



## Factsheet P13 Procedure Series

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House of Commons Information Office

# Command Papers

There are five main classes of Parliamentary Papers: House of Commons Bills (see **Factsheets L1** and **L2**), House of Commons Papers (see **Factsheet P12**), House of Lords Papers, House of Lords Bills and Command Papers. This **Factsheet** attempts to explain something of the history of this last class, Command Papers, and the present scope and content of the series.

This Factsheet and links to further sources mentioned are available on the internet at:  
<http://www.parliament.uk/factsheets>

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## Command Papers

### Definition

Command Papers are Parliamentary Papers presented to the United Kingdom Parliament nominally by command of the Sovereign, but in practice by a Government Minister.

The term **command** arose from the formula that was carried on the Papers, "*Presented to Parliament ... by command of Her (or His) Majesty*". The origin of this formula lies in the fact that these are Government Papers - that is, they have their authority from Ministers of the Crown (constitutionally, the Sovereign) and are laid before Parliament as conveying information or decisions which the Government think should be drawn to the attention of one or both Houses of Parliament. Today, the formula is usually, "*Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for ... by Command of Her Majesty*".

### History

In the eighteenth century, these papers were usually printed as appendices to the **House of Commons Journal**, but this method became inconvenient as the years passed and the papers increased in number.

In the eighteenth century, command papers were normally presented by Privy Counsellors, and at the beginning of that century they were few in number. At the time it was generally accepted that the Crown did not freely volunteer information; but presented papers merely when it was expedient or necessary to obtain expenditure, for the disposal of Crown property, or by a change in the law. Information could be sought by Parliament, by way of an address to the Crown, but the return to such an address would not be a command paper.

Various political considerations led to this principle being abandoned. As time went by, Governments found it more and more convenient to present papers of their own volition to Parliament when issues arose: it was perhaps felt useful to have the paper "on the record" and in black and white before the House.

Command Papers ceased to be appended to the Journal in 1833, when a numbered series began. This first series, unprefix, ran to No 4222 of 1868-69. Other series followed this, each with a different prefix, as follows:

- C 1 to C 9550 – 1870-1899
- Cd 1 to Cd 9239 – 1900-1918
- Cmd 1 to Cmd 9889 – 1919-1956
- Cmnd 1 to Cmnd 9927 – 1956 to November 1986
- Cm 1 onwards – November 1986 to date

It is therefore important, when citing Command Papers, to use the correct prefix.

To some extent, the duration of these series illustrates the degree to which at various times the Command format has been used by governments. In particular the using up of the "Cd" series in nineteen years is good indication of the varied and miscellaneous scope of the set at that time. In the 1907 session, for instance, a page taken at random, detailing 17 of the 443 papers that session, included the report of a Departmental Committee on Bobbinite, the 9th Annual Report of the Congested Districts (Scotland) Board, a statement relating to the expulsion of aliens, and an

appendix to the Report of the Arterial Drainage (Ireland) Commission. The assumption that information was not freely volunteered to Parliament had therefore by this time undergone a complete reversal.

### **The 'Geddes axe'**

It was not so much a regard for constitutional niceties as a government economy drive which saw a reduction in the number of papers issued as Command. The Geddes axe, in the post-World War I period, led to the issue of a Treasury circular in 1921. Among other things this instructed:

"The presentation of papers by Command should be discontinued except in the cases of documents relating to matters likely to be the subject of early legislation, or which may be regarded as otherwise essential to Members of Parliament as a whole to enable them to discharge their responsibilities. Other documents hitherto issued as SOPs (ie items published by HMSO but not Parliamentary Papers), or whenever possible, be discontinued. In the case of documents at present presented pursuant to statute My Lords understand that the Act of Presentation can be met by the presentation of a document either in manuscript or after being printed as a Stationery Office Publication."

Another Treasury Circular in the early 1920s prescribed an octavo size for Command Papers instead of the former foolscap size. Some material (e.g. many statistical documents) became non-parliamentary for this reason alone. The reduction was such that in 1922, for instance, only 229 such Papers were presented compared with the 718 in 1908.

## **Categories of Paper**

There has been little change in the content of the series since the '1920s. The main types of Paper included in it are as follows:-

- State papers (including communiqués, treaties, etc). Treaties may be reprinted with a different Cm number when they are ratified.
- White Papers (i.e. Government proposals for legislation), and related policy statements, and some annual reviews
- Green Papers (Government consultation documents).
- Government replies to select committee reports (see below)
- Reports of Royal Commissions, but not normally the evidence of the Commission.
- Reports of some major Committees of Inquiry, and other Commissions and non-Parliamentary bodies
- Annual Reports, Statistics, etc. of certain bodies

In recent years relatively fewer annual and periodical Reports have come out in the Command Paper series. In part this was due to bodies having preferred to bring out their reports in a larger format than the royal octavo size, which was standard (and obligatory in all but exceptional cases) for the Command series from 1921 to the 1980s, and in part, that departments began to exercise different judgements as to what might be thought of as proper for the series.

### **Government replies to select committee reports**

Some replies to select committee reports are issued as special reports of the committee concerned. In this case they are printed as House of Commons papers. Otherwise, they come out as Command Papers, and are often referred to as "White Papers", though this is perhaps something of a

misnomer. The Government can also reply to a select committee report during a debate, and it has even been known for such a "reply" to emerge as the answer to a written parliamentary question or as a departmental publication.

### **Royal Commissions**

Reports of Royal Commissions are virtually always Command Papers. These may include "one off" reports when a Royal Commission has been appointed to investigate a particular subject or the periodical reports of Commissions like that on ancient monuments.

### **Annual reports**

Apart from those for government departments and agencies, the annual reports and statistics now appearing as Command Papers are relatively few. They include judicial statistics, prison statistics, immigration statistics and reports from the Foreign Compensation Commission and Customs and Excise.

### **Northern Ireland Command Papers**

There was a separate series of Command Papers for Northern Ireland, prefixed Cmnd, and numbered in one undivided sequence 1 to 588, between 1921 and 1975. The indexes mentioned below do not include these documents.

### **Unprinted Commands**

A few Papers each year are presented "by Command" but not printed in the Command Paper series, (eg Departmental Minutes) or have a limited distribution. Copies of these papers are made available to Members of Parliament (MP's) via the Printed Paper Office in the House of Lords and the Vote Office in the House of Commons. Shortly after laying, copies are also made available for publication on the Official Documents website<sup>1</sup>. These command papers, are termed '**Unprinted Command Papers**' by the House of Commons Library (see **Factsheet P15**), and include such items as the BBC and Sports Council Annual Reports. Estimates are issued "by Command" but printed in the HC Papers series

## **Numbering and indexing**

### **Allocation of numbering**

Command Papers are usually part of a numbered series up to 9999, and the current abbreviation is Cm. The numbers are allocated to Command Papers by HMSO.

Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO) operates within the Office of Public Sector Information (OPSI) see: <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/> and is responsible for the administration of Crown copyright and the regulation of the contracts covering the printing and publication of legislation and other official materials.

One of HMSO's functions is the coordination of the publication and numbering of Command Papers<sup>2</sup> and other House of Commons numbered series. The timing of the Command Papers release is kept within the control of the department concerned.

### **Unnumbered Command Papers**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk>

<sup>2</sup> HMSO/OPSI sets common standards on appearance and format described in their booklet 'How to Publish a Command Paper' See: <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/official-publications/publishing-guidance/how-to-publish-a-command-paper.pdf>

It is also possible to lay unnumbered Command Papers, e.g. Explanatory Notes to treaties, but all published Government documents should form part of the numbered series available to view on the Official Documents website.

### **Indexing**

Subject Indexes to Command Papers exist only as part of the indexing of parliamentary papers generally. There is a special index to Papers of the eighteenth century: thereafter, various cumulations exist, three indexes covering 1801 to 1850, and semi-centennial indexes for 1852-1899 and 1900-1949. There are decennial indexes for the sessions between 1950-59, 1960-69 and 1970-79.

Sessional Indexes (published as House of Commons Papers) are also prepared. The TSO daily lists and annual catalogues are useful tools for finding papers. All parliamentary papers are indexed and recorded on 'PIMS', a House of Commons Library database. Users can access this database on the Parliament website at: <http://www.polis.parliament.uk>. Alternatively, users can ask the House of Commons Information Office for assistance.

### **Binding arrangements**

Papers between 1801 and 1969 were bound up in sessions, firstly by type, in four divisions - Bills, Reports of (Select) Committees, Reports of Commissioners (ie of non-Parliamentary Committees and bodies) and Accounts and papers (the rest). Bills were arranged alphabetically, but the other sections followed a subject arrangement. For sessions between 1969 and 1979 there were two divisions, Bills (plus minutes of proceedings thereon) and the rest, arranged by subject. This format was abandoned in 1979. From the 1979-80 Session Papers have been bound only in numerical order. Sessional indexes have been prepared on new subject headings derived from the House of Commons Library computer indexing system, PIMS.

### **Format**

In 1983, the House of Commons Services Committee recommended a change from royal octavo to A4 paper size. This was accepted by the House on 2 May 1984, and took effect from 12 November 1986, but unfortunately some papers started appearing in the larger format from 1983 onwards, thus breaking up the standardised format of the sessional sets.

Various sets of Papers with a classified, rather than a form arrangement, covering a number of sessions, exist in the House of Commons Library, those from the nineteenth century being largely now only of historical interest. A set of Papers from 1950 to date has also been compiled to draw together serial or periodical reports each in a single sequence, which are, or were once, in the HC or Command Series. (So that, for example, all Reports of the Doctors and Dentists Pay/Remuneration Review Body from 1963 to date are in one sequence, despite their having appeared in both Command and HC series and other formats). This set, which has its own special classification, is kept in the House of Commons Library for Members, but all other users are faced with extracting serial reports from various prints in the numerical sequence if a "run" is required.

## **Presentation to Parliament**

Normally, Command Papers are presented to both Houses, but it is not unknown for the presentation to be made only to one: C 328 of 1871, a return of military attaches in the Diplomatic Service, being a rare example of a paper presented to the Lords only.

Command papers can be presented at any time during the life of a Parliament, ie they may be presented during an adjournment, a recess or when Parliament has been prorogued but not when Parliament has been dissolved (the period between the dissolution of a Parliament and the first day of meeting of the next one). Where possible, papers are normally presented when Parliament is in session.

When publication of a Command Paper is likely to attract a high level of Press or Parliamentary interest it will generally be accompanied by an Oral Statement. When the subject of a Command Paper is still of parliamentary interest but not so significant, then publication is generally announced by means of a Written Statement in the House of Commons (and a Written Answer to an arranged Parliamentary Question in the House of Lords). Many routine Command Papers (eg Select Committee reports) may be published without the need for an accompanying Written Statement, Parliamentary Answer or Oral Statement.

As a general rule no copies of Parliamentary papers may be delivered to any department, placed on sale to the public or made generally available to the Press (without restriction) until they have been laid before Parliament and made available to Members. The purpose of laying a paper before the House of Commons is to make the information contained in the document available to the House and its Members. Members are able to go along to the Journal Office to look at these documents as soon as they are laid.<sup>3</sup>

## Availability

Once a paper/document has been laid before the House, it will appear in the Appendix to the Votes and Proceedings. The Votes and Proceedings are the formal legal record of what happens in the House of Commons and are published overnight at the end of each sitting day. Votes and Proceedings are available to view on the parliament website<sup>4</sup>.

Cabinet Office guidelines on the content of Government Websites make it clear that departments must publish the text of Command Papers on the internet.

From May 2005 onwards, all Command Papers and House of Commons Papers, as well as key departmental papers, can be accessed on the TSO's Official Documents website<sup>5</sup>.

The HMSO provides a full index of Command Papers on the OPSI website<sup>6</sup>.

All current Command Papers published as a response to Select Committee Report should be published on the relevant Committee's webpage on the Parliament website.

All current Command Papers may be bought from TSO bookshops and from TSO agents abroad,

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<sup>3</sup> Speaker's Ruling, 25 March 2009 (HC Deb c307)

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090325/debtext/90325-0003.htm#09032538000004>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmvote/cmvote.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/official-publications/command-papers/index.htm>

from the Parliamentary Bookshop, or ordered through booksellers.

Parliamentary Papers not mentioned above which are not available electronically may be available in large reference libraries or can be consulted in the Parliamentary Archives searchroom. See the [Parliamentary Archives FAQ](#) for more information on finding Parliamentary Papers.

Out of print papers can be consulted at the British Library Official Publications Library<sup>7</sup>, at most university libraries and at many public libraries.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/atyourdesk/docsupply/collection/official/index.html>

## Further Reading

Office of Public Sector Information/  
Her Majesty's Stationery Office  
'How to Publish a Command Paper'  
A guide to what is a Command  
Paper - September 2006  
[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/official-  
publications/publishing-guidance/how-to-  
publish-a-command-paper.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/official-publications/publishing-guidance/how-to-publish-a-command-paper.pdf)

## Contact information

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London SW1A 2TT  
T: 020 7219 4272  
F: 020 7219 5839  
E: [hcinfo@parliament.uk](mailto:hcinfo@parliament.uk)  
<http://www.parliament.uk/>

House of Lords Information Office  
House of Lords  
London SW1A 0PW  
T: 020 7219 3107  
F: 020 7219 0620  
E: [hinfo@parliament.uk](mailto:hinfo@parliament.uk)

Education Services  
Houses of Parliament  
London SW1A 2TT  
Enquiry line 020 7219 2105  
Booking line 020 7219 4496  
F: 020 7219 0818  
<http://www.parliament.uk/education/index.htm>

Parliamentary Archives  
Houses of Parliament  
London SW1A 0PW  
T : 020 7219 3074  
F : 020 7219 2570  
E: [archives@parliament.uk](mailto:archives@parliament.uk)

Parliamentary Bookshop  
12 Bridge Street  
Parliament Square  
London SW1A 2JX  
T: 020 7219 3890  
F: 020 7219 3866  
E: [bookshop@parliament.uk](mailto:bookshop@parliament.uk)

## Factsheet P13 Command Papers

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### For your purposes, did you find this Factsheet

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| 1. Very useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Fairly useful    | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not much use   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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| 3. Clear       | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not always clear | <input type="checkbox"/> | Rather unclear | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Any comments?

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Please write to:  
Head of Section  
House of Commons Information Office  
London SW1A 2TT

**If you prefer, please email to:**  
hcinfo@parliament.uk

**If you require a reply, please print your name and address below**

Name

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Address

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