



DEBATE PACK

Number CDP-0148, 12 June 2019

Making Parliament a more modern, family friendly and accessible workplace

A general debate on making Parliament a more modern, family friendly and accessible workplace will take place in the Commons Chamber on Thursday 13 June 2019.

The subject of the debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee following an [application](#) from Ellie Reeves MP and John Cryer MP. The motion for the debate is:

That this House has considered making Parliament a more modern, family friendly and accessible workplace.

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

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Contents

1. Background	2
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Diversity	2
1.3 Access	2
1.4 Family-friendly workplace	3
2. Parliamentary material	4
2.1 Oral questions	4
2.2 Written questions	5
2.3 Debates	6
3. Press Articles	7
4. Further reading	8
4.1 Commons Library Briefing	8
4.2 The Good Parliament Report	8

1. Background

1.1 Introduction

Ellie Reeves and John Cryer applied for the debate on 21 May 2019.¹ Ellie Reeves explained that the application followed a request she had made at Business Questions for a debate on making Parliament a more accessible workplace.² It also followed the publication of a Fabian pamphlet, with suggestions from 11 new Labour MPs for measures to reform Parliament.³

In their application, Ellie Reeves and John Cryer noted that proxy voting for parental leave had been implemented⁴ but there had been no general look at changing parliamentary procedures to make the House a more modern, accessible and family-friendly workplace. They also highlighted the difficulties disabled visitors encountered when visiting Parliament.

1.2 Diversity

The Good Parliament report, published in July 2016, was prepared by Professor Childs following her secondment to the House of Commons. The Report offered "a 'menu' of practical solutions – 43 recommendations – to address the diversity insensitivities that remain in the UK House of Commons".⁵ In response to one of Professor Childs' recommendations, a gender sensitive audit was undertaken. The results, [the UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018](#), were published in December 2018.

On 11 June 2019, the House of Commons and House of Lords Commissions published a [combined response](#) to the UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018.

1.3 Access

During the second reading debate on the *Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill 2017-19*, Dame Caroline Spelman, who chaired the Joint Committee that examined the draft bill, highlighted "just how inaccessible the present Parliament is for those who are visually or physically impaired".⁶ Andrea Leadsom, then the Leader of the House of Commons, said that "the Bill contains very clear provisions that specific focus on accessibility should be a core part of the work".⁷

¹ Backbench Business Committee, [Representations](#), 21 May 2019

² [HC Deb 9 May 2019 cc683-684](#)

³ James Frith (ed), [New Brooms: Ideas for Reforming Westminster from Labour's 2017 Intake](#), Fabian Society, September 2018

⁴ The Library Briefing [Proxy voting in divisions in the House](#) (CBP 8359, 12 February 2019) describes the changes that have been made on a pilot basis

⁵ *Ibid*, p9

⁶ [HC Deb 21 May 2019 c642](#)

⁷ *Ibid*

The Bill requires Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority to have regard to

the need to ensure that—

- (i) any place in which either House of Parliament is located while the Parliamentary building works are carried out, and
- (ii) the Palace of Westminster (after completion of those works),

are accessible to people with disabilities

The opportunities afforded by the Restoration and Renewal programme to experiment with how the House operates were highlighted by a number of members during the course of the debate.

1.4 Family-friendly workplace

In May 2017, the Procedure Committee reported the views of Members on the sitting hours of the House, based on a survey conducted in June and July 2016. It had sought views on the impact of sitting hours on personal effectiveness, and on their personal and/or family life. The Committee found:

The outcome of the survey indicates support among the majority of respondents for the current sitting hours of the House on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Although the survey demonstrates some support for several alternative schemes of sitting hours, the responses to the survey do not indicate any consensus as to what alternative sitting hours should be.⁸

⁸ Procedure Committee, [*Sitting hours of the House: response to a survey of Members*](#), 2 May 2017, HC 1144 2016-17

2. Parliamentary material

2.1 Oral questions

[House of Commons Chamber: Electronic Voting System](#)

HC Deb 17 Jan 2019 cc1316-1317

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions the Commission has had on the potential costs of installing an electronic voting system in the House of Commons Chamber. [908612]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Commission has had no discussions on the costs of installing an electronic voting system in the Chamber. Its responsibility in this matter is limited to the financial or staffing implications of any change to the present system, were a change agreed by the House. If the House agreed to pursue electronic working, further work by the House service in conjunction with the digital service would be needed to accurately identify the investment, planning and development required to deliver electronic voting.

Patrick Grady: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the answer. I accept that a change has to be a decision of the House, but the reality is that this is not just about democracy anymore; it is about health and safety. Six hundred Members trying to get through the Lobby the other night was an incredibly worrying situation: if Mr Speaker had called for the doors to be closed, it would not have been physically possible for the Doorkeepers to do so. There was claustrophobia, and we know the issues of Members with health challenges and Members who are pregnant. The House of Commons Commission needs to consider the issue from the perspective of safety in the workplace environment, with democratic considerations to one side.

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues for their questions—I think electronic voting will be my specialist subject on “Mastermind”. He has come up with a new angle, and I support the point he makes. Members in the packed Division Lobby when the Government were defeated very heavily will have noticed that the congestion was significant, and there were risks associated with that.

On the back of the hon. Gentleman’s question, I will ask the authorities to look at doing a health and safety risk assessment. As he will know, and as I have stated previously, if he wants to pursue the matter—I understand that he has perhaps not yet done so—he needs to ask the Procedure Committee to look at the whole subject of electronic voting.

2.2 Written questions

[House of Commons: Nurseries](#)

Newlands, Gavin: To ask the Rt. hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, if the Commission will take steps to provide crèche services for the children of hon. Members, staff and visitors.

Tom Brake | House of Commons Commission: The House of Commons operates an onsite nursery, available to Members, their staff and staff of each House. Based on consultation with Members, the facility was specifically set up as a nursery, rather than a crèche, to meet the needs of Members and their children, some of whom might be facing long hours in a stranger's care, reflecting Members' work pressures.

Professor Sarah Childs' report, 'The Good Parliament', includes a recommendation for a crèche as well as a nursery. The recommendations in this report are being explored further under the auspices of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion.

24 Nov 2016 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 907449

[Commons Reference Group On Representation and Inclusion](#)

Jo Stevens: To ask the Minister for Women and Equalities, how many recommendations from the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion the Government has accepted since that group's foundation.

Nick Gibb | Women and Equalities: The Commons Reference Group consulted government on two recommendations from the **Good Parliament** report. The first was to support the permanent establishment of the Women and Equalities Select Committee. The Government accepted this recommendation and the committee was made permanent shortly after the 2017 general election.

The second recommendation was to commence Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which would impose mandatory diversity reporting for candidates on political parties. The Government recently confirmed that it would not bring this into effect.

17 Oct 2017 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 107431

2.3 Debates

Proxy Voting

HC Deb 28 Jan 2019 cc596-613

Resolved,

That this House:—

- 1) reaffirms its resolution of 1 February 2018 on baby leave for Members of Parliament;
- 2) endorses the Fifth Report of the Procedure Committee, HC 825, on Proxy voting and parental absence;
- 3) accordingly directs the Speaker to prepare a pilot scheme governing the operation of proxy voting for Members absent from the House by reason of childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child, pursuant to the recommendations in the Committee's report, this resolution and the temporary Standing Order (Voting by proxy for parental absence);
- 4) directs that a scheme prepared in accordance with this resolution and the temporary Standing Order (Voting by proxy for parental absence) shall be signed by the Speaker and the leaders of the three largest parties in the House before it is published, and that it shall enter into effect for a period of 12 months when the Speaker takes the chair on the sitting day after the day of publication;
- 5) directs that any amendment of a scheme in effect by virtue of paragraph (4) above shall take effect when the Speaker takes the Chair on the sitting day after a proposal signed by the Speaker and the leaders of the three largest parties in the House is published; and
- 6) directs the Procedure Committee to review proxy voting arrangements within 12 months of the commencement of a scheme established by virtue of this order.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill 2017-19

- [2nd reading: House of Commons 21 May, 2019](#)
- [Committee Debate: 1st sitting: House of Commons 4 June, 2019 \(1\) \(2\)](#)
- [Committee Debate: 2nd sitting: House of Commons 4 June, 2019 \(1\) \(2\)](#)

[Parliamentary Buildings \(Restoration and Renewal\) Bill \(HC Bill 388\)](#)

Houses of Parliament (Family-friendliness)

HC Deb 10 Nov 2015 cc42-3WH

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the family-friendliness of Parliament.

3. Press and media articles

Please note: The Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

[Anti-Discrimination Tribunal hears third accessible entrance should be added to Parliament Square development](#), 29 May 2019

The Examiner, Emily Jarvie

A lift should be installed at the north-east entrance of the Parliament Square development despite there being two other accessible entrances to the plaza, the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal has heard.

[Second House of Commons to be built so work can begin on fixing Parliament](#), 8 May 2019

The Telegraph, Gordon Rayner

A more modern version of the Commons chamber, complete with its familiar green benches, will be constructed on the site of the former Department of Health building on Whitehall.

[The Good Parliament Report, Brexit politics, and the Institutionalisation of a Diversity Sensitive Commons](#), 23 April 2019

PSA Parliaments Group Blog, Sarah Childs (Birkbeck)

Professor Sarah Childs discusses the implications of the parliamentary politics of Brexit, and prospects for future reforms at Westminster

[Necessary baby steps towards The Good Parliament: proxy voting in the Commons](#), 28 January 2019

LSE Blog, Sarah Childs (Birkbeck)

On 28 January 2019 the House of Commons unanimously voted to implement a trial of proxy voting for MPs on parental leave. Sarah Childs explains how the vote came about, and why the pilot is unlikely to be overturned.

[A Better, But Not as Yet, Good Parliament: The UK House of Commons 2016-2018](#), 16 August 2018

PSA Parliaments Group Blog, Sarah Childs (Birkbeck)

Sarah Childs discusses progress on implementing the recommendations of her report The Good Parliament two years on from its publication.

[The Good Parliament: it is about more than breastfeeding and trans-toilets](#), 1 August 2016

PSA Parliaments Group Blog, Sarah Childs (Birkbeck)

4. Further reading

4.1 Commons Library Briefing

Commons Library Briefing paper, [Parliamentary Buildings \(Restoration and Renewal\) Bill 2017-19](#), 16 May 2019

4.2 The Good Parliament Report

Professor Sarah Childs, [The Good Parliament](#), [pdf] July 2016

Executive Summary

The recommendations in this Report are a blueprint for a more representative and inclusive House of Commons. They have the potential to significantly enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of the House. Institutional leadership will be provided by the newly created Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion.

An Unrepresentative House

The House of Commons is not as representative as it might be; its membership remains disproportionately white, male and elite.

One hundred years ago the Commons contained no women; had only ever returned a handful of minority ethnic men; and was largely filled with men of independent means. Much has changed over the last century. Yet, the House remains unrepresentative and its working practices continue to reflect the traditions and preferences of Members who have historically populated it. The House is, then, at some distance from meeting the international democratic standard for The Good Parliament: 'truly representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective in all its functions'.¹

Institutional Deficit

Historically the House of Commons has lacked the institutional will to address issues of representation and inclusion.

Members of Parliament are often regarded as individual office-holders. This can obscure a wider institutional responsibility to act. Hence, parliamentary reform is too often the result of individual MPs expending significant time and political capital. This is no longer a satisfactory state. The Good Parliament Report is for the House as an institution to 'own'.

The New Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion

To redress its institutional deficiency, the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Rt Hon John Bercow MP, has established a new group of MPs.

The Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion provides the necessary political and institutional lead to deliver on The Good Parliament. Formally chaired by the Speaker, it is comprised of a small number of Members, male and female, from across the House, and with the Deputy Speakers as Acting Chairs.

The Good Parliament Recommendations

The recommendations contained in this Report will transform who sits in the House, have the potential to significantly enhance Member effectiveness individually and collectively, improve the quality of parliamentary outcomes, and should ultimately raise the public's regard for the House. Individual recommendations are explicitly linked to particular actors. This makes it easier to hold them and the House to account.

Houses of Parliament

Restoration and Renewal

What has happened since the debates in early 2018?

In early 2018, members of both Houses backed a temporary move out of the Palace. They agreed to temporarily vacate the building to allow the increasingly urgent work on the Palace of Westminster to be carried out in one single phase. Members also agreed that the Palace of Westminster would remain the long-term home of Parliament.

Benefits of the Restoration and Renewal Programme include:

The Programme is designed to protect the Palace and its historic legacy for future generations, while ensuring value for money for the taxpayer. A further anticipated long-term benefit is a more open, accessible Parliament for all, including significant improvements to disabled access.

- Containing all the services needed by a modern, accessible, accountable Parliament, with better, safer access for those who work in and visit the building.
- Improving disabled access, fire safety and removing risks caused by asbestos.
- Increasing energy efficiency, with lower maintenance and running costs and a significantly reduced carbon footprint.

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