

Reset:

A blueprint for a 21st Century Parliament



Compassion
in Politics

50:50
PARLIAMENT

OCTOBER 2024

Contents

| | |
|---------------------------|---------|
| Forward..... | Page 1 |
| Summary..... | Page 2 |
| Introduction..... | Page 5 |
| Background..... | Page 8 |
| Exit Survey Findings..... | Page 11 |
| Recommendations..... | Page 17 |
| Conclusion..... | Page 29 |
| Actions..... | Page 30 |

FOREWORD BY KIM LEADBEATER MP

The last few years have been a fractious time in Politics and, sadly, the reputation of Parliament itself has at times been tarnished. Public trust of politicians is at an all time low and the disconnect between Westminster and the public it seeks to serve seems wider than ever. As such, the new report from 50:50 Parliament and Compassion in Politics provides us with some of the potential ways to drive forward change and modernise the Mother of all Parliaments.

The report plays a vital role in light of the very welcome objectives of the Modernisation Committee to drive up standards, improve culture and working practices, and reform Parliament to make it the most effective seat of democracy it can be. Providing a realistic snapshot of why previous MPs chose to step down from a role often described as a “true privilege”, the report highlights their concerns but also offers us all hope.

Hope that our Parliament can indeed become as inclusive, compassionate and effective as it can possibly be. Hope that the current mood amongst many MPs, and those involved in politics, to enact change can, and should, be seized upon and implemented for the sake of us all. Indeed, to quote the leader of the house, Lucy Powell MP, many of us are “raring to go” when proactively working towards needed political reform. This report adds to the momentum and drive we can see in this time of change and forms a welcome part of our collective and collaborative route forwards.

There is much good work that has been started, much still to do, but this report, alongside the voices of others, makes an immensely valuable contribution to the vital work of change.

A new season for Parliament, for politics and for us all is indeed possible, a new season of hope.

Summary



'It's an uncontrolled playground of abuse. Parliament is still run like a gentleman's club but the standards of the 19th century gentleman have disappeared. Bullying & manipulation are normalised and expected. And there are far too many staffers learning bad habits like drinking at work. The whole Palace is out-of-control and the most depressing place I've ever worked.'

The "Blueprint for a 21st Century Parliament," produced by 50:50 Parliament and Compassion in Politics, provides an immediate starting point for modernising the UK Parliament into a more inclusive, supportive, and effective working institution. It is not exhaustive, but it provides the framework for quick and low-cost changes to create immediate impact while the Committee considers longer term structural changes.



'Macho culture dominates'

While much progress has certainly been made on modernising Parliament in the last decade or more, the report draws from a 2024 survey of departing MPs that paints a picture of a workplace culture at times still characterised by outdated practices, high stress, and inadequate mental health support. This environment contributes to declining public trust in politicians, with the MPs also citing family strain, mental health challenges, and toxic behaviours as reasons for stepping down from the role they feel privileged to have held.



"Quite frankly if you can't stand the heat, get out of the fire. We knew what we were signing up for. However, objectively, it's an utterly dreadful set of working conditions.'

By implementing the reforms suggested, Parliament can start to reset the deficit in public trust and begin to address the longstanding issues that affect many MPs with the goal of inspiring a new generation of leaders who feel valued, respected, and capable of serving with integrity; a change that will benefit both the politicians and the public they serve.



'It's a huge privilege and truly a great honour to be a lawmaker, but it's debilitating on the rest of your life - family, finances and privacy.'

The report's recommendations prioritise procedural and cultural reforms such as implementing electronic voting, piloting hybrid work options, establishing an independent HR function to support MPs and staff professionally, and evolving Prime Minister's Questions, and other debates, into a more constructive format that encourages respectful dialogue. These changes aim to inspire public respect for the political process and to make Parliament a more welcoming and inclusive environment - particularly for those under-represented in the corridors of power - while underscoring Parliament's commitment to integrity and accountability. Equal representation, both of women and minorities, remains an issue and, with representation shaping policy, it is critical that we act fast to ensure Parliament is accessible to talented people from all backgrounds.



'It's been the most extreme experience of my life. The highs are wonderful. The lows are miserable. There's very little in between. The collapse of public respect makes it an impossible job for the MP & their family. I had a nervous breakdown after my candidacy in 2005 & again as a Minister.'¹

Our recommendations are aimed at achieving three overall outcomes for the future of our Parliament:

That it should be inclusive and representative:

- To deliver a House of Commons that reflects, and is able to represent, the diversity of the British public (including the 51% of the public that are women)
- To improve public trust in politicians and, by extension, the UK's democratic process.
- To meet the international democratic norms of gender sensitivity and gender equality, including the 2022 Kigali Declaration² and the UN Sustainable development goals 5 and 16³

That it should encourage best workplace practices:

- To create a modern, inclusive and healthy workplace that supports politicians in meeting the complex challenges our nation faces for the benefit of all
- To role model non-violent conduct and cultures and lead on reducing hostility and aggression in the public political space
- Promote active cooperation between MPs and parties around issues of common concern and interest.
- To inspire public trust that parliament is 'modern', professional and fit for purpose
- To meet the basic duty of care to support and protect British elected representatives and their staff.
- To address the worsening mental health crisis amongst MPs, to ensure that those with high levels of empathy are not driven out of the political space.

That it should embody a culture of integrity:

- To show that Parliament is responding to public concerns about transparency, honesty, and self-regulation.
- To reset public perceptions about, and enhance political engagement with, Parliament and its elected politicians.

Introduction

The need to significantly improve the working practices and culture at Westminster - for the benefit of MPs, staff, visitors, as well as those they serve - is evidenced in the welcome establishment of the Modernisation Committee and its inquiry.

This report prepared for the Committee by the organisations 50:50 Parliament and Compassion in Politics draws on existing research and recommendations alongside the results of a 2024 survey of exiting MPs conducted together with the Apolitical Foundation and sponsored by the law firm Hogan Lovells.

The survey found evidence of workplace practices and norms which are, at times, at odds with the standards expected of a workplace in the 21st century. It also suggested a growing mental health crisis amongst Parliamentarians which has been fed and exacerbated by inappropriate workplace practices and culture. Quotes from the survey appear throughout this report. Whilst the dataset is not large, and therefore cannot be inferred to be indicative of all Parliamentarians, the qualitative data we received is compelling and, at times, disturbing. The data gathered also reflect views shared both anecdotally, in other reports (more below), and in recently authored books about Westminster culture such as Rory Stewart's 'Politics on the Edge' and Ian Dunt's 'How Westminster Works and Why It Doesn't'.

Exiting MPs Poll and BBC Radio 4 Documentary

The survey formed the basis for a BBC Documentary: [Broken Politics, Broken Politicians](#) that was broadcast on Radio 4 in May 2024 and presented by journalist and Co-Founder of Compassion in Politics Jennifer Nadel and produced and conceptualised by Daniel Tetlow. The documentary contains first hand accounts of many of the issues this report seeks to highlight, including an interview with a former Government Minister who had to conceal a mental breakdown while in office, and a serving male MP who attempted suicide and was subsequently contacted by eight other MPs who said they had reached similar states of mental despair. References and quotes from the documentary are used through this report.

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to work with the welcome remit of the Modernisation Committee by suggesting some practical steps to create a more inclusive, functional and gender sensitive Parliament; to help protect MPs and staff and prevent any harm from arising; and to set a clear agenda for change that will also help improve public perceptions and trust of politics and politicians.

To that end, this report also builds on and draws from research and recommendations made over the last 14 years that would have led to a more inclusive and functional political work culture had they been implemented. Chief amongst these are [Professor Sarah Childs' 2016 Good Parliament Report](#). We also reference [Caroline Lucas' report 'The Case for Parliamentary Reform'](#), [50:50 Parliament's recommendations in 2021 to the Women and Equalities Committee](#) and [Compassion in Politics and the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development's evidence to the Speaker's Conference in 2022](#).

Our hope is that these existing recommendations, together with this report and the survey findings, will enable the Committee to take some clear, impactful and immediate steps in tandem with the very important longer term work of the Committee.

According to the [IPSOS Veracity Index Report from December 2023](#), voter confidence in politicians is at a forty-year low with only 9% of respondents saying they trusted what politicians said.

At a time when such low levels of trust risk undermining democratic engagement, these recommendations - in addition to providing for the better and more inclusive functioning of Parliament - also provide the Committee with a clear opportunity to show that the Government is serious about making good its promise for a 'reset' and to 'clean up politics'.

Our recommendations are as follows:

Representation and inclusivity

- Review flexible and inclusive working best practices from other parliaments and organisations with a commitment in principle to adopt best practice: including but not limited to, job shares, multiple forms of childcare offering, work/life balance initiatives.
- Bring forward a debate on the working culture in Parliament, to focus on gender and diversity sensitivity, the online abuse associated with the role, the impact on family life and mental health.
- Modernise the language used in parliament
- Increase the agency for MPs, particularly opposition members and backbenchers, by establishing a House Business Committee for clarity on working hours and taking measures to prevent the 'talking out' of private members bills
- Ensure gold standard care and policies with stringent policies of zero tolerance of sexual harrassment and bullying

Best Working Practices

- Establish an independent Human Resources department to oversee the employment of MPs' staff and ensure gold standard
- Promote constructive, respectful debate.
- Return to the use of electronic voting in the Commons.

Culture of Integrity

- Launch a consultation on the conduct of the Whipping system.
- Introduce a rule to ensure honesty and transparency.
- Put the Members' and Ministerial Code of Conduct on a statutory footing.

Background

In recent years political standards have been significantly undermined by a string of scandals including but not limited to “Partygate”, “Pestminster” and the “Expenses Scandal” plus the alarming number of MPs accused or found guilty of sexual abuse, and repeated instances of bullying, harassment, and intimidation. The public image of politics, and politicians, is inarguably one of deep distrust, division, and declining standards. The election has given us an opportune moment to ‘reset’.

In recent years MPs have spoken out about some workplace culture issues and processes, including concerns over the whipping system, (for example, the threat of funding for a school being withheld), ⁷and about abusive language used in parliamentary debates or in the back rooms and bars at Westminster. Their voices have been joined by a chorus of members’ staff who have similarly described a system of toxic competition and harassment⁸that orientates towards the undermining or destruction of opposition colleagues rather than the pursuit of good policy.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that recent investigations have shown that the mental health of MPs is below the population average. A report by the APPG for Mental Health, chaired at the time by Dr Dan Poulter, discovered that anxiety, depression, and high levels of stress are exceedingly common amongst MPs.⁹Similarly, research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development and Compassion in Politics ¹⁰shows that MP’s staff are also adversely impacted by the current working environment. ¹¹

This research, coupled with that of Dr. Ashley Weinberg,¹² has also demonstrated a number of other factors that have helped to create an increasingly suboptimal system. Tight control of government business means that backbench MPs rarely have much influence over legislation and certainly have few opportunities to introduce their own. Their best hope is to come high-up in the Private Members’ Bill ballot - reducing the legislative agenda to a lottery. The expectation that MPs ought to be more often present at Westminster rather than giving time to their constituents also means that many have to travel long distances at the start and end of the week, spending considerable time away from their family and support networks. And the practice of voting on legislation in full view of colleagues leaves open the potential that MPs will be pressured into voting against their conscience or constituency interests.

These systemic problems have been added to by the meteoric rise of social media and the access and platforms that affords. Fed, in part, by the divisive language used in parliamentary debates, the abuse, harassment, and threats directed towards elected officials has grown markedly. This has been particularly pronounced amongst female and black MPs. In the run up to the 2017 General Election, the 20 BAME MPs received almost half (41%) of the abusive tweets,¹³ despite there being almost eight times as many white MPs in the study. Diane Abbott received a disproportionate amount of abuse and was the target of almost a third (31.61%) of all abusive tweets. Two MPs have been murdered in the last 8 years, and while the security used to protect MPs has been increased, this can only hope to treat the symptom rather than the cause of the abuse. 50:50 Parliament and Compassion in Politics back, in their entirety, the Jo Cox Commission Civility Report and recommendations as a way of addressing these issues.



I have seen female MPs put under even greater pressure from misogynistic conduct on social media¹⁴

Women are still under-represented in Parliament, despite progress at the last election, along with people from Black and ethnically minoritised (global majority) backgrounds and disabled people. It is widely accepted that women face additional barriers compared to men to taking part in public life, including shouldering the higher burden of childcare and experiencing misogyny and harassment. In an internal survey, women from the 50:50 community cited the perceived 'misogynistic environment' in Parliament, above abuse and harassment, as the main reason they would not currently consider standing for Parliament. 2028 represents the centenary of the Equal Franchise Act - making this an opportune moment to address cultural and systemic issues which make the House fall short of becoming a 'gender-sensitive' Parliament.¹⁵

None of this - it should be said - is the fault of any particular individual, party, or government. We have inherited a system that was developed on a piecemeal basis around male politicians of considerable privilege who, by and large, had other professions. The traditions and cultures that have been passed down over generations reflect those historic origins and the prejudices that gave rise to them. The election of a new government, as well as the public's ever-growing dissatisfaction with the way politics is done, offers the opportunity to look afresh at how we can create a political

system that delivers for those it serves and those who serve within it.

It is no secret that the public feels alienated from politics. The numbers are startlingly clear: voter turnout decreasing, ¹⁶party membership falling, ¹⁷trust at rock bottom.¹⁸ The task of rebuilding politics does not just fall to those in elected office. To assume as much would be to take a narrow view of what politics is and where it happens. We need to find ways to reconnect voters and MPs, public and Parliament. We need to bring in new and fresh voices and ensure that Parliament is a place where elected officials from diverse backgrounds can thrive. 132 MPs stood down at the last election, and, as our survey shows, a number cite untenable work and work/life conditions. **The 'Mother of Parliaments' is in need of urgent modernisation to ensure it is a healthy and attractive place of work for future generations and that it inspires the trust of voters.**

Exit survey findings

This survey sought to understand the extent to which commonly cited issues, such as working hours and outdated working practices, contributed to the 132 resignations of sitting MPs in 2024, as well as getting a broad view of people's experience of being an MP and to what extent gender affected their experience. It is based on results of exit interviews conducted with MPs who had already announced their resignation from Parliament by March 2024.

Our findings present a picture of Parliament and political life which is at once stimulating and rewarding and at the same time chronically stressful and exhausting.



'It's a huge privilege and truly a great honour to be a lawmaker, but it's debilitating on the rest of your life - family, finances and privacy.'

Many respondents used the word 'privilege' to express how they felt about becoming an MP, with real job satisfaction coming from 'making a difference' and 'helping the local community', and one MP highlighted that they had *'Developed good relationships with colleagues from different parties'*. Indeed, 87% of respondents said they would encourage other people to stand for Parliament, although there were many added caveats within the comments. 1 in 3 said that the levels of abuse they received as an MP had been a factor in deciding to resign, whilst another third cited the impact the role has had on their mental wellbeing. Over half of respondents said that they needed to step down owing to the impact of the job on their family life including fear for their own wellbeing, safety and the safety of others.²⁰ One respondent stated: "There are huge impacts on family and personal life which has [sic] increased substantially in the last 20 years."

To try and alleviate these problems, there was strong support amongst our respondents for better mental health care in Parliament, increased security for MPs, and efforts to change the culture of behaviour on the floor of the House of Commons.

Methodology

An invitation to complete an Exit Survey was sent to all Members of Parliament who, by March 2024, had announced that they would not be re-standing for election. A copy of the survey, which was completed online, can be found at the end of this report.

Data

132 MPs stood down at the last election. 24 MPs took part in the survey. Of those, 23 provided demographic characteristics. It should be noted that there's a consensus amongst academic researchers that response rates for UK politicians are notoriously low and 18% (24 from 132) is not below average.²¹

Where we footnote 'from second dataset', this pertains to an expanded survey which was sent to half of respondents, with a couple of additional questions added.

Additional qualitative data is also included from interviews collected in the aforementioned BBC Documentary.

- Gender: 6 (26%) of the respondents were female; 17 (74%) male.
- Parties represented:
 - Labour: 6
 - SNP: 3
 - Conservative: 13
 - Plaid Cymru: 1

We acknowledge that this is a small, self-selecting, group of MPs. However, there is clear qualitative evidence of detrimental norms and practices which make the job of MP more difficult.

Reasons for resigning

This question allowed MPs to cite multiple reasons for their decision to resign. While 17 of the 24 stated that they were doing so for "personal reasons such as retirement or health" and nine cited exploring other personal interests, it was concerning that a significant number of respondents pointed towards the pressures of the job and the detrimental impact it has had on their wellbeing as push factors in their decision not to re-stand. "I also found the impact on my family and family life was very significant and so I felt a considerable degree of guilt, as many working women do". Long working hours featured amongst the reasons

MPs were standing down and as previously stated, a third said that the impact on their own mental health was the reason they decided not to stand again with the same number citing the levels of abuse and intimidation as their reason.²² Another MP pointed to “moral injury” as a reason for their resignation.



“Everyone hates politicians now.”

Parliament as a workplace

The overall picture of Parliament as a place of work is, from our survey, mixed. Some MPs felt that Parliament was improving whilst others felt there was still a long way to go to make it a place where people could thrive. 43% of our MPs said that Parliament is “worse” than most other workplaces when it comes to standards of behaviour with 26% saying it is “much worse.” Although only 36% said effective mechanisms are not in place in Parliament to tackle inappropriate behaviour, many of the associated comments indicated that measures did not go far enough in addressing this. One MP said they knew people who had experienced problems at work but were reluctant to report it because of the ineffectiveness of the complaints systems. Another described Parliament as being home to “archaic, unpredictable and often shambolic working practices.” Some MPs did acknowledge improvements stating “there have been huge improvements internally and there is beginning to be improvements with how Parliament and police deal with external threats to MPs”, although a number of respondents indicated that there was still a way to go before new mechanisms were effectively put into practice.

Mental wellbeing

Our survey found that being an MP can have a significant negative impact on mental health. 42% agreed and 25% strongly agreed that their mental health has been adversely affected by their role, equalling in total two-thirds of the respondents from the second data set. One painted a very upsetting picture: “It’s been the most extreme experience of my life. The highs are wonderful. The lows are miserable. There’s very little in between. The collapse of public respect makes it an impossible job for the MP & their family. I had a nervous breakdown after my candidacy & again as a Minister.” Another, commenting on life after the 2019 election, said they

had experienced “a sense of futility as an MP.” One MP also referenced media exposure as being detrimental to their wellbeing - pointing to the futility of responding to “personal attack.”

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“The life of an MP has broken my marriage, family, finances [and] health [and] spat me out a broken man.” Retiring MP, 2024²³

Gender

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“As a woman MP and minister during the Blair/Brown years we achieved changes to improve women's lives that would never have happened if there had not been a strong group of women working together”²⁴

Roughly half of all respondents said that their gender had affected their experience as an MP, with both men and women feeling discriminated against. One MP suggested that being a male made it harder to be promoted to a Cabinet position, with another stating “As a white, heterosexual male I've been discriminated against.” Likewise, women felt that being female had an adverse impact, “Had all the same experiences as others - patronised, ignored, belittled etc” and “ there is still masses of misogyny out there.”

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“I was shocked at the heckling and barracking of particularly women speaking in debates. What was personally more unpleasant as a woman is the sexist abuse on social media which is specifically targeted at women MPs.”²⁵

83% of the women surveyed said that their gender had influenced their experience of being an MP, from positives such as ‘working collaboratively’ to the negatives, such as ‘suffering more abuse, online and in person’.

Advice to future MPs

As previously stated, most MPs would recommend the job but with 'caveats' that people understand what they are getting themselves into. Bearing this in mind, respondents had advice for people who are looking to serve as an MP.

Much of this advice for future MPs centred around the need to have a very supportive family and staff team in place. For example: *Make sure you have the support of your family; Make sure you hire the strongest possible team to support your work; Hire staff with experience for both Westminster and your constituency office - they will certainly know more than you, and Don't do it unless your partner is 100% supportive.*

Another theme was the need to maintain personal integrity and identity. One MP advised future MPs to "decide what your principles are and stick to them. Don't let the system swallow you" and another cautioned: "Focus on achieving one or two key things and let the rest float over you."

One MP gave a clear and disconcerting piece of advice: "Don't become an MP."

Solutions

We provided MPs with a list of possible solutions²⁶ and allowed them to state their support for as many as they chose.

The largest amount of support was given to "providing better mental health support" (45%) and "increasing levels of personal protection" (also 45%). It is alarming that these forms of "crisis" care are so urgently required in a system that is designed to govern the wellbeing of the nation.

Indeed, support was also high for changes that aim more at changing the underlying culture of Parliament. 45% agreed, for example, that there must be changes made to behaviour on the floor of the House of Commons.



*“While better mental health support can help when someone is struggling, changing the behaviour and antisocial working patterns would be more preventative.”²⁷
Retiring MP, 2024*

MPs also backed an independent ethics commission, compassionate leadership training, and more family and/or female friendly policies (all backed by 27%) and around 18% supported putting codes of conduct on a statutory footing.

‘Female friendly’ policies were suggested both in the Good Parliament Report and also in a wide-ranging list of suggestions from 50:50 Parliament to the Women and Equalities Committee in 2021. These included actions that would result in the greater representation of women in Parliament, such as sex/gender quotas for ‘vacant held’ and ‘target’ seats; all women shortlists; increased action within the Parties around training and recourse to funds; and suggestions mirrored here such as ‘family-friendly’ working hours, remote voting and job shares.

In addition, the Caroline Lucas report referenced above highlighted the need for modern, less opaque, language which would also address, in part, both the modernisation agenda and the agency (and therefore self esteem) of MPs.



“There needs to be greater recognition that we are in politics, not a (wealthy) gent's club” Retiring MP, 2024²⁸

Other suggestions from retiring MPs included a re-design of Parliament, with more open-plan working and a horse-shoe style debating chamber to foster better working relationships; staff salaries to be classed centrally instead of as an expense; voting to take place at the same time every week; and stopping all drinking before 6pm.

Recommendations

Promoting inclusivity and representation

1. Launch a consultation into how to promote flexible and inclusive working

An MP works an average of 60 hours per week.²⁹ They are frequently absent from their family, including children or anyone in need of care. This presents a considerable barrier to many people with disabilities or caring responsibilities from standing for office.³⁰ Meanwhile, at Westminster, decisions are frequently made which impact precisely these people - decisions about education, childcare, benefits, social care and healthcare, for example.

With half of the respondents in our survey citing the impact on family life, and long working hours - often far from home - as push reasons for stepping down as an MP, it is time to review and modernise the current system. To keep pace with other workplaces, and make Parliament an attractive place for future generations, Parliament should consider a consultation into how flexible working could be implemented, reviewing best practice from other Countries.

Alongside the re-introduction of electronic voting, progress such as increased hybrid working, the feasibility of job shares (which may help in balancing constituency work with national priorities as well as allow for more primary care-givers, who are predominantly women, to become MPs), and also a review of parental leave policies and the current childcare offering. If there is not an adequate child care offering onsite, including a creche, then this directly impacts new mothers in particular, which means Parliament is failing to be gender-sensitive - as suggested in the 2016 report by Prof Sarah Childs 'The Good Parliament Report'.

Remote working was, of course, allowed during the pandemic and Compassion in Politics' polling showed a majority of the public support the continuation of online voting post-pandemic.³⁰

A court case in 2015 determined that parliament had a duty to look into the potential for job-sharing by MPs.³¹ No further detailed study has yet been conducted. In Wales, however, the Parliament is intending to investigate this proposal under their new 2021 Act.³² Job Shares are now a

normal part of nearly every kind of business and appear in nearly all sectors. We urge politics to play catch-up.

2. Bring forward a debate on the working culture in Parliament, to focus on gender and diversity sensitivity, the impact on family life and mental health

2024 saw the largest intake of new MPs on record,³³ and, a record number of women MPs. This is an opportune moment to seek input from this new intake, alongside more seasoned peers, on the working conditions in Parliament and whether it is conducive to a well-functioning democracy. We acknowledge that our dataset is small (despite a higher than average response rate from MPs) and allowing for this debate would also enable a greater volume of views. We would be particularly interested to see if the Women and Equalities Committee, together with the newly established 'Women's Caucus', could put forward a collective response.

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“The Modernisation Committee will support the initiatives being taken forward by the House Authorities, including the work previously undertaken by the Women and Equalities Committee on creating a more ‘gender-sensitive Parliament’, to make the House of Commons an accessible and inclusive place of work”

We are aware that there can be a reluctance on the part of both new and old MPs to be seen to complain about what they believe to be a position of privilege. However, our two organisations see this as a matter of profound importance for the wellbeing of our democracy that needs to be openly debated and prioritised.

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“Unless you are born to wealth and/or power there are few other routes to effective influence.” Retiring MP, 2024

3. Modernise the language used in parliament



“Westminster sticks to arcane rules. You know, when I was deputy chief whip, most MPs have no idea how amendments are tabled and the debates that ensued and all the rest of it. Just the way a piece of legislation goes through is almost impossible to understand. So on a practical level it's very mysterious and arcane.” Ex-Deputy Chief Whip, Ann Milton,³⁴

Much of the language used in Parliament and many of the practices are not easily understood by the public and create the impression of a remote, distant and out-of-touch political elite. A low-to-no-cost, immediate fix could be replacing archaic terms with easily understandable modern language and adding explanatory notes to amendments.

As long ago as 2010,³⁵ the ex-MP Caroline Lucas called for the language that is used in parliament to be reviewed and modernised. As she stated: “A systematic overhaul of Parliamentary language [would] make it self-explanatory, thus demystifying parliamentary processes, and increasing transparency and accountability.”³⁶

4. Increase the agency for MPs, particularly opposition members and backbenchers, by establishing a House Business Committee for clarity on working hours and taking measures to prevent the ‘talking out’ of private members bills

In 2009, the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (the Wright Committee) recommended the establishment of a House Business Committee to “assemble a draft agenda to put to the House in a weekly motion”. The purpose of the Committee would be to ‘assemble a draft agenda to put to the House undertaken by a unified House Business Committee composed of representatives of all parts of the House with a direct interest: backbenchers, Government and Opposition’. This was never implemented. A House Business Committee would ensure that Parliament as a whole, not just Government, is able to set the agenda - giving greater agency to backbenchers and smaller parties- as well as potentially establishing better clarity on working hours which will benefit all members, but particularly those with caring responsibilities.

Improvements to the scheduling of 'House Business' was called for - via "improving the predictability of the Parliamentary Calendar" in both the 2014 Women in Parliament APPG Report and the 2016 Good Parliament Report.

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"This mismatch between what your constituents, who in the end pay your bill and have sent you there to deliver big change, - and yet very often you're not feeling that you're delivering as the Parliamentarian you promised to be. Nor as the Minister. ... Few of us can afford to be publicly honest about the dangers of a depressed and dysfunctional parliament or to risk invoking public vitriol... so you work harder, which leads to a very familiar cycle of exhaustion and depression and for me that led to total physical burnout and breakdown". Quote from Anonymous Cabinet Minister in BBC Radio 4 Documentary 'Broken Politics, Broken Politicians'

It's estimated that only 5% of backbench legislation has any realistic prospect of becoming law. This leads to frustration amongst voters who wonder why their MP is unable to make good the promises of their election campaign and a feeling of impotency amongst MPs themselves.³⁷

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"It's very hard to demonstrate to the people who voted for you that you're doing what you said you would do, adding value to your communities. There's an expectation that local politicians can do all sorts of things that they have absolutely no power or influence over andit puts being in the spotlight harder than ever Lee Waters. Former Welsh Deputy Minister for Climate Change 2021 to 2024.³⁸

We suggest that the Government needs to loosen control of the parliamentary timetable to enable all MPs to better contribute. In Scotland and Wales Committees can now initiate legislation ³⁹ ⁴⁰

Another immediate first step to improving the agency of backbenchers would be to prevent the 'talking out' of bills which makes a mockery of their efforts and the time members spend attending debates.

'Reform of the timing of PMBs (private members bills) is needed, with consideration given to timetabling them earlier in the week, but the act of talking out a Bill must also be addressed. It is an insult to other Members who want to seriously debate the Bill, to the Speaker and most importantly to the electorate, who do not want to pay to run a debating Chamber that is being mocked by its participants.' - Caroline Lucas, The Case for Parliamentary Reform - 2010 ⁴¹

Encourage best working practices

5. Establish an independent Human Resources (HR) function



"Parliament works on a system of patronage, favouritism and "old boys' networks" which attracts people who think they have the right to mistreat others; it also makes it much harder for victims to come forward and often means the victims are further victimised afterwards. Things have changed in the last few years but the environment can still be utterly toxic." Retiring MP, 2024 ⁴²

We recommend that a modern HR system be created to oversee the employment of MPs' staff following the model of the Parliament Workplace Support Service set up by the Australian Parliament in 2023. As previous investigations have pointed out, the system for employing members' staff essentially leads to the creation of 650 small, independent businesses. ⁴³ ⁴⁴ MPs do not receive any management training and the HR complaints service is, according to our own research, not considered as effective as it should be in preventing an MP from abusing their position of power over staff members or other MPs. An independent HR function could also own and uphold the final recommendation of the Kigali Declaration - which states that there should be stringent policies with the objective of zero

tolerance of violence against women, sexual harassment and bullying in parliament. Not only that, but failing to have an independent HR service also means that MPs end up managing aspects of recruitment, interviews, and work plans in addition to the hours spent in Parliament and their constituency. For the benefit of both MPs and their staff, Parliament should introduce an independent HR function. One MP we surveyed requested “A trusted place outside the whips system to raise issues such as bullying”.

In 2022, a report by the CIPD,⁴⁵ the professional body for HR and people development, and Compassion in Politics, entitled ‘Political Working Lives’ further reinforced the case for an independent HR function. The report contained the results of a survey of MPs’ staff (to which 297 had replied) and was supported by the Speaker of the House. Recommendations based on the report were submitted to the Speaker’s Conference in 2022.⁴⁶ It found, inter alia, that:

- 33% have experienced conflict at work in the last 12 months: Of those, 22% said they had been undermined or humiliated. 10% said they had been verbally assaulted.
- 5% say they have been discriminated against.
- Instances of sexual harassment were reported and one case of sexual assault.
- 65% of incidents have gone unresolved.

Party feuding

- 71% say MPs are suspicious of MPs in parties other than their own.
- 51% say there is no respect between MPs of different parties.

Support

- 50% said the independent complaints process was not helpful.



“We regularly see bullying and abuse normalised in the Chamber, which is televised, so one can only imagine how MPs misuse their power when not being filmed. Such behaviour would be unlikely to be tolerated in ANY other sector”.
Retiring MP, 2024⁴⁷

6. Promote constructive, respectful debate



“Behaviour in the actual chamber is all you need to witness, more a pantomime than a serious debating chamber particularly at PMQs” Retired MP 2024⁴⁸

The language in the Chamber should be that expected in any other place of work. Parliament should set the tone for workplace interactions and be held to the highest standards, not only in integrity, but in behaviour. The culture of Prime Minister's Questions, in particular, is often akin to the behaviour one might expect in a school playground with booing, jeering, and intimidating behaviour. This undermines the authority of our elected representatives, not to mention potentially deterring engagement by anyone put off by such antics. The behaviour and language also provides a misleading impression of the working practices and tone of much else that happens in the house, most notably the cross-party work of Select Committees.



“We're not in a good place. I mean, if people want drama, there's loads of things on the telly. I think politics shouldn't be about creating, you know, entertainment. It should be about getting the serious business of running the country and looking after people and helping people. If you want to, you know, watch a show with a bit of excitement, a few fireworks. There's plenty on Netflix and elsewhere”.
Kim Leadbeater MP⁴⁹

A first and totemic step would be to ban booing and jeering in the Commons. Polling by Opinium for Compassion in Politics shows that more than half (51%) agree with this, with just 20% thinking that this style of debate is an important tradition.⁵⁰ This style of communication should be replaced with a functional and professional method of oral questions which inspires respect for the political profession and also results in real, rather than performative, accountability. More radical suggestions, beyond

the increase in civility and respectability needed, are described in the Good Parliament Report, 2016.



“Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) is frequently regarded as the epitome of the masculinised style of the House of Commons – ‘willy-jousting’ par excellence: ‘feisty’, ‘raucous’, ‘gladiatorial’ and ‘rowdy’. Favourably disposed MPs will tell you that the ‘theatre’ that is PMQs is integral to British parliamentary politics. ‘It would be unrealistic to expect that, having corralled 500 people of deeply held and opposing views in a small room, contentious assertions will be heard in reverent silence; they won’t. MPs will tell you that each party wills – and requires – their leader to perform. That the public ‘love’ the spectacle. The media’s interest represents – if not constitutes – PMQs as the most important political moment of the week at Westminster. Viewing figures would concur.”
- Good Parliament Report, 2016

Similarly, with the nature of public debate outside Parliament becoming increasingly toxic and dangerous, this provides a clear opportunity for the UK’s leaders to model a more respectful, civil and professional approach. The irony being, of course, that the majority of Commons business is conducted in a far more collaborative and professional manner than the public perceives.

There is also a growing body of psychological evidence relating to the negative impact that conflict based work environments have on the executive functioning of the brain. When triggered into a ‘fight or flight’ state the brain tends towards rigidity and binary/black and white thinking. For sound evolutionary reasons once the ‘threat’ response is triggered we are biologically programmed to focus on ‘survival’ and our capacity for skills including collaboration, compromise and nuanced thinking becomes limited. As does the capacity to admit to doubt or mistakes, everything must be defended. Thus, if we want politicians to function at their cognitive best, creating a psychologically safe work environment is key.

As the globally renowned clinical psychologist, Professor Paul Gilbert OBE, explains:

“ An absence of psychological safety in the political space sets our threat systems to be overly responsive and sensitive to threat, putting politicians into defensive-protective states of mind. The states are known to have physiological patterns that have negative impacts on physical and mental health. In addition, they tend to impair the frontal cortex that in turn can impair analytic thought, decision-making and cognitive flexibility. These have a negative impact on the ability to collaborate and engage⁵² in nuanced thinking. In contrast, as people begin to feel safe and more supported in their environments a different physiological pattern emerges which facilitates the functioning of the frontal cortex, supports openness, creative thinking and courageous action. It is essential therefore that an understanding of how different contexts can create quite different brain states which impact decision making and relationship formation is embedded in the political space.

7. Return to electronic voting

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150 years after a Liberal government recognised the need to allow the public to vote in private, that same right has still not been extended to Members of Parliament. We argue that, in order to avoid the continuance of intimidation of MPs to vote a certain way, a system for electronic voting should be introduced to the Commons - much as it has been for nearly all voting chambers across the country.

Electronic voting was used during the Covid-19 Lockdowns and is used in other elected chambers across the Country. This has been proven to work effectively and would make parliament a more inclusive and pluralistic environment by helping MPs to choose how they vote because of their conscience rather than because of any outside intimidation.

As the then MP, Caroline Lucas, argued in a report on the Reform of Parliament back in 2010:

“The introduction of electronic voting, which it is estimated could save 1.5 hours or more of MPs’ time a week. This time costs over £30,000 in salary costs per week and could be put to far better use. Put another way, it takes about 15 minutes per vote and in the last Parliament there were over 1200 votes , meaning an MP with an 85 per cent voting record would have spent over 250 hours just queuing up to vote.” ⁵⁵

Allowing for inflation, those costs in 2024 stand at £45,000 per week. Electronic voting also reduces the time that voting, especially in its current archaic form, takes. Thus, electronic voting will also enable more votes to take place.

Cultures of Integrity

8. Launch a Consultation on the whipping system

In the last months of the previous government, MPs like William Wragg spoke out against the bullying behaviour of their own Whips. Such accusations have not come in isolation. There have been frequent reports of some Whips abusing their powers.⁵⁶ Many of the techniques that are purportedly used by whips to ensure party loyalty would not be seen as acceptable in other work settings and should not be acceptable in the Commons.

“The whipping system can be very damaging. Traditionally, you know, the whips office would withdraw funding from an MP’s constituency. They might contact their political party locally. ..their association chairman, all these things. Absolutely it has got to change. Coercion, control, all those things, in my view, have no place in a modern government. ” Ann Milton - Ex-Deputy Chief Government Whip ⁵⁷

This is problematic for many reasons. The behaviour itself, of course, is wrong and should have no place in any workplace. But, just as concerning, is what its continuation says about the orientation of our politics. A system in which MPs are not allowed to vote with their conscience - and can be severely reprimanded for any attempt to do so - quashes independent thought, promotes moral injury, and undermines personal ethics and good behaviour.

As an interim measure, we would encourage fewer votes with a 3-line whip and a significant increase in ‘free’ votes/votes of conscience.

While we appreciate the need for parties to organise their members, the whipping system in name and practice should be reviewed with a view to modernising it. Polling by Opinion for Compassion in Politics in April 2022 found that only 11% of the public supported the whipping system. While it is, of course, for MPs themselves to make these decisions, we suggest it be replaced by a system⁵⁸ which more carefully balances collective

responsibility and party strategy with an individual's own conscience and commitment to representing the interests of those who have elected them.

9. Introduce a law to promote honesty and transparency



"Members across the House will know that the events of recent years and the misconduct of individual members has eroded public trust and confidence in this institution. It is incumbent on all of us to embody the high standards that the public expect of us and we must all act to change and improve the reputation of this place." - Memorandum to the Modernisation Committee

A democracy is built on honesty and transparency. Without these, the public lose faith and at best withdraw and at worst seek other, non-democratic means of political expression. This has been the trend in British politics. The "Expenses Scandal", the "Partygate" story, the inquiry into Covid-19 contracts, and the seeming increase of lies and misrepresentation in the Chamber and beyond, suggest that the seal on dishonesty has been broken and dishonest behaviour is now seen as permissible. Further, the mechanisms that do exist have not proved adequate in either changing this behaviour or in providing sanctions sufficient to restore voter trust, with just 9% of voters saying they trust what politicians say.

If we are to restore public trust, and thus strengthen the esteem in which elected officials are held, more action is needed and Compassion in Politics has drafted a bill that we believe will address this issue.

In July of 2024 the Welsh Senedd committed to introducing legislation⁵⁹ within the current parliament that would see politicians and candidates disqualified for deliberate factual misrepresentation without lawful excuse such as national security interests. As with its legislation for Future Generations, Wales has put itself at the forefront of moves to reform political practices and accountabilities. The introduction of the duty of candour on public servants through the Hillsborough Law means that

without action, public servants will be under a legal obligation to tell the truth while their political masters are not. We would like to see similar legislation adopted by Westminster.

There is huge public support for this measure. It is easily understood and would provide a highly visible and tangible action to telegraph the reset that is so badly needed. Polling done by Opinion for Compassion in Politics shows that 72% of the public would support a law to prevent deliberate factual misrepresentation by politicians.⁶ And a petition launched on Change.org gathered over 200,000 signatures for such a measure. The public understands that the courts regularly adjudicate on matters of misrepresentation in other areas of life and do not see why the same laws cannot be applied to politicians who arguably have an even greater moral duty to speak with honesty and integrity.

10. Put the Members' and Ministerial Code on a Statutory Footing

The MPs' code of conduct is not statutory, the Ministers' code is determined by the Prime Minister, creating uncertainty as well as the impression that politicians are able to mark their own homework. . We recommend, along with a number of other organisations including the Institution for Government, that the members' code, and the Nolan Principles it contains, should be put on a statutory footing so that it can be properly and independently enforced. The same must be applied to the Ministers' code.

This will not only contribute to improving public confidence in politicians, it will also help to create a more cooperative environment. Members of any community are more likely to act altruistically when the rules are clear and widely adhered to. The only way for that to be guaranteed is by publishing the rules and giving independent parties clear powers to enforce them.

Conclusion

The responses to our survey presented a complex message. Whilst MPs mainly felt that serving their country and constituency in this role was a privilege, an honour even, and they enjoyed the opportunity to 'make a difference'; the demands of the role, and the culture in Parliament, for some, made it untenable.

Most MPs said that they would recommend the role of MP, but 'with caveats' that included, "It is still important that we have representation from all sectors of the community but I feel obliged to warn them of the reality of what to expect, especially the impact on their family" and "Some parts of the job are extremely rewarding, some are needlessly stressful and some are an embarrassment in a so-called liberal democracy."

The broad picture was that reforms and improvements had been made in Parliament, and that was welcome, but not enough to fully address some of the entrenched cultural practices and norms which make Parliament, for many, dysfunctional. For some, working as an MP in Parliament has been extremely detrimental to their mental health and family life. And these are the people who have 'made it through' all of the hurdles that it takes to get selected by their Party and elected by the electorate.

To inspire the confidence of voters and to make Parliament a place where future generations of women and men, from all backgrounds, can thrive - and fulfil their roles to their best of their potential without suffering deleterious effects on their mental health and family life - it is time to truly modernise.

Although there has been progress, there is much more yet needed to make the 'Mother of Parliaments' the best it can be for its members and for the public they serve. We hope that this report and recommendations can positively influence that. We are thankful to the many people, both past and present, who have already done so much to help with the process of reform and are hopeful that this momentum will continue.

Actions

We understand that the Modernisation Committee will be seeking solutions that can be implemented both in the near, medium and long-term. In this report we have deliberately left aside issues of constitutional reform to focus on actions that can be taken in a shorter time frame. There is a catalytic benefit that can come from making immediate headway and showing a direction of travel. We commend actions that have already taken place, both prior to the Committee (such as the implementation of maternity leave for Ministers and the Independent Complaints and Grievances Scheme) and also in the short time that the Committee has been active - such as the cessation of consultant jobs for MPs. To acknowledge the speed with which we assume the Committee will continue to act, we have broken down our recommendations listed above into an “action plan” that we would suggest can be implemented within the lifetime of this Parliament.

This Parliament, with its clear intent to clean up politics and a record intake of new Members, has an unrivalled opportunity to reset politics for the good of both politicians and citizens. At a moment when, across the world, democracy is under threat, the stakes could not be higher to ensure that Parliament is fit for whatever challenges lie ahead.

Immediate steps:

- Ban booing and jeering in parliamentary debates and establish a more respectful, constructive and efficient PMQs.
- Put the Members and Ministerial Codes on a statutory footing.
- Establish a new requirement for honesty in politics, enforced by law.
- Introduce electronic voting.
- End ‘talking out’ of Private Members Bills.
- Increase in free votes

Conduct time limited consultation with goal of implementing recommendations by 2028:

- Job Shares hybrid working and improved childcare for MPs.
- House Business Committee.
- The Whipping system.
- A modern, independent HR function.
- Modernising language and practices.



*“Every modernising measure has been resisted very strongly by people who've been MPs a long time and often the Whips offices, without a doubt. When the speaker of the House of Commons said men could take their ties off, you'd have thought that the world had fallen in to be absolutely honest, and maternity leave, paternity leave, all those things, the House of Commons has been late in coming to these things. But absolutely, it has got to change. Because what we're looking at is not about individual political parties, it's not even about the government of the country. It's about democracy.” Ex-Deputy Chief Whip,
Ann Milton*

Footnotes

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