

# Speech: Roscoe Lecture Series – Andrea Leadsom

Good evening.

Thirty-four years ago, I started my career in the City.

It was my first job out of University, and I was excited to be in such a buzzing industry.

I still look back at that time with some amazement – it was fast-paced, high-pressured, and a huge opportunity to learn. My time in the dealing room led to a long and rewarding career in banking, and as a young woman, I loved it.

I shrugged off the frequent propositioning, I enjoyed the boozy expense-account lunches, and I was fine with the expectation to work all day and party all night.

I never called out any of the excessive behaviour at the time – it seemed normal, and anyway, not likely to change.

It was only when I was appointed as the youngest female senior executive in a major UK bank that I really experienced entrenched misogyny at first hand.

After a 12-week maternity leave, desperate for more time with my new baby, I was told: “We’ve managed without female senior executives until now, we certainly don’t need part-time ones.”

That was some decades ago – but today we still hear pathetic excuses from FTSE firms in response to the lack of women in boardrooms.

Comments like: ‘All the ‘good’ women have been snapped up.’

Or... ‘Women don’t fit comfortably into the boardroom environment’.

Or... ‘We already have one woman on the board, so it’s someone else’s turn’.

Excuses with no basis in reality!

This time a year ago, all of us, particularly those studying at college or university, working in the television industry, or in politics, had a shocking wake-up call.

How is it that some of the awful behaviour of three decades ago is still being experienced by some women today?

As Leader of the Commons, I have heard time and time again the sort of behaviour that has driven people out of politics.

More often than not, these behaviours are exhibited by those in positions of power.

Worst of all, it has gone unchallenged for years.

And in 2018, I don't need to tell you that's just not good enough.

Now, I may be a politician, and one affiliated to a particular party, but tonight I want to put politics to one side.

This is not about Westminster. This is not about one party or another – or even about one industry or another.

This is about a fairer society and a democracy that everyone can participate in.

The #MeToo revelations reflect a wider malady – that our democracy is falling behind the public's expectations.

We've seen a coarsening of public debate – so severe that some politicians and journalists have had to use police escorts, or take their aggressors to court to make them stop.

Where anti-Semitism and Islamophobia have reared their ugly heads.

As well as the direct victims of such abhorrent abuse and hatred, this has broader, and serious consequences, for public life, as well as for the victims.

It narrows the field of talent and reduces the number of people willing to put themselves forward to stand up for what they believe in.

It's healthy to have political differences.

What's not right is for those differences to stifle a healthy democracy – where everyone's voice is heard and everyone's hand is counted.

But change won't happen if we are silent about the damage being inflicted on it.

So what I want to set out to you today is my ambition to show how Parliament can harness the #MeToo wake-up call by showing true leadership, ensuring that our Parliament aspires to be the best, and leading the way for other democracies, so we are a role model for our society and in the world.

## **VOTE 100**

Of course, this year commemorates an important anniversary for those who did speak out – the women who won some of us the right to vote and the right to stand as MPs.

Their campaign was sparked by the change they wanted to see, and paved the way for the now 489 women who have been elected ever to the UK Parliament.

Just to put that in context, there are 441 men in Parliament just today.

It's been fantastic to see how positively everyone has embraced the Vote100 events, marking this centenary year of women's suffrage.

Celebrating the suffragettes and suffragists like Emmeline Pankhurst and Millicent Fawcett. The first woman MP to take her seat in the Commons, Nancy Astor. And even the many men of the period who supported giving women the vote, men like David Lloyd George and George Lansbury.

And I'm not forgetting about Liverpool's own Eleanor Rathbone, either – a brave campaigner for women's suffrage who was a member of the Liverpool Women's Suffrage Society from 1897 onwards.

Eleanor Rathbone recognised that our democracy suffered for its lack of representation.

As an MP from 1929, she campaigned on issues as diverse as support for the armed forces to, amazingly for that time, preventing female genital mutilation in Kenya.

Fearless and trailblazing – she set an example that so many female activists and politicians aspire to.

Today our head of state is a woman. Our Prime Minister is a woman. The head of the Metropolitan Police is a woman.

In Parliament, the Leaders of the Houses of Commons and Lords are women. And Black Rod, one of the oldest Parliamentary roles, is a woman for the first time in its 650-year history. Talk about progress!

But I'm also struck by the irony that, even as we celebrate the progress we have made, we seem to have taken a big step backwards.

## **ICGS**

Women may have greater representation than ever before, but it's clear that abuse of power, inequality and a culture of deference is still embedded in our society.

It remains entrenched in Hollywood, in higher education, in charities and in business.

And the world of politics has proved no better – yet surely we should be leading the way in finding the solution, rather than lagging behind and being part of the problem.

The genuinely shocking allegations that emerged from Westminster last year not only unearthed this culture, but threw it into the spotlight, challenging us to address it.

Some very brave people stepped forward and forced everyone to listen, and take notice.

It was clear action was needed – not least because as Leader of the House I

was personally approached by a number of those people who told me about their harrowing experiences.

Now quite often, when a scandal like this breaks, there's a flurry of activity as everyone desperately tries to show that they mean business.

But also quite often, when the scandal dies down and everyone has become consumed with the next problem, it all goes back to how it was before.

That would have been unthinkable.

So last November, the Prime Minister convened a meeting of all party leaders at Westminster.

She tasked me with setting up a working group to take the steps needed to instigate change.

Chairing the working group was not always easy – it won't surprise you to learn that getting seven different political parties together can be tricky, especially when their day job is to challenge each other.

But if there was one thing we had in common, it was a determination to be the change we wanted to see.

And so I'd like to pay tribute to each one of the party representatives, as well as the dedicated members of staff and peers, for what turned into a good example of collaborative working, driven by a shared desire to make a difference.

We took huge amounts of evidence, conducted surveys, heard from past and present members of staff in person and in writing, and spoke to officials, to lawyers, to HR advisers, to Parliamentarians and many more.

Whilst there had been appalling incidences of sexual harassment and even allegations of rape in Parliament, what quickly emerged was a much more widespread problem of bullying and intimidation.

And what we realised needs to change in Westminster is its culture of deference and subservience:

- a culture that makes it easier to remove the complainant rather than address the problem
- a culture in which victims have felt unable to complain for fear of not being believed or being made out to be a troublemaker
- a culture where those who should have taken action instead turned a blind eye

So, over nine months, the working group negotiated conflicting priorities, we navigated complex employment structures, and complicated legal challenges, and many arcane Parliamentary procedures and conventions.

Throughout our work, we came across examples of mistreatment every bit as disturbing and shocking as the cases reported in the press.

There was, quite rightly, close scrutiny of our work. The eyes of the public, of Parliamentarians, and most importantly those who work in Westminster, were on us.

And I understand the scepticism about the level of change this group could bring about.

Depending on who you spoke to, our proposals were:

- either too draconian – or not strict enough
- they were agreed in too much haste – or not fast enough
- or they showed too much respect – or too much contempt

But ultimately, at the heart of our work, was an ambition for a Parliament-wide system that serves all those who work there – to ensure everyone, without fail and at all times, is treated with the respect and dignity they all deserve.

And for all the challenges we encountered, we never wavered from our effort to ultimately achieve that goal.

And so, before summer recess, we succeeded in launching a new Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, called the ICGS, in Parliament.

The ICGS, for the first time, gives all staff in Parliament, regardless of who employs them or where they work, an independent system they can turn to if they have been bullied or abused.

The system is, crucially, confidential.

In all the evidence we took, a key message that came through loud and clear was that victims will not come forward if they fear being identified.

They justifiably fear that they will wake up one morning to find TV crews camped outside their front door, asking them to comment on suggestions that they have made up allegations for party political reasons.

That is today's world, but it's not right and it's not fair.

It is revictimisation – plain and simple – which is why we have placed the complainant at the heart of the process.

By ensuring confidentiality, yes – but also by giving the complaints procedure real teeth.

Where an investigation takes place and a complaint upheld, there is a full range of sanctions – from informal resolution, written apologies and compulsory training – right through to dismissal of staff, expulsion of Peers or recall of MPs.

Since the launch in July, there has been a steady stream of calls to the helplines and a number of formal investigations are now underway.

So is it perfect? Definitely not.

Have we resolved all outstanding issues? No we haven't.

But this is just the beginning of the journey, not the end.

Achieving the culture change we need to see in Parliament will take time.

Being the best and leading the world – as a role model in our society – this is our ambition.

So I am pleased that, in light of these truly disturbing, deep-rooted and intensely damaging revelations, rather than bluster and grandstanding, we have taken tangible action, which represents the first big step towards the intrinsic culture change that we are determined to see.

## **Me Too – continued**

In spite of this work, I know that staff still lack confidence and still feel disillusioned.

Frankly, I can't blame them.

The recent rejection of sanctions against a peer accused of serious serious sexual misconduct, proves that shifts in attitude, and even results, are proving more elusive than we thought.

All year, I've found myself going from Vote100 celebrations to meetings about harassment, and I find myself constantly thinking, 'How can this be the case?' And beyond that, 'What will bring about real change?'

When the public expressed outrage over the President's Club scandal, the Chairman resigned and the charity shut down.

But where does the buck stop in our Parliament, in our political world, in our democracy?

So I have outlined three tests when it comes to judging the success of the new Complaints Scheme:

- Firstly, does it mean that everyone who works here can now expect to be treated with dignity and respect?
- Secondly, has it rebuilt the confidence of those who have suffered in the past?
- Thirdly, do all those who work here now feel they have a proper stake in the decisions that affect them?

I've come to the conclusion that achieving real cultural change runs far deeper than just setting up a complaints process.

If we want our democratic institutions to lead, rather than follow reluctantly, we need to institutionalise changes that can help us become the best in class.

We also need to look at how our democratic debate and our engagement right across our society contribute to us becoming the world-leader that we want to be.

## Democracy across the UK

We've already seen how, during the last 100 years, having a voice in the Commons has helped to transform outcomes for women.

From Eleanor Rathbone, who used her time in the Commons to campaign for cheap milk and better benefits for children of those who found themselves out of work during the Depression – to the first maternity leave legislation, introduced in the 1970s and extended several times since – to equality laws and our current efforts to combat the gender-pay gap. Women's voices have enriched our national life.

We've come a long way in the last 100 years, and so has our democracy.

If you look at the last 100 years in the UK you will see an amazing transformation in the effectiveness of our political system to hear every voice and count every hand.

In his important book *The Life And Death Of Democracy*, John Keane lists many of the ways in which civic engagement has grown – including, to pick a few at random, the development of:

- think-tanks
- human rights organisations
- focus groups
- conflict-of-interest boards
- social forums
- independent public inquiries
- opinion polling

There are many more, but you get the idea!

What this tells us is that there has been an extraordinary proliferation of new ideas for democratic participation.

Taken together, we now have a vibrant political culture which advocates for the interests of every kind of grouping.

And that's not the only way our democracy has improved.

These days, representative politics is about more than just Westminster, as you will know here in Liverpool.

The devolution of significant powers to regions and cities – in Liverpool as in cities like Manchester and Birmingham – has built on existing, local, civic government structures.

It's right that people are given more of a say. And it's right that the government of the day plays its role in supporting Parliament.

Striking the right balance here is a key part of my role as Leader of the House of Commons.

On the one hand, it's so important that the Opposition are able to conduct robust scrutiny of the work of ministers and their departments.

On the other hand, it's also vital that the party that won the general election is able to deliver the promises they made in their manifesto, without being frustrated by smaller parties in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

In our democratic system, the government wields power, but is also accountable.

Citizens engage with Parliament, either directly or through campaign and pressure groups.

Parliament then puts their views to ministers through the work of MPs on select committees, in the Commons chamber or even just in the corridors of Westminster.

The government listens carefully and engages with those views in an open, responsive fashion. Well that's the idea, anyway. It's certainly the approach I encourage!

Our version of representative democracy remains a model of great interest to countries transitioning to democracy around the world.

Earlier this week I spoke to Parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth about our shared interest in democracy. What struck me is that, wherever you are from, everyone recognises that democracy can never be quite perfect. It is always a work in progress.

Acknowledging that, the government plays a stewardship role in sustaining a flourishing democracy, taking the opportunities but also confronting the challenges posed by wider change in our society.

For example, it's right that we make the most of the many opportunities offered by the digital age, which have opened up new ways for people to engage with politics.

The rapid growth of online campaigning... the development of the e-petitions system... the use of social media to directly engage with politicians, cutting out the middle-man. All these changes have one thing in common: helping that model of representative democracy function better by ensuring everyone's views are heard.

Inevitably, though, the changes driving these opportunities also offer challenges.

Social media can have a terrible impact on the mental health of young people.

Individuals and businesses face complex and growing threats to their

cybersecurity.

And online chatter about politics is just as vulnerable.

The proliferation of fake news... the constant abuse from internet trolls... the harmful impact of breaches of data protection laws. These are new challenges that the government must take on as we look to fulfil our responsibility to respect, protect and promote our democracy in the digital age.

It's vital we work to help our democracy adapt to these latest changes:

- so that if you see political content on social media you know where it has come from
- so that it is plain to everyone what spending has taken place, and by whom, on any political campaign
- so that we make clear what standards are acceptable and what are unacceptable for behaviour online
- and so that you can be confident that those who intimidate candidates cannot themselves stand for public office

These are some of the essential steps needed to maintain and protect the space where political debate takes place.

The space in which a constant dialogue can take place between those being governed and those doing the governing.

Over the last century we have made great strides and, as I told Commonwealth Parliamentarians earlier this week, we can be incredibly proud of our Parliamentary democracy and the balance it strikes between power and accountability.

## **Democratising the Commons**

You would expect the home of our democracy to demonstrate the highest standards of accountability in the way it runs itself.

And I certainly see that displayed by the highly competent and professional clerks of the House who provide excellent, impartial advice and support to MPs.

But in the 18 months I have been in this job, it has become apparent to me that – when it comes to the way the House itself runs – there are some serious questions to be answered.

In my view, it is not enough to say we are committed to changing the culture.

It is not enough, even, to have introduced a new complaints procedure.

And it is not enough to make democracy digital.

We also need to fundamentally rethink our own governance structures in the Houses of Parliament – and that's what I want to focus my concluding remarks on.

The recent inquiry into historical allegations of abuse of House staff by Dame Laura Cox highlighted that further action is required.

Dame Laura concluded it was difficult to envisage how the current senior House leadership could deliver the necessary changes or restore the confidence of staff.

The Cox review makes clear the reasons why only profound change will make a difference to the lives of those working in Parliament.

And in my view, the fundamental problem is that, in the Commons, there is authority without accountability... and accountability without authority.

In any institution, these two things have to go hand-in-hand.

The House of Commons Commission provides the board-level oversight of everything from the maintenance of an ancient building to staff pay, and even whether the WiFi is working.

My grave concern is there is a massive disconnect between authority and accountability.

On the one hand you have the Clerk of the House of Commons and the Director General with authority over House management – but no vote at the House Commission.

And on the other hand you have seven MPs on the Commission with voting authority – but who cannot possibly be themselves accountable for the day-to-day running of the House.

The Commission's proceedings are opaque, not only to Members of Parliament, but to the staff the House of Commons Commission is supposed to represent.

So what can we do about this fundamental dislocation?

Well – I believe that if we have learnt anything over the last 100 years at all, we have learnt we have got to continue the democratising trend.

In 2014 the long-serving Labour Member of Parliament Jack Straw conducted a review which brought about much needed change to the governance of the House of Commons Commission.

Now it's right to ask what more must be done so that staff have faith in the place they work.

Firstly, I believe staff need a real say. The culture change in Parliament arguably has the biggest impact on staff – but are their views currently being heard loud and clear?

So I want to consider opening up membership of the Commission to ensure that all staff who work in the House are properly represented. Which leads me to a second possible proposal for reform.

At present, the only people who vote on the Commission are the seven MPs. I believe all members of the Commission should have a say, including the Clerk, the Director General and the external Commissioner – linking authority to accountability in a tangible way.

Thirdly, I think we should give serious thought to changing the way individuals are appointed to the Commission. Why does the Commission appoint when the democratic process is to elect? Those who have relevant skills and experience should be at the table.

One of the most successful reforms that followed the expenses scandal of 2009 was the Wright Committee report that led to the election of MPs to select committees. This has made them so much more able to hold the government to account.

That democratising reform should matter to all of you, because it means your views are being more vigorously communicated through the scrutiny of elected Select Committees.

And fourth, I also believe that we need a Chairman who can ultimately combine the authority and the accountability that should be demonstrated in the governance of the seat of our democracy.

Currently, statute requires that the Chair of the House of Commons Commission is the Speaker of the House. Yet, the Speaker of the House is there to serve the Chamber first and foremost, and to be a figurehead for the broader organisation.

The role of the Speaker is to hold one of the highest Offices in the land, presiding over debates, managing the chamber and ensuring political impartiality.

It is a stretch to imagine that the highest office within the seat of our democracy should also be responsible for determining the opening hours of our cafeterias.

Those who are ultimately accountable for the smooth running of the House are actually the senior officials, such as the Clerk and the Director General, which is why I believe their authority needs to be strengthened.

Those who vote on the Commission should be represent all the people who work in Parliament – authority and accountability must sit together.

We should embrace every opportunity for change if we are to realise our ambition to be a role-model in the world.

This matters to everyone because Westminster, as the place that makes critical decisions that affect all of our lives, needs to be the shining light that promotes democracy, hears every voice, and counts every hand.

And it should matter to everyone because, whatever line of work you're in, you should be able to point to Parliament and say 'they're fixing it, so we should too'.

## Conclusion

So, this evening I'm asking the question of how we can be the best in the world – in fact, how can we inspire the world?

Well, it's all of our responsibility to make sure that the historic struggle for democracy, and the struggle for representation, wasn't in vain.

We've got to keep those principles alive.

And so our challenge is to ensure that the improvements in women's representation over the last 100 years should be reflected in the further action we demand in light of the #MeToo movement.

For #MeToo is bigger than Westminster – it represents the significant moment that our society realised that together, we need to make a real change.

And we can only expect to take the lead, to be the best if we take risks... if we challenge the status quo.

If history has taught us anything, it's that change often feels uncomfortable and sometimes even impossible.

That never stopped the women's suffrage movement and it shouldn't stop us now.

At the highest level of authority – in the heart of our democracy, the place with the highest public expectations – we have got to be the change we all want to see.

We have to make sure everyone who feels marginalised has a voice and a vote.

We have to build an organisation that is based on the best of values, and one that inspires the culture beyond its own doors – in other workplaces, public spaces, and institutions.

There's so much to do in the next 100 years – but change won't happen by itself.