

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Women in the House of Commons, HC 507

Wednesday 21 November 2018

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Members present: Mrs Maria Miller (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Sarah Champion; Angela Crawley; Philip Davies; Vicky Ford; Eddie Hughes; Mr Gavin Shuker; Tulip Siddiq.

Questions 121 - 167

Witnesses

I: Baroness Jenkin of Kennington, Co-Chair, Women2Win; Nan Sloane, Training Co-ordinator, Labour Women's Network; Sam Smethers, Chief Executive, Fawcett Society; Professor Sarah Childs and Isabel Hardman, Assistant Editor, The Spectator.

II: Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh OBE; Gemma Doyle; Flick Drummond and Rt Hon Jenny Willott OBE.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Jenkin, Nan Sloane, Sam Smethers, Professor Sarah Childs and Isabel Hardman.

Q121 Chair: I would like to welcome our witnesses and those who are watching online or in the public gallery. This session is incredibly special to all of us, particularly to women Members of Parliament, because it is the centenary of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918. It was 100 years ago today that that Act was not just passed but received Royal Assent and that women were, for the first time, able to stand for Parliament.

We will be hearing from two sessions today about the barriers that still exist, 100 years on, to women becoming and remaining Members of Parliament. Our first panel is a group of eminent experts and representatives of organisations that help support female candidates to stand for election. Then in our second panel, we are incredibly grateful to those who are attending that because it is made up of women who are former Members of this House and have generously agreed to come back to talk about their experiences. I can see some of them already in the gallery today.

Please take your seats. I am sorry; it may get a little warm in here so take your coats off and I hope you find the session incredibly interesting and helpful. I would like to start by thanking 50:50 Parliament for all the work they have done in helping to ensure we have so many women in Parliament today to mark this centenary.

To remind those who may not have seen a session like this before, we have a number of questions we want to ask. Members of Committee will ask them in turn. The names of the members of the Committee are in front. You will notice that the last thing on our mind is which party we represent because the work of Select Committees is cross-party. That is why we are so strong and that is why we make such good reports. Tonia is going to start our questioning.

Q122 Tonia Antoniazzi: If you could identify the three top barriers to women entering Parliament, what would they be?

Professor Childs: Parties. Parties gate-keep access to politics.

Chair: Could I remind everybody that the Victorians did not have the foresight to design these rooms with microphones in, so please make sure you are directing your comments to a microphone?

Professor Childs: I shall restate. Access to political office is very much controlled by political parties. When we are trying to understand who gets into our parliaments, we have to look at parties, their practices and



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the extent to which they create a demand for women and other diverse candidates. Whilst you said three, my feeling is we have to look at party practices in the round. We have to ensure a good supply of women, but many women are seeking to participate in politics. It is how they negotiate the gendered politics of parties and the extent to which parties are open to different kinds of candidates.

Isabel Hardman: One of the first things actually is the image of Parliament. It still appears to be a very manly place. If you are growing up and trying to work out what your aspirations are, you do not necessarily see yourself as being a politician if you are a woman because you look at the House of Commons and it sounds quite manly. I am sure Baroness Jenkin will back me up on this: selection panels, when they are imagining an MP, will imagine a man rather than a woman. A woman can feel quite challenging to those selection panels when she comes in to the room.

The cost of standing is even harder for women. It is incredibly expensive. I am happy to share the figures I have from my research with the committee, but it is much harder for women to shoulder that cost. Finally, it is women being asked the question. I think we see for both men and woman, if you are not asked whether you would like to be an MP, you are much less likely to consider being an MP. It seems that women are even less likely to be asked whether they would like to go into Parliament.

Baroness Jenkin: By the time it gets to the end, we will not have anything new to say. Can I start by saying thank you for inviting us and how inspiring it is to be in a room so full of women? I count every room I am in and usually it is 45 men and five women. Today it is lovely for it to be the other way around. Thank you for doing this.

Eddie Hughes: It is not so good for me. It is a bit daunting.

Baroness Jenkin: Get used to it, Eddie. In addition to what the other two said, there are different levels of party. There is definitely an enthusiasm at the top of my party, probably a bit belated, and our party Chairman has said that he has more than an aspiration of having 50% of women on the candidates list or the candidates list being 50%. I certainly think that one of the main barriers is that women do not think of it for all kinds of reasons. A boy probably knows at about seven he is going to make a great MP. A woman waits until she is, let us say, 45 and somebody has to say to her, "Have you thought of doing this? You have run this campaign. You have done this and you would be absolutely great", which is part of what today is all about, of course.

There has been a change of our rules of selection so we do have to have a younger person and a woman on the final selection panel, which does not sound like rocket science, but it is something. Just the inability to navigate the maze and not understanding what the processes are puts them off even applying in the first place because it seems so alien.



Q123 **Chair:** Could I ask a supplementary there? Baroness Jenkin, you are a member of the other place so you have an interesting perspective alongside the other witnesses here. We just look at this room today and members of the committee rather laughed beforehand there are lots of previous Members who were all men on the walls. That is what Isabel talked about: looking at Parliament and seeing a lot of men and not a lot of women. What do you think about that?

Baroness Jenkin: Almost everywhere that we all go, grand institutional venues, have that. If you go to an Oxford college, it is exactly the same. The truth is in the 100 years since women have been able to come in, we are still only at just more than there are existing men. Sorry, I do not have the figures in my brain. It is difficult. This is part of the history of our country. You cannot change the history of our country. What really matters is the ones that have come in since they came in. I declare a sort of interest because my grandmother was the 33rd ever woman MP. I do not think this part of it is particularly off-putting. The building is obviously not fit for purpose, but that is a whole different issue.

Q124 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Some of the things, Baroness Jenkin, that you have mentioned have been areas of progress. What other areas of progress have there been and where is the most work still required?

Baroness Jenkin: The main area of progress is people understand that it is important. When Theresa May and I started Women2Win it was to rattle the cage of our own party. When she was elected, there were 13 Conservatives and 101 Labour done through the mechanisms we will discuss later. That has been a massive change.

Chair: Could I remind everybody there is no photography to be taken during the session and remind everybody this is broadcast so you just need to be careful about not talking and being aware you are on screen? Sorry to interrupt you.

Baroness Jenkin: Certainly in my own party, as I said, when we started the numbers were pitiful. It was about just being there to wake people up and show that it is important. The changes speak a bit for themselves. I know it is slow, but the figures have been incremental. I know there are people on this panel who would like everybody to go to all-women shortlists or possibly legislate. If we can improve the figures reasonably incrementally, and take the men with us, which is an important part of it because if they dig in we might have more difficulty, that would be my main concern.

Nan Sloane: At the risk of sounding slightly smug, we do not have a problem with women coming forward to stand. We have a system that positively encourages women and, because we use positive action, we have a situation where women who do come forward know they are going to stand a reasonable chance of being selected in a seat that they can win. When women are deciding whether or not to invest time, money and other resources in what may be a very long haul, what happens at



the end of it is inevitably going to be a factor in whether or not they think that is worth it. Although it is not perfect, and I would never say it was perfect—it can always do better—it has resulted in significant numbers of women MPs and significant numbers of women standing in good seats. There are other issues with the diversity of that group of women which is something that we are moving on to discuss, as well as the diversity of men. In terms of numbers, it is less of a problem than it is for other people.

There are barriers in terms of resources. There are barriers when candidates may be looking at very long periods of time as candidates and, despite the legislation, some uncertainty about how long the period between their selection and election is likely to be. There are cultural problems, both within the party and within politics and there are problems, as I think Isabel said, with the image of politics and the belief that politics is not in itself an honourable thing to want to do. People are being wary about whether or not that is something they want to go for. In our case, the barriers are not about whether or not women can get selected, but about what happens to them in the course of doing that and whether or not at the end of the day it turns out to be worth it.

Q125 **Chair:** At the risk of completely annoying Tonia, where are most of your candidates coming from?

Nan Sloane: They come from a variety of sources. Some of them come through the party structures, as activists, party officers and often have stood in local government elections; they may be councillors and come through that route. A lot also come through the trade union route and have experience in that field. It is rare for women to get selected without a background of activism of some kind. The party does expect some input first.

Q126 **Chair:** What proportion of your female MPs would have union backing?

Nan Sloane: I have never sat down and broken that down because women tend to be involved in a multiplicity of organisations and also everybody gives women advice to do everything that is available, so women will come and do our training. They will go on the Fabian Women's Network Mentoring Scheme; they will go through the trade union route.

Q127 **Chair:** Would you be able to provide that information to the Committee?

Nan Sloane: I imagine it is available, yes.

Sam Smethers: From our perspective, we have done some research looking at MPs' routes to success in Parliament and research on the experience of candidates. To summarise very briefly, effectively there are four barriers. One is data. We do not collect the basic data. Section 106 has not been commenced, for inexplicable reasons, to be honest. I do not really understand why, but we do not have that baseline data. We do not have a really clear strategy amongst all the parties.



There is that lack of strategy and having a plan in place, or it is relatively recently developed in terms of strategy. Culture is a massive one, so some of the issues we have already heard articulated from the other witnesses. That encompasses the issue of bullying and harassment, which is still very much part of political culture, unfortunately. That is something we have to try and stamp out, but we have to confront the fact it is there. Then it is about practice. It is about the kind of practices in terms of selection procedures, in terms of what you are expected to do as a candidate and how you combine it with care responsibilities.

The other thing that is important on the positive side, because I do not want to be entirely negative at all and I recognise this is a really important message, is AskHerToStand does work. That message, and again this came through very clearly in the research, is that women are much more likely to say they have been asked to stand than men. That supportive network around them, both that message coming from the leadership of parties, coming from people they know and having relationships around who support them is fundamental for women to enable and encourage them to come forward.

The final thing I wanted to flag up, which is important around the wider reason we need women in politics, is that the electorate say politics is more relevant to people like them when they see women representing them. Six out of 10 women say that but about one third of men say that too.

Q128 Sarah Champion: On AskHerToStand, I am here because a woman asked me to stand. That is the only reason, and so I actively ask other women. I find if they get a knock back they tend not to pop back up again. Did you research that or is that your experience?

Sam Smethers: Not that precise experience, but we found there were certainly experiences they had that did knock them back, whether it be online abuse, turning up at their first party meeting and it not being a very positive experience, or going through the selection process and finding it was a bruising one. Some women did come back time and again.

We had some women we spoke to who had been standing in 10 different seats. They were persistent and resilient but it is true to say there was a multiplicity of knockbacks, which were not helpful. We are always riding this two-horse message. We know women when they get here drive change. We can see that that if we look at the women in this place right now and all the issues, campaigns and legislation they take forward, and the work of this committee are transformational. We know women make a massive difference, but at the moment we are still seeing women discouraged. That is also women standing at local level too. Let us not forget about local councillors.

Nan Sloane: Can I add to that? In my experience, women often want to stand in a specific seat, often the one in which they live because that is



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going to minimise, apart from anything else, the domestic disruption of living in one part of the country, representing another and being in Parliament. If they then get knocked back in a selection for that particular seat, they are unlikely to go for another one. There are lots of different reasons why women give it one go and they do not. I do not think we should assume it is all about the process.

Chair: I am very conscious of time here and I know Tulip wants to come in. Can I bring Tulip in for a quick supplementary?

Q129 **Tulip Siddiq:** Sam, I am here because a man asked me to stand actually, but I really want to know whether you think it makes a difference if elected representatives ask women to stand. Is it female MPs asking, leaders of the council asking or is it anyone asking? Have you noticed any difference between whether it is someone who, for example, is their local MP saying, "Do you want to stand for a council?" or do you think it does not make a difference?

Sam Smethers: We did not measure that in the research so I cannot give you that answer. To be honest, women need to hear it more than once and from multiple sources. Again, I think is as experienced as well. It does not matter whether it is men or women; they just need to hear the message that, "You could do this; this is for you", and to hear it reinforced repeatedly. It does make a difference. What we also have to confront, and I keep coming back to this, is we have to change the practice of parties, Parliament and local government. All of three of those need to change, alongside getting women in.

Q130 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** I am a mentor. I am a new Member of Parliament, but I also encourage women to stand. It is really important we get that message across. My next question is to Sarah. What has been the most positive outcome from your Good Parliament report?

Professor Childs: The Good Parliament report was designed to offer what I call a shopping bag of reforms. It was not just going to say there were one or two things wrong with Parliament, but actually it needed wholesale change to address what is a thoroughly gendered, masculinised institution that needs changing. The most important thing has been the establishment of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion because otherwise this report would have lain on a shelf. What that was, was a group of cross-party men and women, who took the report seriously, identified their agenda and got some changes.

The changes in the first year or so have included getting rid of the art rule that meant that you had to be dead for 10 years before your portrait could be in this palace, allowing children in the division lobbies and baby leave. This House has voted in principle for baby leave, to have proxy voting for men and women on leave, but we have not had a vote yet.

In a way, there have been eight or nine changes already from the report, but it is about the institution recognising that it has a gender problem, a



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diversity problem and it has to act. Members have an institutional responsibility to make this place welcoming for individuals.

Q131 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Where would you like to see further progress in the report?

Professor Childs: We must get baby leave as soon as possible. This is a symbolic intervention, but it will also make a real difference for those already here who are thinking of having children. It will also send a message to those outside that this place is like other workplaces. Sometimes we treat this place too much as if it is an exception. Sometimes it is of course, but other times it should be like other workplaces.

We need to address the way in which the hours and the parliamentary year are structured. You spend a lot of time voting. It seems to me we might be able to look to somewhere like the Scottish Parliament, think about their division hour and think about a way in which this place could be more effective so that MPs have more control over their time. There are those kinds of issues.

The report looks at three areas: participation and getting women into Parliament, rules and culture here, and the experiences of MPs. It is very hard to give you one or two things that must change, but there should be an ongoing commitment to reform and to take on board what is wrong with this place. We have had a lot of criticism of this place in the last year or so and that needs to be taken very seriously in all of those three areas.

Q132 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** I think I know how you are going to answer this question. Has Parliament as an institution been doing enough to reduce the barriers to women's participation at Westminster?

Professor Childs: The obvious answer has to be no, I am afraid. The global evidence would suggest the adoption of quotas immediately. We know they work, particularly when they have enforcement mechanisms. In the absence of quotas, I too, I am afraid, am going to have to say we need Section 106 enacted. Again, it really is disappointing this year.

Chair: On both of those things we are going to go into a bit more detail. I will move onto Angela's questions that start to talk about the programmes to increase the number of female MPs.

Q133 **Angela Crawley:** We covered this briefly earlier, but what in your view is the effectiveness of all-women shortlists to date? Do you think there is a role for all-women shortlists going forward? Nan, you were quite supportive and, Anne, you have a different view.

Nan Sloane: It is not just all-women shortlists; it is also positive action measures because obviously different elections and different electoral methods. All-women shortlists are what you use in a first-past-the-post system rather than PR, so it is what is used for Westminster. I can only



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speak directly for the Labour Party's experience. Some 45% of Labour MPs are women and that is directly due to the use of all-women shortlists for those selections over a long period.

Even quotas are not a magic fix. They have to be used consistently and without some of the evasions that happen sometimes, but they are what works. We know they are what works. They work around the world. They are, with one or two exceptions, the principle reason why countries that do well in terms of women's representation do well. There are different ways of doing it but the bottom line is that if you really want to increase the numbers of women in any elected institution, you need to use some form of quota system. You need to back that up with all the other things, with asking, training, supporting, sorting out the finances and all of those things we know are problems, but quotas are the thing that works. It is a hard thing for people to accept, I understand, but it is nevertheless the case.

Chair: Can we speed up the answers a little bit? I am just conscious of time.

Angela Crawley: Anne, you take a different view.

Baroness Jenkin: I personally have always said that if we went backwards, all options should be on the table. This is the only option, unless anybody has something else up their sleeve. I think I am right that when the Labour Party stopped doing it, you did go backwards. There was one election.

Nan Sloane: Yes: 2004.

Baroness Jenkin: It proves the point. My preference is for incremental reform, incremental improvement and for people in my party to understand that this matters and provide the support and mechanisms to make sure it does happen. If Parliament voted for it, and maybe that is something the others would raise, I personally would not resist it.

Q134 **Angela Crawley:** Should parties focus on increasing the number of female candidates overall or on supporting female candidates to be selected in winnable seats? Professor Childs, do you want to come in?

Professor Childs: Absolutely on winnable seats. Quite clearly, if we are asking women to stand then we want to make sure they have a good chance of being selected and elected. The Labour Party evidence is quite clear: where you use all-women shortlists in winnable seats, you translate very efficiently women from candidates into MPs. It might look good if you have a significant percentage of women in your candidates, but if they are all at the bottom, effectively, of your list, by which I mean in first-past-the-post in all of your unwinnable seats then arguably you are wasting a resource. You are probably going to put people off because they will see experience of women standing and losing. Parties must be



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aware of where women are getting selected. It is another reason why we want Section 106.

Isabel Hardman: If you are going to focus on getting women standing in winnable seats, you also have to make part of that focus working on the cost of standing. Women are disproportionately affected by the cost of standing. I think it was the Fabian Society that surveyed members and 49% of women who had stood for something, whether it was Parliament, the European Parliament or so on, said they could not afford what was necessary for their campaign. Only 27% of men said that.

In the research that I did for the 2015 election, I surveyed 532 candidates and I looked at winnable seats. I looked at all the seats, but just to break it down for the winnable seats the average cost for a Tory who won in a marginal seat was £121,000. That was of their own money. That was not campaign expenditure. That was the cost of moving to the constituency, travelling around and the loss of earnings. I suspect that was probably because there were quite a few barristers who were standing in that group, but for those Conservative candidates who lost in marginal seats they still lost an average of £18,000. For Labour those who stood in marginal seats spent an average of £19,000 to win and £35,000 to lose. Their safe seat colleagues still lost £13,000 on average. For the Lib Dems, they lost on average £26,000.

I can provide a more detailed breakdown to the Committee. I did not split it by gender, but I think that amount of money is prohibitive for huge sections of society. Culturally, women are expected to spend that money on their family or not to take those risks men are encouraged to do. I do not think that is right, but that is where we are at the moment. If you are the person who is disproportionately taking on childcare, who already has a gender pay gap within the family, that is much more prohibitive.

Q135 **Philip Davies:** Picking up on Isabel's point, is there not an issue here with a lack of ambition to a certain extent, in the sense that it seems to me you would all be very happy if we were to replace Rupert, a City banker from Chelsea, with Jemima, a city banker from Chelsea? To me, that does not in itself necessarily do a great deal for the diversity of Parliament. Is the point not that, as Isabel raised, all you are planning on doing is replacing a male version of one thing with a female version of exactly the same thing, which does not actually do a great deal for diversity in Parliament?

Isabel Hardman: Yes, we can also use up using people's backstories as a mask of for what is really going on. To take an example of a man, Sajid Javid has a very compelling backstory where he was born in poverty, but he did become a banker in between so he could afford to go into Parliament. If you talk to a lot of MPs, whether male or female, a lot of them had perhaps a humble start but managed to do very well for themselves. That is great for them, but we are not seeing people coming straight from working class backgrounds because they simply cannot



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afford it. You have to afford up basically a house deposit to be able to interview for this job.

Sam Smethers: It is really important to think about diversity as opposed to just gender equality, which is why Section 106 data would be so important because that would be about all diversity characteristics, not just gender equality. I completely agree with you that we need more diversity in Parliament, including sexual, class and professional backgrounds. That came through our report as well. At the moment there are many barriers and Isabel has already highlighted some of them in terms of financial barriers. It is not just experienced by women. I would agree at least in part with what you are saying.

Q136 **Philip Davies:** The other thing with regard to all-women shortlists, and I think the Labour Party found this in Blaenau Gwent in 2005, is that if you have a man who is very hardworking, a pillar of the local community for years and all the rest of it, why should they be completely excluded from even being selected and have a woman parachuted into that seat simply because they are a woman? There was a huge backlash in Blaenau Gwent. Labour lost a safe Labour seat on the very back of simply parachuting in a woman to a seat where there was a man who had done loads of stuff in the local community and was excluded. An independent got elected. Are you sure there is public support for doing what you are doing in the Labour Party?

Nan Sloane: We certainly lost Blaenau Gwent. That is one seat out of hundreds where we have selected women using all-women shortlists. The balance of evidence is on them working and the electorate being less concerned about the internal methodology by which candidates are selected and more concerned about the issues around elections.

There are issues around positive action measures. It is necessary to be clear with people what you are doing, why you are doing and why it is necessary to do it. Research from organisations like the Fawcett Society indicates that the electorate does expect to see a level of diversity in its public representatives. Whilst that may not be the key thing they vote on, because at a general election people are voting for parties rather than individuals, it is a factor in what they see when they look at politics and the political class.

The final thing on that I say is I have great sympathy for the well-respected local member; I have more sympathy for the well-respected local women who do not get selected if we do not use some sort of positive action. Positive action is an indicator of failure, not success.

Q137 **Philip Davies:** If you accept, which I think most of us do, that women have been discriminated against in the past, is the solution not to remove the discrimination, rather than to reverse the discrimination?

Nan Sloane: There is a long-term solution, which is indeed to remove discrimination, but in the short-term we need to rectify.



Sam Smethers: They are being discriminated against in the present as well as in the past.

Q138 **Eddie Hughes:** I think we are going to move fairly quickly through these because I think you have touched on some of this stuff already. To Anne and Nan, how are you measuring the success of initiatives to increase the number of female MPs? I think you have already touched some of this, but in terms of actual data can you point to where this initiative has had this result?

Baroness Jenkin: As I said, when we started Women2Win, we were 9% of the parliamentary party. I will reverse that: 91% Members of Parliament were male. When we went into the election last year, we went in with 17% to 70%. It still sounds pitiful compared to Nan's figures, but it is an improvement. Unfortunately, the election did not work out for us in many ways, except that you are here Eddie, which is great. We did not make the improvement that we expected, so we are still at 21% women. Four out of five of our Conservative MPs are still men.

Looking on the optimistic side, it is better than it was and many more women are coming forward. Women2Win really are there with the CWO, the Conservative Women's Organisation, to support women through the process to help navigate the maze and demystify the process. I did a weekend in a youth hostel this weekend where we had 25 women, all of whom had passed their parliamentary assessment, which is part of the process. They all went away enthusiastic and well supported. The support is a really important part of it. One of the women said at the end of it, "I now find I have a home", which was very important for me.

Nan Sloane: We have various ways of deciding what success looks like. One is obviously the outcomes in terms of the numbers of MPs. There the figures speak for themselves. We also want to create a much wider pool of women who are thinking about public office at different levels, but who are also thinking about other forms of activism, whether it is within the party, community groups or in all the different areas. One of the problems that we have is we focus so much right on the top, on Parliament, that we do not look at the pool out of which all those candidates need to come and the diversity of experience and activity that that pool needs to include.

We also look at what women do after. The Labour Women's Network runs training schemes. I think all women's groups in parties do. We do not just look at how many women go on to become MPs. We look at what women are doing as a result of having done our training. That contributes to the raising of aspiration levels of women within the party. Other organisations also do that.

Q139 **Eddie Hughes:** You mentioned the focus at the top. In terms of leadership for these initiatives, do you think that comes from the top in both parties?



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Nan Sloane: I cannot speak for any party other than my own. Do you mean in terms of what the party does?

Q140 **Eddie Hughes:** Individually, do you both think for your respective parties that the leadership runs those initiatives?

Nan Sloane: In mine, yes.

Baroness Jenkin: I think so. When our previous party Chair gave evidence to this Select Committee, he said he wanted 50% of Parliament to be women. Our current one is committed to it. Obviously, our Prime Minister is committed to it, but she has a few things on her mind at the moment. There is a commitment. We do now have a Women's Engagement Officer. We have a Vice Chairman for Women who has done a proper strategy. There is a commitment, but they kind of want it to happen by magic.

Q141 **Eddie Hughes:** Can we have some brief thoughts from the other panel members which regard to whether the political parties are doing enough. If not, what is the one thing they could do to make it better?

Professor Childs: The leadership of parties making rhetorical statements supporting women's presence in our Parliament is absolutely critical because it sends a really big message on big platform stuff. It is also about how they change parties on the ground. You can have leaders saying good things, you can have lots of women developing networks and supporting each other and that is I good. However, for the bit in the middle, I wonder how much is really changing. That, in a way, is maybe what MPs need to be working on. We need to have this sense that the transformation is not just happening at the top, not just happening amongst women's networks but actually is running throughout the parties.

I know absolutely that you have been very involved, Anne, with bringing men along, but we need to see more and more men championing this issue because parties will not change given the distribution of who has positions in local parties unless those people also put this issue as a top priority. That is what worries me. We can talk about women's ambition and improve women's ambition, but if we do not change how parties function on the ground in local constituencies, those gendered experiences of doing politics are going to put ordinary women off.

My measure of its success is when ordinary women do politics ordinarily and we are not just looking at the super women, the special women or the women who have the circumstances of lots of money or something else that allowed them to do it. It has to be absolutely changed throughout party structures.

Sam Smethers: What would be really valuable but at the moment has resistance to is an independent process to deal with harassment and bullying. Labour needs one. The Conservative Party needs one. Local government needs one. We do not have a standards process anymore



and standards committees as a matter of course in local government. Where do you go, as a woman, when you have those experiences? Who do you turn to? How is your political party and the institution you are part of dealing with it? At the moment, that is lacking. Until we sort that out we are not really going to see fundamental change.

Isabel Hardman: It is not just in terms of the independent process for complaints of sexual harassment, which is so important because at the moment I do not think women have faith that if something happens to them they have anywhere to go that is independent where their complaints will not be used for factional purposes, for instance. Also, there should be something a bit further back from that to prevent problems from happening.

One of the suggestions I make in my book, along with suggestions about the cost, is that there is a proper HR system that involves appraisals both for Members of Parliament and their staff. You have a lot of young graduates who are in their first jobs who do not know what to expect from their employers. In my first job as a journalist, I certainly did not know what to expect from my editor, whether having things thrown at me, for instance, was a normal thing. That did not happen to me, but you do not know, when you are 21 or 22, what is acceptable.

Having an independent body where you can go in an appraisal and say, "My boss is asking me to do this. I am not actually sure whether I should say yes", would stop a lot of those problems from developing into huge crises. If you have proactive questioning, both of the staff about whether they are feeling comfortable in their job but also of MPs about their personal circumstances about their lives, it would also enable a chance for some kind of intervention where some of the MPs who have been involved in some of the allegations were known to their parties as being problematic. If you had an HR intervention earlier, some of the cases might not have happened.

Q142 **Sarah Champion:** A number of you have mentioned Section 106 of the Equality Act, which is the requirement for political parties to record and publish diversity data. Sam, you raised it first. Would you say there is currently enough data on this?

Sam Smethers: No, there is not. It should be a matter of course. It is very straightforward to monitor electronically, collect the data, collect it centrally and maybe the Electoral Commission, for example, could do it. We need to do it for local elections, parliamentary elections, devolved elections and the mayoral elections. It should just be a matter of course that we collect that data and it is reported. There is no reason fundamentally why it cannot be done.

Q143 **Sarah Champion:** If you had that data, the next step is how do you think that would help make change?



Sam Smethers: We would have a baseline. At the moment, if we want to know how many women councillor candidates there are or how many women councillors there are, somebody in my office sits there, looks at pictures on a website and counts people. It is just ridiculous to be in a position where we do not have that data. We would all know where are starting from. It is about transparency. In the 21st century, that is a minimum requirement of our politics.

Q144 **Sarah Champion:** I might ask you the question that gets you the answer. What impact would that data make on political parties?

Professor Childs: It is a baseline but it is also rolling. The way it has been designed is that information is being kept as parties select, which means parties get a really good view of what is happening. They probably have that anyway, but the public will now have it so parties will be able to respond to what they imagine will be the public's response to their data. If we think about the way in which transparency, information, nudging, changing behaviour through greater access to information works, it is quite possible that parties will look to improve the selection of diverse candidates a year out from an election if they realise that, with a year to go, their data is looking rather poor.

That is the kind of change that stops short of positive action. It nonetheless might include positive action, but does not necessarily require it. It means that parties' behaviour can change in an anticipatory fashion of a reception of their data. That is really, really critical because we keep waiting for the morning of an election and going, "Oh dear, we are not very diverse. We did not make quite enough of a jump". Then we think, "We will put some more things in place". Then we wait for another election. Then we go, "Oh, look", and when we count them on the day of the election there are not very many. This is about changing behaviour and making sure parties are being monitored in a transparent and public fashion with the desire and goal of them changing their behaviour prior to elections.

Q145 **Sarah Champion:** Nan, you were nodding frantically. You have done such an amazing job getting Labour women MPs and Labour women councillors. How would that data have helped you?

Nan Sloane: It would tell us all kinds of things. It would tell us some things that we know, which is that globally we are quite good at getting women candidates through, but it would tell us lots of things that we do not know. We do not know what the diversity of levels of candidates in local government is. There is hardly any data about that. It is, as Sam rightly says, extremely hard to get data about gender. Data about anything else is completely impossible. Local government is one of the major pathways into Westminster and we do not actually know who is there. It would tell us where to look. It would tell us where we need to target. The Labour Women's Network is a voluntary organisation; our resources are very scarce. It would tell us where we can make the best difference, whereas at the moment it is guess work.



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The other area I would like to see that is not covered by Section 106 is who is not getting selected. Who is trying and not making it, and is there anything we can do about them? It would be invaluable. There is no scenario in which data is not useful.

Baroness Jenkin: I cannot really disagree with anything everybody has said. We do publish the data on the party's website but not of course in as much depth as we would like. Perhaps you would like to invite the minister to give the official answer from the Government. I do not know.

Q146 **Tulip Siddiq:** We cannot have a panel without asking a question about intersectionality and double discrimination. I think it would be remiss of me not to ask at least Professor Childs about that. When you did your research, there must have been barriers that were heightened for women of colour. Do you want to make a comment on that?

Professor Childs: Absolutely. One of the reasons why the report shifted from a gender-sensitive to a diversity-sensitive framework was to recognise that women are not the only group and to recognise, particularly in the context of social media violence against women, that that often appears to be or is disproportionately experienced by black women and other minorities. That is terribly critical. It is also about culture; it is also about feeling that the party is welcoming.

I go back to this idea of party demand. We have this idea that parties are just there and women have to go into them. We have to really look to change our parties so that they become open to people who have different experiences. There is a risk sometimes of having this as a zero-sum game: it is either women or working class men, or it is white women and middle class women. We have to always be talking about diversity. All of us were very clear that what we want are diverse women. That is where we should really end.

Chair: That is a fantastic place to finish our first panel. There is always the challenge in this place of getting everything in the time available and I want to make sure we can hear from our second panel as well. On behalf of the whole Committee, can I thank our witnesses for coming forward today? Could I ask you to move stage left and our next panel to seamlessly move into place?

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, Gemma Doyle, Flick Drummond and Rt Hon Jenny Willott.

Q147 **Chair:** If the second panel can join us, I will ask them to briefly introduce who they are and maybe when they were an MP. I will ask Flick to start that. Who are you and when were you an MP?



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Flick Drummond: I am Flick Drummond. I was the MP for Portsmouth South until last year. I got in in 2015 and was unelected in 2017.

Gemma Doyle: I am Gemma Doyle. I was the Labour Member of Parliament for West Dunbartonshire between 2010 and 2015.

Jenny Willott: I am Jenny Willott. I was the Lib Dem Member of Parliament for Cardiff Central from 2005 to 2015.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: I am Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh. I was the SNP Member of Parliament for Ochil and South Perthshire from 2015 to 2017.

Q148 **Chair:** On behalf of the whole Committee, thank you for taking the time to be with us today. We are enormously grateful. Before I bring Tulip in with our first set of questions, I wanted to ask you: why did you want to become an MP in the first place?

Flick Drummond: I wanted to change the education system. I had four young children and the local schools were not delivering what I wanted them to do so I trained to be an Ofsted inspector so I could find out more about it. Then I became a local councillor and decided I had to become an MP to do that.

Gemma Doyle: I began campaigning as a Labour member when I was 15 years-old in the constituency that I was from that I then went on to represent. I was also conscious of a lot of problems and issues in that area and wanted to do something about it. I was also conscious of where power lay in this country. I am not sure if I got that right or not but felt that if someone was making decisions somewhere, then I wanted to be a part of that.

Jenny Willott: Like Gemma, I started campaigning quite young because my Mum was a local councillor and she stood for Parliament. I came and worked here when I graduated, knowing nothing about politics and having not studied politics at all. I came with all the preconceptions that everybody else has about MPs all being a bunch of crooks and being completely worthless layabouts. I came and here and realised it really was not like that at all.

I also looked at the MPs and I thought they are all quite normal and if they can do it there is no reason I cannot do it. With youthful arrogance, I decided to come and join. I also felt very strongly there were nowhere near enough women. I am very much a believer that if you think something is wrong, you have to go in there and sort it out yourself.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: As a lawyer, I was very well aware of the issues facing women of colour across all communities, particularly in Scotland where I worked, and felt in particular that underrepresentation at Westminster was stark so I saw an opportunity to try and be a voice a good.

Chair: Great. Those are inspiring stories.



Q149 Tulip Siddiq: Jenny and Gemma, you both touched on the fact that you started getting involved in politics quite early on. My question is about the challenges that all of you faced. I will start with Jenny. Do you think the challenges women face in terms of entering politics become more prominent at candidate selection stage or do you think it was a challenge from the beginning when you first joined and started getting involved?

Jenny Willott: Not when I first joined. The Lib Dems just want anybody and everybody that can to deliver leaflets and get involved in campaigns, like every political party. I never faced any issues at all as an activist. There are challenges in the selection process in all the political parties. It can be particularly challenging the way the Lib Dems work, and I think Labour is the same, in that it is down to local parties and one member, one vote. Sometimes you have a bit of a tension between the local democracy and the right of the local party to choose who they want to represent them and the fact that can mean you end up with a very similar looking group of candidates, a lot of whom tend to be male, most of whom tend to be white and they tend to be all quite similar.

There is a bit of a conflict sometimes, tension between how you make sure the selection process is still democratic but that you actually get a much more diverse group of people coming through. I certainly faced far more challenges at the selection process than I did as an activist. I was a local councillor at a ludicrously young age before I came to Parliament and did not have many issues at local government selection because it is not as contentious somehow, and it is sort of seen as something that is okay for women to get involved with. Whereas at the parliamentary selection, I did face more challenges.

Gemma Doyle: I should say that my experience in politics has been largely positive. I am very conscious that that is not the same for all women so I would put that caveat on it. The real tensions do come at candidate selection stage. I was selected on an all-women shortlist. I would have stood whether it had been that or not, but that is where you do get real flashpoints and challenges for women in politics. Certainly in the Labour Party, because we use gender balance throughout a lot of our structures when we send delegates to conference etc, that helps to make sure there are women in all bits of our party. Certainly, when I was first involved in politics, if you looked around local government in Scotland, and I am sure in many other parts of the country, it was very male dominated. That is a big problem and parties need to look at how they ensure representation throughout their structures.

Q150 Tulip Siddiq: Flick, do you have anything to add about whether the challenges were greater when you first started your selection?

Flick Drummond: They were when I first started off, which was a long time ago. I only had two selections before I whizzed off to America and then came back. Things have changed dramatically now. The attitude of those selection committees was quite different towards women. I remember in the 1990s, they were saying, "Why is she not just chairman



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of the association?", whereas now you would not even think about that. It is really improving fast. I suspect that it will get better.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: In my selection for the seat, I was up against seven gentlemen. I managed to win the selection but the issues definitely exist. I believe very strongly in quotas if we want to change things because if we are starting from the point that people go through the same examinations, the same interviews, that they have to do to become candidates or party prospective candidates, we have to accept each and every one is good enough. Therefore, it is a matter of political will and the will of the political party how they want their candidates to look, so there is no reason why they could not be 50-50 in all candidates. We are all equal and all as good as each other.

Q151 **Tulip Siddiq:** That brings me neatly on to my next question. You talked about quotas, Jenny. Is there an initiative a political party could undertake to increase the number of women? Would you support quotas, for example?

Jenny Willott: Personally, I am in favour of all-women shortlists, which is not a very popular view in my political party. I have had a number of debates about it over the years, probably over the last 20 years. I am quite impatient. One of the phrases that Baroness Jenkin used earlier, that people expect it to happen by magic, is definitely how it feels a little bit. In my party, there has been a huge amount of effort put in over the years. There really, really has.

I was first selected as a candidate in 1999, which is an incredibly long time ago now, and here definitely has been progress. In every single election that I stood, 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015, there was an overwhelming majority of male candidates in the winnable seats in every single one of those elections. It may get a little bit better, but frankly the record of the Lib Dems is pretty dire on gender balance.

For a party that stands on a very strong platform for equality, it is just not good enough. Doing the behind-the-scenes work, and Jo Swinson in particular has done a huge amount of work in this particular area, we are just not getting change fast enough. I am too impatient. You need to get more women in there to show the difference it makes and to show what a benefit it brings. That helps generate change in the future. Personally, I am in favour of all-women shortlists.

Gemma Doyle: I am also in favour of all-women shortlists. If parties are using them, they need to be clear about the decision-making process around them. That would deal with some of the problems. The Labour Party should either have a randomised system or a clear set of criteria by which they choose which seat is an all-women shortlist and which is not. I also think we need to look at how we ensure gender balance in our mayoral candidates across the country. We are not seeing much diversity in those people and the people who lead our councils. We need



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some more initiatives. I am afraid I do not have all the answers but I suspect the panel we had before have lots of good ideas.

Flick Drummond: If we are desperate that is a good idea, but if you think about the people who are actually selecting, they want to have someone who is going to represent them, who most looks like them or who they want to look like their constituents. That is how they are choosing. They are choosing people who are the best fit for that constituency. It is not necessarily going to be a woman; it may be a man. We should allow them to choose for that reason.

Q152 **Tulip Siddiq:** Do you not think there is a danger that every single constituency will end up choosing a white man because of unconscious bias?

Flick Drummond: No, they are not at the moment. The move is very clearly towards women.

Q153 **Tulip Siddiq:** Does the fact that you have fewer female MPs in the Conservative Party than any other party demonstrate there must be some sort of initiative?

Flick Drummond: Yes. A lot of that is about supporting the candidates in the first place going for selection. I did about 11 selections. I was so nervous. That is where we need training for women to be able to stand up there, do the public speaking and have the confidence to be able to answer the questions. That is where we are falling down, certainly in my party, because a lot of the women perhaps have not had that experience before.

Q154 **Tulip Siddiq:** Did you say you went through 11 selections?

Flick Drummond: Yes.

Chair: Gosh, that was short.

Q155 **Tulip Siddiq:** The final question that I have most of you have touched on, do you want to comment on whether your political party is doing enough to increase the number of female MPs in Parliament? Because we are rushing through, I will go quickly for comments.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: If it were the case that the best person was chosen for the constituency, Parliament would not look the way it looks right now. The issue is the best people are not being chosen because we have been waiting for so long for things naturally to take the course of events, which has not happened. You need to take positive action if that is what you want to happen.

Secondly, in relation to political party work, I was the National Women and Equalities Convenor for the SNP for seven years, also during the period whilst I was an MP. We worked extremely hard and we have increased our female representation because we took positive action. Like all other politics parties, we have had to persuade our male and



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female membership. Let us not forget there are many men who are supportive of what we do and many women who are not supportive of what we do. We have to bring everyone along with us on the journey.

We have been very successful in appointing women's officers to every branch across the country to identify women who might want to come forward. We make sure that the support is available for them if there are any barriers or meetings they attend where men are overbearing and give a sense that it is their way or no way, and it is enshrined that they are going to be the next candidate, which happens so often. I feel very strongly not just about representation for women, but also our minority communities that have over a period of time got lost in translation. This is an issue that must be dealt with and dealt with quickly. When we are living now in a culture of racism and xenophobia and all of the prejudice that exists, women are absolutely being put off. Women in Parliament and women in colour in Parliament is not just good for women; it is good for society as a whole. Action needs to be taken by all political parties to ensure that void is dealt with.

Q156 Tulip Siddiq: Jenny, you said you feel maybe the Lib Dems are not doing enough. Is there anything else you want to add? This is about political parties helping women get into Parliament.

Jenny Willott: They have made huge strides. It is nearly 20 years since I was first selected. They have made significant changes to the process and it is much, much better than it was. Personally, I would like to see more positive action to make some really significant changes.

Gemma Doyle: I am proud that the Labour Party has been at the forefront of increasing women's representation in politics, but we cannot be complacent. As I say, it is about looking at the culture as well. I would love it if one day we do not need all-women shortlists. We need to work out how we get to a stage where perhaps we do not need them anymore, how we change the culture and how we would measure that. That might be the next stage of thinking.

Flick Drummond: I feel quite excited. The work that Baroness Jenkin has been doing has transformed it. Like Tasmina said, it is about educating the members too and educating the committees that are selecting the candidates. It is 100 degrees. You are preparing the candidates to be good in front of the selection committee, but you are also getting the committee to look at diversity and other aspects, not just someone who is standing there who they think might would be a good MP there and then, but one they can develop, particularly if you are selecting them a year or two in advance.

Q157 Tonia Antoniazzi: In your experience, what support from your party did you find the most useful and what further support would you like to have had when you stood?



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Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: I was in the unique position of having to be the person, as National Women's Convenor, who had to be alright all of the time for everybody else. That was very challenging because people forget to ask you how you are, if you are coping and if you need any support. Women are expected to be strong and to be able to fight and bat off everything. It is very difficult and very challenging.

I went for three seats and eventually was chosen for one. You like to have support available to you and it was absolutely there. Collectively, there were lots of women standing for election. After 2014 and the Scottish independence referendum, I was not anticipating a general election that we would be participating in in 2015. There was quite a rushed selection process and we had quite a lot to get through.

In saying that, the democratic act that happened in 2014 meant that a lot of women who felt so far removed from politics felt very strongly there was a place for them. We had the benefit of having lots of women come forward who had not come forward before. Support was there for people of likeminded positions, but political parties should not forget women should be asked, and everybody should be asked frequently how they are getting on and if they need any help. Becoming elected is just part of the process. When you get here, when you get into this establishment, you have to deal with a whole lot more, some of which we will come on to later in this session.

Jenny Willott: I had support in different ways in that before I stood for election I was really encouraged and pushed by various people, one of whom was Lembit Öpik who I was working for at the time. He really pushed his staff to stand for election. I went and ended up in this place. His press officer ended up in the European Parliament. Someone else ended up standing. He really encouraged the women who worked with him in particular to stand for election.

Conrad Russell, the late Lord Russell, took it upon himself to push young women who he thought would be potentially really good Members of Parliament, support them and encourage them and so on. He really encouraged me to stand for seats and put myself forward in a way I probably would not otherwise have done.

In practical terms, there were two things that the party did that made a real difference, one of which is financial. Going back to the point that Isabel was making earlier, I was very young when I was a candidate and I had no financial backing behind me. I did not have savings or anything like that. I ended up with the most incredible amount of debt by the time I got here. I stood in 2001 and did not win and the Party gave me a grant to help me in that election, which made the most incredible difference. I do not think I would have been able to come out the other end and survive, then stand again four years later had I not had that financial support.



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The other thing they did was they ran a programme that went on for a number of years where, for seats where there were female candidates, they would organise campaign weekends and send lots of people to come and help in that particular seat for that particular weekend. That gave the most amazing boost. When you are plugging away in the middle of winter, it is pouring down with rain, it is freezing cold and you are utterly fed up of knocking on doors, to have a weekend when you get people from all over the country coming along to give you a boost and help you is a real fillip. It really boosted the local party as well and keeps you going. Those are two of the things that made a real difference.

Gemma Doyle: In 2010, when I first stood I was selected quite late: six weeks before the election. I did not really have the formal support you might think from the party. I did, however, have three probably quite distinct networks that I built up over my time in the party over a number of years. Whilst I was a candidate, when I was trying to be a candidate and when I first came in here, those three networks made me feel reasonably comfortable here quite quickly. We and parties should try to recreate those networks for people where they do not exist as much as they can.

The 2015 election for Scottish Labour was very different to the 2010 election, which most of you will be aware of. All of the sitting MPs and new candidates in that election tried to give each other as much support as we could because it was a very, very difficult election for us. We were into a time where we were facing an awful lot of abuse and an unpleasant atmosphere on social media and elsewhere.

Flick Drummond: The support has changed dramatically, as I say, with Women2Win. In 2007 when I was selected in Portsmouth South there was very little support at all. By the time it came to 2010 it was a lot better. From a selection point of view, that had changed dramatically too. In 11 selections, nobody gave me any help with public speaking or preparation for any selections. It was literally by experience that I got better. That has changed now. We make sure that candidates are very much geared up towards the selection.

On the financial support, I am one of those who had to spend a lot of money. I had to move house, so there is stamp duty and solicitors' fees and everything. That really does mount up. Fortunately, my children did not need childcare but for younger women with children, it would be really nice. We get money for the campaign that we can spend on campaigning, but we do not get any money to support us as a person or to support us for childcare. You are expected to go out in the evenings, campaign, speak at dinners and things.

Particularly as a woman, as one example, when I was an MP they were complaining that I did not have a lot of people round for dinner parties and things. Apparently the last MP, who was male, and had a lovely wife who obviously liked cooking and they had lots of dinner parties. There is



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no way that my husband and myself who were working full time really had the energy or the time to do that.

Jenny Willott: Or the desire!

Flick Drummond: Or the desire, exactly. There was that culture we had to change to realise that when women are working in Parliament, they might not have time or the spare capacity to do those extra things.

Q158 **Angela Crawley:** I think we have covered this in quite a lot of detail, but if you have anything more that you want to add on about your experience of being a woman candidate in a local party, please feel free. I wanted to move forward to your experience of being an MP. We have not really covered that yet. From your experience, how would you sum up the culture in the House of Commons and how inclusive do you think the culture is?

Flick Drummond: I absolutely loved my two years here. I could not fault it. I was lucky that nobody bullied me, apart from the Whips occasionally because I wanted to vote one way. I thought it was a great job for women, too, because it is a very flexible career. You do not have to be here nine-to-five; you have to be here to vote, but if there is something going on and you need to be somewhere else, you can do that because you are your own boss. That was fantastic. The only problem is the voting hours, particularly on a Monday. 10 o'clock in the evening is hard. For people with younger children, it really should be a nine-to-five, rather than 11-to-seven or 2.30 to 10. I understand all the reasons behind it, but it is not very conducive to family life.

Gemma Doyle: As I said at the beginning, I had a broadly very positive experience here. There were one or two instances when I either received unwanted attention from a male colleague that was inappropriate or there was a pretty disgusting comment made when I was appointed as a shadow Defence Minister by another MP, but they were isolated instances. Perhaps because I have the confidence of having been around the Labour Party for such a long period of time—I should say none of those comments were from Labour members—they did not affect how I did the job.

I regret that I feel there is a bit of a narrative building up that this is a terrible place for women to come and work, either to be MPs or staff. In general, I do not think that is the case. I am aware of awful things that have happened to people that should not happen and should be dealt with. In general, this is an atmosphere where people come with lots of different skills and backgrounds—I wish it were a wider variety of backgrounds—and where you can do the job in lots of different ways and make a contribution. There are things that need to be dealt with, but in general I would want to send a message that this is a good place for people to come and work.



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Jenny Willott: It is quite interesting in that there are some real positives and there are some negatives. When I was first elected, which was quite a long time ago now, I did have quite a lot of inappropriate comments, probably more aimed at my age than the fact that I was a woman. I got repeatedly asked which MP I worked for.

Angela Crawley: I still get that.

Jenny Willott: I had lots of people making nice, friendly or positive comments about the skirt I was wearing, the colour of my hair or something, which they would not do if I was male and they probably would not have done it quite so much if I was older. It was a bit of a killer combination, being both young and female. I cannot comment if that is still the case because I am not here and I am older. I get fewer comments about things like that nowadays.

There are some challenges in the culture. While I was here I had two children. Having small children in Parliament is, in some ways, extremely difficult. Some of the things that Sarah Childs was talking about earlier about some of the reforms that are being put in place would make it much easier. There are a number of MPs, including the Chair of this Committee, who have received small children dumped on them as I ran into the voting lobby.

Chair: They were lovely.

Jenny Willott: Lots and lots of people have held my children while I voted, which is not really an ideal way of running an institution. The changes that are coming through are very, very welcome. Having said that, there is quite a supportive culture here in many ways. There were lots of MPs who were quite happy to take my kids and across party lines there is a lot more support between Members of Parliament than is often recognised from the outside. In some ways, you have the flexibility that Flick was mentioning, and particularly when you have small kids that is quite helpful. Once they go to school, it is a lot more challenging. There is a lot more support and a much more supportive culture than people realise.

Q159 **Angela Crawley:** Tas, I know you will have something to say about the culture of the House of Commons and how inclusive you felt it was in your time here. I think you will also agree there is something about the support of prospective MPs and supporting MPs when it comes to dealing with harassment and bullying in Westminster and you would have something specific to say about that.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: I do indeed. First of all, it is a huge privilege to represent people, in whichever parliament you might be in in the world, absolutely. It also has a challenge. I would first of all pay tribute to the House staff at the House of Commons who are absolutely fantastic and make everybody feel welcome regardless of where you come from. I was the first woman of colour in Scottish history ever to be



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elected to any parliament—the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament or indeed Westminster—so it was a very new thing for me, as a mother of four coming down here and with all the challenges that gave me.

I really enjoyed my time and embraced it fully, but there are challenges from the press for sure. I would speak in debates and I remember speaking in the one on whether or not we should participate in air strikes in Syria and all the next day's news was about, or certainly the *Daily Mail* decided to do a lovely pictorial about, what I was wearing as opposed to what I was saying. I find that very difficult because you give up so much of yourself, your family time and your life. Particularly for a Scottish MP or however far away you are from London, the distance it takes to get there to represent people, and you feel nobody is paying attention to what you are saying, but finding ways to criticise you. I find that really, really difficult to deal with.

From a Member support perspective, many of you who were in the Chamber at the time will remember that time when Sir Nicholas Soames actually woofed at me. He actually barked at me in the Chamber when I was saying something. I am sitting there as a new MP thinking, "What do I do here? Do I sit back and take it and say this is the way it is or do I say no, actually I am doing a disservice to the people I represent and women in general if I do not challenge it?" so I did and I challenged him. He said if I was offended he was sorry. I do not know why one would not be offended at being barked at. Then he went on to say it was a friendly canine salute. I have never heard anything like it in my life.

My point, and a point I wanted to make today, is women should expect each other, regardless of political parties, to speak up for each other when these things happen. I do not know what anybody did, apart from the press reports about how ridiculous it was. I am not sure which women of all political parties came together and said, "This is unacceptable". My challenge to the Committee is: what would you do if that happened again? If women are going to come forward and be in this atmosphere where these types of things still take place, we should at least offer them a guarantee that they will not be subjected to that kind of behaviour.

Q160 **Chair:** Tasmina, can I ask you, what do you think the Speaker should have done? The Speaker is in charge of what happens in the Chamber.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: The Speaker was entirely supportive because I went to the Speaker. I afforded the courtesy to Sir Nicholas Soames that he did not give to me so when I knew it was out of order, I went to the Speaker and said I would like to make a point of order. I was polite enough to write a note to Sir Nicholas Soames and pass it to the Government Whip to say, "Could you pass it to him to let him know I am going to mention what he said?" The Speaker offered me the opportunity to make that point.



Q161 **Chair:** That does not actually do anything.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: It did because it gave me the opportunity to make the point. Something I said in my maiden speech, Chair, was I wanted to make sure particularly BAME women felt they were able to speak in the environment of Westminster. I had every opportunity that was given to me by the Speaker to be able to do that, including being on a variety of different commissions.

I was involved in the Speaker's Democracy Award, in the selection of the new Serjeant-at-Arms, the first BAME Serjeant-at-Arms in the history of the House of Commons. I have had massive support from the Speaker and I certainly do not have any criticism in that respect because whenever I needed a platform to voice my concerns, of which there were many, it was provided to me by him.

Q162 **Eddie Hughes:** What difference do you think proxy voting would have made to your life as an MP?

Flick Drummond: To me personally, I think I voted 98% of the time. I did not need it because my family is all grown up so I was in a very fortunate position but I can imagine for other people of families, it would be really, really helpful.

Gemma Doyle: I presume that is specifically in the context of baby leave, no in general proxy voting. Is that what you meant?

Eddie Hughes: You can interpret it either way.

Gemma Doyle: It would enable MPs to have a more normal family life. However, for those of us who represent or did represent seats outside of London, it would depend on whether your family are based here or not. There are very few or there certainly were historically very few women with young children representing Scottish seats because it is extremely difficult to have to fly up and down and spend all that time travelling every week. I would say it could make a difference but it would be in the context that it would make a difference for a small number of people. In terms of baby leave, yes, it is very important to do.

Jenny Willott: It is not just Scottish MPs who have long distances to travel. I was in south Wales and I traipsed up and down between Cardiff and London with one and then two children every week. It is difficult. Proxy voting would have made quite a significant difference to me at various points.

Just before the birth of my second child, two days before I went into labour, I had to come all the way back here in order to vote in a three-line whip. I could not drive because I was literally nine months pregnant. My mum had to drive me and my two-year-old all the way here in order to vote and then drive me all the way back to Cardiff again. The ability to not do that and instead to have had someone voting on my behalf would have been quite a nice change.



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Chair: Presumably you could have gone into labour at that point.

Jenny Willott: I could. That was why my mum drove me because I was absolutely determined that my son was not going to be born in London. I want him playing for Wales when he is older.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: I would add that I am absolutely in favour of anything that makes it easier for Parliament to operate and easier for people to feel they can participate in Parliament. It is not a good look for Parliament for the public to see people being wheeled in unwell to vote. It is really not who we are. People look at Westminster, look at it on the television and it does not do us a good service at all. Anything that we can do to make sure people are not put in dreadful positions should be welcomed.

Q163 **Vicky Ford:** We are always multitasking as you know, ladies, in this job. It has been fascinating to listen to your experiences about the route here. Back to the selection process and inappropriate questions, both in the House of Commons and back to the selection process, were there any times during that selection or that interview where you felt there were questions that were inappropriate? If so, were you able to raise them at the time? Were you able to raise them in the meeting? Did you get support from the local party? Were you able to raise them in the national party?

Flick Drummond: I must have been very lucky because I do not remember having any inappropriate questions or if I did I would have dealt with them very solidly. I cannot really answer that question, I am afraid.

Gemma Doyle: No inappropriate questions. We have a system for hustings in the Labour Party where every candidate is asked the same questions in a formal setting. I do not recall being asked anything I could call inappropriate outside of that setting either.

Jenny Willott: I did. It is fair to say it was quite a long time ago now. It is nearly 20 years ago and the processes have changed. In a hustings meeting, not in the constituency that I represented, in a selection beforehand in a different seat, I was asked, "People around here will not vote for women so what are you going to do about it?" to which I pointed out the MP in the next-door constituency was a woman.

Also, in the same constituency when I knocked on the door of a member of the local party, he took one look at me, I explained who I was and he said, "I am not voting for a bloody woman" and slammed the door in my face. That has changed a bit. I never experienced anything like that in Cardiff in my constituency when I was getting selected or during elections, actually. Our processes have changed internally in the Lib Dems to make sure you do not have questions like that.



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Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: In the SNP, if there are a number of candidates going for a particular seat you will face hustings as well and members ask questions but I never faced any inappropriate questions at all. It is one member, one vote so all of the people who are members of that constituency will have an opportunity to vote for you if they so wish. Every candidate is given a membership list and people's phone numbers. It is up to you to get on with the job. I phoned everybody. That is exactly what I did. I said, "I would like you to vote for me" and I told them why I would like them to vote for me.

Q164 **Vicky Ford:** If you had some sort of inappropriate question, or when it happened to you, Jenny, did you feel that you could raise it with your party? Did your party support you?

Jenny Willott: It was in a hustings meeting that was chaired and moderated and so on. I kind of kicked up a bit of a stink afterwards and I got an apology from the chair who allowed the question to be asked, which I do not think he should have done. We did change the processes afterwards so the party was aware that there were issues and do something about it.

Flick Drummond: I would have raised it immediately and said, "Is this an appropriate question for me?" Of course, it would have alienated then the selection panel. That is the problem. It is real fine balance.

Vicky Ford: This is the last of our set questions. I wondered if there was anything you wanted to comment on before we all go to PMQs.

Chair: I think Sarah had a supplementary.

Q165 **Sarah Champion:** You were asked about the questions you were asked. I wonder if you could comment about the structural selection process and hustings. I ask specifically because of a former Labour woman MP. When we do our hustings, everyone has to stay in the room and she was breastfeeding at the time. She was told that if she left the room to breastfeed her child, who was not allowed in but was in the car park with someone, she would lose her space.

The other women in the all-woman shortlist covered for her so she could go and breastfeed her child. Did you come across any structural things about the timings of the meeting, the locations or anything like that during the selection hustings?

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: Certainly my experience was that the timings were agreed with everybody. Everyone made sure those who were in charge of the process that those who were the prospective candidates could attend that particular meeting.

I would like to think the SNP have reached a stage where people do not ask people to do really dumb, stupid, unacceptable things anymore because they would face the wrath of everybody if they do that. We have very much moved away from that. It was up to the candidates to agree



amongst themselves if they wanted to be on the panel altogether and listen to everybody's answers or if they wanted to go one by one. It was very much done on a consensual basis, which is the best way to deal with anything.

It is almost more difficult than fighting an election. You will probably know this yourself, Sarah, when you have colleagues you are up against, people who you know, respect and have the same political viewpoints as. We should not underestimate the support people should be given in the selection process for that very reason. People will take sides because people will have their preferred candidate and it is quite hard to see your party in a different light where there are people in your party who do not support you on a particular issue. No, my experience and the experience of all of those candidates I know, particularly women who I have had first-hand knowledge of, has all been very positive.

Jenny Willott: To pick up on the point Tasmina was just saying, internal selections are actually much more difficult than an election itself because people are judging you on who you are as a person and choosing whether you will be the best candidate.

When you are in an election, you are representing a party and you have a lot more support behind you. Internal selections can be far more bruising but the way we deal with it is very similar to what Tasmina was saying: the dates are all agreed, the times are agreed and the processes are discussed between the candidates. There is no way someone would not be allowed to go and breastfeed a child. It is done far more by consensus and agreement in order to make sure it works for everybody and nobody is excluded at that point.

Gemma Doyle: I did not come up against any sort of structural problems in the way you have outlined, Sarah. We all know that politics takes up an awful lot of your time and that is a challenge for everyone and has to be balanced against the rest of your responsibilities.

Flick Drummond: The guidelines are quite clear in the Conservative Party so that you know how the selection process is going to go and you have to adjust your timetable accordingly. I do not think there is any consensus amongst the candidates. Certainly if you did have a problem, you would speak to the person organising it. I am sure they would accommodate whatever is needed to be done.

Q166 **Sarah Champion:** On that, I love your idea that you agree what time it is going to be. Do you have that sort of situation?

Flick Drummond: No, we do not. That is a really good idea. I might suggest to our party that we do have that so all the candidates can talk together and decide how it is going to move forward, but I have not been for selection, of course, for a long time so I do not know whether it has changed or not.



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Q167 **Chair:** We are going to close with one final question. You have all been in this place. You have all represented your constituents. Some of you have held ministerial office. I wanted to hear from you as a final comment, what was your real high point from being here? What is the thing you are really proudest of having achieved?

Flick Drummond: Being on this Select Committee, obviously. I really enjoyed being on this committee because we did achieve an awful lot. It then has an offshoot that I did: the Women and Work All Party Parliamentary Group with Jess Phillips. We achieved quite a lot, particularly in getting older women back into work. I want to say thank you to 50:50 and the other people here because they are making a huge difference as well. The difference between, as I said, when I first started out on the journey and now is huge. You really feel that support behind you.

Gemma Doyle: Before I was shadow Defence Minister, we had not, as far as anyone can work out, had an MP who had been either a Government or opposition defence spokesperson. We had had a Baroness, Ann Taylor, in the Lords, which was fantastic but not on in the House of Commons Chamber. My absolute high point came in the closing days of the 2015 campaign where I knocked on someone's door and they dragged me into the house. You are usually getting an earful, but we had managed to help them have a bannister rail installed on the stairs on his house so he could get up and down in his house. It is about the small things like that where you can make a big difference to people's lives.

Jenny Willott: I agree with Gemma that a lot of the satisfaction comes from changing people's lives on a one-to-one basis. The thing that I was proudest about that probably nobody else noticed was that I was the first female MP from a Welsh constituency to attend the Cabinet. I think I am still the only one.

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: For me, it was being the first BAME woman from Scotland to be in Parliament, the work I did with the various people in Parliament and commissions I served on, and getting to know so many people where, although we will have different political views, in the main people are here for all of the right, good and honourable reasons. My favourite bit was after I had spoken in an International Men's Day debate, perhaps in 2016, where I won the award thereafter in the press or some press of "toxic feminist of the year", a badge I wear with pride.

Chair: That is a great note to end on. On this really historic day, 100 years on from women first being able to stand for election, and speaking as the 265th woman to ever be elected to this place, I am hugely proud to chair this committee and really, really pleased to be able to welcome back some former colleagues who I hope perhaps will become colleagues again in the future.

I hope that hearing their reminiscences and also their experience has given people in the gallery today some real food for thought about the



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challenges, but also the immense opportunities of being a female member of the House of Commons. It is something we are very conscious of. We would also like to echo comments made about 50:50 Parliament and all the work they are doing to try and help make sure we get even more women elected at the new election. Thank you very much.