

Speech: Strengthening Our Parliamentary Democracy

I am number 336.

I'm sure you're wondering, 'what on earth does she mean by that?' Well today I am standing here as the 336th woman to become an MP – ever in the UK! Just to put that in perspective, there are 442 male MPs in this Parliament alone.

Now 100 years ago, it wouldn't have been possible for me to be here as Leader of the Commons – but thanks to the sacrifices of the women who came before, we won the right to vote, and eventually, to stand as parliamentary candidates.

The suffragettes and the suffragists made huge sacrifices; women who were imprisoned, women who were humiliated in public and at home, women who endured hunger strikes and women who paid the ultimate price – women like Emily Wilding Davison.

From the first women in the world to get the vote in New Zealand, to those who just pipped us to the post in some states of the US – this was a long, global fight, but it was a fight that changed the world. A century later, we can feel proud with the progress made in the UK as we remember the struggle and the achievements but we are also reminded of how far we have to go.

When we think of democracy, it's easy to think of it as 'just' voting. But it's about so much more than that. Democracy today is a society that hears every voice, considers every view, counts every hand. Democracy is encouraging open dialogue and embracing, rather than recoiling, from our differing views.

So 100 years since some women in the UK got the vote, can we really say our democracy is as equal as those women sought to make it? I think not.

Democracy is not something we can take for granted. There is a growing concern about democratic backsliding in countries right around the world. Wherever you are, whatever your political context, democracy is something that requires nurturing all the time.

In recent years, something in our own politics has shifted. Aggression and intolerance is on the rise, social media presents a very challenging battleground, and as the Prime Minister recognised in her recent speech on standards in public life, public debate is coarsening.

To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson – the 3rd US President – the democracy we get is the democracy we deserve. That means if we collectively fail to tackle discrimination, bullying, and attempted censorship; then we cannot be surprised when the health of our democracy suffers. We must not be complacent.

For in this centenary year, we have to ask ourselves, where will we be in another 100 years? Well, to begin with, in the spirit of the suffrage movement – we must continue the fight to achieve a 50/50 parliament. We still sadly fall far short of that target. Just as importantly, it is to achieve an inter sectional parliament – one that recognises our diversity of race, religion and gender in the UK.

The question is, how do we get there? We cannot assume that we are heading in the right direction, and just wait to see what happens. We will only realise these changes through action.

So this evening, whilst I am very proud of our democracy, I want to talk about three areas that I think we have to look very closely at over the coming years, if we want to have a democracy that works for all:

- first is participation – supporting young people to engage with politics, and making sure everyone uses their voice, and their vote
- second is e-democracy – how can we make sure the digital world is compatible with a fair and open democracy?
- third is securing a parliament fit for the 21st century – a parliament that is the best workplace in the world

Participation

I will come to each of these in turn but I want to start by looking at participation in democracy, and where better than the recent referendums?

The Scottish independence referendum saw an incredible turnout of 84.6% – to be followed by the EU referendum with an impressive 77.2% turnout. These decisions will shape the future of our United Kingdom, and the huge interest they attracted should be celebrated.

Then, the 2017 general election was seen as a game changer for the role of young people in elections. Over a million under-25s made voter registration applications, 34% of the total, in the run-up to the 2017 general election. This helped increase the size of the electoral register to 46.8 million electors – which is a record.

Nevertheless, young people continue to be under-represented in our democratic processes including on the electoral register. YouGov estimate that at the 2017 general election, only 57% of 18 to 19-year-olds voted compared with 84% of those aged 70 and over.

Research by the British Election Study also suggests that the ‘youthquake’ wasn’t as seismic as first reported, putting the turnout figure somewhere in the region of 50%. So whilst youth engagement appears to be at its highest in 25 years, turnout remains comparatively low, especially compared with other

European countries.

Recent research shows that young people in the UK are interested in 'politics', broadly defined, but have turned to alternative forms of democratic engagement, from consumer politics to community campaigns rather than engaging in what might be seen as more 'formal politics'. Evidence suggests this could be due to a lack of knowledge and awareness of how and why young people should participate in our democracy.

Well we must do better. Voting is the ultimate act of protest. By that, I don't mean casting a protest-vote. I mean casting a vote, full-stop. As we have seen in the recent referendums and recent elections, it does matter and it does make a difference. Voting sends a powerful message, it has the ability to change everything and it is entirely yours to cast. As the leading American suffragette Carrie Chapman Catt said in 1920, "the vote is the emblem of your equality."

Those words ring true to this day.

That is why the Government is so committed to building a more inclusive democracy. We recognise every voice matters as an issue of social justice, and are working towards making our elections the most accessible ever by 2022.

So I want to pay tribute to the Minister for the Constitution, Chloe Smith, and her predecessor Chris Skidmore, for their work to:

- tackle democratic engagement by modernising electoral registration
- strengthen the integrity of our electoral system through a series of measures to tackle election fraud
- promote this summer's inaugural National Democracy Week, which will act as a focal point for promoting democratic engagement

I also want to praise Parliament's own efforts to reach out beyond the walls of the Palace of Westminster. I hope you will all get involved in November, when this year's Parliament Week takes place, an annual festival which informs people about Parliament and also empowers them to get involved.

In my own role as Leader of the Commons, I've loved being able to get involved with the UK Youth Parliament and visit a number of schools taking part in Votes for Schools – a great organisation encouraging young people to debate, and voice their opinion.

The 2018 Audit of Political Engagement by the Hansard Society is published on Monday and will show that progress is being made, with a significant improvement over the period of the Audit in the percentage saying they are certain to vote. This headline figure is encouraging but the Audit also shows that underlying issues remain.

Many continue to take a dim view of the efficacy of our political system. In other words, they don't feel if they get involved it will make much of a difference. This is a challenge for all of us and doing more to ensure our public space for debate is as inclusive as possible is a critical first step.

People deserve to feel that their voice will not just be heard but also respected. Creating an equal space for participation and debate falls to all of us, and not just the Government.

Universities are a beacon for discussion and debate and we are lucky that the UK is home to 12 of the world's top 100 universities, including the world's number one and two.

But recently, we have heard worrying reports by online forum the Student Room, that a third of students have experienced racism on campus and a shocking report by the National Union of Students claims that sexual misconduct by university staff is 'rife'.

As institutions that thrive on free speech and inclusion – universities are in many ways, a testing ground for the state of our democracy.

Nobody should be silenced because of their race or gender, and we cannot let it go unchallenged. What becomes acceptable in a liberal environment like our colleges or universities, soon becomes acceptable in wider society. Whilst ensuring they remain bastions for free speech, these institutions must do more to expel all forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, and all religious intolerance, from their campuses because to feel shut out from a lecture, or from a debate is to be shut out from democracy.

Our experiences in education should encourage us to make our voices heard once we have left school – including at the ballot box. What we cannot doubt, however, is the enthusiasm and engagement of young people in political issues and for that we can't ignore the role played by the internet.

E-Democracy

From blogging to campaign videos, the internet has revolutionised the way we interact with politicians and parliament. It has, in many ways, been a force for good. Over half of 12 to 15-year-olds interested in the news get their updates from social media – compared with only 17% who read a newspaper. The web has also made previously opaque processes far more accessible. Take voter registration, or e-petitions; just two examples where digitalisation has made democratic engagement easier and quicker.

In its first year of operation, the current petitions system saw over ten million unique email addresses used to sign petitions in the UK. The topics for petitions are hugely varied – from what should be on the national schools curriculum, through to animal rights issues and foreign policy. All political parties understand the value of social media for communicating to their supporters.

But whilst there is much to embrace, we are in danger of allowing the internet to provide an unregulated free-for-all, with serious consequences for our society, such as the harmful impact of data protection breaches and the ways this erodes trust. The proliferation of 'fake' news, we've even seen a trend of selective reporting on debates in the Commons – like that of animal sentience. Such cases prove that a lie gets halfway around the world

before the truth has a chance to get its boots on. And of course there is the constant abuse from internet trolls. We heard only last week the appalling antisemitic abuse suffered by Jewish colleagues in Parliament, with social media being used as the most common vehicle for spreading that abuse

I am also concerned by websites publishing details of debates and votes that only tell half the story. I know plenty of MPs have been sent abusive emails from their constituents because websites such as They Work For You have reported them as missing a vote. What these websites don't tell you, is whether an MP is away from Parliament because they have just become a parent – or whether they were paired with another MP because they are on important Select Committee business overseas – or even if they are tending to a constituency crisis. These are crucial parts of the puzzle when it comes to the accurate reporting of 'what goes on in Parliament.' It's a slippery slope. Abuse can turn to trolling, and trolling has driven some of my own colleagues offline. In the worst cases, parliamentarians have also been victims of violent crime.

A recent report by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy found that 44% of female parliamentarians from 39 different countries have received death threats or threats of rape, assault or abduction.

The Government's Internet Safety Green Paper, published last October noted:

"There is much anecdotal evidence that online abuse and hate crime can silence the voices of women, BAME, faith, disabled and LGBT communities, who feel that they have to remove themselves from certain platforms and discussions in order to stay safe."

How can this be the case in 21st century Britain?

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has proposed introducing a social media code of practice, transparency reporting and a social media levy. These are all steps that will help to achieve our aim of making Britain the safest place in the world to be online.

The Government's response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life report, which was commissioned by the Prime Minister, outlines a comprehensive set of actions. This includes a review of offensive communications by the Law Commission – making sure that what is illegal offline, is also illegal online.

Of course, equal participation in our democracy is not just a problem for our online spaces. The wave of sexual misconduct allegations, and the 'Me Too' movement, soon reached the door of Parliament. For too long, a culture of bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment has gone unchecked. It is no wonder, that out of fear of being hounded, out of fear of being called a liar, or out of fear of being ignored; victims so often stay silent. That silence erodes the democratic participation of too many people, particularly women and in Westminster, we have so far failed to set the best example.

A Parliament Fit for the 21st Century

What we urgently need is a parliament fit for the 21st century – and following last November's allegations, the Prime Minister acted quickly. She asked me to chair a Working Group to tackle allegations of bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment, and to implement strong procedures to handle complaints and grievances. This was by no means easy. With seven political parties plus staff representatives, there were a huge number of views on how best to achieve our aims.

I was reminded quite regularly, by committed and talented colleagues across the House, that we've tried this before, and it didn't work then, so it won't work now – you all know the score! So it was a groundbreaking moment for Parliament, when the recommendations of the Working Group's report were actually approved by the Commons, the Lords, and the House of Commons Commission. There will now be radical changes that will fundamentally change Parliament for the better.

Work is underway to establish:

- a behaviour code that will cover all those working in or visiting Parliament
- independent services to investigate cases of bullying and of sexual harassment – with the appropriate support provided for each
- a new set of sanctions available to the Parliamentary Commissioners for Standards – who deal with complaints against MPs and Peers
- vitally, confidentiality that will give victims the courage to come forward

It is my hope that by creating an independent complaints process, with proper sanctions, this will not only provide the much-needed support to those who have been treated badly but will also help create the culture change we want to see, where everyone working in or visiting Parliament is treated with dignity and respect.

Since publication of the report, we have heard further, worrying allegations about bullying of House staff by MPs. And it has become clear that the Respect policy that was meant to protect staff of the House of Commons, is just not working for them.

So I was pleased that my recommendation to the House Commission for an independent inquiry into the bullying of House staff was approved and that it is now being taken forward under the independent chairmanship of Dame Laura Cox QC.

There can be no hiding places, or cover-ups, for anyone abusing their power. It is the dream job of so many to work in Parliament and in politics – helping to make our world a better place. We owe it to them, and to the next generation of politicians, staffers and campaigners, to make this a great place to work. As I've said many times, it is a right not a privilege, to be treated with respect and I'm committed to making our Parliament a fair and safe place for everyone.

Conclusion

Before I finish, I want to return to the question I posed at the start. Is our democracy as equal as the suffrage movement sought to make it? Their achievement was the moment when some women were given the vote, paving the way for universal suffrage in the following decade.

The franchise is now a fundamental part of our democracy. It is vital. But as I hope I have made clear this evening, democracy is about more than just voting.

A democracy that works for all is one where:

- each voter is confident to express themselves in public debate
- each voter is confident their views will be represented without fear or favour in Parliament by their local MP –
- each voter believes they will not be subject to abuse or intimidation

It's clear that the UK has a lot to do to safeguard our democracy from what are new, emerging, and uncharted threats.

That's why I conclude where I started, with those who refused to accept the political status quo, 100 years ago. I am inspired by the suffragists and their determination to achieve change. We should be energised by their example of seeking the political culture we want to see, not the one we have today. We should never forget how lucky we are to live in a country that gives us a vote and we must do everything we can to protect that including making equality itself, an emblem of our democracy.

Thank you.