



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House

Issued by the Speaker and the Deputy Speakers



DECEMBER 2015

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Speaking in debates

1. If you wish to speak in a debate in the Chamber, or in a 90-minute or Thursday afternoon debate in Westminster Hall, you should write to the Speaker in advance, noting any relevant experience or expertise. If you have not written in, you may still seek to take part in a debate by approaching the Chair or trying to catch the Chair's eye during the debate, but those who have written in advance will usually be called first. Adding your name to a notice of motion or amendment is not enough to indicate an intention to speak; even if your name is on a motion you should still inform the Speaker's Office if you wish to take part in a debate.
2. Once you have written in to request to speak, you are under an obligation to turn up in the Chamber for the start of the debate and you should plan to be present for most of it. Debates in the Chamber should be an exchange of views. If you are hoping to be called to speak in a debate you must be present for the opening speeches. After you have spoken you must, as a very minimum, remain in the Chamber for at least the next two speeches and you must return to hear the winding-up speeches. Members who fail to observe these courtesies will be given a lower – or no – priority on the next occasion they seek to speak. Where there are no formal wind-ups (such as backbench business), you must still be present for a reasonable proportion of the debate, to hear any ministerial contributions, and for the conclusion of the debate.

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House

3. The list of those who have given notice is used by the Chair to calculate the length of any time limit on speeches. If circumstances prevent you from attending a debate for which you have indicated a wish to speak, you should inform the Speaker's Office at the earliest opportunity of your wish to withdraw your name, or speak directly to the occupant of the Chair on the day in question.
4. Selection of speakers in debate is at the discretion of the occupant of the Chair. The Chair cannot, however, predict precisely when you might expect to be called. The objective at all times is to give all Members a fair opportunity to take part in debate. The Speaker and Deputy Speakers will take account of relevant experience or expertise (in or outside the House, including on select committees where particularly relevant), Members' expressed interests or constituency involvement and the number of times Members have previously spoken (or have sought to speak but not been called) during the Session.
5. The Speaker or Deputy Speakers may impose time limits on speeches in order to give as many Members as possible the opportunity to contribute to a debate. It will not always be possible for every Member who has indicated a wish to be called to speak.
6. You should write in advance to indicate a wish to speak on the second or third readings of bills. For Committee of the whole House, report stages or consideration of Lords Amendments it is not necessary to do so.

7. Brevity in debate will give other Members a greater opportunity to speak and increase your chances of being called early on the next occasion on which you seek to speak. Opening speeches should be of a length which takes account of the numbers wishing to participate and the time available.
8. You may intervene briefly in someone else's speech, but only if the Member who has the floor gives way. If the Member makes clear that they are not giving way, you should resume your seat. An intervention should relate directly to what has just been said and not be a short speech of its own. Particularly where there are time limits in operation, you should be conscious of the impact of multiple interventions on the chances of others getting the opportunity to participate. Excessive interventions may prejudice your chances of being called to speak earlier rather than later in the debate. It is a discourtesy to others to make an intervention shortly after arriving in the Chamber, and to leave again shortly afterwards.
9. To be called to speak you must be seated within the formal limits of the Chamber (the Chair does not call Members sitting on the cross-benches below the bar).

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House

10. You should always address the House through the Chair. "You" means the Chair. Accordingly, other Members should not be addressed as "you", but should be referred to as:

- "the honourable Member for [constituency] (for a Member on the opposite benches)";
- "my honourable friend (for a Member on your side of the House)";
- "the honourable Member opposite" (where the context makes clear to whom you are referring).

Note that:

- Privy Counsellors are "right honourable";
- Ministers may be referred to by office or as "the Minister".

"Learned" (for QCs) and "gallant" (for those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces) have largely fallen out of use.

The House of Lords may be referred to as "the House of Lords" – there is no requirement to call it "the other place".

Participation in adjournment and other half-hour debates

11. Half-hour adjournment debates in the Chamber are intended to be an exchange between the Member who has the debate and the Minister. Other Members may make a speech in the debate only with the permission of both the Member and Minister concerned, secured in advance of the debate. If such permission is granted, the Chair must be notified. These restrictions apply also to half-hour debates in Westminster Hall, but not to longer debates there. They may be disapplied in the Chamber, at the Chair's discretion, if an adjournment debate starts unusually early.
12. The practice of taking interventions does, however, apply in these debates: it is entirely up to the Member who has the floor whether to accept a request to intervene. Opposition frontbenchers may not intervene from the front bench in their shadow capacity in either the backbench or ministerial speech in a half-hour adjournment debate, even if it starts early and therefore lasts longer than half an hour. The same applies in half-hour Westminster Hall debates.

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House

Question Time

13. Before Question Time or ministerial statements, you should only write to the Speaker seeking to be called when you wish to draw to his attention a particular fact (for example, a constituency connection or personal interest) which you think should be taken into account. Members who submit generalised requests to be called will be given no preference.
14. A request to be called at Prime Minister's Questions should be submitted only in the most exceptional circumstances. An example might be where a particular personal tragedy has occurred in connection with one of your constituents. Generalised requests to be called at PMQs will be counterproductive.
15. Questions must be brief, and particularly so during topical questions. You may make use of notes, but should avoid reading out your question word for word as this greatly undermines the impact of questions. Supplementary questions must be relevant to the substantive question just asked.
16. Members with oral questions should not leave the Chamber until all supplementary questions on their question have ended.

Urgent Questions

17. If you are called by the Speaker to ask an Urgent Question, the question should be asked in the terms that were agreed when you applied. It should not be embroidered.

Statements

18. Members seeking to be called following a ministerial statement, Urgent Question or the business question must be present for the whole of the opening statement. You should remain in the Chamber until you have been called to ask a question and for at least one exchange afterwards.

Participation levels

19. The Speaker's Office keeps comprehensive records of Members' success and failure in being called in debate, following ministerial statements, Urgent Questions and at Prime Minister's Questions. These statistics are always taken into account on subsequent occasions when deciding whom to call.

Parliamentary language

20. You should always bear in mind Erskine May's advice in 'Parliamentary Practice' that "good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language".
21. There is no hard and fast list of unparliamentary words. Whether something said is a breach of order depends on the context. The Speaker deprecates personal remarks about other Members. Any abusive or insulting language used in debate will be required to be withdrawn immediately. Accusations of deliberate falsehood, if seriously alleged, would be a matter of privilege and – as with other matters of privilege – may only be made on a substantive motion after writing privately to the Speaker to obtain permission to raise a matter of privilege. Any such accusation made in the course of other proceedings would be disorderly and must be withdrawn.
22. The privilege of freedom of speech in debate – that is, the protection against civil action or criminal sanction for what is said in proceedings of the House – allows us to conduct our debates without fear of outside interference. But it is a freedom which should be exercised responsibly, in the public interest, and take into account the interests of others outside this House. You should research carefully and take advice before exercising this freedom in sensitive or individual cases.

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House

Dress

23. As with the language you use, the way in which you dress should also demonstrate respect for the House and for its central position in the life of the nation. There is no exact dress code. Convention has been that for men a jacket and tie is expected; for women the equivalent level of formality should be observed.
24. The ostentatious display of badges, brand names, slogans or other forms of advertising of either commercial or non-commercial causes is not in order. The tradition of the House is that decorations of any kind (such as medals) and uniforms are not worn in the Chamber.
25. Members who fail to show respect to the House will not be called to speak by the Chair, and if they show flagrant disrespect in their manner of dress they may be asked to withdraw from the Chamber.

Courtesies and conventions in the Chamber

26. On entering or leaving the Chamber, you should give a slight bow to the Chair, as a gesture of respect to the House. The same courtesy should be extended to the Chair in Westminster Hall and the Chair of a public bill, delegated legislation or European committee.
27. You should not cross the line of sight between the Speaker and the Member who has the floor or, at Question Time, between a Member asking a question and the Minister responding to him or her.
28. When the Chair stands, all other Members should resume their seats (or be standing outside the speaking limits of the Chamber – beyond the bar or behind the Chair) and be silent.
29. When the Chair is preparing to collect the voices for the second time during a division and name the tellers, other Members should not pass between the Chair and the tellers until the tellers have departed for the lobbies.
30. When the tellers are ready to announce the result of a division, Members should either resume their seats or stand outside the speaking limits of the Chamber (beyond the bar or behind the Chair). The result should be heard in silence.

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House

31. The House has agreed to the use in the Chamber of hand-held electronic devices, provided that they cause no disturbance and are not used in such a way as to impair decorum. All such devices must be in silent mode. The taking of telephone calls or listening to voicemails in the Chamber is prohibited. You may use electronic devices in place of paper notes as an aide memoire in debate. Electronic devices may not be used to film, take photographs or make audio recordings in or around the Chamber.
32. When listening to a debate you should not read books or newspapers or obviously devote yourself to your correspondence. Use of iPads, for example, should be confined to that necessary to enable your participation in debate. Laptops, newspapers and large briefcases should not be brought into the Chamber; small bags are permitted. Food and drink should not be consumed in the Chamber, though water is permitted.

33. You should face the Chair when addressing the House. It is discourteous to turn your back on the Chair. It also means your words may be lost. The television cameras and microphones covering proceedings for broadcast have been placed to give the clearest coverage of Members whilst addressing the House through the Chair, and the Official Report (Hansard) relies on the feed from these microphones to record what you say accurately.
34. Members should remember that the TV cameras do not focus only on the Member speaking but also broadcast occasional reaction shots during debates and Question Time.

Courtesy to other Members

35. You should notify colleagues whenever:
- you intend to refer to them in the Chamber (other than making passing reference to what they have said on the public record);
 - you table questions which specifically affect colleagues' constituencies;
 - you intend to visit a colleague's constituency (except on purely private visits).
36. All reasonable efforts should be taken to notify the other Member and failing to do so is regarded by colleagues as very discourteous.

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House

Courtesy to staff

37. Members, their staff, and House staff work together to make the House of Commons function effectively. This work is typically undertaken in a constructive manner and there is clear commitment on the part of the House of Commons Commission to ensuring that everyone is, at all times, treated with dignity, courtesy and respect.
38. The House of Commons endorsed a new anti-bullying/harassment policy, the Respect Policy, in July 2014. This policy sets out the process for managing situations where House staff feel that they have experienced unacceptable behaviour on the part of Members or their staff. Complaints raised under the Respect Policy are taken seriously and could be referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, the Committee on Standards and possibly the House itself for sanction. There is a zero tolerance policy for inappropriate behaviour.

General

39. The Clerks at the Table are available to assist all Members, and you should always feel free to approach them for impartial advice.

