

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: [Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit](#)
HC 2267

Tuesday 16 July 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 16 July 2019.

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Members present: Mrs Maria Miller (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Vicky Ford; Eddie Hughes.

Questions 83–131

Witnesses

[I](#): Charles Walker MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee, House of Commons.

[II](#): Sir Paul Beresford MP, Chair of the Administration Committee, House of Commons.

[III](#): Sir Bernard Jenkin MP, Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, House of Commons.

Examination of witness

Witness: Charles Walker MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee, House of Commons.

Chair: I welcome our witness today, and anybody who is watching online or in the Public Gallery. This is the second session of our inquiry into a gender-sensitive Parliament, in which we are focusing on the actions of the House of Commons and on what it is doing to achieve that aim.

We have a series of three conversations today. The first is with Charles Walker, Chair of the Procedure Committee. On behalf of our Committee, I thank him for taking the time to be with us and take part in our session. We have just four questions, so we will keep it very tight.

Q83 **Eddie Hughes:** How important do you think procedural change will be to implementing the gender-sensitive Parliament recommendations?

Mr Walker: Procedurally, I think the Procedure Committee has done a very good job outside the report—particularly in proxy voting, which there was some delay in introducing, as you are aware. My Committee unanimously agreed a report, promoted it and held the Government to account. Finally proxy voting was introduced, which will hopefully mean that more women feel that being a Member of Parliament is a vocation for them.

As far as the report that you refer to is concerned, I am not entirely sure what we can do procedurally to advance its recommendations. There are some things we can do that are not necessarily related to the report—I think some of our recommendations around reforming Friday sittings would be useful for family life, for example. I don't think we should sit on Fridays; I think we could change the way we do private Members' Bills so that we take private Member's Bill business on Wednesday and Thursday evenings. That is where I think we could make some difference.

As Chair of the Procedure Committee, I have also conducted a couple of inquiries into sitting hours of the House. There might be some scope for changing sitting hours, but I am not entirely sure whether tinkering with them will actually make this a more gender-friendly Parliament.

Q84 **Eddie Hughes:** Tinkering might not, but maybe something more substantial would.

Mr Walker: I am not entirely sure how that would work. If you live in the home counties, as I do, changing sitting hours is of some advantage, but what if you are commuting 200, 300 or 400 miles? I do not see how changing sitting hours will necessarily improve the lot of women particularly in this place—they will still have to leave home on Monday and will invariably not get home until Thursday evening. Changing sitting hours could be of some advantage to Members of Parliament within commuting



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distance, but for those Members of Parliament who have to travel significant distances to get here and are required to spend the week here, I am not sure whether it would deliver a meaningful improvement.

- Q85 **Vicky Ford:** There were two recommendations in the audit on that. I completely agree with you that some Members who live further away were saying, "I don't mind working long hours when I am here", but one recommendation was for parents with children locally was to make it standard that Committees did not start their meetings before 9.30 am, so that parents would at least be able to see their kids and do the school run in the morning, given that it is often very rare that they see them in the evening.

Mr Walker: And the Liaison Committee could decide to do that—it would not be a matter for the Procedure Committee.

We try to have set hours, and we know what they are: 2.30 on Mondays, 11.30 on Tuesdays, 10.30 on Wednesdays and 9.30 on Thursdays. The sitting hours of the House are something that the House could change. We can do a report; we will canvass Members of Parliament and ask them whether they are content with the sitting hours or whether they feel that some change might be required on certain days. But the sitting times of Select Committees would be for the Liaison Committee, of which Maria and I are members. Personally, I think that bringing them in line with the sitting hours of the House is a good idea.

If you are talking about Bill Committees and Standing Committees, that is something that procedurally we could look at, and that the usual channels could look at. I have not thought about it at great length, but I can see advantages in bringing them in line with the sitting hours of the House, although it would make it more difficult for the people on those Bill Committees to attend Question Time in the morning or on Monday afternoons.

- Q86 **Vicky Ford:** There was a very specific recommendation that Committees—Select Committees, for example—should not start before 9.30 am, say.

Mr Walker: That is for the Liaison Committee. I know, having sat on Bill Committees, that they can start at 8.55 am.

- Q87 **Vicky Ford:** The second recommendation from the audit was to look at ways to decrease the unpredictability of what happens in the Chamber. The lack of being able to predict the day ahead was commented on by a lot of people—particularly the number of urgent questions that come up and then throw people's diaries. Have you looked at that?

Mr Walker: Yes, but the sitting hours of the House are, in the main, predictable, aren't they? We occasionally sit later because Government business and the usual channels demand it, but they are predictable. I know that they start at 2.30 pm on Monday, 11.30 am on Tuesday, 10.30 am on Wednesday and 9.30 am on Thursday, so they are predictable, and we know when they will end, within reason. Having decided that we would



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have fixed end times, we should probably try to stick to them as closely as possible.

The issue is really where votes fall within that day, but it is a working day, and we know that the working day is seven and a half hours. Would having fixed voting times make it easier for people to manage their work diaries? It might do—we could have more meetings; we could find more reasons not to be in the Chamber—but I go back to the point that I am not sure whether tinkering with the voting hours of the House, or having a fixed hour, will address the main question around creating a work environment that is more conducive to allowing women to consider a vocation in Parliament. Again, if you are traveling from hundreds of miles away, the voting hour is not of huge concern.

- Q88 **Vicky Ford:** I do not think that that is what the gender-sensitive audit actually said. It asked, for example, whether there is a way to manage urgent questions.

Mr Walker: But what is it trying to achieve? I do not understand what it is trying to achieve.

- Q89 **Chair:** More certainty, I think.

Mr Walker: But we have certainty. We know when the sitting day starts.

- Q90 **Chair:** You say that you don't think that would address the issue of encouraging more women to come into Parliament and stay in Parliament. What do you think would address that?

Mr Walker: I think we have to look at the fact that women tend to be the primary carers for their families—for their children, but also for their parents—so I think we should give Fridays back. I don't think we should sit on Friday. I know it is only 13 Fridays, but I don't think we should do it. I also think that we have to look again, I am afraid, at the way that IPSA structures its allowances, particularly in relation to women.

I do not think that you can just look at this and say that you will improve the overall environment for women in Parliament by changing when we have votes. I do not think that that is the main issue. I think that, actually, a vocation in Parliament is a pretty unattractive prospect for many women. I think being hundreds and hundreds of miles away from home is difficult, as is invariably ending up living in a suitcase or having your expenses pored through by your local newspaper to see how many bedrooms you rent for your small children. I think those have a much greater impact on turning people off this place than knowing that they might be voting at 5 pm or possibly at 6.30 pm.

- Q91 **Eddie Hughes:** The House of Commons and House of Lords Commissions have published a joint response to the audit. Has your Committee been involved in the House of Commons response? If so, how?

Mr Walker: No, we have not been involved. We were asked to take a look at some things. I am more than happy to look at what we can do. I wish the Government had taken seriously our report on private Members' Bills.



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I am happy to look at sitting hours, because that falls within the remit of the Procedure Committee. However, a number of things that people felt were procedural actually fell within the remit of the Liaison Committee.

Perhaps if we had a clearer steer from the Commission and the Government on, say, voting times we would be more willing to do it. We tend to do a report when there is a request to do so. For example, on proxy voting, although the House passed a resolution that it wanted to introduce it and to ask us to look at it, I had already received a letter a few days earlier from the Leader of the House to ask whether we would take an interest in it. If we feel that there is a willingness, in the main, on behalf of the House and the Government to at least think about change, we think it is probably a good idea to do a report. If we feel it is just a fishing expedition that will absorb a huge amount of our time and never see the light of day, never get debated and never appear on the Floor of the House, it is probably a less attractive prospect for our Select Committee, as I am sure it is for your Select Committees and some of the things that you might find yourself doing, which you know will not see the light of day or get Government, or Opposition, buy-in.

- Q92 **Chair:** It is interesting. I would like to move on from that point. I think you said in your letter of response to the Commission and to the Speaker that you would be prepared to undertake an inquiry on the scheduling of the business of the House, should the House of Commons Commission consider that there is merit in the proposal. There would need to be a clear commitment from the Government and the usual channels to the principle of it. Do you think that those are the right triggers for work in these areas? I reflect on the number of times the former Leader of the House has said to us in debates that it is for Members to make these decisions, yet the mechanisms and channels for Members to make their voices heard are sometimes quite opaque. What do you think should be the trigger to address these issues and others?

Mr Walker: I have huge respect for the previous Leader of the House, who was fantastic, and I greatly enjoyed working with her on proxy voting. I have great respect for the current Leader, but I have to be honest that sometimes Government is very good at deflecting things away from itself. Voting times and the scheduling of business are entirely the responsibility of Government and the usual channels. Your aspirations to get fixed voting hours and more certainty in the day can be delivered only if it is embraced by our Whips' office, the Government of the day and the Labour Whips' office. As you know, Chair, some of the biggest small C conservatives in this place reside in the Opposition Whips office. I will not stand in the way of fixed voting hours, but they have to want to do it. I keep going back to proxy voting. There was a huge effort to resist it, but in the end it became an overwhelming demand from the Floor of the House for change.

- Q93 **Chair:** You are right. It is a very complex matrix of individuals that affects change in procedure. As the Procedure Committee, you are very happy to work on whatever is required, but you need to have clarity that it will be well received. Would that be fair?



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Mr Walker: It is. You have the Government of the day and a Government in waiting. They are very reluctant to make any procedural change that might lead to their losing control and power within the Chamber of the House of Commons. Even if they cannot directly identify what power or control they might be losing, they are still reluctant to do something that inadvertently leads in a year's time to their coming across a circumstance in which they say, "Damn, if we hadn't made that change, we wouldn't be in the hole that we're in." Do you see what I mean? They are very risk and change-averse.

Q94 **Chair:** In our first evidence session, when we had the management of the House of Commons in front of us, I was struck by how complex the management matrix of this place is. It is something that does not make this any easier, in terms of having either a strategy for management affecting change, or accountability on delivering recommendations and reports such as this. In your role as Chair of the Procedure Committee, rather than as a Member of Parliament, could you reflect on anything about the management structures that might need attention if we are to get these sorts of recommendations through? Obviously, you have said the usual channels. Is there anything about the management of the place?

Mr Walker: Things happen at a glacial pace in Parliament—you know that as well as I do. Bluntly, if you want to make this vocation more attractive for women to come into, there has to be a corporate will and desire to do so. By "corporate", I mean it has to be the Commission, the Government and the Opposition; it has to be a collective enterprise. I cannot really put my finger on it, but I am almost certain that the way we do things at the moment does deter many good and able women from pursuing elected office in this place. It is no good assigning responsibility for that failure—and it is a collective failure of Parliament—to any specific group within the structure of this place. Ultimately, collectively, we can change it, but there has to be a collective will to change it and I do not believe that exists yet.

Q95 **Chair:** How do you generate a collective will or enterprise for change, in your experience? How would you best effect that collective will to come about?

Mr Walker: We are doing it piece by piece. If I had that answer, I would give it to you. I am a bit of an old stick-in-the-mud at times. I am a small and large-C conservative. When this whole idea of proxy voting was floated, I thought "I am not sure I am very comfortable with that idea. What's going on here? Hello, hello?" Actually, when I looked at it and received evidence from colleagues—both men and women—I decided it was the right thing to do. I decided that I like having more female colleagues in this place. I think it is a very good idea for women to come here and not feel they have to give up or delay having a family or not have a family at all to get here. I was persuaded of the case very quickly. It is a process of change, isn't it? Hopefully most people will come to accept that change, but they will come at a different pace.



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What you are doing, what happened with proxy voting, what colleagues are doing, are slowly changing the environment here. The Childs report is changing the environment. It is not going to happen really quickly, but I hope it happens a little quicker than at the moment. It is about collective responsibility.

- Q96 **Chair:** What role do you think the House of Commons Commission has or could have in articulating the notion of a collective will for change?

Mr Walker: I think it becomes easier for the House of Commons Commission to do it if we, from all sides and corners and genders of Parliament, say that is what we want to happen. I think the Speaker commissioned the Childs report, although it was an independent report, but there is an awareness that, as parliamentarians—I keep going back to it—we tend to be quite small C conservatives. We are reluctant to give up traditions. The Commission probably often reflects where Parliament is. If we get ahead of the Commission, it will quickly catch up and the change you are seeking will accelerate.

- Q97 **Vicky Ford:** I want to come back to the predictability of Parliament, because this was not just about predicting voting times. I sat on the audit and we took a lot of evidence from staff and Members, of both sexes. Everybody understands that this is a fixed seven-hour day, but within that day, to know how you are going to schedule your day is very unpredictable in this place. You know a week in advance what the main things are on the agenda, but then you get a number of things that change your agenda at the last minute, especially with urgent questions.

The particular request I remember from the audit was whether we can look at that level of unpredictability. For example, this afternoon, we have got a debate on the first 1,000 days of a child's life. There will be lots of mums and dads who want to speak in that debate and they will have set up their agenda specifically to do that. Then, if you get a lot of last-minute urgent questions, it can fling everything out of control at the last minute. We all know things come up urgently, but the question was whether there can be a consideration of how other Parliaments manage that sort of issue. Are we doing as much as we can to make it predictable?

Mr Walker: That is a business management issue. One could construct an argument that urgent questions could come at the end of the day, not at the beginning. I am going to argue against myself and say that you could have a fixed end point and we should try and keep to that as far as possible. However, there is also an argument that you could have a fixed end point for voteable business, and after that point you could have urgent questions because, as we accept, many colleagues are away from home and are here in the evenings. You could have urgent questions at the end of the day—whether that would somewhat diminish their urgency will be for the House to consider. That is a business change that could be considered by Members of Parliament.

I accept that I get frightfully frustrated when a four or five-hour debate is curtailed and ends up being a one-hour debate. Let us be honest, the

Whips Office is fairly good at playing those games—tabling three of four of their own Government’s statements if they want to knock some business out or restrict the time for that business to be debated on the Floor. That is a legitimate area, as all the areas you suggested are.

Chair: Charles, thank you so much for coming before the Committee. Could we continue the conversations between our Committees as we pull our report together and when we issue our report?

Mr Walker: Absolutely.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Paul Beresford MP, Chair of the Administration Committee, House of Commons.

Chair: We will now move on to our second witness. Sir Paul Beresford is Chair of the Administration Committee. Thank you, Sir Paul, for joining us. We have a similar set of questions for you.

Sir Paul Beresford: May I make a statement first? I am hoping that, out of this, my Committee can get some help from your Committee in some of the areas where we have considerable difficulty.

We do not make rules—we are an Administration Committee. *[Interruption.]* Sorry—I turned it off but it turns itself on. Four males, four females and one ethnic minority immigrant—me—look at catering and banqueting, visitor services and retail, digital services—this is quite important for men and women, because we are looking at the House of Commons and the constituency—as well as the broadcasting of Parliament, education and public outreach and engagement, rules of access and use of facilities and the management of the buildings. It is an advisory role.

We have, would you believe, 18,800 card-carriers. At any time during the main part of the day there are probably 3,000 people on the estate, using it and working in it. From the point of view of looking after women, in this building we have a family room. The problem with this building that we have found time and again is that it is Victorian; it was built as a gentlemen’s club and it works as a gentlemen’s club.

Trying to bring in simple things such as toilets for women has been quite difficult. When trying to change rooms, we had difficulty with a severely disabled MP who we had to find special rooms for, because of the nature of the building. R&R is a possibility and I hoped that you could make that point in your report, so the shadow R&R will wake up to that, if it has not already. We have a nursery and back-up services. We are looking at



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expanding that as is suitable, but demand is not fantastically high. It does offer services right through to 10.30 in the evening.

The digital side is also important for women, particularly for security. You will be aware of the trolls and hammering that women in particular have got on the internet, through attacks from phishing. We have put in effort to try to protect Members. That works both here within the perimeter and in the constituency.

The other big problem we have is IPSA. We have an ongoing dialogue with IPSA. General agreement does not happen, and we have just written a very strong letter to IPSA. Part of it is, to quite a large degree, the way in which IPSA treats women. The simplest example is taxis at night, when many women on my Committee have pointed out that they feel under threat. They want to go home before the 10 o'clock deadline and they virtually have to get a certificate from the police so they can get the payment for the taxi to go home. I think that is ludicrous. The same goes for travel. Many MPs—particularly women—will book a first-class ticket long in advance so that it is cheaper than the standard ticket, so they have space, they are left alone and they can work. IPSA publishes that. When the MP gets back, the details are published, and then a local constituent—an aggravating individual—will have a go at them because they used business-class or first-class tickets instead of ordinary tickets, even though it was at a lower cost. We have a long list of stuff that we are sending to IPSA. If I sent you and the Committee the letter we are sending, you might be able to look at it and possibly have some beneficial effect on it.

Chair: Thank you very much. That is a really helpful outline.

Q98 **Eddie Hughes:** Do you see a role for the Administration Committee in scrutinising actions to implement the recommendations of the gender-sensitive Parliament report?

Sir Paul Beresford: Yes, but mostly I see that is going to have to come from your Committee. My personal feeling is that this Committee is the one that should be doing it—that should be looking at it and advising us. You have the knowledge, and you can utilise other Committees to do that.

Q99 **Eddie Hughes:** You have previously looked at provision for new Members, including instruction and training. Is there a role for your Committee in scrutinising actions to create an inclusive culture, for example in relation to training on the Behaviour Code, and on bullying and harassment, as part of Members' induction?

Sir Paul Beresford: Not a major role. I think that really comes from the Commission. The Commission needs to own it and move on it. In fact—telling stories out of school—that was discussed at the Commission last night.

Q100 **Eddie Hughes:** But your Committee has looked at provision for new Members, including induction and training.



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Sir Paul Beresford: Yes, but what we look at is, when new Members come in, teaching them where to stand, where to sit, where to get advice, where to put in questions and so on.

Q101 **Eddie Hughes:** Isn't it true that a natural extension of that would be things like the Behaviour Code? This is not just a point of functionally where to stand and how to submit a question but the idea of what is deemed acceptable behaviour in this place.

Sir Paul Beresford: Yes. Explaining it, teaching it and so on is part of it, but your question was about monitoring it.

Q102 **Eddie Hughes:** No. Do you think there is a role for your Committee in terms of setting the induction programme to include—

Sir Paul Beresford: Completely, yes.

Q103 **Eddie Hughes:** Finally, do you have any other comments or observations with regard to IPSA, other than the ones you made, such as those about taxis and first-class travel?

Sir Paul Beresford: Let me pick on just one other thing. There are more, and I will put them in the letter. When I came to the House, we barely had policemen on the door, let alone policemen with guns. Now, we need them. The MPs who are picked on are almost entirely women. It is not illogical that if someone is going to upbraid an MP, they will pick not on someone of my size and antagonistic attitude but on women or MPs' families. It took an enormous struggle to get IPSA to agree to pay for locks and so forth to make constituency houses and offices safer. We have moved on to other areas, and we have been trying to persuade IPSA that it might be appropriate to put CCTV in many of those homes. IPSA's requirement is that it has to have a statement from the police, and the police won't give a statement unless there has been an incident. If someone comes down and bashes my wife's door, or a female MP's door, to get in, that is the incident, but it is too late—it has happened. I am trying as best I can, through both my Committee and the Security Committee, to get a change in attitude to that. One of these days, as we had recently with Ms Cox, we will have not just an incident but another murder.

Q104 **Chair:** May I ask a supplementary question on that? The IPSA organisation is there to regulate the money that is given to Members of Parliament and to scrutinise it. It has been set up in that way. I am sure that other Members of Parliament in other countries will have similar payment regimes. Have you done any work to understand how they also struggle with ensuring that the payment regimes in place reflect the reality of a Member of Parliament's life? Or have they got around that in some way? It seems to me to be particularly difficult to understand, for my constituents, why IPSA will potentially be seen as obstructive in things that many businesses would take for granted, such as ensuring that staff working late have a safe mode of transport home. I am not necessarily talking here just about MPs, but also the House of Commons view on parliamentary staff who need to go home. Most people would see



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taking a taxi at 11 o'clock at night as being important for all staff. Have any other parliaments looked at this, as far as you are aware?

Sir Paul Beresford: I don't know if any other parliaments have done so. I put your question round the other way: the difficulty we have is in getting them to understand where we are, why we are, why we do these things, why we don't like our rail ticket expenditure to be published in quite that way, and their reliability on falling back on their statutory position, and the fact that they are saving the taxpayer.

Q105 **Chair:** In our first evidence session, we had the House of Commons management in front of us, and we heard evidence about how the strategy for and accountability of the House of Commons operates in practice. What is your view of that? I am not sure if you saw or were able to see the session, but that doesn't matter. Do you think that the management systems here are as they should be? Should there be any change?

Sir Paul Beresford: You've got to recognise that we are in a democracy, and that is why we have the complications of effectively two management boards. We have the officials and we have the Commission. It does operate, but what it does not do is be as open or as clear as it should be. It is not explained in such a way that the public or MPs can easily understand it. Again, this letting out of our secrets is recognised by the Commission. It was a bolt of lightning to them, helped on by a few of us yesterday. They are arranging for a big think-tank, and an awayday to look at it and look at it again and come forward with recommendations. Why we have to go on an awayday I don't know. At least two of you on this Committee have, by stirring on the Floor of the House, got some positive results.

Q106 **Chair:** You are a member of the Commission by dint of your role as the Chair of your Committee. You have an insider's track on it, unlike the rest of us. From what you have said, do you feel that there is room for a review of the way that body works, so that it is clearer as to how it oversees the management of the House of Commons?

Sir Paul Beresford: That is the intention of the awayday.

Chair: That is the intention. That is helpful.

Sir Paul Beresford: Or one of the intentions of the awayday.

Q107 **Chair:** One of the intentions. Brilliant. I want to pick up on something else you just said. You said that there was a "bolt of lightning". What do you mean by that? What was the "bolt of lightning"? It was a realisation of what?

Sir Paul Beresford: A realisation pushed by a few Members, and the remaining ones tagging along and agreeing. No names.

Q108 **Chair:** A realisation of what?

Sir Paul Beresford: A realisation of some of the points made by you: that we need to be more open, that people within the House and outside the



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House don't quite understand how we work, and so on. Going back to my own Committee, one of our biggest problems is to get anybody in the House of Commons to understand. When we send out press releases and so on, they are not read. There is a simple reason why they are not read: on a busy day, you can get up to 1,000 emails. We have got to find a way of getting it across. What I got my Committee to agree was that we put out a two, three, four, five, six-page leaflet every second week that some people read. Have any of you read it? Getting it out for people to look at is really difficult. People do not understand. If you walk in and it's been a day where 38 degrees have decided to have a go at you and you turn your computer on and there are 1,000 emails, a little email from me saying, "This is what we do in the House of Commons" doesn't get noticed.

Q109 Chair: But doesn't that point you towards a changing structure? It is pointing you towards that, in some respects. In the same way that you do not expect people to assiduously follow everything on your Committee, we do not here, either. People who are interested will follow the work of the Committee, but the problem is that the work of your Committee has a bearing on absolutely every aspect of the running of the House. It is difficult, isn't it, when you have got obligations that impact on Members every day, yet it is, as you say, difficult to engage people because of pressure of work.

Sir Paul Beresford: No, because it works. What it doesn't do is explain what it is doing to others, and the interlocking between the two Committees, finance and admin and the Audit Committee—and also the role of the two outsiders, the lay people there, who are very sharp auditors.

Q110 Chair: When do you expect the outcome of your deliberations, in terms of the future workings of the Commission?

Sir Paul Beresford: I am not anticipating a time. We have got a thing called a recess coming up and I think we might have some interesting times between now and whenever.

Q111 Chair: So could I maybe suggest that we can write to the Commission to ask them for a little more detail on the timings of those reviews? It would be useful for the Committee to know that. It is probably inappropriate for me to press you on that.

Sir Paul Beresford: To save my skin, perhaps you would wait until there's an announcement on it, so that I haven't given it away that that is what is being discussed.

Q112 Chair: No problem.

Q113 Vicky Ford: We need to find a way to make the announcement other than through the email system.

Q114 Chair: Just to finish off, obviously you are aware of the IPU report—the gender-sensitive Parliament report—and the many and different recommendations that it has put forward. For your Committee, which do you think should be prioritised over the next year?



Sir Paul Beresford: Which report?

Chair: The gender-sensitive Parliament report.

Sir Paul Beresford: I think the things that I was talking about—the recognition of providing facilities, and so on, given the actual time that women spend here with families, and I include the elderly as well—we have got a number of ideas that we are going to be discussing and bringing in, such as extra support, and bringing in the opportunity for card-carriers to be members of the family, or the team that are looking after them. That is absolutely vital and we have got to bring it in.

What I did not really touch on, though I started on it, is the difficulty we have got with the public view of us. The reports that have come out are vital: we need them, we have got to act on them and all the rest of it; but they do not give the reputation of many MPs, or MPs in general, the flavour that there ought to be. That puts people off coming here. I have touched on the security aspect; that is quite worrying. I have talked to people—you know that in the past I have tried to encourage people to come in as MPs and candidates and they are put off because of all the things you have mentioned: all the difficulties of the hours, of looking after the family and children, and also of the threats that they will receive. That is quite interesting, because from my past experience, working in local government 20 or 30 years ago, we got the threats then. I remember my wife ringing me up when she had been threatened by an unpleasant individual on behalf of the unions. She had been followed to the supermarket and followed back. The individual rang her up and said, “If your husband continues to do what he is doing, we will kill you and the children”. So it has been going on for a very long time; but the publicity has gone out now, and I think that puts people off. Why would you want to come here, with the hours you are doing, with the pathetic pay we get—I have got to put that one in—and when you are constantly going to be subject to threats?

Q115 **Chair:** It is interesting that you bring up not only the issue that obviously is pertinent to your work because of the IT link, but the issue of threats to sitting Members. That is not new, but it is new that people will talk about it. That is quite a development, and it’s probably a useful development that people are aware of that, but even now there will be Members who won’t talk about the threats that they receive and therefore we are probably seeing only the tip of the iceberg, in terms of the pressures that Members are under. Going back to your role with IPSA, to what extent do you think that IPSA are aware of that, and what could your Committee be doing to encourage them to be more aware of it in the future—both officially and unofficially?

Sir Paul Beresford: We have regular meetings with IPSA. They are vigorous. And we frequently follow up with letters. We do not always get the answers we want, so we are going to keep putting on pressure. I will send you a copy of the letter that is two pages of points that we need help on, if you agree. IPSA I find very, very slow to move.



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Q116 **Vicky Ford:** I just wanted to say, because we have just been joined by a lot of younger people in the Gallery, that this is the most fantastic job in the world. It's a job in which you can really make the world a better place. Many, many women in this place are fantastic, and it is a great job to be—

Sir Paul Beresford: There are a few able men, too.

Vicky Ford: And some of the men are okay as well. It's a great job to do as a woman. We want to use this session to try to make sure that we are making the job accessible to everybody, no matter what your sex, your race, your ability or disability. It's fantastic that we have already made huge strides on diversity and are one of the more diverse Parliaments in the world.

The threats to parliamentarians have changed. Parliamentarians have always received threats, but there are more. This is not just a British issue; it's an issue all across the world. My question to you is: are we looking at how other Parliaments are addressing those threats? I want to make just one more point before anybody thinks, "Why did she just walk over there?" This is a compostable plastic cup. I don't use the single-use plastics; I use the compostable cup. Thanks to your Committee for making us more plastic-free in this Parliament. So the question is: have we looked at other Parliaments in the world?

Sir Paul Beresford: When appropriate, regularly—even as far away as the Antipodes. Don't mention the cricket.

Vicky Ford: The cricket was great.

Q117 **Chair:** Sir Paul, thank you so much for your time today. We are very grateful. Can we agree that our Committees will continue to be in dialogue in the future?

Sir Paul Beresford *indicated assent.*

Chair: Because we have a lot of shared interests, particularly around this report, but on other issues as well.

Sir Paul Beresford: Thank you. That was my aim.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Bernard Jenkin MP, Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, House of Commons.

Chair: I thank our witness for joining us in this evidence session for our inquiry on the IPU "Gender-Sensitive Parliaments" report and how it is being implemented in the House of Commons. We are joined in this third



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session by Sir Bernard Jenkin, Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Thank you for joining us; we are very grateful. We will ask a number of questions over the next 20 minutes, starting with Eddie.

Q118 Eddie Hughes: What are the constitutional and/or democratic implications of the findings of “The Good Parliament” report and the UK gender-sensitive Parliament audit report?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I have glanced at these publications, and I would say that the implications are many and various. The intention to try to address gender equality in the House of Commons and to create a different quality of institution, in terms of our attitudes and our culture, is very welcome.

My overall critique of a great many initiatives is that we finish up making recommendations about individual things that need to change, but we don’t actually talk enough about why things persist as they are and why that reflects prevalent attitudes and behaviours, which is what culture really is. We don’t talk about what attitudes and behaviour need to change in order to create a much readier willingness to implement the kind of changes that people want to see.

Q119 Chair: May I ask a supplementary question? Your critique is that there isn’t enough strategic vision behind the tactical changes that can happen—I am paraphrasing what you have just said. In what way might that happen in the future? It is critical that any democratic institution remains in touch with the attitudes of the people who we represent and that we reflect that in the organisation of this place, the Parliament. How could we do that better?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: For example, if we did more surveys of voters about what they feel about a Parliament that so under-represents women, we might be surprised by what we find—what attitudes they have to working practices that tend to make it more difficult to include women in Parliament; what voters feel about attitudes and behaviours that they see on television in Parliament; and what effect they think that would have on whether women would want to be MPs. We might then be able to persuade the men, who largely control what happens in Parliament because of their prevalence, that it is the men’s attitudes that need to change.

I also think that we have got to recognise that there is a generational question here. I have done getting on for 28 years in Parliament. I hope my attitudes and views have continued to alter, but there is a piece in one of the papers today about the armed forces; the Army thinks it has got a problem with the attitudes of its senior officer cadre because they tend to be old and white and male, and therefore have certain attitudes that tend to be unchallenged by their peer group. The armed forces have to be an organisation that reflects society as it is, in order to be able to serve society effectively, and Parliament, even more so, needs to reflect the way society is in order to represent society better.



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Q120 **Chair:** At the risk of incurring Eddie's wrath, can I ask another supplementary? Which bit of Parliament do you think would be the most effective at doing that sort of research and then making sure that it was acted upon?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I would recommend that your Committee get hold of some money to do extensive polling along these lines. My Committee has done polling in the past. It is very helpful, and provides a lot of underpinning for the recommendations you want to make in the subsequent report.

Q121 **Eddie Hughes:** Well, we don't have much money yet, so our intention today is to poll you. What potential is there for our democracy and our constitution to work better if issues identified in these reports were addressed—for example, women's representation in leadership across the House?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: There is an awful lot of attempt to promote women once they are elected. I think both the candidates for Conservative party leader are saying that they want women well represented in their Cabinet; but if you are drawing from a limited pool, and only 32% of parliamentarians are women—rather less than that in the Conservative party—

Chair: It is 20% in the Conservative party.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: We are immediately trying to ameliorate what I would describe as a bad situation. So I think, yes, by all means try to create gender equality on the Speaker's Panel, but that is trying to fix a problem from the wrong end of the telescope. I think we need to tackle the problem at root. First of all, does Parliament agree that 50% of parliamentarians, in an ideal world, would be women, and if it does, what is Parliament going to do about it?

Q122 **Eddie Hughes:** Is that back to your question about polling the public? Because it is odd to ask a club so heavily dominated by men whether they think there is a role for women here. I mean, 80% of our party in Parliament is men, and you would ask them whether they think it is a good idea to have more women here.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I was involved, with my wife Baroness Jenkin, in the early days of Women2Win, before it existed, with Theresa May. That was at a time when I think we were down to about 9% women in the Conservative party. I said to her one morning, "Look, you women have got to stop trying to do this on your own. Haven't you noticed that men control the Conservative party? Until you get men signed up to your objective to increase women's representation, and actively doing something about it, it's unlikely you're going to be very effective."

So we got six male MPs to write a letter to *The Times*; we recruited David Cameron, who got it very quickly that much needed to change; and yours truly finished up implementing something for the Conservative party called



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the A-list. I bear the scars on my back to this day of creating a mechanism for positive action to support women candidates into politics.

The question for parliamentarians, though, is whether that is something that we should just leave to the individual political parties, or whether it is something that Parliament as a whole should address. It would be tempting, perhaps, for the Labour party to say, "This is a real problem for the Conservative party. We do all-women shortlists; they don't. Let's leave them stewing in their own juice."

Actually, I think there would be a majority for legislative action for positive action. I realise I am probably in a tiny minority of Conservative MPs who currently think this, but I would say to my colleagues that if we want the Conservative party to be more representative of the people we seek to represent, we had better recruit more women candidates and women MPs. At the moment, the voting figures—or the polls, certainly—suggest that women are more reluctant to vote Conservative than men.

Q123 Eddie Hughes: Do you see a role for your Committee in scrutinising actions to implement the recommendations of the gender-sensitive Parliament audit report? If so, which areas would you expect to focus on?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: If there were proposals for statutory positive action to promote women into Parliament, I would expect us to scrutinise those proposals, but I do not think I would expect my Committee to initiate those proposals.

Q124 Eddie Hughes: I am talking about the recommendations from the gender-sensitive Parliament audit.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I'm afraid you have an advantage on me; I am not sufficiently familiar with those recommendations. I know that it has about 22 recommendations. If any recommendation had constitutional implications, we would look at it. We do not do procedure—that is for the Procedure Committee—and I note that quite a lot of them are about procedure, rather than constitutional matters.

Q125 Chair: May I ask a supplementary question on that? It is important for our country to have a strong Parliament, and central to the constitution that we have a strong Parliament to deliver representation of the people. What you said earlier with regard to asking the general public how they feel Parliament should be run to make it a better place for everybody to work in, including women, is a really interesting idea, and something that the Committee may want to follow up on, but should not Parliament have mechanisms to achieve that constant renewal of the way that we work in a more formalised way? Would that not be central to the work of your Committee? As guardians of our constitution, and of the importance of the strength of our constitution, you would have some skin in the game on how this place works.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: That is an interesting suggestion, and I will take that away. Tangentially, we look at some of the issues we think affect the reputation of Parliament, in particular those concerning the whole bullying



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and sexual harassment controversy, or the code of conduct for Members. The Cox report and the Gemma White report are very relevant to the culture of Parliament, and personally, I am very interested in that, but the way that Parliament has tended to respond to these problems—this applies equally to gender-sensitivity issues—is to try to create new codes or new rules.

For example, it is interesting that we have had a Speaker now for 10 years who has regularly admonished the House for its behaviour, but nothing ever seems to change. What will we do about that? Because I think that the behaviour of the House at Prime Minister's questions—I am afraid that some of the women are included in the bad behaviour bracket; it is not confined to the men—that kind of rather male-stereotype behaviour obviously alienates women. Apart from the Speaker admonishing us, there seems to be little discussion about what to do about it. Maybe my Committee should look at that—but again, we might be straying into the procedure area, rather than the constitutional one.

On the underlying theme, there are two points that I would make. The first one is that regulation is not just about rules; we want an institution that demonstrates better governance, and that is about not just compliance with rules but being clear about what values we live by as an institution and as individuals within the institution, and what principles should reflect those values. There should be discussion about those values and principles, so that everyone understands what they are. Then any rules you have are merely a fall-back for the worst offences.

If you look at the code of conduct for Members, you have the seven principles of public life, which are based on an assumed set of values, which are not actually stated, and then a lot of very detailed rules about financial disclosures, but not much else. We have overlaid rather untidily on that, first, a rather panic-driven injunction to political parties to regulate the behaviour of their representatives—in the Conservative party, we now have a code of conduct for the behaviour of representatives—and, secondly, the new independent complaints and grievance scheme to back up the new Behaviour Code in Parliament.

In a way, the new Behaviour Code is a huge step in the right direction, but we have created rather a regulatory mess with this higgledy-piddledly arrangement. Unfortunately, although the Laura Cox report and the Gemma White report are both significant and important reports, at the heart of the Cox report is a failure to understand one of the constitutional implications of implementing all her recommendations, which is that we are a sovereign Parliament and cannot subject it to external judicial oversight, or oversight by a body that is not of Parliament. There are ways to address that, but these things need to be seen in the round.

We cannot keep throwing in more and more fresh ideas and initiatives. It does need a comprehensive look, with an understanding of all the problems and challenges, and a preparedness to take action that is consistent with Parliament as it is as an institution, as well as to challenge attitudes and behaviours. If you want to change the nature of an



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institution, the longest and most protracted way of doing it is to keep doing restructuring, reorganisation or anything but talking about what it is that you really want to change.

What you really want to change in Parliament is some fundamental attitudes and behaviours. There are some people with good attitudes and behaviours, and there are some people with less good ones. You want to be able to reinforce and support the good ones and call out the bad ones, in a non-adversarial and non-judgmental way. People are very suspicious about the training for the new code of behaviour, but that is actually a way to start a conversation. I hope that the Gemma White report will lead to training about how MPs employ people, because if people understand better what makes a good employer and are able to change their ways, that is a good way of going about things, rather than naming and shaming, which creates fear and actually arrests change.

Q126 Tonia Antoniazzi: You talk about behaviour. Before coming into this House, I was a teacher, and you are expected to set fantastic standards for the children in front of you and for the public. I feel very strongly that coming into this place has been a real eye-opener for me. Social workers and other people are subject to checks. I just wonder whether there should be checks on potential candidates and parliamentarians, so that we are saying, "I'm going to have an up-to-date DBS check because I want people to know that I'm setting a standard to be a parliamentarian." Is there a possibility or a place for something similar to be done for parliamentarians, just to show that we set the bar quite high on behaviour?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I would want to think about that one. Of course, any candidate is free to conduct whatever checks they like on themselves and demonstrate their own credentials, but Parliament is meant to represent every kind of person in society. If you look at criminal prosecutions, the proportion of MPs who are prosecuted for criminal offences or speeding offences is about the same as it is for the rest of society. We want a representative Parliament. I would want notice of that question, but it is an interesting suggestion.

Far better would be, as I personally recommended when the code of conduct for Members was being reviewed, that, first of all, we should have principles-based regulation, where principles that are not adjudicated are set out very clearly about how we expect people to behave, rather like this Behaviour Code to a certain extent, and then very clear rules for breaches where we think there should be sanctions.

When people fall short of the principles, it should be the role of the Commissioner for Standards to pull someone up, take them aside, and have a conversation with them and say, "It's reputationally damaging for Parliament for you to behave like this. It might be painful for your family that you have been personally embarrassed. Is there some way that we can support you in order to ensure that there is no repeat of this behaviour?"



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Actually, if you go to the Commissioner for Standards and say, “I think I’ve breached the code of conduct for Members,” the commissioner will not be able to advise you at all because the commissioner might have to adjudicate on the case if there is a complaint, so we have a complaints-driven system, which is also not very conducive. There should be a separate person who Parliament appoints to adjudicate on breaches of rules, so that we do not have a regulator who is also being judge and jury on what is being regulated.

Incidentally, I think it is a very common mistake that we have created systems where financial and other regulators make the rules, do the investigation and prosecute the case. That has become the fashion in regulation, but it is very unfortunate because there is no evidence that it works very well. It certainly does not seem to improve behaviour; I see no evidence of that in the City of London, for example—well, there is evidence of improved behaviour, but it is very slow.

There still seems to be an attitude, which really came back to bite us when we had the expenses scandal, that if it is not against the rules, it is all right. “It was within the rules” is the lamest excuse, but that is how a lot of financial regulation is treated: an absence of prohibition is regarded as approval or permission to behave in a certain way. That is not the way you behave in your family, and it is not the way we expect company directors or schoolteachers to behave. We need to rethink how we discuss how we want MPs to behave, without automatically resorting to rules and punishments, and then we can have a less charged and perhaps more supportive conversation.

Chair: I am going to gently bring us back to the gender-sensitive Parliament.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: All this relates to gender stuff as well, because we want to have a conversation across the House with all Members about attitudes towards women. Let’s face it: Mr Hughes and I have been in meetings where we have found ourselves with only men, and you wonder how the value of the conversation might be enhanced if there were one or two women in the room as well, adding their perspective.

One of my favourite adages is that men and women are equal, but our life experiences are very different. If we do not involve those different life experiences in all the decisions we make, we lose out—company boards now know that they are poorer boards if they do not have fair representation for women. I do not think that is widely appreciated among quite a number of senior colleagues in this place.

Chair: That neatly moves us on to the last question.

Q127 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Which of the recommendations of the gender-sensitive Parliament do you think should be prioritised over the next year?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Again, I have looked at the original report; I have not studied the gender-sensitive audit, but I would go for 50:50 representation. If there is an objection to aiming for 50:50 representation



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for men and women, what is it? I cannot see what the objection is. If we start going backwards, I think we have to recognise that there is a case for legislating for positive action. Does that answer your question?

Q128 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Yes. I think we have seen a lot of advancement with proxy voting, and I think work could be done for parent MPs now, while we are still sitting.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: A lot of the problem is that most people in Parliament do not have small children. There is still a residual attitude of, "Why should we change the whole way we run this place for a very small number of colleagues who have small children?" But that is not the point, is it? One is a product of the other.

Tonia Antoniazzi: It is obvious.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: It is obvious to you and me, but I am afraid that until we can discuss this in a less charged atmosphere—even for appearing here and saying these things, I will probably get some push-back from some of my colleagues.

Q129 **Eddie Hughes:** Tonia has the luxury of being in a party that is 46% female in Parliament.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: And they have done that by positive action. In fact, there is no example anywhere in the world of a legislature reaching 50:50 representation for men and women without positive action.

Q130 **Chair:** May I ask a final question? In our first evidence session for this inquiry, we heard about the House of Commons strategy and accountability mechanisms for delivering on the recommendations in the gender-sensitive Parliament audit. The Committee felt that a range of views were expressed. What is your view on the current approach taken by what I might call the management here, as opposed to Members?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I was instrumental in initiating the House of Commons Governance Committee, chaired by Jack Straw—I think it was in the 2010 Parliament—to address the concerns about the management. It underlined in my mind that there needed to be a cultural change in the management and the organisation. To the credit of the House service and the rest of the administration, there has been a strong awareness of the need for cultural change.

In the oral evidence I presented to that Committee, I suggested that an awful lot of power is invested in one person—the Speaker. I do not mean any personal criticism of him, but I simply observe that that concentration of power is not conducive to better governance and leadership. It means that we are dependent upon one person.

We primarily elect the Speaker to chair the proceedings of the House of Commons and to deal with matters of procedure. It is less obvious that we are electing a Speaker with the administrative and leadership capabilities to manage a vast business—a very large and significant operation, particularly with things like R and R coming up.



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In my evidence I suggested that the role should be split; that the chairman of the House of Commons Commission should not be the Speaker. That suggestion has not been taken up. Given the burdens that fall upon a modern Speaker, I think we need to look at whether it is too much for one person and there is a case for evolving a different arrangement.

Q131 Chair: What do you think will be the best mechanism to stimulate that sort of debate, which is directly personal to this, because it is about the implementation of a policy?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: First of all, somebody needs to recommend that it is part of the solution. It is very difficult. My Committee could do an inquiry into the governance of the House, but it is not really set up to do that. Maybe your Committee could make a recommendation as part of this inquiry that this is something that needs to be looked at, but the obvious thing would be to set up a special Select Committee for the purpose of reopening the question of the governance and leadership of the House.

Maybe there needs to be more discussion and understanding of what the problems are, why they persist and why it takes so long to change things. I am bound to say that people get frustrated with how difficult it is to change things in this place. That is partly a strength of the system; it is not something that people can easily fiddle with, nor would we want them to, because a great deal depends on the stability of this place. But there are means of changing things, as we saw from the Straw Committee. I would recommend that there should be another Straw Committee of some kind, which would take an open-minded look at what needs to change.

Chair: That is incredibly helpful. Thank you very much for coming along to this second evidence session for our inquiry. I hope that we can stay in contact with your Committee, both through the inquiry itself and when we come forward with our recommendations.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: And you are, of course, free to make recommendations to other Select Committees. Thank you very much.

Chair: Indeed. Thank you for your time.