

Gender Sensitive Parliament Inquiry

1.1 This evidence was gathered as part of a discussion in a Birkbeck Parliamentary Studies class in March 2021. In the seminar, having read Professor Child's report, we looked at the moves toward a more gender sensitive parliament, and researched and discussed the changes and progress between 2016 and 2021.

1.2. The evidence below is a summary of responses and thoughts of students in an online survey conducted at the end of the session.

2.1 How successfully have changes proposed in the past been implemented to make the House of Commons more gender sensitive?

2.2. Most of the group pointed to the success of proxy voting as the stand-out achievement. As one member of the group put it: 'Proxy voting has been useful for working parents and gives parliamentarians a little more freedom to be able to tend to their personal lives'.

2.3 The permanent establishment of the Women's and Equalities Committee was mentioned by several students, as were the changes to the dress code.

3.1 What additional procedures and working arrangements should be changed. Suggestions can include, but need not be limited to: leave for Members who are parents and carers, proxy voting and virtual attendance?

3.2 The class felt that the most important change would be to continue to make available virtual attendance and electronic voting for MPs who needed it. The success of the system had been proved, and it would be a key means to ensure fairness and access for members with particular responsibilities. As one said: 'as virtual attendance has been tested throughout the pandemic, it could be valuable for members in the future'.

3.3. A second strongly supported potential change was for the right to Maternity and Paternity leave for MPs, with many citing the recent changes for Ministers as a precedent. During the seminar, there was widespread surprise at the lack of such rights for MPs. It was felt that leave was justified a point of principle, as well because of the positive consequences for members and their children. As one member of the class put it simply 'Maternity/Paternity leave is crucial for a new family and a child's life chances. The law should apply to Members'.

4. How should our Buildings and facilities be changed to support a gender sensitive House of Commons and the opportunities presented by the Restoration & Renewal Programme? (What can be changed about the buildings and way Parliament works)

4.1 There was a sense that parliament as a building must be re-designed and altered. Some suggestions focused on the Chamber itself, with many in the group suggesting that HOC chamber could be redesigned to 'make it easier for voices to be heard'. This would help make the atmosphere of the chamber less combative and adversarial.

4.2. Other changes focused on the facilities, and suggestions included making voting lobbies larger, creating gender neutral toilets, and ensuring there were 'multiple spaces for breastfeeding infants for those who work in the parliamentary building'.

4.3. A series of wider changes concerned 'greater use of inclusive artwork and statues from wider parts of society', which was linked to discussion in class about the BLM movement and the subsequent reassessment of the Parliamentary art collection.

5. How can a more inclusive culture be adopted in the House of Commons?

5.1. One member of the group suggested an MP cross-party mentoring scheme: ‘New MPs should be assigned mentors for a period of 1 year, not from their party but from an opposite party where possible’.

5.2. Other procedural changes included ‘New members prioritised at Question times’ and ‘gender balanced select committees’, as well as encouragement of behavioural changes, such as a reduction in jeering. It was important to ‘change the appearance of the chamber from a male-dominated shouting arena’.

5.3. There needed to be mechanisms for ‘better representation for issues that affect women, ethnic minorities and other unrepresented groups within the House’, alongside wider adoption of quotas from parties. This also applied to staff.

6. Which individuals or bodies are responsible for taking action? What and who should drive change on this issue?’

6.1. There was a belief that, within parliament, change should be led by a specialist committee. There was strong support for other bodies taking a role and offering input, from IPSA to the Government Equalities Office. Civil society need to be involved too, as did key stakeholders: ‘Parliament is made up of varying stakeholders so there needs to be a drive from all of them’.

6.2. One member of the class suggested that a committee of experts be used modelled on SAGE, suggesting Parliament ‘set up a version of ‘SAGE’ to implement and drive changes’.

Members of the class giving evidence were:

Stephen Restall
Ridar Khalil
Maxim Platonov
Tony Tanushi
Jorge Raigosa
Chandni Jounija
Anna Negrotti
Biruke Berhe
Saliou Mbaye
Thom Yardley
Mark Christopher Robert Clarkson-Graham
Ugne Cicinskaite
Ben Worthy

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