



THE HOUSE OF COMMONS CHAMBER

TRADITIONS IN THE CHAMBER

MPs are not allowed to speak in the space between two red lines running along the length of the Chamber. It has been claimed these lines are traditionally two swords' lengths apart to prevent MPs duelling although there is no evidence to support this.

ST STEPHEN'S CHAPEL

The original debating Chamber for the House of Commons was Saint Stephen's Chapel in the Palace of Westminster given by King Edward VI in 1547.

The Chamber

The House of Commons Chamber is where Members of Parliament (MPs) debate and vote on important issues. The main business of the House takes place here and can involve MPs putting questions to government ministers, debating issues of national importance and passing legislation.

The Speaker's Chair and the Table of the House provide a focal point in the Chamber at its north end. There are green leather benches on either side where MPs sit: looking towards the Speaker's Chair the government sit on the left and the opposition parties on the right. The front benches are reserved for government ministers and opposition spokespeople. Only MPs are allowed to sit on the benches in the Chamber.

Ministers and the Official Opposition's shadow ministers stand at the despatch boxes to address the House. The Mace, a ceremonial staff of office representing the authority of House of Commons, is placed on the Table of the House when it is sitting.

Visiting the Chamber

The public gallery of the Chamber is accessible when the House is sitting, via the Cromwell Green Visitor Entrance. Visitors watch proceedings from behind a security screen installed in 2006.

Sound is provided through a speaker system. UK residents can ask their MP to arrange a tour of Parliament which includes walking through the Chamber.

Wartime damage

During the Second World War, on 10 May 1941, a bombing raid destroyed the House of Commons Chamber. MPs used the House of Lords Chamber until the Commons was rebuilt. The new Chamber, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, was used for the first time on 26 October 1950.

Reporting from the Chamber

The Press Gallery is located above and behind the Speaker's Chair. In 1803, Speaker Abbot recognised the need to protect the right of reporters to be in the gallery. His successors have strongly defended that right and access for accredited journalists has been guaranteed ever since. The Press Gallery now represents more than 300 newspapers, wire service, radio, television and internet journalists who work at Westminster.

Broadcasting from the Chamber

The BBC is required by its Licence and Agreement to "broadcast an impartial account day by day, prepared by professional reporters, of the proceedings of both Houses of Parliament". This requirement has been met by the *Today in Parliament* radio programme since October 1945. Sound recordings of proceedings in the Chamber began in 1978.

In 1990, after a trial period, the House of Commons agreed that its proceedings should also be televised. Today, BBC Parliament offers live unedited coverage of the House of Commons on cable, digital satellite and Freeview.

BBC Parliament also offers 'recorded as live' coverage of the House of Lords; extensive coverage of select and standing committees and full live coverage of the main political party conferences as well as proceedings in devolved assemblies.

BBC 2, BBC News Channel and Sky News show Prime Minister's Questions live, along with some ministerial statements and committee evidence, extending coverage to other important debates such as the Budget. In addition to this, most channels use brief extracts of parliamentary material in news bulletins and current affairs programmes.

Live and archived coverage of Parliament's proceedings taking place in public, including debates and committee meetings of both Houses is also available on the Internet at www.parliamentlive.tv

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House of Commons Information Office

T: 020 7219 4272 E: hinfo@parliament.uk

House of Commons Information Office,
House of Commons, Westminster,
London, SW1A 0AA

House of Lords Information Office

T: 020 7219 3107 E: hinfo@parliament.uk

House of Lords Information Office,
House of Lords, Westminster,
London, SW1A 0PW