
Issued by the Speaker and the Deputy
Speakers

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons



September 2021

Introduction

This guidance was agreed by the Speaker and Deputy Speakers and is intended to help Members, particularly those new to the House, in understanding the behaviour expected in the Chamber of the House of Commons and in Westminster Hall.

While open to change, these rules are important in maintaining the good order of proceedings and the civility of debate—so that all Members are able to participate and be heard with respect.



Applying to speak in debates

1. If you wish to catch the Speaker's eye to speak in a debate in the Chamber, you should write to the Speaker in advance. You should also write if you wish to speak in a Westminster Hall debate of an hour or more in length. 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. You should write in advance to indicate a wish to speak on the second or third readings of bills. It is not necessary to do so for Committee of the whole House, report stage or consideration of Lords Amendments.
3. The informal and unpublished list of those who have given notice is used by the Chair to calculate the length of any time limit on speeches and determine the order in which to call speakers. 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 you have previously spoken (or have sought to speak but not been called) during the Session.

Attendance in the Chamber

5. 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 at the end of the debate. Members who fail to observe these courtesies will be given a lower or no priority on the next occasion they seek to speak. Where (for example, on backbench business) there are no formal wind-ups, you must still be present for a reasonable proportion of the debate, and for the conclusion of the debate. If you are not present for opening speeches or leave the Chamber after these without notifying the Chair, it will be assumed that you do not wish to take part in the debate.

Length of speeches

6. The Chair 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. The Chair will not call a Member after the wind-up speeches have concluded, even if there is time remaining.
7. Even if time limits are not imposed, you should speak with reasonable brevity and be mindful of others. 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.

Interventions

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 must 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. It is a discourtesy to others to make an intervention shortly after arriving in the Chamber, and to leave again shortly afterwards. At the very least you must have been present for the whole of any speech you intervene in. Excessive interventions may prejudice your chances of being called to speak.

End-of-day adjournment and other half-hour debates

9. 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.
10. You are not required to get agreement in advance before making an intervention in speeches in these debates: it is entirely up to the Member who has the floor whether to accept a request to intervene. But opposition frontbenchers may not intervene 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.

Question time

11. 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 not be given priority.

12. 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.
13. Questions must be brief, and particularly so during topicals. You may make use of notes, but do not read out your question word for word as this greatly undermines the impact. Supplementaries must be relevant to the substantive question just asked. If you have asked an oral question, you must not leave the Chamber until all supplementary questions on that question have ended.

Statements and urgent questions

14. If you wish to be called to ask a question following a ministerial statement, urgent question or the business question, you must be present for the whole of the opening statement.
15. Government and Opposition front-benchers must keep to the time limits set by the Speaker for statements and urgent questions. Frontbench spokesmen must remain present till the end of questions on the statement or urgent question.
16. If you are called by the Speaker to ask an urgent question, the question should be asked in the terms that were agreed when your application was accepted. It should not be embroidered. Your supplementary question must take no longer than two minutes.

Participation

17. 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.

Speaking in the Chamber

18. 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).
19. 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.

Listening to debates

20. Whether seated in the Chamber or standing behind the Chair or elsewhere, you must take care that your private conversation or observations on debate do not disturb proceedings or make it difficult to hear whoever is speaking.
21. You 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.

22. When listening to a debate you should not read books or newspapers or obviously devote yourself to your phone or other electronic device.

Use of electronic devices

23. 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. Their use should be confined to enabling your participation in debate. You may use electronic devices in place of paper notes in debate and may consult them when you are not speaking, but they must not distract you or others from the debate going on or make it look as if you are not listening. All such devices must be in silent mode and the taking of telephone calls or listening to voicemails in the Chamber is prohibited.
24. You must not use any device to take photographs, film or make audio recordings in or around the Chamber.

Parliamentary language

25. You should always bear in mind Erskine May's advice in *Parliamentary Practice* that "good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language".
26. 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 may only be made on a substantive motion. No such accusations should be made in the course of other proceedings: if they are, they must be withdrawn immediately.

27. 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 taking 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. Similarly, you should take care to avoid referring to cases which are active before the courts, unless the Speaker has specifically agreed to waive the House’s sub judice resolution.

28. Members must always address the House through the Chair. It is wrong to address another Member as ‘you’. This is not just an archaic convention. It is essential in maintaining the civil tone and objectivity of debate. It also avoids personal attacks as opposed to political criticism. As “You” means the Chair, 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)’
- or perhaps ‘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”.

References to the Gallery

29. It is no longer considered out of order to make any reference to visitors in the Public Gallery, but any such reference should be brief and relevant to the debate, and must not be phrased in a way that might intimidate or seek to influence debate.

Dress

30. As with the language you use, the way in which you dress should demonstrate respect for your constituents, for the House and for the institution of Parliament in the life of the nation. Members are expected to wear business attire in and around the Chamber. Jeans, chinos, sportswear or any other casual trousers are not appropriate. T-shirts and sleeveless tops are not business attire. Smart/ business shoes are expected to be worn. Casual shoes and trainers are not appropriate. Men are encouraged to wear a tie, and jackets must be worn. It is a privilege to serve as a Member of Parliament and your dress, language and conduct should reflect this.
31. Wearing scarves, T-shirts, or large badges displaying brand names or 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 (medals, etc) of any kind and uniforms are not worn in the Chamber.
32. Members who fail to show respect to the House will not be called to speak by the Chair, and anyone showing flagrant disrespect in their manner of dress may be asked to withdraw from the Chamber.
33. You are not required to wear business dress if you are only attending to vote in a division, but in those circumstances you should not take your seat in the Chamber or stand within the Chamber between divisions.

Courtesies and conventions in the Chamber

34. 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.
35. 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.
36. 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.
37. Singing and chanting are not permitted in the Chamber. Clapping is also not allowed as it eats into the time available for debate and, as the Modernisation Committee pointed out, “there is a danger that such a practice might be open to abuse and could lead in certain circumstances to orchestration of what would amount to standing ovations with the success or failure of a speech being judged not by its content but by the relative length of the ovation at the end”.
38. 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.
39. 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.

Bags

40. Space in the Chamber is limited. Laptops, rucksacks, newspapers, briefcases and extra-large handbags should not be brought into the Chamber. Only small bags are permitted.

Food and drink

41. Food and drink should not be consumed in the Chamber, unless you have alerted the Chair that you need them for health reasons. Water is permitted.

Accompanying children

42. You may take babies or toddlers with you into the division lobby, and – if necessary to get to the division lobby – take them through the Chamber. For safety reasons, you are asked to carry your child and not to bring pushchairs through the lobby. You should not take your seat in the Chamber when accompanied by your child, nor stand at either end of the Chamber, between divisions.

Courtesy to other Members

43. 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).

All reasonable efforts should be taken to notify the other Member, and failing to do so is regarded by colleagues as very discourteous.

Courtesy to each other

44. 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.

45. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) is a support service for anyone experiencing bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct on the parliamentary estate and/or while carrying out parliamentary work. The scheme is available to staff employed by or working for the House of Commons, House of Lords, or Parliamentary Digital Service, staff working for MPs and Peers (including constituency staff), MPs and Peers, as well as contractors employed by external organisations who hold a parliamentary pass and visitors on the Parliamentary estate.

46. All members of the Parliamentary community can call the ICGS Helpline, for free at 0808 168 9281 (Text relay: 18001 0808 168 9281). Working hours are 9-5 Monday-Friday. The helpline can also be contacted by e-mail (support@ICGShelpline.org.uk). An advisor will support anyone contacting the ICGS Helpline by talking with them about their experiences. The advisor will then provide guidance through options for dealing with the behaviour, including the option to make a formal complaint. These conversations are confidential.

Advice

47. The Clerks at the Table are available to assist all Members, and you should feel free to approach them for advice – either at the Table or in the offices in the corridor at the back of the Chair.

