



Parliament Explained 2

House of Commons

Our democratically elected chamber of 646 Members of Parliament.



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The House of Commons



What is the House of Commons?

The House of Commons is the democratically elected chamber in our Parliamentary system where important matters are debated and decisions reached. Together with the House of Lords and the Monarch it forms our Parliament.



Membership of the House of Commons

How many MPs are there?

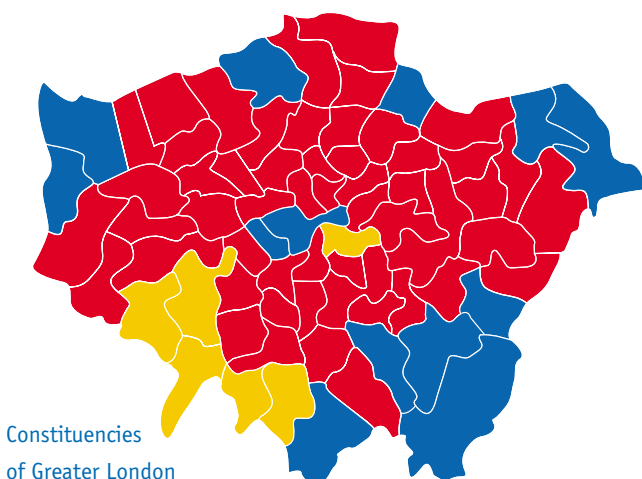
There are currently 646 Members of the House of Commons. They are commonly known as MPs – Members of Parliament. Each MP represents one of the 646 areas or constituencies into which the United Kingdom is divided.

How are MPs chosen?

With a few exceptions, all those over 18 may vote in Parliamentary elections, provided that they are citizens of either the United Kingdom or the Irish Republic. The exceptions are Members of the House of Lords, those detained under mental health legislation, those serving prison sentences of more than twelve months and those convicted of corrupt practices at elections during the previous seven years. Nobody can vote unless they are registered as an elector. A form is sent to each household every autumn so that everyone who is old enough has a chance to register. Everybody has one vote, but they do not have to use it. There are two types of Parliamentary election. A general election is when there is voting in all 646 constituencies on one day. A general election can be called by the Government at any time. Normally there has to be a general election within five years of the previous one.

A by-election occurs when a Member dies, retires or resigns. Polling only occurs in the one constituency without a Member, or perhaps several if they have all fallen vacant at the same time, but not in all 646 constituencies. In each constituency the candidate with the most votes wins and can then take his or her seat in Parliament (for further information on Parliamentary elections see Parliament Explained booklet No 1).

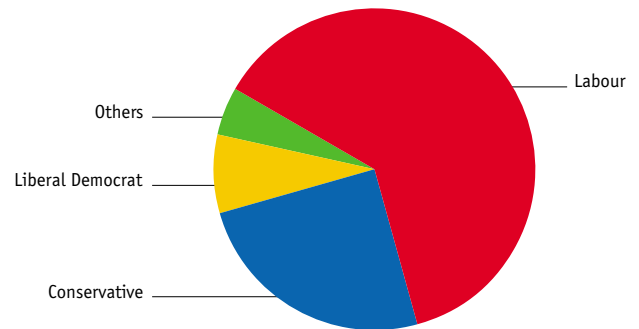
A Member may refer to the constituency as his or her seat. MPs represent and help all the people who live in the constituency, regardless of whether or how they voted, or if they support the party's policies. Almost all the Members of Parliament belong to a political party. They therefore have certain loyalties to their party as well as to their constituency. An MP has to achieve a balance between the interests of all those who have a claim on him or her.



Political Parties in the House of Commons

Which political parties are represented?

Following the general election of 7th June 2001, the state of the parties in the House of Commons was as follows:



Labour	411
Conservative	164
Liberal Democrat	52
Ulster Unionist Party	6
Scottish National Party	5
Plaid Cymru (Welsh Nationalist)	4
Social Democratic and Labour Party	3
Ulster Democratic Unionist Party	5
Sinn Fein (have not taken their seats)	4
Independent	1
The Speaker and 3 Deputies (do not normally vote)	4

Total

659

There are 118 women MPs.

This changed to 646 in 2005.

How is the Government formed?

As you can see from the table, the Labour Party has the largest number of MPs in the House of Commons, having won most seats in the general election of 2001. The party winning most seats in a general election will form a government and the leader of the party becomes Prime Minister. As the Conservatives won the general elections of 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992, we had a Conservative Government for eighteen years, with the party leader, firstly Margaret Thatcher, and from November 1990 John Major, as Prime Minister. There were Labour Governments from 1964 to 1970, 1974 to 1979 and since their election victory in 1997. Tony Blair has chosen a team of Ministers to help him, drawn from members of his own party in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Together they make up the Government (see Parliament Explained booklet No 4).

Who are the Opposition?

The second largest party in the House of Commons is currently the Conservative Party. The Conservative MPs are Members of Parliament but not members of the Government. At present, only chosen Labour MPs and peers form the Government. The Conservative MPs belong to the Official Opposition whose job it is to challenge the Government, to make it explain its policies and to check that it does its work properly. While in opposition, a party will develop its own policies and work out new tactics, because it is the aim of every Opposition to gain power itself at the next election. It therefore has to make sure that it is properly prepared to govern the country itself, if need be. The Leader of the Conservative Party, currently Iain Duncan Smith, is Leader of the Opposition. He is the leader of what is often known as the 'Shadow Cabinet'. Members of the Shadow Cabinet each 'shadow' the work of a Government Minister, criticising him or her if they disagree with policies and at the same time developing the knowledge and skills that will be needed, if and when they are returned to power themselves. The Liberal Democrats and the other smaller parties are also known as opposition parties. The Opposition is extremely important for the working of our Parliamentary system. This is clearly shown by the fact that the Opposition is recognised as 'Her Majesty's Opposition'.

Within the House of Commons the division of most of the Members into Government and Opposition is reinforced by the seating arrangements in the Chamber. The Government and its supporters sit on the right of the Speaker and the Opposition with their supporters and smaller parties on the left. A small party that generally identifies with the Government can sit on the Government side of the House. This is unusual. Just because they sit on the Opposition side of the Chamber the smaller parties don't necessarily vote with the Official Opposition against the Government. The smaller parties can vote with either side, depending on the issue which is being considered, or they might decide to abstain (not to vote at all).



Party organisation in the House of Commons

How are the parties organised?

Communication between the MPs within a party is obviously much easier if the party is small. Usually the MPs in the minor parties can meet for informal discussions without having to organise special channels of communication. The Labour and Conservative Parties, however, with so many more MPs, have had to organise themselves carefully to ensure that there is proper communication between the different Members.

The Parliamentary Labour Party, which includes Members of the House of Lords as well as the House of Commons, meets each week to discuss policy and work out new tactics. The Conservative Party has a similar organisation (often known as the 1922 Committee after the meeting in 1922 when the Conservatives decided to end their coalition with the Lloyd George Liberals). Both the Parliamentary Labour Party and the 1922 Committee help communication within the parties. Disputes and differences can be settled at their meetings. Front-benchers are interested to hear what is said as they need the support of their back-benchers both in opposition and in power. Both parties have subject groups to channel discussion in areas of policy.

Who are the Whips?

In addition to the two organisations mentioned above, most of the parties, large and small, have important officials, chosen from among their MPs, known as Whips. They have a variety of functions within their party. Discipline is important in any party, and the task of maintaining discipline falls to the Whips.

Although MPs in the House of Commons can theoretically vote as they wish, they are generally expected to vote with their party. This usually presents no problem. Most MPs belong to a party because they agree with what it stands for. Occasionally, however, revolts do occur. These become particularly important when the Government has only a small majority and the votes of a handful of MPs can make all the difference. Parties feel that it is, therefore, necessary to reinforce Members' natural loyalty to their parties with a tight system of party discipline. Within each of the main parties there is a Chief Whip, together with 10-12 Whips. Party organisation centres on the Whips' office hence those of the three larger parties are situated just off Members' Lobby, close to the Commons Chamber.

Why are they called Whips?

The term 'Whip' was first used in the eighteenth century. The party organisers of the time were likened to the person on the hunting field who 'whipped-in' the hounds in the pack to keep them all together. The term 'Whip' is, therefore, most appropriate as these officials work to keep their parties together.

How do the Whips keep Members informed?

Obviously it is part of a Whip's job to see that Members are kept informed about forthcoming business and that they know which issues matter most to the parties. Every week a Whip sends the MPs a notice, also known as The Whip, giving the order of business for the following week. Each matter to be discussed will be underlined once, twice or three times according to its importance. If it is underlined once then it is not a particularly important issue and attendance is merely requested. A rather more important matter will be underlined twice meaning that attendance is particularly requested. Attendance is essential when an item is underlined three times (a 'three-line whip'). The Whip illustrated shows three-line whips. In the case of a three-line whip, a Member will normally be expected to attend unless he or she is either seriously ill or has to attend to some extremely urgent business elsewhere and has permission from the Whips' office to be absent.

What happens if a Member wants to miss a vote?

When the two largest parties have roughly similar numbers of MPs then a Member who wishes to be absent from a 'two line whip' will 'pair' with an MP from the opposing side. This 'pairing' is recorded by the Whips and as both sides would be losing a vote then neither would gain an advantage. At present when the Government has a large majority then it is not possible to operate a pairing system. Instead groups of approximately 50 Government backbenchers are each given a week, known as a 'constituency week', when they are not expected to be available for one and two line whips. This enables the backbenchers to spend more time in their constituencies without putting the Government's majority at risk.

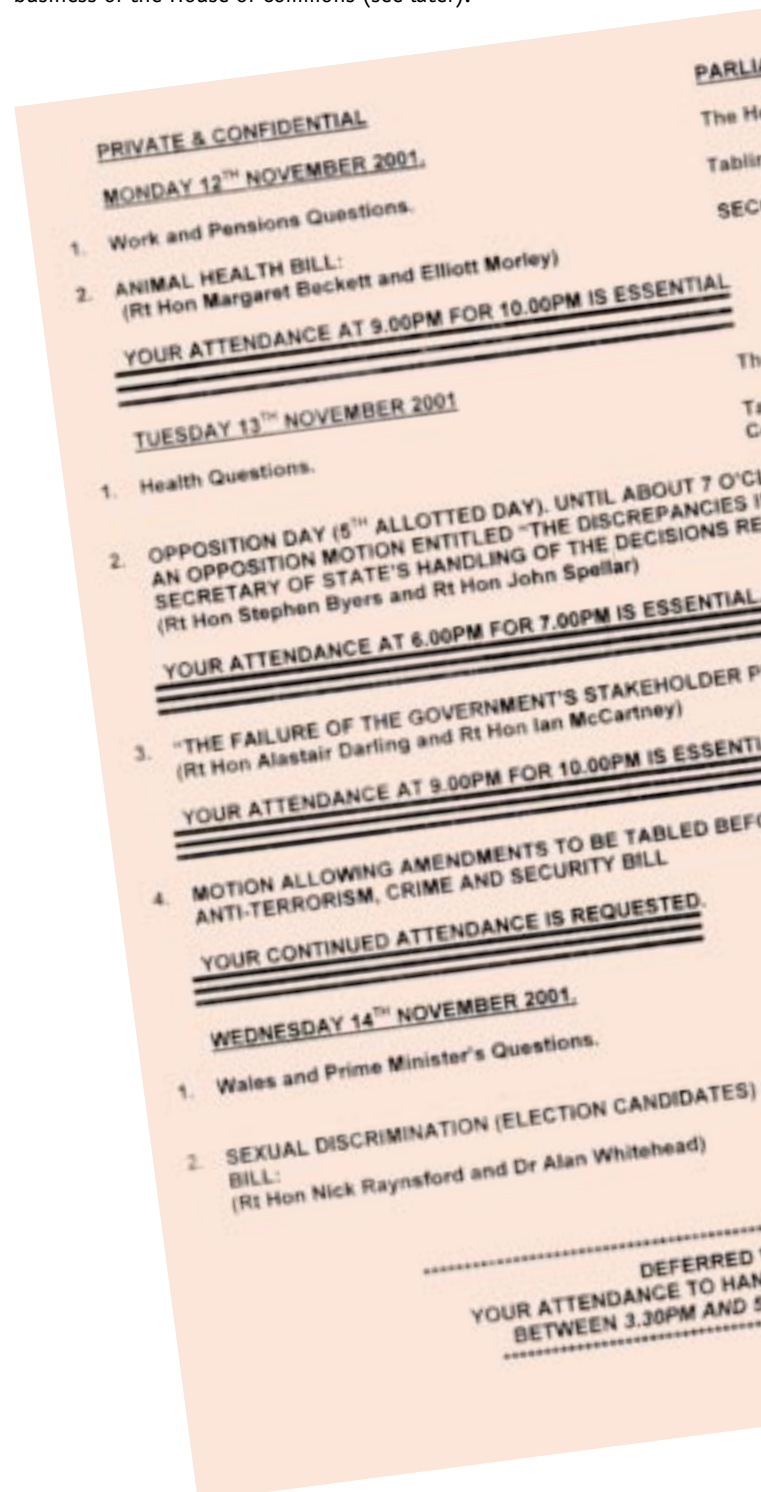
How else can the Whips help Members?

Usually, Members are willing to accept the discipline of the Whips, as they want their party to be as effective as possible. It is often not in a Member's interest to defy the Whip. Whips can be extremely helpful in a number of ways. First of all, Members rely on them for information about what is being talked about behind the scenes in Parliament. Secondly, Whips can be very helpful to Members who are promoting a Bill (proposed law) or a particular cause. Whips are also an important channel of communication between front-benchers and back-benchers. They communicate views, opinions, requests and grumbles. Whips also make recommendations to the party leaders as to which back-benchers are likely to make good Ministers. The opinion of the Whips can be extremely important for the reputation of a Member within his or her party.

What happens when a Member defies the Whip?

If a Member, despite the reasons listed above, still chooses to disobey the Party Whip, he or she can be warned several times. Continued defiance may eventually result in the Whip being withdrawn or a Member resigning the Whip. This means that the Member no longer belongs to the party in Parliament. Most Members would never go this far as they benefit from belonging to a party and it rarely happens. Sometimes the Whip is restored after a time. If it is permanently withdrawn, a Member may find his or her political career ruined as without party backing, their seat is very likely to be lost.

The Whips are also very important because they help to arrange the business of the House of Commons (see later).





The work of the House of Commons

What work does the House of Commons carry out?

The House of Commons does various types of work, which we shall consider in turn.

Making laws

The House of Commons spends nearly half of its time making laws. There are three types of Bill which are considered in the Commons. Government Bills and Private Members' Bills are both Public Bills, i.e. they are designed to affect the public as a whole. Government Bills are sponsored by the Government, while Private Members' Bills are promoted by individual back-bench MPs. In addition, some time is spent on Private Bills which affect only one area or group of people (details of how a Bill passes through Parliament are given in Parliament Explained booklet No 4).

Controlling finance

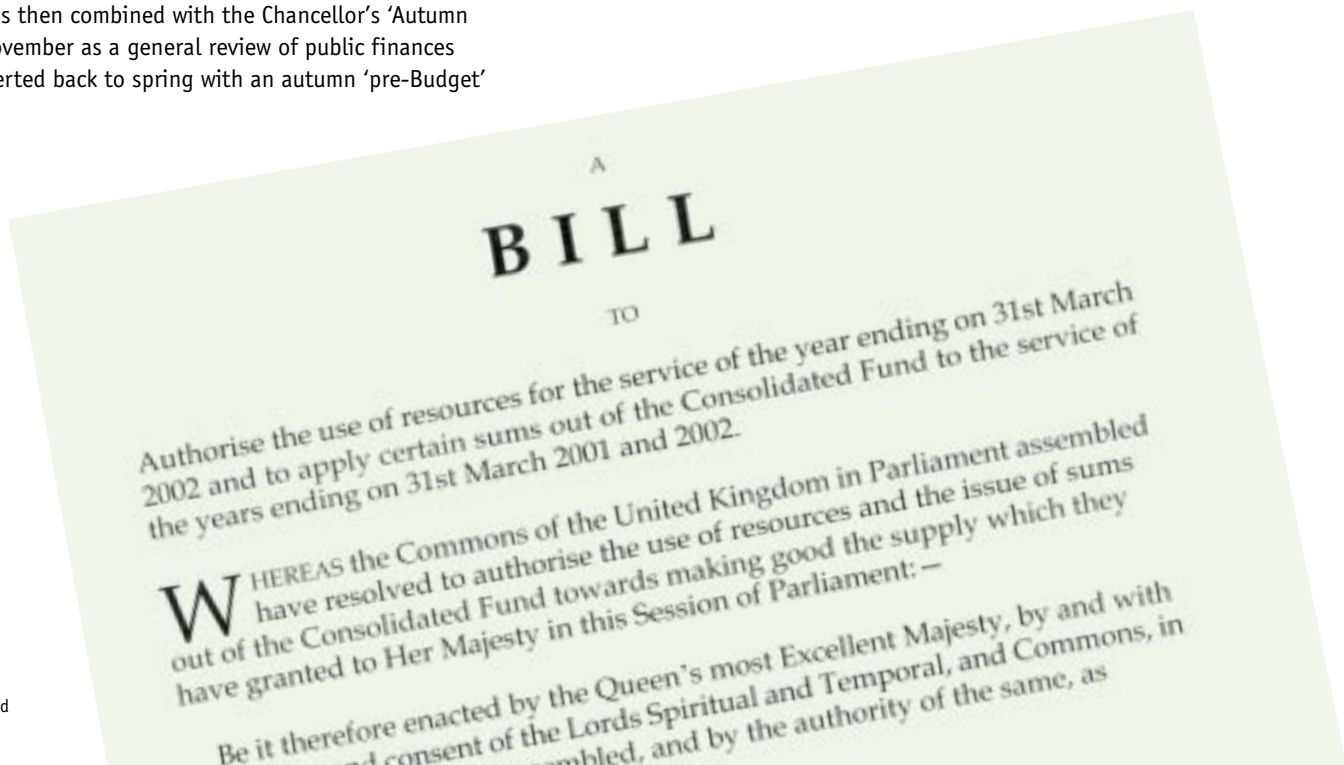
Before the Government can raise or spend money it must have permission from Parliament. As the House of Lords has no control over financial matters, it is the House of Commons which has to give this permission. The Commons contains 659 MPs who are directly elected by the public to look after their interests. It is only right, therefore, that they, rather than Members of the House of Lords who are not elected, should agree before the public have to pay taxes.

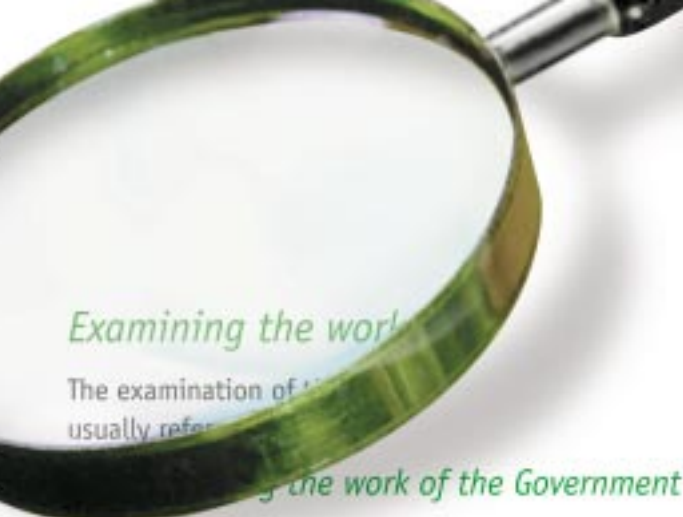
The Commons, first of all, controls the raising of money. Each year, the Chancellor of the Exchequer presents his Budget Statement to the Commons. In this, he explains how the Government intends to raise the money it needs to run the country during the following year. Some of this money will be borrowed by selling Government Bonds on the Stock Exchange, but the main way of raising money is by taxation. The Budget may, therefore, contain proposals to cut or increase taxes. Until March 1993, the Budget was presented in the spring. It was then combined with the Chancellor's 'Autumn Statement' in November as a general review of public finances but has now reverted back to spring with an autumn 'pre-Budget' statement.

Obviously it is the duty of the House of Commons, on behalf of the people, to make sure that taxes are not raised without good reason. The Budget proposals therefore have to be examined and discussed very carefully. The Budget proposals are set out in the Finance Bill which will go through all its stages like any other Bill. This usually takes about four months. At the end of this time, the Finance Bill becomes the Finance Act: a new law permitting the Government to raise the money it needs.

The House of Commons also has to give its approval before any money can be spent by the Government. Each year the Government presents its Estimates to the House of Commons. These set out the amounts required by each Government Department. The House has to agree to these Estimates before the Departments can be given any money. Three days are set aside under the House of Commons rules for discussion of the Estimates.

The House of Commons also has a way of checking up on Government Departments afterwards, to see whether they did their housekeeping properly. This work is done by the Select Committee known as the Public Accounts Committee. This Committee can examine cases of overspending by a Department and can also check whether the Government spent its money wisely. In order to carry out this work properly the Committee can see any accounts or documents which it considers necessary. It can also hold meetings where witnesses are questioned. The Committee is helped in its work by over 500 auditors in the National Audit Office. Once a series of investigations is complete, the Committee presents a Report to the House of Commons, which may choose to debate anything it considers particularly serious. These Reports are available to the public and the press through The Stationery Office and on the Internet. Any really bad mistake is, therefore, likely to be widely reported in the press.





Examining the work of the Government

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The examination of the work of the Government by Parliament is usually referred to as scrutiny. The Government is made to explain its policies and there are opportunities for criticising the Government.

Within the House of Commons the process of scrutiny is carried out in several ways:

(i) By Select Committees (Committees of Inquiry)

In 1979, twelve new Select Committees were set up to examine the work of one or more Government Departments, e.g. the Education and Skills Select Committee looks at the work of the Department for Education and Skills. Like the Public Accounts Committee these Departmental Committees can ask to see written evidence and examine witnesses. Usually the examination of witnesses takes place in public. Notice of these meetings is given in the press and in the House of Commons *Weekly Information Bulletin*, which may be stocked by your local library and is also on the Internet.

Most Select Committees have about eleven back-bench Members. The parties are represented in proportion to the number of seats they have in the House of Commons. As the Labour Party currently have a majority in the House of Commons they also have a majority on the Committees. The Members will be chosen by the House itself, after a recommendation from another Select Committee called the Committee of Selection. In addition to the Departmental Committees, there are other Select Committees examining the internal running of the House of Commons such as information services and procedure. Each Committee publishes reports which may be debated in Parliament and which are always available to the public and the press.

(ii) By asking questions

All Ministers are responsible to Parliament for the work of their Departments. Each Department has at least one Minister in the House of Commons who can answer other Members' Questions about the work of the Department. Most of the 40,000 or more Questions asked each year receive written answers, but about 3,000 a year are answered during Question Time, which takes place between 2.35pm and 3.30pm on Mondays to Wednesdays and 11.35am – 12.30pm on Thursdays. You may have heard extracts from Question Time on the radio or have watched it on television. Ministers take it in turn to answer Questions. Every Wednesday the Prime Minister answers Questions for 30 minutes on his own particular work as head of the Government, usually on a very wide range of subjects.

(iii) During Adjournment Debates

At the end of each day's sitting the House adjourns (suspends its proceedings) until the next sitting. However late the House sits, and this can be into the early hours of the morning, there is an Adjournment Debate for the last half hour. This is a chance for an individual MP to raise a matter of special concern to his or her constituents and to get a detailed explanation from the Minister involved. If we look at the Adjournment Debates for the week beginning Monday 22 October 2001, we can see the types of subject which are considered during Adjournment Debates.

Monday, 22 October

Barbara Follett on Government policy on abandoned vehicles

Tuesday, 23 October

Mr Mark Hoban on housing development in Hampshire

Wednesday, 24 October

Mr Colin Pickthall on off road motor cycles

Thursday, 25 October

Dr Vincent Cable on cervical cancer screening

Friday, 26 October

Helen Jones on the treatment of Mrs Mary Kelly at Whiston Hospital

Private Members' Debates also take place in the Westminster Hall chamber on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings and sometimes on Thursday afternoons.

(iv) On Opposition days

The Opposition can criticise Government policy on twenty Opposition Days. On seventeen of these the subject for discussion is chosen by the Leader of the Opposition. On the remaining three, the choice lies with the smaller Opposition parties.

Controlling indirect law-making (delegated legislation)

In recent decades, central government has taken on more work on our behalf than Governments ever did in the past. As a lot of this work requires new laws to be passed before it can be carried out, Parliament, and especially the House of Commons, has become very short of time. Sometimes, therefore, Parliament allows ministers to make laws affecting their own area of responsibility. Parliament keeps overall control by passing a sort of “parent” act which lays down limits which must not be overstepped by the minister. As Parliament has given them this power – delegated power – the process by which ministers make laws is known as delegated legislation. Most of these laws are laid before Parliament before taking effect, and quite a few are debated. They are also examined by yet another House of Commons investigation committee – the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments (Statutory Instruments are the main type of delegated legislation) – which joins with a Lords Committee for most instruments.

Examining European proposals

When we joined the European Economic Community (Common Market) in 1973 we agreed to obey the laws of the Community. A Select Committee in the House of Commons (the Select Committee on European Legislation) examines all proposed European laws before they are actually passed. The likely effects of the laws upon Britain are considered. The Report of this Committee may influence some of the people concerned with making these laws and it is sometimes possible for proposals to be changed if it can be shown that they will cause problems.

Protecting the individual

In the past, the grievances of the public were often brought to the attention of the House of Commons by means of petitions. Many petitions are still presented to Parliament. Some are presented by a Member making a speech. Others are read by a Clerk. Often they are presented by being placed in the Petition Bag which hangs on the back of the Speaker’s Chair. A Member can place petitions in the bag at any time during a sitting.

Nowadays many people contact their local Member of Parliament if they have a grievance against central government. Some complaints received by Members are not, however, against central government at all. MPs have to redirect those who, for example, should really be complaining to the local council about the state of their roads or housing problems. Most people write to their MP at the House of Commons but others prefer to meet the Member in person. Many MPs hold local ‘advice bureaux’ (sometimes known as ‘surgeries’) when they meet constituents who have problems which need solving. It is also possible for constituents to meet their MP at the House of Commons. Anyone can go to the Central Lobby and fill in a green card which will then be taken round the building by an official known as a Doorkeeper. Usually constituents meet their MP in the Central Lobby if they want to lobby him or her i.e. to win support for a particular cause which concerns them, rather than with their own problems. Upon being given a green card a Doorkeeper will carry out an extremely thorough search and normally an MP will be found if he or she is in the building. Unless the MP is extremely busy, perhaps serving on a Committee or attending to someone else, the MP will come along and talk to the constituent. Upon receiving a complaint against central government an MP will normally write to the appropriate minister. If the MP is not happy with the minister’s response to the letter he or she may actually go to see the minister. If the Member is still not satisfied then he or she can raise the matter at Question Time and, perhaps later in an Adjournment Debate. Often an Adjournment Debate is a Member’s last resort. There are, however, some cases which can be taken one stage further by being referred to the Ombudsman (Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration). This is when a person suspects that a decision taken by central government against them was not made in the proper way (maladministration). He or she can only make a complaint to the Ombudsman through an MP. If the decision, although unpopular, was made in the proper way, then there is nothing that the Ombudsman can do about it. If, however, it does turn out to be a case of maladministration, then the Ombudsman will investigate the case, issue a report and may suggest a suitable remedy.



Business of the House of Commons

How is business arranged in the House of Commons?

The Government plays a major part in controlling and arranging the business of the House. A government will want to introduce new Bills into Parliament during each session. It will also need time to explain its policies to the House in debates and statements. The Leader of the House, a senior member of the Cabinet, is the person responsible for arranging the business of the House over the whole session. The details are worked out by him or her, together with the Government Chief Whip. The Chief Whip and his or her staff work out roughly how long each item of business will take. This will often involve thinking several months ahead, particularly in the case of Bills which have to go through several stages in the Commons. The Government Chief Whip also has to work out the weekly timetable. Although over 60 per cent of the House of Commons' time is taken up with Government business, time also has to be set aside for Opposition business because effective Opposition is vital if our Parliamentary system is to work. About 10 per cent of the House of Commons' time is, therefore, set aside for the discussion of subjects chosen by the Opposition, mostly on the Opposition Days previously mentioned. There are also opportunities for individual MPs to raise matters which concern them either in the form of a debate, during Question Time, or by introducing a Private Members' Bill.

As the business of the House is something which affects both Government and Opposition, the Government Chief Whip will work with the Opposition Chief Whip in arranging the business. These two Chief Whips will first consult their own party leaders (and the Government Chief Whip will also discuss things with the Leader of the House) before they meet each other. Sometimes the Government may want to get a Bill through quickly. If it is something that the Opposition disagrees with then they may want to slow it down and have plenty of time to argue their case. The two Chief Whips will then have to work out a compromise. In addition to these formal meetings, the feelings of the two sides are also communicated in informal discussions which are said to take place "behind the Speaker's Chair". Some actually do take place there as that area is technically outside the House, but most of them take place outside the Chamber. All known opinions are, therefore, taken into account when the business is arranged. Every Thursday when the House of Commons is in session the Leader of the House makes the Business Statement. This is when the business for the following week is formally announced in the Chamber. Some future business may also be provisionally announced. Occasionally additional Business Statements need to be made to take account of changing circumstances.

Is there a daily timetable in the House of Commons?

Although different subjects will be discussed in the Chamber each day, they are discussed in a particular order.

The Order of Business on Mondays to Wednesdays (Thursday mornings and Fridays are different) follows the timetable set out below, although on some days extra things may be discussed in addition to these and not all of the items will take place every day.

2.30pm Prayers –

read by the Speaker's Chaplain.
The Speaker then takes the Chair.

Preliminary Business Motions for new writs –

for by-elections in vacant seats

Unopposed Private Business –

Private Bills (no debate possible)

2.35pm Questions to Ministers –

oral answers are given

3.00pm Questions to Prime Minister–

Wednesdays only

3.30pm Private Notice Questions –

urgent questions allowed to be asked without the usual notice

Business taken after Questions

Ministerial Statements –

a Minister explains the Government's position on something important that has happened

Requests for Emergency Debates –

requesting a debate on an urgent matter. If allowed by the Speaker it will normally take place the following day

Public Business

Introduction of Public Bills –

First Reading

Government Business Motions –

for example to allow the House to sit beyond 10.00pm that day to discuss important business

Motions for leave to introduce Bills –

(Tuesday and Wednesday only) a type of Private, known as a 'Ten Minute Rule Bill'

Other Public Business –

the majority of the day's business – later stages of Bills, general debates, etc

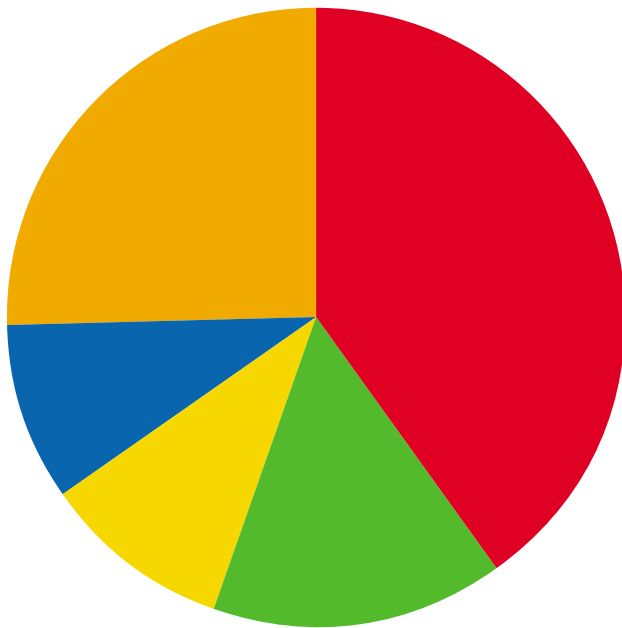
10.00pm Public Business ends

(can be later if the House agrees)

Presentation of Public Petitions

Motion for the Adjournment of the House – The Adjournment Debate is held

10.30pm House Adjourns.



Analysis of Session 1999-2000

■ Government Bills	560 hrs
■ Adjournment Debates	213 hrs 22 mins
■ Questions	138 hrs 15 mins
■ Opposition Motions	129 hrs 28 mins
■ Others	354 hrs 18 mins
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Addresses	39 hrs
Private Members Bills	83 hrs 30 mins
Private business	8 hrs 58 mins
Government Motions	37 hrs 41 mins
Estimates and Money Resolutions	38 hrs 10 mins
Statutory Instruments	32 hrs 28 mins
Statements	93 hrs 26 mins
Miscellaneous	7 hrs
Prayers	14 hrs 5 mins

Total sitting time 1442 hrs 41 mins

The reporting of debates

How are the proceedings of the House reported?

A clear and independent record of all the proceedings in the Chamber of the House of Commons and its Standing Committees can be found in Hansard – the Official Report. (A separate Hansard covers the House of Lords). Hansard is named after the family who used to publish the reports in the 19th century. Hansard reporters are a highly skilled team of shorthand writers and stenographers who need a minimum shorthand speed of 180 words a minute. They work in relays from the front row of the Reporters' Gallery above the Speaker's Chair. A daily Hansard covering the proceedings in the House from its start up until about midnight is available the following morning in time to be read over breakfast. If the House sits beyond midnight then the remaining proceedings appear a day later. Copies of Hansard in daily, weekly and fortnightly volumes can be purchased from The Stationery Office. It can also be referred to in public reference libraries and on the internet.

Are the proceedings of the House broadcast?

The first experiment in sound broadcasting of the proceedings of the House of Commons took place in 1968 but it was not until April 1978 that the permanent sound broadcasting system was inaugurated. BBC Radio began live daily broadcasts of Question Time but this was discontinued in July 1980. Regular programmes featuring Parliament can be heard on Radio 4.

Television coverage of the proceedings of the House of Commons did not begin until November 1989. This was initially for a six month experimental period and included detailed restrictions on what could be shown. After a review of the experiment the Select Committee on Televising the Proceedings of the House extended the period until 1991 when permanent arrangements were recommended by the Broadcasting Select Committee. Continuous and unedited coverage of proceedings can only be found on the Parliamentary Channel (available to subscribers via the satellite network). Both BBC2 and Channel 4 have regular programmes while Parliament is in session.

Meetings of the House of Commons

When and where does the House of Commons meet?

The House of Commons meets at Westminster in a chamber specially designed for the purpose. The Chamber was deliberately built rather small – it holds only 427 MPs instead of 659 – but this creates a better atmosphere for discussions than would be possible in a larger chamber. It is, after all, only on rare occasions that all 659 MPs are in the Chamber at once. The House of Commons sits at 2.30pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, at 11.30am on Thursdays and at 9.30am on Fridays except during the breaks (recesses) at Christmas, February, Easter, late Spring Bank Holiday and the Summer. In the 1999-2000 session the House sat for 170 days. A session of Parliament normally lasts about a year, from November to November, but it can be longer or shorter than this, for example before or after a general election.

Since November 1999 sittings have also taken place in the Westminster Hall Chamber to allow more time for Private Members' Debates. These take place on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 9.30am to 2.00pm and from 2.30pm to 5.30pm on Thursdays.



Visiting the House of Commons

Is the House of Commons open to the public?

The Strangers' (public) Gallery is open whenever the House of Commons is sitting. The Education Unit has a small allocation of Gallery tickets for educational purposes only and can arrange for a small number of students to attend debates. Members of Parliament can obtain a small number of tickets for their constituents to visit the Strangers' Gallery. Overseas visitors can apply to their Embassy or High Commission. Non-ticket holders may form a queue behind the notice for the House of Commons at St Stephen's entrance but a wait of several hours may be necessary in the early part of the afternoon. It is generally easier to gain admission in the evenings, on Thursday mornings and on Fridays.



There are also a limited number of seats for the public in the Westminster Hall Chamber.

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

The 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



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 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 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

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

Other titles in this series:

1 Parliamentary Elections

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5 Debates in Parliament

6 House of Lords

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