler:** There are a couple of things. Sometimes you have to wait for people to die. Sometimes it can be a slow progress, and people do not want to change, or they feel that if women are to get involved they have to step aside, rather than seeing it as a positive measure that the more women are involved the better decisions that are made, the more diverse decisions, and the better way to move forward on issues. Sometimes it is that winning the hearts and minds of the argument that takes time.

Q60 **Chair:** I am going to bring Jess and Angela in, but I wanted to ask the same question of the Labour Party: do people in local government in your party face prejudice and bullying at local government level?

**Dawn Butler:** I think it would be naive to think that people do not. It is a cross-section of society who are involved in local government. We do have robust procedures, and we do have those in place, but the key is to identify the barriers and then to remove those barriers.

Q61 **Jess Phillips:** Dawn, I wanted to ask, if we had all-women shortlists for council leaders, all-women shortlists for police and crime commissioners, and all-women shortlists for metro mayors, do you think our figures would be better?

**Dawn Butler:** Yes, they would be better, and I think Jeremy Corbyn has said that he will be looking into that to ensure that we encourage that to take place. I do not think, legally—

Q62 **Jess Phillips:** At the moment, legally, on metro mayors and police and crime commissioners, it does not currently exist; however, the Labour Party is currently attempting to remedy that. For leaders of councils, the Labour Party could make a rule that says that, "This time it has been a man; next time it has to be a woman". Do you think that would improve it?

**Dawn Butler:** Of course. We have that rule at certain levels, and we also have a rule in the Labour Party that of every three councillors, one must be a woman. At least one.

Q63 **Jess Phillips:** However, on council leaders, do you think the Labour Party needs to have some more all-women shortlist action around council leaders?



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**Dawn Butler:** I think that would improve tremendously. For example, in Brent we always try to have it so that if the leader is a man, then the deputy leader is a woman, and vice-versa.

Q64 **Angela Crawley:** I want to lend some support to the panel, because I was a 24-year-old young, gay councillor when I was elected for the first time, and actually I have to confess that it was some of the main political parties on the panel and their councillors who made it a really daunting experience when I was first elected. In fact, the worst offenders were the Labour men. There are all of the mechanisms that exist within the Labour Party, and I do not doubt for a second that in this place the mechanisms are improved. Yourself, Dawn, Jess, Rosie, are evidence that there are mechanisms to successfully get women through the pipeline. However, actually go into any local government debating chamber across the land and you will find what you can only describe as archaic measures and archaic examples that young women or any women will have to face standing for election for the first time. That is not a prospect I would encourage anyone to sign up for. The reality of local government is that despite all the mechanisms that happen at the top of your party and all the nice words that everyone is saying right now, the experience is not the same on the ground, so what will you do to personally challenge the mechanisms within your own parties to ensure that local government is a place that young women, and young people generally, want to go into?

Q65 **Mr Shuker:** Can I bring in Amanda, just because we have heard, generally, from the other three?

**Amanda Sater:** On your point, with the improper behaviour and the harassment that has been going on, the party has recently strengthened our code of conduct for party representatives, making it a more robust process. This outlined a minimum standard of behaviour expected of anybody who represents the Conservative Party as an elected or appointed official. Having those standards does help in terms of people focusing on how they behave, and making sure that people behave in a proper way.

People have spoken about experiences from their own parties, and we should show by example. The way we behave in any represented or elected office is obviously a role model to attract people to come in, and again we should make the environment and the way we behave an example to others.

Q66 **Mr Shuker:** Do any of you believe that bullying, harassment, intimidation and misogyny as a situation or a culture is better in local government than it is, say, here in Westminster?

**Sir Vince Cable:** No.

**Chair:** Do they have any evidence? Have they looked at that? They are answering with a nod, but has anyone actually looked at it?



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Q67 **Mr Shuker:** If I put it in the reverse, it might make it slightly clearer. Do any of you fear that the situation and the spotlight on bullying, intimidation, misogyny and so on is worse at local government level because we have given it less attention than we have done here?

**Ian Blackford:** That is why what we are doing in Westminster is important in ensuring leadership on this issue in the responsibilities we take here. However, there is a particular aspect that we have to focus on, and that is the training of active members and their staff as well.

Q68 **Chair:** We are talking about the current situation rather than how it might improve.

**Ian Blackford:** Yes, but I think we have to recognise there is a problem, and it is about how we take our responsibilities to deal with this. I can reflect on what has been said by the honourable Member for Hamilton, because I know from my wife's experiences when she was a leader of a group on the same council. We have got to make it crystal-clear to society that the kind of behaviour that has been experienced is not acceptable. It has to change. This is not just about politics, it goes much wider than that, but we have to show leadership on this issue and what is expected in the rest of society.

Q69 **Mr Shuker:** Is it not a viable hypothesis that most young women's experience of politics at a local government level can be so poor that they choose to get out of politics rather than progressing into further leadership roles?

**Ian Blackford:** Yes, absolutely. That is why we have to tackle this.

Q70 **Mr Shuker:** If I ask a few factual questions so we can get to the end of the section, do any of you want to offer me a defence of the current legal position, where it is acceptable to have an all-women shortlist for a Westminster election but not for a police and crime commissioner election or for a directly elected mayor?

**Ian Blackford:** We do it where we have responsibilities in Scotland.

**Mr Shuker:** Philosophically, there should not be any problem there.

**Ian Blackford:** No.

Q71 **Mr Shuker:** Amanda, when we had Patrick McLoughlin in front of us—and I appreciate you are speaking on behalf of the Conservative Party but not on behalf of the Government—we published a recommendation from that evidence gathering that the Government bring forward that measure. Now, the Government rejected that. Do you understand why the Government rejected extending all-women shortlists to those two other leadership roles?

**Amanda Sater:** I am here on behalf of the party, so it would be difficult for me to comment.

Q72 **Mr Shuker:** As a party, do you have a problem with that



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recommendation about extending all-women shortlists to, legally, the option for parties to implement all-women shortlists, which they could choose to use or choose not to use, for police and crime commissioner elections and directly elected mayors.

**Amanda Sater:** I think the legislation predates—

**Mr Shuker:** It does.

**Amanda Sater:** From the Conservative Party perspective, at the moment we are not considering all-female shortlists.

**Sir Vince Cable:** I do not have any objection. It seems a perfectly fair proposition. The difficulty often is recruiting candidates to stand for these posts. There is one category that you have missed, which I think is quite important and a proactive role is possible, which is where you have things like the London elections, where you have a list system, and it is possible to use list systems to promote better gender balance and other minority representation. This happens in London, it happens in the Scottish parliamentary system and in others. We use it quite actively in London to make sure that minority groups get a higher weighting in the voting.

Q73 **Mr Shuker:** The Speaker's conference in 2009 got a recommendation and agreement from the Labour, Lib Dem and Tory parties, who committed to the principle of publishing data about candidates so that we can see who is coming through the pipeline and whether they get elected or not. However, our experience in the report was that this evidence gathering was pretty shaky and that there were big gaps in it. Do any of you feel that you have robust processes in monitoring those protected characteristics as candidates come through, and what do you publish?

**Sir Vince Cable:** We publish quite extensively. We have a diversity officer whose remit includes improving the database. I do not claim it is perfect; we have thousands of councillors, and Labour and the Conservatives would have many more. It is everything from big cities to local parish councils. The data is not satisfactory in totality, but clearly unless you have a database to operate from, you cannot measure progress, and we recognise that. We are improving, and it is quite sound, actually.

Q74 **Mr Shuker:** Do any of you feel that the data you publish is inadequate at the moment?

**Ian Blackford:** We certainly publish in terms of those who are standing for elected office. A question was asked about delegate entitlement to national conference. I am not aware of that being published in the past, but I am certainly more than willing to make sure it is made available. It is a question of collecting the data.

Q75 **Mr Shuker:** Would it be helpful for Government to bring forward section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which would require political parties to publish that data, and to have a standardised format to publish it?



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**Ian Blackford:** Yes.

Q76 **Mr Shuker:** Do any of you object to it?

**Sir Vince Cable:** No.

**Dawn Butler:** No, but I think how it is gathered needs to be more comprehensive, because it is probably a voluntary scheme that people have to self-identify. You have to look at how the data is gathered, but I have no objection.

Q77 **Chair:** We have actually been told that the two big parties do not think the little parties can cope with it. Do the little parties think they cannot cope with gathering data?

**Sir Vince Cable:** We think we are capable of it.

**Ian Blackford:** Chair, you raised a reasonable issue earlier about whether or not we had this information for our conference. The way the system works at the moment is that those who want to go to conference do. I am not aware that we have specifically looked at the gender balance, but I think it is a reasonable request and we will do it. I do not think the size of the parties is relevant to that. I think it improves transparency to have the information available. Whether it is required for legislative reasons or not is irrelevant; we should do it.

**Chair:** I should probably say, at that point, that I am conscious of the fact that we do not have a number of the smaller parties in front of us today, for logistical reasons, but I might well ask the Clerk to write to the smaller parties in the House, to ask them whether they would find it an onerous problem to collect this sort of information.

Q78 **Mr Shuker:** Lastly for Amanda, Patrick McLoughlin said when he was before us in a similar session, "One thing that has made the Conservative Party better is that we actually have more diverse representation across all sections of the community". As I understand it, the Conservative Party does not want to bring forward section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which would allow us to judge whether or not what Patrick has said is accurate. Would you commit to bring forward and supporting that policy?

**Amanda Sater:** With the timing of the last election, it was not possible for parties to publish their figures, and I know that we published information about candidates—their bios—on the internet. However, we hope to publish more detailed figures moving forward.

Q79 **Mr Shuker:** Is that on a voluntary basis? You do not believe it should, in law, be brought forward that parties should publish this data?

**Amanda Sater:** We would hope to publish the figures moving forward.

**Chair:** Amanda is not a Government representative. I can sense the hesitation.



**Mr Shuker:** Your party is in government, though, let us be honest.

**Ian Blackford:** If I may say something that I think is pertinent to that, which is that the Government in Scotland are bringing forward legislation on gender representation on public boards, which will make Scotland the only part of the UK where there is a requirement for equal representation.

Q80 **Chair:** I am conscious of the fact that I did not ask a question of Amanda that I asked of the others. When it comes to local government, do you think that Conservative elected representatives who are women face prejudice?

**Amanda Sater:** I do not have evidence in front of me, but I have anecdotally had local government candidates and councillors tell me that they have had issues in local government, yes.

Q81 **Chair:** So this seems to be an issue across all of the parties: that women at local government level do face prejudice because of their gender, which I think is an interesting finding.

I would like briefly to turn to something quite topical around the working environment in Westminster, but I would like to broaden this out, because I know we have had a number of reports of alleged improper behaviour in Parliament by many different individuals, including allegations of sexual harassment and even sexual assault, which does not send a great message out to women who are aspiring to enter Parliament.

What I am most interested in is what steps your party is taking to ensure that any allegations, whether they are in Westminster or more broadly, are acted upon quickly and appropriately, and also what you are doing if there are any historic allegations that have not been acted upon.

**Amanda Sater:** As I mentioned before, we have strengthened our code of conduct for the party to include representatives, making that a much more robust process. The code outlines the minimum standards required, as I mentioned before. There is a new confidential hotline for reporting potential breaches, and a more detailed process for investigating complaints by a panel, including an independent member. This includes protection against bullying and harassment, victimisation and unlawful discrimination. The party has and will take robust disciplinary action against any party member proved to have engaged in unacceptable behaviour.

**Chair:** That is any party member, not just Members of Parliament.

**Amanda Sater:** Any party member. That action may include suspension or expulsion. It is important for all parties to provide support and standards and rules, to create a better environment, but those are just some of the things that we are putting into place.

Q82 **Chair:** Sir Vince, are you taking a similar approach in your party?



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**Sir Vince Cable:** We changed our procedures in 2014, in the light of historic cases that had not been properly dealt with. We asked Helena Morrissey—I do not think she is a party supporter—to give professional advice as to how to set up a good system, and we did act on her advice without qualification. It does involve a strict code of conduct for all members of the party, and we have established what we call a pastoral care officer, independent of executive roles in the party, who is there as a first point of call if there are examples of harassment and bullying, and to give advice, support and guide people into the proper channels. We think this system, although it is better than what we had before, needs constant review, and that is what we are doing at the moment.

Q83 **Chair:** Do the Labour Party have a code of conduct?

**Dawn Butler:** Yes, we have always had a code of conduct. That has been strengthened recently. The National Executive Committee has added to that. We have a confidential hotline. Our policy and processes have been put in place in consultation with the trade unions, with ACAS—

Q84 **Chair:** If you have such a strong process, why is it that we hear that some of the allegations made were not acted upon? Are you reviewing that system?

**Dawn Butler:** Those are historical, and do not relate to the new system.

Q85 **Chair:** Your new system post-dates those allegations.

**Dawn Butler:** It does, for the ones I think you are referring to.

Q86 **Chair:** When was your new system brought in?

**Dawn Butler:** The new system was brought in about 12 months ago, and it was strengthened just a month ago.

Q87 **Chair:** Ian, have you got a code of conduct and a complaints procedure?

**Ian Blackford:** Yes, we do, and that applies to all party members. Of course, in the light of what has happened over the course of the last few weeks, Nicola Sturgeon has written to every party member and informed them that they have access to a solicitor through the party. There are a number of mechanisms that are open to people, and I would encourage those who have been abused in any way, or suffered any bullying, whether it is recent, historic or current, that they bring that forward. They can also do that through the party structure, through the party clerk in Edinburgh. I have also communicated to all our members and all our staff here the mechanisms they have in place for Parliament as well. It has to be clear that throughout politics there is zero tolerance and there will be the strongest action taken against anyone who misbehaves.

Q88 **Chair:** It is good to hear that you all have codes of conduct in place now, you have all got processes in place, there are things being done in Parliament to address this, so why, oh why, do you think all of you sitting in front of us today have had incidents where people have not felt



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confident about coming forward in the past? What was wrong then that has been changed now? Can I start with Amanda?

**Amanda Sater:** That is a difficult one to answer. There has been a lot of media attention around people coming forward. I think people feel that there is a better environment around coming forward. It is a difficult one. We have had our code of conduct for volunteers in place for some time, so people have been able to go through that code of conduct, and we have had a telephone line as well. Volunteers have been able to access that. It is a difficult one to answer, but I do think that having the media talk about this and people talk about this creates a better environment for women and men, and people who have been victims, to come forward.

**Sir Vince Cable:** Publicity is clearly a significant factor. People having confidence that there is an independent person within the system to whom they could go, so they are not dealing with people who are judge and jury in their own cases. Those are significant factors.

**Dawn Butler:** The empowerment of women and women feeling empowered is part of the reason why so many people are now coming forward. Social media has a role to play as well. Ultimately, we have to ensure that there is a zero-tolerance approach to any kind of harassment, sexual harassment or bullying.

Q89 **Chair:** So it is about changing attitudes.

**Dawn Butler:** Absolutely, and we have to also change the culture, and change the culture in this place.

Q90 **Chair:** But changing attitudes as to why people might come forward more generally. I want to keep it more generally about the parties.

**Dawn Butler:** Changing attitudes and changing culture as well.

**Ian Blackford:** I think there have been abuses of power, and this is something which goes right across the political parties. I am appalled that we have not shown due leadership on this historically. The fact is that it has been public pressure and the media who have brought this to the fore. We should be ashamed of ourselves that we have not given proper leadership on it. We now know the scale of the problem, and we must all work together to make sure we get the—

Q91 **Chair:** What has changed that would make somebody now come forward?

**Ian Blackford:** I think the dam has broken.

**Chair:** Thank you. The dam has broken. That is a good line.

**Sir Vince Cable:** If I might add a legal point, the traditional complaints process is operated under a criminal standard of proof, which is very difficult to establish and has inhibited people from coming forward. It is



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now done on a balance of probabilities, which means that cases are much more likely to be determined for the complainant.

Q92 **Mr Shuker:** The two main parties, as I understand it, have strengthened their systems, reviewed them, and concluded that it is acceptable for a party member to have to report to another party member in the same party, allegations of intimidation, abuse or harassment. How is that defensible?

**Dawn Butler:** That is not correct.

Q93 **Mr Shuker:** So, if I, as a Labour Party member, wish to report that I believe I have been a victim of sexual harassment, who is it I contact?

**Dawn Butler:** There is an independent line that you can contact.

Q94 **Mr Shuker:** Who picks up the phone?

**Dawn Butler:** It is a third party organisation. There are different avenues and different routes that you can feed into. You can either call a completely independent third party, or you can call a confidential helpline, or you can call a helpline here at the House of Commons as well, which is also third party.

Q95 **Mr Shuker:** Dawn, this is really important, so I apologise if this is my ignorance, but a few weeks ago all women's officers and all constituency secretaries were emailed an updated version of this policy for the Labour Party. It said that you should contact the head of complaints at the Labour Party. It gave a mobile number. As I understand, that is someone who is employed by the Labour Party, who is a member of the Labour Party. Are you saying that that policy has changed?

**Dawn Butler:** Yes, there is an independent element being introduced into that policy; that is correct.

**Chair:** Perhaps you could clarify that to us. It sounds like there is a difference of opinion.

Q96 **Jess Phillips:** Can I ask who the independent part is? Which organisation?

**Dawn Butler:** It is EAP, the employment advisory programme. I think it is the same that the House of Commons uses, so Health Assured.

**Jess Phillips:** They will take the complaint.

**Dawn Butler:** Yes.

Q97 **Mr Shuker:** So the Labour Party now has a system of independent third-party reporting?

**Dawn Butler:** Yes, there is independent third-party reporting in the system.

Q98 **Chair:** Could I ask whether you could write to us about that?



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**Dawn Butler:** Certainly.

**Chair:** Would you be able to give us details? It sounds like there is a difference of opinion on that.

**Dawn Butler:** Absolutely, I can send that to you.

**Chair:** Perfect.

Q99 **Mr Shuker:** Can I ask Amanda to answer the same point on the independent third-party reporting?

**Amanda Sater:** It is an independent, completely confidential hotline that comes through, and then we have a panel that is made up of an independent person.

Q100 **Angela Crawley:** Can I ask each of the panel members for a simple yes or no answer? Were you aware of problems within your parties before the media turn its attention to this matter? Yes or no, Ian?

**Ian Blackford:** No, I was not, but I was concerned about the HR structure.

Q101 **Angela Crawley:** A simple yes or no. Dawn.

**Dawn Butler:** No.

Q102 **Angela Crawley:** Were you aware of problems within your party, before the party had to take action due to the media attention on the subject.

**Dawn Butler:** No.

Q103 **Angela Crawley:** Vince.

**Sir Vince Cable:** Not in individual cases.

Q104 **Angela Crawley:** Amanda.

**Amanda Sater:** Can I just clarify—

**Angela Crawley:** Yes or no?

**Amanda Sater:** The panel is set up with an independent member on it. Sorry, I just wanted to clarify that before. Sorry, what is your question?

**Angela Crawley:** The simple question is: were you aware of problems in your party before the media brought attention to this subject? Yes or no?

**Amanda Sater:** No. Not personally, no.

**Dawn Butler:** That is not to say we were not aware that there were problems.

**Angela Crawley:** The question was yes or no. You are saying no.

**Amanda Sater:** Sorry, could you just ask the question again?

Q105 **Angela Crawley:** My question is whether you were aware that there



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were problems within your internal party structures before the media brought this issue to people's attention only a few weeks ago.

**Amanda Sater:** No.

**Angela Crawley:** Each of you have said no, that you were not aware of any problems whatsoever in your party structures before the media took a hold of this issue.

**Chair:** Sorry, I think you are asking two different questions there.

**Amanda Sater:** What problems were those—structure, or the process? I just want to clarify.

**Angela Crawley:** My point is that I do not believe for a single second that any member of this panel can sit there, with their hand on their heart, and say that they were not aware of a single problem structurally, institutionally.

**Chair:** Angela, can I ask for clarification? Are you asking whether the panel think there is a problem with the structure of their party, or whether they were aware of individual cases?

**Angela Crawley:** I would not ask about individual cases.

**Ian Blackford:** Can I make an important point? When I became Westminster leader of the SNP, the first thing I did was review the structures that we had in place to support staff. There is a wider point, which is addressed by what Parliament has put in place last week, which is the overarching HR support. It absolutely appalled me coming into Parliament in 2015—it scared the living daylights out of me—that we do not, as a Parliament, have proper procedures in place to protect the interests of staff. That goes beyond party.

**Dawn Butler:** Can I just clarify something? When I entered Parliament, I fought quite vigorously for us to have a HR department and for us to have proper procedures in Parliament. It is very different, and I think that it is not really helpful to try to simplify in terms of a yes or no answer. This is something that we have to tackle and we have to tackle seriously.

Q106 **Angela Crawley:** Let me be absolutely clear: my question was simply about whether you were aware of structural or institutional problems in your parties before this happened. The simple answer is that, yes, you were all aware.

**Sir Vince Cable:** We were all aware that there were basic problems. We thought your question was about whether we knew of individual cases.

**Angela Crawley:** I am not asking about specific cases. I do not think that it would be appropriate to speak about individual cases. With respect, both Ian and Dawn acknowledged that they were aware of problems and they have sought to bring in measures—HR, et cetera—to tackle those institutional problems. People are being far more upfront



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about accepting that there were issues and that institutionally, or within your parties, you have addressed them. I am not entirely getting that impression from the whole panel, and that is why I asked the question.

**Amanda Sater:** Chair, just on the processes that we had in central office, we were happy with the existing process that we had. Obviously there were cases and issues that were ongoing. I just wanted to make that clear.

Q107 **Jess Phillips:** What evidence does your party have about the effect of fear and abuse and harassment on the willingness of people to come forward as candidates to remain in public life once elected, and what do any of your political parties do to offer support to candidates responding to such abuse, because we all have seen quite widely that it exists?

**Sir Vince Cable:** I think I have partly answered that already. One of the reasons people fear to come forward is that they become—

**Jess Phillips:** I am not talking about sexual abuse. To move away from the sexual harassment, I am talking about the abuse that is sustained by candidates in elections.

**Sir Vince Cable:** If we are just talking about the aggressive language that we encounter in politics, to some extent we have to put up with it.

Q108 **Jess Phillips:** Do you think that it is worse for women?

**Sir Vince Cable:** I think it probably is, because of what you could call casual misogyny, and there is a lot of that around.

Q109 **Jess Phillips:** As someone who suffers from it, it does not feel very casual. Do you put anything in place for your candidates to support them from the abuse that they suffer?

**Sir Vince Cable:** We have a leadership programme, and we have very important mentoring systems, which are designed to help women not just present themselves, but deal with difficult situations, and it is obviously a question of calling out unacceptable behaviour as part of that.

Q110 **Jess Phillips:** As part of that, what steps do you think your party is taking to reduce the incidence of such abuse?

**Sir Vince Cable:** Dealing with it very robustly, and refusing to accept unacceptable behaviour. Of course, our disciplinary procedure covers unacceptable behaviour.

Q111 **Jess Phillips:** If a candidate in an election from an opposing political party suffered abuse from somebody within your political party—if, say, that abuse was misogynistic—you would say that there would be robust processes in the Liberal Democrats to stop that person from being a candidate again or being an activist or member of the Liberal Democrats.

**Sir Vince Cable:** That would be a reasonable request.



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Q112 **Jess Phillips:** I shall test that. I would put the same question to everybody on the panel.

**Ian Blackford:** Unfortunately, I have to attend Prime Minister's Questions, so I apologise that I am going to have to go quite soon. This is a massive issue; let us be absolutely crystal-clear about it. There is clear evidence that women candidates and women parliamentarians have suffered far greater abuse than anyone else has.

Q113 **Chair:** So what do you do about it?

**Ian Blackford:** There are things we can do about it, in terms of providing support to people. If anyone has crossed the line and is a member of a political party, they have to be held to account for that.

Q114 **Jess Phillips:** What does "held to account" mean?

**Ian Blackford:** Suspension or expulsion, if that is what it takes.

Q115 **Chair:** How many people has the Scottish National Party expelled or punished as a result of bad behaviour?

**Ian Blackford:** I am aware of situations where people have been suspended.

Q116 **Chair:** Do you keep that data?

**Ian Blackford:** Again, I would have to get the data for you, because I do not have that readily to hand.

**Jess Phillips:** That would be good.

**Ian Blackford:** There is another issue as well. We need to look at where people have been abused, and the responsibilities that the social media networks have to support individuals in that regard as well.

Q117 **Chair:** Expulsion is a punishment that comes from the SNP. Is that something the Labour Party does as well?

**Dawn Butler:** We do that as well.

Q118 **Chair:** How many people have you expelled?

**Dawn Butler:** I do not know that number. I do not have that data.

**Chair:** But you could tell us. Thank you, Mr Blackford. I am sorry we are so proximate to PMQs. I thoroughly understand your need to be there. The Speaker would not expect anything else.

**Sir Vince Cable:** Chair, could I excuse myself for the same reason.

**Chair:** Yes, of course.

**Dawn Butler:** I think we all have to excuse ourselves.

Q119 **Philip Davies:** Just before Dawn goes, you said that you expel people who engage in the behaviour that Jess talks about. There was a Labour



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MP for Hayes and Harlington who was talking about lynching a Conservative MP during an election campaign, repeating it, endorsing it, and going around talking about it. What did the Labour Party do? They made him shadow Chancellor. They promoted him to shadow Chancellor. So if you are saying, "Yes, we expel people who behave in the kind of way that Jess has mentioned", what are you going to do about the shadow Chancellor, or do you endorse that behaviour?

**Dawn Butler:** I think you are misrepresenting the situation.

**Chair:** I think going into individual cases can be difficult.

**Philip Davies:** No, I do not think it is. There is a real, live case. We know exactly what he said. It is on the record. There is a recording of what he said. I want to know why the Labour Party promoted somebody in that situation, rather than doing what you say that you do.

**Chair:** Shall we ask Dawn to write to us on that? I am just conscious of time.

**Dawn Butler:** You are misrepresenting the situation, but I will happily write to the Committee.

Q120 **Jess Phillips:** And will you provide me with the data on the number of people that the Labour Party has had to expel or suspend based on such abuse?

**Chair:** Is that alright?

**Dawn Butler:** That is fine.

**Chair:** I am very conscious of the fact that the timing of this meeting is not ideal for parliamentary Members, so rather than trying to continue I think what we might do is, if there is anything else we have not been able to cover in our session, we will write to you. Can I thank you, on behalf of the Committee, for coming in, for being very frank with us, and for helping further our investigations in this matter? Thank you very much.