



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Voting by proxy, HC 722

Monday 28 February 2022

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Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Aaron Bell; Chris Elmore; Patrick Grady; James Gray; James Sunderland; Owen Thompson.

Questions 187-226

Witness

I: Mr William Wragg MP.

Examination of witness

Witness: Mr William Wragg MP.

Q187 Chair: I thank our witness for joining us for this session of the Procedure Committee, at which we are taking further evidence in our inquiry into the possibility of extending proxy voting beyond the existing baby leave scheme. It is important to make the point up front that, although Mr Wragg is a member of the Committee, he has absented himself for the purpose of this evidence session and is a witness for us. This is unusual, but not unprecedented. It has happened before, including with members of our Committee, I understand. We are grateful that you are able to give evidence today, Mr Wragg.

As you know, we have a series of questions for you on proxy voting. I will kick off with a simple question: do you believe that eligibility for proxy votes should be extended to people with long-term illness?

Mr Wragg: Thank you, Chair, and to the Committee for its kind invitation and its indulgence in accommodating me at a time of my choosing. The short answer to your question, if I can break the habit of a lifetime, is no. That could have something to do with me being a witness.

Q188 Chair: Is there any situation in which you could see an extension of the proxy voting scheme beyond those who are eligible through parental leave?

Mr Wragg: There is to an extent, but I would say that only if it were put to me that it were happening and I were asked my views on its restriction. I should add, at the risk of coming across as entirely heartless, which is easy to do if you oppose something that is there ostensibly on humanitarian grounds—to help MPs who cannot be present still to cast a vote—that nobody could be failed to be moved by the evidence given by Amy Callaghan or Tracey Crouch, when I was sitting on the Committee, so I realise that my opposition to any prospect of extension must come across as very difficult.

The point I wish to make, however, is that when I was a member of the Procedure Committee in the previous Parliament, our inquiry that made the recommendation on baby leave was done very discreetly for that particular purpose. Indeed, a number of the people who advocated that at the time also said that they did not support its extension for other reasons as well. If anything, I am a legacy of the ancien régime, defending the position that we came to then.

Q189 Chair: What do you think the difference is? Why is it acceptable for someone on parental leave to exercise a proxy, but not those on leave for other reasons?



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Mr Wragg: Logically, there is not a difference. If you were to push me and say, "Well, there's no logic in your argument, Mr Wragg"—you would not be the first person to say that—my answer would be to scrap the scheme for baby leave, and then there would be utter consistency at least. But even I realise that it is impossible sometimes to turn back the tides of progress.

It is about knowing the difference between someone who is having baby leave and someone who might be ill and the nature of that illness—whether they wish to have that illness recorded, issues around mental capacity and wondering if some of the practices we already have in the Commons are in fact quite humane. As the Committee knows, I often speak up for Whips Offices of all variety, but one of the most humane things that we do as a Parliament is that accommodation through pairing. There might well be future scope to look at how nodding through might be used.

If you were to say to me, however, "Well, it's happening, Mr Wragg. Tough luck, your argument has been defeated, but what would you restrict it to?", that is a slightly different question. If I am frank—I notice two SNP colleagues on the Committee—Amy Callaghan's case is a most convincing one, given her inability on medical grounds to travel, but I think that broadening it any further is difficult. I also think that we should be mindful of those who would not wish to speak about their reasons for being absent from the House of Commons.

Q190 **Chris Elmore:** Mr Wragg, you are touching on some of these matters in terms of risk. The key question for me is about the consequences that you see from a decision to expand proxy voting to those with ill health or caring responsibilities. The fundamental issue is that you clearly see the risk in it, but can you expand on that in more detail?

Mr Wragg: It is the risk of what is personal. I think that it was put by a previous witness that, usually and ordinarily, the birth of a child is something to be celebrated. It is also something that cannot be concealed very easily. The difference between the celebration that comes with that, and someone's sense of privacy about their own health—be that physical or mental—should be borne in mind.

I have also been struck by the argument, "Well, people wouldn't have to apply for a proxy", but the problem is that if some people had applied for a proxy when they were ill and had been quite transparent about the reason for their absence, that in itself puts pressure on others or at least allows questions to be asked of them: "If so-and-so has spoken so movingly of their mental health, for example, why do you have a proxy? What's wrong with you?" These are quite prying questions.

Occasionally as Members of Parliament, we have to stand up for ourselves. I am sure you have questions about what is driving the nature of this inquiry, but I think we have to remember that we have the right to privacy, particularly on medical matters, and we should not always feel the need or the pressure to share that with the world.

Q191 Chris Elmore: I suppose there is an Americanism in this, in the sense that members of Congress often give up their health information. That is something that has not come across the pond. That is your substantive point—that we still have some level of privacy in public life in this country.

Mr Wragg: Yes, indeed. I think that is also symptomatic of us as a country. I think we as a country generally believe that medical matters are private matters, not just in our walk of life but in many other places of work. I am sure that people with an active interest in HR would be able to testify to that.

Q192 Chris Elmore: So your firm view would be that if a Member was offered a proxy due to ill health rather than caring responsibilities, that would put an inordinate amount of pressure on every Member if they needed to be off, particularly if it was for cancer treatment or something of that ilk that required a course of treatment—that that would just be too overbearing and would mean that other Members could not use pairing, for example?

Mr Wragg: Yes. Going back to the idea that we could have a hybrid system, I do think that the imposition on other people who did not wish to make use of that facility would be an unfair pressure on them.

Q193 Chris Elmore: My final question is about mental capacity to cast a proxy. If a Member was off with a proxy due to having an episode of poor mental health as opposed to receiving treatment for cancer, just to keep using that example, what would be your opinion in terms of the House, the Speaker, party Whips or whoever having to decide whether the Member had the capacity to make the decision if their proxy said, "What would you like to do on this?"

Mr Wragg: There are two questions there. The first is slightly before that—whether they would have the mental capacity to agree to having a proxy, let alone to have individual votes run by them. We may move on to that later, but that is a very interesting topic in itself. It is not just about the mental capacity of somebody who might have a mental health problem at any particular time; it would also be relevant if a colleague—heaven forfend—was in a coma or receiving palliative care. We have to examine this in the extreme, because they are realistic prospects. At what point would it no longer be suitable for them to have that proxy?

Q194 Owen Thompson: Good afternoon. As you have already referenced, the predecessor Committee highlighted issues around a Member's privacy if there was to be an extension. If I can put it to you in this way, just to make it as difficult as possible for you—

Mr Wragg: Please do.

Owen Thompson: What solutions to invasions of privacy could you suggest that would make it workable, so that we would not be invading a Member's privacy should an extension be granted?

Mr Wragg: You would have to ensure that they could be applied for without a particular reason being published. The difficulty would be, in



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analysing it in the round, if a particular Member had made it public why they had a proxy. Going back to the discussion with Mr Elmore, not all Members would be in the position so to do, so it would have to be blind in that sense.

Q195 **Owen Thompson:** Again, I suppose some of that comes back to personal choice. Some Members are very open about their personal situations; others would not want to be, but ultimately it would be a choice that they could make.

Mr Wragg: It would be, but that would also be true were there not to be a proxy voting system. I believe the vast majority of constituents would be understanding if their Member of Parliament was open about the reason. Forgive me, Chair, if this is going to crop up later, but ultimately, what is driving this urge is the abuse that some Members of Parliament have suffered if they have had a prolonged period of absence and groups or individuals have taken it upon themselves, whether from a party political perspective in a Member's seat or not, to highlight that to suggest that they therefore are not fulfilling their duties as a Member of Parliament. I think we have to separate that attack from the principle of whether it is right or wrong to have proxy votes.

Q196 **Owen Thompson:** In the review of the pilot arrangements, it was decided that evidence of maternity would no longer be required; it is enough for the Member just to apply. Do you think that is something that could be replicated in this situation should we be looking to extend—

Mr Wragg: It is difficult. I said at the outset that I opposed the extension, but if there were cases and if the Committee were of the mind that we should limit it to x, y and z of the most serious personal situations and conditions, and if we stipulated that, inevitably there would have to be a means of verifying that. I would like to think—I am quite sure that I do think, actually—that that would not be abused, but if the Committee were minded to be very clear about what it thought should fall into the auspices of an extension, that is unavoidable.

Q197 **Owen Thompson:** It is not enough that we are considered honourable Members?

Mr Wragg: I think we are all honourable Members, and I am sure that none is more honourable than the others.

Q198 **James Gray:** Someone would have to decide whether a proxy vote should be issued, offered or granted. Who would that be?

Mr Wragg: That is part of the problem, and part of the reason that I oppose the principle of extension. I do not know who it would be. Are we saying that it would be a matter between the Member and Mr Speaker, for example? If we are suggesting that it needs somehow to be verified with a medical certificate, as it would be in the workplace, is it for him to do so or is it for somebody in an HR function? I think that it would probably be the Speaker, but that would sometimes put the Speaker in the invidious position of making that judgment.



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Q199 **James Gray:** If it were not the Speaker, presumably it would have to be a Clerk or the Clerks in general.

Mr Wragg: I presume so.

Q200 **James Gray:** But even if it were the Speaker, the Clerks would no doubt have to advise the Speaker or the Speaker's Office. Do you agree that if that were the case, it would be putting Clerks—quite possibly, junior Clerks—in a very difficult position? In a previous session of the Committee, I used an example for which I was then roundly mocked in Private Eye; none the less, I would do it again—

Aaron Bell: Learn from it!

James Gray: Yes, learn from experience. The example was that if I fell off my horse and twisted my ankle, a Clerk or somebody would have to decide whether that was a sufficiently disabling injury and perhaps whether the cause of the injury was equally laudable—or not, as the case may be—for them to grant the proxy; or would we say, as was implied a moment ago, that if any honourable Member applies for a proxy, he or she gets it, in which case there would be no need for a decision to be made, as it would be automatic?

Mr Wragg: If you were to fall from your horse and suffer that injury, I suspect that the assessment to be made would be how mobile and nifty you were on a pair of crutches. I recall that you have had a similar injury before and I seem to remember you managing quite well. But I take your point that it would be for the Clerk or Mr Speaker. I am less taken by the idea that a more junior Clerk would be left to make the decision—I do not think that they would be, because it would not be fair—but I take your point.

Q201 **James Gray:** The Speaker and his senior advisers are absolutely flat out every day and doing what they have to do to run the House. Do you agree that if they were suddenly asked to adjudicate on 20, 30 or 50 MPs in a day, they could not do it?

Mr Wragg: Particularly if there had been carnage in the dressage arena—that would really place a huge burden on the Clerks. I take your point. The principal aspect is: who is going to make that decision? Perhaps you ask that question rhetorically, because it supports the reasons for my argument of opposing the extension.

Q202 **James Gray:** Are we driving towards the notion that it would be impossible for the Speaker, the Clerks or anybody else to take these decisions—to adjudicate between someone with a very serious illness, and someone who might be a malingerer or have other reasons not to be there? For example, imagine that I have had a slight injury on the skiing slopes and I do not want to come home for a three-line Whip, so I say, "Oh, I am awfully sorry Mr Speaker." We can't have that. Therefore, we are presumably moving towards the notion that we are all honourable Members, and that therefore if we ask for a proxy, there must be good reason for it. If that were to be the case, to what degree do you think



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that it might well—not initially perhaps, but over years—come to be abused quite significantly?

Mr Wragg: There is a risk that it would evolve from being extremely well intentioned and targeted to having a broader remit. I should declare that I am one of seven Members of Parliament who did not have a proxy vote throughout the pandemic—I think there is another one here—so I come at it from that disposition. I think that Mr Gray's argument, although interesting in his choices of injury, is none the less an important one.

Q203 **James Gray:** I am using slightly absurd language; let us be more serious about it. Would you agree that there must be a hierarchy of seriousness? Quite plainly, if someone has a mild headache, that is not very serious, but if someone is suffering from a terminal disease, that is extremely serious and very tragic. Who would decide that hierarchy? Can the House itself can lay down what is and is not serious?

Mr Wragg: Well, you tell me. You are answering the question yourself—

James Gray: I am asking helpful questions.

Mr Wragg: These are extremely helpful questions in that respect, Mr Gray, but they are almost rhetorical. I agree entirely about why you are asking them.

Q204 **James Gray:** If there were to be a regime on extending proxy, there would have to be some kind of list or procedure—whether for a person or for a list—to decide what would or would not be suitable for proxy.

Mr Wragg: Yes, there would, if it were not left to the individual Member to determine, which, as you say, and I agree, adds to the risk that, over years, that will be increasingly sought after outside the original purpose.

One aspect that is important to look at is how the proxy vote works. If somebody is away from here for whatever reason—if they are convalescing, taking time out for illness and so on—should they really be consulted on each vote? Would they wish to be consulted and would it be appropriate? If somebody is seriously ill and away from here, would they be in a fit state or wish to have that disturbance? I think that is one aspect that we have not really discussed so far.

Q205 **James Gray:** Before we come to that, I have one more question, if I may. If proxy voting were extended to a variety of illnesses of various kinds, which we have had difficulty defining, to what degree do you think that reasoning should be published?

Mr Wragg: I personally do not think it should, to the extent that my opposition to the extension of proxies is, partly, on the basis of the medical privacy of Members of Parliament.

Q206 **James Gray:** If we are saying that no one can decide because we do not know who could and the Speaker does not have time; that there cannot be hierarchy; and that, anyhow, there should be no publication of why a proxy is needed, are we not saying that it is entirely a blank cheque? Any



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Member of Parliament may apply for a proxy for any reason, at any time, without any kind of explanation to anybody.

Mr Wragg: I think that is a risk over time. I do—

James Gray: We are talking about the rules here. If those three premises are correct, we are saying that any Member of Parliament may apply for a proxy. He need not speak to anyone about it; he need not publish why he did it; and he need not conform to any rule of regulation. He merely says, “I want a proxy,” and he gets it—or she.

Mr Wragg: I admit that that would be a problem, yes.

Q207 **Chris Elmore:** I have always been nervous, rather than uncomfortable, around the idea of who defines ill health. I agree with Mr Gray on that substantive point.

I also wonder about when a Member has a child. Without getting into a broader debate, that is a binary issue—you have either had a child or you have not. We defined it in the previous Committee, as you will remember, including adoption and all the other ways in which you can have a child. It is for six months. The Member can stop it at a particular point and restart it, but they have a maximum of six months. I wonder what your view is. I do not think that I have asked previous witnesses this, so it is a new line of questioning perhaps.

Say this goes through, the House accepts it, and it is a six-month proxy for ill health in extreme cases—but it is for only six months, and the treatment for a Member is eight months. We would have pairing with maternity—when a Member finishes maternity, maybe we could offer additional pairing—but I wonder what your view is of the pressure that would be on that Member to return if they have not finished treatment, or would it simply be for as long as the treatment, because you would not often have treatment for that long a period, even in some cancer treatments? I am curious to know your view more than anything. I think I am playing devil’s advocate, rather than advocating it.

Mr Wragg: If there were such a restriction, I am sure that there would be exceptions to prove it necessary for this question to be revisited again. I am quite sure of that. You alluded to pairing, and that being used in that way. I appreciate that that is something that SNP colleagues do not necessarily avail themselves of—the usual channels—but if it were sufficient to have a proxy for six months and you say we could bring in pairing to alleviate any concern, why might not that be done from the beginning?

Q208 **Chris Elmore:** I suppose my broader concern is about who defines the illness, to go back to Mr Gray’s point about it being Clerks, the Speaker’s Office or whatever. What if nothing is published to explain why the Member is off and has been allocated a proxy? That is published with baby leave, at the end of every day, and it can be found out for Members—I have just finished holding a proxy for the Member for Walthamstow, for example, and who does that is published.



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I am trying to square in my mind, that if we did not publish what was wrong with the colleague when they have a proxy, is there an additional pressure through the vileness of social media, rather than necessarily from constituents, when they are told, "The Member is off", or, "They are off for this amount of time", and what is wrong with them, while somebody else could have a different type of cancer that requires a shorter element of treatment and therefore be back from their proxy far more quickly. In Amy Callaghan's case, which was moving—I was so pleased to see her in the House, I think last week or the week before—her support is needed over a much longer period, so I come back to the point: who decides what the period is and for how long if, for example, we do not give a doctor's note to explain what is wrong with the Member? Again, I am throwing the question in to prompt the report discussion, rather than saying that this is my own view.

Mr Wragg: It is very valid. In that question, you explore a number of the issues that give me concern. No doubt, when the previous Committee gave its recommendation for baby leave, we let the genie out of the bottle. The way it was gotten through the Committee was by making it very tightly defined and on a trial basis, but to temper the enthusiasm for proxy voting, we have to look at what it is to be a Member of Parliament voting.

There are plenty of different aspects to being a Member of Parliament—casework, constituency work and everything else, but also voting on the law. I have asked this of previous witnesses, and it was regarded humorously: had they ever changed their mind on how they were going to vote during the course of a debate? If they were on a proxy, that would present difficulties, because you would be requiring them to follow the debate and then to let their proxy know that they wish to change their default vote, which I presume would usually—even in my case—be with the party Whip.

These are fundamental questions about what it is to be a Member of Parliament voting on the law and whether a proxy vote system—in the purest sense, I admit—is compatible with that. I think that we allowed a certain amount of deviation from that purist view of what it is to be a Member of Parliament voting on the law when it came to baby leave. Is it fit to have wider application? That is where my scepticism comes from.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in Owen Thompson, who wants to come in on that point, then back to James Gray.

Q209 **Owen Thompson:** Briefly, we had a number of other witnesses and other submissions, but are you aware of anyone making the case that proxies should be extended for a headache or a twisted ankle, or is that in fact a red herring to distract from the serious conditions that have actually been flagged up?

Mr Wragg: It may well be a red herring, but I think the issue still stands about how it might be used going forward. I am not one of these people who advances the view that some of our colleagues find it an



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inconvenience being a Member of Parliament and would sooner be out doing plenty of other things rather than attending the Chamber or following debates or voting. I think that is a very unfair assessment of some of our colleagues. Do I think that it would be readily and widely abused? No, I do not. Do I think that there is a case for what might be termed mission creep? Yes, I do.

Q210 James Gray: Just for the correctness of the record, I was not for a second suggesting that anybody who had a headache would apply for a proxy. The point I was making was that between having a headache and having terminal cancer there are a whole range of things, and somebody would have to decide at what stage in that range the line came.

Mr Wragg: It can be either be arbitrary, which everyone can take issue with, because some people will think it is too lax and some people will think it is too severe, or it can be left to the judgment of the individual Member of Parliament, in which case I think it is more open to abuse in the context of this inquiry.

Q211 James Gray: Just one final thought on the question of publishing. I suspect that most people are of the view that we should not publish medical reasons for a proxy, if it was extended to allow that. If that is the case, what would happen if one person with a proxy wished to publish it and made a speech to the House of Commons saying, "I have a proxy because of mental health difficulties." Would that not put pressure on everybody else to do the same thing?

Mr Wragg: That is a very valid point. As I mentioned earlier, I am very happy for people to disclose whatever they wish to disclose about themselves, as to whatever is going on in their lives and how that understandably impinges on different aspects of the role of Member of Parliament. That is perfectly legitimate and is for them to do—they should be supported in doing so, incidentally. But I do think that it could set a precedent by which it would bring pressure to bear on those who do not wish to, for whichever reason, have similar disclosure.

Q212 Patrick Grady: Maybe we could talk a little bit about some of the alternatives, or at least the alternatives that are currently in place, and how well or otherwise they work. We have pairing, or nodding through, which are quite different things. Could you reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of the existing systems?

Mr Wragg: I think there is an informality with pairing, isn't there? You will know better than anybody—you can correct me on what the SNP practice is and whether they take part in that—but I do think that has a role in terms of its discretion and, frankly, the smooth running of Parliament sometimes as well. Believe it or not, there is co-operation behind the scenes. When that works well, it works well to the advantage, in a very humane way, pastorally, for Members of Parliament. That is something that we should give the Whips Offices credit for. So I would suggest that pairing can perform well, but I would appreciate questions from you as to why that might not be the way forward from a parliamentary perspective.



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I think, though, if we ask ourselves why we are here, and going back to baby leave in the previous Parliament, it was because of predominantly online campaigns, where a Member was away for a prolonged period of time and of people questioning that and implying or stating clearly that that person was not a fit Member of Parliament because that person was not voting for or against x, y or z issues. That is where, if I can be so bold—obviously I will not be looking at my Twitter for several weeks—we should push back. We should push back against that and rather than completely changing the way that we would wish to see the role of a Member of Parliament in reaction to that, we should say, “No, it is legitimate for Members of Parliament, if they are ill or have reasons—as we have described with baby leave—not to be at Westminster.” Now, I have no doubt that if there were to be an important vote—shall we say?—such as a matter of confidence in the course of that, or, as we saw perhaps more frequently than was desired in the last Parliament, through the votes following the referendum on leaving the European Union, that Member would make every effort to come to Parliament.

In many ways, we must not view how pairing works based on our reflections on the last Parliament, where it was a numbers game and where the numbers were very tight every time—on a couple of occasions it literally mattered where one person was—and where nodding through was used for those Members who were ill. I remember Nick Bowles in particular coming in. However, I also remember a failure of the pairing system, which then caused relations between the Whips Offices to collapse, such that it was necessary to have people brought in to vote who frankly should not have been brought in.

That would be my rather rambling reflection on pairing, Mr Grady.

Q213 Patrick Grady: You are right that the SNP practice is not to take part in pairing, except in very rare circumstances, or when the pairing is a kind of natural occurrence—for example, because of a Select Committee visit and there is a balance of absences.

I suppose that is part of the point—namely, that pairing happens for a whole range of different reasons and not necessarily just due to the incapacity of a Member. As you rightly point out, it requires there to be a pair: two people have to co-operate in order for it to happen. There has to be a willing proxy as well and the proxy has to be willing to take on that proxy.

To be fair, you spoke about people changing their minds during the pandemic. I don’t think it happened to me, but I know that other folk who were proxies at the very least had to rebel. The Government Deputy Whip was repeatedly walking through the Opposition Lobby. So that’s not uncommon as well.

Nodding through is effectively a kind of proxy anyway and it strikes me that of all the arcane procedures in this place it is one of the most arcane, because it still requires the Member to be present on the Estate and to be verified as being there. I just wonder if you could reflect a little bit on that.



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Mr Wragg: Yes, it does. It is arcane but, to an extent, humane, although I am sure others would disagree with me about that—on the fact that somebody would have to be brought to the Estate. I mean, we have all seen the play “This House”; it almost has a comic quality, although it is literally deadly serious.

I think there is probably a greater role for nodding through in some circumstances. My opposition to its extension comes from the basic position that—naively, perhaps—I believe that Members of Parliament do, on occasion at least, use their faculties to decide during the course of a debate how they might vote. Now, if a Member of this Committee wishes to disagree with that assessment of the role of a Member of Parliament, including themselves, they are more than welcome to do so, but I approach it—admittedly naively—from that very purist position.

Q214 **Patrick Grady:** What is the response, then, if a Member is remote—on a Select Committee visit, for example—and paired off, and then suddenly realises that a Division is taking place, and they have been diligently following the debate on Parliamentlive.tv and want to change their mind? Is there some scrabble around to break that pair, or has that Member just chosen to absent themselves from Parliament on that day because they are off on a Select Committee visit?

Mr Wragg: I would suggest that they have chosen to absent themselves from Parliament that day, and if they were prepared to do so, they would break that pair, and the consequences are that the normal good relations between parties in this place break down. It has consequences—actions have consequences. This is, after all, more about the behaviours of Members of Parliament collectively than it is about the rules that govern them.

Q215 **Patrick Grady:** Just one final line, Chair. It is worth saying that Amy Callaghan, when she was here last week, was quite clear in the media that she was there against doctor’s orders. The advice from her doctor was not to travel.

The provision on tonight’s Order Paper is going to lead to three sets of votes, which will probably keep us here until midnight. If we want to support Members, and indeed staff and everyone else who has to facilitate all that, are there other alternatives we could be looking at in terms of the proceedings of the House—the timing of votes and awareness of when things like the deferred Divisions procedure, for example, are going to happen?

Mr Wragg: That immediate example is where nodding through could be better used in the course of a day. That would be one thing. You highlight another difficulty, though, which is where there are consequential votes or where certain votes are not expected but do happen and how proxies can accommodate for that. Unless the blanket instruction is “Vote with the Government Whip”—

Q216 **Patrick Grady:** With the Party Whip, not the Government Whip.



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Mr Wragg: I am quite sure that all parties expect their Members to vote with the Whip. The only qualification I would make, because it would be inhumane for me not to do so, is on the example where a doctor has said that a Member of Parliament should not travel. That is the conundrum we face. I am sure it will be for this Committee, with its usual deliberative abilities, to square that circle.

Q217 **Patrick Grady:** If that can either be certified or if the Member self-declares, then—

Mr Wragg: It is a very narrowly defined issue: whether a person should or should not travel. It is not about whether they are well; it is very specifically that they should not travel. That is what we have to overcome as a Committee. I have not just come here this afternoon to play the ultimate devil's advocate and speak up where seemingly none of our previous witnesses did—even if they were meant to do so. I have not come here to make myself popular. I have simply come here to put the alternative argument against expanding the system, but it still leaves questions for me.

Q218 **Chair:** Can I ask about pairing? Pairing is used not just for ill health. It is used, as we have talked about, for Committee visits and for other institutions that Parliament has. It also allows an MP to be in their constituency, perhaps for personal reasons or constituency matters. Do you fear that, if we were to go down this road, the flexibility of pairing would wane?

Mr Wragg: Yes, it would. The danger when we embark on inquiries like this is that we start to shine a light—it is well-intentioned, but none the less a light—on things here. That is all well and good where there are rum things afoot and ill things going on—that is absolutely fine and right—but when it comes down to things like pairing, which have evolved over time and are useful and humane, I would be bold on questions around maternity leave. When we start asking those questions—and as officeholders we are not subject to the usual employment law on such matters—in seeking to answer an apparent problem, we open up more problems than we resolve.

Q219 **Aaron Bell:** Thank you, Mr Wragg, for coming. I salute your indefatigability in attending throughout covid. However, to follow from Mr Grady's question, had you been asked to self-isolate—we have obviously abandoned that now—is that not a situation where a proxy would be appropriate?

Mr Wragg: No, I just wouldn't have voted. That is an astonishing thing to say. I just wouldn't have voted.

Q220 **Aaron Bell:** You personally wouldn't have, but for other Members, you have just conceded that inability to travel might be a reason for giving a proxy.

Mr Wragg: Yes, but it is different in terms of length of time. That is the conundrum, is it not? How long is it acceptable, if you are unwell for whatever reason—to miss a couple of weeks' votes, for example? All votes



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are honourable votes, and all votes are important but, to plagiarise George Orwell, some votes are more important than others. I think the test is when a Member's illness meets one of those situations. As I recall, although I may be wrong and I am sure the Clerk could advise the Chair on this, I do not think the baby leave vote extended to a vote of confidence. Am I entirely wrong in that? I am not sure if we stipulated that there were some votes that were exempt from proxy.

Aaron Bell: I will let the Chair come back on that later.

Mr Wragg: The point I am making is to illustrate that.

Q221 **Aaron Bell:** Are you proposing that, should we go down this route, there should be a minimum length of time that any proxy is given, which would perhaps reflect the seriousness of the circumstance?

Mr Wragg: I am stating my opposition with the expectation of a negotiation to follow.

Q222 **Aaron Bell:** I understand that. To answer some of the questions about seriousness and the obvious problem with drawing a line somewhere between spraining your ankle and having terminal cancer, it seems to me that saying it needs to be for a certain period of time would perhaps be appropriate.

Mr Wragg: I don't know if it would, because I do not think there is any consistency in that. It is not the time that's the issue. The argument advanced by those who wish to have a proxy vote is based on somebody being ill or unable, and I do not think that is necessarily time-limited.

Q223 **Aaron Bell:** In which case, self-isolation would be an obvious category of when you would put down a proxy vote because you are completely unable.

Mr Wragg: Correct.

Aaron Bell: Understood.

Chair: Would you like the clarification? We have checked, and proxy votes do not count towards numbers for quorum, so they do not count for the purposes of a closure motion, for example. They did not count for the vote for an election, which needed the 75% majority, although of course the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 is being abolished.

Q224 **Aaron Bell:** Thank you, Chair. As you may recall, in one of our evidence sessions it was suggested that a remote vote could be better than a proxy vote for Members unable to attend Westminster due to illness but who wish to cast a vote. You have already spoken about the two flip sides to that, one where people may want to be off completely, but also that the physical act of casting a vote might address the issues about mental or physical capacity. What is your view on that being a strict alternative or another option? We did have remote voting during the pandemic.

Mr Wragg: We did, and some of us did not avail ourselves of that facility, but that is a different story. The point is that yes, that has an attraction to



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it, but the fundamental issue still stands. If somebody is ill and away from Parliament, then I would venture to say that in the majority of cases, they are ill and wishing to be recuperating. They should be following our proceedings—fascinating as they are to the Member of Parliament—at home as an onlooker.

I am not quite sure that that sits with the strictness of separation—if somebody is ill, they are ill. They are away from Parliament. To cast a remote vote would presumably require—again, I say this naively—following our proceedings to determine what their point of view is as opposed to what the party Whip wants, so I don't think that is necessarily a solution.

Q225 Aaron Bell: It is not a complete solution, but it might be a solution for individual Members in particular cases, such as Ms Callaghan or someone self-isolating. They might want to avail themselves of that opportunity precisely to address the issue you raised earlier of people being accused of not participating.

Mr Wragg: Yes, but I would push back on that accusation of not participating. People who are MPs would no doubt be diligently going about their other duties as well. Frankly, to just have some common humanity to explain that if a person is ill, they are unable to be here, I think we should push back against those who would wish to traduce an MP and their reputation. I also think—I voiced this in an earlier session—that sometimes the problems we face with the ill treatment of MPs can, believe it or not, come from Opposition parties in particular constituencies. We had members of all different parties here, but is there not a case for being strict with our own activists and members if such traducing takes place?

Aaron Bell: I agree with that. Thank you.

Q226 Chair: Does anyone have any further points, or is there anything you would like to add to your evidence, Mr Wragg?

Mr Wragg: Just to say that I am extremely grateful to have had the invitation. I have perhaps unusually played the devil's advocate, realising that some of the things I have said will be unpalatable but understanding fully the thrust of the reasoning as to why people would wish to have proxy voting. I wish the Committee well in its deliberations.

Chair: I thank you very much for your time this afternoon. I shall bring this to a close.