

Written evidence submitted by Ellie Reeves MP [GSP0016]

Introduction

My name is Ellie Reeves and I am the MP for Lewisham West & Penge. Before entering Parliament in 2017, I was an employment rights lawyer specialising in maternity rights and family-friendly working. I have a six year old and a one year-old and I have first-hand experience of trying to juggle the competing demands of being an MP and raising a family and have strong views on how Parliament can be reformed to become a more modern, gender-sensitive and family-friendly workplace.

We are incredibly fortunate to have such a rich Parliamentary history. However, Parliament and its culture have evolved over hundreds of years and along societal lines, which have meant it has been typically designed by and for men. This has created barriers and made it more difficult for women, who have historically borne the majority of caring responsibilities, to stand for and work in Parliament.

Whilst reform has occurred in recent years, many aspects remain which evolved without the consideration of the needs of those who may be parents or primary carers. There has also been a reluctance amongst some Members to reform Parliament, essentially producing a narrative that politics and Parliament needn't change: but rather it is for those men and women with caring responsibilities (child and adult) to 'fit' in with how Parliament works.

If Parliament is to be a more modern workplace, which is open and accessible to all, we need further and stronger reform. This is important as public faith in our democracy rests on our Parliament and its procedures being representative of all those it serves. In this submission of evidence, I will outline some of the reforms to date that have made the House of Commons a more gender sensitive workplace as well as the fundamental reforms which I believe are needed to further this.

Reform to date

The past 20 years have seen widespread and welcome changes to Parliament such as the changing of Parliamentary hours, so the days of all-night sittings are now long gone. In addition to this, an on-site nursery has been introduced and most recently the introduction of up to 7 months of Proxy Voting has been given to female Members with a new child.

In my case, if it were not for these reforms, I would never have felt able to stand for Parliament in the first place. When my local MP retired at the 2017 General Election, I agonised over whether to put myself forward, particularly as my son was only two at the time. It was the existence of the House of Commons nursery that made the decision to stand for Parliament possible.

Two years on from that, with a husband who is also a sitting MP, it was the trial of Proxy Voting that has enabled us to have a second child. In most other professions, it is unusual to face barriers like this - with no formal provision for maternity leave before proxy voting was introduced. Whilst these changes have been positive some aspects of Parliament continue to present barriers to those with caring responsibilities which in turn prevents many from standing to become Members of Parliament.

Divisions

At present a Division can take around 20 minutes, if we have multiple Divisions this leaves 650 MPs walking around in circles through the voting Lobbies over and over for hours on end late into the evening. That is not an efficient use of 650 MPs' time.

For many of us, this extended time at the end of the day is the difference between seeing our families that evening or not. Whilst my son was in the HoC nursery, one vote at 19:00 meant he

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could vote with me, but multiple votes meant childcare would have to be arranged and not being able to see my son that evening. Further, for all the support staff who keep Parliament running, late-night voting means they will also unlikely be able to see their families.

This goes against any kind of notion that Parliament is a gender-sensitive and family-friendly workplace as it creates a barrier to those with caring responsibilities. However, a simple solution that would go some way in preventing this problem would be to introduce a form of electronic voting.

Just as in recent years, the Clerks have moved from paper-based forms to recording votes on iPads we could similarly use simple and straightforward technology, to move to a system in which multiple votes could be registered at the same time. That would not be possible where votes are contingent on one another but, as they rarely are, it would significantly reduce the time we spend on multiple vote scenarios from something that is currently determined over several hours into something determined in a matter of minutes.

Such a system could be implemented by lining a series of electronic booths, kept secure through fingerprint verification, up along the lobbies making the process much quicker and much more accessible. This would also help reduce the long queues which often occur in the lobbies leaving hundreds of Members queuing up to give their name to three Clerks, which has on occasion created cramped and claustrophobic conditions which colleagues have struggled with.

A much quicker voting process would, for many MPs, make the difference between seeing their children before bedtime or not. Some Members advocate for remote electronic voting and this was successfully trialled during the pandemic. Although I am not fundamentally opposed to this, I do believe that the act of physically attending the Lobby to be counted is an important part of our democratic process and should not be completely discounted. It helps to ensure the engagement of MPs and I know many of us use the time to raise issues with other colleagues.

Therefore, having an electronic system described above would not prevent Members from attending the lobbies and having the opportunity to speak informally with other Members. Not only would this system be a far more efficient use of Members' time, but it would make a huge difference to those with caring responsibilities or suffering ill health.

Parliamentary Timetable

There is often a lack of predictability in and advance knowledge of, Parliamentary sitting patterns. In the last government we usually only got the business for the week ahead on the previous Thursday.

For example, if we had late votes on a Monday and were only given notice the previous Thursday, it gave Members with caring or childcare responsibilities only one and a half working days to secure arrangements. This could be further complicated by the addition of Urgent Questions, Ministerial Statements, Standing Order No. 24 applications and protected time for debates.

Although this has significantly improved over the last 18 months, with business given two and sometimes three weeks in advance, we are still at the mercy of the Leader of the House who could revert to giving very little notice at any time.

If parliamentary rules were changed so that, subject to exceptional circumstances, business was always given three weeks in advance, this would allow more time for Members to organise their diaries effectively whilst also allowing them to put in place arrangements to cover any caring responsibilities.

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Most workplaces outside of Parliament have a much firmer idea of their timetables meaning employees do not have to respond so reactively to events. Furthermore, this allows employees to structure their work plans more productively and put in place better measures for work/life balance.

In addition to this, I believe it is also important to review current Parliamentary timings and in particular, the timings of votes. This could include looking at deferring more Divisions or allocating set times for casting votes, particularly if lots of votes are to follow the moment of interruption, or on Mondays when the vote comes at 22:00.

We could instead defer those Divisions to the next sitting day, for example, much as we do for other motions. This is particularly important with debates on protected time, which means that a division will fall later than 22:00 on a Monday and 19:00 on a Tuesday/Wednesday - sometimes well into the night or early hours of the morning. In these cases, the vote should be deferred to the following day. That is not just for the benefit of Members, but it would give Clerks, House staff and security personnel a better certainty of their working patterns.

Members whose families reside inside, or outside London & the South East will have differing opinions on reform of Parliamentary timing which is why I believe this matter should be looked at through a Speaker's Conference, to better judge the feeling across the House rather than imposing blanket amendments.

Proxy Voting

A trial of Proxy voting for new parents was introduced in 2019, something that enabled me to have a second child. The trial was a success and I am pleased the House has adopted it. I believe this strengthens our Parliament as a more gender sensitive institution, but the scheme doesn't go far enough.

Under the scheme, new mums are only entitled to a proxy for a maximum of 6 months after their due date and up to one month before the due date, with the period of absence having to start at or before the due date. But given only 4% of babies are born on the predicted due date the inflexibility of this rule means that if a baby comes late, then proxy voting would not even cover 6 months at home with your baby.

Given Statutory Maternity Leave outside of Parliament is 52 weeks this seems like it is only incremental reform. Although MP's are not employees, proxy voting should still be for the full year to reflect the workplace standard. Whilst not all MP parents may wish to take a proxy for this long, it is important to allow MP parents the ability to dedicate the time they feel appropriate according to the needs of their baby and their family life. Further, if the length of maternity provisions is considerably worse for MPs than in other professions, many women may be deterred from standing for Parliament in the first place.

In my case I felt that I would have to work right up until the birth of my second child in order to maximise my time off afterwards. This left me struggling through the voting lobbies in the later stages of pregnancy in the hope of maximising my time away from Parliament after my baby was born and therefore I am pleased the official scheme allows for up to a month off before your due date which allows to avoid such a situation.

However, the day after I activated my proxy and went on maternity leave a General Election was called meaning I found myself back at work, nine months pregnant, planning my general election campaign and losing a significant chunk of my leave. Of course, contending with a snap election is to some extent the nature of politics, which is inherently unpredictable, and you can't change this but

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there were no measures in place to account for this such as an extension to my proxy period to reflect this circumstance.

This was important to me as I wished to have longer than 6 months away from Parliament in order to breastfeed, bond with my baby and ensure my own mental wellbeing. Yet in practice having less than 6-months on Proxy voting left me vulnerable to returning to work far earlier than I might have wished to and this is out of step with employment legislation. Therefore, the ability for new mums to have a Proxy should be extended to 12 months in line with Statutory Maternity Leave. If it remains at 6 months, then at the very least this should be 6 months from the baby being born, not 6 months from when the baby was due.

The need for Proxy leave has wider context too. As we continue to strive for full equality between the genders, we must continually recognise the role that fathers and paternity leave have in our society. I have long been an advocate of the idea that greater emphasis on paternity leave is one of the keyways we reduce inequality in the workplace.

But this scheme only allows fathers to benefit from Proxy voting for two weeks. Neither does it allow for fathers to take shared parental leave as they could do in a workplace outside of Parliament. Therefore, I believe we should allow for an appropriate shared parental leave policy with the necessary Proxy voting arrangements.

Family friendly estate

Converting a bar into an on-site nursery in 2010, in the face of a great deal of opposition was a major reform and has significantly contributed to making Parliament a more gender sensitive place. As mentioned above were it not for this I would not have been able to put myself forward for election. There are also a number of simple reforms to buildings and facilities that could be easily done to make the Parliamentary estate a more gender sensitive place.

Firstly, to make sure that the Family room is used only as a family space. I have found this room near the chamber an incredibly useful space to take my son after nursery whilst waiting for votes and in between divisions. I have also used it for breastfeeding both my children in a quiet and safe space. However, frequently I have found this room being used by other members to have meetings in. This is extremely unhelpful and takes away the privacy and sense of safety that this one small place in Parliament affords a parent and their child. Reinforcing the use of this room for family needs only would be a great help to future users.

Another simple measure would be to introduce dedicated parent and baby parking bays where the disabled parking bays are nearer to the chamber. One of the difficulties of being a parent of a young child and an MP is carrying your tired child and their belongings as well as yours to the underground car park after a late session. A simple practical thing like this would have gone a long way in making it easier and less tiring for me to do my job and be a primary caregiver.

Conclusion

Ultimately making Parliament a more gender sensitive place is not just about addressing equality issues and making sure the needs of Members and future members are met, it is also about ensuring the public has continued trust in this place. If Parliament continues to be perceived as archaic and not keeping pace with modern times, then public confidence in Parliament's utility and ability to represent individuals' views will be severely damaged. I believe the measures outlined above will go some way to achieving this and for summary they are:

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- Reform of Divisions to an electronic system still using the lobbies to save time and prevent undue longer working hours.
- Increased use of deferred divisions to avoid voting late at night.
- Subject to exceptional circumstances business should be given three weeks in advance so Members can effectively plan their diaries and outside commitments.
- A Speakers conference to look into reform of the Parliamentary timetable.
- Allowing the ability to take 12 months' Proxy Voting to align with Statutory Maternity Leave of 12 months for those in workplaces outside of Parliament.
- The introduction of an appropriate shared parental leave policy.
- Introduce dedicated parent and baby parking bays nearer to the chamber.

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