

Speech: Leader of the Commons addresses cross party conference on violence against women in politics

'Deeds, not words'.

That, as you all know, was the motto of the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst.

In 2018, these remain symbolic words for us all, as the UK celebrates 100 years since the first women were able to vote.

A century later, and the topic of this conference is a stark reminder that whilst we have achieved so much, we still have a long way to go in the fight for equality.

I'd like to pay tribute to the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, who for over 25 years now, have shared the UK's expertise in those two vital institutions of democracy – political parties and parliaments.

The Foundation has played a vital role in promoting women's rights around the world through the promotion of democracy.

From the Coalition of Women MPs from Arab Countries Combating Violence Against Women to the Women's Parliament in Uganda and the support for women candidates in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Foundation has achieved so much.

And that phrase – deeds, not words – resonate with us all to this day – reminding us that for everything we say, it is ultimately what we do that counts.

So I hope this conference has motivated everyone to go back and take action in their jobs, and in their communities – in whichever way they can –

To ensure we can meet the 21st century challenges to gender equality.

My role as leader

Now, many of the steps we can take as parliamentarians and as parties are closely related to my own work as Leader of the House of Commons in the UK.

The role of the Leader is unique, and I wear two 'hats' on a daily basis.

My first 'hat' is as a representative of the Government in Parliament.

It is my responsibility to oversee the Government's legislative agenda – which, as we prepare to leave the European Union, is a particularly significant and challenging task.

My second 'hat' is as a representative of Parliament in Government.

That means ensuring that Parliament strikes the right balance between giving the opposition, and backbenchers, the chance to conduct robust, effective scrutiny of the executive, whilst also ensuring the Government has the opportunity to deliver its manifesto.

In practice that means encouraging ministers to engage with Parliament in a responsive and consultative fashion.

Steps have been taken over the decades to make Parliament a more accessible place for women and families – including changes to the sitting hours, and even an on-site creche –

But we also owe a great deal to fantastic candidacy campaigns such as Women2Win – a Conservative group which helps identify women to stand as MPs. I know other parties have similar initiatives.

Even now though, as Leader of the Commons in 2018, there are still practical challenges for women in politics such as formal baby leave for new mothers.

A number of cross-party MPs have been looking at how we can make the system of baby leave more effective for all parents in parliament.

And I am pleased that the Procedure Committee are now looking closely at the options and solutions available.

Sexual harassment

In my role, I have taken on an important additional responsibility in recent months, which I would like to tell you about in more detail.

In the late autumn of last year there was widespread shock as allegations emerged of sexual harassment and bullying in Westminster.

Whilst this is clearly a problem that affects many in parliament, a majority of the complainants are women.

A fundamental part of the challenge was that it was felt existing procedures for dealing with problems like this are just not good enough.

That was leading some to feel they had no option but to go to the press.

Others were deterred from escalating their cases precisely because of the risk that they would find themselves on the front pages of national newspapers –

so their solution was to deal with the unhappiness by resigning.

The Prime Minister moved quickly to bring all the political parties in Parliament together to address this problem.

She asked me to chair a cross-party working group across both the House of Commons and the House of Lords which aimed to establish a new independent process in which complainants could place their confidence.

Our proposals have been approved by both Houses – and they include establishing:

- a behaviour code that will cover all those working in or visiting Parliament;
- two separate processes to deal with cases of bullying and of sexual harassment – with the appropriate support provided for each;
- a review of the sanctions available to the the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards – who deals specifically with complaints against Members of Parliament and Members of the House of Lords;
- and the right to confidentiality and representation for all involved.

My ambition throughout this whole process has been to bring about a fundamental change to the culture of Westminster – so that we can make this one of the best parliaments in the world in which to work.

Staff and parliamentarians alike deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

And our work to achieve that will not stop there.

Report on violence against women in politics: global perspectives of a global issue

Harassment in workplaces like Westminster, is of course just one of the contributing factors to a world where women and girls experience violence on daily basis, and it came as no surprise that in a survey of female parliamentarians across 39 different countries, 44% of women have received death threats or threats of rape, assault and of abduction.

And it saddens me that I, and far too many of my colleagues, are included in these statistics.

A woman in politics should not have to pay this price.

From trolling and the echo-chamber of social media – through to the shocking and violent deaths of female politicians, like our own Jo Cox, and just a few days ago, Brazil's Marielle Franco.

Violence against women, particularly during elections, is not confined to one country or society – it is a global problem.

In recent UK elections, we have seen shocking levels of intimidation and abuse – including swastikas graffitied onto campaign posters, as well as vitriolic homophobia, sexism, and antisemitism.

There was even a coffin delivered to the constituency office of one of my colleagues.

In a speech last month, the Prime Minister stated that 'the ideal of a truly plural and open public sphere, where everyone can take part, is in danger'.

We have introduced steps to tackle this:

- The Government will consult on a new electoral offence of intimidating candidates and campaigners;
- The Conservative Party has published its Respect Pledge covering all candidates who are standing for election – and we have encouraged all parties to do the same;
- We are introducing a new Domestic Abuse bill, which will challenge the acceptability of abuse and address the underlying attitudes and norms that perpetuate it;
- We have established a new, Annual Internet Safety Transparency Report, to provide data on offensive content and the response to it;
- We are doing more to protect candidates by changing the requirement to publish a home address on ballot papers.
- In parliament I am working closely with the security teams to upgrade the security of members in their London and constituency homes.

The threats faced by prospective candidates, for either local or national office, are driving potentially brilliant public servants away from politics.

We cannot allow this sort of behaviour to jeopardize our long-standing tradition of free speech and inclusive politics – the hallmarks of what make us a proud democratic

What we need to do domestically and globally within parties and Parliament

So, I am delighted to see such a diverse representation of people here today.

Delegates from different countries, different societies, different histories and different political systems.

Everyone will have a sense of how far their own political culture has come on the journey to a better parliamentary democracy – one that serves the interests of women as well as men – and how much further there is to go.

But we are all bound by the need to tackle violence against all women in politics.

Not only is it unacceptable, and often criminal, and not only does it lead to wider exclusion of women in public life, but it has a detrimental impact on the people we represent.

Women around the world need women in politics.

It gives them a voice, and a seat at the table.

We can make our democracies a welcome place for women by creating the most inclusive environment possible:

- One that educates our young people to respect the views of others, and to value women equally;

- One where our electoral laws are respected and upheld;
- One where women are given equal pay for equal work;
- And one where opportunities for women open up across all sectors – from the engine room to the boardroom.

Whether working in parties or in parliaments, as elected representatives or the officials who support them –

Women make an enormous difference to our democratic life.

That is as true in the United Kingdom as it is in every other country around the world.

So when I look at the recommendations this conference has produced, I see real lessons for the UK –

Particularly in what our political parties can do to stop violence against women.

We've got to stamp out this pervasive culture of bullying and harassment, which so often deters women from working in politics –

And it is my sincere hope that the new independent complaints policy I am implementing in the UK will provide the support, confidentiality, and most importantly the sanctions –

That will fundamentally change our parliamentary culture for the better.

Conclusion

Before I finish, I would like to take a moment to share with you some of the lessons I have learned in the work that I have been doing.

The first is, when women speak out, and say 'there is a problem', the answer is not 'no there isn't.'

Even if we worry about what that answer might mean, the response cannot be to close ranks.

And when women speak out, and say 'these processes aren't working for me', the answer is not 'yes they are'.

Just because things have always been done 'a certain way' does not mean that is 'the right way', particularly as the scale of the problems becomes clear, and the evidence that the responses to it have failed in the past.

All parties have got to recognise that changing the way we respond to bullying, harassment, and sexual violence is not just inevitable, but it is the right thing to do.

These issues transcend politics.

When I became Leader of the House I did not expect my job to become so

focused on tackling the darker side of the culture in parliament, but I think it's important that it has, and I hope the groundbreaking changes we are making will support women working in parliaments in the decades ahead.

This conference holds important lessons for all of us who want to change society for the better.

Your actions, your deeds, will make the world a better place, just like the suffragettes before us, and for that, you should all be immensely proud.

Thank you very much.