

House of Commons unanimously adopts new parental-leave policy for MPs ^[1]

The policy change is the latest effort by the House of Commons to try to make the Hill more family-friendly.

Author: Wright, Teresa

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EXCERPTS

For the first time ever, members of Parliament will have the right to take paid parental leave from their jobs on Parliament Hill when they adopt or give birth.

The House of Commons unanimously agreed to new rules that will allow new parents who are serving as MPs to take up to 12 months of parental leave. The rules give MPs who are expecting babies the right to take up to four weeks off as leave at the ends of pregnancies as well.

Until now, MPs who missed more than 21 days of sitting time for a reason other than illness or official business have been docked \$120 a day. (Their \$178,900 base salaries work out to \$490 a day.)

Democratic Institutions Minister Karina Gould, who was the first cabinet minister to give birth while in office, calls the move a historic change.

"I think it's long overdue, but I wholeheartedly welcome it," the Liberal MP for Burlington, Ont., said in an interview Thursday. "It sends the signal that it's acceptable and legitimate to take some time away from Ottawa after you've given birth or adopted a child."

Gould said many of her constituents were "gobsmacked" to find out she didn't have the option to take formal maternity leave after she gave birth to her baby boy, Oliver, in March 2018.

She did take a few weeks off, which she credits to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for being supportive, but was back in the House of Commons a few weeks later, with Oliver in tow. But she said the lack of a formal leave policy has left new parents in Parliament feeling pressure to go back to work right away.

This policy change is the latest effort by the House of Commons to try to make the Hill more family-friendly.

Child-care services are available to members during sittings, including when the House has deliberations that go late or, as has happened a few times in the last year, when there is an all-night voting marathon.

Also, when the Commons moved into temporary quarters while Centre Block undergoes years of renovations, the new facility in West Block came with a family room equipped with a crib, change table and rocking chair.

Push for proxy voting

Gould said these are welcome changes, but notes there is still work to do to make being an MP with a newborn easier.

One thing that could make a big difference is allowing MPs to vote by proxy if they are unable to be in Ottawa for an important vote due to childbirth or major illness. This change was made in the United Kingdom's House of Commons after an MP there delayed a scheduled caesarean section to participate in a vote.

"In 2019, that just shouldn't be the case anymore. We can absolutely find ways to make this work in our modern lives," Gould said.

"I think that coming to Ottawa and voting here is very important, however if you've just given birth or you've just had surgery, if you can send your vote in, in an informed way, there should be proxy voting."

Regardless of the new rules, of course, voters will get to decide at election time whether they believe they've been properly represented by an MP who's taken a parental leave.

NDP MP Niki Ashton, who represents northern Manitoba's Churchill-Keewatinook Aski, said while she believes this move is a good first step, Parliament remains an "archaic" workplace for new mothers and many more changes are necessary.

Ashton gave birth to twins in November 2017 and had to attend a public event just 11 days later. She said she would have welcomed a formal maternity leave, but she pointed out without a change in voting rules, no new parent will be likely to take a full year of leave from the Commons. She echoed Gould's view that alternative voting opportunities should be adopted.

She also said childcare for newborns is not truly available, as the daycare used by MPs and hill staff only take children aged 18 months and older.

"I would say the patriarchy is alive and well on Parliament Hill — this is a workplace that has been dominated by older men since its inception, and those patriarchal views continue to persist despite the fact that society has evolved," she said.

"If we're going to be serious about encouraging women to run for federal office, these are not negotiable measures, these are critical. There's various ways of discouraging women from doing this work and certainly, frankly, a workplace full of barriers to doing your work while having a family is a major disincentive."

The new leave policy will extend to new fathers as well, but Toronto Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith, whose wife had a baby a year after the 2015 election, said he hopes it will help more younger women get involved in federal politics.

"There are lots of disincentives for young people to get into politics, for women to get into politics. The more that we address and remove those disincentives, it's incredibly important," he said.

Gould said she hopes this change will lead to a culture shift on Parliament Hill and in legislative chambers across the country.

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