

Written evidence submitted by Compassion in Politics

Background and our previous work in this area

1. Compassion in Politics is a cross-party think-tank working to put compassion, cooperation, and inclusion at the heart of politics. Our work is split into two branches: developing proposals for reforming the political system in order to reduce factionalism and engender more compassion and developing policies that spread the values of compassion, equality and inclusion.
2. We are supported by over 50 parliamentarians from six different parties and have had 100+ MPs support our work to reduce bullying and harassment in the commons. We also provide resilience and compassion training for organisations, parties and activists and have been commissioned by the House of Commons to deliver training on compassion and stress reduction for MPs staff. In addition, we provide the Secretariat to the All-Party Group for Compassionate Politics Co-Chaired by Debbie Abrahams MP and Baroness Warsi.
3. Our work is supported and promoted by a network of academics which includes Prof Alice Roberts, Noam Chomsky, Rainbow Murray, Guy Standing, Ala Sirriyeh, Kristin Neff, Peter Singer and Bill McKibben, and by public figures such as the Dalai Lama, Ruby Wax, and Gillian Anderson. Additionally, we draw on research from globally renowned academic psychologists working in the field of Compassionate Leadership. Compassion in Politics forms partnerships with like-minded organisations who work in the same space such as Carnegie UK, Equality Trust, Compass, British Psychological Society, The Mindfulness Initiative, Action for Happiness, Shelter, Southall Black Sisters and More United.
4. The All-Party Group for Compassionate Politics, for which Compassion in Politics is the Secretariat, has been developing a Compassion Pledge for MPs and Peers aimed at spreading a more empathetic, open, and positively kind atmosphere in Westminster.
5. In 2019 Compassion in Politics and More United ran a campaign for a new Code of Conduct for MPs.¹ This was a voluntary code and was launched in response to what we perceived to be the growing toxicity of Westminster debates. The code was signed by over 100 MPs on a voluntary basis.
6. During the 2019 general election Compassion in Politics ran the “Stop the Nastiness” campaign.² We invited candidates to take a pledge to campaign with respect and compassion.

¹ https://www.compassioninpolitics.com/stop_the_nastiness

Several hundred candidates registered their support and in a report produced after the election we were able to show that many candidates who took the pledge found it helped them to combat toxic campaigning in their constituency.³

Responses to Inquiry questions

(We have chosen to answer the questions that most directly relate to our work)

What values, attitudes and behaviours should the Code of Conduct for MPs seek to encourage or discourage?

7. We argue that the value of compassion should be at the heart of the Code of Conduct. This value, which is innate to all humans⁴, can *enable* so many of the other behaviours and values that the Code is seeking to encourage. Compassion involves having empathy for other people and acting according to that empathy in a way that is helpful and not harmful. Such behaviour should, therefore, require the adherent to act selflessly, with integrity and with honesty - as the Code already requires. We would therefore strongly advise that the code seeks to embed a compassionate approach at its core.

8. The Code should also include the definition of bullying as set out by the Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (ACAS). This would bring the behaviour of MPs into line with workplaces across the country. The sanctions for bullying should apply across Westminster - including on the floor of the Commons. Further the Code should be made intersectional by expressly forbidding any behaviour that could be considered to deliberately insult, abuse, or bully someone with a protected characteristic as set out in the Equality Act 2020.

9. We also argue, though accept that there will be resistance to this proposal, that the practice of booing and jeering in the House of Commons Chamber should be forbidden. Our own research has shown that this behaviour is extremely off-putting to the public⁵ and we know from MPs that many are fearful of speaking up in the Chamber for fear that their pronouncements will be echoed by a chorus of boos and shouting. This practice is silencing individual voices and alienating the public. At a time when faith in the political process is so dangerously low, it would send a very important signal to the public if Commons debates were conducted in a more

² <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/03/mps-pledge-to-stop-abusive-language-during-general-election>

³ https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cip/pages/304/attachments/original/1615220450/2019_general_election_candidate_review.pdf?1615220450

⁴ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_compassionate_instinct

⁵ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/shouting-jeering-uk-parliament_uk_5f4d5380c5b6cf66b2bbac9e

mature, inclusive, and civilised manner. We note that the parliaments in Scotland and in Wales, created by Westminster, have very different atmospheres and practices in terms of how debate is conducted. We have met with the Speakers' office in Holyrood to discuss what accounts for these differences and the clear message was that many of the behaviours would simply not be tolerated. History and tradition cannot be allowed to shield behaviours that risk bringing politics further into disrepute.

How successful is the current Code of Conduct in achieving these aims, and in what ways does it need to be changed to do so more effectively?

10. Sadly our experience is that the Code has so far not been effective in achieving its aims. The Members that we speak to and work with report that the culture in Westminster has in fact deteriorated in the last decade, especially for female and black and minority ethnic MPs. The Code is not to blame for this - members variously cite the rise of social media, an increasingly combative media environment, and the hostile Brexit debate as being the causes of this growing toxicity. But it *has* failed to prevent the downturn in cultural standards.

11. We argue that, firstly, the Code should be far more positive in outlook from the very start and that it could achieve that by embedding compassion as one of its central values. It may also be helpful to describe just two or three key values that are expected of MPs as public servants - and we would argue that compassion should be one of those.

12. The larger problem, however, is that the Code of Conduct must be seen in a much broader context and work must be done to identify how the Code is either upheld, promoted, or discouraged by the wider culture of politics. For example, the code requires that MPs take decisions "solely in the public interest." One could very well argue, however, that that is not possible in a parliamentary system in which party allegiance is expected of Members - particularly if they are seeking promotion to the Front Benches - and is enforced by the Whipping system. Similarly, how "honest" can a Member be if they fear their opinion might lead to them being castigated in the press or on social media or, indeed, jeered at in the Commons Chamber? We would therefore argue that, as far as possible, for the Code to be effective this inquiry must go wider and look at the culture of politics which is limiting its efficacy.

13. While there are systemic, Westminster-wide solutions to the problems listed above - and other factors that are working against the Code - we do have recommendations to help individual Members to practice the values contained within the Code. Members should be offered training that helps to reinforce the behaviours enshrined within the Code and, again, would also strongly recommend that the Members receive training in compassion and self-

compassion. Such training has now been shown to be effective in reducing conflict⁶, increasing self-resilience⁷, promoting empathy and kindness⁸, and helping trainees to reconnect with their core values⁹. This is essential if we are to expect Members of Parliament - who face abuse, death-threats, and enormous internal and external pressure on a daily basis - to uphold values and behaviours which sometimes demand enormous reserves of strength and forbearance.

How can the Code be made simpler, clearer, more transparent and more readily understood?

14. Less, as they say, is more and we believe it would be helpful if the Code could summarise, perhaps in its introduction, three key values or behaviours of a Member of Parliament. We would argue - for the reasons given in Paragraph 7 - that one of those key values should be compassion.

How can the requirements of the Code be communicated better to MPs and to the wider public?

15. For the public to take an interest in the Code they first need to be given a very clear and open opportunity to advise on what the Code should contain and for that reason we are glad to see the Inquiry will be extending its consultation to the general public.

16. We would also argue, however, that it is less important that the *code* itself is communicated to the public and more that MPs are seen to uphold its central *values*. To assist with that we would again advise that MPs are provided with training in the skill and attributes promoted by the Code. This will help to reinforce the desired behaviours and approaches.

17. Further we suggest that the Committee help to organise "value days" or "value events" in which, for example, Members and the public are invited to celebrate examples of the values being upheld and share ideas on how they can be further built into the political system. In addition, it may be beneficial for the Committee to organise an awards ceremony to reward MPs who have been seen to be particularly effective in championing particular values.

18. In terms of helping the public to understand the duties and expectations of their MP it maybe useful to require that every MP has a link to the Code on their own website and that the landing page for that link also contains a very clear button that people can use to submit a

⁶ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1754073919838609>

⁷ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23576808/>

⁸ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27664071/>

⁹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12671-019-01185-9>

complaint against an MP who they believe has shown a deliberate disregard for any one of the values.

How far is the Code of Conduct consistent with other codes that have effect within Parliament, that is, the Parliamentary Behaviour Code and the House of Lords Code of Conduct, and are changes to the Code needed to create greater consistency with the other codes?

19. Behaviour Code: one aspect of the Behaviour Code which is not present in the Code of Conduct is the issue of bullying. We argue that the definition of bullying as set out by the Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (ACAS) should be incorporated into the Code of Conduct (see Paragraph 8 above). This would bring the Code into line with the standards expected in most workplaces across the country - which is vital when the Houses of Parliament should be setting the gold standard for behaviour. That definition of bullying should be applied across Westminster, including on the floor of the House of Commons.

20. House of Lords Code of Conduct: we have nothing to add in terms of comparing the actual content of the Lords and MPs codes *however* we do wish to make the point that, as referred to above, context is everything. Despite the similarities, MPs work in a very different context to the Lords: arguably more high profile, more aligned to a particular party, and, of course, subject to re-election. Those pressures on MPs must be considered when thinking about how to write and enforce their Code.

In what ways does the Ministerial Code complement or undermine the Code of Conduct?

21. We would recommend that the Code of Conduct borrows from the Ministerial Code's structure in that the latter sets out "general principles" that Ministers are expected to follow. A similar structure to the Code of Conduct would be like giving MPs a compass that helps them to navigate their duties in a way that conforms to the spirit of the Code.

How should the House's commitment to tackle racism and discrimination be incorporated in the Code?

22. See Paragraph 8.

The current Code only authorises the Commissioner to investigate breaches of the Rules of Conduct specified in Paragraphs 10 to 17 of the Code – should she be empowered to

investigate alleged breaches of the wider Code including the Seven Principles of Public Life?

23. Yes. We cannot reserve certain expectations of behaviour and make them exempt from scrutiny.

How can the Code and Guide be effectively enforced?

24. As argued in Paragraph 13, Members should be offered training in some of the key behaviours set out in the Code - and arguably the training should be made compulsory.

25. The Speaker of the House should be empowered to properly enforce the Code on the floor of the House, including, we would hope, preventing booing and jeering.

26. We would recommend that a formal group of MPs is established to advise on the application of the Code and provide advice on how it can be better enforced across the House. That group should also offer support to parliamentarians who believe that they are being treated with hostility by other Members and have the ability to organise and commission their own training courses.

27. The Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD) has been in contact with the All-Party Group for Compassionate Politics about conducting their Good Work Survey amongst parliamentarians and their staff. An offer letter will soon be sent to the Human Resources Department. CIPD are willing to carry out this work for free and we would strongly urge that the Committee also endorse their proposal which could provide hugely beneficial insights into working life in parliament and - crucially - allow us to benchmark it against the other bodies who run the CIPD survey.

28. We would like the Committee to conduct a review of the Whipping system and the impact that it has on MPs ability to comply with the Code - especially with the principles of Integrity and Selflessness - as well as the atmosphere of fear and coercion that the system creates.

10 March 2021