

Introduction: the importance of a gender sensitive UK Parliament

1. The Institute for Government is an independent think tank working to make government more effective. As part of this, we work to help Parliament scrutinise government effectively and hold it to account. This submission is based on research and analysis conducted across the Institute's work on Parliament.
2. Diversity in all forms, including gender, is vital to help Parliament fulfill its roles. A more diverse body of MPs and peers, as well as parliamentary staff, ensures the presence of a range of perspectives in Parliament. This is helpful in debating issues, passing legislation, and holding the government to account. Diversity also helps Parliament to fulfil its representative function, ensuring that it looks more like the population it serves.
3. Increasing gender diversity in Parliament requires work to ensure that both Houses are sensitive to gender-related issues, including how its ways of working, culture, and physical environment interact with the needs of people of different genders. If Parliament is seen as a gender sensitive institution, then there is likely to be greater diversity in those seeking careers as either Members or staff.

The current situation

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

4. Measuring the gender sensitivity of the Commons is difficult. One indication of the Commons' gender sensitivity is the gender balance of MPs (although this is also affected by other factors – particularly the choices of political parties). Currently, 34% of MPs are female. This is the highest proportion ever and reflects a steady increase in the number of female MPs since the 1990s. However, there are significant differences between the gender balance of MPs in different parties. Progress towards gender balance in the House of Commons has been limited by a lack of progress in female representation among Conservative MPs in particular. Another measure is the gender balance of staff employed by the House of Commons. In the 2019/20 financial year, 45.9% of staff were female.
5. The growth in the number of female MPs indicates that more women are inclined to stand for election. Many factors may drive this, including broader changes in society and culture, that are beyond the remit of this inquiry. But it suggests that the Commons is viewed as a workplace that is increasingly welcoming to female MPs. However, there is much more to be done.
6. Generally, there is a greater willingness on the part of politicians and parliamentary authorities to acknowledge and discuss gender diversity, and a recognition that it is important to the Commons' ability to fulfil its representative role. For example, during the campaign for the Speakership in 2019, candidates routinely discussed issues related to gender.
7. Within this increased awareness of diversity, a number of changes have been made in the Commons in recent years that have improved its gender sensitivity. These include, though are not limited to:
 - a. **Proxy voting for MPs on baby leave.** Following the introduction of a pilot scheme in January 2019, the Commons made permanent proxy voting for MPs with newborn or

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newly-adopted children. Prior to this, MPs in late pregnancy, or recovering from complications due to childbirth—or simply seeking to spend time with newborn or newly-adopted children—had to rely on informal pairing schemes. At times, including during key Brexit debates, these arrangements broke down, forcing MPs to choose between their health and personal needs and ability to vote. Even when pairing schemes were honoured, they meant that MPs involved were unable to formally register a vote. Proxy voting removes these barriers and helps ensure that all MPs can represent their constituents while balancing their health and personal needs and professional responsibilities.

- b. **Reform of the Commons' sitting hours.** Changes in 2005 and 2012 made the Commons' sitting hours more predictable and ensured they were less likely to last into the early hours. Our analysis found that in the year following the 2017 election, despite several crucial debates on Brexit, the Commons only sat beyond midnight on three occasions.¹ This is a stark contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, where over a quarter of sitting days lasted beyond midnight. These changes make it easier for MPs with caring responsibilities—who are more likely to be female—to balance these with their parliamentary duties, although many report that they still do not find the sitting hours genuinely 'family friendly'. And the situation is more complicated for MPs whose constituencies require travel over long distances.
 - c. **Improved data collection.** Data collection on gender in aspects of the Commons' work has improved in recent years. For example, the Commons Liaison Committee regularly collects and publishes data on the gender diversity of select committee witnesses. This data has been included in the Commons' Sessional Returns since 2017. Also, in 2018, the first Gender Sensitive Parliament Report was published, containing a range of data related to the diversity of the two Houses. Collecting and analysing data is crucial to understanding how well the Commons is performing in relation to gender.
8. However, further steps are required. Although there are more female MPs than ever, the proportion of female MPs is still well below the proportion of women in the UK population (50.6% in 2019, according to ONS figures). The proportion of female MPs in the House of Commons is also below that of the three devolved legislatures. Similarly, although almost half of Commons staff are female, the proportion decreases at more senior levels. This indicates the need for further action to ensure a gender sensitive Parliament.

What more needs to happen

What additional procedures and working arrangements should be changed?

9. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Commons adopted hybrid proceedings, which allowed those unable to travel to Westminster for health reasons to contribute virtually. At times, MPs were also able to vote remotely. The House should commission research into whether hybrid proceedings affected MPs' ability to balance family and parliamentary commitments, as has been reported anecdotally. The House should consider whether some elements of hybrid working—for

¹ Institute for Government, *Parliamentary Monitor 2018*, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/parliamentary-monitor-2018>

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example, the ability to ask questions of ministers remotely—might be continued for Members with caring responsibilities or other specific personal circumstances.

10. Select committees should also consider how the ability to hold evidence sessions remotely has allowed them to attract more diverse witnesses, given that they do not need to travel to Westminster. As part of this, committees should compare their data on witness diversity during usual and hybrid/remote proceedings. The House should review whether some facility for witnesses to give evidence remotely be made permanent as a way of ensuring greater flexibility for witnesses with young children or other caring responsibilities.
11. The proxy system for MPs on baby leave has worked well and allowed MPs to continue to fulfil aspects of their role. The House should consider whether this permanent system should be expanded to include MPs with other caring responsibilities or specific circumstances—for example, those looking after elderly parents.
12. Temporary changes made to the Commons' ways of working during the Covid-19 demonstrated that remote voting is possible. Although provision for this has now ended, the House should resurrect and retain the ability to vote remotely—so that it might be used in the future, either in a situation where large numbers of MPs cannot reach Westminster, or by those facing particular caring responsibilities or health issues. This would also capitalise on the significant time and effort expended by staff on devising the remote voting system.
13. It is welcome that MPs can now take paid maternity leave and seek some additional funding for maternity cover. But the practical difficulties faced by some pregnant MPs in recent years indicates that the question of how MPs can take maternity leave, and the range of support and funding they are entitled to, requires more fundamental thought. Many of the changes made in relation to maternity leave in recent years have been driven by circumstances facing individual MPs, and a more thorough look at the issues facing new parents—including provision of paternity leave— is overdue.

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?

14. When planning for the future Commons chamber—and any temporary chamber—consideration should be given to permanently incorporating facilities that enable remote participation in Commons business, such as the screens that have been installed in the chamber during the Covid-19 pandemic. These changes will allow for the kinds of procedural changes suggested above.
15. Restoration and Renewal (R&R) also offers the chance to improve the security and safety of all Members and staff. This has been a major concern in recent years, with the cost of security assistance for MPs in 2018/19 over 2000% above pre-2015 levels.² Terrorist attacks on Parliament, as well as serious threats made against MPs— leading to prosecutions—have highlighted the vulnerability of MPs and staff in Westminster and in their constituencies. These threats have disproportionately targeted female MPs—as well as those from minority backgrounds. R&R should consider how security could be improved around the parliamentary estate.

² Institute for Government, *Parliamentary Monitor 2020*, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/parliamentary-monitor-2020>.

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16. Consideration of safety and security should also include measures to minimise the number of spaces in which harassment might be more likely to occur— for example, in poorly-lit or less frequented parts of the Estate.
17. As part of R&R, staff and Members should be consulted about whether there are any facilities they would like to see incorporated into building plans—for example, spaces for childcare or babychanging (accessible to all genders)—that might help meet their needs. And as has been recommended by others, including Professor Sarah Childs, toilet facilities should be provided in proportion to a future expectation of gender parity—and gender-neutral toilets should be also incorporated into plans for R&R.³
18. A gender sensitive Parliament is one in which people of all genders feel welcome and represented. One way of achieving this might be to consider the artwork that is on display throughout the Estate, and whether it might be made more representative of the diversity of Parliament. The 2018 ‘209 Women’ exhibition in Portcullis House, and the ‘Voice and Vote’ exhibition in Westminster Hall were important steps forward, and consideration should be given to how this kind of work could be more permanently incorporated into the Estate as part of R&R.

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

19. Allegations of bullying and harassment in the Commons have undermined the confidence of many staff—and damaged Parliament’s reputation with the public. The 18-month review of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) found continuing problems with its speed and complexity – and a failure to resolve these issues will risk further damaging confidence in the Commons as a workplace. Greater transparency about investigations currently underway may help to build confidence that the system is working as intended. Because those subject to harassment have disproportionately tended to be female, there is a danger that people who might have considered careers in the Commons instead look elsewhere. It is imperative that problems with the ICGS are dealt with in a way that increases confidence in the system and makes clear that bullying and harassment will not be tolerated.
20. In recent years, many MPs—and particularly female MPs—have highlighted their concerns about safety, linking these to the tone of political debate in the Commons. Female MPs across all parties have tended to receive higher numbers of threats, as well as more abuse on social media. Multiple female MPs cited this as one reason behind their decision to leave the Commons at the 2019 election. These concerns must be taken seriously by all Members, as well as the parliamentary authorities. Members should consider the language and tone that they use in debates and ensure that it remains civil and respectful, even where there are major differences of opinion. The Speaker should be willing to indicate when language or conduct in a debate is inappropriate or unacceptable, or when it may risk inflaming tensions.
21. Beyond concerns about potentially inflammatory rhetoric, all politicians should also consider whether their language and conduct in the Commons creates a welcoming environment for people of all genders. Some female MPs have suggested it does not—for example, the former Home Secretary Amber Rudd told the IfG that “There is a kind of boys’ club-type behaviour in parliament because it is still more like a public school or a university club than anywhere else you’ll ever go.”⁴

³ Sarah Childs, *The Good Parliament*, July 2016.

⁴ Amber Rudd, *Ministers Reflect*, Institute for Government, December 2020,

What and who should drive change on this issue?

22. The Commons Procedure Committee, as well as the Liaison Committee, can play an important role in examining some of the procedural questions raised above. They can propose changes but these cannot be brought about without government support. Securing substantive changes, especially on procedural matters, will require the agreement of the government which will need to bring forward the required motions for the House vote upon. As a normal matter of convention, votes on such House business should not be whipped.
23. The permanent establishment in 2017 of the Women and Equalities Committee was an important and welcome step. The Committee should take a leading role in monitoring the House's progress towards greater gender sensitivity. This role might include collecting and collating data, holding regular evidence sessions on these issues, and producing regular reports.
24. All of those who work in the Commons can help to forge a culture and environment that is welcoming to people of all genders through their behaviour and the way that they treat their colleagues. The establishment of workplace equality networks across both Houses, such as ParliGENDER and ParliOUT, has been a welcome step in supporting efforts towards greater gender diversity among all those working in Parliament.
25. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that many actors outside of Parliament—including the media and the public and – in particular – political parties – also have an important role in driving greater gender sensitivity in politics more broadly. There is much to be done in this space, but one tangible step forward—as the Centenary Action Group have stated— would be to commence Section 106 of the Equalities Act 2010, which would require publication of data on the diversity of parliamentary candidates.⁵

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