

Hashtags and tweeting bills before Parliament

Note from James Thresher, Head of Digital Outreach, Public Information and Outreach, Houses of Parliament.

Summary

This note aims to outline the approaches taken by the Digital Outreach Team to posting updates on social networking platform Twitter in respect to the passage of bills through the House of Commons.

Background to the Digital Outreach team

Public Information and Outreach (PIO) is responsible for encouraging greater awareness of the work and relevance of the institution of Parliament, and promoting productive engagement between the public and the House of Commons and House of Lords.

Within PIO, the Digital Outreach team is responsible for publishing real-time information on the work of the House of Commons, developing explanatory content on the Parliament website and forging productive working relationships with influential external websites and web forums.

The Twitter account

The [@HouseofCommons](#) Twitter account was launched on 4 January 2013. It is produced by Digital Outreach staff to provide impartial, regular and timely updates about Parliamentary business that takes place in the Commons Chamber and Westminster Hall.

The account is used to help increase public knowledge and understanding of the work and opportunities for engagement with, the Commons Chamber. As of the end of October 2014, the account had 52,093 followers, including many Members of Parliament and political journalists.

Account content

Content of updates on [@HouseofCommons](#) includes (but is not limited to) the announcement of Urgent Questions and Ministerial Statements, the start of debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall, calls for written evidence for Public Bill Committees, the results of key divisions (where possible) and the coverage of other ad hoc announcements and proceedings, such as the 2013 and 2014 recalls to debate Syria and Iraq.

Using hashtags

When tweeting from the [@HouseofCommons](#) account we seek to make effective use of hashtags. As hashtags are used to categorise and find topics in search on Twitter, we have used them to raise awareness of the breadth of subjects that are discussed in the Commons and, particularly in the case of Urgent Questions and Ministerial Statements, to help demonstrate the topicality and relevance of the work of the House in scrutinising government.

As House staff we have a duty to maintain impartiality at all times and to act in a manner which does not bring the organisation into disrepute. These are principles that also inform our decision making when considering appropriate hashtags to use.

At times there may be hashtags that are widely used but reflect only one side of a political debate and in some instances, even the terms themselves are a source of great contention. One such example is 'under-occupancy penalty' which can also be referred to as 'under-occupancy charge' or 'bedroom tax', depending on the political position taken.

In instances where such contention exists, unless the term is clearly stated in the title of a debate or bill, if we feel we cannot maintain a balance of political positions in our tweet, such hashtags are avoided.

How we tweet bills

Given the potential complexities of legislative scrutiny in the Commons, as well as the challenges of micro-blogging as a medium, rather than attempting in-depth commentary we have opted to concentrate on signposting information published on the Parliament website on the proceedings of Government and Private Members' Bills.

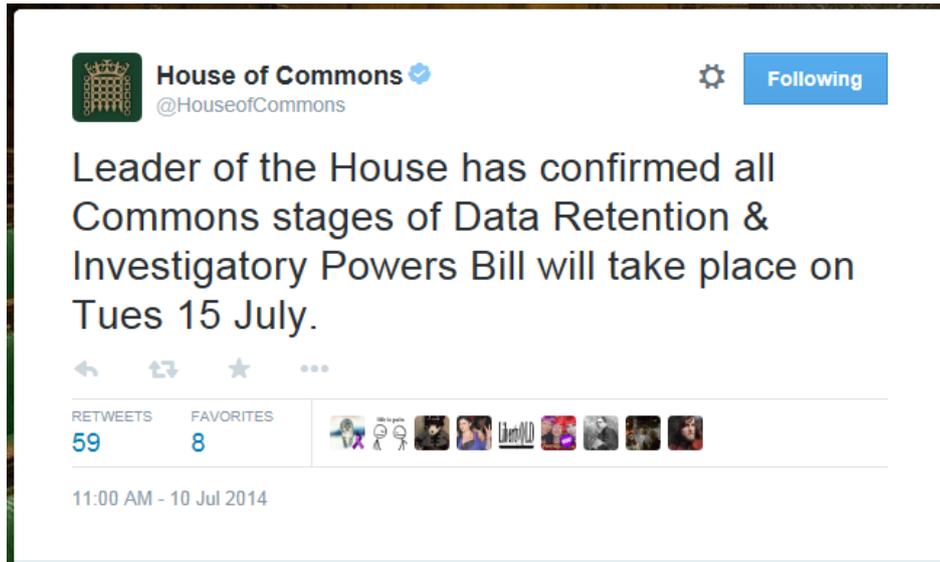
Typically this involves linking to news articles in the [Parliament News section](#) of the site, also created by the Digital Outreach team, which in turn can direct web users to:

- relevant pages for each specific bill, together with explanatory notes, in the [Bills before Parliament](#) section
- the video/audio feed of proceedings in [Parliament.TV](#)
- transcripts of debates in [Hansard](#)
- explanatory content giving [guidance on the passage of a bill](#)
- relevant briefing papers produced by the House of Commons library.

When we tweet Bills

When tweeting bills we seek to raise awareness of the next stage of proceedings that is going to take place, and when.

As the first reading of a bill is a formality and there is little content available on the Parliament website to flag up at the time, we tend to start tweeting at the second reading stage. There have been exceptions for bills that have a high level of public interest, such as the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Bill, when we have tweeted the announcement by the Leader of the House of Commons during the Business Question on the preceding Thursday.



<https://twitter.com/HouseofCommons/status/487174637621874688>

Updates on @HouseofCommons then follow a bill's progress through the Commons, from second reading to Committee stage, report stage, third reading (or whichever stages may constitute 'remaining stages') and then finally debate on any Lords amendments.

If a bill goes to a Public Bill Committee following second reading, we work with the Scrutiny Unit to highlight the call for written evidence, drawing attention to the fact that this is an opportunity for those with relevant expertise and experience or a special interest to submit their views to the relevant committee. When available, the subsequent announcement of the evidence programme is also tweeted.

We also aim to tweet the outcome of key divisions on bills. Tweeting the results of all divisions on the account has not yet proved possible, due in part to the availability of staff resource during later sittings of the House (weighed against public demand/interest in updates on particular votes). Some divisions, such as those on amendments during report stage, can also be exceptionally difficult to accurately describe in 140 characters and ensure that we do not potentially create a misleading understanding of what MPs have or have not actually voted for.

Hashtagging keywords in the Bill title

Since the account launched, we have considered different approaches as to how we use hashtags in tweets about bills. Our initial approach after the launch of @HouseofCommons was to highlight keywords within the title of a bill.

Although we were aware that Twitter users were using a variety of bill-specific hashtags, we took the view that tweeting keyword hashtags instead could optimise the reach of the information in tweets – as well as highlighting the breadth of subjects debated in the Commons – at a time when the account was in its infancy, with just a few thousand followers and yet to be given verified status.

Early examples included the Government's **Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill** and the **Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill**.



<https://twitter.com/HouseofCommons/status/336908105084444672>

Using bill-specific hashtags

As the number of followers of the account has grown, and staff confidence in using the medium increased, we adapted our approach to use bill-specific hashtags.

Following discussions with colleagues in the House of Lords we sought to follow a more coordinated, bicameral approach to the use of bill-specific hashtags from the start of the 2014-15 parliamentary session in June 2014.

Examples include the Government's **Modern Slavery Bill** and **Childcare Payments Bill**.



<https://twitter.com/HouseofCommons/status/492240395883913216>

Using both key word and bill-specific hashtags

More recently we have explored using a combination of both previous approaches, hashtagging keywords within the title of a bill and using the bill-specific hashtags. Although this approach can reduce the number of available characters, and risks exceeding the three hashtag limit thought to be best practice, we are optimistic that this will increase the reach of our tweets further.

Examples include the Government's **Pensions Schemes Bill** and the **Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill**.



<https://twitter.com/HouseofCommons/status/534672893079453696>

Observations

The following observations in respect to legislative scrutiny and Twitter may be of use to the Digital Democracy Commission as they consider their recommendations.

Seeking to originate hashtags

Based on our experience to date it can be difficult for Parliament to initiate the use of bill-specific hashtags. Bills can have a form of existence before their formal introduction in either House. The first reading of the **Modern Slavery Bill** took place in the Commons on 10 June 2014, but it was announced by the Government as a draft Bill in December 2013; the hashtag [#ModernSlaveryBill](#) appears to have come into use some six months before the Bill began its passage through Parliament.

Other bills, including some Private Members' Bills, can be a result of particular campaigns with pre-established media interest or public relations activity that include social media.

We can seek to initiate bill-specific hashtags – such as [#ChildcarePaymentsBill](#) (for the **Childcare Payments Bill 2014-15**) or [#NICBill](#) (for the **National Insurance Contributions Bill 2014-15**) – but find no or few other non-Parliamentary Twitter accounts use them, although this can sometimes be a reflection of low interest on Twitter in that particular legislation.

More often than not, bill tweets from @HouseofCommons tend to join in existing discussions using hashtags on which some consensus on Twitter has emerged, rather than initiating them.

Deciding on key aspects to hashtag

It is fairly straightforward to create a bill-specific hashtag when the title of the bill is succinct, e.g. [#WalesBill](#). However, it is more of a challenge when bills have considerably longer titles, such as the **Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill 2013-14**. The matter is further complicated when we consider whether opting for one aspect of the bill over others suggests an undue emphasis on said aspect, when each are potentially politically contentious issues.

Some bills, such as the **Social Action, Responsibility and Heroism Bill 2014-15**, can be composed of a number of elements that make it difficult to settle on one easily understood hashtag that reflects the aims of the bill. In this instance, in consultation with colleagues in the House of Lords, we opted for [#HeroismBill](#) for tweets on the Commons stages. By the time the Bill reached the Lords however, [#SARAHBill](#) had become more widely used on Twitter.

Popular hashtags can be very different

A further consideration was posed by the passage of the **Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill**. While [#LobbyingBill](#) was widely used for this bill, a number of Twitter users adopted [#GaggingBill](#) (and later [#GaggingLaw](#)) in reference to changes in the regulation of third parties which register to campaign at general elections contained within the bill. As it reflects a highly political aspect of the Bill, we would not have used this hashtag, especially as it contains no elements of the actual title.

In some instances, bill-specific hashtags can bear no resemblance to the title of the Bill. The **Medical Innovation Bill** is a Private Members' Bill that was introduced in the House of Lords in the 2012-13 session - and again in the 2013-14 and 2014-15 sessions, yet it is widely referred to as the [#SaatchiBill](#) after its sponsor Lord Maurice Saatchi.

Keeping up with hashtags

Given that community consensus is a key feature of the use of hashtags on Twitter, they can by their nature be fluid, constantly evolving. This was particularly noticeable in relation to Twitter user's response to the **Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Bill 2014**.

This Bill presented something of a challenge as its passage was fast-tracked through Parliament, reducing the time available for us to research and draft potential hashtags, and increasing the need for us to post information in a timely manner.

Over the course of our content planning we identified and opted to use [#DataRetentionBill](#) as the hashtag for this Bill. On the day (15 July) we noticed shortly before we were due to begin posting our tweets, that [#DRIP](#) was increasingly being used in reference to the Bill, so we sought to include both tags where possible. By the time the Bill completed its passage through the Commons later that evening, [#DRIP](#) had become the more widely used hashtag, and we adapted our approach again accordingly.

Since then, the use of both hashtags has continued to change; #DataRetentionBill has recently been used in reference to similar legislation planned in Australia and #DRIP being used in a variety of different contexts.

In a similar vein, [#EnergyBill](#), which had been previously used in reference to what became the **Energy Act 2013**, is now used in the context of billing of domestic energy supplies, rather than legislation.

Hashtags can be global

Finally, as mentioned above, #DataRetentionBill has recently been used in respect to similar legislation planned in Australia. Similarly [#FinanceBill](#), which we have used to reference the annual legislation that enacts the proposals announced in the UK Government's Budget statement, is now also used in tweets on the Irish Government's 2014 Finance Bill.

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