Thank you for inviting me to participate in your Committee’s seminar last week on the sitting hours of the House. My own Committee discussed this matter yesterday. I fully appreciate that you intend to invite individual views from Members, and Members of the Committee may make points of their own in that regard. The Committee asked me, however, to pass on a few points in relation to our own remit, which is to consider the services provided to and for Members.

First, the Committee suggested that consideration of the hours during which the House sits might best be framed through the question of how the House and its Members might most effectively conduct their business. From that perspective, the points made below should not be taken as any bar to change, but are made to highlight areas in which unforeseen consequences may arise.

Several Members pointed out that any significant change to the current arrangements on Monday and Tuesday mornings might have a substantial effect on both the tours provided to members of the public and the House’s education work, particularly in relation to school visits.

In the context of our current inquiry into catering, it has become clear that the sitting patterns of the House are one of the key determinants in whether the facilities provided by the House are busy or empty, profitable or loss-making, on any given evening. A change which moved the sitting day to earlier for most or all of the week would require substantial change in the way in which facilities including the dining rooms, cafeterias and bars are presently operated.

Changes in the sitting arrangements of the House affect not only Members but our own staff and the staff of the House. That in turn will have effects not always foreseeable on the ability to offer Members the service they currently enjoy in such areas as catering, research facilities, and office accommodation services.

Finally, the Palace of Westminster in particular requires substantial routine maintenance. Changes in the pattern of sittings across the year may have impacts on how easy it is to plan and conduct such work, which will in turn have an impact on the costs of such work. There will also, inevitably, be some impact on Members if works have to be done during periods when the House is sitting.

A few points were also made that, though not strictly within the Committee’s remit, may be of interest.

First, any change in the hours of sitting will have an impact on Ministers. Our system being as it is, they are Members of the House and required to attend it routinely. A closer alignment between the hours of the House and “normal” business hours might affect their ability, for example, to hold meetings with Members during the day.

Secondly, any change in the hours will have differing effects for different groups of Members. Obviously, the interests of those – the majority – whose constituencies are far from London need to be taken into account.

A new problem has also arisen from IPSA’s current rules on overnight allowances, however, for those 128 Members who live in or relatively close to London, and for whom late-night sittings or late-evening meetings now present difficulties hitherto unknown. It would be a matter of some regret if the sitting hours of the House and its work were to any extent determined by the application of administrative rules which are intended to assist, not obstruct, Members in undertaking their duties.
February 2011

Written evidence submitted by Derek Wyatt, formerly MP for Sittingbourne & Sheppey
1997-2010 (P 102, 2010–12)

I have regularly written in over the past 14 years to Parliamentary committees looking at the changing nature of the role of MPs et al but I note but for small incremental changes here and there not much changes and these reports though in the main sensible are neatly filed in the waste paper basket until the next one. Notwithstanding, and in the hope that one day Parliament will agree it has fallen too behind the views of the people it serves, I offer my thoughts on your new Inquiry:

How the role of an MP has changed in recent years

My office handled just over 19,000 cases over 13 years most of these had nothing to do with my work as an MP but were instrumental in providing us with a snapshot of what was going wrong, largely, in my constituency. Rarely, were these issues to do with national policy. I began to think I was actually the local CEO of Social Work. This was because some county and borough councils and councillors (which my experience in Kent) do not have an outward facing philosophy nor an understanding of service.

As a for instance, the Housing Office would close at 3.30pm on a Friday, bad landlords would make their tenants homeless at 4pm on the same day. These desperate families would come to my Friday surgery desperate for help. Sometimes they couldn’t read or write or fully understand quite how they had become homeless (though not all were saints). I was left to pay their accommodation in a B&B and once in a hotel, to stop them sleeping in their car with their children (not much fun in winter) sometimes for three nights until the Housing Office opened on Monday morning.

You might ask why they didn’t go to their county or borough councillors instead. Or why there wasn’t an emergency telephone number (there was but it was an answer-phone message service). Or why the councillors didn’t answer our letters when we raised these issues with them or why they took the view that it was nothing to do with the MP and he/she should keep his/her snout out of local issues.

My view is that our citizens do not readily understand the subtle differences between a borough councillor and a county councillor or for that matter a borough councillor and an MP. It will become worse, if some MPs now think there only job is to be a Grand Councillor in their constituency rather than an MP in Westminster. This would be a dangerous trend.

In America, I was fortunate to witness, at the John Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, the four day training and education scheme newly elected Representatives attended before taking up their positions in Washington, DC.

Whilst it is true, that newly elected MPs have an induction course it does not include an analysis of the main policy issues which will face them over the next four or five years. I would have thought that a discussion with LSE, UCL, SOAS and the Bank of England would enable courses to be arranged for both newly elected MPs and newly elected Ministers and Shadow Ministers not dissimilar to those at Harvard. These could happen in the first week for Ministers and the second week for Shadow Ministers (if appropriate) and MPs following the General Election.

So long as MPs have local offices and take such a high profile in their constituencies I cannot see an end to the “social-work” creep. For this to change then county and borough councillors must also have a designated professionally staffed office (why not in a Library or at a CAB office?). Until, this happens MPs will always be the dumping ground for local issues. Indeed, I would contend that
with email and text, it is now much easier for constituents to reach an MP and I suspect that this had also led to an increase in workload. Of course, in some ways an MP welcomes the contact because it gives him/her the chance to collect valuable data ready for his/her next General Election campaign.

**What the role of an MP should be and how this is reflected in time spent at Westminster and in the constituency**

If you are not in the Government or the shadow government your role as an MP in Westminster is largely that of a minion used frankly as voting fodder to ensure your own party’s pledges or policies are successfully negotiated.

This leads MPs to seek an alternative career structure inside or outside Westminster or spend more time working on constituency matters. This is not healthy for the democratic process.

The whole parliamentary year needs to be overhauled. It has slavishly copied the Oxbridge and Law Court calendars for too long.

There is no need to start parliamentary business at 1430 Monday–Wednesday and 1030 on Thursday and 0930 on Friday. The days of MPs having a City job in the morning, coming to their Clubs in Pall Mall for lunch and then taking a carriage to the House for 1430 ended sixty years ago.

The mid September–early October Conference season would sit more naturally, if indeed it is still a necessity, at Easter. If this was moved, then MPs could come back in September and run through without a break till Christmas.

It would be much more efficient for Government if departmental question times were moved to 0930 from Monday–Thursday. It’s an absurdity that we ask them to break up their day. I can hear the cries from MPs who live in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales or the distant parts of England shrieking at the thought that they would have to come down on a Sunday evening. But that’s their job; that’s what they signed up for—to represent their constituents in Parliament and not the other way around.

If, Parliament started at 0930 every day it would only need to go on to 1730 (an eight hour day). It could fit the business of the House into three semesters of 12 weeks. The Parliamentary week should be 32 hours in Westminster and 8 hours in the Constituency (there would be no Friday sittings). This would not only be family friendly and encourage yet more women into Parliament but it would also be family friendly for men too. It is not sensible to be working from 0930 to 2200 three days a week; this is senseless and not helpful to the health either of the MP or the nation.

- What are the defects and the strengths of the current patterns
  
  (See above)

- What are the constraints on reform of the sitting patterns
  
  (See above)

- What pattern of sittings over the course of a month or the year would best enable MPs to perform their role
  
  (See above)

- What pattern of timings for sittings on days spent in Westminster would be most effective
• How should the way business is conducted in the Commons be altered to accommodate any new pattern of sitting hours, days or weeks

(See above)

• What changes should be made to the process for considering Private Member’s bills in particular (the only business currently considered on Fridays)

We should do all we can to enhance the role of an MP; Select Committees should be able to bring forward their own Bills based on their reports; at the moment £millions of public money is spent on Select Committees and yet very few reports lead to any significant Government changes of heart. What a sham it all is then.

As for MPs very few Private Members make it through. So again what is their point? Allow all Private Members Bills to be taken in the Chamber just after PMQs on a Wednesday morning so they are not relegated to a more difficult time. We need to make sure MPs are given the chance to properly engage in the democratic process and not be bought off by the scheduling of Whips Office.

• Should greater use be made of Westminster Hall

What is its purpose? Few MPs attend debates; again has anything been changed by a debate there? Well, of course, the MP calling the debate makes headlines locally but frankly we are talking to ourselves. Rename it the Second Chamber, re-design it, make it a more integral part of the scheduling, allow it to run from 1030-1730 four days a week; make it compulsory for all Bills to go through pre-legislative scrutiny there, allow much more space for the public and for MPs – so upgrade so it looks like a second chamber. Allow all Bills to start in either Chamber.

• How can select and public bill committee meetings be accommodated within any new arrangement

Re-design the rooms in which these are held in, especially Public Bill committees which are hostile to the public (and so few can attend).

• What other factors should be considered in proposing changes to sitting hours (e.g. impact on staff of the House and Members staff, services to Members, cost, work of Government departments, public access to debates, the media)

All debates, bill committees and select committee meetings should be available live on-line.

March 2011

Written evidence submitted by Rt Hon David Blunkett MP (P 105, 2010–12)

I have no objection to the following being made public as appropriate.

I’m responding in broader terms than the individual questions that have been asked, and hope this is acceptable in the collation of evidence and presentation to the Committee.

The major and radical change in the role of an MP (in my experience over quarter of a century) has been the impact of 24-hour, seven-days-a-week news, the advent of the internet and mobile phone,
and the consequent total change in the volume of communication between constituents and Members of Parliament.

In addition to the enormous jump in the number of individual, constituency and broader issue-based matters communicated (often by email) to Members of Parliament, there has also been a parallel change in an understanding of the rights of constituents, the demands that they can and do make, and the range and breadth of concerns springing, at least in part, from greater awareness and the globalisation (including of media reporting) of issues which would otherwise have been available to only a few.

In parallel with these changes, we have also seen alterations in the role and standing of Parliament in the life of the nation, the diminution in attention given to parliamentary affairs through both print and broadcast media, and the changed relationship with European institutions, devolved parliaments and assemblies and next steps and outsourced agencies. Whilst scrutiny of (as opposed to scrutiny by) Parliament has increased dramatically, coverage of parliamentary activity has diminished substantially.

There may be a presumption throughout this inquiry that MPs are parliamentarians. In the historic way in which this is described, they are not. Rather, they are first and foremost politicians; secondly, representatives of their constituency; thirdly, a voice for those constituents and the wider area; and, as a consequence, parliamentarians in the sense we understand it—namely that they are engaged in the activities internal to Parliament.

However, those activities are only a small part of the role of any full-time politician, speaking in a whole range of influential settings, on behalf of their constituents. Any parliamentarian who did not understand the way in which influence can be exercised both through the media (old as well as new media), through influencing debate both domestically and internationally, appreciating the role of interest and pressure groups (as well as the power of finance and business), would be living and working in a vacuum.

It is also crucial to realise that different approaches by Members of Parliament reflect these various and complex roles—which may change with circumstance and will vary in terms of the degree or proportion of time spent in each of the various roles which Members of Parliament have to fulfil.

Some Members of Parliament will, by choice, spend more time on internal parliamentary procedure; others will spend time both in the Chamber of the House and on the public platform, airing the views of their constituents and reflecting their own policy interests; some, in print and broadcast media and beyond, will seek to reflect back into Parliament through the mobilisation of public opinion, their particular views on major issues of the day. In addition, facilitating campaigning activity, locally, nationally and globally, has become an increasing part of the job. All of these activities fall within the remit of an active, effective and perceptive Member of Parliament.

However, all of this needs to be understood within the particular constitutional arrangement present in the United Kingdom. Our parliament is not an assembly such as can be found in France or the Congress of the United States, made up of individuals who see themselves primarily as legislators. In other words, the Executive in Britain is rooted in the House of Commons and, whilst ministers can be drawn from the House of Lords, it is primarily the Commons that both provides access to ministerial office and holds ministers to account inside, rather than external to, the House of Commons.

To fail to understand this substantial difference (and the difference in the UK to federal structures elsewhere), would lead to a misunderstanding of the nature of Parliament and the role of politicians and parliamentarians within it.
So, on the immediate issues relating to time spent in the constituency, in public and political activity, and in Parliament, it has to be borne in mind that not only will this vary from time to time, but it will vary between different Members of Parliament according not only to their predilections, but to their particular interests, abilities and temperament. What is right for one Member would be seen as a diversion or an irrelevance to another. Neither one approach nor the other would be bad or good, just different.

Holding the Executive to account can be achieved in the Chamber, in public bill and select committees, by written question (as well as oral intervention), and by challenges made outside through the Commons—including through the media. Campaigning outside Parliament can be as effective as more formalised interventions inside the Palace of Westminster, and for some politicians would be a better use of their time and talent. The reason for mentioning this is because sittings of the House and the time spent inside the Palace of Westminster is so often seen as a benchmark for the work-rate or effectiveness of an MP (by websites such as theyworkforyou.com). This, as indicated above, is a gross misunderstanding of how such MPs can make a difference, without in any way undermining the very different role of others who may not be so visible but are doing an essential job of scrutiny and process.

Therefore, these varying and diffuse roles should be reflected in any debate or inquiry into how Members do their multifaceted job, and the flexibility, responsiveness and diversity of the job itself. The conclusion to be drawn, contrary to what is sometimes presented by branches of the media, is that sittings of Parliament, the length of time of the parliamentary day, week or year, is an ineffective way of judging how MPs are representing their constituents and the wider public, and the use of their time and talent.

What would help, in a purely practical and common sense way, would be certainty of sittings, proper notice, the ability to manage time effectively, and the avoidance of complete disruption to a range of activities inside and outside the House which are directly related to the role of a Member of Parliament and their political duties.

For example, certainty as to when votes are taking place. This can be achieved by the deferral of votes to be taken at the end of the sitting day, or deferred to a set time (as with deferred votes at present). Waiting for a vote, multiple votes with major downtime in-between, trooping through badly organised and historically anachronistic voting lobbies, has absolutely nothing to do with a modern parliament and everything to do with a nostalgia for a bygone era which was already out of date before the Second World War.

There are of course reasons why these matters have not been resolved effectively in the past—over and above the natural conservatism of Members of Parliament and the way in which the institution sucks people into its patterns of working and its self-presumed prestige. Parliament itself exudes the atmosphere of a museum, a club, a debating/lobbying forum, and a functional working environment for research, responsiveness and representation.

What suits Members of Parliament representing constituents in or near London (or in some cases with easy access to airports around the UK) is totally different to those who spend the best part of one day a week (sometimes more than an average working day) travelling to and from the constituency.

Speaking, meeting, holding discussions and debates with the public, is hardly ever mentioned as a key function of a modern MP. Taken together with work with and through the media, it certainly is. Therefore, even when Parliament is sitting, it is crucial to have some opportunity to be able to undertake activities which require a knowledge in advance of when debates are to take place; an
Order Paper that is intelligible to a reasonably intelligent human being; an appreciation of when votes are to be taken and on what; and sufficient notice of changes to the activities of the House (including Westminster Hall) to be able to contribute meaningfully.

Once it is clear what a Member of Parliament is expected to achieve and how best to facilitate their successful carrying out of those duties, it is then possible to determine whether (for instance) it would be better to sit earlier and finish earlier on a Tuesday; or, at report stage or committee stages of bills taken on the floor of the House, where proper timetabling (by agreement) could facilitate votes being taken at the end of the debate or by deferral. It would then be possible to look (other than the Queen’s Speech and budget debates) to a modern form of sensible electronic voting—if required, rather than off the premises. Existing paper-based ‘deferred divisions’ have already indicated a willingness by Parliament to move towards this, but without the speed or efficiency of modern electronic communication.

It is a simple fact that since the modest changes to curtail most debates at 10pm, the number of fatalities amongst Members of Parliament has dropped dramatically. In the 1970s and ‘80s, there were on average around four by-elections per year. Anyone plotting the graph can see the difference as more modern and sensible hours were adopted—and without diminishing the work-load at all. Acceptable hours changed the nature of the lifestyle of Members of Parliament for the better.

It is therefore time to recognise both the potential role of Parliament and its current limitations in the political scene. Understanding that Parliament itself is only one of a variety of influences and sources of power within global economic and political activity, would be a crucial step in getting this right.

There is of course (referring back to the nature of our Parliament and the question raised of pressure on Ministers) the issue of just how often and in what form members of the Executive should and can be held to account within the various elements of our parliamentary scrutiny. Difficult as this is for backbenchers, there has to be a recognition of the limited amount of time that junior Ministers can spend, including in Westminster Hall debates, if they are to be able to do the job within their departmental brief for which they are paid.

This is particularly true of those ministers taking through legislation. Some progress has been made in facilitating parallel activity, not least by more sensible timetabling within the work of committees scrutinising legislation and avoiding filibusters.

And last, but by no means least, there is the small matter of Members of Parliament retaining some semblance of normal life. This includes a rational family life, caring duties, the necessity to eat at a reasonable time and in a digestible form, the ability to maintain both personal and wider political relationships, and (in relation to carrying out perfectly legitimate duties outside the House) some semblance of reliability.

We should therefore see both the timetable within which Parliament operates, the nature of the working day, the method and rationale in relation to voting, the parallel activities which go on within Parliament, and the work of staff (both of the House and of MPs), in the context of the fact that Parliament is part of a much broader political dialogue within which decisions are reached, power is exercised and influence brought to bear. In this way, we might just bring ourselves into the 21st Century—which is where, of course, everyone else is currently living.

Recommendations

1. We provide certainty in relation to voting either directly by timetabled agreement (including combining votes at the conclusion of debates), or by deferred votes. This change would particularly apply to report stage of bills, committee stage when taken on the floor of the House etc.
Disagreements around times of sitting (and particularly in relation to conclusion on Tuesday) can be dealt with by differentiating business in such a way that, as in 1 above, votes are timetabled (or deferred) in a way that gives absolute certainty and could, for instance, allow Private Members’ Bills to be taken between 7 and 10pm on a Tuesday, whilst freeing the late evening for other essential political (and where appropriate, parliamentary) activity.

With some exceptions, electronic voting should be introduced which would build on the paper-based deferred voting already in practise.

The Order Paper and other procedures and processes of the House, which bear no resemblance to any meaningful method of communication or information in the 21st Century, should be drastically reviewed. Facilitating the public as well as new Members must surely take precedence over sheer obscurantist gobbledygook?

That there is a recognition of the changed role of Parliament in a global economic and political environment in circumstances of devolution (and a changed relationship with Europe), and that those elected to Parliament are, first and foremost, politicians fulfilling a wider role.

March 2011

Written evidence submitted by Sarah Childs, Professor of Politics and Gender, University of Bristol (P 111, 2010–12)

1. How the role of the MP has changed in recent years

Despite a lack of recent academic research into the role of the MP within their constituencies, it is apparent from MPs’ (auto)biographies, surveys and interviews that the balance between constituency representation, legislative work, and scrutiny of the Executive, has shifted towards the former. There was, for example, already evidence of the rise of MP-constituent correspondence prior to the onset of email. More recently, New Labour’s ‘constituency week’s provided for MPs to return to their patch whilst parliament was sitting. There is, moreover, much talk of MPs as ‘gloried social workers’. Few MPs appear to be around Westminster on Fridays, as concerns around private members’ bills attest. Finally, MPs are often criticized for having too little time to devote to legislative work and for offering less than adequate scrutiny of government. The latest Hansard Society audit should reveal the percent of an MP’s time that will be spent on constituency representation, of one form or another.

MPs’ ‘turn to the constituency’ has multiple likely causes, not least, but not limited to: declining deference on behalf of voters, changes to local government, reduced partisanship and a greater focus by political parties on local campaigning, as well as new forms of technology, such as email, and, lastly, some MPs’ choice to focus on constituency representation for personal fulfilment.

2. What the role of an MP should be and how this is reflected in time spent at Westminster and the Constituency

Notwithstanding concerns over the rise of constituency representation in the modern era, the goals of good legislation, holding the executive to account and representing one’s constituents should not be thought of as oppositional or a zero sum game, but rather as symbiotic. The ‘good MP’ in Westminster (and the good minister for that matter) would be one who draws on their constituency representation to make better laws, better hold government to account (and be an effective minister, for that matter). A re-balancing of this relationship, one that preserves constituency representation at the same time as delivering a more efficient and effective legislative process and scrutiny of the
Executive, should be undertaken. The means by which to put this into practice might begin by establishing how much time parliamentarians need to be in Parliament over a session to consider legislation and formally hold government to account. (This calculation would include the average number of bills per session; the number of days devoted to each of the various legislative stages per bill, including pre-/post-legislative scrutiny; parliamentary debates; and time spent on select committee and other parliamentary activities, including Westminster Hall, private members’ bills, and all-party parliamentary groups).

It might also consider whether it is time to try to create a constituency convention, in which MPs, just as they will not act for another MP’s constituent, will not act in respect of the responsibilities of another political actor’s remit or role. In other words, constituent issues relating to local government should become the responsibility of local councillors and/or a local govt ombudsperson, and not the MP. Whilst this would require attitudinal and behavioural change on behalf of constituents and MPs, it might, over time, have benefits in revitalizing local government/local accountability, even if it would need to be sold as part of the means by which MPs are working harder for them in parliament (so as to avoid the charge that MPs are trying to do less). I acknowledge that MPs might have electoral reasons to engage in such constituency representation, and that any reform would require collective acceptance of any new convention.

3. **What are the defects and the strengths of the current patterns**

Defects: The current work load of MPs is too high and the parliamentary week is too pressurized. Based on my recent interviews with Labour MPs first elected in 1997 it is clear that the MPs consider their workload overwhelming and that there is a little work/life balance. One rushes to and from Parliament; has competing demands when one is in Westminster; and a lack of ‘family’ time at the weekends, because of constituency and party obligations.

Strengths: the Monday start time. This permits MPs to return to Parliament in the morning rather than returning on Sunday evenings, which would negatively impact family life.

4. **What are the constraints on the reform of the sitting patterns**

Institutional resistance, from both those MPs and the House authorities who favour tradition; the working conditions of others who work in House to support MPs in their work, including catering, cleaning and administrative staff; and the popular and media perception of MPs as over-paid and underworked. In the case of public perceptions, a new parliamentary year and parliamentary timetable could be introduced as a reforming measure taken in the context of the expenses scandal to ensure that MPs are more effective parliamentarians and better representatives of their constituents.

5. **What pattern of sittings over the course of a month or the year would best enable MPs to perform their role**

The process of re-balancing constituency representation and parliamentary scrutiny and other parliamentary activities might be as follows:

a. Agree the total number of days that an MP has to work with. This would establish the total working days of an MP over a parliamentary year. Such a change should enable a clear distinction between the time when an MP is working and when they are on holiday. It should also remove the unfortunate term ‘recess’ which the public and the media too often interpret as MPs’ ‘holiday’, as in the charge that MPs are not working during the summer recess.

b. In conjunction with parliamentary clerks, and drawing on evidence based on recent parliamentary sessions, the number of days needed for the formal scrutiny of
legislation, and other parliamentary business should be established. Added into the
discussion should be reflections on the existing number of Fridays, and no doubt
Saturdays on which MPs engage in constituency representation (I purposefully
exclude party constituency activity, which should fall outside these considerations).
Whether this is too much or about right would, no doubt involve much debate, but
should ultimately produce a total number of days to be spent by the MP formally in
their constituency and in Parliament.

(c) The next stage is to consider how best these days might be distributed over the
parliamentary year. I would suggest that these are grouped into weeks. The total
number of weeks per year to be spent in Parliament and in the constituency should
be, as stated above, evidenced based and driven by the demands of parliamentary
scrutiny but recognizing the importance of constituency representation. Constituency
weeks might be grouped into one or two week blocks to be distributed throughout
the year. I do not wish to be prescriptive here: it is for MPs and the House to
consider whether one week in five, or two in ten or some combination thereof might
be most effective for both parliamentary scrutiny and constituency representation.
Note, that in the weeks the MP is in Parliament (Mon-Fri), their constituency
workers would still engage in constituency case work, and the MP might still be
present in the constituency at the weekends. There is no reason to assume that these
reforms would lead to less time overall in the Constituency. It might well, however,
permit MPs to claim back more of their weekends for family life. NB: Constituency
weeks might well be timetabled to fit with, at least as far as possible, school
holidays.

These reforms beg questions of MPs who are ministers. Would, as one of my students put it when
we discussed reform in class, ministers return to their constituencies during ‘constituency weeks’?
If so, how would Government function? I see no reason why there could not be a slightly different
arrangement for backbench MPs and Ministers. Perhaps, if there were two week constituency
blocks, ministers might return for a slightly shorter period—so that at any one time a ministry may
have fewer ministers present during that particular week. Such an answer will not be completely
satisfactory to all, but I imagine, this to not be so different from present practice when Parliament is
in recess. In other words, the change may be less real than initially imagined.

6. **How should the way business is conducted in the Commons be altered to accommodate
    any new pattern of sitting hours, days or weeks**

I leave for those more experienced in the workings of the House to devise how fewer, but fuller,
weeks in Parliament would play out in terms of structuring the House on a day to day basis.
Whether PMQs should shift back to Thursdays or when select committees might meet should not be
considered in a piecemeal fashion. It is my view that tinkering with the parliamentary timetable is in
insufficient to the task of delivering good legislation and enhancing parliamentary scrutiny. I would,
however, suggest a Monday lunchtime start and a Friday early afternoon end to the parliamentary
week, to continue to permit MPs to travel to Westminster on Mondays and enable MPs to return to
their constituencies by Friday evening, if they so wish. By working on a five day parliamentary
week when the House is in session, it however would be possible to radically reform the hours of
the House. Committed to more professional and family friendly House of Commons, core
legislative and scrutiny business should end at 6pm Mon-Thursday. Evenings would still then be
available for other parliamentary activities. Tuesdays to Fridays they might start at 10am to allow
necessary House administration. Debates regarding the hours of the House are often met with
differences of opinion between London and non-London MPs but the reforms suggested here negate
these arguments because when the House is sitting MPs would be present for the ‘normal’ working
day, without creating the tension of desiring to complete parliamentary work to return to the
constituency.
7. **What changes should be made to process of considering PMBs**

Changes to the above mean that PMBs would no longer be affected by many of the issues of them being debated on Fridays, as is current practice.

8. **Should greater use be made of Westminster Hall?**

I have much sympathy with those advocating both core hours and plenary sessions of the Chamber, around which other parliamentary activities should be scheduled.

9. **How can select and public bill committee meetings be accommodated within any new arrangement**

Given my answer to question 5, these would be formally considered in the process of reviewing the parliamentary timetable. They should take place in the core hours of the House.

10. **What other factors should be considered in proposing changes to sitting hours?**

Taking as the most important driver of reform effective scrutiny of the Executive and good legislation, other key factors are: (1) modern, professional, and family friendly hours; and (2) enhanced legitimacy and public engagement

*Modern, professional and family friendly hours.* There is no reason why, today, the House’s parliamentary timetable should reflect the historic hours of professional men, who wished to work outside the House in the mornings and spend the evenings in their ‘old boy’s club’. A modern House of Commons, like the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales, should have professional, family friendly hours. This goal is perfectly compatible with a more effective House, if the way in which the House overall sits is revised in ways I suggest. Importantly, advocating family friendly hours is not about MPs working less when they are in Westminster, but rationalizing their work in ways that rebalance work/family life, so as to both improve the conditions of current MPs, and to signal that the House is open to a diverse group of Members, not just those who either do not have caring responsibilities or who have that care undertaken by others.

*Public perceptions.* The subject of the public’s evaluations of Parliament is mostly beyond the scope of this enquiry. We know, however, that the electorate often rate their own local MP highly even whilst they are critical of MPs as a collective. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the aftermath of the expenses scandal, Parliament should act to improve its standing with the electorate. One means to do this might be to reform the House in ways that demystify what MPs do and change dominant perceptions of the House (I fully accept that these perceptions may be misplaced, but they remain powerful): that MPs fail to hold Government to account—the Chamber is nearly empty, except for PMQs; MPs are neither sufficiently in the House nor in the constituency; have long holidays and spend too much time wining and dining at Westminster. Reforms such as those advocated here should be easy to sell in this context: they clearly set out when an MP would be in Parliament and in the constituency. When in Westminster, the MP would clearly be seen to be working full-time, Mon–Friday.

*The state of play*

- What MPs do in Parliament is largely unknown to much of the public;
- The 2009 expenses scandal has engendered a ‘crisis of confidence’ in our MPs and in parliament
• MPs often argue that there are too many demands on their time during the parliamentary week.
• MPs’ ‘long hours’ are neither producing better legislation, nor greater executive scrutiny.
• MPs are facing apparently increasing constituency demands that limit their time to engage in parliamentary scrutiny and the passage of good legislation. Their time in the constituency is also constrained, causing poor work/life balance.
• Parliament is not family friendly and remains under-representative in terms of women’s representation. Reform to the sittings of the House and the parliamentary calendar should make parliament more attractive to those, male and female, with family and caring responsibilities.

Recommendations

• Major reform to the annual parliamentary timetable and to daily parliamentary hours.
• Parliament should sit for fewer but fuller weeks.
• Parliamentary hours should be Monday 2–6pm, Tuesday–Thursday 10–6pm and Friday 10–3pm (or thereabouts). These are modern, business and family friendly hours that also take into consideration the fact that MPs work in two places. This is in line with practices in other comparable countries, not least Scotland and Wales.
• Constituency weeks (or blocks of weeks) should also be introduced to ensure that MPs are able to better represent their constituents.

March 2011

Written evidence submitted by Zac Goldsmith MP (P 113, 2010–12)

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Committee’s inquiry into the sitting of the House and the Parliamentary calendar. I wish to restrict my comments to the consideration of the question:

• What changes should be made to the process for considering private members’ bills in particular (the only business currently considered on Fridays)

I would welcome the Committee’s support for new measures to give a fair chance for the passage of Private Members’ Bills. I think that it is right that private members’ bills continue to be debated on Fridays. I recognise the pressure for debates in Government and Opposition time, and the necessity for governments to secure their legislative programme.

However, I would strongly support the introduction of deferred divisions on private members’ bills to relieve the need for 100 Members to be present in the House on a Friday to support a bill. The ‘holding over’ of a sitting Friday’s divisions on one of more private members’ bills to the following Wednesday would ensure that most Members don’t have to make the difficult choice between their constituency engagements (and returning to their families on a Thursday evening) and staying on a Friday to vote on a bill.

Those Members with a particularly keen interest in a bill, and keen desire to speak in the chamber, would then also be more likely to enjoy a serious Friday debate without the risk of shameless filibustering. If the government of the day does not support a private members’ bill it can defeat it at a deferred division by the usual voting whip, or on the merits of their argument, but not by procedural means. The introduction of deferred divisions would not necessarily result in more private members’ bills making it on to the statute book, but it would at least give Members sponsoring a bill a fair chance of securing 100 colleagues to support their bill.

March 2011
I have worked for several MPs in recent years, either in Home County constituencies or further afield. I thought that my experiences of the working practices and demands on an MP and their staff might be helpful.

The Home Counties MPs who could commute daily to Westminster benefited from the later starting time for sittings, as they were able to work in the constituency office and deal with constituents’ issues before travelling into Parliament. The Midlands MP had to live in London during the week, so Monday mornings and Fridays, together with Saturday and Sunday, were the only days she could work with constituency office staff and meet constituents. IT made it easier for documents to be shared between constituency and Westminster staff so that the MP was aware of everything being sent out, while the constituencies where the MP could commute were able to save documents for when they were in the office, or staff could travel between the constituency and parliament for work purposes. The problem with the commuting MPs arose when they were put on a select committee, because that meant that they had to work in parliament in the mornings at least two days a week, losing time in the office, and making Mondays and Fridays more important as constituency time.

I should imagine ministers or shadow ministers would find it much harder to spend time in their constituency offices, and would rely on their staff communicating and travelling much more.

I mainly worked for backbench MPs, and would point out that the norm for a Member of Parliament is approximately 80 hours per week, however you divide the timetable. Family friendly hours in parliament mean more time for constituents, it is still very difficult for MPs to spend time with their families, unless they block out time in the long recess.

Friday private members’ bills are therefore difficult for MPs. If they arrange meetings or advice surgeries on a Friday, they can re-arrange them if they are lucky in the ballot, but if they merely support another Member’s bill, it is difficult to decide to disappoint constituents so that they can remain in Parliament on a Friday. Westminster Hall debates are extremely useful, when constituents want something raised by their MP, they do not always understand how hard it is for a backbench Member to get something answered by a Minister. Westminster Hall gives the opportunity for local issues to be raised.

Constituents’ expectations of the service they get from MPs has increased rapidly since I started working for MPs. The use of email means that they expect an immediate response, and charities and lobbying organizations put buttons on their websites generating emails to MPs on various issues. Thus the sending of emails is extremely easy for constituents, but responding is time-consuming for MPs and their staff. Faxes also get sent automatically, using up paper and ink, and all of these need to be processed. Letters to MPs have increased, and tear-off slips and postcards as part of campaigns can be overwhelming and need interns or volunteers to deal with the huge numbers. This did not happen so much ten or fifteen years ago.

Constituents also expect their MP to be in the constituency and in Parliament simultaneously. It is possible for London and Home Counties MPs to travel backwards and forwards to meet these expectations but Midlands and Northern MPs do have to stay in one place for at least one day at a time. If they spend a lot of time with constituents, the website theyworkforyou.com will point out that they have hardly spoken in Parliament. If they spend a lot of time in the Chamber, then the local papers will point out that they are hardly ever seen in the constituency.
The way to deal with the high expectations of constituents is to have a good team in the constituency and in Westminster. It is vital that the MP is not prevented from doing a good job in Parliament by the need to spend hours dealing with casual callers in the office or on the telephone. Staff have to work closely with the MP to know what they would wish to be done under different circumstances, so they can get on with the job of being an MP while their staff keep the constituents happy.

When sittings started and finished later, many MPs employed their staff to start work later and finish later, for example a working day of 11am to 7pm. This suited a lot of people who were on low salaries and could commute at off peak prices. Later sittings would not disadvantage most staff, who tend to work longer hours than contracted in any case.

I do not think that changing the sittings to normal office days would help reduce the workload of MPs, or make them more available to constituents. Select committees would still have to take place sometime as well as Standing Committees on Bills, and MPs would still have to spend time in their constituencies meeting and consulting with constituents.

Contrary to popular belief, all the MPs I have worked for have spent all their recesses in their constituencies, working in the constituency offices and visiting local organizations. When they take a holiday, it is for a number of weeks, and they then return to the office to continue their work. Several MPs I have worked for take a computer and headed notepaper on holiday with them, and even have correspondence re-directed so that they can deal with it. The workload is far too heavy for MPs or their staff to take long breaks in the summer, as members of the public commonly believe.

March 2011

Written evidence submitted by David Hamilton MP (P 118, 2010–12)

Introduction

The sitting hours and calendar of the House of Commons are not directly related to many of the rules, procedures and standing orders that reduce the power of the legislative in comparison to the executive. However we are curtailed in our ability to work by the current timetable. Much of the discussion on this subject will focus of the issue of “family-friendly hours” and the holidays which are perceived to give MPs the summer off. Whilst the Committee will receive numerous representations about how the system could be reformed for the benefit of individual members I hope they will consider the bigger picture. For me the big question is how can the hours and calendar be reformed to make Parliament and the Commons more effective bodies.

I will explain a number of ideas which I would like the Committee to consider, in summary they are:

- End the annual sessions of Parliament
- Introduce an annual speech similar to the American “State of the Union”
- Protected time for Select Committees
- End votes for PMB business on a Friday
- Allow additional time for PMBs to be debated on a Wednesday evening

I believe that the Committee needs to consider that MPs from different parts of the country have different needs from the parliamentary timetable. As a Scottish MPs I am effectively stranded in Westminster from Monday to Thursday (and the occasional Friday), therefore I would support a
more compact and focused Parliamentary week. However I accept that MPs for seats in commutable reach of Parliament (or those who base their family in London), would be more likely to prefer time to utilise in their constituency in the week. Whilst I accept that the Committee will need to find proposals which balance these needs I hope that they will reflect that it is those MPs with the biggest burdens that need the most assistance.

**Parliamentary Calendar – Annual Sessions**

The annual session of Parliament is an arbitrary and pointless mechanism which splits the parliamentary calendar for no meaningful reason. Whilst the House of Lords may appreciate the power that the ping-pong period in the days before dissolution gives them, this is not a reason to maintain a mechanism which squeezes the parliamentary timetable. Abolishing the annual session will allow the legislative process to be extended, allowing more time and ensuring that even if debates are split up through the sitting hours there is no reason why they should be guillotined in the brutal way that they currently are. The changes being introduced by the Fixed Term Parliaments Bill offer an opportunity to reform the system of annual sessions of Parliament.

Parliament should move into a single sessions which runs from one election to another. This would have a number of advantages. It would allow Parliament and the Commons in particular to move into a modern professional model of working. However I believe that the real benefit would come with a number of knock-on reforms. This would include the use of pre-legislative scrutiny, allowing a bill to go from draft form to an act in a single seamless liner process. It could also increase the power of Select Committees. I will expand my ideas about how committees fit into the parliamentary timetable below. But by removing the annual deadline committees could be given the opportunity to hold witness sessions on the terms of a bill. Bringing increased knowledge into the debate and therefore narrowing the information gap between the legislative and the executive (and the Civil Service). I would like to see this combined with the abolition of standing committees, with select committees taking over the committee stage of the legislative process. This is something which Parliament would struggle to encompass under the current annual sessions.

I believe that Governments of all parties have avoided scrutiny by curtailing debate. In the previous session of Parliament this was done on a number of occasions, the issue is particularly worrying at report and committee stage of the legislative process. Whilst I am not advocating the end of programme motions which will see the House sitting till all hours in a battle of wills between the Whips Offices, I do believe that ending the need to move legislation along will allow Parliament to end the presumption for report and third reading to be completed within a matter of hours. If we remove the false deadline on the annual sessions then the Government will be able to extend the days given to each bill and still manage its legislative and business program.

One knock-on implication from this would be the removal of the annual state-opening of Parliament. At the moment the Queen’s Speech is a useful mechanism, which in an informative yet restricted way allows for the Government to take stock and set out an agenda for the year. I believe that although useful the Queen’s Speech is a wasted opportunity. The protocol of using the Monarch to deliver the Government’s agenda means that the general stock-taking is limited to a shopping list of bills. I believe that the comparison with the American State-of-the-Union speech is striking. A speech by the Prime Minister could look beyond the legislative agenda and allow the Prime Minister to give an overall view of Government policy, and the situation, threats, opportunities that the Government faces in non-legislative areas such as foreign policy.

I also believe that there are good political reasons for doing this. At the moment the biggest set-piece speech that a Prime Minister gives is to their party’s annual conference. I believe that the introduction of an event similar to the State-of-the-Union would help to highlight the primacy of Parliament, and give the Prime Minister the opportunity to express Government policy in the
appropriate manner—as Head of Government, held to account by the legislative, and not Leader of their party. The Queen’s Speech would be retained for the opening of Parliament every five years.

Time available for Select Committees

Select committees are probably the best arena which MPs from all sides of the House have to scrutinise the Government and provide themselves with expertise in policy areas. Yet since their introduction 30 years ago nothing has been done to integrate them with the central work of Parliament, they remain annexed onto parliamentary business as an extra with poor links to other parts of the Commons. Changes to the calendar offer an opportunity to rectify this, parliament can and should do more to accommodate select committees.

My suggestion is that the Procedure Committee gives the House the option of a setting time aside each week for select committee meetings, with no debates taking place in the chamber or other standing committees sitting. I believe that ring-fenced time for select committees will give them the potential to enhance both the breadth and depth of the work that they do. My suggestion would be for this to take place on a Tuesday morning into the early afternoon. The extra time will allow MPs to do more in-depth work on their inquiries including planning, hearing evidence and discussing recommendations. I think that the Committee should look at the possibility of moving to a committee day, similar to the system used in the Scottish Parliament.

More importantly it should be married to reforms which bring select committees into the legislative process—fully integrating them into Parliaments must fundamental business. As outlined briefly above I would like to see select committees given the job of holding committee stage of Government legislation. This would allow their expertise to feed into the debate, rather than the pointless and shambolic nature of standing committees—which most backbench MPs use as a opportunity to catch-up on paperwork, whilst the front benches read speeches into the official record. I believe that giving select committees the power to hold evidence session as a matter of routine will improve the quality of legislative output. To do this they need two things, time in the working week to spend on these issues, hence the committee days, and time in the parliamentary session to allow a Bill to spend a matter of weeks, rather than hours, in committee stage.

I believe that there is a strong consensus that the timetable in the Scottish Parliament works well, especially in relation to the effective running of meaningful select committees. Having time put aside for committees gives them the ability to do their work in more detail and prepare adequately for their meetings. I believe that the Procedure Committee should look at the integration of select committees into the timetable in the course of this inquiry.

Private Members Bill and Friday Sittings

There are two separate issues which need to be raised under the subject of private members’ bills (PMB). These broadly fit into the questions of how and when. The Procedure Committee is ideally suited to instigation the debate on the reform of how PMBs are discussed. The current system is a farce. The ability for an individual member or a handful of members to ‘talk-out’ a Bill is a disgrace to the House. It undermines the House of Commons. Members should have the right to a full and frank debate, but this should not be used as a fig-leaf for members to kill legislation through a technicality.

I believe that the rules governing PMBs, although not directly relevant, do have an impact on the issue of sitting hours and the calendar. As a Scottish MP who has to write-off an entire day to attend a Friday sitting I am put off from attending the Commons on a Friday by the fact that on any given day an individual member can choose on a whim to kill the business being discussed. It makes attending the Commons on a Friday a risky option which more often than not the majority of MPs
are not willing to take. I believe that the Procedure Committee should conduct an inquiry, as a matter of urgency, on the rules for PMBs. This would look at how they are debated.

The question for this inquiry is when they are debated. Firstly, I think there is a consensus that 13 sitting Fridays a year is not enough time, as well as sitting on more Fridays I believe that the House should consider utilising Wednesday evenings for this purpose. When the House finishes early evening on a Wednesday there is the potential for around three hours debate with the House then finishing at the same time that it would on a Monday and Tuesday. In my opinion this could transfer the time for PMBs from a Friday, when the opportunity cost for MPs is valuable constituency time, to Wednesday evenings which is wasted time for many MPs.

There is a separate question of when they are voted on. I believe that we should end the practice of voting on PMBs on a Friday. Votes should be moved either to deferred ballots when the House of sitting on another day or to Wednesday nights, so that the business taken can include votes from a Friday sitting if the House continue to hold PMB debates on both Friday and Wednesday evenings.

The Committee must recognise in all of its deliberations on Friday sittings and PMBs that there are a number of MPs who have become highly skilled in talking out Bills. This is something which is deemed unfair by the majority of MPs and I believe that as a practice it reflects badly on the House. I therefore ask that the Committee makes every effort to publish proposals for reform, not to scupper reform because of the opinions on the Committee. I believe that the committee has an obligation to the House to establish workable proposals for meaningful reform, which can then be put in front on the House for them to decide. The Committee should not veto these reforms by failing to make relevant proposals. It is for the whole House to decide.

**Sitting Hours**

I am broadly happy with the hours we currently use. As suggested above I believe that there is a strong case for creating more room for committee sessions on a Tuesday. On that basis I am opposed to any suggestion that the House should move to using the current Wednesday timings on a Tuesday. The late sittings allow the House to work in Committee on a Tuesday morning; I do not believe that the House would utilise the spare time if we were to finish early on a Tuesday. There are a number of reasons for this; but the best evidence I have is that committee’s do not meet on a Wednesday at the moment. I believe that it would put undue pressure on committees if we sit early on a Tuesday.

As mentioned above I believe that we should consider using Wednesday nights for private members’ bills.

**The Calendar**

I believe that the House of Commons as an institution needs to be less apologetic for the amount of time we are not sitting. We have allowed the press to create a narrative whereby MPs are on holiday when the House is not sitting; this is false and needs to be challenged. There is a legitimate debate about the balance between our roles as legislators and local duties; but we must not allow the press to continue this story.

Returning for three weeks between the summer holidays and conference season is an important change. It allows the House to maintain its scrutiny of the Executive. Therefore I hope that we at least retain those three sitting weeks. However I believe that there is a need to look at moving the summer recess forward; Scottish school holidays start a month earlier and this should be considered in the deliberation on the scheduling of the calendar. If we moved the calendar forward by a fortnight then the House would be able to return for a full month between the summer and
conference. I believe that this would have an economy of scales which would allow for more
detailed and meaningful work in this period. By starting recess in the middle of July and returning
at the start of September we can cover the entire English summer holiday. This would allow
Scottish MPs to benefit from the fact that Scottish school holidays are on a different basis from
English Schools, given the extra pressure placed on Scottish MPs this would be helpful, especially
for those with young families.

Finally, can I draw the committee’s attention to 2012 when the Olympic Games will be held.
Transport will be beyond capacity with millions more people coming into the city, and the added
pressure this will have on the police to protect London. I believe that the parliamentary authorities
need to consider what impact changing the recess dates, perhaps as a one off, could ease the burden
on the police and security services.

March 2011

Written evidence submitted by the Hansard Society (P 119, 2010–12)

MPs are not a homogenous group of like-minded parliamentarians: each defines their role, function
and interests differently and the relationship each has with his/her party varies. They do not
represent an en bloc vote for an agreed programme of parliamentary reform and their views on
sitting hours and the parliamentary calendar will vary considerably dependent on their particular
constituency location (i.e. their distance from Westminster) and their family circumstances. We
recognise that it will therefore be very difficult for the Committee to secure consensus among
Members on any package of reform.

However, as issues of priority we would recommend that the Committee consider the following.

Improved use of existing time: electronic and deferred voting
There is very little if any scope for providing ‘new’ or ‘extra’ time within the parliamentary sitting
week. The focus should therefore be placed on improved use of existing time. Greater use of
delayed voting where appropriate could be utilised, either through the existing mechanism of
delayed divisions where votes are registered on paper, or by grouping all divisions until the end of
the day’s business when motions are non-contingent.

More revolutionary however, would be the introduction of electronic voting. At present up to 15
minutes can be spent on each division—calculated across each sitting week and each session the
amount of time spent by Members moving through the lobbies and waiting for the results is
therefore considerable. This could be dramatically reduced through the introduction of a system of
electronic voting in the lobbies / in the vicinity of the Chamber (such that Members would still have
to be present at the House to vote but less time would be spent on the mechanics of the process).

Balancing Chamber and Committee time
Many MPs have found that they can have timetable clashes between public bill committee and
select committee responsibilities. As the former are whipped these take priority, downgrading
attendance at select committee sessions. We believe that the Chamber should remain the ultimate
forum for holding ministers to account. However, to improve its effectiveness Parliament should
become a more committee-based institution. In order to provide for greater focus on select
committee work one half or perhaps even one full day per week should be ring-fenced in the
parliamentary week for committee work during which time the main Chamber should not sit.¹ This

would enhance the status of committees and, by rationing time in the Chamber, would mean that it acts as a plenary session for issues of greatest importance.

However, we recognise that re-arranging the timing of business in the Chamber relies heavily on how legislation is dealt with which is beyond the immediate scope of the Committee’s inquiry. We have recently recommended a wide range of reforms to the legislative process many of which would impact on how time is used in the Chamber, in Westminster Hall and in committee.2 We recommend, for example, greater use of split committal of bills and a move towards a legislative rather than a sessional cycle for consideration of bills. **In addition to reviewing sitting hours we therefore urge that the Procedure Committee considers reform of the legislative process and undertakes a review of the core tasks of the Chamber. In addition, we recommend that the Liaison Committee undertake a linked review of the core tasks of select committees, as recommended by its predecessor Committee in its 2009-10 annual report.**3 The Hansard Society has recently set out what we believe a review of select committee core tasks should cover.4

**Regularising sitting hours**
As the data below shows, the House has often sat in this session beyond the usual timetable and the times of adjournment on Wednesdays have been particularly erratic. An earlier start, on Tuesdays for example, would facilitate greater time for debate subject to any decisions that might be taken about the ring-fencing of committee time. Wherever possible greater notice about whipping arrangements on any given day needs to be provided to Members to enable them to better arrange their working day and priorities.

**September sittings**
We recognise that Members’ views on the value of September sittings are mixed. However, in terms of Parliament’s reputation with the public, the long summer recess is indefensible, despite the public’s desire for MPs to be working in their constituencies (see below). And Parliament not sitting for around ten consecutive weeks, as has been the case in the recent past, is unacceptable in terms of accountability.

At present, effective scrutiny of legislation by the Commons is heavily constrained by programming and the availability of time in the parliamentary calendar; it is unacceptable that many clauses continue to go unscrutinised by the House on the grounds of lack of time when the House chooses not to sit for extended periods particularly over the summer. Last year’s September sittings were utilised effectively, particularly by select committees, and they should continue.

**Private Members Bills**
Private Members’ Bills (PMBs) should provide an important opportunity for backbench MPs to initiate legislative proposals, as well as policy debate, to check the executive, and to respond to issues of public interest and concern. In recent decades, however, the number of PMBs receiving Royal Assent has steeply declined. The success of the PMB process is inhibited by three key factors: (a) excessive control of time by the executive, (b) the lack of resources available to MPs to individually support legislative initiation, and (c) the existence of procedural thresholds which enable even limited opposition to thwart popular bills, much to the bewilderment of outside observers.

Many of the procedural devices that can be deployed to destroy a PMB derive their potency from the fact that PMBs are not timetabled. It is possible to devise mechanisms to allow certain bills to

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enjoy the advantages of timetabling and therefore the likelihood of passing all stages, if both Houses consent—for example, through the use of a PMB Select Committee or, looking to the medium-term, through the proposed Business Committee. At present PMB business is normally confined to Fridays which is a difficult day for MPs in terms of attendance because of the clash with constituency engagements. Time could be set aside on Tuesday or Wednesday evenings, for timetabled bills. Extra time could also be granted where a specific bill was felt to need more consideration or the extra time could be granted to prevent logjams at the end of a session. The existing Friday arrangements could remain operational for uncontroversial bills and Westminster Hall could also be used as a forum for PMBs in order to add more capacity to the timetable. However, changing the timetable alone will not be enough to address the weaknesses in the PMB process. Reform of the procedures governing PMBs will also be needed if the parliamentary function of MPs as legislators is to be rejuvenated.

Parliamentary Calendar
As long as different school holiday dates apply in different parts of the country it will be impossible to deliver a parliamentary calendar which balances sitting and recess dates that suit all Members. However, the introduction of a fixed term parliament should facilitate better planning of parliamentary sessions and the provision of greater advance notice to Members about sitting dates.

At the start of each new Parliament the transition period of up to two weeks following a general election should be retained to provide a proper period for the orientation and induction of new Members. We would also recommend that the House consider setting aside up to a week each year for Members to take advantage of opportunities for professional development. In almost every other profession (e.g. doctors, lawyers, accountants) considerable emphasis is placed on individuals refreshing and augmenting their skills. However, little if any provision is made for MPs to acquire professional development training and support. Whilst some provision is offered within the existing timetable it will be impossible for most Members to take advantage of it due to competing obligations and priorities. The issue needs to be prioritised within the parliamentary timetable.

Role and function of MPs: ‘A Year in the Life—From Member of the Public to Member of Parliament’

The Hansard Society is currently engaged in a research study—A Year in the Life: From Member of the Public to Member of Parliament—exploring the life and work of new MPs elected for the first time in May 2010. One survey of new Members is complete and the second survey is currently underway. The data below is therefore only provisional but may be helpful to the committee when considering the role and workload of Members in the context of this inquiry.

Before being elected, new MPs expected to work on average 60 hours plus 8 hours travel time. After several months in office 47% of respondents to the first survey (completed July/August 2010) felt their assessment had been too low, while 46% felt it was about right. More recently new MPs have been surveyed about the hours they are currently committing to their responsibilities (March/April 2011–ongoing). The average number of hours per week is 69 plus 8 hours travel time with the range of hours worked varying from 40–100 hours per week plus travel hours ranging from three to 15 hours in total. 34% of respondents report working 60–69 hours per week (minus travel); 26% report working 70–79 hours per week; and 24% report working 80 hours per week or more. 44% of respondents report travelling for at least 10 hours per week with 42% travelling between 5–9 hours each week.

When asked how their hours had changed since they started their role, 67% said their hours had increased and 29% that their hours had largely stayed the same. Only 4% report that their hours have reduced since the start of their parliamentary careers.

The working week of new MPs is on average divided 64% at Westminster and 36% in the constituency (according to our first survey). MPs perceive their time is divided between their different responsibilities accordingly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>First survey</th>
<th>Second survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constituency casework</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commons Chamber</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituency meetings /events</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commons Committees</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local campaigning</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National campaigning</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New Members were asked how satisfied they were with the operation of the sitting hours and parliamentary calendar. The results were as follows:

**Sitting hours of the House of Commons**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>First survey</th>
<th>Second survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly satisfied</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very satisfied</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all satisfied</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very/fairly satisfied</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parliamentary calendar/recess dates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>First survey</th>
<th>Second survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly satisfied</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very satisfied</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all satisfied</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very/fairly satisfied</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above data suggests that sitting times rather than the parliamentary calendar is the most pressing area for reform as far as new Members are concerned.

The data below records the number of times the House of Commons has adjourned within a specific hourly period on the 129 occasions the House has sat Monday to Thursday between 25 May 2010 and 31 March 2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Before 6pm</th>
<th>6 - 7pm</th>
<th>7 - 8pm</th>
<th>8 - 9pm</th>
<th>9 - 10pm</th>
<th>10 - 11pm</th>
<th>11 - 12pm</th>
<th>12 - 1am</th>
<th>1 - 2am</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Tue</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
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Given that the Chamber sits from 2:30pm on Mondays and Tuesdays, the adjournment hours indicate that MPs are regularly required in and around the Chamber for debates and votes for eight to nine hours or more each day. However, whilst the work of the Chamber may not begin until 2:30pm in reality the MPs day begins much earlier. On Mondays MPs are often travelling to Westminster from early in the morning, with some fitting in constituency engagements as well,
dependent on the travel demands determined by the distance of their constituency from Westminster. And on Tuesday mornings MPs are regularly engaged in committee work with sittings beginning as early as 9am. On Wednesdays, the House sits from 11:30am but as the data above indicates the end of the parliamentary day in the chamber is somewhat unpredictable. A working day of at least twelve hours and often more is therefore largely the norm not the exception for MPs at present. Add to this the hours spent travelling to and from their constituency, plus local engagements in their constituency on Fridays and at weekends and MPs are working significantly more hours than is the norm for many of their constituents.

Regular sitting hours of 8pm and beyond undoubtedly make it very difficult for Members with families to balance their work and family responsibilities. When asked what impact, if any, being an MP had on their personal/family life, responses were universally negative. The following remarks are indicative of the overall tone of responses received: ‘Destroyed it!’, ‘overwhelming’, ‘very difficult to maintain a family life with this job’, ‘massively damaging’, ‘personal life? It’s devastating’. Whilst many respondents said they had some idea what they were letting themselves in for, and many still regard their role as a great honour, such negative responses from MPs who have served less than a year in office is worrying.

The free-text responses to our survey of new Members indicates some common areas for reform. Some Members complained that whipping arrangements are changed and communicated too late in the day making it difficult for Members to plan their work and their family responsibilities. A number of Members confirmed that they would like to see sitting hours changed to a 10am–6pm pattern Monday to Thursday. Some suggested that government business should cease at 7pm but the House might continue to sit beyond this for other, non-whipped business and it would then be for Members individually to attend according to their interests and priorities. There was considerable support from respondents for reform of the sitting arrangements in relation to Private Members Bills, and many respondents urged that electronic voting should be introduced in order to reduce the time spent in divisions. A feature of many of the responses was frustration with what Members saw as archaic and time-wasting tactics in debate (e.g. exaggerated courtesies and repetitive speeches) which unnecessarily contribute to a prolonged day and ineffective working practices.

**Public Attitudes: MPs and Parliament**

Public attitudes to politics, MPs and Parliament are complex, contradictory and rarely uniform. They do not offer a ready guide to reform.

In the Hansard Society’s latest annual Audit of Political Engagement, perceived knowledge of Parliament has increased this year with a seven point rise (to 44%) in the proportion of the public claiming to know at least ‘a fair amount’ about it, bringing it to its highest level ever recorded in the Audit’s eight year lifecycle. A third more of the population now claim to know at least ‘a fair amount’ about Parliament than did so in the first Audit study in 2004.

However, despite an increased in perceived knowledge, fewer people are now satisfied with Parliament (27%) than at any time in previous audits. Only 38% of the public believe that Parliament ‘holds government to account’ and just one in three people (30%) agree that Parliament is ‘working for you and me’, a significant decline of just eight points in one year. One in three (30%) perceive Parliament to be one of the two or three institutions that have the most impact on their everyday lives, behind the media (42%) and local councils (40%).

The 2010 audit report had a particular focus on MPs and Parliament. It found a significant ‘perceptions gap’ between what the public wants MPs to do and what the public thinks they actually

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do. The most commonly held belief (held by 50% of the public) was that MPs spend their time ‘furthering personal and career interests’. The next most common activities that people assumed MPs do was ‘represent the views of their political party’ (37%) and ‘present their views through the media’ (32%). Both of these, however, were low priorities in terms of what the public would like MPs to spend their time on, with around one in 10 people considering these to be important activities for an MP.

Few people believed that MPs get involved in the type of activities the public considers most important for MPs to do. Just under half the public (46%) believe most MPs should ‘represent the views of local people in the House of Commons’, but only one in 10 people (10%) believe most MPs do this—a perceptions gap of 36 points. Similarly, two in five people (41%) said MPs should be spending their time ‘representing the UK’s national interests’ but only one in 11 (9%) believed MPs do this—a perceptions gap of 32 points.\(^8\)

In the four qualitative discussion groups conducted for the Audit 7 study most participants acknowledged that they had little understanding of what MPs typically spend most of their time doing. Similarly the groups laid bare the lack of public knowledge about Parliament and how the institution fits into our constitutional system of governance: most used the terms Parliament and Government interchangeably. Irrespective of how much participants felt they understood the working lives of their MP, however, there was almost universal agreement that MPs should spend more time in their constituency than in Parliament. They wanted their MP to focus on listening to and helping local people, to be a ‘community champion’ for the local area.

The latest Audit 8 also explored public perceptions of the MPs role through qualitative discussion groups.\(^9\) Participants were asked to describe what they thought the role of Parliament to be. Representing citizens’ views, improving and making laws and protecting citizens emerged as the prime functions perceived by participants to be Parliament’s responsibility. They clearly saw Parliament as a place where ‘the voice of the people’ is represented. There was widespread acceptance that being an MP is a difficult job and one that many nonetheless do well. But views on whether or not participants felt represented by their MP very much relied on knowledge of who their MP was. Many participants did not know the name of their MP from which they extrapolated

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\(^8\) Ibid., p.93.

that the MP must not be doing a good job of representing them because, if they did not even know who she or he was, how could they be doing so? Those participants who could identify their MP generally felt that they were doing a good job, even if they did not necessarily vote for them, in large part because they felt they were representing their constituents well. Such positivity largely stemmed from the fact that the MP for a lot of the participants was very visible locally, and in a small number of cases from good experiences when the participants had had cause to contact them. In most of these instances what mattered most to the constituent was receiving a response, even if it did not resolve their problem. Simply by responding they felt that the MP had at least taken the time to consider their problem.

March 2011

**Written evidence submitted by the Trade Union Side (P 120, 2010–12)**

In our evidence to the Administration Committee inquiry into catering, the Trade Union Side said that “when decisions are made about the House - specifically about the House and its business-the staff can be just outside the peripheral vision of those who are actually making those decisions… the interests of staff don’t seem to be very high up the scale of priorities of people making those decisions, and there is an expectation that staff will simply adapt.”

The “expectation that staff will adapt” to the introduction (and, in some cases, subsequent removal) of early September sittings, regional select committees, Westminster Hall and other recent parliamentary developments has greatly assisted MPs in their attempts to innovate as they attempt to keep Parliament at the centre of the nation’s public life.

A great deal of work—much of it unseen and unacknowledged—has ensured that the daily Hansard, documents from the Vote Office, information from the Library and refreshments from the bars, cafes and restaurants are available at all hours, depending on the sitting times of Parliament. It is not an exaggeration to say that without the ability and willingness of staff to adapt to the singular sitting patterns of the House, MPs’ ability to represent their constituents and to scrutinise the Executive would be severely compromised.

But in the light of the various pressures affecting the relationship between staff of the House and their employer, how that expectation of staff flexibility is maintained must take a more prominent role in considering the way in which Parliament works.

The pay, terms and conditions of House of Commons staff are facing more scrutiny than at any point in recent times. The “psychological contract” under which staff provided the flexibility necessary to allow the House to get its business, in return for perceived security of tenure, favourable leave arrangements and good pension benefits is in danger of being eroded.

The terms of reference for your inquiry invite evidence on several themes. We would wish to comment principally on those most relevant to the interests of the members of the four recognised unions.

**What are the defects and the strengths of the current patterns.** As in other areas of life, unpredictability of demand leads to uncertainty in supply. As a hypothetical example, a vote is scheduled for 10pm on a Monday night. Catering and other departments arrange staffing rotas, menus and so on on that basis. The Whips of each party reach agreement at 7pm and the vote is cancelled. Do the House authorities see that as an unavoidable consequence of the political
arrangements that can be made in the legislature? Or as a waste of limited resources at a time of tight financial settlements?

**What are the constraints on reform of the sitting patterns.** The principal constraint on reform is likely to be the same as it has been for many decades; the differing opinions of more than 600 Members of Parliament. But, as we state above, a potential future constraint on reform may be a change to the “expectation that staff will adapt”. The House believes that it cannot be immune from the massive changes taking place across the civil service. Staff may begin to ask whether—in principle, if not practice—changes to sitting times and the parliamentary calendar should proceed without the staff consultation and negotiation that accompany proposed changes to working patterns in other areas?

In addition, recent reductions in allowances payable to staff have already had the effect of reducing the number willing to take on duties outside of their normal working hours where they are not obliged to do this work as part of their contract of employment. MPs may find it hard not to notice some diminution of services if this continues, or increases.

**What changes should be made to the process for considering Private Member’s bills in particular (the only business currently considered on Fridays).** One of our major concerns in this area can be expressed in quite simple terms; there are currently five hours of business on each sitting Friday devoted to Private Member’s Bills. Any attempt to shoehorn those five hours of business into the remainder of the parliamentary week is likely to lead to serious concerns from staff and their representatives, not least in terms of the cumulative effect of late sittings and long working days on the health and wellbeing of staff.

Again, the level of allowances payable, which for many staff do not reflect their ordinary rate of pay, are not attractive enough to encourage staff to work unsocial hours. It is not unreasonable to expect that if staff are required to work extended hours they should receive an appropriate level of pay for this work. Will the House approve increased levels of allowances for staff in the current economic climate?

An idea being floated, we believe, is that several hours could be added on to the end of business every Wednesday evening for this purpose. The trade unions would strongly oppose such a proposal. Staff are already reporting health and wellbeing concerns about the effects of late-night Tuesday finishes followed by what appears to be a developing pattern of extended Wednesday sittings. The convenience for MPs of having the bulk of parliamentary business taking place on Monday to Wednesday is an important factor in running the legislature. We would argue that the health of the staff enabling that business to take place is as important a consideration. The unions believe that the sitting patterns of the House result in regular breaches of the Working Time Regulations—this must be a key consideration in developing any changes to these patterns.

In addition, any decision by the House to end Friday sittings except in exceptional circumstances is likely to have serious consequences for many staff across the House and the trade unions would require early and detailed consultation on any such proposal.

**What other factors should be considered in proposing changes to sitting hours (eg impact on staff of the House and Members staff, services to Members, cost, work of Government departments, public access to debates, the media).** A related, but, in our view, still legitimate, question is, “Can radical changes be made to sitting hours without the agreement of the staff of the House?” Many staff of the House have arranged their domestic lives in such a way as to permit the House to manage the peaks and troughs of parliamentary demand. For eight or nine months of each year, personal, family and caring responsibilities of staff are governed by the unpredictable nature of sitting times.
In addition, proponents of the "9 to 5" working day for the House of Commons need to be reminded that the working day for many House staff does not simply begin at the commencement of the day's business. Many staff can be at the House for two to three hours before start of business; as an example, staff can be required to attend well in advance of the start of business to ensure that the Vote office has the appropriate documents available for that day, whether in the Chamber, Westminster Hall or Committee. Catering and cleaning are two other obvious examples.

Needless to say, staff and unions here would need much persuasion and negotiation before beginning to countenance approving a scheme under which the working day for a fair proportion of staff might have to begin at approximately 6am, five days a week.

In conclusion, we would say that change is, of course, possible, but the agreement of the staff concerned cannot be an afterthought in the development of such change. The expectation that House of Commons staff will simply adapt to changing sitting patterns and times cannot remain unaffected by the changing expectations that House staff themselves now face in terms of their pay, pensions and job security.

March 2011
Written evidence submitted by Caroline Lucas MP (P 121, 2010–12)

Introduction

I very much welcome the Committee’s Inquiry: Sittings of the House and the Parliamentary Calendar. The sitting hours for MPs have a profound effect on the procedures and processes of the House of Commons, which in my view are in urgent need of reform. The Procedure Committee Inquiry offers a valuable opportunity to consider some of the many ways that reform of sitting hours could make the House more efficient and how this could reduce the cost to the taxpayer of some of the time-wasting processes which are currently part of how we operate.

I will explain in my submission why I want to see the end of late night sittings (with the exception of Mondays) to make MPs hours and those of parliamentary staff fit better with family life. I have also included a number of related reforms to parliamentary procedure that were included in a report that I circulated to all MPs in November 2010, entitled The Case for Parliamentary Reform. 10

At a time when the political process is struggling to regain its legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the public, it is more vital than ever that Parliament can demonstrate that its work is efficient, transparent, and accountable. Now is the time to shake off the image (and in some cases, the reality) of the “old boys’ club”, and to move Westminster into the twenty first century. The reforms I suggest relating to sitting hours are a small part of that process. They are by no means exhaustive.

Note to the reader

I have attempted to write this submission with a spirit of openness and accessibility so that it is understandable for members of the public following the Committee’s work. I have used footnotes to help explain commonly used but not self-explanatory Parliamentary terms.

Recommendations:

I have concentrated in particular to three of the Committee’s questions:

- “What pattern of timings for sittings on days spent in Westminster would be most effective”
- “What changes should be made to the process for considering Private Member’s bills in particular (the only business currently considered on Fridays)”
- “How should the way business is conducted in the Commons be altered to accommodate any new pattern of sitting hours, days or weeks”

My submission to the Committee inquiry includes the following proposals:

1. More efficient working hours, with an end to late night sittings (with the exception of Mondays) to make MPs hours and those of parliamentary staff fit better with family life.

3. A change to the timing of Private Members Legislation with a midweek slot for Private Members’ Bills.
4. The introduction of electronic voting in the Chamber (and in the voting lobbies) using hand held electronic devices and the introduction of an option to record an abstention.
5. The ‘holding over’ of votes so that there is a specified time for voting at the end of each Parliamentary day.
6. Recording of abstentions and an opportunity for MPs to explain how they have voted.
7. For debates in the Commons Chamber, the list of those selected to speak should be made available to MPs in advance and the Commons should consider new rules on who is selected to speak and speaking time limits.

1. More efficient working hours

Costs could be saved by starting proceedings in the House earlier in the day on Tuesdays and Wednesdays (Mondays and Thursdays are discussed separately below) so that the House does not have to pay the additional staff and resource costs of late sittings. This change would also be family friendly and open up Parliament to people with young families.

It is reasonable for proceedings on a Monday to start later in the day to allow Members time to travel down from their constituencies. This time is needed so that an MP can spend Sunday as a family or constituency day. On a Monday, therefore, it makes sense for proceedings to continue as at present, starting at 2.30pm and finishing at 10pm.

To save the additional staff costs, on Tuesdays and Wednesdays MPs should have standard Chamber sitting hours of 9am—6pm (these times would also apply to Thursdays but this is less of a change from current hours, as discussed below). With the exception of Mondays, this measure would have the effect of doing away with late night sittings.

At present the late starting time for sittings of the Chamber allows MPs to hold meetings without having to miss Parliamentary business. If this reform to Chamber hours were made alongside reform of how MPs vote, with the ‘holding over’ of the majority of votes (see the sections below on electronic voting and associated changes), this would give MPs the opportunity to organise better and plan meetings so that they don’t clash with voting times.

Given that the morning is a key part of the working day, this proposal would also give greater priority to business in the Chamber rather than to that outside of it. MPs would still be free to organise meetings during the evenings when the Chamber was not sitting.

The key aim of this proposal is to change the hours so that the main part of an MP’s typical working week is one that is more accessible to people currently under-represented in the House of Commons. For example, starting earlier and finishing at 6pm would mean that those with young children might be able to put them to bed without missing Parliamentary debates or votes.

On Thursday, the House of Commons already does rise at 6.30pm, so we already have an example of how a more standard day works perfectly well. The hours for Thursday should be
9am–6pm as for Tuesday and Wednesday. This represents only a minor change from the current practice of sitting from 10.30am to 6.30pm.

This, combined with the time and money saved by using electronic voting, would give Members more time to scrutinise legislation at lower cost to the taxpayer.

2. Preventing the ‘Talking out’ of Private Members’ Bills

Private Members’ Bills (PMBs) are Bills introduced by MPs who aren’t government Ministers. They are held on Fridays, the day when most MPs go back for meetings in their constituencies. For an opposed Private Members’ Bill to go through on Second Reading, 100 Members must be in the House to support it. Given the constituency commitments of MPs, there are rarely 100 MPs in Westminster on a Friday (please see the next section for a proposal to move PMBs to a mid-week slot).

MPs that have stayed for a PMB on a Friday often start to head back to their constituencies for meetings later in the day, so the longer the debate goes on, the slimmer the chances of enough MPs remaining to vote it through. The current system allows backbenchers to deliberately waste the time allotted for debate on a Private Members’ Bill in order to delay it, so that the vote takes place when there are likely to be fewer Members to support it.

A recent example was on 12 November, when Tory backbenchers tried to ‘filibuster’ or talk out the Sustainable Livestock Bill. Between them they sought to hamper the Bill by talking for long as possible, using process not argument—one stood and read out poetry, for example. This meant that the vote on the Bill happened much later than would have been the case if only real debate had occurred, and as a result MPs who supported the Bill had by that time left for meetings in their constituencies.

Reform of the timing of PMBs is needed, with consideration given to timetabling them earlier in the week, but the act of talking out a Bill must also be addressed. It is an insult to other Members who want to seriously debate the Bill, to the Speaker and most importantly to the electorate, who do not want to pay to run a debating Chamber that is being mocked by its participants.

There should be explicit rules which prevent the practice of talking out a Bill. The Wright Committee stated that “merely procedural devices” should not be able to obstruct Private Members’ Bills and referred to the popular proposition that a maximum of three hours should be given for any Private Members’ Bill Second Reading debate. This should be cumulative in successive sittings, after which the question would be put to the Chamber on whether the Bill should receive a Second Reading. This would render pointless the act of ‘filibustering’.

3. Timing of Private Members Legislation—a midweek slot for PMBs

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11 http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/laws/Bills/private-members/

12 http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmrhdoc/1117/111702.htm paras 193-4
I hope that consideration will be given to moving Private Members’ Bills (PMBs) back to a midweek slot so that they are better attended, making Fridays a formal constituency day. If three hours rather than five were allotted for debate on Private Members’ Bills, and this were combined with the proposal for the Chamber to sit earlier on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, there would be adequate time for PMBs earlier in the week without displacing other legislation.

The benefits of moving PMBs to a midweek slot, principally higher attendance from Members, would outweigh the cost of the shorter time allocated for debate.

Making Fridays a formal constituency day would mean that Members could regularly plan to see their families at the end of the week.

4. Electronic voting in the Chamber

Many aspects of the way that the House of Commons runs are archaic and wasteful of both time and finances. We need to modernise Parliament and make it more efficient.

For example, the process of casting each vote takes at least 12–15 minutes. If there are several votes during the day/evening, this can mean that the act of simply voting takes well over an hour, and sometimes nearer two, with Members running backwards and forwards whenever the bell rings indicating a vote. Compare this to the European Parliament where all the votes are done at once at a specified time, known in advance, at the click of a button.

For some, there is an understandable desire to hold on to traditional ways, but an appeal to custom cannot justify the waste of time involved with the Commons archaic voting process. The time votes will be held is often totally unpredictable. On most sitting days there is at least one vote and there can be four, five or more votes in a day. On the days with multiple votes, all the time spent slowly filing through the 'aye' and the 'no' lobbies, could be spent actually scrutinising legislation, meeting constituents or dealing with some of the hundreds of communications that MPs receive each day.

Making the process of casting votes less time-consuming would make it possible for MPs to vote on more aspects of a Bill. This means the public would have a clearer record upon which to hold MPs to account. A system which inherently discourages voting on the specifics of the Bill requires less thought from those who are charged with passing the legislation. Speeding up voting should help to address this problem.

The Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons issued a consultation paper to MPs on Voting Methods in 1998. The results of the consultation showed that just over half of the 64% of MPs who responded “preferred” the traditional voting method and 70% of respondents considered it “acceptable”.

In 1998, one of the reasons that some Members supported the current system was concern over losing the opportunity to speak informally with Ministers in the lobbies. Others objected in principle to any system using fingerprint recognition which was one of the systems put

13 Private Members’ Bills are Bills introduced by MPs and Lords who aren't government ministers, for more see: http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/laws/Bills/private-members/
forward in the consultation. 36% of Members did not express a view when they were asked in 1998. We now have a new intake, and many Members with whom I have spoken would like to see reform.

A technically feasible electronic alternative for voting in Parliament exists. The important benefits of backbenchers meeting Members of the Government in the voting lobbies does not have to be lost if an e-voting system were adopted. E voting is used in both the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish National Parliament; the European Parliament has voted electronically for decades; the French legislate with a show of hands, checked if necessary with an electronic ballot\(^\text{14}\); and the US Congress can cast their votes electronically.\(^\text{15}\) The House of Commons should catch up.

More information on which countries do and which do not utilise e-voting systems is contained in the chart in Appendix 1 at the end of this submission.

After discussion with industry experts\(^\text{16}\) who have supplied e-voting systems, it is clear that a workable system could be made secure for the Commons. A hand-held electronic voting device could be kept near each seat in the Commons, with access to additional devices for Members who did not have a seat, as there are more Members than seats. Members without a seat could use their device in the voting lobbies.

To identify the MP who is voting, Members’ current security passes could be modified to allow them to be inserted into the handheld device. TV monitors would have details of the vote and Members could simply press 1 to indicate for, 2 to indicate against or 3 to abstain. After a short period a Speaker in the Chamber and in each voting lobby would announce each amendment to be voted on and the results in turn.

Security, cost and access to Ministers

This system would be secure as the technology can allow the readers to work in very accurately defined spaces, like the Chamber and voting lobbies and not beyond, so the effectiveness of the current security that sees only Members allowed in the Chamber/voting lobbies would continue.

If an MP lost their pass/smart card the Clerks would hold a secure spare which could be made available to the Member at short notice. To prevent any Member passing their cards to a Whip or other MP, either biometric identifiers could be considered or, if MPs reject biometrics, a clear penalty for any such fraud which would make it not worth the risk. For example defrauding an MP’s electronic vote could potentially trigger a by-election.

If the Commons chose a pre existing electronic voting keypad system, the keypads and related software and hardware would cost in the region of £400k,\(^\text{17}\) less than 0.1% of the £434 million cost of running the Commons in the last financial year.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{14}\)http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/connaissance/fiches_synthese/fiche_45.asp
\(^{15}\)http://thomas.loc.gov/home/lawsmade.bysec/consideration.html#voting
\(^{16}\)http://www.iml.co.uk/
\(^{17}\)Based on an estimate from industry experts, IML, ibid.
However, the value for money that such a system would bring would quickly justify a one-off cost on this scale. If, through a more efficient voting method, MPs are saved even half an hour a day, over a week this would free up hours for more effective scrutiny of legislation and so provide the taxpayer with considerably better value for the money paid for MPs salaries. For example if a voting process takes 15 minutes using the current snails pace division system, it costs the taxpayer £5136 for MPs salaries for each vote under the current system. The proposal would also be likely to reduce staffing and other associated costs.

Since e-voting would still require MPs to come to the Chamber, the opportunity to catch up informally with Government Ministers would not be lost.

5. The holding of votes at one efficient time

To deliver the time-saving that would make Parliament a more streamlined working environment, an e-voting system would need to be combined with the 'holding over' of a day’s votes to the end of the day. In 1998, the Modernisation Select Committee provided an explanation of what this means when it noted that ‘Members seemed interested in the possibility of holding divisions over, so that all votes could be taken one after another at a convenient time, instead of holding divisions immediately at the end of each debate’. Despite this finding, little has changed, and taxpayers’ money is still being wasted by votes being held at separate, unspecified times.

Although 2004 saw the introduction of “deferred divisions”, where some votes which would otherwise take place after the end of the days’ sitting are held over to be conducted in writing over Wednesday morning and early afternoon, this option not used frequently in practice.

It is also important to acknowledge that for some votes where there is a high degree of public interest, for example the recent vote on military action in Libya, the vote on the Iraq War in 2003 or the decision to bring in tuition fees in 2004, MPs would want to vote immediately after a debate is over. This could be at the discretion of the Speaker, and announced to MPs and the public as far in advance as possible.

6. Recording of abstentions and an opportunity for MPs to explain how they have voted

Whilst not strictly related to sitting hours, the question of allowing members to record an abstention is closely linked to the proposal for electronic voting, which is linked to the sitting hours question, hence my inclusion of the following paragraphs.

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18 From the Office of the Chief Executive of the House of Commons: the running costs of Parliament in financial year 2009/10 are £434 million for the Commons and £112 for the Lords. With effect from 7 May the “running costs” would also cover IPSA, which is responsible for paying MPs' salaries and pensions.

19 Workings for over £30,000 figure: MPs Salary = £65,738 / 52 = £1264 Weekly wage. Hourly wage on a 40 hour wk (most MPs work well in excess of 40 hours - I am using 40 hours as this is the average length of a working week as laid out in standard Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority contracts) 1264/40 = £31.60, so an MP’s salary is 53p a minute. If each vote takes 15 minutes, 15 x 53p = £7.90. Multiply this by the number of MPs £7.90 x 650 = £5136. If there are 10 divisions a week this costs = £51,360 in MPs salaries. Presuming votes on four days with Friday as a constituency day, and that voting electronically still took 15 minutes a day, this would save 1.5 hours in MPs salaries = £30,816.

20 http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmmodern/779/77903.htm
There is no formal opportunity for MPs to record an abstention or to explain how they have voted. The names of MPs who are present in the Chamber for the debate but who do not vote are unrecorded, just as if they had been absent from the House.

The only option that Members currently have if they want to show that they were present but choose to abstain on is to vote both for and against. This is something that Richard Taylor, former independent MP for Wyre Forest and the independent minded late David Taylor MP for North West Leicestershire were both known for doing. However, their admirable attempts to record their abstentions were often misunderstood, with the press unfairly ridiculing them for not being able to make up their minds.

In 1998 a majority of MPs ‘indicated strong or general support’ for an option to record an abstention, yet nearly 13 years later nothing has been done.

The Commons could also replicate the European Parliament's ‘Explanations of votes’ website (please see the footnote below for a link to an example page). MEPs can (but do not have to) post a short paragraph on why they voted as they did for constituents to read. This is an effective way to provide the public with an explanation of why a Member voted the way they did.

7. Clearer rules on speaking time in debates and the rules for who is selected to speak in a Commons debate

I would like to see reform of sitting hours go hand in hand with reform on the rules on speaking time in debates to allow more members to contribute and to increase the opportunity for MPs to plan and to organise their time in the most efficient way.

On occasion more Members want to speak in a debate than is possible in the time available. The way the system works now, MPs have to send a letter to the Speaker to indicate their wish to speak. The Speaker and his deputies then draw up a list for their own reference, of who is to speak and in what order. However, most MPs are not privy to this list, and can spend 4-5 hours in the Chamber, unsure of whether they will be called to speak or not.

The list of prospective speakers should be published as soon as it is drawn up to enable Members to both contribute to debates in the Chamber and attend other Parliamentary meetings.

Reform on the speaking time limits could start with a rethink of Standing Order 47 (Standing Orders are written rules under which Parliament conducts its business) which sets out the current rules on time limits on speeches for both front and back-bench Members.

The Chamber should be asked to debate and approve written guidelines, including criteria for the Speaker’s decisions on which Members have been selected to contribute to the

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21 http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmmodern/779/77903.htm Paragraph 3
23 “Speaker” means the person in charge of the Commons Chamber, not the MP speaking.
debate and in what order (for example, MPs with a particular interest or responsibility on the issue being debated rather than, for example, length of service) and on whether to set a limit on backbench speeches.

Under the current system, there are too many debates where MPs who wish to speak are not able to. New rules could include an open, published, mechanism for giving notice of the wish to speak rather than an informal behind the scenes note to the Speaker. The purpose of this would be to help MPs see how the selection and time-limit process is working.

Revised rules should work to ensure that where a Member has given notice by a reasonable time, they should wherever possible be given the opportunity to speak. Most Members would rather have the certainty of three minutes of speaking time as opposed to a possibility of either six minutes or no time at all.

April 2011
# Appendix

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Electronic voting</th>
<th>Number Year of votes</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>European Parliament</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>792 2009/10</td>
<td>Desk-based, card ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EU Member Parliaments</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>Votes by standing (approve) and sitting (disapprove)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium House of Representatives</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>514 2003/4</td>
<td>Desk-based, no ID check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium Senate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>405 2003</td>
<td>Desk-based, no ID check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Rep Senate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unanimous votes and those carried out by sitting and standing are not included in the figures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Rep Senate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vote also by show of hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>697 2002/3</td>
<td>Desk-based touch screen voting, card ID (from Summer 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>433 2002</td>
<td>Desk-based, visual ID only - 3 to 5 minutes per vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France Assembly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>312 2002/3</td>
<td>Desk-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany Bundestag</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7,200 2003</td>
<td>Votes mainly by show of hands; some (45 in 2003) via named voting cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany Bundesrat</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Yes*</td>
<td>137 2002/3</td>
<td>An electronic system was installed but not yet implemented (in May 2010); ID card</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland Dail</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>249 2009</td>
<td>Votes are generally desk-based by voting buttons - however, voting through lobbies can be called for (eg votes of confidence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland Senate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>239 2009</td>
<td>As Dail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy Depuities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5,865 2003</td>
<td>Desk-based, card ID validated by fingerprint recognition. In addition to the electronic votes there were 5 roll call votes in 2003; and the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk-based, touchscreen, ID by fingerprint recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk-based touch screen or voting buttons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland Bejim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk-based, card ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland Senate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk-based, card ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>71 2009/10</td>
<td>Touch screen, card/PIN &amp; username and password (login possible at any desk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Card ID</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Card ID Chip &amp; PIN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>697 2002/3</td>
<td>Touch screen, fingerprint and password recognition; secret ballot voting performed outside electronic system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom House of Commons</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>135 2009/10</td>
<td>Voting through lobbies &amp; (a few “deferred”) by ballot paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom House of Lords</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>43 2009/10</td>
<td>Voting through lobbies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>99 2009/10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA Congress</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>991 2009</td>
<td>Card ID; “voting stations”; some votes use non-electronic system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA Senate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>397 2009</td>
<td>Desk-based votes only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada House of Commons</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>116 2009</td>
<td>As Westminster, but no lobbies - voting takes place by MPs raising in their seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia House of Reps &amp; Senate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>129 2009</td>
<td>As Westminster, but no lobbies - Members locate themselves on either side of the Chamber (Members have to vote if present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UK Devolved Legislatures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>249 2009/10</td>
<td>Desk-based, Card ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk-based, Card ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Ireland</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>45 2009/10</td>
<td>Voting lobbies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ECPRD, National Parliament websites
Washington Post Votes database
NIA Official Report
http://www.parliament.pt/AudiadesParlamentares/Paginas/AudiadesParlamentares.aspx
House of Commons Sessional Digest
House of Lords Sessional Statistics
Written evidence submitted by Dr Philip Giddings and Professor Michael Rush
(P 122, 2010–12)

The Role of the Member of Parliament

Introduction

1. This memorandum draws on research material in our forthcoming book, Parliamentary Socialisation: Learning the Ropes or Determining Behaviour (to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in August 2011), which is a long-term study of the socialisation of Members of Parliament covering the 1992–97 and 1997–2001 Parliaments, 1 with additional data drawn from the 2001–05 Parliament gathered by the Hansard Society.

2. We have focused on two aspects of our research. First, using survey material from three studies, including our own, 2 we examine MPs’ views on the role of the Member of Parliament. Second, drawing on our own surveys and on surveys of newly-elected MPs conducted by the Hansard Society in 2005 and 2006, 3 we set out of Members’ views of different aspects of the role and job of the MP. The appendix to the memorandum consists of edited extracts from our book.

The role of the Member of Parliament

3. Our analysis of the survey data led us to conclude that, within the their overall function of providing democratic legitimacy to government, backbench MPs fulfil three major roles, which we have termed the partisan, constituency and scrutiny roles.

The three roles of the Member of Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROLE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The partisan role</td>
<td>Supporting the party in debates, the asking of parliamentary Questions and signing of motions, committee work and, above all, in the division lobbies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The constituency role</td>
<td>Helping constituents with individual problems e.g. access to welfare, housing and other local council issues, and immigration cases. Dealing with the collective interests of the constituency e.g. promoting local business, seeking funds for the constituency, environmental issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The scrutiny role</td>
<td>Assessing government policy proposals; examining primary and secondary legislation; evaluating expenditure and taxation; checking on the implementation and administration of government policy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 This research was supported by an award from the Nuffield Foundation Small Grant Scheme during the 1992–97 Parliament and an ESRC grant (R000222470) during the 1997–2001 Parliament
4. We, of course, accept that the House of Commons is the major recruitment pool for ministerial posts and that MPs belonging to opposition parties fulfil roles as frontbench spokespersons, but our focus is essentially on backbenchers. We also accept that Members perform other roles but argue that these are subsumed under the three major roles we have delineated.

5. We argue that, although the role of the Member of Parliament is multi-faceted, all MPs perform the partisan, constituency and scrutiny roles and that these roles are not mutually exclusive. However, we also argue that the balance between these roles varies between Members and over time, especially during the course of a Member’s parliamentary career.

The job of the Member of Parliament

6. In the 1992–97 and 1997–2001 Parliaments questionnaires were sent to newly-elected MPs and to a control group of longer-serving backbench Members. We asked Members four questions relevant to their role: first, whether they thought MPs should be full-time or part-time; second, who they saw themselves as representing; third, what were the most important parts of their job as an MP; and, fourth, who influenced them in their work in Parliament. These questions were replicated in the 2005/2006 Hansard Society surveys.

Full-time v. part-time

7. All Labour and Liberal Democrat respondents thought the job of being an MP should be full-time, in contrast to 28% of Conservatives in 1994 and 40% in 1999. However, most Conservatives who thought it should be part-time acknowledged that the demands of the job rendered it full-time in terms of the number of hours per week needed to meet those demands. This reflected the view, widely expressed in comments made in responses to the questionnaires, that they needed to keep in touch with 'the real world' and that occupations outside politics were the most effective way of achieving this.

The Member of Parliament as a representative

8. Members were asked to place in rank order representing their constituents, the nation as a whole, and their party. First and foremost, our respondent MPs clearly saw themselves as representing their constituents (64% in 1994 and 68% in 1999), then the nation (22% in 1994 and 16% in 1999), and, a long way behind, their parties (8% in 1994 and 10% in 1999). There were, however, significant differences between members of different parties, with Conservatives more likely to place the nation second and Labour MPs their party second.

The most important parts of the job

9. MPs were asked to place in rank order different aspects of their job—scrutinising the government and civil service, supporting their party, influencing party policy, and helping constituents. Again constituents came first overall, though more strongly among Labour than Conservative MPs. The most significant finding was the difference made by whether a party was in government or opposition. When in government, in 1994, Conservatives ranked scrutiny fourth, but in opposition, in 1999, they ranked it first. This emerged more starkly if the proportion of MPs ranking scrutiny first or second in the two Parliaments is compared. In 1994, 38% of Conservatives did so; in
1997 the proportion had jumped to 82%. Conversely, in 1994, 46% of Labour MPs ranked scrutiny first, compared with 35% in 1999. There were also differences in attitude towards supporting their party: as with the representative role, Labour MPs were stronger on party in both Parliaments.

**Influencing MPs**

10. MPs were asked who strongly influenced them in their parliamentary activity – the party leadership, their personal opinions, constituency opinion, and representations from pressure groups. The latter were by far the least influential. In contrast to the emphasis on constituents in whom they represent and in the most important part of the job, when it came to sources of influence constituency opinion came some way behind their personal opinions and the party. In short, the party leadership was the most important. In short, the partly leadership was the most important.

**The role of the Member of Parliament—an overview**

11. MPs regard themselves primarily as representing their constituents. This is reflected in other data we collected showing that most MPs spend more time on constituency work than any other part of their job. However, they say that party, not constituency is the most important influence on their *parliamentary behaviour*. That is not very surprising since their parliamentary activity—tabling Questions and motions and participating in debates and committee work—takes place within the context of party. ‘Party’ here means not the narrow context of the party whips, but the wider context of MPs being members of parties with which more often than not they agree.

Michael Rush,
University of Exeter.

Philip Giddings,
University of Reading

*April 2011*

I am pleased that the Procedure Committee is reviewing a series of issues which are important both for the operation of the House of Commons and also the work of its MPs.

The Committee’s press release identifies a number of matters which are to be covered. I intend to comment on only a few of them although I regard them as key to: the future good working of the House, the good Government of the country and the ability of MPs to perform their roles while at Westminster.

(If I may comment in passing, I am concerned about the phraseology of one small aspect of the press release issued at the time of the announcement of the inquiry. In a bullet point (7) the release asks ‘How should the way business is conducted in the Commons be altered to accommodate any new pattern of sitting hours, days or weeks’? It seems to me that the pattern of sittings should accommodate the business, not the other way round. What I would regard as the correct order is given in the opening paragraph of the release.)

My submission concentrates on the passage of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 and in particular the implications of the Act arising from the reduction in the number of MPs. I will only comment to a limited extent on any committees or sittings, more the overall impact of the Act.

The table below shows the number of MPs after certain General Elections since 1832.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015?</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore at no point since the Great Reform Act of 1832 will there have been fewer MPs than post the next General Election. This will have substantial implications for the operation of the House and for the MPs who sit in that Parliament.

Role of MPs

I do not believe the role of MPs should change markedly as a result of the Act. As I perceive it the role of the MP should be to

- provide Ministers for Government,
- hold the Government to account,
- represent the views of the electorate and in particular an MP’s constituency
- help develop future policy
This, as I see it, is no different from the current role of an MP. There is however one element of an MP’s role which has diminished markedly over the last 50 years i.e. the development of future policy and a second has been greatly diminished i.e. holding government to account (see below)

Workload of MPs

For many MPs the representational workload will not increase since they already represent as many voters (if not more) than will be required under the Act. However, it is clear that most MPs will not be able to serve on more committees than they do currently. This will therefore result either in the number of committees being reduced or acceptance that each committee has fewer members. (see below)

If there is a way in which the development of policy by MPs can be encouraged, the House and the nation would benefit. This could probably be achieved by providing more broad ranging debates with fewer restrictions on the duration of speeches. This is of course in contradiction to what has been happening over recent decades. Alternatively MPs could work more closely with think tanks etc within a variation of the select committee structure.

On a small matter, MPs may have to move away from being super councillors which they have often become in recent years. This will however have to be a decision taken by the MPs themselves in relation to their own workload unless a view is taken that more time needs to be spent at Westminster.

Structures of Government and the House

To cope with the reduction I would recommend

- A reduction in the number of Government Ministers (and PPSs)
- A comprehensive review/reduction of the Committees in Westminster
- Probably a substantial reduction in/if not cessation of Westminster Hall debates
- Despite the above we should somehow see a reduction in the guillotining of Bill Committee stage debates

Fewer Ministers

When the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill was being debated Richard Shepherd MP and others made a very strong case that the power of the Executive would be strengthened unless the number of Ministers was reduced. Without such a change, Richard Shepherd’s view, and I share it, is that the House and its members could not perform one of the key roles of an MP at Westminster i.e. bringing Government to account.

If by dint of this reduction in MPs the power of the Executive increased, Westminster would be failing to serve the country. Fewer members of an Opposition and fewer Government backbenchers would make life even more comfortable for Government.

Many (mostly with a vested interest) will argue that this reduction in Government is not possible. However, the German cabinet of the CDU/SDP coalition had 14 members, the
current Australian administration has 41 Ministers, of whom 20 are in the Cabinet. It can be argued (although I do not accept this) that these are Federal systems and therefore somehow different. This doesn’t disprove the need to reduce the numbers of British Ministers. An alternative comparison is France which has a cabinet of 15. These variations are stark against a British Cabinet of (at minimum) 23, a number which, unfortunately, tends to rise over the period of a Parliament. Although the figures may appear small Britain has over 50% more Cabinet ministers than France and Germany.

Every extra Minister (and PPS) reduces the numbers of MPs to hold a government to account and I am not aware that there has been any work published which reviews the Act discussing how Government and Westminster will cater/cope with this imminent change. It is crucial that any such review ensures that the power of Westminster to hold the Executive to account is in no way diminished and if possible enhanced. It will, in part, be the structure of sittings, hours and committees which will perform that role.

- I would therefore suggest this committee asks for a submission from Government (probably the Cabinet Office) on how it intends to cater with the implications of the Act.

It seems to me that a sensible measurement of this committee’s review is that it provides a structure which can effectively hold Government to account post 2015.

Committee Structure

The structure of Committees in the House is already overstretched with regular poor attendance, often with MPs popping in for a few minutes then leaving.

Once the number of MPs is reduced, the position will be even worse unless there is a reduction in the size of Government. I have presumed that Government will have come down in size. Even with a reduction in the overall size of Government there will need to be a reduction/restructuring in the number of committees.

Most select committee would have to lose at least one member which may then have implications in relation to party/governing party representation. Reducing Government is likely to result in a reduction in number of departments. The select committee structure could therefore be cut and therefore the burden on MPs. If this were to happen it may well be possible to maintain the current numbers on each select committee. This would also enable a continuation of the select committee process of urgent reviews. These reviews seem to be a welcome development and should continue since they serve the House well.

Other committees will also have to review the implications of a 10% reduction in membership. Some committees may have to be merged and others have their role changed. It might even be worthwhile considering whether certain roles can be undertaken with the House of Lords e.g. Lords Ministers sitting on Commons standing committees.

- This review should assess whether its recommendations would work with 50 fewer MPs. There is no benefit in recommending changes that will not be effective in less than 4 years time.
Westminster Hall

Debates in Westminster Hall are a relatively recent introduction. With fewer Ministers and MPs I do not believe it will be tenable to continue to serve this extra ‘chamber’ in future. I know that many MPs have found it a useful way or raising a subject that would not be found time on the floor of the House. I would therefore recommend that a decision is taken that Westminster Hall debates will not continue post 2015 but that a way is found for some of the subjects covered be included in the timetable on the floor of the House.

Guillotining of Debate

Governments of different persuasions have taken to guillotining of debate in committee to an extent which would have been considered unacceptable 30 years ago. While changes to allow sensible consideration of Bills were necessary (I served on the Telecommunications Bill Committee where one speech in 1982 lasted over 11 hours-just before I arrived in the House) the position now regularly produces Acts of Parliament where large numbers of clauses have been given no consideration whatsoever. The result is bad legislation. Standing Committee sittings may have to be extended. It cannot be for the House of Lords to try to put right what the Commons has not reviewed.

April 2010

Written evidence submitted by Brian Donohoe MP (P 127, 2010–12)

I wish to register my view that there should be status quo in respect of the Commons sitting hours. I have not been swayed by the argument that sitting hours should relate more closely to working practices in the outside world. Indeed, some will argue that this may allow Members of Parliament to better fulfil their duties to constituents and their families. However, the core objective of the present sitting hours is not to make an MP’s life more convenient but to make the time they spend in Parliament more effective.

I believe this is especially important given the current climate of radical reforms being proposed by the Government. It would be somewhat irresponsible to take time away from the scrutiny of legislation in favour of increasing constituency appointments. This, combined with the constant reassessment of IPSA’s responsibilities and capabilities, would create a tentative atmosphere in Parliament.

March 2011

Written evidence submitted by Unite Parliamentary Staff Branch (P 134, 2010–12)

We are the Unite Parliamentary staff trade union branch representing staff of MPs, both in Parliament and in constituency offices. We have over 500 members from all political parties,
and work on a cross-party basis to represent the view and concerns of our members and the wider staff who work for MPs. We would like to thank the Procedure Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry into the sittings of the House and the parliamentary calendar. We have restricted our submission to the questions that either impact MPs’ staff or to issues branch members have asked us to raise with the Committee.

How the role of an MP has changed in recent years

MPs’ staff are well-placed to comment on how the role of an MP has changed in recent years. One of the most common complaints the union branch executive receives from its members and other MPs staff is that the staffing budget level determined by IPSA is inadequate for dealing with the increase in correspondence in recent years. The increased use of email campaigns by charities and pressure groups means that at a click of a button constituents can send a model email to their MP. Many constituents are signed up to multiple campaign email lists and can generate large amounts of work for MPs’ and their staff. Many Members’ offices are currently under-staffed and are struggling with the amount of policy casework generated by the internet and campaign cards. Many constituents have an expectation that their model email will generate a response from the MP in a matter of days and weeks at the most. Traditional notions of the ‘role of an MP’ and working patterns have had to change to respond to these new campaigning techniques.

The last time MPs’ offices and their workload was thoroughly audited was in the ‘Review of Parliamentary Pay, Pensions and Allowances 2007’ conducted by the Review Body on Senior Salaries. This report made numerous comparisons with the previous report by the Review Body on Senior Salaries in 2004 and demonstrated that the assumptions made about the way to calculate staffing needs in 2004 no longer applied. It was this that led the 2007 report to recommend that the staffing budget should be increased to provide support from 3.5 members of staff from the previous 3 staff members.

The report found that the number of MPs employing 3 or more staff had increased from 14% in 2004 to 87% in 2007—over a six fold increase. This was due to increasing volumes of work handled by MPs and their staff, including the growing popularity of emails. By undertaking this research the 2007 review was able to determine that MPs staffing needs had changed in the intervening three years since their previous review. The review also suggested
that, “there is every reason to suppose this trend [of increasing workloads] will increase”. The report also based its conclusions on the assumption that they would be valid for four years, at which time a new report should be commissioned, saying, in recommendation 4:

“...future reviews of parliamentary pay, pensions and expenditure should henceforth normally take place at four-yearly intervals...” (Review Body on Senior Salaries: Review of parliamentary pay, pensions and allowances 2007, report No. 64, Vol 1. P viii.)

It is therefore reasonable to assume that MPs’ workload has increased even more significantly since this review was undertaken and the Branch would like to see another similar review take place as soon as possible and staffing budgets raised accordingly.

The additional demands of IPSA are also forcing staff to spend longer each week processing expenses. According to our recent staff survey, virtually 70% of staff who processed claims under the old system spent less than an hour a week doing this, with much smaller proportions spending longer. Under the new system, only 8% spend so little time; 58% spend 3 hours or more a week, and 26% spend more than 5 hours each week processing claims.

The recession, and the ongoing effect of budget cuts at the central Government and local Government level, has also generated large amounts of work for caseworkers. It is likely that the workloads of Members and their staff will come under increasing strain due to budget cuts in the legal aid and debt advice sector in particular. With funding to these areas being reduced, constituents may go to the MP as the only resort for assistance, rather than the last resort as has traditionally been the case.

What the role of an MP should be and how this is reflected in time spent at Westminster and in the constituency

There are different opinions as to what the role of an MP should be, and particularly the proportion of time that should be given to Parliamentary work compared to constituency casework and vice versa. We think is a question for individual Members themselves. Their decision about what sort of MP they will be will be based on many factors including career plans, majorities, the make-up of the constituency they represent and local issues.
We think it is important that Parliament makes it possible for Members to choose their own path. We were disappointed, for instance, with the Speaker’s response to the recent IPSA annual review in which it was suggested that some staff should be relocated out of Westminster to save money. For many staff and researchers in particular, working on the parliamentary estate and having access to facilities like the Library, or being able to attend all-party staff meetings are a key part of the job they do for their MP. MPs should be able to arrange and staff their offices based primarily on their idea of what their role should be and not theoretical savings to the House budget.

**What are the defects and strengths of the current patterns?**

The strength of the current patterns is that MPs from constituencies far from London have enough time to travel to Westminster on the Monday, thereby preserving Sunday as a personal day. There are some branch members who make this trip frequently themselves and this means they do not have to give up their personal time to travel to London. We think the 2pm starts on Mondays should remain.

Another strength of the current parliamentary sessions is that the summer recess gives MPs and their staff time to focus on work in their constituencies and to plan for the year ahead. The media portray this period as a long holiday, but we think it is a necessary break from intensive parliamentary work. Other parliaments, such as the Australian Parliament, have even more regular breaks between parliamentary sittings:


Whilst we are not advocating a switch to the Australian model, we include this example because it shows that other parliaments recognise that being an MP is not just about what happens in the Chamber and allow sufficient time for MPs and staff to focus on other areas. Just because MPs are not in Parliament making speeches does not mean they or their staff are on holiday. Parliamentary sittings should not be expanded if the only rationale is to show the media and the public that MPs are ‘working’. It is important that constituency work is valued too and perhaps the Procedure Committee could look at how constituency-based work can be better explained and demonstrated to the public.
One of the defects of the current patterns is late night sittings, which although rare, can have a detrimental impact on Members’ staff. This was commented on mainly by parliamentary researchers, who sometimes have to work beyond their contract hours when their MP is planning to speak in a later debate and additional research or last-minute changes to a speech are required. This can place a great deal of pressure on Member’s staff with caring responsibilities who need to leave work at set times. It can also be expensive because Members may have to pay their own staff overtime, as will the House authorities for House staff. We recommend action be taken to prevent late-night sittings and to make sitting times more family-friendly for all who work in Parliament.

**What pattern of timings for sittings on days would be most effective?**

Some of our members have commented that the current timings for some sittings mean that MPs are not travelling to and from work like their constituents. They suggested it would be beneficial if more Members had to travel at peak times and experience the same problems that the general public does. It would also mean Members would experience the same issues with childcare that affect their staff and the rest of the working population. We recommend sittings on Tuesday-Thursday are changed to reflect the more common working hours of the rest of the population. In particular, we see little rationale for the 2:30 pm start on Tuesdays when MPs are already in Westminster and don’t need the travelling time like they do on Mondays.

**What other factors should be considered in proposing changes to sitting hours?**

Any change in the sitting hours will have an impact on MPs’ staff who work in Parliament. We recommend that any proposals emerging from the Procedure Committee’s inquiry are discussed with MPs’ staff groups. The two cross-party groups, the UNITE Parliamentary staff branch and the Members and Peers Staff Association (MAPSA), have a joint memorandum of understanding with the House authorities and should be consulted ahead of any changes. These two groups can help disseminate information about any changes to sitting hours to MPs’ staff and collect and feedback any information on their effect.

*April 2011*
I am writing in my personal capacity as the former Vice-Chair of the Speaker’s Conference (on Parliamentary Representation). The committee was established in 2008, by order of the House, to “consider and make recommendations for rectifying the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large and [where appropriate ...] associated matters.” The Speaker’s Conference ceased to exist at the end of the 2005 Parliament.

In the course of our inquiry we spent some time debating what the role of a Member of Parliament is and also how the customs and procedures of the House may encourage or deter individual candidacies. Some of this work is pertinent to your inquiry, and I summarise the relevant conclusions below.

What the role of an MP should be
There have been various attempts to define the range of tasks an MP carries out: we looked, for example, at the description produced by the Review Body on Senior Salaries in 1996.¹ In our report we stated that:

“An MP has a number of responsibilities. The main ones are:

- As a legislator, debating, making and reviewing laws and government policy within Parliament; and
- As an advocate for the constituency he or she represents. The MP can speak for the interests and concerns of constituents in Parliamentary debates and, if appropriate, intercede with Ministers on their behalf. The MP can speak either on behalf of the constituency as a whole, or to help individual constituents who are in difficulty (an MP represents all their constituents, whether or not the individual voted for them). Within the constituency an MP and his or her staff will seek to support individual constituents by getting information for them or working to resolve a problem.

¹ Appendix 1 of Report No. 38, Cm 3330-II (HMSO, 1996)
In addition some MPs will:

- Take on an additional role as a Government minister;
- Take on a formal role within Parliament, supporting the Speaker by chairing committees or debates; or
- Have a formal role to play within their political party, for example, being a spokesperson, co-ordinating a campaign or advising the party leadership on a particular area of policy.”

The following points arise from this description:

(a) The MP’s role as a legislator remains crucial. Much of a Member’s work can be supported by his or her office but a Member’s vote cannot be transferred.3

(b) Notwithstanding the central importance of the legislative role, constituency work is increasingly important; we recorded a “strong public expectation that when not required at Westminster, Members will actively participate in the life of the constituency, including at weekends”. We thought it important to acknowledge that an MP works actively in both places.

We thought that there should be a description of the main functions of a Member of Parliament, in order to increase transparency and public understanding of Parliament. Nonetheless, recognising that each constituency will have different needs and expectations of its MP, we recommended that the description “should not remove the scope for MPs to approach the job ... in various ways; it should contain general principles and main objectives and tasks, rather than highly detailed prescriptions”.4 We recommended that any description drawn up should have cross-party agreement and should be published in the interests of transparency.

What are the constraints on reform of the sitting patterns?

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2 Speaker’s Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) HC239-I (2009-10) paragraphs 81-82.
3 While nodding through may be used as a form of proxy voting, its use is restricted: (a) by the requirement for the parties to agree to its use on a case by case basis; and (b) by the requirement that the Member be present within the precincts when the vote is cast. The vote therefore remains closely tied to the Member as an individual.
4 HC239-I (2009-10) paragraph 87
Reform of the House’s sitting patterns has been considered relatively recently. We chose to use the Modernisation Committee’s description of the constraints on reform (from 2004-05) which we considered was still relevant. While the Modernisation Committee had identified a widespread feeling that sitting late enhanced neither the quality of debate nor the reputation of the House it identified three principal constraints as follows:

- How the hours could be made to fit in with constituency work;
- How the hours could be made to fit with family life; and
- How the hours could be made to fit with patterns of travel between home, constituency and Westminster.

The importance of reforms for quality of representation

The Modernisation Committee identified a perception that late sittings did not contribute to respect for the House. Our work on the Speaker’s Conference identified a further argument for reform of the sitting patterns: that the inflexibility of Parliament’s working practices (which are partly institutional and partly the result of the way that the political parties work), together with the increasingly heavy workload of constituency demands, combine to create a lifestyle which is detrimental to Members with caring responsibilities, both for children and other dependants. The impact is not part of the job but it is a direct consequence of the job, and has led some Members to choose not to seek re-election.5 In the current Parliament a survey by Mumsnet has raised similar concerns. Of the 101 MPs who responded to the survey

- 91% considered that Parliament was either not very (33%) or not at all family friendly (58%);
- 62% said that the impact upon their family life of going into or being in Parliament was either somewhat (37%) or largely negative (25%); and
- 28% had considered quitting as a consequence of the stresses the role placed upon family life.6

Some commentators will still argue that the special nature of the tasks carried out by the House means that certain sacrifices may have to be made. Yet we considered it important to recognise how widespread and significant the deterrent effect of the sitting hours may be, in

5 HC239-1(2009-10) paragraph 252
6 http://m.mumsnet.com/family-friendly/is-parliament-family-friendly
its impact upon the quality of representation in the House. We heard, informally, that those whose decisions about Parliamentary candidacy were influenced by the House’s sitting patterns included not simply mothers but fathers, single parents, carers for any vulnerable family member and the wider community of individuals in their 20s or 30s who were hoping or planning to start a family.

The working practices of the House have a real bearing upon the diversity of representation within the House. The Conference concluded that they impact upon our effectiveness and the extent to which our work receives public support. If sitting late at night does not enhance the quality of our debates, neither does it help if the voices of significant groups in society are not heard. To cite an example raised during our inquiry, our effectiveness in scrutiny and debate, and our legitimacy as decision-makers, is compromised if those with current experience of frontline services such as health, education and/or welfare services are absent. Any parent with small children will have such experience: it should be heard more clearly in the House.

The leadership of all the main political parties has accepted that there should be a place within the House of Commons for individuals from all sections of society: this is a matter of justice. In our view it was essential to the House’s credibility that the participation of Members who have young families and/or other caring responsibilities is maintained and supported; we asked that this be kept in mind by all engaged in the process of Commons reform.

The most effective pattern of sittings

We were challenged to consider the House’s sitting hours by the evidence we received from Kitty Ussher MP. Kitty Ussher, who stood down at the 2010 general election, wrote to us advocating that “the House’s core working hours should be changed to 9am to 4.30 pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday”. She argued that this change would, other than in exceptional circumstances, provide “a reasonable working assumption that whipped activity would usually finish at around 5pm” and would enable MP parents with children nearby to

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7 HC239-I (2009-10) paragraph 14
8 HC239-I (2009-10) paragraph 5
9 HC 239-I (2009-10) paragraph 253
spend time with them in the evenings while maintaining their commitment to spend time in
the main chamber.  

We concluded that, ideally, sitting time for the main Chamber should be brought into line
with what are considered to be normal business hours. We recognised, however, that this
might be difficult to achieve.

An alternative proposal, also put forward by Kitty Ussher, was for a greater use of deferred
divisions in relation to business taken in the late afternoon and early evening on certain days.
Deferring divisions at these times would enable the suspension of the running whip for an
agreed period, for example, between 4pm and 8pm. This would enable Members to go home
to spend time with their families at teatime or bedtime—or, indeed, to spend uninterrupted
time on committee or constituency business according to their pattern of work—before
returning to the lobbies to vote.

The latter proposal presented some problems. In particular, it would be impractical to defer
divisions on occasions when detailed amendments to Government bills are being considered.
We considered, however, that it merited examination. We looked at the business which was
conducted at Monday and Tuesday sittings of the House in sessions 2007-08 and 2008-09 and
found that votes were called between 4pm and 8pm on only half of those sitting days.

The business on a significant number of these days was the initial consideration (second
reading) of bills. Since second reading debates normally last for an entire Parliamentary day
an agreement to defer afternoon divisions on these days would have had no impact on the
progress of business. Such an agreement could, however, have given those Members not
directly involved in the debate greater flexibility either to spend time with their families or to
work with constituents, according to their chosen pattern of work. Even on those days when
votes were called between 4pm and 8pm, there were decisions taken (for example, on
opposition motions or, less frequently, motions to approve European Union documents)
which could have been deferred at least until the close of business that same evening.

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10 References in this section are to HC239-I (2009-10) paragraphs 278-286.
Clearly, the demands of particular stages of bill consideration mean that it would not be possible to defer afternoon divisions as a matter of course. Deferring afternoon divisions and suspending the whip only on certain days would not be a full answer to the difficulties faced by Members with young families but we considered that it would, nonetheless, be a step in the right direction. We also believed that the certainty of time uninterrupted by divisions might be perceived to be advantageous, both for committee work and for Members’ constituency work.

We recommended that the House should have the opportunity to vote again upon its sitting hours early in the 2010 Parliament. In view of the difficulty in securing a move to normal business hours we also recommended a substantial further development of deferred voting in order to facilitate a more family friendly approach to sitting arrangements and unscheduled (unprogrammed) votes. We recommended that further consideration should be given to modern methods of voting to facilitate a more efficient and practical use of time.

If you would find it helpful to receive further information about the Conference’s report please let me know.

May 2011

Written evidence submitted by John Mann MP (2010–12, P 139)

The modern MP, living in constituency, requires Fridays for surgeries and constituency business.
I therefore propose the following changes:
No Friday sittings
Private members business to be 9.30–2.30 on Tuesdays
In addition Parliament should begin at 11.30 on Monday and at 9.30 on Wednesdays and Thursdays.
This creates an extra six hours.
March 2011
Written evidence submitted by Linda Rostron, Written Answers Unit, Hansard (P 140, 2010–12)

Whatever your plans, whatever your decisions, please don’t forget that public sector cuts are affecting House staff. I am doing even more for less.

March 2011

Written evidence submitted by the Canadian House of Commons (P 150, 2010–12)

1. What are the standard sitting hours of the (Canadian HOC) Chamber on each day of the week?

The standard sitting hours of the Chamber are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00 - 11:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10:00 - 11:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 - 11:15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government Orders</td>
<td>11:00 - 11:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15 - 12:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Oral Questions</td>
<td>11:15 - 12:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 - 1:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Review of Delegated Legislation*</td>
<td></td>
<td>12:00 - 1:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 - 1:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private Members’ Business</td>
<td>1:30 - 2:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30 - 2:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private Members’ Business</td>
<td></td>
<td>1:30 - 2:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00 - 2:15</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private Members’ Business</td>
<td>2:15 - 2:30</td>
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<td>2:15 - 2:30</td>
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<td>2:30 - 3:00</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private Members’ Business</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3:00 - 5:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private Members’ Business</td>
<td>3:00 - 5:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:30 - 6:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private Members’ Business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30 - 7:00</td>
<td></td>
<td>Adjournment Proceedings</td>
<td>Adjournment Proceedings</td>
<td>Adjournment Proceedings</td>
<td>Adjournment Proceedings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* If required, House to sit at 1:00 p.m. for the review of Delegated Legislation pursuant to Standing Order 128(1).

Please note that certain proceedings (notably Private Members’ Business and Adjournment Proceedings) may be suspended, delayed or rescheduled in accordance with the Standing Orders as a result of events such as recorded divisions, “Statements by Ministers” and “Introduction of Government Bills.”

2. What pattern of sittings and recesses is adopted over a typical year and how many days a year do you typically sit?
The Standing Orders of the House of Commons (S.O. 28(2)(a)) set out the pattern of adjournments (and therefore sittings) for the calendar year as follows:

“When the House meets on a day, or sits after the normal meeting hour on a day, set out in column A, and then adjourns, it shall stand adjourned to the day set out in Column B.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Friday preceding Thanksgiving Day.</td>
<td>The second Monday following that Friday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Friday preceding Remembrance Day.</td>
<td>The second Monday following that Friday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The second Friday preceding Christmas Day.</td>
<td>The last Monday in January.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Friday preceding the week marking the mid-way point between the Monday following Easter Monday and June 23.</td>
<td>The second Monday following that Friday or, if that Monday is the day fixed for the celebration of the birthday of the Sovereign, on the Tuesday following that Monday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June-23 or the Friday preceding if June-23 falls on a Saturday, a Sunday or a Monday.</td>
<td>The second Monday following Labour Day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these periods of adjournment, Standing Order 28(2)(b) specifies that:

“The speaker of the House shall, by September 30, after consultation with the House Leaders, table in the House a calendar for the following year setting out the sitting and non-sitting weeks between the last Monday in January and the Monday following Easter Monday.”

Thus, in addition to the above-mentioned periods of adjournment, the calendar generally provides for at least one week per month, and occasionally two weeks, during which the House does not sit and Members can return to their constituencies.

The Standing Orders (28(1)) also provide for nine days during the calendar year when the House does not sit: New Year’s Day, Good Friday, Victoria Day, St. John the Baptist Day, Dominion Day (known today as Canada Day), Labour day, Thanksgiving Day, Remembrance Day and Christmas Day. All, except St. John the Baptist Day, are statutory holidays. The Standing Orders further provide that
when St. John the Baptist Day and Canada Day fall on Tuesday, the House does not sit on the preceding day; similarly, when they fall on Thursday, the House does not sit on the following day. Since these non-sitting days typically fall within periods of long adjournments, this provision rarely comes into play. It would, of course, come into play if the House were to meet outside the House calendar.

Assuming that the House is in continuous session for the full calendar year, then, the calendar provides for about 135 sitting days, with two prolonged adjournment periods: one following the June adjournment and the other following the Christmas adjournment.

3. **Do you have designated constituency weeks or days when the Chamber does no sit?**

As indicated above, the calendar generally provides for at least one week per month, and occasionally two weeks, during which the House does not sit in order primarily to afford Members the opportunity to spend time in their constituencies.

4. **Do you have designated committee weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?**

No. Generally speaking, committees meet when the House is sitting, although they do occasionally meet during periods of adjournment.

5. **Have the hours of sitting patterns changed recently or are there plans for major changes in the near future?**

There has been no change to the hours of sitting pattern in recent years, nor has there been any indication that such a change is forthcoming.

*June 2011*

**Written evidence submitted by the Australian Senate (P 151, 2010–12)**

1. The standard sitting hours on each day are provided by standing order 55 as follows:

   Monday: 12.30 pm – 6.30 pm, 7.30 pm – 10.30 pm
   Tuesday: 12.30 pm – adjournment
   Wednesday: 9.30 am – 8 pm
   Thursday: 9.30 am – 8.40 pm

   At present, there is also a temporary order in operation (till the end of the year, at this stage) which provides for the Senate to meet at 10 am on Mondays. The additional time is allocated to government business to compensate for a similar period of time on Thursday mornings being allocated to the consideration of private senators’ bills
under the temporary order. The times of meeting operate in conjunction with standing order 57 which sets out the routine of business for each day. The hours of meeting and routine of business are regularly varied by motion on the last sitting days preceding winter and summer recesses, to deal with urgent legislation that needs to be finalised before the Senate adjourns for several weeks.

2. The pattern of sitting in any year typically falls into three groups of sittings. The first period begins after the summer break (late January or early February) and may continue until Easter. A break then occurs until the Budget sittings commence, usually in the second week of May. The appropriation bills are dealt with before the end of the financial year on 30 June and a winter recess follows. This year, for local political reasons, the Senate will meet in the first week of July but this is highly unusual. The winter recess ends in August and sittings recommence till late November or early December. The typical pattern of sittings during those periods involves two sitting weeks (Monday to Thursday), followed by two non-sitting weeks, but this pattern is subject to variation depending on external events (such as the timing of Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings, for example, or major international events being hosted in Australia, not excluding sporting events such as Olympic or Commonwealth Games). Within each period of sittings, the Senate also conducts one or two weeks of estimates hearings when the Senate itself does not meet. The number of sitting days is at historic lows, having fallen from a long term average of around 80 days each year to an average of around 50 days. Estimates days are not included in the latter average. Data on sitting days from 1901 to the present are available on the Senate website at the following location:
http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/work/statsnet/general/sittingdays_year.htm. Also see information on sitting patterns since 2000:

Although the Senate sets its own sitting days by resolution, in practice the sitting pattern for both Houses is now determined by the Prime Minister’s office and adopted by the Senate, almost as a formality. The Senate retains the ability, however, to meet pursuant to a request made by an absolute majority of the whole number of senators, an ability exercised from time to time.
3. There are no designated constituency days. Senators are representatives of states as a whole and while they have offices in their home states and they undertake constituency-style duties on behalf of electors, there are probably significant differences in the assumptions made about constituency roles in our respective countries. One of the reasons for the disposition of sitting days is the large size of Australia which, combined with a relatively short electoral cycle for the House of Representatives, has led to an expectation that members will spend as much time in their electorates as possible (and as little as possible in Canberra).

4. There are designated weeks for Senate estimates hearings: one week for additional estimates in February, two weeks for budget estimates hearings in May-June and one week for supplementary budget estimates hearings in October (see sitting patterns via the link above). Otherwise, Senate committees are meeting somewhere in Australia on most non-sitting days throughout the year. They also meet frequently on sitting days in Canberra, including for the purpose of taking evidence, although this is only possible if the Senate so authorises them. Authorisation is commonly sought and given. All committee rooms are within reach of the chamber should divisions or quorums be called while committees are meeting. Fridays of sitting weeks are also very heavily used for committee meetings, particularly committees undertaking inquiries into bills (such inquiries having relatively short reporting timeframes).

5. The hours of sitting and routine of business underwent a major review in 1994, driven by the desire of senators to find alternatives to ‘legislating by exhaustion’. There have been minor modifications since but no return to the pattern of very late nights and unpredictable adjournment times.

The background to and evolution of current practices may be found in Annotated Standing Orders of the Australian Senate (2009), published on our website as ‘Commentaries on the standing orders’. In particular, see the following commentaries:


May 2011
1. What are the standard sitting hours of the Chamber on each day of the week?

The *Rules of the Senate* stipulate that the Senate sit at 2pm from Monday to Thursday, and at 9am on Fridays. The Rules provide for the adjournment at midnight from Monday to Thursday and at 4pm on Fridays, although the chamber often adjourns significantly earlier. Between 6 and 8pm, there is a break in the sitting, which is also often set aside.

In practice, the Senate rarely sits on Mondays and Fridays. When it does sit on a Monday, the sitting will usually begin at 6pm or 8pm.

In addition, the Senate usually adopts a sessional order to allow the chamber to sit at 1:30 on Wednesdays and Thursdays, and to adjourn the Senate at 4pm on Wednesdays. The purpose of the early adjournment on Wednesdays is to allow committees the time to sit after the Senate has adjourned (committees are not allowed to sit when the Senate is sitting, unless special permission is given.)

2. What pattern of sittings and recesses is adopted over a typical year and how many days a year do you typically sit?

The Rules do not set a calendar for sittings. In practice, the Senate broadly follows the calendar of the House of Commons, but with frequent variations. The Senate generally sits from the end of January or the beginning of February until the last week of June, though this can be extended as long as necessary. Last year, for example, the Senate sat until July 12, 2010.

After the summer break, the Senate generally returns around mid-September and sits until the last week before Christmas (for e.g., our 2011 calendar foresees the Senate sitting until as late as December 23. Although the Senate functions on the assumption that we will sit until that date, it will often adjourn the week before if required key bills are adopted by then.) During these long blocks of sittings there are occasional break weeks.
In practice, the Senate's role as a revising chamber means that the schedule of the Senate's sittings depends to some extent on the timing of bills arriving from the House of Commons. The Senate's sitting calendar, which is established by the leadership in consultation with the caucuses and reflects expectations only, indicates this assumption in the scheduling of Senate sittings one week past the House of Commons’ last expected sitting week before the longer adjournments at the end of June and before Christmas.

See the Senate's sitting calendars here:
www.parl.gc.ca/ParlBusiness/senate/calendar/cal2011¬e.htm

See the House of Commons' sitting calendars here:

3. Do you have designated constituency weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?

The Senate does not have days or weeks that are specifically designated as constituency periods. It does however have certain holidays (days and weeks) that are reflected in the sitting calendars. These are:

- Good Friday and Easter Monday (the Senate does not sit the week before and the week after these days)
- Victoria Day (May 24) (the Senate does not sit during the whole week)
- St. John the Baptist Day (June 24)
- Canada Day (July 1)
- Thanksgiving Day (2 1111 Monday in October) (the Senate does not sit during the whole week)
- Remembrance Day (November 11) (the Senate does not sit during the whole week)

Senators often take advantage of these adjournments of the Senate to visit the provinces they represent and attend to duties outside the Senate chamber.

4. Do you have designated committee weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?
The Senate does not normally have designated committee weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit. When they do occur, and this is infrequently, it is through a negotiated agreement between the government and the opposition.

5. Have the hours of sitting patterns changed recently or are there plans for major changes in the near future?

There have been no recent significant changes to the pattern of sitting hours, nor are there any plans to change it.

Any changes in sitting hours are the result of the volume and urgency of the work before the Senate. Longer sitting hours are the norm prior to the longer summer and winter breaks, as well as before the end of the fiscal year (March 31), when certain bills are needed in order for the government to have the funds to function.

June 2011

Written evidence submitted by the Australian House of Representatives
(P 159, 2010–12)

1. Standard sittings

The standard sitting hours of the House are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>House Hours</th>
<th>Main Committee Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>10.00 am – 10.30 pm</td>
<td>10.30 am – 1.30 pm and 4.00 pm – 10.00 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>2.00 pm – 10.30 pm</td>
<td>4.00 pm – 10.00 pm (if required)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>9.00 am – 8.00 pm</td>
<td>9.30 am – 1.00 pm and 4.00 pm – 7.30 pm (if required)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>9.00 am – 5.00 pm</td>
<td>9.30 am – 1.00 pm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are 56 hours in the standard sitting week here but it is not unusual for some variation – for example, this week the House met later on Monday because of a visit by Prime Minister Key of New Zealand, and then sat earlier on Tuesday to compensate.
I have provided details for the Main Committee because it operates as a second chamber. In some ways it is similar to Westminster Hall, in that it has an open membership, and meets simultaneously with the House. A significant difference is that, while all government bills are initiated in the House and must be returned to the House for their final consideration, by agreement many non-controversial bills are referred for consideration in the Main Committee. Typically more than 30 per cent of government bills are referred to the Main Committee each year.

2. Pattern of sittings

The sitting year is divided into three periods:

- the Autumn sittings, usually from early February to late March;
- the Budget sittings, usually from early May to late June or early July; and
- the Spring sittings, usually from mid August until late November or early December.

The standard pattern is for the House to sit for two weeks on/two weeks off, but this pattern is not followed fully – see the attached sitting schedule for this year:


Normally the House sits for between 65 and 70 sitting days each year.

3. Designated constituency weeks or days

There are no designated constituency weeks or days. The weekly program provides opportunities for members to raise constituency matters during periods for members’ statements in the Main Committee or the House, as well as the daily adjournment debates and the weekly grievance debate.

4. Designated committee weeks or days

The House does not have designated committee weeks or days when the chamber does not sit, but significant amounts of time are provided each Monday for the presentation and consideration of reports from parliamentary departments. In addition, sometimes committee
reports are presented and discussed on other days but when this happens there is no
guaranteed time period: while a report can always be presented the allocation of time for
discussion on a day other than a Monday is a matter for negotiation with government.

5. Changes in the sitting pattern

During the last Parliament the routine weekly sitting hours consisted of 36 hours in the House
and 12.5 hours in the Main Committee, giving a total of 48.5 hours.

The August 2010 election resulted in a hung parliament and, during the negotiations leading
to the formation of a minority government, commitments were made to introduce many
changes to House procedures and arrangements. An additional 7.5 hours was added to the
standard sitting weeks, bringing the total to 56 hours. All of the additional hours were for
non-government business.

The Procedure Committee has been charged with monitoring and reviewing the changes
implemented at the commencement of the current Parliament. The committee’s first report
was presented in April. It recorded some of the concerns in respect of additional sitting hours
and recommended that the House consider measures to manage the workload of members
during sitting weeks (having regard to the health and well-being of members, their staff and
parliamentary staff) — see Interim Report pp 45-53 available at:

Any change to the sitting hours will be a sensitive matter in a political sense.

June 2011

Written evidence submitted by the Lok Sabha (India) (P 160, 2010–12)

1. What are the standard sitting hours of the Chamber on each day of the week?

Standard sitting hours of the Chamber, i.e. Lok Sabha on each day is governed by Rule 12 of
Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha which states as under:-
“Unless the Speaker otherwise directs, sitting of the House on any day shall ordinarily commence at 11.00 hours and conclude at 18.00 hours with a lunch break for one hour which may ordinarily be from 13.00 hours to 14.00 hours.”

2. What pattern of sittings and recesses is adopted over a typical year and how many days a year do you typically sit?

As per provisions of article 85(1) of the constitution, the President shall from time to time summon each House of Parliament to meet at such time and place as he thinks fit, but six months shall not intervene between its last sitting in one session and the date appointed for its first sitting in the next session. Normally, three sessions of the House of about 23 to 24 weeks’ duration are held during a year and the House on an average sits for about 120 days. However, since 1993 after the constitution of the Departmentally Related Parliamentary Standing Committees, the actual average sittings of Lok Sabha have been below 100 days.

3. Do you have designated constituency weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?

There is no such provision under the Constitution or Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha.

4. Do you have designated committee weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?

Since 1993, after the constitution of the Departmentally Related Parliamentary Standing Committees, the House adjourns for about 3/4 weeks during Budget Session to enable Standing Committees to consider Demands for Grants of Ministries/Deptts. and prepare their reports.

5. Have the hours of sitting patterns changed recently or are there plans for major changes in the future?

There has been no recent change in the sitting patterns of the House nor are there any plans for major changes in future.

June 2011
Q1. What are the standard sitting hours of the Chamber on each day of the week?

A1. Standard sitting hours: Monday and Tuesday. Standing Order 10 refers (see Appendix 1 below).

Monday 12 noon—6.00 p.m.
Tuesday 10.30—6.00 p.m.

While Standing Orders specify that business cannot go past 6.00 p.m. on Monday without special arrangements, the same doesn’t apply to Tuesday so in practice often the sitting will go past 6.00 p.m. on Tuesday.

Q2. What pattern of sittings and recesses is adopted over a typical year and how many days a year do you typically sit?

A2. The Business Committee agrees dates for recess at the start of each session. Usually the session runs from the first week in September through to the end of June, with recess at Christmas of two weeks, Easter of two weeks and Halloween one week.

2008/9—there were 69 sittings
2009/10—there were 70 sittings
2010/11—there were 49 sittings (but an election in April)

Q3. Do you have designated constituency weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?

A3. The generally accepted pattern of work is:

Monday and Tuesday—Plenary
Wednesday and Thursday—Committees
Friday—Constituency

Q4. Do you have designated committee weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?

A4. No.

Q5. Have the hours of sitting patterns changed recently or are there plans for major changes in the near future?

A5. We had longer sittings towards the end of the last mandate which were necessary to progress the rush of legislation that needed to complete its stage before dissolution at midnight on 24 March 2011. There are no plans at present to review sitting times.

June 2011
Appendix 1

Standing Order 10: Sittings and Adjournments of the House

(1) The categories of business to be conducted in the Assembly shall consist of the following:

(a) Assembly Business
(b) Executive Committee Business
(c) Committee Business
(d) Questions
(e) Private Members & apos; Business
(f) Private Business
(g) Adjournment Debates
(h) Party Business
(i) Matters of the day.

(2) Subject to the authority of the Business Committee to determine the time for commencement of business in plenary session, the sittings of the Assembly shall be arranged as follows:

Monday 12.00 midday–6.00 pm
Tuesday 10.30 am–6.00 pm.

The allocation of time for business within these sittings shall be determined by the Business Committee, except that -

(a) there shall be a period for questions as set out in Standing Orders 20 and 20A;
(b) at the end of each sitting up to one hour may be set aside for an adjournment debate;
(c) Deleted 02/06/09

(3) Where business on the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm on Monday, the Speaker may allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the outstanding business is completed, whichever is earlier.

(3A) Where it appears that Monday’s business may not be completed by 7.00 pm, a motion to extend the sitting into the evening may be moved by—

(a) a member of the Executive Committee (in respect of outstanding Executive Committee Business):
(b) a member of the Business Committee (in respect of any other outstanding business).

(3B) A motion under paragraph (3A) may only be moved if—

(a) notice of the motion has been given to the Speaker by—

(i) 11.00 am on the Monday in question; or

(ii) such later time as the Speaker may allow; and

(b) the motion specifies the latest time at which the Assembly is to adjourn and the Speaker considers that time to be reasonable.

(3C) Consideration of business on the Order Paper not concluded by the time the Assembly adjourns on a Monday shall be postponed until such time as the Business Committee determines.’

(4) If at the time the Assembly is to adjourn a division is in progress, or a question is being put and a division or a vote in the chamber results, adjournment of the Assembly shall be deferred until after the declaration of the result of the division or vote in the chamber.

(5) If Tuesday's business cannot be completed in the allocated time, the sitting may be extended into the evening, into Wednesday, or both.

(6) Additional sittings may be arranged by the Business Committee according to the exigencies of the Assembly.

(7) Where an oral Ministerial statement made under Standing Order 18A impinges upon the time bands specified in this order, the Speaker shall act in accordance with Standing Order 18A(6).

(8) An adjournment of the Assembly shall mean an adjournment until the next sitting day unless the Assembly, on a motion moved by a member of the Executive Committee after notice, has ordered an adjournment to some other definite date.

(9) A session of the Assembly shall be that period from the commencement of business following the summer recess until the end of the subsequent summer recess. The Business Committee shall determine the dates for recess.
Written evidence submitted by the National Assembly for Wales (P 162, 2010–12)

Introduction
As the National Assembly for Wales has just entered its Fourth Assembly, the pattern of sitting days is yet to become clear. Therefore, our response is based on the conventions adopted in the Third Assembly.

1. What are the standard sitting hours of the Chamber on each day of the week?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Plenary meetings - sitting hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday (Commencing at 1.30pm)</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday (Commencing at 1.30pm)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Designated Constituency Day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. What pattern of sittings and recesses is adopted over a typical year and how many days a year do you typically sit?

On average, the typical number of sitting days per year is 66. The typical pattern of sittings and recesses is shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number of weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christmas Recess</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitting weeks</td>
<td>5 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Half Term</td>
<td>1 week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitting weeks</td>
<td>5 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easter Recess</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitting weeks</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitsun Half Term</td>
<td>1 week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11 The number of days Plenary meets, not the number of days on which business takes place.
Sitting weeks | 6 weeks
---|---
Summer Recess | 9 weeks
Sitting weeks | 5 weeks
Autumn Half Term | 1 week
Sitting weeks | 6 weeks
**TOTAL** | **52 weeks**

3. Do you have designated constituency weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?
The designated constituency day during sitting weeks is Friday. Generally, the chamber only sits on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

4. Do you have designated committee weeks or days when the Chamber does not sit?
Committee business takes place in the pattern described below. Generally, committees do not meet concurrently with plenary meetings of the Assembly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Committee Meetings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Occasional meetings in the afternoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>All day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Designated Constituency Day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Have the hours of sitting patterns changed recently or are there plans for major changes in the near future?
In the Third Assembly, the National Assembly’s Standing Orders were fairly prescriptive in terms of specifying when the chamber must sit. The Standing Orders required Plenary meetings to usually start at 1.30pm and finish no later than 6pm. However, business routinely finished later than 6pm on Wednesdays. Towards the end of the Third Assembly the Business Committee conducted a review of Standing Orders in preparation for the Fourth Assembly. The new Standing Orders now provide greater flexibility in relation to the timings and structure of plenary meetings in order to respond to the demands of business. There is now no usual end time for plenary meetings in the Standing Orders. However, the Business Committee is still required by Standing Orders “to have regard to the family and
constituency or electoral responsibilities of Members” and to avoid timetabling business before 9.00 am or after 6.00pm on any working day. Nonetheless, the sitting patterns are not expected to change substantially.

*June 2011*