



Parliament Explained 5

# Debates in Parliament

Debates in Parliament allow opinions to be discussed and decisions to be reached.



Introduction	1
General Debates	2
Debates in Parliament	3
The House of Commons	4
The House of Lords	7
Attending Debates	10

# Debates in Parliament

## Introduction

### How are decisions reached in Parliament?

Both Houses of Parliament air opinions and reach their decisions by means of debates. Every year the House of Commons and House of Lords each spend hundreds of hours debating. Many of the debates are about proposed laws; others simply allow the opinions of MPs and Lords to be heard. Some debates involve matters of national or international importance; others involve matters of local importance to just a small area of the country. Sometimes individual MPs and Lords have the chance to choose subjects for debate. It is important, therefore, to understand how the system of debates works, and why so much of Parliament's business is conducted in this way.



## General Debates

### Why have debates at all?

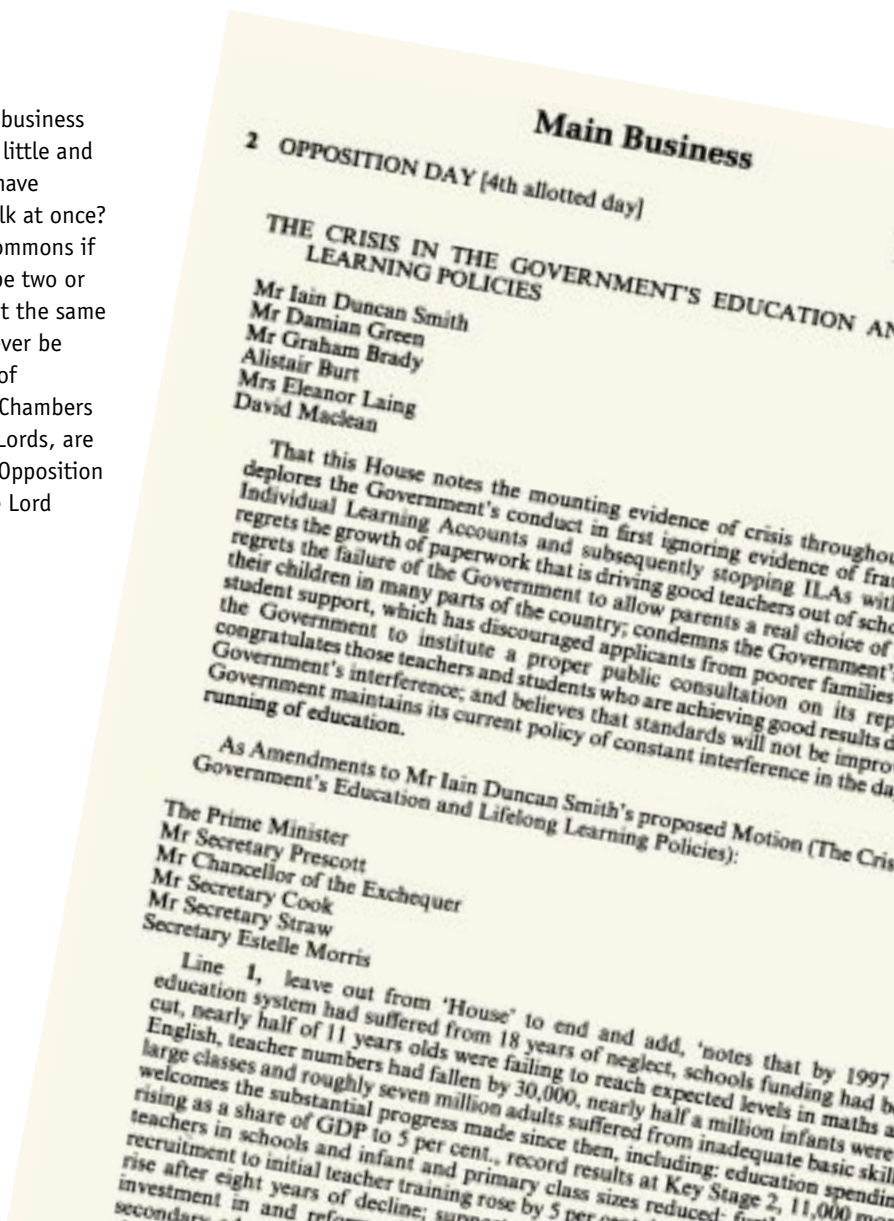
Some of you will have taken part in school debates and will already know how a debate works. For those of you who have not, a debate is a discussion that is conducted according to a particular set of rules. All debates are based on a motion. At school, for example, you might debate the motion that 'This House believes that the requirement to wear school uniform is out-dated' or that 'This House believes that fourteen year olds should be allowed to ride motor bikes'. The reason for having a motion is to ensure that everyone knows exactly what is being debated. The motion also divides the participants into two clear sides arguing for and against the motion. Perhaps you think this is a bad thing and that it would be better to have a general discussion in which a number of viewpoints would be expressed? The trouble is that, without the focus that a motion provides, it would be more difficult for the debate to result in a decision. The rules of debate give both discipline and a sense of direction to a discussion.

### What are these rules of debate?

We have already considered the importance of the motion and how this divides those taking part into two clear groups: those in favour and those against. There are also rules governing the way in which the two arguments are put forward. There are usually one or two principal speakers in favour of the motion, and the same number against it. Those speaking against may put down an amendment to the original motion to allow their beliefs to be recorded. After the principal speakers anyone else wishing to speak can then rise and make their contribution. Speakers address all their comments to the chairman, not to each other. If tempers become heated, it is the chairman who will step in to control the debate. The chairman usually decides when the discussion should end. The last person to speak is normally a principal speaker for the motion. He or she winds up the debate by replying to the arguments put forward by the opposition. A vote is then normally taken. If there are more votes for the motion, then the motion is carried, if not, then the motion is defeated. Those who choose not to vote are said to abstain. If the voting results in a tie, the chairman may decide one way or the other by using his or her casting (deciding) vote.

## Debates in Parliament

Both Houses of Parliament conduct the majority of their business in the form of debates. Vague discussions would achieve little and would waste an enormous amount of time. Perhaps you have occasionally heard a class of thirty pupils all trying to talk at once? Can you imagine what it would be like in the House of Commons if several hundred MPs tried to do the same? There might be two or three hundred different conversations being carried on at the same time. The noise would be deafening and nothing would ever be decided. It is, therefore, generally agreed that a degree of discipline is needed for parliamentary discussions. Both Chambers of Parliament, the House of Commons and the House of Lords, are well laid out for debate with the Government facing the Opposition under the watchful eye of the Speaker (Commons) or the Lord Chancellor (Lords).



# The House of Commons

## Who chairs the debates?

Debates in the House of Commons are chaired by the Speaker who, sitting on the raised chair between the two sides, is in a good position to control proceedings. Although the Speaker will have begun his or her career in Parliament as a member of one of the parties, he or she will have abandoned any links with that party after being elected Speaker. The Speaker is the neutral chairman of debates. He or she has to be completely unbiased and must not show favouritism towards any party. A new Speaker is elected by the Members of the House of Commons either after a general election or when the previous Speaker has died or retired. The Members always elect someone who they can respect and whose authority they will obey. The Speaker has three deputies who can take the Chair if required.

## What happens during Commons debates?

Debates in the House of Commons are, in many ways, like school debates. As in your school debates, all debates in the House of Commons are based on a motion. Often the motion will be considerably longer than anything debated in schools. Matters discussed in the Commons may be extremely complicated. It is most important that Members should know exactly what they are supporting or opposing. For example; the motion opposite was tabled by the Official Opposition in 2001 and the amendment was proposed by the Government. You can see from this that nobody should have been in any doubt as to what, exactly, was being debated. This particular debate involved a subject of general interest – education, however, a large proportion of the debates in the Commons concern proposed laws (legislation). Once again all discussions are held in the form of debates and each one is based on a motion. For example, the motion ‘That the Bill be now read a second time’ would be inviting the House to decide whether a bill (proposed law) should be allowed to complete its second stage (known as a Second Reading) and to proceed to the next stage. Some topics that do not require a decision may be discussed on a technical motion such as “That this House do now adjourn”.

All speeches are addressed to the chairman, in this case, the Speaker or his deputy. The principal Member in favour of the motion will speak first. Often the Government will have proposed the motion in which case the Member who speaks first is likely to be a Government minister. The Opposition case – the case against the motion – would then be put forward by their spokesperson. When these front-benchers – a Government minister or Opposition spokesperson, who normally sit on the front benches near the Table – have had their say, it is then the turn of the back-benchers. These are Members who sit on the back benches and are neither Government ministers nor Opposition spokespersons. Whilst front-benchers may, if they wish, speak from the Despatch Boxes on the table in front of the Speaker, all other Members rise to speak from wherever they are sitting in the House.



Rt Hon Michael Martin MP,  
Speaker of the House of Commons

## Who decides who should speak in a debate?

Whenever a Member finishes speaking it is the Speaker who decides who should speak next. Members who are keen to speak in a particular debate tell the officials in their party who arrange the business (Whips) and also the Speaker. The Speaker is then likely to call upon them to speak at some stage of the debate. At the end of each speech, a number of hopeful MPs who want to speak next will rise to their feet to try to 'catch the Speaker's eye'. In fact, this is often unnecessary, as the Speaker will usually know in advance who particularly wants to speak.

The Speaker will already have worked out roughly how the time should be balanced between Government and Opposition, front-benchers and back-benchers, and between the different viewpoints within each party. Usually Members are called from alternate sides of the House. When the Speaker calls on a Member to speak, the other MPs who rose at the same time will then sit down. Only one Member is allowed to stand and speak at any one time. If a Member wishes to interrupt a speech, he or she will rise to their feet. The Member who is speaking may then sit down and allow an interruption – or 'intervention' – to be made in his or her speech, but if he or she refuses to give way, then the Member wishing to interrupt should sit down.

Sometimes tempers rise and several MPs may try to shout at once. The Speaker then has to exert the Chair's authority. You may have seen and heard him on television and radio saying "Order, Order" as he brings the House under control again. Speeches must not be read, although notes can be referred to. After all, the whole point of having a debate is that one Member should follow on from what another has said, not that each should read his or her own speech which was prepared in advance.

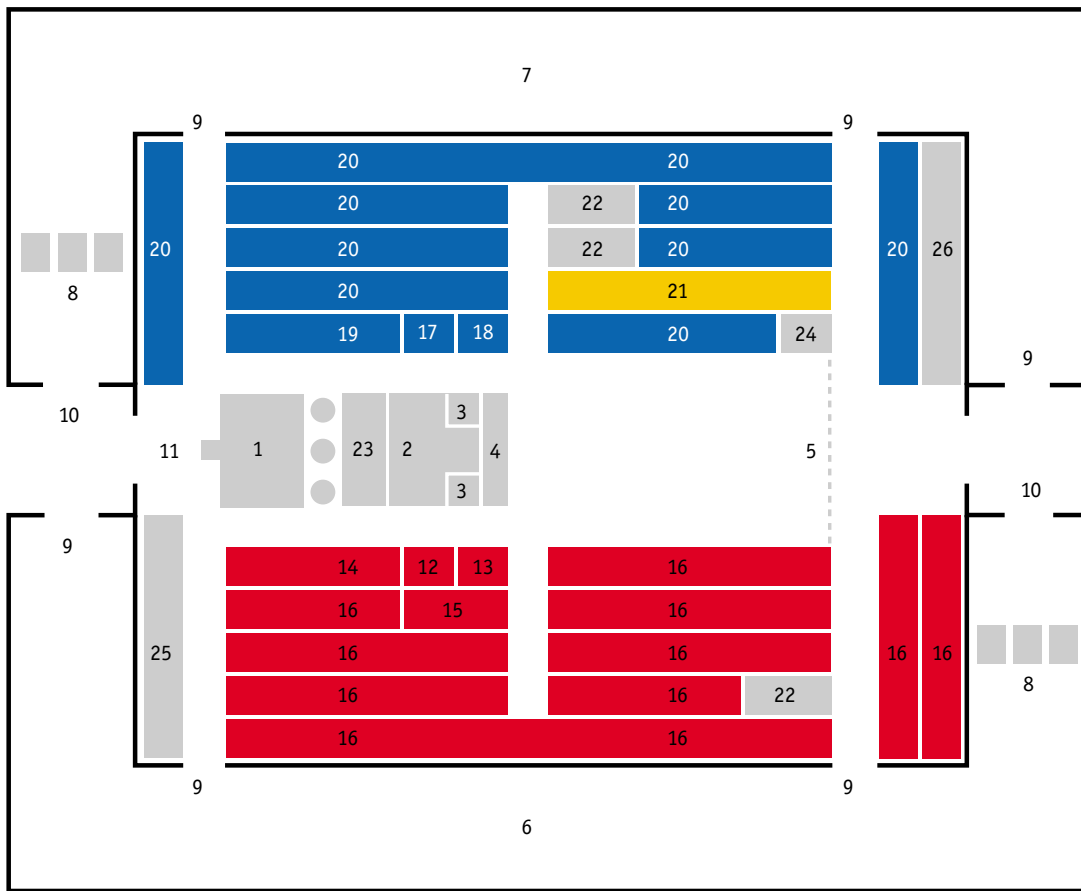
If one Member, in the course of a speech, wishes to refer to another Member, he or she must not mention their name, but should instead refer to "The Honourable Member for..." followed by the name of the constituency – the area represented by an MP. (The United Kingdom is divided into 659 constituencies, each of which is represented by one MP.) This form of address prevents debates from becoming personal attacks on individuals. Those Members, often current and former members of the Cabinet, who are Privy Councillors are referred to as the "Right Honourable Member for...". During the final stages of a debate 'winding up' speeches are usually made by an Opposition and a Government front-bencher.



## How long are debates?

The House of Commons does a great deal of work and is very short of time. For this reason, there is a time limit on most debates – many debates having started between 3.30pm and 5.30pm, have to end at 10.00pm. It often happens that not everyone who wanted to speak has had a chance to do so. To enable more Members to contribute to a debate, the Speaker will sometimes impose a time limit on backbenchers' speeches. Sometimes there is no time limit on a debate. If it is a debate on a bill there is always a danger that those opposing the Bill will try to prolong the debate to stop it making further progress. This kind of delaying tactic (known as 'filibustering') can be stopped by applying the 'closure' – a special motion which will end the debate. If the Speaker and the House both agree to the Closure Motion then the debate will end and a vote will take place.

We have already seen how most debates have a time limit on them. When a bill is being considered a timetable or 'programme motion' may be agreed or, if progress is slow, the Government may seek a limit on the further time that can be spent debating the bill (an allocation of time motion or 'guillotine'). As the Opposition usually disagrees with such a bill, they will generally oppose a guillotine. The Government, however, will have a majority in the House of Commons and will usually be able to see that a guillotine motion is passed.



The Commons Chamber

- 1 Speakers Chair
- 2 Table of the House
- 3 Dispatch boxes
- 4 The Mace
- 5 The Bar of the House
- 6 Aye Division Lobby
- 7 No Division Lobby
- 8 Division Clerks' Desks
- 9 Entrances to Lobbies
- 10 Exits from Lobbies
- 11 Petition Bag
- 12 Prime Minister
- 13 Government Whips
- 14 Other Ministers
- 15 Parliamentary Private Secretaries
- 16 Government Back-benches
- 17 Leader of Opposition
- 18 Opposition Whips
- 19 Shadow Ministers
- 20 Opposition Back-benches
- 21 Liberal Democrats
- 22 Other smaller Parties
- 23 Clerks at the Table
- 24 Serjeant at Arms
- 25 Civil Servants
- 26 Strangers

## How are decisions reached at the end of debates?

At the end of a debate, the House of Commons has to decide whether the motion should be agreed to or negatived (defeated). First of all the Speaker decides whether a vote is really necessary by getting the two sides to express their opinions by calling out "Aye" or "No" to show whether they agree or disagree with the motion. Once again the Speaker follows a set of rules which say exactly how this should be done. When the last Member in favour of the motion has sat down, the Speaker then 'puts the question' – to remind the House what the motion is. If the debate were on the second reading of a bill the Speaker would say, "The Question is that the Bill be now read a second time". He then invites the two sides to express their opinions by saying "as many as are of that opinion say 'Aye'; the contrary 'No' ". The Speaker listens while the two sides shout out "Aye" and "No". He will decide which side sounded more numerous and then say "I think the 'Ayes' (or the 'Noes') have it". If the other side protests, then there has to be a proper vote, called a 'Division'.

## What happens during a Division?

In both Houses of Parliament, the Members vote by walking through two corridors, known as Division Lobbies, which run around the outside of the two Chambers. The plan of the House of Commons above shows the position of the two Lobbies, the Aye Lobby and the No Lobby. The Speaker announces that a division is to take place by giving the order to 'clear the Lobby', to make sure that there are no visitors or staff in either Lobby who might get mixed up with the MPs as they vote. The Division Bell is then rung in all the places where MPs are likely to be such as the library, committee rooms and cafeterias. Each room has a television monitor which relays the sound of the division bell.

As soon as they hear the division bell, Members start to hurry towards the division lobbies. They have only eight minutes in which to reach the lobbies. Many Members have offices outside the Palace of Westminster and it can be quite a rush to get to the lobbies on time. The police clear a path for them as they scurry in from every direction. Two minutes after the question was first put the Speaker repeats it. If their opinion is still challenged, four Tellers – two Members from each side – are named. Their job is to count the Members as they come out of the two lobbies. Each lobby will be manned by one teller for the ayes and one for the noes, so that they can check each other's counting. As soon as the tellers have been chosen, they take up their position at the end of each lobby. They open the doors so the Members can be counted as they file past.

Before they are counted, however, the Members all have to have their names checked off by one of the Clerks who sit at three large desks at the end of each lobby. Members pass through the desks according to the initial letter of their surname.

The record of how each Member voted in a division will be published in the following day's Official Report, known as Hansard. Once they have been registered in this way, Members pass beyond the clerks' desks to be counted by the tellers. The tellers stand beside the doors at the exit from the lobby which are propped open in such a way that only one MP can pass at a time. This makes it easier for the tellers to count them. The last Member through shouts 'All out'. Eight minutes after the Speaker first put the question, all the doors into the lobbies are locked. Any Member arriving after that time will not be able to vote. If however, a Member is within the precincts of the House, but is too ill to walk through the Lobby, he or she can be counted in, if his or her opinion is known. A Member who votes in the wrong lobby by accident cannot undo that vote, but can cancel its effect by crossing to the other lobby and voting on the other side. Members may decide not to vote in a division, in which case they can stay in the Commons Chamber while the division takes place. Members not voting are said to abstain, although there is no way of recording this. The tellers then line up, enter the chamber and approach the table. The senior teller on the winning side gives the numbers to a clerk – one of up to three sitting at the table in front of the Speaker.

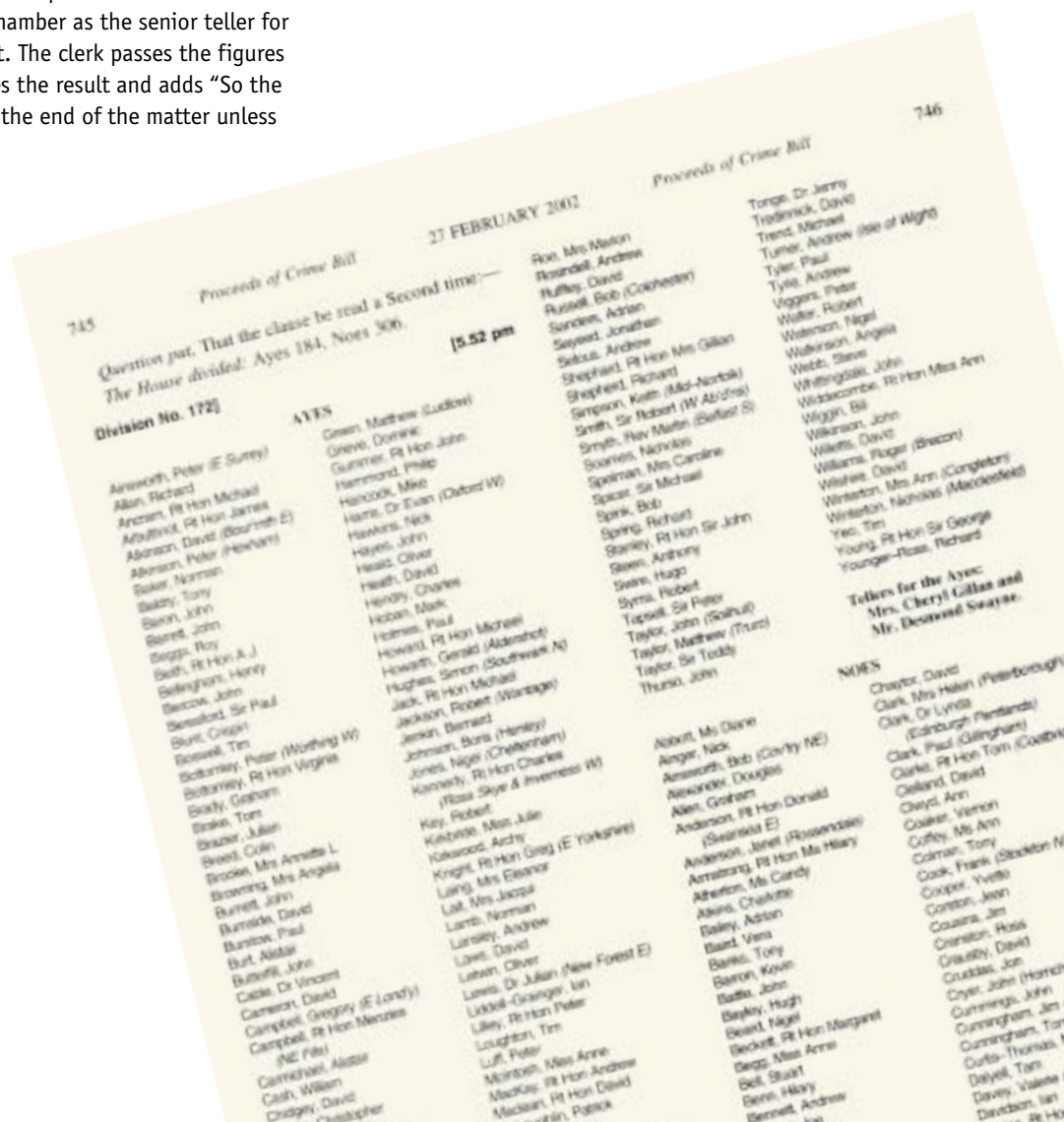
In a close vote, the Members waiting in suspense can tell who has won as soon as the tellers enter the Chamber as the senior teller for the winning side is always on the right. The clerk passes the figures to the Speaker who formally announces the result and adds "So the 'Ayes' (or 'Noes') have it". This will be the end of the matter unless – very rarely – there is a tie.

## What happens if there is a tie?

On the rare occasion when both the Ayes and the Noes have the same amount of votes then the Speaker will use a casting (deciding) vote. There are conventions – established traditions – as to how the Speaker will cast his or her vote. A decision should never be made solely on the vote of the Speaker. If the decision is on, for example, a motion to bring about change then the Speaker will vote 'No' so as to leave things as they are. If a tied vote occurs during the passage of legislation then the Speaker votes 'Aye' in order to allow the Bill to proceed to the next stage where Members will have further opportunities to debate and vote again.

## Other Debates

As well as debates in the House of Commons chamber, MPs also debate in the Westminster Hall chamber. This provides additional time for debates (eg on topics raised by individual Members) that could only be accommodated in the House of Commons itself at unsocial hours. Debates on the Committee stages of bills usually take place in Standing Committees rather than in the House of Commons Chamber. Further information about the House of Commons can be found in Parliament Explained booklet No 2.



# The House of Lords

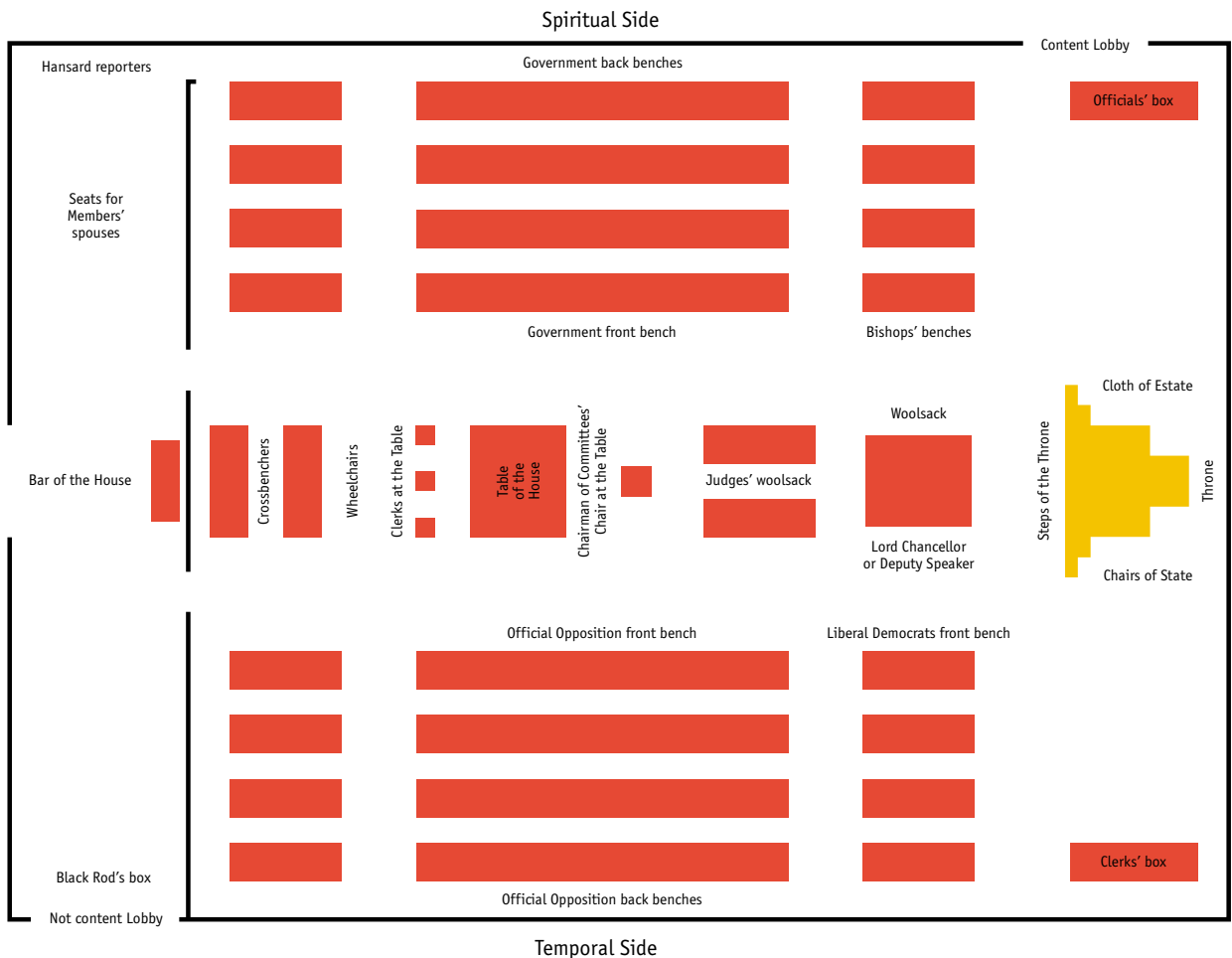
## How are debates carried out in the House of Lords?

House of Lords debates serve the same function as House of Commons debates, but there are a number of key differences in the types of debates and the way they are conducted. Another important difference is seen in the position of the Lord Chancellor, who amongst other roles, acts as the equivalent of the Speaker in the Commons. He presides over debates in the Lords from his special seat, known as the Woolsack.

## Is the role of the Lord Chancellor similar to that of the Speaker?

Unlike the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Lord Chancellor is not politically neutral since he is a member of the Cabinet. If there is a Conservative Government there will be a Conservative Lord Chancellor. When the Labour Party is in power, the Lord Chancellor will belong to the Labour Government.

As a member of the Government, the Lord Chancellor may make a speech on behalf of the Government. But as the Woolsack is the Speaker's seat, it would not be right for him to speak from it while making a Government speech. So in this situation he rises from the Woolsack and steps to the left before making his speech. The Lord Chancellor, therefore, by being able to take part in debates, is in a very different position from the Speaker of the House of Commons. He is not, in fact, a chairman at all and it would be wrong to refer to him as such. He does not, control the proceedings during a debate. You will never hear the Lord Chancellor shouting "Order, Order". It is assumed that the Lords themselves will keep order during their debates. On the whole, debates in the House of Lords are calmer than those in the Commons. If, however, the temperature did rise, there would be a chorus of 'Order, Order', from Lords sitting all round the Chamber, rather than from the Lord Chancellor himself.





Another difference between the Lord Chancellor's position and that of the Speaker of the House of Commons is that he does not decide who shall speak next in a debate. The practice of 'Catching the Speaker's Eye' in the House of Commons has no equivalent in the House of Lords. Instead, there is a list of speakers. The order of speaking will have been arranged in advance by agreement between the party Whips, together with a representative of the Cross Benchers – those who sit on the cross benches between the Government and the Opposition, and have no party ties (see plan). The Government Whips issue this list of speakers before the debate, but Lords can take part in a debate without having given notice beforehand, although it is not encouraged. If a number of Lords rise to speak at the same time, most of them will normally sit down immediately, allowing the remaining Lord to speak. If however, more than one Lord remains on his feet, there will be cries of "Order, Order" from all round the Chamber. This usually encourages all but one to sit down. The remaining Lord will then speak.

Unlike the House of Commons, where all speeches are directed towards the Speaker, all speeches in the Lords are addressed to the House in general and begin 'My Lords ...'. If one Lord making a speech wishes to refer to another Lord, he will do so in a particular way, eg 'The Noble Lord, The Lord Bloggs...', or in the case of a Bishop 'The Right Reverend Prelate, The Bishop of ...'. This is rather like the procedure in the House of Commons where Members are not referred to by name. As in the House of Commons notes can be referred to, but speeches should not be read. Long speeches are discouraged. Indeed, the House resolved in 1965 'That speeches should be shorter'.

### What types of debates take place?

Many debates in the Lords, like those in the Commons, are concerned with the various stages of law-making. The House of Lords, however, holds more general debates than the House of Commons. There are three main types of debate:

#### *On Legislation:*

The Second Reading of a bill, for example, is an opportunity to debate, in general terms, what the Bill is about.

#### *General Debates:*

Most Wednesday afternoons are set aside for general debates. Sometimes there is one long debate (up to a maximum of five hours) or two shorter debates. Each of the parties and crossbench group are allocated Wednesday slots for debate. The sort of issues that are debated include:

- The future of the London Underground
- Post-16 education
- The situation in the NHS with particular reference to medical teaching and research
- Child abuse
- A strategy for the recovery of the countryside, tourism and rural businesses





### *Short Debates (Unstarred Questions):*

These are technically questions that can be debated. They are a bit like adjournment debates in the Commons but involve more than just one speaker. They last for 1½ hours and usually take place during the dinner break on days when legislation is being considered or at the end of a day's business. Some of the subjects that were debated in 2001 included:

- Problems and needs of Gulf War Veterans
- Steps to increase the involvement of women in the democratic process
- Encouragement for disabled people to work in the tourism industry
- Request to the government to legislate to outlaw human cloning

There is usually no division at the end of a debate and the motion is simply withdrawn at the end of the discussion, after the Lords have had an opportunity to give their views. The opinion of the House is sometimes expressed at the end of some general debates, and on all debates on proposed laws. This is done by the two sides calling out their opinions and, if there is any doubt, by voting in a division.

### *How are divisions organised?*

The main function of the Lord Chancellor as Speaker of the House is to "Put the Question". Instead of 'Ayes' and 'Noes', however, the Lords will be divided into 'Contents' (those voting 'Yes') and 'Not-Contents' (those voting 'No'). At the end of a debate, the Lord Chancellor or his deputy repeats the terms of the motion before the House. He then says 'As many as are of that opinion will say 'Content', the contrary 'Not-Content'. If only one side responds, he says 'The Contents (or Not-Contents) have it'. If there is a response from both sides, he judges which side has more supporters and then says 'I think the Contents (or Not-Contents) have it'. If the other side does not challenge his decision he then says 'The Contents (or Not-Contents) have it'. That is then the end of the matter.

If his opinion is challenged, there has to be a division. 'Clear the Bar' orders the Lord Chancellor. The division bells ring, two tellers are chosen from each side, and the House then divides. The Contents walk through the lobby to the right of the Lord Chancellor and the Not-Contents through the one on his left. The procedure is very similar to that in the House of Commons. The Lord Chancellor is allowed to vote in all divisions (unlike the Speaker of the House of Commons who only has a casting vote in the event of a tie). He does not, however, have to walk through a division lobby, but instead has his name taken by a Clerk at the Table. When all the Lords have voted, the numbers are communicated to the Lord Chancellor, who announces the result.

For further information on the House of Lords see Parliament Explained No 6.

## Attending Debates

### How you can attend debates?

#### *Debates in the House of Commons*

The House of Commons sits at 2.30pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesday, at 11.30am on Thursdays and 9:30am on Fridays, except during the recess periods at Christmas, February constituency week, Easter, late Spring Bank Holiday time and the Summer. Additionally ten Fridays each session have been designated 'non-sitting' days when MPs can work in their constituencies. Apart from the Summer Recess which is in August, September and part of October, recesses are at roughly the same time as school holidays.

Constituents can request tickets to attend a debate from their MP. This is the only way to guarantee admission at popular times such as Prime Minister's Question Time. Visitors without tickets should join the public queue outside St. Stephen's Entrance. Those at the front of the queue will be admitted after about 4.00pm on Mondays to Wednesdays, at 1:00pm on Thursdays and at 9:30am on Fridays. Those wishing to avoid a lengthy wait are advised to consider visiting on Monday to Wednesday evenings, on Thursday afternoon or on Fridays when the demand for places in the Gallery is generally less. In addition, all MPs have a small number of Gallery tickets which they may be able to allocate to schools in their constituency. The Education Unit has an allocation of Gallery tickets and can arrange for a small number of students to attend debates.

Debates in Westminster Hall take place between 9:30am and 2.00pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and between 2:30pm and 5:30pm on Thursdays.

#### *Debates in the House of Lords*

The House of Lords sits at 2.30pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, at 3.00pm on Thursdays and occasionally at 11.00am on Fridays. There is no fixed finishing time and often the House of Lords sits until after 10pm and sometimes well into the early hours of the next day. The House of Lords has similar, but not exactly the same, recess periods to the House of Commons.

Both Lords and MPs can obtain up to fifteen Gallery tickets for the House of Lords. Again, a small number of Gallery tickets are available for school parties from the Education Unit. School parties can also join the public queue outside St. Stephen's Entrance. The head of the queue is normally admitted at the beginning of each day's sitting.

## Find Out More

#### *Archives*

Archives from 1497, including original Acts of Parliament, are kept in the House of Lords' Record Office (The Parliamentary Archives) which is open to the public, to view records on request tel: 020 7219 3074.

#### *Hansard*

The day's proceedings are printed in the Official Report, (separate volumes are produced for the Commons and Lords) referred to as Hansard after its original printer. It is also available at [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) by 9.00 the following morning.

#### *Television*

The televising of Parliament was pioneered by the House of Lords in 1985, followed by the House of Commons in 1989. The proceedings of both Houses can be seen on the BBC's parliamentary channel when the House is sitting.

#### *Website*

Go to [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) for general information on the role and function of both Houses, or details of membership, future business, legislation and Select Committee activity. For an experimental period it is possible to view a live **webcast** of House proceedings at the same address.

A website for young people can be found at [www.explore.parliament.uk](http://www.explore.parliament.uk)

#### *Education enquiries*

Applications for Gallery tickets for students and educational groups and further information about the work of Parliament can be obtained from:

Parliamentary Education Unit  
Room 604  
Norman Shaw Building (North)  
London SW1A 2TT

Tel: 020 7219 2105  
Fax: 020 7219 0818  
E-mail: [edunit@parliament.uk](mailto:edunit@parliament.uk)

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Chris Weeds  
Education Officer

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