

Written evidence submitted by Compassion in Politics [GSP0019]

Background and our previous work in this area

1. Compassion in Politics¹ 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.² 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.

¹<https://www.compassioninpolitics.com/>

²https://www.compassioninpolitics.com/stop_the_nastiness

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6. During the 2019 general election Compassion in Politics ran the “Stop the Nastiness” campaign.³ We invited candidates to take a pledge to campaign with respect and compassion. 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.⁴

Response to inquiry questions

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

7. From our informal conversations with female MPs it is our understanding that the culture in parliament has, in the last decade, become more hostile for women. One MP described it thus: a culture of ridiculing women has been replaced by one of open hostility. While it must be said that the majority of male MPs act with respect towards their female colleagues, those who display aggressive tendencies have become emboldened and ever-more threatening in their behaviour.

8. This trend cannot be viewed in isolation. It is being fuelled by an increasingly toxic, nasty, and divisive style of politics. Vicious debates about Brexit - fuelled by the use of incendiary words like “surrender” and “betrayal” - have created tribes of colleagues and alienated the public from their representatives. A record number of MPs stood down at the 2019 election, with many citing the growing nastiness of politics as their prime motivation. Moreover our own research has shown that, for example, Labour and Conservative politicians are less likely to agree with one another now than at any other time in the 21st century.⁵

9. Not only is the heightened misogyny and sexism directed towards female MPs part of a wider cultural problem, that abuse does not solely take place within the House of Commons. A survey of 2019 general election candidates carried out by Compassion in Politics found that two in three candidates (69%) felt the conduct of the election was “nastier” than any previous election campaign.⁶ Further, physical and sexual threats directed against female MPs through

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

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

⁵https://www.compassioninpolitics.com/parliament_has_become_more_divided_and_hostile_research_shows

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

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social media have become commonplace - with the most persistent abuse directed towards female MPs of colour.

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?

10. We recommend that an audit be conducted to ensure that the working arrangements in parliament - for MPs, Lords, and staff - meet best-practice standards as set out by the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD). As the chief decision-making body in the country, parliament should be setting a leading example for the support that it provides to the people who work there. This will have to include, but not be limited to:

- Setting stricter limits on debating times in parliament in an attempt to create more family and leisure time for all MPs. The Commons sits for longer debating hours than most democratic parliaments. This could be easily achieved by moving the start of debates to earlier in the day and also having Oral Statements take place in the morning.
- Introducing parental, carer, and compassionate leave.
- Championing home working (including online electronic voting).
- Exploring the option for MPs to job-share: this would especially benefit women, carers, and people with disabilities who might otherwise struggle to work the hours currently demanded of an MP.⁷
- Introducing the Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (ACAS) definition of bullying onto the floor of the House of Commons and giving the Speaker the power to enforce it. That definition is: “Bullying is behaviour from a person or group that’s unwanted and makes you feel uncomfortable, including feeling: frightened, less respected or put down, made fun of, or upset.”⁸
- Creating an independent Human Resources body for staff and parliamentarians.
- That HR facility should be responsible for agreeing, with the government and leader of the opposition, the sitting dates of parliament at least one year in advance. Making the scheduling of parliamentary sessions a matter for the government removes agency from MPs and also reduces their ability to plan, for example, for childcare and holidays.

11. In addition we recommend the establishment of a formal group to provide female MPs and staff with peer support and guidance. This group should be provided with a budget to hire

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<https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/job-sharing-for-mps-supported-by-women-candidates-for-most-parties>

⁸<https://www.acas.org.uk/if-youre-treated-unfairly-at-work/being-bullied>

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support staff and advisers. Creating such a formal institution would not only demonstrate how seriously parliament takes the issue of misogyny and sexism but would also lead to the provision of targeted support to female parliamentarians and staff.

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?

12. The Chamber of the Commons should be redesigned in a circular shape. The current arrangement is an anachronism and, by positioning the government to face the Opposition, creates an environment of conflict. Most modern parliaments have adopted a circular or horse-shoe layout and we would strongly advise that the same is done in the House of Commons. In addition, we would like the parliamentary authorities to trial having MPs sit next or at least near to a member of a different party rather than in their party groupings as is currently the case. The current system entrenches the tribal nature of politics.

13. The House of Commons should be provided with considerably larger childcare facilities. The existing facilities at 1 Parliament Street are vastly over-subscribed.

14. Electronic voting should be introduced into the Commons. The system of filing through two doors into cramped conditions behind the Speaker allows too much room for intimidation as well as making a public display of members who dissent from their party. To create a culture of respect for divergent views and to minimise the pressure placed on members when they cast their votes they should be allowed to vote electronically from their seats. This would have the added advantage of reducing the amount of time required to vote.

15. Use an electronic system to register questions for debate and to be notified if a member will be called to ask their question. The current system - where a Member has to try and gain the attention of the Speaker - is unnecessarily informal and gives preference to the most persistent Members who shout the loudest. It also means Members have to sit in the Chamber for long hours with no guarantee they will be able to ask their question.

16. Place desks in front of Members as is the case in other parliaments. This would allow Members to take notes and read papers more easily.

17. Expand the number of seats in the House of Commons. The fact that there is only room for 427 MPs to sit in the Commons is obviously unsatisfactory. It is designed to increase the sense of pressure and hostility in the Chamber but this atmosphere is not conducive to cooperative

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and considered policy-making. It is also potentially unfair on MPs with hidden or unhidden disabilities who have a greater need to sit down during debates.

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

18. Ban the practice of booing and jeering in the Commons. While some members may believe this is an important tradition, the behaviour is off-putting to the public and creates a loud and raucous environment which elevates emotions and hostility.⁹

19. Provide compassion training to all MPs. Such training has now been shown to be effective in reducing conflict¹⁰, increasing self-resilience¹¹, promoting empathy and kindness¹², and helping trainees to reconnect with their core values¹³. This will be essential in creating a more respectful atmosphere in parliament while helping female MPs to protect their mental health.

20. Establish a mandatory induction programme for all MPs that includes compassion and respect training and self-care advice. This would have two principal objectives: to ensure that new MPs feel welcome *and* to instil the appropriate standards for behaviour right at the start of an MPs' career.

21. Offer counselling support to all MPs. MPs should be provided with on-site mental health counselling. Research by the British Psychological Society has shown that MPs are more likely than the general population to suffer from mental health problems - the result of long-working hours, exposure to abuse and criticism, and isolation from friends and family.¹⁴ While these structural problems should also be alleviated, it has to be acknowledged that an MPs' work will always involve making difficult decisions, often under the public spotlight. Such pressures will endure and the toll they take on MPs should be addressed.

22. We would like the parliamentary authorities to undertake a review of the Whipping system as we suspect this creates an atmosphere of fear, legitimises coercion, and reduces the agency of MPs.

⁹ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/shouting-jeering-uk-parliament_uk_5f4d5380c5b6cf66b2bbac9e

¹⁰ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1754073919838609>

¹¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23576808/>

¹² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27664071/>

¹³ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12671-019-01185-9>

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<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Cognitive%20strain%20in%20Parliament.pdf>

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23. Finally, we note that little is currently known about the experiences of trans, non-binary, and gender diverse parliamentarians or staff in the House of Commons. We recommend that an inquiry be established to understand what life is like in parliament for these groups and, as will presumably be necessary, to develop recommendations for improving access, inclusion, and representation.

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