

# We should use parental leave for MPs to set an example, not drag our feet <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

When I gave birth on Good Friday last year, I didn't expect to be fighting an election campaign within a matter of days. Baby Theo was four days old when the prime minister decided to call the snap election.

My husband and I were taken aback by her sudden u-turn and initially hoped that the news was a late April fool. We were just adjusting our lives to looking after a brand new little person, and we wondered how on earth we would get through nine weeks of campaigning with a newborn.

The vast majority of my constituents were incredibly supportive. I had lovely cards and messages from lots of people and I have lost count of the number of people I spoke to during the campaign who asked how Theo was getting on.

There were only a few people who said they assumed that I wouldn't carry on. I asked them politely if they would make the same assumption if my husband were the MP. Of course they wouldn't.

Fortunately, my husband's employer allowed him to bring forward his shared parental leave, without any notice. Thanks to the last Labour government such provision exists for dads - although only 5 per cent of them take up the opportunity.

Needless to say, it was a very stressful few weeks. Apart from the obvious physical exhaustion, breastfeeding and endless nappies, I was always under pressure to meet deadlines for election material - letters, leaflets and posters - and organising the next campaigning session.

My family rallied round. My parents knocked as many doors, if not more, than I did! We joked that it felt like my husband was the candidate for the first few weeks as I couldn't really go out door-knocking very much.

About six weeks after giving birth, I started campaigning several times a day and I walked eight miles on polling day.

After the election, there wasn't much let up. I had election returns to complete and I also organised three thank you parties to help all the kind people who helped me retain my seat. In subsequent weeks, I came into parliament to swear in, to vote on the Queen's speech, Finance Bill and a number of European Withdrawal Bill amendments.

During the six months I took as maternity leave, scarcely a day went by when I hadn't considered or dealt with a constituency or parliamentary matter.

There is not much that can be done formally to help new mums when an election is called so suddenly. We were just unlucky.

However, as Harriet Harman is proposing, there should be a formal system for maternity leave and shared parental leave for MPs. We should have the option of proxy voting so that a colleague can vote on our behalf.

Relying on the goodwill of the opposition and government whips is simply not enough. I am not the only MP to be criticised by a national newspaper for missing so many votes, without mentioning my maternity leave.

The website - [theyworkforyou](#) - rejected my suggestion that they reflect that I was on leave next to my voting record.

Maternity and paternity rights have improved markedly over the last 20 years due to legislation that MPs have voted on in our parliament. Yet those rights are not extended to MPs. We should set an example for others to follow, rather than dragging our feet.

I have been inspired by many colleagues who had children in office before me and hope that many more women will follow in our footsteps.

Emma Reynolds is a Labour MP

-reprinted from The Times

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