



THE HOUSE *of* COMMONS

a brief guide

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A Message from the Speaker



Visitors to the House of Commons Chamber often remark that it is much smaller than they expected. Indeed there is seating accommodation (including the side galleries) for only 437 of the 659 Members of Parliament, which is why you may see MPs standing around the Speaker's Chair during major debates and statements. But the size of the Chamber and its confrontational design contribute, I think, to the special nature of debate in the House of Commons, which is lively and robust but also intimate and often conversational. It is truly a debating chamber, where every Member is free to express his or her own view on a matter, and where opposing arguments can be expressed frankly and passionately. We value the vigorous nature of debate in the House of Commons – it is a reflection and a reminder of our nation's democratic principles.

Much work goes on in Committees, away from the Chamber, and MPs have many other demands on their time as they take up matters raised by their constituents. It is possible therefore that at certain times of the day there may not be as many Members present in the Chamber as you might expect.

Whether working here at Westminster or visiting, even briefly, I think you sense the long history behind our Parliament. The UK parliamentary system – that is, the House of Commons together with the House of Lords and the Sovereign – has evolved over the last 700 years. For over nine centuries there has been a royal palace at Westminster and the building which the Houses of Parliament now occupy – the Palace of Westminster – is still designated a royal palace. The present building was built after a catastrophic fire in 1834 destroyed most of the ancient buildings. Designed by Charles Barry, assisted by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, the current Palace of Westminster is a truly magnificent building and its distinctive shape is recognised throughout the world. The House of Commons Chamber was rebuilt between 1945 and 1950, following destruction in the Second World War.

I hope this guide helps convey a sense of our Parliamentary tradition and gives you a flavour of the work that goes on in the House of Commons.

Speaker of the House of Commons



The House of Commons – What Members of Parliament do

Members of Parliament (MPs) have many duties that involve them in different activities at the House of Commons and in their constituencies.



Representing constituents' interests

MPs spend some time each week working in their constituency and dealing with constituents' problems. An MP will often be able to advise on how to address a particular issue and may write to the relevant authority or Minister on behalf of a constituent. MPs can also raise local or personal issues in a variety of ways in the House of Commons.

Legislation

The House of Commons examines and passes proposals for new laws, generally in the form of Bills presented to Parliament by the Government. Individual backbench

MPs can also present Bills but there is not as much time available for discussion of these "Private Members' Bills". The Government cannot simply legislate on its own – it requires the approval of the House of Commons and the House of Lords for new laws (though the House of Lords has no say in financial measures). Bills are usually amended during their passage through both Houses, and Bills that pass through all the required stages become Acts of Parliament. Most of the detailed examination of Bills in the House of Commons is carried out in *Standing Committees*.

Scrutinising Government

A major role of the House of Commons is to subject the policies and actions of the Government to public scrutiny. The Government runs the country but Parliament holds the Government to account. When Government Ministers make statements in the House of Commons, they are interrogated by the Opposition and by individual Members of all parties. MPs can also question Ministers directly during the periods given over to question time in the House of Commons. Written questions are also put to Ministers and the answers are included in the published *Official Report* of proceedings.

PROGRESS OF BILLS: MAIN STAGES

<i>1st Reading</i>	Formal Presentation
<i>2nd Reading</i>	Debate on general principle
<i>Committee</i>	Detailed examination of clauses and proposed amendments (normally in Standing Committee, though constitutional and other important Bills will be examined in the Chamber)
<i>Report</i>	Consideration of Committee amendments and opportunity for further changes
<i>3rd Reading</i>	Final debate on Bill as a whole

Most Bills go through the same stages in both House of Parliament – they can start in either – and a final text has to be agreed before *Royal Assent* is granted.



A typical working day

When Parliament is in Session, the House of Commons generally meets from Mondays to Thursdays and on most Fridays.

The work of the House is regulated by an elaborate code of procedure. The Government determines the business and the order in which it is taken, although some specific slots and days are given over to Opposition parties and “backbench” Members.

In the Chamber the day’s business always begins with prayers followed by any items of private business, which are taken formally (without debate). The main business of the day follows.

ORAL QUESTIONS

On Monday to Thursday Government Ministers from a particular Department or Departments answer questions. The Prime Minister has a weekly question time, on Wednesdays. At question time the Speaker calls the name of the person with the first question in the *Order of Business*. As the text of the question is already printed, the Member says simply (for example) “*Number one*”. The relevant Minister reads a prepared reply, after which the Member is then allowed a “supplementary” question and the Minister again replies. Other MPs are then called to ask supplementary questions.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Matters of importance or urgent concern may be raised after question time in the form of ministerial statements to the House, Private Notice Questions (PNQs) or applications for emergency debate. A *Business Statement* is usually delivered each Thursday detailing business of the House for the forthcoming week or two.

House of Commons
Tuesday 8th March 2005

Summary Agenda

11.30 a.m. Afterwards	Prayers. Private Business (<i>without debate</i>). Oral Questions to the Secretary of State for Transport.
12.20 p.m.	Oral Questions to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and to the Minister for the Cabinet Office.
12.30 p.m. Afterwards	Urgent Questions, Ministerial Statements (if any). Presentation of Bill (<i>without debate</i>). Royal Marriages (Freedom of Religion)—Motion for leave to introduce a Bill under the Ten minute rule (Mr Edward Leigh) (<i>for up to 20 minutes</i>). Road Safety Bill: Report Stage and Third Reading (<i>may continue until 7.00 p.m.</i>). Statutory Instruments (Motions for approval) (<i>without debate</i>). Adjournment Debate: Local government financial settlement for Southend (Mr David Amess) (<i>until 7.30 p.m. or for half an hour, whichever is later</i>).

At the end of the sitting

DEBATES

Not all debates relate to specific pieces of legislation. There is also opportunity for debate on the important issues of the day and for backbench MPs to raise matters of local interest. For example, at the end of each day’s proceedings there is an *Adjournment debate* which usually lasts for half an hour and is generally on a constituency matter.

COMMITTEES

There are meetings of Standing Committees and Select Committees most days. Most of these are held in public and anyone can attend.

LEGISLATION

The main business of the day will often be a debate on a Bill – on second reading, report stage or third reading. If the committee stage of a Bill is considered by all MPs in the Chamber, as opposed to a Standing Committee, then the Mace, which usually sits on the top of the *Table of the House*, is placed in the brackets below the Table.

Road Safety Bill

LAYS AMENDED IN STANDING COMMITTEE (A)

CONTENTS

Counts towards costs of road safety measures

- 1 Road safety grants
- Fined penalties*
- 2 Conditional fixed penalties
- 3 Conditional fixed penalty points
- 4 Cliving of fixed penalty points by vehicle owners
- 5 Speed cameras operator licensing
- 6 Public passenger vehicle licensing
- New system of endorsement*
- 7 Licensing record
- 8 Unlicensed and foreign drivers
- 9 All drivers
- Deposits*
- 10 Theoretical penalty deposits
- Disqualification etc.*
- 11 Power to require specimens of breath or samples or to hospitalise
- 12 High risk categories, medical enquiries following disqualification
- 13 Period of disqualification to allow to allow specimen to be tested
- 14 Accidents licence suspension
- 15 Disqualification period for return to driving
- Spending*
- 16 Mobile phone
- 17 Speed measurement equipment (sets their devices)
- 18 Exemption from speed limits
- Insurance in penalties*
- 19 Conviction, and its consequences, liability



House of Commons Publications

The record of what is said each day is published the following day in the Official Report, also known as *Hansard*.

Select Committee reports and papers are published as *House of Commons Papers* and Bills are issued in a separate numbered series.

The Government presents papers to Parliament as *Command Papers* (“by command of Her Majesty”). Many statements of government policy (*White Papers*) are published as Command Papers.

Most of these publications, together with a lot more information about the work and procedure of the House of Commons, are available on the Parliamentary web site (<http://www.parliament.uk>). This includes the *Weekly Information Bulletin* which enables readers to keep track of what is going on in Parliament.



How to contact an MP

MPs usually deal only with their own constituents, so if you wish to raise an issue with an MP you should write to the Member representing the constituency in which you live. If you do not know who this is, you can enquire at your local library, ring the House of Commons Information Office (020-7219 4272) or use the constituency locator service on the Internet (www.locata.co.uk/commons). You can then contact your MP’s office at the House of Commons – House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA (tel: 020-7219 3000).

Your local library should also have details of where your MP regularly holds "surgeries" in the constituency.



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Draft Animal Welfare Bill

First Report of Session 2004–2005



Select Committees

Another way in which the work of the Government is scrutinised is through the departmental *Select Committees*. These committees, made up of Members from all parties, examine the expenditure, administration and policy of Government Departments. They conduct inquiries into subjects within their remit and take evidence from interested bodies. Ministers often appear before them and answer questions. Select Committee reports typically make a number of recommendations for action by the Government.



Approving taxation and expenditure

In order for the Government to be able to implement its policies, it has to raise money through taxation. The Government presents its taxation plans to the House of Commons annually when the Chancellor of the Exchequer delivers the "Budget" statement. The House has to approve the levels of taxation being proposed and must also approve the Government's expenditure plans.

Procedure in debate

The Speaker sits in the *Speaker's Chair* at the end of the *Table of the House*. The Government sits to the Speaker's right and the Opposition to the Speaker's left. It is the Speaker's duty to keep order in debate and to call MPs to speak. The MP selected must address the Chair, and must refer to other MPs by their constituency or to Ministers by their office. Thus MPs will refer to each other as "*The Honourable Member for ...*", or (to Privy Counsellors) "*The Right Honourable Member for ...*". If the MP referred to is of the same party, they will generally be "*My Honourable Friend*". By custom, only Ministers and Opposition spokesmen and women (*front-benchers*) may speak from the *Despatch Boxes*.

Debates in the House of Commons are always based on a *motion*, (e.g. "*That the ... Order be approved*" or "*That the Bill be read a second time*"). At the end of the debate the Chair (the Speaker or, in the case of a Committee Stage of a Bill, the Chairman) will *put the question*. A *Division* (vote) of the House may follow, which requires MPs to walk through the appropriate "*Aye*" or "*No*" lobby adjoining the Chamber. *Tellers* announce the results of divisions to the Speaker or Chairman.

