



Office of the Leader  
of the House of Commons

Our Ref: MP640344

30 November 2017

*Dear Charles*

### **Proxy voting and Baby Leave for Members of Parliament**

I am writing to you regarding the issue of baby leave for Members of Parliament, which as you may know has become increasingly prominent in recent weeks. Discussions have centred around two issues; the need for MPs to be able to take maternity, paternity or adoption leave and to have their vote accommodated for in the Commons during any such absence.

As you may know, the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, which is made up of cross-party MPs and is chaired by the Speaker, has agreed that the solution to this issue would be to provide Baby Leave for MPs and adequate representation of their constituents in Parliament (proxy votes), through a resolution of the House.

I am interested in the principle of such changes as I have been a champion of early years attachment for many years. I passionately believe that the bond created between parent and child in the first few months of life has a lasting effect and impact. I also strongly support mitigating any barriers that may discourage women from pursuing a parliamentary career.

I recognise however that consideration needs to be given to the possible consequences of such changes, which could raise a number of questions from the public about the duties of Members of Parliament and the rules by which they are regulated. Members of Parliament are appointed representatives of their constituencies and are not regulated by the same employment rules that apply to members of the public. Introducing baby leave might suggest that MPs should be considered to be employees, which could have wider implications.

One suggestion is that of a resolution of the House which would allow an MP to appoint a proxy voter if they wished to take leave following the birth or adoption of their child. The introduction of proxy voting would mark a departure from conventional voting practices in the House in a number of ways. For example when

Members vote in a division, it is expected that they do so having been on the Estate during the preceding debate. Were proxy voting introduced, Members could potentially miss important exchanges in the Chamber which might have influenced their vote.

It is also important to note that Members of Parliament are elected by their constituencies as individuals, and therefore it is implied that their votes would not be transferred to another MP. Appointing a proxy voter could be perceived as reducing personal accountability.

A number of alternative suggestions have been made, aimed at addressing the needs of new parents undertaking the duties of an MP while also making sure that constituents have adequate representation in Parliament. One of these is that all political parties represented in the House sign a memorandum of understanding, agreeing to the same terms which would allow their MPs to take parental leave and to formalise "pairing" voting arrangements across parties.

While many Members of Parliament support the principle of baby leave, I believe that any decision should be based on a sound argument. I would therefore very much welcome the views of your Committee on this matter, should it be an issue your Members wish to explore.

I am happy to provide any further information or to meet the Committee informally and in private to discuss further, if that would be helpful.

I am sending copies of this letter to Mr Speaker, the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee and the Minister for Women and Equalities.



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

Charles Walker MP  
Chair of the Procedure Committee