Written submission from Bumps and the Boardroom (WHC0070)

1. What should the Government, political parties, the House of Commons and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority be doing now to ensure better female representation in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond?

2. What are the political parties doing to ensure that female representation will increase at the next general election given the impact that the 2018 Boundary Commission Review could have.

3. What further changes are needed to improve retention of women MPs?

As a Maternity Coach, Consultant, Therapist and Founder of Bumps and the Boardroom with over 14 years experience working and connecting with thousands of career focused, ambitious women transitioning through pregnancy into motherhood and back to the workplace, I have some insights and recommendations I would like to share – as an overall suggestion piece, rather than as individual answers to the above 3 questions.

I believe in order to ensure that female representation will increase at the next general election, the Government, political parties, the House of Commons and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority all need to follow agreed best practice guidelines for managing maternity differently. The House needs to lead and develop a family friendly environment, which is more representative of the country at large.

- Increasing gender diversity and inclusion within the House by asking all political parties to address their day-to-day working policies and procedures as standard and looking at whether they are fit for purpose in 21st century Britain or whether they need to be reviewed and altered is the first step.

- A conscious and unbiased look at the traditions of the House overall to see how far they penalize women, would be the next.

- Encouraging and supporting parents – not just mothers, to participate in caring for their children would significantly help women address the imbalance we currently see in all areas of Parliament.

I am offering guidance to the EHRC and working with both large and medium sized organisations to help equip them with 21st century leaders who are more
feminine, authentic and empowered and there are many learning’s, which can be passed to Government.

I have spoken to MP’s who advise that the current structure and policy for the period before, during and after pregnancy is woefully inadequate and requires immediate review. My understanding is that there isn’t actually any such thing as ‘maternity leave’ for MP’s and if a woman is caring for her newborn she is marked as absent rather than nursing!

In the same way businesses are changing their policies and procedures to attract the brightest graduate talent, Parliament needs to take the lead in ensuring it also attracts and doesn’t deter women who may wish to have a family in the future. Without clear policies that support this choice, Parliament cannot expect to appeal to the widest talent pool.

I believe that if we can get the maternity journey working well and change how we perceive and react to pregnancy – seeing it as a powerful empowerment tool which everyone can benefit from, instead of a bundle of problems to solve - the issues which arise later will be naturally more understood and well managed.

Statistics from the EHRC show that maternity discrimination is rife is all areas of business and society. There is disconnection between what businesses say they want to provide or be like and the reality of what women experience. It would be naive to imagine the House or any areas relating to Parliament are any different.

From my experience connecting with members of the Women and Work APPG and listening to the Parliamentary debate on Maternity Discrimination where MP’s spoke, I believe the issues we see in business are mirrored here.

As the EHRC have recently launched #WorkingForward to encourage UK businesses to unite to end pregnancy discrimination it would seem only sensible that their guidelines are implemented within the House of Commons as the lowest benchmark of acceptability.

In case you are not aware of their 4 recommendations, they are:-

1. Demonstrating leadership from the top down
2. Ensuring confident employees
3. Training and supporting line managers
4. Offering flexible working practices

Clearly there needs to be some tweaking of the language but I believe the framework can be taken and applied to the running of the House.

In my work as a consultant I offer 10 best practice guidelines to both employers and employees. These can be translated to guidelines for both the overall
organisation of Parliament and for individual MP’s and should there be sincere desire to change I am happy to go through these in more detail.

In conclusion, women will continue to birth children but the traditional roles of a man as the breadwinner and a woman as the caregiver are changing in our society. Therefore, the level of respect, understanding and practical and emotional support we offer to women around the pregnancy journey and maternity period needs to change accordingly. Parliament can choose to be a laggard or a leader in this area but if it wishes to be representative of the people it represents and increase the number of women in the House of Commons it needs to address the above issues and implement change.

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