

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Voting by proxy in the House of Commons, HC 825

Wednesday 14 March 2018

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Members present: Mr Charles Walker (Chair); Bob Blackman; Bambos Charalambous; Sir Christopher Chope; Nic Dakin; Chris Elmore; David Evennett; David Linden; Melanie Onn; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 44-60

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Mr David Lammy MP, Chair of the APPG on Fatherhood, and Hannah Bardell, MP

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Rt Hon Mr David Lammy MP, Chair of the APPG on Fatherhood](#)

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Mr David Lammy MP and Hannah Bardell MP

Q44 Chair: David, Hannah, thank you for coming to give evidence to the Procedure Committee about proxy voting and baby leave, as it has been dubbed. Hannah, since you have been sitting there for a few minutes, do you want to make any opening remarks and statements before we allow David to say a few words on behalf of fathers?

Hannah Bardell: I welcome the measures that have been brought forward by Harriet Harman and I think they are hugely welcome. We have certainly supported them from the beginning. I appreciate there are some technical aspects that need to be ironed out but I would like to think we are in a world where, whether it is technology or the application of our imaginations, we can get over some of those barriers.

Passing that point in 2017, where we had more men in the 2015 sitting than there were ever women elected to Parliament, was an important moment. I don't have any children but, for example, were any of my colleagues, in the north-east of Scotland or beyond, to have children they would not physically be able to come to Parliament for up to 10 weeks if they had a Caesarean section because they have to fly down to London. I think we live in a world now where we have to accept that, even though we are elected parliamentarians and it does make our job somewhat different from people in business or the public sector, we should not behave or send a message that we are any different and, where possible, we should be mirroring.

Harriet Harman said in her evidence previously that we are setting the laws of the land and of society in many regards, as are the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies. It is really important that, where possible, our Parliament can fall into step with society and reflect that and also be an open and inclusive place for people to be attracted to come here. I have to say, it was something that I stopped and thought about. I thought, "How would I manage with a baby, coming up and down the road?" All the stuff about league tables and how we are represented digitally and in numbers, and that is the reality for the public. The public do not understand a lot of our procedures here. I think it is important that we make them as friendly as possible. The option of a proxy does mean that we can still register our vote positively here in the House of Commons and our constituents can still be represented in voting terms.

We all know that being an MP is much more than just voting and walking through the lobbies. It is also about being in your constituency and a whole range of other things. Nonetheless the numbers represent votes for our constituents and it is important that they are able to see that, so I



hope that is something that we can work, as we have been cross-party, to find a solution.

Mr Lammy: I too welcome this inquiry by the Committee. I am here in my capacity as Chair of the All Party Group on Fatherhood, but I am also here as a father of three children, having attempted to take paternity leave on two occasions and on one occasion adoption leave and, on all of those occasions, having to break that leave to come in to vote on important occasions.

It is hugely important that this Committee recognises that modern fathers want to be engaged and bond with their children, either birth children or adopted children, in those crucial early days. They want to support their partners. The nature of pregnancy and birth means that there is also a higher incidence of Caesarean section in our society. That means the requirement to support your partner in those circumstances are mandated by the hospital and huge immobility for mothers.

It is important that Members of Parliament are not put in a situation where they are not able to be in the circumstances that they would hope and wish for their constituents and on which we have chosen to legislate in this House. Also, I wholeheartedly agree that our own constituents should not be disadvantaged from having Members of Parliament cast votes, particularly on important matters, and I think this can be sorted out by proxy.

For those reasons, I wrote to the Committee to make my views well known. My general feeling is that the views of my cross-party group, and the vast majority of fathers across the House—both as MPs but also staff in this House—the current expectation is that you are able to take a period to bond with your child in those early steps as a family, and all the evidence, the academic evidence particularly, is that this is very important in child development.

It is something that should and must happen. Of course, there are modern and pressing debates about shared parental leave precisely because, if anything, two weeks is a very short period of time for fathers. Modern couples would like the flexibility to decide among themselves who took what leave at what point and at what point we are together at home. That might be for another day, but I certainly think that the ability to take that time, to not have the pressure of parliamentary duty but to know that your constituents are not disadvantaged in relation to the most important aspect of our job, which is voting on legislation, that time has now come.

Q45 Bambos Charalambous: Some people say that, if we do it for paternity leave, then this is going to open the flood gates for anyone who just does not want to come to Parliament. It could be Ministers who are away on foreign trips. It could be people who are unwell, and some people say this is the thin edge of the wedge. Do you have any thoughts about that?



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Mr Lammy: The 'thin edge of the wedge' argument has been used on other occasions, where this Committee has chosen that the time has come to modernise in a particular way. I have been in Parliament and seen changes. When I came into Parliament 18 years ago we were still sitting into the night and there were arguments made about us killing the idea of the ability to lobby, which I think is central to the Westminster model that you can lobby any Minister and see them at any point in the Members' lobby or as you are walking through a division. Yes, the hours have been changed but we are all able to lobby. We find who we need to find. That still happens. We have not killed the atmosphere of Parliament as a consequence of those hours. It has changed a bit, of course, but I think we have the balance right.

My own view is, if you are a Minister on a foreign trip or you are an MP who is abroad, the system of pairing works well. I do not think we should confuse moments when parliamentarians are away where, frankly, the usual channels and whips' offices work sufficiently well. This is an area where there is a statutory responsibility and where I think the overwhelming view of parliamentarians across the House would be that we have to be current with what we want to say about family life in this country. You would struggle to find parliamentarians who do not recognise it is important to send a powerful message about family life and support at the early stages of parenting.

I think there is a statutory obligation that Parliament should mirror. It is the case that if you are sick that also has some statutory foundation, but that is what is before this Committee at this point in time and, again, the usual channels have dealt with that quite successfully. The argument I make about family, the necessary way that parliamentarians have to wrestle with these issues and make decisions—and I am not aware that Parliament is having big rows around statutory leave on illness but the business of parental and shared parental leave is of debate and is an aspect of debate in this House and, therefore, I think the House should reflect that.

Hannah Bardell: I suppose it is about the thin edge of what kind of wedge because, at the end of the day, I agree with David that the discussion on sick leave and people who are genuinely ill, we all know the stories of folk being brought in ambulances to vote and that does not reflect well on us or this place but that is a debate and a discussion for another day.

No change happens without marginal gains and this is much more than a marginal gain. I think it is about taking a big step forward and sending not just a message about how this House works, in terms of its voting system and being open and supportive of the modern family, it is important to recognise that with equal marriage as well and gay couples being able to adopt and us supposedly being the gayest Parliament in the world. We are becoming much more reflective of society, so I think the 'thin edge of the wedge' argument is not one that I buy into and this Committee will know full well that it is able to take a decision and fend off



the naysayers in certain parts of the media or elsewhere. We have to stand up for progression and stand up for being more democratic because that is what this is about.

Q46 Sir Christopher Chope: Both of you think that this should be treated as a discrete subject, just parental leave and proxy voting for those in a parenting situation and not extended or extendable beyond that. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Lammy: The other thing about this particular leave is that there is a very clear beginning, middle and end and the Committee might take strong view on that. Clearly, illness does not fall into that category.

Q47 Sir Christopher Chope: You are saying this is a special case in its own right and there is no similarity between this and any other set of circumstances.

Hannah Bardell: I would be nervous about talking about it in terms of special circumstances, in the sense that childbirth is the most normal thing in the world and 50% of the population are female and as I said about adoption and gay parents adopting. It has to be normalised and we have to normalise this place in terms of its procedures and how it reflects society. We are still in a world where it isn't because we still sit very late.

Monday night was a perfect example where people had left their constituencies to come down. They were prepared to vote and at the very last minute that vote was pulled and we are still living in that world where if you have childcare, if you try to manage your life it is very difficult. Similarly, pregnancy can be an anxious time for a whole lot of reasons for any parent and to add to that anxiety that you may have to be pulled back to Parliament at the last minute.

I say that as a Scottish MP. I am very close to an airport but I have colleagues that are very far away from an airport. Whether they are a mother or a father or an adoptive parent it is a very difficult situation that you would be faced with. When I saw a Member recently in the tea room having to breastfeed when she was about to have to vote I thought, "This is madness. How have we come to this point that somebody has to travel hundreds of miles?"

Mr Lammy: I don't want to say it is special either and I want to speak now as a father. One of the best things I ever did in my life—and I don't talk about it very much—was to adopt my little daughter. I am not comfortable for other parliamentarians who should choose to adopt that they will find it next to impossible to meet their statutory obligations for adoption leave. The state asks parents to meet those obligations because bonding with adopted children is so fundamental to successful adoption that you have to put in the time. That we are asking parliamentarians that find themselves in that situation not to be able to meet that need, to some of the most vulnerable children in this country, is not acceptable. I



do not say this is a special case. I simply say this is the issue before the Committee and I think the time has come to modernise in this area.

- Q48 **Sir Christopher Chope:** You say that the whips pairing system, working through the usual channels, is effective to deal with every situation other than parental leave and particularly in relation to adoption. I would be particularly interested in Hannah's comments on this because my understanding of what we have just heard informally is that, in the Scottish Parliament, it is not a proxy system that has been brought in for parenting but a pairing system. If a pairing system can be brought in properly for parental leave or circumstances, why do we need to bother about proxy voting?

Hannah Bardell: It is a different circumstance, partly because the numbers are very different in the Scottish Parliament. We have fewer Members. We are looking at a Parliament that, in terms of its numbers, is significantly larger here. It is a system that has worked and I think, because of the numericals, it works in a very different way. Also, to be frank—and not speaking from personal experience in our whip's office—the stories I have heard from other parties about the way whips' offices operate, and the way this place operates, has been about coercion and undue and unfair pressure on people at times when things are very difficult for them, and I just do not believe that that is a fair way to go forward.

This is not a criticism of the Scottish system but, if you look into the detail of how they do it, they have it registered publicly about how that works. We have seen there has not been any particular public criticism of that system or any issues with that. What we have seen down here is that, when people are not here because they are on maternity, paternity or—although it is a separate issue—sick leave, the way we are counted means we are discounted and, therefore, the vote is not registered positively. To me, the way the system works down here, the only way to take that forward is to have a proxy so that the vote of your MP is shown in a positive way in terms of the numbers.

- Q49 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Your concern is more about the transparency than the substance. My own experience is—speaking for the Conservative side—when my child was born in February 1990 I had the adjournment debate and the Government whips very generously said that I could substitute a different Minister who could respond to the adjournment debate because I was attending the birth of my daughter, so it just shows how generous the whips can be.

Hannah Bardell: Wasn't that kind of him? The point is it should not be about a whip being generous. I think that is the point. It is the whole language and the attitude that has grown up around this, "Wasn't it kind of my whip to let me away while I was having a baby?" or your wife was having a baby. To me it seems somewhat absurd. We need to get into a place where it is just the standard practice that you have that period of



time off, whether you are giving birth, your partner is giving birth or you are adopting.

You asked the question earlier about it being a discreet thing. I don't think it should be a discreet thing. I think it is something we should absolutely shout from the rooftops about that we are taking a step forward and the Parliament is becoming more progressive.

Sir Christopher Chope: I was just spelling "discrete" a different way that is all.

Q50 Chris Elmore: I sit on this Committee and I am also a whip. Confession: my name is Chris Elmore; I am the Member for Ogmore. I am also a whip. In relation to going back to how the Scottish Parliament do it and you said that it could not work because of numbers, I am in favour of this and I have said this publicly. But you said it was about numbers and I am just curious about that because why would a formal pairing system not work on this specific issue? This is meant to be an option, the idea of proxy voting, so some colleagues, male or female, may not want a proxy. They would want to be away from here so, therefore, would a formal pairing system work that is published, like a list that the Scottish Parliament does?

The Welsh Assembly has to my knowledge, having worked there a number of years ago for Members, the informal system but it is only an assembly of 60 Members, so I accept it also has scale and people. My point is we should be looking maybe at other options, rather than just the proxy system, because some colleagues may not like it.

The point about what Mr Chope said about isn't it nice his whip let him off, I have to say—and this is not in defence of any whip's office—in my 18 months as a whip, and maybe David can confirm this from the Government perspective but, speaking from the Opposition, I have never known this idea of us forcing and being unpleasant to colleagues about them being pregnant or, indeed, on any health issue either. If anything, I think it has been the other way where there is a hell of a lot of structured support from whip's offices. I am sure it is the same in the SNP, and the Chief Whip is sat over there, within how the whip's office structures work.

I am in favour of this. I am just saying we maybe need to look at not just the proxy voting. Should we look at formal pairing arrangements within the system? At the moment some colleagues, mainly female colleagues, have been pilloried in the press, "They work for you and they are not here", which clearly is a nonsense, because they have had a child.

Chair: Hannah, do you have to go in two minutes or can you extend your stay by a moment?

Hannah Bardell: I have an APPG in seven minutes so, which I am kicking off on deaths abroad. I will make this point and then I will leave if that is okay, David. You may be missing the point there that I was trying to make. I understand the Committee should absolutely look into how the Scottish Parliament and other Parliaments do it. You have to remember



they are very different. They are very different in their culture, very different in the way whip's offices work and have worked.

I am not suggesting for a second that anybody would be making a move against or giving someone a hard time explicitly, but what ends up happening is people feel under a massive amount of pressure and so to me this is a positive move. If people want to use a proxy it is a cultural thing as much as a procedural thing. I think that is the absolutely fundamental point.

You could argue that you could try to extend the pairing system or look again at it, but I think the difference with the Scottish Parliament has been the way it is published. I am not going to profess to be an absolute expert on this but I certainly know that there have been no issues. I think that is partly to do with maybe a different culture in the press about those voting records and so on. I think the way the culture is, unfortunately, in terms of the UK press, in terms of "They work for you" and how things are recorded, I just think this is a much better idea, culturally and procedurally.

I appreciate there are some things around who holds the proxy and that point about if the person who holds your proxy wants to vote a different way, I think there could be something quite sensible where the member of staff communicates directly with the whip's office to say, "If there were any contentions this is how we want our Member to vote and, therefore, we are passing the proxy to someone else", if it was a matter of conscience, for example, and a conscience vote.

You can foresee where there would be some challenges around that, but I just want to believe that it is not outside the wit or imagination and I think we have to move on from the current system and draw a line. Whatever you want to say about how good whip's offices are people will always feel under pressure to come and cast their vote on behalf of their constituents. We have to make sure that they are able to do that but not physically have to come here if they are new parents or adoptive parents.

Q51 Melanie Onn: MPs are not employees. Do you think that, by formalising this process, we run a risk of blurring the lines around the role of elected Members and the expectations of them?

Mr Lammy: We are not employees. I do not see this as blurring the lines. We are simply facilitating the ability to be in step with the people that we represent. All parties agree that maternity and paternity leave is essential. There is some debate in Parliament across the parties around shared parental leave and how that should work, but I don't think that means that we become employees. It simply facilitates the ability to mirror our constituents.

On the issue of proxy and pairing—just to understand what you are saying around pairing—I think it is important that our electorate are able to continue to have their democratic right exercised during the course of



that leave. That is why I like the proxy system because my understanding is, unless you are proposing something slightly different, the pairing system would not be possible. The point is if you go to pairing you are still putting Members of Parliament under enormous pressure where there are very important votes to come in and break that leave.

I would ask the Committee to move away from a system where we were asking Members of Parliament to do that. I would ask the Committee to understand that the ability to bond with your child is a sacred, important moment and we should not put Members of Parliament in that difficult situation. It may not arise over the course of two weeks in relation to paternity leave but, certainly over the course of maternity leave, it is the case that every year there are these very big votes where people have to break that situation.

David Evennett: I agree with most of what you said. I am a big supporter of the proposal we have proxy voting. I want to put on the record—and it is a shame Hannah has gone—that what she was talking about is a whip's office from 30 years ago. I have to say now it is more of an HR department. We are dealing with lots of people with problems on all sorts of issues and so forth, and I have to say in the years that I was in the whip's office, working with the Labour whip's office in Government and in opposition, no one could have been more helpful to make sure that people's issues are dealt with and the maximum support is given to those to be absent.

Why I support this is because it does make it more transparent and therefore out in the open, and sometimes we need that to be the case. I am interested in the Scottish system to see how it works, but I am also very passionate that the view of the whip's office is not what was highlighted there. I say that, having worked very closely in Government and in opposition with the Labour Party because there has been huge co-operation because we are looking after the interests. We are not just getting Government business through or being opposition. We are looking after the interests of our Members on our benches and, therefore, it has changed quite dramatically from when I got in in 1983.

Q52 **Melanie Onn:** Can I go back and ask you a little bit more about adoption? While we are talking about baby leave it struck me that not all adoptions are of babies. Would you envisage that perhaps this proxy system would then be extended to parents who adopt an older child in the same way, given the point you made around bonding?

Mr Lammy: The modern understanding for adoption is that it is fundamentally important that the parent attaches to the child. It is in the interests of the state where adoption happens for that attachment to go well and it is incredibly unfortunate when it does not go well. All the Committee are experienced enough to know that, very sadly, there are too many older children who are not being adopted and it is harder in some ways to adopt older children.



I am aware of parliamentarians who have adopted older children. I won't name them because they may not want to be named but I am aware of great colleagues who have done that and, as I said, I would not want those colleagues to be disadvantaged for adopting a seven, eight or nine-year-old that they need to attach to, that they need to focus on and they need not to be running back into Parliament to vote. They need to have the comfort of knowing that that is being taken care of. I would want to emphasise to the Committee that, when parents decide to adopt, it is a responsibility that I think the state takes incredibly seriously. It is a good thing to do. It is almost as important as voting and we need it to go well.

I know it is a much smaller cohort of people that choose to do that but I am one of those people who have two birth children and one adopted child. As I say, I felt particularly challenged that I broke adoption leave to come in and vote on a couple of occasions because the responsibility, in those circumstances, felt greater than it did for my own birth children. The responsibility to attach to my little girl was very important. It was certainly not something I could just leave to mum and catch up with a bit later. It is really important that you focus in that early period.

Q53 **Melanie Onn:** The paper that you submitted I thought was eminently sensible. If we were to try to progress on how to adopt a proxy voting system, it seemed to be with as minimal fuss as was detailed in your paper.

Mr Lammy: I would not want a lot of fuss. All of us have a close friend or two. For me, it would probably be my colleague and my neighbour Catherine West. We broadly vote the same on nearly every single issue, very good lines of communication, and she understands the temperature of my seat in Haringey. She would be well able to exercise proxy votes on my behalf and I am sure it would work well the other way as well, or indeed I could stretch to Bambos across the way.

Q54 **Chair:** David, you said that it is people's right to democratic representation to have a vote cast, but is there a danger of looking at that the wrong way? It is people's democratic right of representation to have a vote cast but they are not that fussed whether you are on maternity leave, whether you have broken a leg, whether you are on a Select Committee trip, they say, "It is my democratic representation to have a vote cast". Is it not the case that perhaps the overriding argument in favour of baby leave is that we—I know you represent the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood—need to make this place more attractive for women. We want women to come into Parliament and many of those women will be of child-bearing years and we don't want it to either be a deterrent or for them to feel they have to make a choice. Is that not a different way of looking at it? It gets to the same outcome. I am concerned about the democratic representation argument because that could be applied to any occasion when a Member of Parliament is not here. Can you see that?



Mr Lammy: I see some attraction in running the argument in that way but, as Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood, I would want to say that this works for both partners. The danger of placing the entire burden on the mother is that what we are setting up are super women, frankly, and the modern parenting is shared. It really is. It is important that, as parliamentarians, we understand that the modern couple, from 20s through 30s, the presumption is that you are sharing this load and in a sense Parliament has to catch up with them. I recognise why you emphasise women but I also don't want to find fathers in a situation where they are conflicted or where they are second tier in relation to parenting. They really are not these days.

Chair: You can see that across parenting, that parenting is so important we need to encourage parents to feel that they can enter Parliament.

Q55 **Bob Blackman:** David, one or two things I just want to pick up on in your evidence. The first is, unfortunately, miscarriages happen, which is a very important aspect. Of course, that is then a grieving issue as well as a physical health issue. Potentially that is not covered under this arrangement. Do you have a view on that? Equally, there is an issue then of, unfortunately, not every family has a father and a mother or two people together, often lone individuals will choose to have children, which is their absolute right. Under those circumstances, they then have not just looking after a baby potentially but a child later on before they go to nursery or school. Do you have a view that says that, under those circumstances, similar type of arrangements should be made on proxy voting?

Mr Lammy: First, on the question of miscarriage, I would encourage the Committee to reflect quite hard on miscarriage situations where you are in the situation of illness, the Member of Parliament is off and we almost talk about it like an illness, but it is obviously entirely related to birth. Clearly, miscarriage is tragic, emotional, grief, it is very hard and it is often the case that people do not want that particularly broadcast. That is the other reason why the ability to have a colleague continue to vote on your behalf, in that very sensitive and difficult time, is something that the Committee should reflect on. I do see miscarriage as part of the stable of this discussion. It should not be considered like a Member of Parliament who is off ill, in my view.

In relation to the rest of your question, clearly, as Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood, I have to be up to speed with the modern understandings of parental leave. There we tend to look in the world to the Scandinavian countries, don't we? There are now emerging discussions about key moments where parents should be able to take leave. There are debates around transition from primary school to secondary school; there are debates around teenagers and mental health particularly. It is very present in our own country. There are these very big debates happening in society around how we are more generous in relation to modern parenting and allow that parental leave.



Having said that, I recognise that the Committee has a difficult task to follow, certainly, in being modern and up to date with the public but not seeking to be ahead of the public and ahead of other workplaces, so what I might desire, as the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood, might not be where the Committee lands as the Procedure Committee of the House of Commons. I think, Bob, you raise important issues that are absolutely policy debates that are being had in the arena of those of us who are concerned about children, per se, and how as a society we are getting balance right between work and parenting and family life, modern family life.

Q56 Bob Blackman: A quick follow up on the issue of illness and people who have had operations. I shared that I had a very serious operation five years ago and for two months I could hardly walk. Under those circumstances, I could not come in to this place and I could not vote, but I wanted that to be private. I did not want people knowing that that was the problem and I know many other colleagues that have suffered similar types of problems. By differentiating parental responsibilities with very serious illness—I am not talking about pulling a muscle or something—where you are hospitalised for a period of time, surely that should be recognised in a similar type system?

Mr Lammy: Yes, that is why we have to allow Members to chose, in a sense, a proxy in this situation. There might be some Members who choose not to have a proxy. There are certainly a whole category of illnesses in which it takes some time to come to terms with the illness. You want the privacy of your family in order to come to terms with that illness. Many of us who are parents, we also make judgments about at what point we want share this illness with our children, with our elderly parents. Those are really important judgments that people have to make every day of the week. Therefore, for very sensible reasons, parliamentarians do not want that broadcast through the papers and do not want some sort of rigorous mechanism that forces them into that situation.

As I said in my opening, it was not my understanding that illness was before the Committee on this occasion and I would want to advocate on behalf of baby leave and not stray into that territory.

Chair: I would suggest the quickest way to broadcast to your constituents that you were ill would be to have proxy voting for it because it is entirely the case that, if you have had a proxy vote cast, there will be a note to say it is a proxy vote, whereas the traditional pairing way there could be a variety of reasons why you are not in Parliament. If we have categories for proxy voting around illness, it will be marked that Bob Blackman is having a proxy vote cast, which—with the greatest respect, Bob, you are probably not having a child, or your wife—is because you are ill. There is no panacea here to the questions being posed. The only way is forward.

Q57 David Linden: I am quite mindful of time so I won't go on for very long.



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Bob has already covered what I was going to ask about parental bereavement leave, and I think you have covered that excellently. Some people have spoken about the comparisons with the Scottish Parliament. We need to be careful not to be comparing apples and pears here because the Scottish Parliament also has a fixed decision time and electronic voting, so we need to be mindful of that. I must declare an interest in that: I am a SNP whip.

Would it be your preference then that it is just another Member rather than the whips having control of the proxy?

Mr Lammy: I have been here long enough to have voted against my party on a few occasions, so I do not want my proxy vote in the hands of the whips; I want it in the hands of a friend.

Q58 **Chair:** A point I made to all witnesses, we must not get hung up on this, I would just say I would be more than happy—and I am serious—if you were to give me your proxy vote and vice versa because I would be honour bound, as an hon. Gentleman, to fulfil your wishes. I would vote in my lobby and if you were in a different lobby I would vote in your lobby. We are getting really caught up on: should the whips have it? Who should have it? We are all honourable men and women and we are all Members of Parliament who are equal.

I need to ask you a question, David. In Australia, nursing mothers and proxy votes, there is proxy voting except on Third Reading of a Bill that proposed alterations to the constitution because the constitution in Australia can only be altered with an absolute physical majority. Just to protect the interests of Parliament, which is something we have to do as well, could you envisage any exceptions? For example, if we are voting—as we have done on a couple of occasions recently—to submit our sons and daughters or other people's sons and daughters to a theatre of war, do you think we should say there has to be a physical presence, not only to protect Parliament but also the individual? I could see somebody who had a vote cast on a proxy would come under enormous pressure, "You couldn't even be bothered to turn up to vote in Parliament while my sons and daughters were sent to war". Can you see any possible exceptions?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I can. You have heard me advance the importance of attachment, the importance of bonding with your child, I would argue—and I would hope most parliamentarians would agree with me—that family life is important in society. When we die we are not thinking of the job, we are thinking of what we have left behind. But, equally, there are moments, and I reflect on my almost two decades in this place, where we make fundamental decisions of life and death on behalf of others, so I do think that votes to commit people to war might be that exception. In my experience that does not come up every week, every month or even every year in a parliamentary term, but it does come up from time to time and so that might be the exception.

Q59 **Chair:** You would see that as probably the only exception?



Mr Lammy: Life and death.

Chair: Life and death, okay.

Mr Lammy: There could be—but it becomes very technical—some votes of conscience that also pertain to life and death; euthanasia would be one of those scenarios.

Chair: That is very helpful.

Q60 **Sir Christopher Chope:** What about the life and death of the Government? A vote of no confidence in the Government?

Mr Lammy: That would tick the Australian constitutional box perhaps. I don't see that quite as the same. That is about the interests of a party remaining in office, I don't see that as quite the same myself.

Chris Elmore: On that point, is this issue of the proxy being a voluntary thing for the Member? I tend to agree with David on the idea of a fallen Government but then I am in opposition. If a Member goes off for three months under proxy conditions, which is their choice, if there is something that is about sending servicemen and women to war then they should be able to come in but, equally, if there is something not just a conscience vote but it is something that they want to come in for. Our colleague from Wolverhampton, Emma Reynolds, who came back fairly recently after having her child came into speak specifically on the Carillion issue, because it was 1,000 jobs in her constituency. So there still has to be the flexibility. The whole point of proxy is choice.

Chair: I entirely understand that. My personal view is: if there was a very narrow vote to commit troops to war and it was carried by a very narrow majority, and that majority was made up of proxy votes, this House would probably never recover its standing from that decision. We have to be mindful of that. We need to protect standards, as I think you indicated earlier in your evidence as well, David.

I have no more questions to ask. Do we have any more questions to ask? I might write to you. We have done it all. You have been a hero, thank you, David.