



Office of the Leader  
of the House of Commons

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Our Ref: AL/MP545

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Dear Charles

Thank you for your Committee's report on proxy voting and parental absence. I was pleased that you were able to make such swift progress following my letter suggesting that the Committee should consider this matter and in responding to the resolution of the House of 1 February. I am grateful to the Committee for providing considered recommendations on how proxy voting could be implemented for parental leave.

As you know, ahead of responding to the recommendations in your report I was keen to hear views from across the House. I was therefore very disappointed that the debate of 5 July was unable to go ahead due to important and unforeseeable circumstances. As I said then, my approach in that debate would have been to ask Members open questions about how they believe parental leave could best be handled, whether there are alternatives to proxy voting and, indeed, whether there might be unintended consequences of any such change.

The integrity of the voting system in the House of Commons must be above reproach. Votes take place on a variety of important issues that impact people both in the UK and around the world. Therefore any changes to the voting procedure need to be taken forward carefully and with proper consideration. I am very grateful for the Committee's work and recommendations but I believe that there are some outstanding issues that need to be addressed before such a substantial change could be considered.

The report did not offer any view on the merits of proxy voting versus any other system of facilitating parental leave. In the evidence that the Committee gathered for the report, there have been suggestions about other mechanisms such as formalised pairing which may be worth further consideration. This is not a criticism of the Committee, whose inquiry was based on the specific resolution of the House on 1 February.

The report also poses a question as to which types of business proxy voting should be used for. It also suggests that there may be some circumstances in which a proxy vote ought not to be used. Leaving this to the discretion of Members may be the subject of unwanted criticism which is what introducing new procedures for parental leave is trying to protect against.

The debate on 1 February was clear that proxy voting should only be available to Members who are on parental leave. However, I am aware that a number of Members have questioned whether this should be extended further, such as for long-term illness, those who have suffered a bereavement, or other unforeseen circumstances. Such Members may feel disproportionately impacted when they too need time away from the House. This, in turn, could lead to an increasingly substantial use of proxy voting, which could undermine the validity of the important debates that take place in Parliament.

In addition, another potential unintended consequence could be that Members who choose not to take up proxy voting, but choose to take up pairing, could be criticised for this choice, simply by their absence from division lists. We already know that many women on maternity leave face unfair criticism regarding their voting record - any procedural change must not compound this.

I do think it is important that we continue to consider these and other issues holistically to make sure that the House is fully aware of all the implications of any potential changes. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions or issues you would like to discuss.

*Best  
Andrea*

**RT HON ANDREA LEADSOM MP  
LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS**

Charles Walker MP  
Chair, Procedure Committee  
House of Commons