



**Speech to AI Fringe: Designing for the Margins**  
**The British Museum**  
**Monday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023**



**Rt Hon Harriet Harman KC MP**  
Member of Parliament for Camberwell and Peckham  
Mother of the House of Commons  
Chair of the Committee on Standards and Committee of Privileges



House of Commons  
London SW1A 0AA  
0207 219 4218  
[harriet.harman.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:harriet.harman.mp@parliament.uk)  
[www.harrietharman.org.uk](http://www.harrietharman.org.uk)  
[@harrietharman](https://twitter.com/harrietharman)

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I'm pleased to be invited to join you today and chair this very interesting and expert panel discussion.

I hope, like you, to learn a great deal.

Like most people my age, I'm not an expert on Artificial Intelligence, or indeed on anything tech.

My experience has been in Parliament and government on policy making and regulation, and particularly on equality.

The developers of AI and the regulators are different generations. And that's a challenge to be recognised and surmounted.

I'm now chair of The Fawcett Society. We campaign for gender equality and women's rights at home at work and in public life. It's clear that AI will profoundly reshape all of these and so it is vital to ensure its benefits are properly shared by women as well as men and that we guard against bias entrenchment or fuelling discrimination. This issue will be a focus for Fawcett in the coming years and I will say a bit more on that in a moment.

Like I guess most of you here, I am very hopeful about the opportunities AI provides, and I am determined that those opportunities should be shaped in a pluralistic, accountable and fair way and that the dangers should be identified and mitigated. And that's not just dangers for the future, but right here and now.

### **Benefits And Challenges**

Promoting the development of AI and mitigating its dangers are two sides of the same coin. I think we should all be working on both rather than defaulting to two camps, those for and those against.

It is happening. And it will need to be regulated.

I suspect there's lessons to be learned from the development of social media here.

Take the issue of the impact of social media on women.

Social media has given women the opportunity to engage directly with each other, to work together, to campaign together, to share debate unmediated by the traditional male hierarchies that prevail in communications.

It enables them to work from their homes, to be in meetings in their homes. These are transformational advances for women.

And not least for women in politics. Here and around the world. I no longer have to communicate with my constituents or with the Women's Movement through male political editors who are at best ignorant or at worst hostile to my agenda. I just tweet and I'm directly in touch with everybody who wants to be in touch with me.

But at the same time, social media threatens women, particularly young women and most particularly black women and ethnic minority women: women and young girls tormented by threats, abuse, harassment, racism, preyed on by perverts, exposed to self-harm sites.

And social media tech companies are dominated by men, as is AI. In fact, the Fawcett society has new research out tomorrow which highlights the "tech bro" culture. 1 in 5 men in tech thinks women are less

suited to jobs in the sector. Well, I would say that makes those 1 in 5 men unsuitable to be working in the tech sector.

42% of these “bros” said the sector wouldn’t benefit from a gender balance in the workforce.

The women are noticing this, not surprisingly. 72% of women in tech roles have experienced at least one form of sexism at work, including questioning their skills and ability, as well as unequal pay and the usual “banter”.

So it’s not surprising, but it’s got to be worrying, that over 40% of women think every week about leaving the sector.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission ought to conduct a formal inquiry into the AI sector, set targets and if the sector doesn’t meet those targets it should impose quotas and have new powers to fine companies for not meeting them.

### **Policy Making: Pace of Change**

There are lessons from social media for AI on the issue of complexity too and the pace of change.

Public policy-making on support for and regulation of social media, in government and Parliament has been painfully slow and has struggled to face up to the challenges even where there is a broad consensus in Parliament and when it hasn’t been a divisive party political issue.

The Online Safety Act has just passed into law.

But it started with an announcement of an intention to regulate in a speech by the then-Prime Minister David Cameron way back in 2013.

Then fast forward, or rather slow forward, to 2017, there was an internet safety Green paper.

Then, 2019, there was an Online Harms White Paper

The draft Bill was only published in May 2021 and the Bill didn’t become law until just a few weeks ago.

That is 10 whole years.

That sort of timeframe just cannot work with AI which is developing at a rapid pace.

Government’s and parliament’s response to Covid showed us both possibilities and pitfalls when dealing with pace and complexity.

Parliament is notoriously slow to change, but faced with the mounting Covid deaths, we changed our processes literally overnight, meeting remotely, voting remotely. We agreed a process for retrospective approval of law changes in order not to cause any delay. That was impressive.

But the accountability was thin, aside from the work of the Treasury Select Committee, the Health Select Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

I think we need to power up our Select Committees that are in the front line of work on AI. And they will need more resources to match up to the challenge of their scrutinising role on this important and emerging technology.

Because AI development is unimaginably rapid and Parliament's processes are slow yet there needs to be real time scrutiny of government and new rules put rapidly into law, perhaps we in Parliament should be thinking about whether we can have accountability delegated to Select Committees on AI, so through them Parliament can continuously and expertly carry out our Parliamentary scrutiny, and play our part regulation, without causing undue delay or without making Parliament feel that it's being ridden over roughshod and without the executive being properly accountable. So that would be Parliamentary delegation to scrutinise regulations and scrutinise executive action.

### **Public Private Partnership**

And of course AI is a classic case of the private sector and public policy having to work together. That too needs to be reflected in government structures.

I remember when the internet was just starting to gather pace when Labour was in government. We had a specific aim of promoting what was a completely new thing, which most people had never heard of, and we called it e-commerce, and had government structures to actively promote it. The point was we were determined to be ahead of this.

On AI, Government can't be left behind and business can't be held back.

### **Equality For Women**

There's major implications for equality.

And there's a vital role for government to work with the education sector and private sector to develop the AI workforce. We hear a great deal rightly about developing the NHS workforce, we need to hear as loud a volume on developing the AI workforce and we should be ensuring inclusion, particularly of women. We can see that left to its own devices it will not happen, it has to be driven purposefully.

The inclusion of women is important.

It's important for the individual – because no woman should be discriminated against if she has a contribution to make.

It's important for society. It's really an indication of modernity that women are fully included, if you think of the most backward societies they are the male-dominated ones that don't understand and include women in their society.

And of course it's important for the economy.

And it is important for the sector because it will benefit from a meritocracy. This is not the sector doing women a favour, this is women doing the sector a favour. This is not anti-meritocracy it is about meritocracy because it is about including all the talent in the country rather than being limited to just that half of it which is men.

So we really must have, wherever decisions are being taken, in the public or the private sector, no men-only rooms, in planning for the development of the AI workforce or indeed anything else to do with the development of and regulation of AI, otherwise we risk entrenching bias.

And this is not about the male decision-makers listening to, or thinking about, women. It's not about women's voices being heard by a male sector. This is about women being able to share the decision making equally. And that will only happen if there is an express commitment and its delivery is engineered.

## **Levelling Up**

We also need to make sure that there's a regional spread of AI.

Once again that's a question both of equity and getting the best talent. We've heard a lot about levelling up, we need levelling up embedded in AI. Clusters are important but they should be throughout all regions, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, not just emanating from one region.

## **Datasets As Infrastructure**

Without data, we would have no AI, so just as we have recognised that broadband and childcare are part of a modern infrastructure, so we have to see datasets as infrastructure.

And we need to ensure that we make them clean and free from prejudice and bias and not engines of discrimination, as left to their own devices that will be the default position.

That means a massive focus on the quality of data and at the same time a sharp focus on the algorithms not perpetuating and entrenching unfairness.

All public sector bodies need to consider the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act, from right now, when thinking about how they are using AI. And all public sector bodies are thinking about their use of AI, from big national organisations like the NHS right through to local councils.

## **Vigilance Rather Than Blind Trust**

AI seems very complex so we need to be wary of the Emperor's New Clothes syndrome that we had in the Global Financial Crisis.

There was not a proper understanding in government or Parliament of what was going on in the financial markets but we thought that at least some of those in the financial markets did know. So that was reassuring. Except that they didn't.

That was, as it turned out, overoptimistic - with catastrophic consequences. Even most of those in the system seemed to have no visibility down the chain of derivatives and then the whole system collapsed. So we've got responsibility not to think "this is complex for us as Government or Parliament, but we're sure somebody out there knows that it's all fine". We've got to actually work it out for ourselves and be part of it.

## **Whole World And Whole Country Approach**

AI, and the data upon which it relies, knows no national boundaries so we have to look outward to other countries, not just those in the global north but in the global south too.

And again that is not us in the global north doing the global south a favour, this is about recognizing that there is all sorts of innovation going on in the global south that we in the global north can learn from.

And because of the influence that UK legislation has on Commonwealth parliaments it is very welcome that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is coordinating work on how parliaments in Commonwealth countries are responding to the challenge to regulate this sector.

And as well as looking outward to the rest of the world we need to look down to local communities and their councils.

Just as in central government there are opportunity and accountability challenges in local councils. AI can help with better services. They too are making decisions about how their services are provided and to who.

There needs to be help for them and coordination for them in them doing that. I don't think that's happening yet but it really needs to be happening now.

The opportunities are roaring ahead so after those preliminary thoughts, I'd like us now to turn to our very expert panel, Linda Bonyo and Adrian Joseph.

For further information contact **[harriet.harman.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:harriet.harman.mp@parliament.uk)**