

Note from Dame Laura Cox ahead of the debate on 23 June 2020

In February this year the Commission launched a consultation on their preferred option for implementing the third of my main recommendations, namely that there should be an entirely independent process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment against Members of Parliament, in which Members of Parliament play no part.

The second question raised in this consultation sought views on what should happen in those most serious cases where, after a rigorous and independent investigation by the expert panel and a decision as to the appropriate sanction, the House is then asked formally to implement a sanction of suspension or expulsion. In particular, responses were sought as to whether that matter should be decided without debate, and I understand that the overwhelming majority of responses to the consultation expressed the view that there should in those circumstances be no debate.

The Commission has now asked the House to consider whether or not there should be a time-limited debate led by a member of the Commission in such cases, and I believe the House will be considering this question next Tuesday.

I am writing now because I think it right that everyone involved should be aware of the very serious concerns that have been expressed to me in writing in recent days, in respect of the possibility of a debate in the House as regards individual cases in such circumstances. As may readily be imagined, these concerns raise issues of independence, fairness and justice and express genuinely held fears that a debate is likely to result in a complainant's confidentiality being compromised. They refer in addition to the chilling effect that this will undoubtedly have on complainants reporting cases of harassment or bullying, when encouraging complainants to come forward is exactly what the new Scheme seeks to achieve.

Almost two years have now passed since I laid my report before the House at the conclusion of my Inquiry. Much has been done and is still being done to implement my recommendations, all of which were accepted, and this is greatly to be welcomed. However, the nature of the communications I have received in respect of this matter indicate to me the high level of concern and distrust still in existence among the House staff. Support for the wholly independent process about to be established has been widespread, and its creation and implementation will do much to rebuild that trust and restore confidence. I write at this point simply to raise awareness of the concerns being expressed and because I am anxious to avoid the occurrence of anything that could undermine either the trust of the staff or the reputation of the House.

Dame Laura Cox