

**Factsheet P4**  
**Procedure Series**  
Revised March 2009

House of Commons Information Office

# **Sittings of the House**



## Factsheet P4 Procedure Series

Revised March 2009

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House of Commons Information Office

## Sittings of the House

The sitting times of the House of Commons have varied over the years. This factsheet looks at the current practice including the changes implemented in May 2005. The Factsheet also contains a section on the history of sittings since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

This Factsheet and relevant links are available on the Internet at:  
[http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_publications\\_and\\_archives/factsheets.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/factsheets.cfm)

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## Introduction

This Factsheet looks at the sitting times and dates of the House of Commons. It first sets out the hours that the House normally sits and the changes which were implemented after the May 2005 General Election. It then looks at the order in which business is taken before looking at the pattern of sitting over the course of a year. The final section looks at the history of sitting times and recesses and how these have changed.

## Sitting times

The sitting times for the House of Commons are set out in the table below.

	<b>Main Chamber</b>	<b>Westminster Hall</b>
Monday	2.30pm–10.30pm	
Tuesday	2.30pm–10.30pm	9.30am–2.00pm
Wednesday	11.30am–7.30pm	9.30am–5.00pm
Thursday	10.30am–6.30pm	2.30pm–5.30pm
Friday	9.30am–3.00pm	

The finish times for business are the “normal” time set down. The House may sit beyond these hours (or occasionally finish earlier). The section on “moment of interruption” explains this in more detail.

Since January 2003, the House sits on Fridays only when there are Private Members’ bills to discuss. Previously, there were only ten Fridays in a session on which the House did not sit.

### Westminster Hall

The House of Commons also sits in an additional Chamber referred to as Westminster Hall (in fact in a specially converted room off the main Hall) and also known as the Grand Committee Room. Westminster Hall is laid out in an elongated horseshoe shape rather than the opposing benches of the House of Commons chamber to reflect the non-partisan nature of the debates that take place there. The first sitting in Westminster Hall took place on Tuesday 30 November 1999.

On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, there are a series of Private Members’ adjournment debates and Thursday is used to debate select committee reports (up to six Thursdays, as chosen by the Liaison Committee) and other general items of business that would have been unlikely to be debated previously. Cross-cutting questions sessions can also take in Westminster Hall on a Thursday; these questions to Ministers are on subjects that cut across Government Departments. The first session was on 23 January 2003 on Youth Policy to Ministers from the Home Office, Department of Health, Department for Education and Skills and Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

The ballots for the debates on Tuesday and Wednesdays take place on the previous Wednesday morning. Applications for General or short Debates should be made in writing to the Speaker's Office by 10pm or the rise of the House, whichever is the earlier, on the previous Tuesday. The list of forthcoming private Members' adjournment debates in Westminster Hall is available on the Parliament website at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/speakers/adebates.htm>

## Organisation of business

The table below shows the normal order of business in the House of Commons each sitting day. A summary agenda and full order of business are published for the start of each day. The list below shows the order that business is taken throughout the week in the main Chamber:

- Prayers
- Private Business (except Fridays) (see [Factsheet L4](#))
- Oral Questions (except Fridays) (see [Factsheet P1](#))
- Urgent Questions/Statements (statements at 11am on Fridays)
- Presentation of Bills (see [Factsheet L1](#))
- Ten Minute Rule Bills (Tuesdays & Wednesdays) (see [Factsheet L2](#))
- Topical debate
- Main business
- Moment of Interruption
- Exempt Business
- Petitions (see [Factsheet P7](#))
- Adjournment debate

Not all types of business will occur on every day and there are other types of business that occur occasionally such as introduction of new Members, personal statements by Members and points of order.

This Factsheet does not attempt to cover each area of business in the list in detail; further details are available in the Factsheets as indicated

### Prayers

Each day's business starts with **Prayers**. Members stand and face the wall behind them for these traditional prayers for Parliament which are usually read by the Speaker's Chaplain. The public are not admitted to the Gallery at this point nor is this part of business televised. The business then proceeds in the order given above until the "moment of interruption". Oral Questions are held in the first hour of the sitting

### Topical debate

Topical debates lasting 90 minutes take place in the Commons on a weekly basis immediately after questions and statements but before the main business of the day. They focus on issues of regional, national or international importance.

For a topical debate on a Thursday, the deadline for Members to pose subjects for debate is 3.00pm the preceding Monday (afternoon) see (Written Ministerial Statement dated 12 November 2007)<sup>1</sup> outlined below.

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<sup>1</sup> Leader of the House Written Ministerial Statement 12 Nov 2007

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm071112/wmstext/71112m0002.htm#0711121600016>

A Member seeking such a Topical debate may do so in the following ways:

- In writing to the Leader of the House of Commons;
- Via the email link on the home page of the website of the Leader of the House of Commons at: [www.commonslider.gov.uk](http://www.commonslider.gov.uk);
- By requesting a topical debate during the weekly Business Questions; and
- In person to the Leader of the House of Commons.

Following discussions, the House will be notified of the subject selected, either during the announcement of business on Thursday or through the Order Paper, depending on the date chosen for the debate. The subject will appear on the annunciator alongside other business.

A Member whose proposed subject is chosen is not individually contacted to be told the news; they will need to keep an eye on the annunciator on Monday evening along with everyone else as more than one Member may have chosen the same proposal for debate. The Leader of the House of Commons produces a list of all subjects proposed for debate on a monthly basis.

Topical debates were introduced following recommendations by the Select Committee on Modernisation in their report published on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2007 entitled '*Revitalising the Chamber: the role of the back bencher*'.<sup>2</sup>

The Committee reported "One of the legitimate criticisms of the House is that sharp, topical debates are rarely held in the Chamber itself". It recommended that provision should be made in Standing Orders for topical debates

The Government's response to the Committee's report was published on 18 October 2007,<sup>3</sup> the report was debated and the temporary introduction of topical debates approved in the House on 25 October 2007<sup>4</sup>. The first topical debate took place on 15 November 2007<sup>5</sup> and was on the subject of Immigration.

The Leader of the House issued a Written Ministerial Statement on 22 July 2008 on the outcome of her review into the operation of Topical debates.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Modernisation Committee, *Revitalising the Chamber: the role of the back bencher*, 20 June 2007, HC 337 (2006-07) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmmodern/337/337.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Leader of the House of Commons, *Governance of Britain—Revitalising the Chamber: the Role of the Back-Bench Member. (The Government's response to the Modernisation Committee's First Report of Session 2006-07; HC337)*, 18 October 2007, Cm7231 <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm72/7231/7231.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> HC Deb 25 October 2007 cc441-504  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm071025/debtext/71025-0008.htm#07102552000001>

<sup>5</sup> HC Deb 15 November 2007 cc 835-861  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm071115/debtext/71115-0005.htm#07111535000005>

<sup>6</sup> HC Deb 22 July 2008 c94WS  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080722/wmstext/80722m0003.htm#08072253000031>

Standing Order 24A<sup>7</sup> on Topical debates came into permanent effect on 12 November 2008.<sup>8</sup> The new Standing Order on topical debates provides for a special regime of mandatory speech limits on front bench speeches as follows –

- A topical debate shall be opened by a Minister of the Crown who, when called by the Speaker, may speak for up to ten minutes
- A Member speaking on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, when called by the Speaker, may speak for up to ten minutes either immediately following the Minister at the start of the debate or immediately before the Minister at its conclusion.
- A Member nominated by the leader of the second largest opposition party, when called by the Speaker, may speak for up to six minutes either at the start of the debate or before the Member speaking on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition or the Minister, as the case may be, at its conclusion.

A synopsis of Topical debates can be found in the Votes and Proceedings for that day.

### **Moment of Interruption**

This time comes at 10pm on Mondays and Tuesdays, 7pm on Wednesdays, 6pm on Thursdays and 2.30pm on Fridays. At this point, business is brought to an end except for the half-hour adjournment debate. However, there are circumstances where business may continue past this time and therefore the House will sit later than the times given in the table on page 2. These circumstances are:

- A business of the house motion is agreed allowing extra time;
- The time allocated to an item of business in a programme order has not expired;
- The business is exempt from the usual time of interruption;
- The business is unopposed. An example of this would be unopposed Private Members' Bills on a Friday at 2.30 pm

### **Business motion**

A Business of the House motion may be introduced by a Minister to extend business beyond the 'moment of interruption'. This can be until any hour, until a specified hour or until either a specified hour or the end of a specified period after it has started, whichever is the later. Motions to exempt business until any hour are most commonly used to provide time for the report stages of bills (and for committee stages, if the bill is in committee of the whole House). The main debates on second reading, opposition days, estimates days, general debates on Government motions and on motions for the adjournment are usually (but by no means necessarily) concluded by the moment of interruption, though other business may be considered afterwards.

### **Programme orders**

Programme orders set out a timetable for the conclusion of proceedings on a Bill. They are discussed further in [Factsheet P10](#). Business covered by a programme order may continue for the time allocated regardless of the usual time of interruption.

### **Exempt business**

<sup>7</sup> Standing Order 24A (2008-09) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmstords/2/2.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Modernisation of the House Standing Order 24A  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm081112/debtext/81112-0022.htm#0812121800008>

Instances of business exempt from usual rising times by the provisions of Standing Orders are:

- the proceedings on statutory instruments are normally exempt for 1½ hours after interruption or for 1½ hours after their commencement, whichever is later. "Prayers", which are motions calling for the annulment of statutory instruments subject to negative procedure, are taken no later than 1½ hours after interruption;
- proceedings on European Union documents or other items in furtherance of an Act of Parliament are limited to 1½ hours but may be proceeded with at any hour;
- money resolutions on bills are exempt for 45 minutes or 45 minutes after interruption, whichever is later, unless the resolution is on the same day as second reading of the bill when the question is put immediately;
- any bill brought in under a ways and means resolution (e.g. finance bills and other public bills dealing with taxation, etc), (without limit)
- the debate on provisions of a programme motion (45 minutes) (see [Factsheet P10](#)).

#### **Adjournment debate**

Every day, the last half-hour of the sitting is allocated for an adjournment debate, with a backbench Member raising a matter, often of interest to their constituency and the Minister responsible replying. If the main business of the day ends before the moment of interruption, the whole time between its conclusion and usual rising time is available for the adjournment debate. In this circumstance the debate may last more than half an hour. The backbench Member is chosen by ballot, except on Thursday when they are selected by the Speaker from among those unsuccessful in the ballot. Other Members may participate in the debate only with the agreement of the Member opening the debate and the Minister.

#### **Long sittings**

If the House sits beyond the normal time of sitting the next day, the business scheduled for that day falls. The last time a long sitting caused the loss of business was on 25 January 2000 (see Appendix C) though the most recent long sitting was 10 March 2005 when the House considered the Prevention of Terrorism Bill. Prior to 1985, Questions down for written answer on a day where business fell were "wiped out". This is no longer the case. On occasions in the past, it has been a deliberate tactic to speak extensively on exempted business in order to cancel out the following day's sitting. This has sometimes been countered by the Government moving the closure or, at committee stage, moving that the Chairman report progress.

In the 1980s and 90s the House was likely to sit after the 10.00 pm cut-off on about eight out of ten sitting days (Fridays excluded). The average time of rising on Mondays to Thursdays varied little over those decades with sessional averages ranging from 11.51pm to 12.35am. Appendix A gives some relevant figures. The average sitting length varied between eight and a half and nine hours; this has not changed very much from the 1920s (between eight and eight and three-quarter hours).

Very long sittings occur relatively infrequently. As mentioned, the most recent was on 10 March 2005 when the sitting lasted for a total of 32 hours and 22 minutes (Appendix C gives all sittings which have lasted more than 24 hours since records began). It was not until the late 19th century that really long sittings were experienced; in the eighteenth century, the record was a 19-hour sitting (inclusive, no doubt, of a meal break) on the Westminster election in 1741. One of the debates on the *Great Reform Bill* on 18 December 1831, a noon Saturday sitting, lasted until 1.15am on

Sunday morning. The longest Saturday sittings were on 18 May 1794 when the House sat until 3am discussing the *Detention of Suspects Bill* and on 15 March 1884 when the sitting began at noon on the Saturday and did not finish until 5.45am on the Sunday.

### Short sittings

Short sittings also occur with the shortest in recent years being 1 hour 19 minutes on Friday 26 October 1979. The shortest ever is reputed to be Friday 25 November 1910 when the House sat for nine minutes.

### Weekend sittings and sittings on Public Holidays

The House at one time sat regularly on Saturdays but by the nineteenth century Saturday sittings were uncommon. They were provided for as a matter of course until 1861 unless the House approved a motion to the contrary. Since 1900, however, there have been only 21 Saturday meetings, almost all in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The only Sunday sitting since 1900 was on 3 September 1939. The House had also met on Sundays on 4 May 1856, 22 May 1887 and 20 June 1897 but these were to attend church services relating to the Peace Treaty with Russia and Queen Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilees, respectively. It met on Saturday 30 January 1965 in St Paul's Cathedral, for Sir Winston Churchill's funeral, but this did not constitute a sitting of the House.

The House does not now generally sit on public holidays. In the past, however, it has done so, especially in the Commonwealth period (e.g. on Christmas Day 1643 and 1656, and Good Friday (23 April] 1641). It sat on Easter Monday in 1689 and in 1913; for August Bank Holiday.

### September sittings

On the recommendation of the Second Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons,<sup>9</sup> the House voted on 29 October 2002<sup>10</sup> to adopt September sittings in order to provide "a Parliament that is more accessible to the public that it serves". As such, the House sat between 8 – 18 September 2003 and 7 – 16 September 2004. However, there was no September sitting during the 2005/06 session, to allow time for a permanent security screen to be installed in the House of Commons chamber and it has since been decided<sup>11</sup> that the House should no longer sit in September (except in special circumstances).

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<sup>9</sup> Modernisation Committee, *Modernisation of the House of Commons: A Reform Programme*, 5 September 2002, HC 1168- I (2001-02) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmmodern/440/44003.htm#a4>

<sup>10</sup> HC Deb 29 October 2002 c797 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmhansrd/v0021029/debtext/21029-37.htm>

<sup>11</sup> HC Deb 1 November 2006 c414 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/v0061101/debtext/61101-0022.htm>

## The Sitting Year

The sitting year will generally begin in November with the state opening of Parliament and will close in the following November with prorogation. Between these dates the session will be punctuated by a number of recesses when the House does not sit. For the 2002-03 session, the Leader of the House announced for the first time a sessional calendar which gave proposed recess dates for the whole session. Previously dates were only made available a few weeks beforehand. The usual calendar for a parliamentary session is as follows:

	Usual time
State Opening of Parliament	November
Christmas recess	Late December/early January, usually 2 to 3 weeks
Half term recess	February, usually up to a week
Easter recess	Usually Good Friday and around one more week
Whit recess	Usually the week of the Late Spring Bank Holiday
Summer recess	Mid-July to early September
Prorogation	November

### State Opening of Parliament

Currently, the pattern of sitting in a "normal" session is that the session begins with the Queen's Speech in November (Appendix B gives a list of Queen's Speech dates in recent years). Following a General Election, the House of Commons sits for Members to be sworn-in before the State Opening. The first session of a new Parliament will often be longer than normal as it will usually continue until the next autumn. For example, the 2005/06 session started on the 17<sup>th</sup> May 2005 and continued through until the 8<sup>th</sup> November 2006.

It is a common myth that the Queen's Speech will not be made on 5 November, the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot (see [Factsheet G8](#)). It has taken place on this date, for example in 1957.

### Recesses

Periods when the House is not sitting are commonly called recesses, though they are perhaps more correctly termed adjournments. The House normally adjourns for a recess in accordance with the terms of a motion (debatable for up to 3 hours) that it has passed before the recess, naming the days of adjournment and resumption. There are currently five usual periods of recess in each session: Christmas, February, Easter, Whitsun and Summer. The February recess was first introduced in 1999, coinciding with school half-terms, to allow MPs to spend more time in their constituencies. A conference recess period, preceded by a September sitting, was introduced briefly during the 2002-03 and 2003-04 sessions but has since been revised.

The decision as to when to take recesses is made by the House pursuant to the terms of a motion proposed by the Leader of the House.

### Prorogation

The House usually returns from summer recess in mid-October for a period of a few weeks. This is a period to finish business that had not been completed before the summer and conference recesses. At the end of this short period is the Prorogation which marks the end of the session. The House does not sit and no parliamentary business may be transacted during Prorogation.

### Recalls of Parliament

If, during a period of recess, Ministers represent to the Speaker that the public interest requires either an earlier meeting than the day intended, or a meeting on any weekend, the Speaker may give notice of an earlier sitting. This is permitted by Standing Order No 13, which dates from 1948, and has been used 23 times, including the double recalls over the Falklands and the three recalls in 2001 following the terrorist attacks in the United States. The third of these, on Monday 8 October, was unusual in that it began at 6pm. A full list of recalls since 1948 is given in Appendix D.

### History of sitting hours

The House's sitting hours have undergone almost a complete reversal over the centuries. In the 16th century, the House sat in the mornings, and afternoons were reserved to the work of Committees, whereas nowadays the mornings are the times for many Committee meetings, and the afternoons and evenings the main meeting hours of the House itself. The recent changes to sitting hours have again brought the sitting hours forward.

Before 1570, the House met from 8 am to 11 am or noon, and a 7 am meeting time was the norm from 1571 to the Civil War. In 1604, a sitting starting at 6 am was recorded, the earliest ever.

Between 1650 and 1700, the hours of sitting were fixed from day to day and the House usually met at 8, 9 or 10 in the morning. Between 1702 and 1769, the hour was 9am, and between 1770 and 1806, 10am. However, from about the third decade of the 18th century, this theoretical meeting hour was largely ignored, and sittings in fact began in the afternoon, often about 3pm (it being necessary to swear in any new Members before 4 pm, the time then required by law). Sittings in the 17th century had been early mainly because of the difficulty of conducting any work towards evening and the hours of darkness. The cry "Who goes home?" which still resounds through the Palace of Westminster when the House rises, is traditionally supposed to derive from the need of Members to return together across unlit countryside or in boats on the river to the City of London. In practice, 17th century business often finished by midday or soon after. The times of sitting were also to some extent dependent on the accepted hour for taking of meals: after the Civil War period, for instance, the midday main meal time became later - instead of noon, it came to be taken at about 2 pm.

From 1760 to 1833 (for public business) and 1835 to 1845 (generally) the House usually sat at 4 pm; in 1833 and 1834, the House sat at 12 noon, met until 3 pm to consider Petitions, and then reconvened at 5 pm for the main business of the day. The latest time ever appointed for the House to meet is thought to be 10 pm, on 11 August 1853 (this was to enable Members to attend the Spithead Naval Review).

From 1845 to 1888, the time for sitting was generally 4 pm, except on Wednesdays (12 noon). This latter time was established by a resolution in 1846, and by Standing Order in 1852. From 1867 to 1888, the sitting time on Tuesdays and Fridays became often, but not exclusively 2 pm, with a two hour suspension between 7 and 9 pm. In the earlier 19th century, an unofficial adjournment in sittings that went on into the evening was the rule: this enabled the Speaker to have dinner, and was known as the Speaker's Chop. The need for this diminished after a deputy to the Speaker was appointed in the mid-1850s.

From 1888 to 1902, the daily time of sitting was 3 pm, but this was varied after 1902 so as to provide for afternoon sittings at 2 pm and evening sittings at 9 pm (providing an approximate 90 minute break for dinner) on Mondays to Thursdays and sittings at noon on Fridays. The Monday-Thursday

time was further varied to 2.45 pm. with effect from 24 April 1906. This continued until the Second World War, after which the Friday time became 11 am from October 1939. In 1939-40, Monday and Friday sittings were rare (as there had been in the 1914-18 war).

From 18 September 1940, the House met at 11 am and sat until 6 pm every day (Monday-Friday), in order to save fuel. From 14 March 1945 the times became 2.15 pm on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, (and Mondays from June 1945) and 11 am on Fridays. From 30 April 1946 the Monday-Thursday time became 2.30 pm, which it remained until Thursday hours became 11.30 am - 7.30 pm in 1999. The Friday time became 9.30 am with effect from 25 January 1980.

On 1 February 1967, morning sittings on Mondays and Wednesdays, between 10 am and 12.30 am, were instituted, but abandoned later the same year. They were replaced by a provision, which has not been invoked since 1969, whereby a Minister could move that the sitting be suspended, and proceedings re-started the next morning. Whilst the morning sittings lasted, it was provided that no division could take place during them, and that the House might not be counted out for lack of a quorum.

In 1991, a committee to consider revising the sitting hours were established to review the current practice and suggest changes. On 19 December 1994, the House agreed to meet every Wednesday at 10am (from 1995-96, at 9.30 am) to take Private Members' debates. This ended with the establishment of Westminster Hall debates in November 1999.

In 1998, the House accepted the Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee's proposal that the House should sit at 11.30 am on Thursdays for the duration of the 1998-99 Session. In 2002, the Modernisation Committee recommended that the 11.30 am start should be extended to include Tuesdays and Wednesdays, as well as Thursdays. This recommendation was accepted by the House of Commons on 29 October 2002.

In January 2005, the Modernisation Committee published a report on sitting hours that recommended the House should retain the 11.30 am start on Tuesdays and Wednesdays but should start an hour earlier at 10.30 am on Thursdays. However, while the House of Commons voted on 26 January to start at 10.30 am on Thursdays and keep the 11.30 am start on Wednesdays, it also decided to revert back to a 2.30 pm start on Tuesdays. These changes were implemented at the start of the 2004/05 session of Parliament.

### **Pattern of sitting**

In the 17th and early years of the 18th century Parliament would be assembled in October or November for the King's Speech (as for instance in 1605, the year of the Gunpowder Plot, when the Opening was due for the 5th November); and commonly sat until spring. In the later eighteenth century, the sittings often lasted into May, and in the nineteenth, the rising date extended further into the year, eventually reaching August.

Deprecating the growing practice of sitting into the summer, a Member (Mr, later Sir Charles, Forster) in 1858 bemoaned the fact that Parliament used always to "rise by the King's birthday in June". Now "under the influence of a July sun [...] measures often left the House in a crude and imperfect state". (The influence of the sun on the putrid Thames in June and July 1858 led to Members debating with open windows covered by bleach-sprayed curtains.)

At the same time, the pre-Christmas session was abandoned, and a typical year's business in the later nineteenth century began with the Queen's Speech in early February, with a week or so in

recess for Easter - sometimes sitting on Easter Monday, as in 1913. A week or ten days recess at Whitsun ensued. The House sat into the middle of August (not necessarily adjourning for the Bank Holiday Monday which at that time was early in the month) when Parliament would be prorogued until the end of October, and then prorogued again until early December, and then again to February. The House did sit into the "grouse and salmon season" (grouse shooting begins on 12 August and salmon fishing ends on 31 August) but rarely throughout it, save in unusual years such as 1895. In 1909, the House sat right through the summer, dealing largely with the "People's Budget". When business was pressing, as in 1926, the autumn months were sitting months, too.

From 1928-29, a reversion was made to the practice of meeting before Christmas. That year, the King's Speech took place on 6 November instead of in January or February as previously. (This had been tried and abandoned in 1890-91.) Apart from election years, this has remained the pattern to the present day.

### Saturday sittings

The House at one time sat regularly on Saturdays. It is recorded that the demise of Saturday sittings began in 1732 through the influence of Sir Robert Walpole that he "might secure at least one day's hunting a week". Such, perhaps is the origin of the weekend, which spread eventually to the public life of most of the world. It was reinforced from the later 19th century, when Fridays no longer saw long, or very important, debates, and adjournment from 1902 was at 5.30 pm, although for most of the 19th century Wednesday had been the shortest sitting day. The weekend habit was reviled by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who accordingly sought to reverse the Friday arrangements in 1906. The House rejected this proposal. As mentioned in the main text, weekend sittings are now very rare. Indeed, the House has only sat on four Saturdays since 1939.

2 September 1939	outbreak of World War II
30 July 1949	Summer adjournment debates – last sitting of the summer
3 November 1956	Suez Crises
3 April 1982	Falklands Islands invasion

### Other adjournments

In the 19th century, the House often adjourned over Derby Day when that did not fall in the Whitsun Recess. This was a settled practice of Palmerston and in the 1860s and 70s was moved for by the Government. The last such occasion was in 1891, when the motion to adjourn was carried by 139 votes to 109. The following year, 1892, it was defeated by 158 votes to 144, but on Derby Day the House failed to a quorum, on three separate occasions. The motion was not made after 1896. In the 19th century, the House often adjourned over Ash Wednesday or sat at a later time, to allow Members to attend church services.

The House has also adjourned or not sat on the occasion of deaths of the Royal Family, or of eminent statesmen. Indeed, it is a settled practice for the House to adjourn on the death being announced of a former Prime Minister; and on 12 May 1994 the House adjourned following the death earlier that day of the Leader of the Opposition - the Rt Hon John Smith QC. It has usually not sat on the occasions of Royal weddings, coronations, jubilees, etc. The House does not generally adjourn on the death occurring of a Member. It did however on 31 May 1878, when Mr Wykeham Martin (MP for Rochester) died suddenly in the Library.



## Appendix A

### Duration of Sessions and Lengths of Sittings

The number and average length of sitting days in each session since 1979-80 are as follows:

Session	Sitting days	Average length of sitting (a) (hours: mins)
1979-80 (long session)	244	8:55
1980-81	163	9:07
1981-82	174	8:08
1982-83 (short session)	115	8:34
1983-84 (long session)	213	8:59
1984-85	172	9:06
1985-86	172	8:57
1986-87 (short session)	109	8:32
1987-88 (long session)	218	9:00
1988-89	175	9:04
1989-90	167	8:48
1990-91	160	8:35
1991-92 (short session)	83	8:23
1992-93 (long session)	240	8:03
1993-94	154	8:10
1994-95	159	8:16
1995-96	146	8:45
1996-97 (short session)	86	8:21
1997-98 (long session)	241	8:47
1998-99	149	9:15
1999-00	170	8:29
2000-01 (short session)	83	8:19
2001-02 (long session)	201	7:40
2002-03	162	7:57
2003-04	157	7:44
2004-05 (short session)	65	8:14
2005-06 (long session)	208	7:56
2006-07	146	7:40
2007-08	165	7:55

(a) including Fridays

(b) short and long sessions are the result of General Elections being called other than in the autumn

## Appendix B

### Dates of State Opening of Parliament

<b>Session</b>	<b>Date of Queen's Speech</b>
1986-87	12 November (Wednesday)
1987-88*	25 June (Thursday)
1988-89	22 November (Tuesday)
1989-90	21 November (Tuesday)
1990-91	7 November (Wednesday)
1991-92	31 October (Thursday)
1992-93*	6 May (Wednesday)
1993-94	18 November (Thursday)
1994-95	16 November (Wednesday)
1995-96	15 November (Wednesday)
1996-97	23 October (Wednesday)
1997-98*	14 May (Wednesday)
1998-99	24 November (Tuesday)
1999-00	17 November (Wednesday)
2000-01	6 December (Wednesday)
2001-02*	20 June (Wednesday)
2002-03	13 November (Wednesday)
2003-04	26 November (Wednesday)
2004-05	23 November (Tuesday)
2005-06*	17 May (Tuesday)
2006-07	15 November (Wednesday)
2007-08	6 November (Tuesday)

\* following General Election

## Appendix C

### Sittings of over 24 hours

<b>Date</b>	<b>Main item of Business</b>	<b>Time House sat</b>	<b>Time House rose</b>	<b>Total Sitting Time</b>
31 Jul 1877	South Africa Bill	16:00 (Tues)	18:15 (Wed)	26:15
31 Jan 1881	Protection of Person & Property (Ireland) Bill	16:00 (Mon)	09:30 (Wed)	41:30
30 Jun 1882	Prevention of Crime (Ireland) Bill	14:00 (Fri)	20:00 (Sat)	30:00
19 Jul 1904	Finance Bill	14:00 (Tues)	15:35 (Wed)	25:35
20 Mar 1907	Consolidated Fund Bill	14:45 (Wed)	17:36 (Thur)	26:51
22 Jul 1936	Unemployment Assistance (Determination of Needs, etc.) Regulations	14:45 (Wed)	01:04 (Fri)	34:19
11 Jun 1951	Finance Bill	14:30 (Mon)	22:16 (Tues)	31:46
13 Jul 1967	Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill	14:30 (Thur)	14:59 (Fri)	24:29
12 Jun 1969	Divorce Reform Bill	14:30 (Thur)	14:41 (Fri)	24:11
24 Jul 1975	Remuneration Charges and Grants Bill	14:30 (Thur)	16:56 (Fri)	26:26
21 Jun 1977	Price Commission Bill	14:30 (Tues)	21:33 (Wed)	31:03
28 Jul 1977	Consolidated Fund (Appropriation) Bill	14:30 (Thurs)	15:19 (Fri)	24:09
4 Aug 1980	Consolidated Fund (Appropriation) (No.2) Bill	14:30 (Mon)	14:51 (Tues)	24:21
1 Apr 1981	British Telecommunications Bill	14:30 (Wed)	15:30 (Thur)	25:00
22 May 1984	Local Government (Interim Provisions) Bill	14:30 (Tues)	22:43 (Wed)	32:12
5 Mar 1985	Water (Fluoridation) Bill	14:30 (Tues)	20:46 (Wed)	30:16
10 Dec 1986	Teachers' Pay and Conditions Bill	14:30 (Wed)	16:38 (Thurs)	26:08
10 Nov 1987	Felixstowe Dock & Railway Bill (Private Bill)	14:30 (Tues)	20:55 (Wed)	30:25
14 Jun 1988	Housing Bill	14:30 (Tues)	20:01 (Wed)	29:31
25 Jan 2000	Disqualifications Bill	14:30 (Tues)	19:51 (Wed)	29:21
10 Mar 2005	Prevention of Terrorism Bill	11:30 (Thur)	19:52 (Fri)	32:22

## Appendix D

### Recalls Since 1948

The House has been recalled on 23 occasions since 1948.

27-29 September 1949	Devaluation
12-19 September 1950	Korean War
4 October 1951	Prorogation - followed by dissolution
12-14 September 1956	Suez Crisis (12 & 13), Cyprus (14)
18 September 1959	Prorogation - followed by dissolution
17-23 October 1961	Berlin Crisis
16 January 1968	Government expenditure cuts
26-27 August 1968	Czechoslovakia, Nigeria
26-29 May 1970	Prorogation - followed by dissolution
22-23 September 1971	Northern Ireland
9-10 January 1974	Fuel
3-4 June 1974	Northern Ireland
3 (Saturday) and 14 April 1982	Falkland Islands
6-7 September 1990	Kuwait invasion
24-25 September 1992	Government economic policy; UN operations - Yugoslavia, Iraq, Somalia
31 May 1995	Bosnia
2-3 September 1998	Omagh bomb: Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Bill
14 September, 4 and 8 October 2001	International Terrorism and Attacks in the USA
3 April 2002	Death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother
24 September 2002	Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction

## Further Information

House of Commons Library  
Standard Note: **Modernisation: Revitalising the Chamber**; SN/PC/04542 Dec 2007  
<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-04542.pdf>

## Contact information

House of Commons Information Office  
House of Commons  
London SW1A 2TT  
Phone 020 7219 4272  
Fax 020 7219 5839  
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House of Lords Information Office  
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Fax 020 7219 0620  
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Houses of Parliament  
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Booking line 020 7219 4496  
Fax 020 7219 0818  
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