

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Proxy Voting: Review of Pilot Arrangements, HC 134

Wednesday 30 October 2019

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Members present: Sir Charles Walker (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kirsty Blackman; Bambos Charalambous; Sir David Evennett; Sir Edward Leigh.

Questions 1-25

Witnesses

[I](#): Luciana Berger MP and Tulip Siddiq MP.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Luciana Berger and Tulip Siddiq.

Q1 Chair: Here we are, reviewing proxy voting, which I think has been a huge success, except when an occasional Whip has forgotten to cast a proxy vote or cocked it up, so it was probably a very good suggestion of ours that Whips should not be doing proxy votes as a rule. Tulip and Luciana, do you want to make an opening statement? Tulip, tell us briefly how you feel this has all gone for you.

Tulip Siddiq: I am Tulip Siddiq, the MP for Hampstead and Kilburn. I have had two babies since being elected. I have had three elections and two children in the last five years, so as you can imagine, it has been quite busy! The first time I had a baby, in 2016, I had a child and I tried to find out what I could do in terms of arrangements. I knew I was having a baby and I wanted to know what would happen with my voting record. I am the MP for Hampstead and Kilburn, where people are very well informed. They follow how you vote; they look up how you voted, and then they email you in accordance with how you voted. So I was very worried about it looking like I just hadn't turned up for however many weeks it might be. One of the main problems I found was that it said just "absent" when you had had a baby. It didn't say "maternity"; it didn't say you were absent because you had had major surgery—in my case, I had had an emergency C-section. So my main problem in 2016 was that I rushed back to work very quickly, because I was worried about what my record as a public servant would look like after I had had a child. That changed in 2017.

I am obviously happy to elaborate further, but that is the main difference between the two times I had a child while an MP. With one, I rushed back to work, because I knew it would look like I was too lazy and just hadn't turned up. Not everyone knew that I was having a child, so they would just think that I hadn't bothered to do my job.

Luciana Berger: My experience is similar to Tulip's. I will just introduce myself. I am Luciana Berger, the Member of Parliament for Liverpool, Wavertree. I had my first child just in advance of the 2017 general election; my baby was just over four weeks old when the last election was announced. So I found myself, unusually, in the constituency—just in one place—with a small baby for a number of months. But then I found myself having to come back here for some very important votes from the time of my baby being three months old. It wasn't appropriate for my three-month-old baby to be in this place. I was having to feed the baby in the Tea Room; I was waiting around after 9 o'clock at night, up to 10 o'clock at night, to be able to vote. There were some challenges.

But also, I was afforded the opportunity to have a pair, and it was only because a pair was available. At a moment later in the year, between the months of October and December, because there was some absence on the Conservative side, there was a pair, which I was given. That enabled



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me to make sure that I was in work every day but able to go home and put my baby to bed. But I was very aware that I was not able to do that between the months of June and October, so I was able to contrast that experience.

Even though I did not have to be in Parliament because I had a pair, and I was able to explain that, I was still not able to register my vote. Similar to Tulip, there were still occasions when I was not actually voting—I would explain that I had a pair, but obviously it is not the same—and people would be unhappy.

2016 was very different from where we find ourselves in Parliament this year, when every vote counts. I would argue that there have been many more votes at the tipping point where one vote could make a difference to the outcome. In my nine years in Parliament, this has arguably been the most important year for votes that really matter to the future of our country, so having proxy voting has been significant.

I look forward to talking about the positives of the scheme, but also about the areas that I think could be improved.

Q2 Chair: Did you find the notification requirements particularly onerous? That question is open to both of you.

Luciana Berger: With the notification that I was pregnant, I thought it was quite entertaining that I had to present my NHS maternity card, because it was very obvious that I was pregnant. I would argue that we trust Members of the House on many things, so if they look like they are pregnant we could take them at their word and they should not have to present the evidence—but I did.

The key challenging point that I would argue needs to be amended is the day's notification, because you cannot plan for unforeseen circumstances. During my second pregnancy, the doctors thought I might have pre-eclampsia, so I suddenly found myself not in this place because I had to go for tests. I also had a partial water break on the day of the cab strike in Westminster around the square, so I had to walk over to St Thomas'. I was not able to vote on that day and I was not able to notify—and it was two weeks before my baby was born.

One of the issues in a Parliament where every vote might count is having to wait a day from when you change the notification. I put forward the dates when I expected to have my baby—for the second birth, I was having a planned C-section—but it turned out that I had to be absent sooner than expected, so I missed out on one or two votes. They were not knife-edge votes, but they could have been. There have to be circumstances where there can be immediate notification to the Speaker to ensure that votes can be registered.

Tulip Siddiq: My experience was slightly different. You may remember that I turned up in a wheelchair and delayed my C-section. I did that because I felt that I had absolutely no choice.



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People have questioned me about why I was not paired for that vote and why I did not ask to be nodded through. I want to explain to this Committee that the reason I did not want to be paired was that I had lost faith in the system because there was one pregnant woman who felt that she had been cheated out of her vote when she had been paired. There are lots of conflicting opinions on what actually happened, but it does not matter: at the end of the day, she did not get to vote—she was paired, but her vote was not registered. The reason I am saying this is that I did not take that decision lightly. It was a very big decision to delay the birth of my child.

I did think about being nodded through, but I spoke to my colleague Naz Shah, who said that when she was having treatment she asked to be nodded through. She was told that she would come to Parliament in a cab, that they would just look at her and that then she could leave, but apparently, when she turned up, they said, “Actually, you have to stay for five hours.” The nodding-through system had broken down as well.

The pairing did not work and the nodding through did not work, so I just felt that I had no choice. It was a very important vote for me and for the people of Hampstead and Kilburn who have elected me to represent their voice in Parliament, so I felt that I had to do what I did. There was no proxy voting then, so I could not give notification to the Speaker’s Office or give a date—that did not exist.

Who knows why change happens? I know that Harriet Harman had a lot to do with pushing for the proxy vote, but after I turned up in the wheelchair, eventually they said “Yes, you will be able to vote by proxy.” The Speaker’s Office said, “You don’t have to submit any kind of evidence that you are pregnant, because we saw it.” I suppose they make exceptions when it comes to it. I think that they saw the image of me turning up in a wheelchair and knew that I was having a C-section the day after, so they did not ask for any kind of material or say that anything was needed to prove that I was pregnant.

Q3 **Chair:** Common sense was applied.

Tulip Siddiq: It really was. I will just pick up on something that Luciana said. The days before I had the baby, I had steroid injections for various reasons. The point that I want to make is that each pregnancy is different. Some people can work right until the last minute, have their baby and come back because they had a very easy pregnancy—that is great for them. I did not. I had a very complicated pregnancy, with gestational diabetes and various problems that I will not go into in detail—I hope no one ever has to experience them—and I could have done without having to come in to Parliament during the week before. There is something to having a bit of relief before you actually have the baby.

Q4 **Chair:** So you would tweak it, potentially? Luciana, we have to be sensitive to the fact that paperwork always needs to be performed. Obviously, casting a vote is important and there needs to be some period of notice for the necessary arrangements to be made so that confusion



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does not occur, with somebody voting when they should not be. We need to come up with a solution to that.

Luciana Berger: You can put in your original notification, but if it transpired that there was an emergency situation that meant that the Member of Parliament could not be in the House, you could have a sheet that said that you would bring forward that date.

Q5 **Chair:** So you could have a sort of emergency activation procedure, with the proxy already in place? You would be able to activate the proxy earlier.

Luciana Berger: Yes, on the day.

Q6 **Chair:** Brilliant. Tulip, you would like the system to be a little more flexible, with six months after the birth and a bit of time before the birth, because these things do not always happen according to the rulebook.

Tulip Siddiq: I was just trying to say that not every pregnancy is the same. When I was making quite a song and dance about the fact that I wanted some time off, I had some sneering comments from people saying, "I worked right until I gave birth and then went home. I did my day at the office and then I went home and had the baby." I said, "If I could do that, I would," but medically I was not in a good position at that moment. That is the only point that I am making.

Chair: That is very polite of you.

Luciana Berger: I would add that I could not have done that. The medical considerations, with the partial water break and the potential pre-eclampsia, which it was not, were in stark contrast to my first pregnancy, which was very different. No two pregnancies are the same. If it had not been for the general election and things that happened, I would have been off for longer. I missed more votes in advance of and further to my first pregnancy.

Q7 **Bambos Charalambous:** I have two points. First, I entirely agree about giving more advance notice. I am currently Ellie Reeves's proxy and I think that Ellie would have preferred for the proxy to start yesterday. She was only aware of the Government's Bill very late on Monday night, when the Government laid it. Luckily, I was able to contact her and she was able to communicate that information to the Clerks. Had she not been, she would have had to come in. If she were having a difficult pregnancy, that would have been a problem. If you were holding on until the very last minute to get the maximum amount of benefit from the six months, do you think that it would be better if there were, say, a four-week window before you were due to give birth to allow activation, or is that reasonably flexible now?

Tulip Siddiq: I do not know if this will apply to men, though I think a male colleague has taken proxy voting into consideration because his wife had a child, but women should have the ability to say, "Things are quite difficult for me. I am finding very hard to travel in at the moment. I am due any minute and would really rather not come in to Westminster on



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public transport," which is what I was doing because it is the easiest way to get here from my house. Maybe people should have the option to say, "I'd like to start it now. I take into account that it ends in six months, and I will come back in slightly earlier." I would actually have preferred that.

Q8 Bambos Charalambous: Do you think that there should be, in addition to the six months, an extra four weeks beforehand?

Tulip Siddiq: Although that would be good, I question it because I called the Speaker's office the day that my son turned six months and I was told that my proxy voting was over. I should have been told about that slightly earlier. I was only notified when I inquired, "When is this over?", and they said, "It's the 17th, so you need to come back in." I asked whether I could come back in a day later, because he had a six-month medical appointment on that day, for various reasons, at Great Ormond Street, which I wanted to take him to. They said, "Absolutely not, because we would have to change the law to do that." They fed me some sort of line about how it was impossible to do that. If it is possible to do that, I think it would be a good change. If it is possible, yes, I would agree with that. I came back and I got someone else to take him to the appointment, which was fine, but they said that they were not flexible enough to even change it for one day, so I suppose it is very rigid.

Having said that, I would like to say that it made a massive difference. Maybe this sounds a little bit negative, but it made a massive difference for me during my second pregnancy to have the proxy voting. Vicky Foxcroft, who was my Whip, did it for me. She was very diligent. She even rebelled when I needed her to, which is a big thing for a Whip to do, but she did. I am grateful to her.

Chair: That is very encouraging.

Tulip Siddiq: She took it very seriously. Every time there was a vote, she would message me and say, "This is how the Whip is voting. I assume you are voting this way." Sometimes I would say, "No. I am voting this way." And she would be in the wrong Lobby for me. She took the job very seriously and performed it well, so the system worked.

Chair: I love the "I assume".

Tulip Siddiq: Here's hoping.

Luciana Berger: May I say a few things on that question? I brought forward the date by a few days. Similarly to Tulip, I did not realise what the date was that I should return on and only discovered the day before. I did not have such an important event as a medical appointment for my baby boy, but I did have to put in place lots of plans in terms of travelling. I had not realised, because it was not very clear what that six months looked like. At the very least, I suggest that it would be helpful for people to make very clear what the return date is, as expected, because that was not made clear.



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I don't know if this is the right moment to suggest this, but I know you are evaluating the scheme. I agree with Tulip that it certainly made a difference. I can compare it with my experience with my first child and what I shared at the start about having a pair. I had a pair during the latter six months of my first child's first year. As a country we have 52 weeks statutory maternity leave. As I said, I was at work every day in the second half of the first year of my first child's life, but I was able to go home for bedtime. I want to make the point that we should value parents being able to put their children to bed, especially infants under the age of one.

I breastfed my first child. I breastfeed my second child. I have to express here in the House of Commons in order to provide milk for my baby, because I am not able to put my baby to bed—he is now seven and a half months—since I have not had that proxy vote. I should add that I was still in work on many occasions in those first six months, but it was for a few hours. It was not on a Monday night late into the evening.

There are conversations to be had about whether we value parents, both men and women. There is a separate discussion around the two weeks afforded to men. We advocate for shared parental leave. There is no scope for men to take shared parental leave as Members of Parliament. When we talk about those early years, the first 1,001 days of a child's life, Members on all sides of the House advocate for part of that being about developing that relationship with your children. We have to get in early of a morning, if we are on a Select Committee or have other responsibilities in this House. If you cannot play that full part for four days of the week, it has an impact. I see that already.

I would argue that if there is an opportunity in the second six months of a child's life, proxy voting could start from, say, six o'clock of an evening, or something to support parents. If we want a diverse House of Commons and parents to be Members of Parliament, they should be afforded that opportunity, particularly in that first year, to be able to put their children to bed and to breastfeed them as well.

Q9 Bambos Charalambous: So you would want it for a year?

Luciana Berger: I would want it for a year, yes.

Q10 Kirsty Blackman: I am not sure if this is really a question. I had both my children when I was a councillor. I did not get maternity leave of any sort. When I had Harris, I was back in the office after less than four weeks, chairing meetings with him. When I had Rebecca, I took a bit longer. I did not come back for about three and a half to four months, but again I had to come back after having a caesarean section. I think the system that we have is better, but I agree that it is not long enough. You are still doing your constituency work and things like that when you have a small baby. Just because you are not physically in the House of Commons doesn't mean you are not actually working.

Nobody on the list who has had a proxy vote so far has needed to fly to get here. Airlines don't let you fly after 34 or 36 weeks, so you would



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have to start your proxy vote a month before, which means that people who are flying would have only five months with their baby after and would be disadvantaged.

The other thing in relation to that is getting home for bed. There is no chance that I can get home for bed, whatever time I leave the House of Commons. There is the suggestion of having it for a little longer, particularly for those of us who are at a real geographical disadvantage. That would make a very big difference to people. There would be no way I could express, for example; I would just have to take my baby with me if I was to have another baby. It is not fair to my constituents if I disappear off and am not able to cast votes.

Chair: We did cover the issue of travelling. Jo Swinson came and gave evidence, and from memory I recall that you can vary the start of your proxy—the start of your six months—in those circumstances, can't you?

Kirsty Blackman: You can have it before the baby is born, but the issue is that I would be forced to take it a month before because I literally couldn't fly. It is a disadvantage to those women because they could only have five months afterwards, whatever they did.

Chair: That is a very good point well made.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Luciana, could you regale us with what happened in terms of your proxy? I think you changed your proxy.

Luciana Berger: I did.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** How did you communicate with your proxy, and were there any problems with the proxy casting a vote in the way you wished?

Luciana Berger: No massive problem. We found our feet, in terms of making sure we had conversations in a timely fashion in advance of votes taking place. If you have a newborn, in particular, it is all-consuming, and it is quite hard sometimes to create that space. We muddled our way through. There were no mishaps. Nothing happened that was adverse; it just took a while for us to get into a rhythm of being in contact in good time and making sure we both had that conversation. Both my proxies were very clear about what my voting intentions were.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** And were there any examples of where your proxy, who was voting themselves, and was voting in a different way from you, had to go into two Lobbies?

Luciana Berger: There weren't any examples of that happening. One of the reasons I changed my proxy is that I thought there might be a moment in the future when my first proxy might vote differently from me. That is why I thought it was important to change, and that worked very well. I was able to do so from afar.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** This is to both of you. Would you have a daily conversation on the business and the likely votes so the proxy knew—

Luciana Berger: Yes, a WhatsApp or—

Q15 Bob Blackman: The worry we had when we started is that, as you rightly say, it is all-encompassing—the baby takes over—so it is difficult to wade through an Order Paper and to decide which way you will vote on different things. You might trust your proxy to assume that you would vote in a particular way—as with Vicky—but it could be that you didn't have the full facts at your disposal to instruct your proxy to vote the way that you wished.

Luciana Berger: On the one occasion when I perhaps wasn't quite sure, we took the joint decision that it was probably best for my proxy not to register a vote on my behalf. That doesn't mean that I wouldn't have wanted to have the vote on the 99% of other votes.

Q16 Bob Blackman: I am not criticising—

Luciana Berger: No, it is a fair point.

Bob Blackman: I am just trying to find out how this has worked and whether there are any tweaks that we need to make.

Luciana Berger: Sure. I am saying that you have relationships with the people you nominate as your proxy. There are established relationships. You anticipate that most Members of the House will have someone they feel they can most closely turn to. I did. Obviously, at the same time, I was on a journey, having left the Labour party two weeks and one day before I had my baby. I was on a journey through what became Change, then I became independent, and then I joined the Liberal Democrats. That was my backdrop—my experience—which then lent itself to changing my proxy thorough the process. That worked well. I never at any point felt that I was not in contact, or that my proxy was not apprised of my views or how I wanted my vote to be registered. On the one occasion that I wasn't sure, we just said that it was better for me not to vote.

Tulip Siddiq: I think someone from the Committee said that maybe it's good if Whips aren't proxies. For me, it was a good thing that my proxy was a Whip, because she was so well informed about which vote was going on, what amendment was happening and how the party was voting. Initially, I thought I would ask Keir Starmer to be my proxy, because he is my neighbouring MP and we share a borough. I then realised that Keir—who has a lot on his plate, obviously—may not be quite aware of all the amendments and stuff that are going on. He may not always be in Parliament, so for me, Vicky was the right choice. I had a Whip who said to me, "This is what the Labour party line is, this is what the amendment is, and this is what the vote is."

We did have a daily conversation. It doesn't matter whether I have a newborn or not; at the end of the day, I am still the MP for Hampstead and Kilburn, so I was still very aware of what votes were happening. We are in a Parliament with such a small majority that obviously, at the time, I had to be very well informed about what was going on, which I did not resent at all. At the end of the day, I still wasn't travelling into Westminster, so I was grateful for that.



- Q17 Sir Edward Leigh:** Before we end the discussion, I wanted to widen it to include two other issues: fathers, and people who are ill. From your personal experience, you may have some comment. Things have moved on; when my second son was born, in Lincolnshire on a Thursday evening, I was required to vote here on the following Monday, leaving my wife alone with a newborn baby and four children under the age of 12. Things have moved on, and you may have some views on extending proxy voting for fathers.

The other thing is ill people. There was a famous occasion in 1979 on which the Callaghan Government was facing a no-confidence motion, and the Prime Minister decided not to bring in a Labour MP who was actually dying in a hospital in London. As a result, he lost by one vote. It seems that we still have this system where people who are very seriously ill might be brought in in ambulances and the rest. I just wonder whether, from your personal experience of this whole proxy system, you have any views on fathers and people who are very ill.

Tulip Siddiq: The situation you describe—the Prime Minister losing by one vote—is something that could happen now. We are at a time when one vote matters and a lot of the votes are on a knife edge, and I would be in favour of extending proxy voting to ill people.

I just want to say that when I first floated the idea of proxy voting in 2016, I was met with a lot of resistance. One of the things people kept saying was that it would be misused and abused by people pretending that they were ill when they were not really ill. I think we can put checks and balances in place to make sure that does not happen, and that proxy voting is not abused. There are ways of checking whether someone is genuinely having chemotherapy, is actually in hospital, is dying in hospital—whatever the reasons are, we should look into that. We should be a Parliament that grants proxy voting for someone who is seriously ill and cannot come in.

- Q18 Chair:** The danger of that is that you rob them of anonymity. The great thing about pairing is that if you are really, really ill and do not want to share that with people—nor should you be required to—you can be paired. As soon as we introduce proxy voting for seriously ill people, we will have seriously ill people bullied and cajoled into taking a proxy vote, declaring their illness and wearing it in public. That is the great danger. We discussed this at length in the Committee; generally, having a child is something to be celebrated and something that—as Luciana said—you find difficult to hide. Being ill, or having somebody in your family who is seriously ill, is not necessarily something that you want to share with the world. We have to be very careful about that.

Sir Edward Leigh: I was not making a value judgment about whether it is a good idea or not. I am just trying to get a feel for whether people who have experienced proxy voting have any comments on those two cases.

Tulip Siddiq: But why can't we have both? I am not sure. Is there a reason?



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- Q19 Chair:** You could, but the fear is that if you introduce proxy voting, the expectation placed on people is that if they are going to be absent for any length of time, they will have to have a proxy vote, and will have to declare the reason why. We gave this a lot of thought. I am not trying to have the argument here, now, but we have to be very careful about how we tread with this, so that we do not—for all the best reasons in the world—make decisions that some people find very difficult to live with.

Luciana Berger: I would add that there are obviously occasions on which people apply for a pair because of a family event that has nothing to do with illness, or because they have to travel for a Select Committee, a specific interest that they hold in the House, or an international conference. There will always be opportunities. From having visited a Whips Office and seen the pile of slips that go into making the application, I know there are very close relationships between Whips on all sides. If there need to be discrete conversations to say, “We need a Whip instead of a proxy, because someone is keeping something to themselves,” I am sure that would continue to be afforded in the way that it is today.

Tulip Siddiq: The reason that pairing is not ideal solution is because if you are paired, your vote is not registered. That is one of the things that I had to keep saying to people: it was not a silver bullet. You are paired, but it does not say whether you wanted a policy to go through or not. I am not advocating getting rid of pairing, because of the reasons that you have outlined—you are fair to say them—but I really think we could have both mechanisms. It would just have to be explained that people were paired. I don’t even know if the electorate would really look into whether someone was paired or given a proxy; it is just having the option there for MPs.

- Q20 Sir David Evennett:** But most of the time, a pairing is just a one-off; it is not long term. Having been a pairing Whip for the Government, I know you do not actually give people three months off for whatever. It is very rare, unless there is a serious illness. Most of the pairing on our side would have been for a week.

Luciana Berger: Why are they off for three months? When I was in the Labour party, I was paired with someone on the Conservative side who was off for three months—not for illness reasons.

Chair: I don’t want to widen this conversation into extending proxy voting.

- Q21 Sir David Evennett:** Sorry, Chairman. There are two systems, and I think they work well. What I am passionate about is that women in your situation should have it as a right to be absent and have someone vote for them. Once we go down another route, it is a much wider issue, and there are many other complications that we looked at. But the issue we looked at is making sure that people like you are looked after well and yet still have your vote registered.

Chair: And I think there is room for improvement as a result.



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Luciana Berger: On the point about dads, we see many people in the public eye taking shared parental leave. I am thinking of Chris Mason, who is a prominent political reporter who, at different moments, has taken shared parental leave so he could be at home looking after his baby. We extend that opportunity to people outside the House. I am sure there are many male MPs who have partners who have equally pressing jobs that require commitment.

Q22 **Sir David Evennett:** But what we looked at here, as I say, is that this job is quite unique; there is nothing comparable to it in the outside world. As you know, it is a seven-day-a-week job. You are in the constituency, you are here and everything else, whereas not many other people work as long hours as MPs do.

Tulip Siddiq: I agree with you that the jobs are not comparable, but we are meant to be the model of democracy. If we are sitting here and making legislation about men and workplaces, which we do in the Select Committee that I am part of, and if we are passing legislation about shared parental leave and having rights for workers, we need to lead in some way and say that our male MPs should have the same rights that we have.

One of the things I will just mention is that there is a lot of talk about how relationships break down when you come into politics. I have heard a lot about relationships breaking down from the intake of people that I came in with. It has been cited once or twice that it is the pressure of the job. But also, when a wife or partner has a child, they feel that the male MP is not around at all.

Sir David Evennett: Absolutely, and that is why we wanted family-friendly hours, but it has not worked out, has it? That is the other problem, and it is something else that we should be looking at. When you highlighted the Monday nights till 10 o'clock and so forth, the whole idea was that it would be a bit more family-friendly. I am afraid that, in this Parliament, it has not worked out.

Q23 **Kirsty Blackman:** Family-friendly hours only work well if you can go home. On parental leave and the thing about dads, both my babies were born at early term and were well when they were born. I guess that yours were relatively similar in that regard. Do you think there is a case—I'm thinking of David Linden, who has made it clear that both his children were born prematurely, and still he is eligible only for two weeks—for extending the potential of the father's leave in the event that the baby is premature or ill when they are born?

Luciana Berger: Absolutely—without a doubt. I had my baby at the Liverpool Women's Hospital, and I met parents there who had been with their very premature newborns for weeks, if not months. The idea that you would expect someone, particularly if their constituency is in Scotland, to have to leave that behind if they had to register important votes, or if there were votes that were close, as we have seen in this last Parliament—what a terrible bind. What a position to have to put those male MPs in:



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they have to choose between the country and their newborn baby. That should absolutely be a very strong consideration, at the very least, where there is a newborn in an intensive care unit who cannot go home.

Tulip Siddiq: I will just add that I of course agree with Luciana, but a lot of the time the person who is giving birth—the mother—can also have a very bad medical condition and then the father needs to be around to help. That's happened to lots of people I know, and it's happened—briefly—to me, as well.

Luciana Berger: That is an important point. I have had two C-sections myself. The second one I had was fantastic and I bounced back after a week. With the other one, I couldn't move for six weeks; I could not even walk properly down one side of a street for six weeks.

So in terms of the idea that I would be left behind in the constituency with a newborn—if I wasn't the MP, and my partner had gone to Westminster—when I was in that physical condition, when you are not supposed to carry the baby and you are not supposed to lift, and when I did not have family that was close by at that time, that would have been very, very difficult.

Q24 **Chair:** So, in conclusion, there is a case for less rigidity, more flexibility and more leniency around the interpretation of six months, which basically means that one has to look at each individual's circumstances, whether they are commuting, as Kirsty might be, from Scotland, or, Tulip, as you might be, from London, with complications. There just needs to be a greater awareness that no pregnancy is the same as the next pregnancy. Yes?

Tulip Siddiq: But also the thing we mentioned about what date you are leaving and what date do you come back, because that really did come as a shock. I know that that is because I was the first—I understand that—and the Speaker's Office, like I said, were very good, and the arrangements made a huge difference to my life. But I suddenly thought, "I'd better check when my proxy vote is finished". I emailed, and they said, "Actually, it's over tomorrow." I thought, "Oh, okay."

Sir David Evennett: Good spot.

Tulip Siddiq: It was a bit of a shock. I just think that we should inform the person that it is coming to an end. They might not want to come back, or they might want to be paired or whatever at that point, but they should just be prepared and know that that arrangement is over and that they are not eligible any more.

Q25 **Chair:** But, in the main, both of you agree that it is a definite improvement over where you were once and where the House was.

Tulip Siddiq: It has made a huge difference to my life. I got very ill the first time; this one, it was just a relief over my shoulders. I still followed everything that was happening in Parliament, I still did my advice surgeries and I still held meetings in the constituency when I had to. I even came in to Westminster a few times. But what I did not have to do



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was wait hear till 10 pm on Mondays and vote right after I had had a baby. So it made a huge difference.

Luciana Berger: I will just reinforce a point that I made, because I think it is important. Having had that experience before—I did have a baby who was seven, eight, nine months old who didn't have to be here every night. I now have a baby of seven months old who does have to be here every night, up until 7 o'clock, in order for me to vote. I still don't think it is appropriate to have young babies—under the age of one—here.

Chair: You have made that very clear, about being here after 6 pm.

Thank you both so much for giving so much of your time so generously. I am glad things are better, but let's make them even better. Thank you so much.