



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall, HC 1022

Wednesday 9 March 2022

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Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Aaron Bell; Jack Brereton; Chris Elmore; Patrick Grady; Nigel Mills; Gary Sambrook.

Questions 22-51

Witness

[I](#): Stella Creasy MP.

Examination of witness

Witness: Stella Creasy MP.

Q22 **Chair:** Thank you very much for joining us today, Stella. We appreciate it. We know that you are under the weather; as I said before starting proceedings, if you need to stop at any point, please say and we will suspend proceedings. We do not want to put you to any more discomfort than anyone with covid already has.

We are grateful that you asked to have this session virtually and that you still wanted to take part, because we are keen to take evidence and to hear from you on this important issue. Is there anything you would like to say as an opening statement before we go into our questions?

Stella Creasy: Thank you, Chair, and I thank the Committee for your forbearance. I am afraid that covid has finally got me, after two years, although it has not got my son, who seems to be absolutely jolly.

I would like to open with three things. First, I make a plea to everyone interested in this subject to be open-minded, including those people in this place who have commented online, written articles and given interviews, but have not as yet responded to my offers to speak about it. That open-mindedness is important, because it is about recognising that nobody here is seeking to tell anyone how to look after their own children.

I want to be clear: I am not an exhibitionist who wants to get my breasts out in public, as some parliamentarians have suggested, and I am not too tight to pay for childcare. For the record, I use the Commons nursery for my other child, who is two-and-a-half years-old and—I want to be very clear—should be nowhere near any Chamber, or anywhere there are no wipe-clean surfaces or there is anything breakable or of value.

I have spoken out on the poor treatment of mothers by political parties not for my own benefit, because any changes that come will be too late to help me and my children. It is for the thousands of women whom I have met from across the country, from all political parties, who are deterred by our political process. As ever, when women speak out, we get accused of being attention seeking, when we talk from our experience; whereas men bring their expertise when they speak out.

The abuse that I faced online about this issue—which some colleagues have encouraged, frankly—will not stop me from campaigning, but I have to be honest to the Committee that it makes me wary of participation today. I want to be clear: I do not intend to address any personal questions about my family, because no woman should have the ins and outs of her breast output cross-examined.

Secondly, I am wary—the Chair knows this is my view—because I do not believe that this is the inquiry you should be having. It is not about whether babies should be allowed in the Chamber, but about why anyone



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would need to take one in in the first place. That is due to the lack of proper maternity and paternity cover in Parliament. That matters because if the place that makes the laws on these issues itself has no policies on them, how can we defend them or indeed stop the discrimination that our constituents face on these issues?

I know that the Chair will say that that is beyond your remit. The failure of all the organisations in Parliament that might have a role in this to come together, I feel, is problematic, because each says the other must act, so none does. Frankly, I have come to the conclusion that Parliament itself is incapable of addressing this because we want to do it in-house and therefore do not recognise the inherent barrier that that faces. It is not those of us who are already here who people should be talking to; it is those voices, those mums, who might be interested in standing for politics but are put off by our lack of policies, whom you should be hearing from.

I make a plea to the Committee to have, at future sessions, those voices, whether the phenomenal Pregnant Then Screwed, Mother Pukka, Ashley James or any of the other brilliant mums who are campaigning about a woman's role in politics. We are the Mother of all Parliaments, but the Good Parliament project shows us clearly that mothers are not part of our political process.

The final point that I want to make, which I think is very pertinent to a Committee that has, frankly, quite a few Members elected in 2019, is that I am not a pioneer in this. I am not the first person to bring a baby into the Chamber, nor was my son the first baby I brought into the Chamber. In the previous Parliament, frankly, it was commonplace to have children around. Unsurprisingly, the world did not collapse and debates were not disrupted.

We are behind many other Parliaments. If the Committee would like to see the Standing Orders from Australia, which provide proxies for nursing mothers, I am happy to share. Canada is bringing in cover for all aspects of an MP's role, including in the constituency. Finland, Denmark, the European Parliament, Spain and countless other jurisdictions have already dealt with this, and then some. Indeed, in New Zealand, the Speaker is so supportive of nursing mothers and maternity cover that he himself looked after Tāmami Coffey's young son while he spoke.

With that, I put on the record my solidarity with and my thanks to all the other parliamentarians around the world who have been in touch with me, horrified that the Mother of all Parliaments is in this position on these issues, and supporting the need for change. That is: Yong Hye-in, who is a member of the National Assembly of South Korea; Zuleikha Hassan, who is a member of the Kenyan Parliament; Clare O'Neil, from the Australian Parliament; Lara Wolters, an MEP in the European Parliament; and Katharina Schulze, from the Bavarian State Parliament, to mention just a few. It is important to recognise that the world is watching us and what we do on these issues, and how we make sure that our democracy is truly open to everyone. With that in mind, I am happy to take questions.



Q23 Chair: Thank you very much. To add to what you said, we want to listen to all viewpoints on this and that is not helped—this is to the outside world—by social media outrage. There will be differing views and similar views, but we want to hear from those people who are directly affected, so that we can put a report to Parliament for Parliament to have its say on. I urge anyone watching this to remember that we should conduct these conversations with courtesy and dignity.

I appreciate your opening comments. I know you are frustrated about this, but I should say to the outside world that as the Procedure Committee, we are charged with looking at the way we conduct the proceedings on public business, and we have been asked specifically by the Speaker to look at the issue of babies in the Chamber, and that includes Westminster Hall. We don't look at Select Committees or at any of the other matters; we are looking specifically at that, and that is the scope of our report. I do appreciate that the issue is much wider than that, but I just want to make that point for those watching from outside.

May I kick off with a very open question? I appreciate that you said that you didn't want to go too much into personal details, but it would be useful for the Committee to hear from you about your experience of being both a parent and a Member of Parliament.

Stella Creasy: I have been quite open about my experience because I have been concerned. The Good Parliament project is very clear that if you are a mother of young children, our political process has very few of you; if you are father of young children, on the other hand, there are lots of you. I can understand why, and I know that there are members of this Committee who have had similar experiences. I want to be very clear: I would not want to attack any parent for the way that they have managed the system, but I think that the status quo is untenable in a modern world.

Why is that? In particular, in my experience, I have had to negotiate twice, heavily pregnant—the second time incredibly ill—with IPSA about the base support for my office, to be able to represent my constituents. I have been open that I struggled for many years to have children, so when I finally became pregnant to the extent that the pregnancy was successful, I wanted to make sure that that wasn't going to come at the cost of representation of my constituency. The fact is that there is no system in place, despite many offers for years that there should be a consultation. Policies should be drawn up.

What I want to be clear with the Committee about is the fact that I do not sit here saying that my way of doing this is the only way of doing it. My point is, there is no clarity, there is no consistency, there is no policy; and so, in the absence of that, either patronage or struggle is what happens to people, and that struggle means that their children are affected. So I worry for my children that they have had me very frazzled. This little man had me, less than 24 hours after I had given birth to him, on the phone to Ministers because I had a lot of constituents affected by the Afghan situation and ministerial offices were very clear that they would not speak to anybody but the MP.



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In my first pregnancy, I was able to appoint a locum who was able to represent my constituents and be part of those meetings during the pandemic, and it was a very different experience.

I have come into Parliament to make sure that the issues that I know my constituents are concerned about also get represented. I might have a baby, but the legislative programme doesn't stop, and that has been the case for both my children. So, for example, when there was emergency legislation on the situation in Northern Ireland when it came to abortion rights—something that the previous Chair will know I felt very strongly about and had been heavily involved in the legislation—I brought my daughter in with me in order to be able to participate in that debate. I consider these to be what you would call keep-in-touch days.

I know everyone wants to talk about this as somehow being out of touch with the real world. I have looked very closely at the real world: in the real world, when people have maternity cover they have appropriate cover, so they have somebody who can go to all those meetings, but they also have keep-in-touch days, so that if there is something only they can cover, they can come in and be part of their workplace.

I considered coming into the parliamentary Chamber during the six months after I had given birth—I don't think I had maternity leave because I didn't have anyone to cover my job, but in those six months for both my children—as a keep-in-touch day. Again, when I came in to speak about the buy now, pay later industry—something I am very concerned about and I know is heavily affecting the debt of a lot of my constituents—I came in and organised the debate. That debate could not wait until I was perhaps back and my children were older because the debt issues are very pressing for my constituents.

At all those times—as I think anybody who has small children will know—the last thing I would want is to cause disruption to my children, or indeed stop my ability to speak. So I have managed, like many other parents, to make sure that my children were well fed, were happy—as my son is now—so that I am able to speak and people are able to hear me. However, when I did that I received an email telling me that I wasn't able to bring my children in and I wasn't able to speak. So, just to be clear, we have a specific policy, which directly discriminates against pregnant and new mums, that says that if you are on a proxy vote you cannot participate in debates. For a lot of Members who are used to the proxy system during the pandemic, that will be news to them, because we had that during the pandemic. It has clearly shown that it is not a problem to do that.

Secondly, even when I have come in and taken my proxy away, so I have committed to being there all day to vote, I have been told that I cannot bring my baby with me, even if my baby is well behaved and—*[Interruption.]*—not disrupting, although he is just proving now that he can do that if he wants to. I think what this reflects is that nobody has really thought through the consequences of any of the choices that have been made about how parliamentary processes and procedures are



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organised. The consequences are that it is only when these situations arise that anybody starts going, "Hang on a minute—how does this work?"

The consequence of having received an email telling me that I am not allowed to bring my son into the Chamber has been that for the last two and a half months I have not been able to represent my constituents in any debates in Parliament, because I haven't been able to bring him in with me, however quiet and well behaved he might be. The consequence for my constituents is that their voices have not been heard. That cannot be a tenable situation.

For the avoidance of doubt, I am not suggesting that every nursing mother should come into the Chamber, as they do in Australia, but I think we should have the option. We should have a policy in place so that it is not dependent on whether the Chair is a fan of your work or not. At the moment, it is dependent on the Chair deciding whether or not a baby can come in, and it is not possible to find out who the Chair is, so I cannot come in and ask that question in the first place.

Q24 Chair: We will come on to questions around the way the proxy voting system works, because you will know that we are looking at whether it needs to be extended to those with long-term sickness. Obviously, we are looking at the current arrangements for that, so we will come on to some questions about that.

I wanted to pick up on your point around Ministers not speaking to your members of staff. It would be useful for us to be able to raise that with the Leader of the House because that is a very simple thing. I am very surprised that that has happened, actually. Certainly, in my experience Ministers have been happy to speak to office staff—or if the Minister themselves was not, certainly their private office would speak to staff and we could get things cleared that way. Please do let us have details of that, and we will raise it with the Leader of the House.

Stella Creasy: My office has a catalogue of every single time. Because IPSA refused to fund me having a locum this time around—having somebody who could play that maternity cover role—we have kept a tally of every single time a Minister's office or a civil servant has said, "No, sorry—MPs only. Staff can't come."

If staff are allowed to come, they are not allowed to ask questions. In any of the MP briefings that colleagues will be familiar with, my staff, even if they are allowed in, are not able to ask questions, so they are not able to raise constituents' concerns. It is clearly not cover if that person cannot fulfil the same role that you are asking an MP to undertake. I know that people would say that not every MP gets to speak in those MP briefings, but they at least get a chance to put in to ask a question.

These are but minor reflections of the fact that, despite the fact that we make the law on appropriate cover, we do not follow it ourselves. I know that people will say that MPs do not have employment rights, but I just do not think that it sends a very good message in the 21st century that we have never thought these issues through. Indeed, when you raise them it



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is the mothers, and indeed the fathers—I know that there are fathers in Parliament who face these challenges too—who are being problematic, rather than us being problematic for not having a policy that would fit a life experience for a huge number of people, who are not part of our politics. It is quite easy to see why that is the case.

- Q25 **Chair:** I am sure that the Leader's office and others will be watching the debate anyway, because I know that there is interest in this, but if you could provide details of when you had to participate personally and you were not able to have a member of staff there, we would appreciate that. We would like to raise that with the Leader of the House, if that is okay.

Stella Creasy: Yes, I am happy to.

- Q26 **Aaron Bell:** Thank you, Ms Creasy, for appearing in these circumstances. I am really sorry that you have covid. It is not much fun; I had it at Christmas as well.

I am going to try to ask you the same sort of questions that I asked Ms Kearns the other day. You mentioned the real world, and that we should be open-minded. You mentioned keep-in-touch days; my wife benefited from those, and I think that there is a case there. But looking specifically at what the Procedure Committee does, do you think that the House should be seeking to mirror or to lead wider societal changes?

Stella Creasy: I think the House should be at least expecting it. The irony was not lost on me that in trying to negotiate proper and appropriate maternity cover, I was talking to civil servants who indeed had six months' paid maternity cover. I believe passionately—it is one of the reasons why we set up the "This Mum Votes" campaign—that we need to do much more to ensure that maternity and paternity rights are available to people. I certainly think that Parliament should follow, as a basic requirement.

You will notice that in one of the meetings that I had to have with the Defence team, I was in my hospital bed. In this country, it is actually illegal to work in the two weeks after you give birth, but I had casework from Afghanistan and, sadly, there were some murders in my constituency, as well as flooding. It was not practical.

Any politician here will understand why it would be very hard to go to your constituents and say, "Sorry, but on these very serious matters you can't have representation because a woman who has just had a baby is your representative." We struggle as it is to encourage women to come into public life. The Good Parliament project is very clear that mums of young children are absent from our political process, and indeed women go into politics much later in life.

All of us, in all political parties, have heard of inappropriate questions and comments being made to women about their child status either way. These sorts of policies reinforce that culture, because they don't address it. As your wife will know, a keep-in-touch-with-work day is a legal entitlement, but that is just one element. The fact that I did not have someone to cover my role who was on a commensurate level, so that my



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constituents could feel confident that they had the same skill set and same standing, meant that I had to go into those meetings. I am sure you agree that you would not want to say to your constituents, "I'm sorry, but on this occasion, on this important issue, your voice is absent."

Equally, was I as coherent as I could have been when speaking to the Defence Minister, given that I was still on quite a large amount of morphine, having just given birth? I will leave that to him to clarify.

- Q27 **Aaron Bell:** You have made the case that we should compare what we do as Members to the experiences of our constituents, but equally this is not a "normal job" and I think we all go into it knowing that. Legally, it is not a normal job; we are officeholders and we do not have those employment rights. In the long term, would you like this to become more like a normal job, presumably with slightly reduced hours, given that we all tend to work very long hours seven days a week? Would you like that to be the endpoint of what you are driving at—that it becomes a bit more like a normal job?

Stella Creasy: That is a quite unusual question to ask. If you flip it around, what you are essentially saying is that family friendly is not something we think Parliament should be. If we are not friendly to our own families, how can our constituents be confident that we are friendly to theirs?

All of us work very long hours. Like you, I love my job and I am passionate about the community I represent and the causes we work on. I don't think anyone could say that I have shirked, but this is about how we make sure that our politics is open. I go back to the point that this is not about me or any individual policy for myself; this is about the fact that mothers of young children are spectacularly absent from our political process, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out why.

My proxy vote finished two weeks ago, so on the first day I came back we were late night voting. We were here until 1 o'clock in the morning, and it was quite lonely in the Tea Room breastfeeding my son, so I did go into the bars to sit with my colleagues who were there, waiting around for late night votes as well.

All of us would question whether, in the real world, an employer would get away with working in those sorts of ways. Just because it is tradition does not mean that it is the most effective and productive way of working. Far be it from me to suggest that if a section of society is excluded from our democracy, we are perhaps not as productive as we would be if we were working in a way that ensured that that section of society could be included as well.

I know that some suggest that that is somehow a London thing. Let's be frank: in this place, "London" is code for posh. I represent the constituency that has the 10th highest level of child poverty in the country, so we won't take any lessons about being posh, even if we do have the odd coffee shop selling chai latte in Walthamstow.



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We start work at 11.30, even on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Most of my constituents who work shift patterns would look at this workplace and think, "There might be other ways of doing this." We should have an open mind and an interest in what working in other ways could offer. After all, we spent two years doing electronic voting and hybrid meetings, but the world has not collapsed and Parliament has been quite productive.

As a Procedure Committee, having that open mind and recognising that sometimes moving with the times opens up our democracy, which doesn't have a great reputation at the moment on any side, might be a positive thing to do.

- Q28 **Aaron Bell:** I will push on that London point, because I want to ask you the same questions as I put to Ms Kearns. I also gently point out that we did not start at 11.30 today—the Science and Technology Committee met quite a bit earlier. I don't think we want to give our constituents the impression that we start work at 11.30, because that is certainly not the case.

On the London point, because you brought it up, I don't think it is about being posh or anything like that; I think it is about those MPs whose families are based in London, either because they are London MPs or because they choose to do that and go to their constituency at the weekend, and those of us whose families are hundreds of miles away. What you are seeking would privilege one group of MPs over another. That is the challenge I have heard from colleagues. Would you like to address that?

Stella Creasy: Yes, I would like you to explain to me what you mean by privilege and what you think it is that I am seeking.

- Q29 **Aaron Bell:** Well, the point is that only those MPs whose families live in London would be able to benefit in the same way from the changes that you would like us to put in place. Those of us who have families hundreds of miles away would not get the same benefit.

Stella Creasy: So you think that providing proper maternity cover policies for politicians would benefit only those in London? I wish I understood what it is you think I am privileging. Fundamentally, the reason I have taken my son into the Chamber is because I am breastfeeding him and nursing him and, as the Australians have recognised, along with countless other jurisdictions, that requires me to be on hand—unless you are suggesting I get a wet nurse. I am not sure that I understand what privilege you expect Members in London to have. This is not about location; this is about nursing.

- Q30 **Aaron Bell:** I understand that. I think the point is about people on maternity leave whose constituency is hundreds of miles away, because they do not have the same option of coming into the Chamber at short notice because it is short journey and all the rest of it, that London MPs or London-based MPs—many bring up their families in London—have. I am not talking about wet nurses, Ms Creasy; I am just making the point that this has been raised, and it is something specifically—



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Stella Creasy: I am not sure that I understand or follow you. Are you therefore suggesting that we should not have any maternity cover at all for parliamentarians because of location? Surely the point is to have a policy in place and make sure that it is fair, so that everyone understands what they can and cannot do. I have spoken to colleagues on both sides of the House who have essentially said, "Well, I tried to hide in my constituency so that I could spend some time with my child." When you speak to your constituents and hear that they are denied maternity cover and maternity leave, and you understand why that matters to them and their families, surely you should be advocating that in this place, rather than having a "don't ask, don't tell" approach, which is the alternative that you are talking about.

- Q31 **Aaron Bell:** If I could just follow up on the other challenge. Again, this is from colleagues who put this. There is an argument that by bringing babies into the Chamber you create an expectation. You said yourself at the beginning that nobody is telling anyone how they should do things, but the argument has been made that it is counterproductive to women's rights; that if one woman starts coming in during her maternity leave, then other women who might want to take the full six months off completely might feel that they are under the same obligation to do so. What is your view of that?

Stella Creasy: I very much wanted six months of maternity cover, but I did not have that. That argument works both ways, doesn't it? I mean, we all want to be truly libertarian. The point is to have a system wherein either choice is equally possible to make, and right now that is not the case. I think what you are reflecting—

Aaron Bell: Let us assume that we don't have the cover—

Stella Creasy: Mr Bell, can I just finish?

I think that what you are reflecting is a fundamental truism in all this, which is that no mum can ever get it right and no mum will ever be seen to get it right, because we shame mothers for whatever choices they make. The point here is that if you are arguing that there has to be one way of doing it, and that somehow once a woman has had a baby she must be off the estate, or else she is not doing a proper maternity leave—well, I am sure somebody will write something on Twitter.

Perhaps what we should have is a proper maternity policy with proper maternity cover. I note that Canada is looking at how to ensure there is proper maternity leave. We are behind our peers in this process. Rather than suggesting that it is damaging to women's rights to allow women to take a baby into the Chamber—although, I am pleased to hear that you are concerned about women's rights—let us ask why they are having to do it. As I said at the beginning, I had to do it because I had no alternative for making sure that my constituents were represented. Why don't we all agree that our constituents should be able to be represented and our colleagues, both men and women, if they are having children, should be



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able to be with their families, because that will open up our politics to a much broader group of people?

- Q32 **Aaron Bell:** With respect, that is not what I said, because maternity cover is outwith this Committee, and I know you want to make that case. We are dealing, in this short inquiry session, with babies in the Chamber. The argument has been made that if some women bring babies into the Chamber and speak, then other women who are on maternity will feel that their constituents will expect them to do the same thing. That is the argument that has been made.

Stella Creasy: Yes, and the opposite is also—

Aaron Bell: I take the point that women can't get it right. I know what you mean by that.

Stella Creasy: Yes, but the opposite is also true, because what has happened as a result of this argument—as I said, I am not the first person to have done it. I appreciate that you were not elected before 2019 so you were not in a parliamentary Chamber when we had many more children at many more ages around. As I say, the world didn't collapse. We dealt with Brexit and we had those children in there during those debates. Who was the better behaved I will leave to the public to decide. By banning children, you are creating as much of a barrier to those who would like to be able to manage the requirements they have for their constituents.

My point here is that we need a proper maternity policy, because then you wouldn't get into this situation in the first place. All of us could point our constituents to what provision there is, rather than feeling either that we had to be in the Chamber or that we could not be in the Chamber because we might be censured. I can only ask you to go and watch the footage—not of me particularly, but perhaps of our previous colleagues who also brought their children in—and consider whether you feel that is somehow an erosion of women's rights or an advancement of them.

Aaron Bell: Thank you; understood.

Chair: Before I bring in Gary Sambrook, can I make the point that the questions we are putting to you are generic questions; they are not personal opinions? Nobody is stating their personal view; we are just trying to find answers to questions that have been posed to us that we want the answers to so that we can come up with a considered view in our report. I just wanted to make that point.

- Q33 **Gary Sambrook:** Ms Creasy, on the topic of a family-friendly Parliament, your first example was the sitting hours on your first day back. Your natural conclusion, therefore, would be that we should be sitting earlier in the day. You said that we did not start work in the week till half-past 11, which I do not think is a fair reflection of Parliament; many MPs across the House sit on Select Committees and DL Committees, which often sit earlier in the day. Your conclusion that we should bring the sitting hours earlier in the day would mean that many people, just as a matter of geography, would probably have to leave their families on a Sunday



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afternoon or evening if they were travelling, say, from the highlands of Scotland or northern England. Would that make Parliament a more family-friendly place?

Stella Creasy: No, what would have made Parliament a more family-friendly place on that evening would have been the Government having their legislation ready so we did not have to have six hours of protected time until 1 o'clock in the morning. I am sure if you talked to your Whips about that—I take your point. Nobody is suggesting that Mondays shouldn't start late. We have had many debates in this place about family-friendly hours. Surely, one of the answers on this is electronic voting. Again, I don't know whether we really feel that, in the 21st century, it is equally defensible that everybody was in the bar until 1 o'clock in the morning waiting for those votes because of the nature of the Government scheduling, rather than having to start at 9.30 in the morning.

As somebody who has served on DL Committees and Select Committees, I am well aware that there are other forms of business going on, but these hours and the way we work are excluding people from our political process. That is very clear. One of the questions here is: is there a better way of doing this? Is there modern technology that we have learned from in the pandemic that we might be able to use to solve these questions so that we can open up our political process to people wherever they live, whatever stage in their life they might be at and whatever financial background they come from?

Q34 **Chair:** Just for the record, it is worth making the point that the very late votes were on consideration of Lords amendments, not that emergency legislation. We did vote quite late on the emergency legislation—I think we finished voting about 10.30 pm the Monday just gone—

Stella Creasy: No, the Monday before—

Chair: Was consideration of Lords amendments.

Stella Creasy: But it was because the legislation subsequently hadn't been drafted, which meant that that had to be taken at that time. The Whips have talked about this and about the challenges that the Government have faced. Coming up in the next couple of weeks, if you look at the parliamentary timetable—I do not know whether I am sharing any state secrets on this—there is an awful lot of business to get through before Prorogation, and that means there are going to be an awful lot of late nights, but there are also a lot of weeks when there is not as much business. We were thinking, "How do we make this so that we've not got tired, frazzled people making decisions late at night on issues of national importance, regardless of whether they have children?" There are better ways of scheduling.

Chair: Scheduling is something we will be looking at as a Committee, probably in the next Session. You are absolutely right to make the point that because of the way the legislative process works, we have lots of Second Readings early in a Session and we have lots of consideration of Lords amendments late in a Session, which can often mean later nights



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than you would have on a traditional Second Reading. As I say, that is something the Committee will look at in the round when we look at sitting hours, which we do every Parliament, and at the way we schedule business. We will look at that.

Q35 Nigel Mills: I was quite lucky that when we had our twins, in lockdown, I could feed a child under the table while hoping that my speaking slot didn't quite come round or they didn't gurgle at the wrong time and I might get away with it. I probably should not confess to having done that on a few occasions—it is all probably long gone now.

What exactly are you asking for in terms of being able to take a baby into the Chamber, Stella? Is it for up to six months when you are breastfeeding and you would be in there for a few minutes to ask a question, or are you thinking that you could be in for two speeches before yours, give a half-hour speech and then be in for two after that? What do you really think is needed, and how long do you think people would need to be in the Chamber in those situations? I might have got away with my children being quiet for five minutes for a question, but I am not sure that it would have been quite so effective if it had been for an hour and five speeches.

Stella Creasy: I think it also depends on the age of the children. Let me be very clear, Nigel: I think we should have a maternity cover policy that means that you have proper cover so that you can be absent. I think we need to look at what that means for the Chamber. I use the example of keep in touch days because I think it would be up to every parent to determine how they would manage that.

My son is six months old and I am still nursing him; it doesn't suddenly stop at six months. Obviously, the proxy vote stopped and I have had no indication, no support and no policy on what happens next. That is why I have had him with me at these late-night votes—because he still needs to be fed. I hope we are not suggesting that a child should be weaned to the parliamentary calendar. That really would be in the wet nurse territory that we are trying to avoid, in terms of being a bit more modern.

If you trust a parent— I would encourage you to look at the footage of not just me speaking but of other colleagues. Jo Swinson spoke with her children present and they were actually substantially older. If you intend to speak, the last thing you want is somebody heckling you, as this little chap is doing; otherwise the points and arguments you are trying to make won't be heard. That is why I want to be very clear. I have never taken my child into the Chamber as an attention stunt. I have taken him in because needs must. I want to make sure that he is fed, but I also want to make sure that a point is made.

At present and under the previous system, that was not a problem. I think, Nigel, you will remember and recall times when we have had babies in the Chamber and it has not been a particular problem, and I don't see why we cannot have that back. I do think that we need to go much further. The APPG report from 2014 talked about the frustrations of many



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mums that they were beholden to the Whips and to a system where you could not be confident about what cover you could get, whether you had to be in a vote and whether you could speak or not. That just makes organisation much harder to do.

What is interesting, as you are talking about, is that during the pandemic we have had a flavour of what else could be done. Like you, during the pandemic I did bed time and bath time, proposed an amendment and voted on a proposal. I would love anybody to pick out which section of me speaking that was, or indeed for people to feel that that was not a serious contribution. But we seem to have junked the opportunity that came from the pandemic to learn about doing things in a more flexible way, to make it possible for people to combine caring commitments, or indeed to make things possible for our colleagues who are long-term ill. Many of us know colleagues who have come back to work when really they should be taking time off because they are ill, and that is because there isn't a paring system or proxy system that means that their voices and their votes can be heard.

During the pandemic, we got a flavour of ways that we could do that. In this instance, I would make a speech or ask a question and observe the courtesies of the House—because of course I want to hear what my colleagues have to say—and if the Chair were willing to trust me that if my child was going to be disruptive I would leave, I think that would be sufficient. It is not sufficient in terms of being able to be say to any of those women we know who might be thinking of standing for the next Parliament—and selections for all parties are starting to happen—that a process is in place that they can be confident about and plan around, so that if they are thinking about having children—their first child, second child or whatever—they can manage those commitments. That is what I think is the bigger problem: every single time, it is up to women to forge their way through this, rather than support being given to parents as part of our political process.

Q36 Nigel Mills: I am trying to be clear in my mind about the circumstances that you would like to change. Is it just when a mother is nursing a child, and then once a child is not being nursed, they should be in childcare and not coming into the workplace, so there wouldn't be a case; or are you thinking children up to any age? Presumably, you wouldn't bring a teenager into the House, but a child who needs constant adult supervision could be well into the toddler years and beyond. What are you actually asking for the rules to change to?

Stella Creasy: For the avoidance of doubt, as I said in my opening statement, there is no way I would want to bring my two-and-a-half-year-old—actually, I would love to see quite what she would do, but I suspect it would be deeply disruptive. I want to be very clear about this. I do not consider this to be an attack on my professionalism, because fundamentally, professionally, I have points to make, debates to be part of and constituents' concerns to raise, and I wish to be able to do those things. I am just trying to make an imperfect system, which does not offer me any alternative, work. That means having some flexibility about



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whether or not you can bring a baby in, because I don't have the cover to mean that that cover person could come in and speak and I recognise there are huge democratic implications to that. When I have brought a baby in, I have done it purely to be able to manage the imperfect system that we have. It is not a perfect solution, as anybody can recognise.

- Q37 **Nigel Mills:** I think you are saying that it really is youngish babies who you are nursing—

Stella Creasy: Yes. As I say, I would hope that we could trust parents so that we did not set a particular age limit, but I suspect that no parent would want to take—my son, as you can tell, is getting older and more interactive, and therefore it is harder to maintain the solitude that you will have seen if you have seen any footage of in him in previous debates, or indeed as you will have seen when other colleagues have brought children in. If we are going to continue voting late at night when the nurseries are not open, what are colleagues supposed to do? It is quite disruptive, and I think quite damaging to them and their family lives, if we just expect them to somehow cope without having a policy in place.

- Q38 **Nigel Mills:** I certainly agree. When you have got children and you have got to be here on a Monday evening and there is no childcare, my wife has to have them. If she is not well, you have got a choice of being here with them or being at home with them. Sometimes there are no other options. I am not sure I could bring two two-year-olds into the Chamber, although they might liven things up.

Stella Creasy: I tell you what, I'll bring mine as well.

Nigel Mills: I'll take yours and you can have mine.

Stella Creasy: We'll see what cross-party working looks like then.

- Q39 **Chris Elmore:** Stella, I think you have mentioned this previously and as you have been giving answers to colleagues, but this is the first time you have had the chance to do so in a formal Committee of Parliament. I want to understand what you mean by proper maternity leave, for the record. I know you have mentioned a locum, and you have mentioned the maternity proxy system and how it ends abruptly at six months. I just want to understand what, as you see it, would be the full package of maternity leave options and support.

Stella Creasy: I was very taken by the 2014 report by the all-party parliamentary group for women in Parliament, which mentioned that we have a discretionary system. It says, "The lack of formal maternity and paternity leave for MPs is entirely out of step with wider society and gives the impression that the work of a Parliamentarian is not appropriate for those with caring responsibilities. Whilst maternity and paternity leave does exist for MPs in practice, there is no formal system in place. In practice, women who have had babies are usually granted maternity leave, but this is at the discretion of the Whips. Witnesses described to us a feeling of going to the Whips office, forced to beg for 'special treatment' due to their personal circumstances. By formalising provisions through a cross party agreement as to the circumstances in which MPs are entitled to



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leave, whether for reasons of parenthood, caring, sickness or bereavement, we believe Parliament would signify an openness to a wider pool of candidates, both men and women.”

What does that mean for me in practice? It means having a policy in place for the first six months, which I think is a standard we see in business and we would advocate for our constituents. I am very mindful that we have now implemented a two-tier system in Parliament. If you are a Cabinet member, you have full parliamentary cover for your role. I would clarify to the Committee that the law is very clear that it is not about the role that you play; it is the fact that you are pregnant and that you are a new parent that requires you to have that cover. It should not matter whether you are a Back Bencher or a Front Bencher; you should have six months paid maternity cover so that you can actually take a break. It is not about whether you go away and you are being paid; it is about the fact that you cannot actually take cover. I have not been able to be off for six months with my son.

After that, we have got a system of proxies now that offers us an opportunity to learn from the Australian State Parliament where they have a proxy for a nursing parent. I should put on the record that I am very grateful that you have been my proxy for the last six months, and you have voted. Thankfully, even on those occasions when maybe I haven't wanted to follow the Labour Whip, you have been very diligent and still followed my wishes. But actually, my son did not stop needing to be nursed at six months. The issues around parenthood don't stop, and our constituents, understandably, read the record and see whether we voted, so pairing isn't really a long-term option. Nor does it seem appropriate to me that I might be paired at the risk of another young parent not being paired, because it is done on an individual case-by-case basis. I think it is fairer, more transparent and more appealing, frankly, to those women who we might want to get into politics, if we have in place a policy for the first six months, and then a policy going forward perhaps for younger children as well and what political parties will do. That has to be agreed and supported by the House.

I would also say that the House facilities are interesting. The numbers of people I've had to turf out of the family room so I can change a baby's nappy because people use it as a meeting room perhaps reflects that we need to do more to make sure that, if we are having late-night votes, it is possible to look after children when the nurseries are closed.

I also put it on record that the nursery in Parliament is fantastic. I use it for my daughter, and its hours are more flexible perhaps than some others, but still they do not accord with or meet the hours that we are asked to keep. That is a challenge for every parent, and you will have seen me bring my children around the Lobby with me because the nursery is closed and I need to look after them before I take them home.

All of these are challenges that every other workplace has dealt with and has a policy for, and they promote and celebrate that because they recognise that it is how you recruit and retain a wider pool of talent. The

fact that Parliament revels in the fact that it doesn't have those things and sees challenging the situation as somehow anti-tradition is the problem. What we are essentially saying is that Parliament is built for a certain type of MP and no one else.

Q40 Chris Elmore: Thank you. Just to go back briefly, in the case of the Attorney General, where the law was changed, another Member of Parliament temporarily stepped up as the Attorney General. When you talk about a locum through the IPSA system—just so we are clear—you would like there to be a locum that could attend the Chamber, or is it something around another Member of Parliament being able to speak on behalf of constituents in Walthamstow? I just want to understand, because obviously only an MP elected at an election can serve in the Chamber due to whichever Act of Parliament in whichever century it comes from. How would that work? The ministerial change that came in last year allowed Michael Ellis to cover as Attorney General. Just so it is methodically explained how it would work.

Chair: Before you come in on that, Stella, if I could just make the point around what happens if you're a Minister. Obviously, I have been a Minister, and I was not allowed to speak on matters regarding my constituency; I could only speak from the Dispatch Box. Arrangements were in place with my near-neighbour colleagues, including Mr Brereton sat next to me, so that they would speak about matters regarding my constituency. I would sit on the Front Bench and nod along, and they would refer to me being there, but I could not actually speak on those matters and was prevented from doing so as a Minister. It would be really interesting to understand exactly what it is you are calling for, because it could have implications on those issues as well.

Stella Creasy: Sure. Let me help the Committee by giving you some evidence from mySociety, because I asked them to analyse how often an MP spoke in the Chamber. Part of the reason why IPSA refused to fund a locum was that they argued that an MP's job was solely in the Chamber. Actually, it is about 12% of our working year. The median MP speaks on 32 days in a standardised year. MPs vary a lot around that central figure, with 50% falling between 23 and 48 days. We are talking about covering a very small percentage of what we all actually do. As people have said, we all work long hours, and we enjoy our long hours. I am not suggesting that this is about an easier life. But in terms of what we're actually trying to cover, it is a small percentage of what an MP does.

I think there could be a number of ways that you do that. As you've pointed out, we have systems in place to provide cover for Ministers in terms of raising constituency issues, but we don't for mums. I think the keep-in-touch-day model is something we should be exploring. My simple point is: why is it 2022 and we've made laws on these issues that affect our constituents—they have legal rights around the keep-in-touch day—but we haven't actually considered how they take part in our parliamentary system? If we're talking about 12% of the working year, it is not a lot, but it is obviously the bit that our constituents might see.



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Similarly, we had to work with the House authorities—I want to thank the Clerks—to clarify that my staff could table questions on my behalf and participate in some other meetings. My locum was able to attend parliamentary meetings as she had a parliamentary pass. She went to meetings with Ministers and she also spoke at public events. I have to say that nobody batted an eyelid when she introduced herself as my maternity cover—my biggest problem was that she was so good that I was worried my constituents in Walthamstow might much rather keep her than have me back.

In covering work in the Chamber, the MOMA Act that you are talking about—the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021—provided a framework to ensure that the Attorney General and others could have maternity cover. Let me be very clear that I welcome maternity cover for Cabinet Ministers. However, if a constituent came to us because they were in a workplace that had a two-tier system that meant they were denied basic employment rights on the basis of their status and seniority, we would recognise that as problematic and illegal. So we have done 50% of the thinking about how to resolve this, but not 100%, and as a consequence all those women who might be looking for selection shortly will be thinking, “Well, is it possible to combine having a family and being an MP?”

There are a number of ways we could resolve this. I have different ideas about what worked for me personally but, frankly, just having a policy in place and having the various Committees and procedure people talk to each other would be progress, because that has not happened. That APPG report was in 2014, so people raised this eight years ago and nothing happened.

- Q41 **Chair:** I think it is worth pointing out for the record, and for anyone viewing or reading this who is not sure why we are talking about cover for the Attorney General, that it has always been the position that Ministers on maternity leave had other MPs step into their ministerial role, usually from the Whips Office. The issue with Cabinet Ministers is that they are appointed by the Crown—they have to go to Buckingham Palace or Windsor castle and receive a seal of office from Her Majesty—so their work cannot be conducted by another. We therefore needed legal provision so that another MP could step in and cover the Cabinet role of the Attorney General. That is why the law had to be changed. There has always been cover for Ministers. Certainly, Thérèse Coffey covered for a Minister on maternity leave at one point, and Jo Swinson’s maternity leave, when she was a Minister, was covered by other MPs.

Stella Creasy: To be honest, Chair, my challenge is that, at the time of the MOMA Bill, the Paymaster General wrote to me and pledged that Parliament would look at this very issue, and at ensuring that maternity rights were actioned within Parliament for all MPs, let alone looking at the widespread evidence of maternity discrimination in our society, especially during the pandemic—we have seen that rocket. That was a year ago. She pledged to me that that would happen before Parliament rose, but it did



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not. Nobody else is looking at this. As you say, Chair, your remit is just to look at whether you bring babies into Chambers.

Employment legislation is very clear that it is not about the role you play within an organisation; it is about your status as a pregnant or new parent. It is illegal for you to work for the two weeks after giving birth—very basic. But the outcome of the lack of policy in Parliament and the behaviour of IPSA meant that I was working in those two weeks, so I was doing something illegal in order to make sure that my constituents were represented. That is surely untenable. The MOMA Act simply reinforces that we have given parliamentary time to thinking about this, but only for 50% of the House, and the detriment is a result.

- Q42 **Chair:** I just want to go back to this. I actually had maternity leave when I was an employee and when I was self-employed, so I am aware of the different ways it works. But I just want us to be really clear before we move on. What is it that you are actually calling for? Are you calling for another MP to be able to speak on behalf of your constituents in the Chamber, or for somebody else, chosen by you, to be your locum, who could then come and speak on your behalf in the Chamber?

Stella Creasy: I would be happy with either model. My point is that at no point has anybody in Parliament grasped the nettle of having a maternity or paternity policy cover, so at no point does anybody get to make the choice. Let me be very clear that what worked for me and my constituents might work differently for other MPs. The point is that right now there isn't anything to work from, so nobody has as yet been able to appoint cover under the IPSA scheme, because IPSA does not provide proper funding to be able to do that. I have taken on some extra staff to try to manage the backlog of casework that we now have as a result of me not being able to work as much as I had been because I have this little chap.

My preference would have been to have a locum who could cover 88% of my role in my constituency and then to be able to use keep in touch days. Something else may work for other MPs. That goes to my point about being able to bring a chatty boy into the Chamber with me. The point is that this debate and this discussion has not happened. In 2014, the APPG wrote that this inquiry is about babies in the Chamber. It is the wrong end of the telescope for me. Even if you decide that there is a case for people to be able to bring a baby in the Chamber and learn from other jurisdictions where they are doing it, that does not solve the fact that 88% of our job takes place outside. Our constituents understandably want somebody of seniority and experience to represent them, but we cannot be sure of appointing one.

- Q43 **Chair:** I should point out that there has been a fantastic report by the Women and Equalities Committee published last week, which has an enormous amount of material in it around how we make sure that Parliament is as gender sensitive as possible, and that includes, for new parents, both fathers and mothers. I have one more point on the technicalities of proxy votes. We have discussed before, outside of this Committee, the issue of the way the proxy vote system works for



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parental absence. The scheme that Parliament adopted, which the predecessor Committee looked at, is clear that on a parental leave proxy vote you cannot participate in proceedings in the Chamber while exercising that proxy vote. I believe that was done for very deliberate reasons at the time. Clearly, we are several years down from that now. We are looking obviously at extending proxy votes for long-term sickness, and we are carrying out an inquiry on that. I wonder if you want to make any comments on the proxy vote exclusion, where you are able to participate in the Chamber while on a proxy vote on parental leave.

Stella Creasy: It has meant that on the days when I have sought to represent my constituents, I have had to give up my proxy in advance. It means that I cannot take part in urgent questions, because we do not know in advance that an urgent question is going to happen. It means that I have had to be on the estate for the whole day in order to be able to take part in votes. I would just point out to the Committee that during the pandemic we did have the flexibility where people could participate in a debate and a discussion—a Westminster Hall debate, for example—without necessarily having to be on the estate the rest of the time.

I was told that the rationale was that they were worried there would be a large number of people confusing the clerks by asking to be proxied. Given that we are talking about one or two people at any one time who might have a parental leave proxy, I just think that is not the case anymore. I would certainly encourage the Committee to learn from the pandemic and the possibility of having a proxy and having more open-ended proxies, especially when it comes to those of us who have such immediate caring commitments. That would ensure we can register a vote and still participate in debates and discussions. Trust us to be good parliamentarians and good colleagues when participating, and trust that we try not to disrupt other people while also representing our constituents.

Q44 **Chair:** Obviously, the proxy votes in the pandemic were specifically there for public health reasons. The authorities did not want everyone congregating in the Division Lobbies, as that would have been a dangerous place to be when covid was rife.

Stella Creasy: In theory, everyone could congregate in a Westminster Hall debate, couldn't they?

Q45 **Chair:** Potentially, but socially distanced.

Stella Creasy: That is separate to whether or not you had to either have a proxy or not have a proxy. My point is: you could have a proxy and still speak in a debate as long as you did not vote.

Q46 **Chair:** Actually, with the original covid proxy votes, we did have an issue around participating in the Chamber. We had to change the proxy votes to allow participation in the Chamber, because we had that problem early on. Originally, covid proxy votes did not allow for participation in the Chamber because they were for those with sickness. Once it was established that, for public health reasons, the Division Lobbies were not



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suitable places for Members to congregate, the proxy votes came in that allowed for participation in the Chamber. The baby leave proxy vote has never allowed for participation in the Chamber. That was done very deliberately by the predecessor Committee, but we are open to looking at that. I just wanted to make that point. We have two more questioners who would like to come in. It will be Jack Brereton and then Patrick Grady.

- Q47 **Jack Brereton:** I want to go into the specific details of the rules of the Chamber. A lot of this is captured in guidance issued by the Speaker. What are the very specific changes that you would like to see around those rules?

Stella Creasy: I want to see a maternity cover policy. As part of that, I think removing requirements that mean MPs cannot bring their children into the Chamber, if that is the only way to make things work, would be welcome. It may have been convention that you shouldn't take a child into the Chamber. It was not until I was written to by the office of the Chairman of Ways and Means that I knew that. I had taken a baby in several times, and Clerks had commented on me having children in the Chamber several times. It feels like a rule that has been resurrected.

For me, it only makes sense for that to happen as part of a wider set of reforms to make it possible to combine caring for very small children with parliamentary duties. That includes having provision for proper, appropriate cover and seeing that provision as part of your keeping in touch days, so that you have that as an option, and, frankly, seeing that cover as a positive thing that we do to make sure that our politics is more open to a wider group of people. Otherwise, as I think one of the speakers at the start said, there will be pressure on women to react in certain ways in this situation.

At the moment, there is pressure for women to react in certain ways in this situation. I'm sure many of us have spoken to colleagues, late at night, who are very distressed about leaving children at home who need nursing or care that because of the parliamentary system they have not been able to provide. I feel that, as a bare minimum, a starting point would be removing the rule that you can't take a child into the Chamber—I realise that my son isn't being a very good advert for it today—so that you can contribute, but it shouldn't be the endpoint by any means. Otherwise, it won't take us any further forward.

- Q48 **Jack Brereton:** As a parent, I certainly recognise many of the challenges parents often face—not just Members of Parliament, but parents in all sorts of work. I wanted to also touch on what Ms Kearns said about her experience of the Speakers and Deputy Speakers being incredibly supportive of her. Have you felt similarly supported by the Speaker and the Deputy Speakers?

Stella Creasy: I am pleased to hear that that has been Ms Kearns's experience, but it has not been mine. If anything, frankly, it has been the reverse. I have had very little contact with the House authorities on this matter.



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I have noted the comments that have been made about my family and my arrangements by the Speaker in public forum. I am sad to see that; I don't think it is helpful or will encourage more women into politics, if think they are going to have their family lives challenged. Of course I went to see the Speaker about the situation with IPSA to plead for support. I was heavily pregnant and ill at the time. As I said, I think the situation will only change when we start talking to the women who are not here, who are not part of the process and who have not made it through; only then will we truly understand the barriers we have set up in this place.

If you are asking whether I feel that I have had support, the honest answer is no. I have been open about that. I would also say that the lack of support is cross-party. No one was more disheartened or heartbroken than me by the lack of support from within my own party. I have spoken about that publicly because I think it has to change. Privately, I have had a lot of MPs, cross-party, be supportive, say that the situation is ridiculous and they don't have a problem with it, and recognise that it is time for Parliament to have some sort of maternity and paternity policy.

As much as I might personally feel that my children have been challenged—as you can see, my son has strong opinions about it himself—I want to focus now on what can be done positively. Even if people have felt that they can be critical of me and what I have proposed, the point is that we don't have any proposals at all right now. That is the problem. We are coming up to another general election and the issue has still not been resolved. It was in 2019, prior to the last election, that I raised with IPSA the need to have a consultation on what maternity cover might look like and how we might provide it for MPs. I am grateful for the support of Theresa May, who wrote in support of it, and indeed the leader of the SNP at the time and the leader of the Liberal Democrats. I don't see it as a partisan issue; I don't see it as a House issue. I see it as an issue for all of us. If we act as though the status quo is open to everyone, then the people who look at it and think, "I can't combine having a family life with being a representative," will never feel that we are on their side, and I don't think that is what any of us want.

Q49 Jack Brereton: The way in which other Parliaments have codified this has generally been permissive in nature. Some Parliaments have drawn a distinction between presence and participation in, or initiation of, proceedings. Is that sort of distinction sensible?

Stella Creasy: That is the thing for me. There are plenty of other examples to draw on, whether in Canada or, indeed, in our Assemblies in Wales and Scotland. The Australian Parliament changed its rules to allow female lawmakers to nurse their infants in the Chamber and to give breastfeeding mothers a proxy vote. Iceland has a scheme in place. Even in America, which does not have parental leave—I talk to my colleagues in America about how to campaign for proper parental leave—they have taken babies on to the floor of the Senate. The Canadian House of Commons has just universally agreed to its first parental leave programme for Members of Parliament. Crucially, that covers Members of Parliament in their constituencies. The NDP House leader, Peter Julian, said that there



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is no mythical MP who does not do work in their constituency, because somebody who does not do work in the constituency does not get re-elected. Members of Parliament are still working in this period. Parental obligations have to be balanced with that constituency work. There are plenty of examples that we can learn from, in terms of what has worked.

As I said at the start, a number of colleagues around the world have reached out to express bemusement that we, the Mother of all Parliaments, are even having this debate and working out how to resolve these policy questions. To be clear to the Committee: I am not saying that my proposal is the only proposal. My point is that we need to have a process to resolve this, because otherwise we are going to look very out of step with many Parliaments across the world. Also, we could be supporting parliamentarians in other jurisdictions. My colleague in Kenya was also thrown out of her Parliament for bringing her baby in to breastfeed. I am sure that we would want to show solidarity with her—she had a right to be heard, but without support she was put in that position.

Q50 Patrick Grady: Thank you, Stella, I think this has been really useful. To be honest, most of what I was going to ask has kind of been covered, because it was to talk about the institutional context and alternatives. To go back briefly to the Women and Equalities Committee report that the Chair mentioned, it has some fantastic recommendations in it, including that the House of Commons Commission should have some sort of oversight of all of this. You have spoken a few times about the lack of co-ordination between all the different institutional authorities and manifestations of corporate governance that we have here. How could it be brought together? Where should leadership come from in order to bring about the kind of changes that you are looking for?

Stella Creasy: That is a really good question. I have been seeking that for two and a half or three years now. Having promised in 2019 that there would be a consultation on what maternity arrangements would look like and that the House authorities were looking at this alongside IPSA, my legal team discovered that actually the process was stopped when the Labour Women's PLP wrote to oppose any form of consultation whatever. I would hope that attitudes have changed. If nothing else, we should have some form of policy-making process, and the resources available, the House rules and the wider political support given by political parties should be part of that.

We have institutions that can do that. The point is, at the moment, every single one of them tells me that the other is responsible. I am sure that the Chair will not mind me saying that I have been in touch with her several times to ask whether she can pick issues up, but the remit of your Committee is quite narrow. In any other workplace, the answer, "Well, we'll make it up as we go along," would not be acceptable. It has to come to a head now.

I recognise that there are different opinions, as I said. I would really like to see opinions from all the voices that we are not hearing as a result of these policies. But whether it is the Commission, IPSA or the Speaker



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himself, I think we could all do better, and I think our colleagues in other jurisdictions are showing us up by doing better and by having these debates. The Canada one looks particularly progressive. I don't think any of us would necessarily have picked out Canada as a place that was so forward thinking on some of this.

- Q51 **Patrick Grady:** The only other question was about alternatives, but that has probably been covered in quite a bit of detail. I guess things like the use of call lists and so on would be more helpful for planning your working day. The same applies to the timing of votes. But you might not have anything to add, because we have probably covered most of it.

Stella Creasy: Call lists, electronic voting, proxy systems—we have the tools in front of us. What we don't have is the clear policy, so at the moment it's at the behest— Of course, the flipside of this is that I would not want to be the Whip trying to navigate between different, competing family demands, because that doesn't work for anyone, or being accused of using that role to exert political pressure, which I know has happened and I don't think is fair on Whips; it's an impossible position for people to be in.

What all of us want—I have talked to a number of colleagues across the House who are in the same position as me—is a fair and transparent process, but we also need policies that play their part in our constituencies as well. I go back to what the Canadians pointed out. I don't think we can be in a position where we are saying to people, "Look, you have six months' paid leave, so you can go away and basically do no work for six months, because that's how you get to be with your child." I think our constituents would rightly say, "Well, I couldn't get away with that in my workplace. Why do you get away with it? Why haven't you got cover?" Cover in any other role is a perfectly normal thing. If your child's teacher is off having a baby, they have maternity cover, but that teacher might be part of discussions throughout their cover about your child where they have specific knowledge. There are plenty of models around that we could follow, whether they are in other Parliaments or other workplaces. The point is that we have to have the political will to do this, and that is what I am not sensing in the current Parliament. That is why—if I can make a plug—we set up the "This Mum Votes" campaign, which is a cross-party campaign to challenge all the political parties and political actors to do better, because mums' voices are missing from our politics as a result of the current position.

Chair: Thank you so much for your evidence today, Stella. I will again remind those watching that we are governed by a Standing Order that restricts us to the conduct of public business, and that is what we are looking at as a Committee, but we have covered a wide variety of topics in the course of the last hour and a bit. I hope you are feeling better soon. Your son is absolutely gorgeous—the little bits we could see of him.

Stella Creasy: I'm afraid it's a difficult time of the afternoon for him to be quiet. That's one of the things, isn't it? Most parents know when their children are more likely to be well or less well behaved and so can plan



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accordingly. I apologise to the Committee that maybe he's not the best model just yet, but if you think he's bad, you should see his sister!

Chair: To be clear to everybody, there are no rules about babies in Select Committees, so this is absolutely, completely and totally orderly and, as I say, it has been a joy to see him. Thank you again for the evidence we have heard. Could I again, as I did after Ms Kearns gave her evidence, remind those viewers that this is not a debate that we should be conducting on social media? We will consider the evidence, we will consider it carefully, and we will make recommendations based on the evidence we have heard. We are very grateful to you for the time you have given us and, again, we do hope you are feeling better soon. Thank you.

Stella Creasy: Thank you.