



House of Commons
Procedure Committee

Early Day Motions

First Report of Session 2013–14

Report, together with formal minutes and oral evidence

Additional written evidence is available on the Committee website at www.parliament.uk/proccom

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Procedure Committee

The Procedure Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, and to make recommendations.

Current membership

Mr Charles Walker MP (*Conservative, Broxbourne*) (Chair)
Jenny Chapman MP (*Labour, Darlington*)
Nic Dakin MP (*Labour, Scunthorpe*)
Thomas Docherty MP (*Labour, Dunfermline and West Fife*)
Sir Roger Gale MP (*Conservative, North Thanet*)
Helen Goodman MP (*Labour, Bishop Auckland*)
Mr James Gray MP (*Conservative, North Wiltshire*)
Tom Greatrex MP (*Lab/Co-op, Rutherglen and Hamilton West*)
John Hemming MP (*Liberal Democrat, Birmingham Yardley*)
Mr David Nuttall MP (*Conservative, Bury North*)
Jacob Rees-Mogg MP (*Conservative, North East Somerset*)
Martin Vickers MP (*Conservative, Cleethorpes*)

The following Members were also members of the Committee during the Parliament:

Rt Hon Greg Knight MP (*Conservative, Yorkshire East*) (Chair until 6 September 2012)
Karen Bradley MP (*Conservative, Staffordshire Moorlands*)
Andrew Percy MP (*Conservative, Brigg and Goole*)
Bridget Phillipson MP (*Labour, Houghton and Sunderland South*)
Angela Smith MP (*Labour, Penistone and Stocksbridge*)
Sir Peter Soulsby MP (*Labour, Leicester South*)
Mike Wood MP (*Labour, Batley and Spen*)

Powers

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 147. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/proccom>.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Huw Yardley (Clerk), Lloyd Owen (Second Clerk) and Jim Camp (Committee Assistant).

Contacts

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Summary

Our predecessor Committee considered the role of Early Day Motions in 2006-07. That inquiry identified a number of uses for EDMs. EDMs continue to be popular, and it is clear that they remain a valuable tool for those Members who use them. Consequently we recommend no change to the current procedure.

In light of concerns about authentication, we do not think that it is appropriate for EDMs to be tabled electronically. However, there may be benefits from allowing Members to add their signatures electronically. We recommend that PICT conduct a full feasibility study to explore this option.

1 Early Day Motions

The role of Early Day Motions

1. In the last Parliament our predecessor Committee conducted an inquiry into Early Day Motions.¹ That inquiry identified a number of uses for EDMs, summarised in a Memorandum from the then Clerk of the House:

Most EDMs fall into one or more of the following categories:

- expressing opinions on issues of general public interest, often to assess the degree of support amongst Members;
- continuing the political debate (for example, criticism of Government or Opposition policy);
- giving prominence to a campaign or the work of some pressure group outside the House; or
- highlighting local issues (such as the success of the local football team, the achievements of constituents, the need for a bypass, and so on).

EDMs are also used for narrower purposes:

- for “prayers” against statutory instruments, usually in the name of the leader of an opposition party, which act as a trigger for reference of an instrument for debate in a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation. Such motions normally account for 2% or less of EDMs in a session (0.9% and 1.3% in the last two sessions);
- to criticise individuals (members of the Royal Family, Members of either House, a judge, or the Chair) where such criticism in debate would be disorderly; and
- to set out detailed allegations against a company, other body or individual under the protection of parliamentary privilege.²

2. In the first Session of this Parliament, Graham Evans MP held an adjournment debate on the subject of EDMs, during which a number of Members raised concerns about the role of EDMs.³ Following a request from Mr Evans, we have considered whether there is a case for reform or even abolition of EDMs.

3. During this inquiry, we heard evidence from Members who refuse to sign EDMs and those who are prolific signers. We are grateful to those Members who have assisted us. In evidence it was clear that the uses outlined by the then Clerk of the House to our predecessor Committee still hold true today. We sympathise with the comments made by Mr Evans and by other Members in the adjournment debate that EDMs have been

¹ Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2006-07, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, HC 513.

² Procedure Committee, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, para 60.

³ *HC Deb*, 6 February 2012, col 134.

devalued by their volume and “the utter ridiculousness of many of them”.⁴ However, it is apparent from the evidence presented to us that EDMs are still a valuable tool for the Members who use them.⁵ During the last session there were 1312 EDMs, attracting 32,722 signatures, an indication of their continued popularity. As we heard during our evidence session:

[looking at] the list of the most-signed EDMs over this session...the ones that are getting a lot of support are not frivolous at all. There are two in the top 10 about the NHS. There is something about the beer duty escalator; there is one on rising fuel costs and energy efficiency and one on probation. I know that they can be used to demonstrate cross-party support for issues as part of a wider campaign.⁶

4. Whilst the advent of the Backbench Business Committee has provided a further avenue for Members to raise issues within Parliament, demand for time allocated to that Committee is very high. As David Crausby MP noted in evidence, “[the Backbench Business Committee] offers quality but couldn’t possibly deliver the quantity of opportunity that the Early Day Motion delivers”.⁷ We agree that EDMs continue to provide a benefit to those Members who use them. Amongst other purposes, as we note above, EDMs allow Members to raise issues under the protection of Parliamentary privilege that might otherwise be difficult to bring to the attention of the House,⁸ and they provide the usual means by which Members bring forward prayers against statutory instruments.

E-tabling or e-signing

5. In their last report on the subject our predecessors considered the possibility of allowing Members to table or sign EDMs electronically, in a similar manner to the electronic tabling of questions. On that occasion, the Committee concluded

94. ...Experience with the e-tabling of questions has shown that the authentication procedures for electronic tabling are far from watertight. Parliamentary questions are important. They should be tabled only by Members. But they are requests for information; not expressions of a particular point of view. An EDM is a proposition on which, at least in theory, the House might reach a decision. One of the principal purposes of an EDM is to allow Members formally and publicly to record their support for it. We do not believe that the deliberately weak authentication requirements used for parliamentary questions are appropriate for EDMs.

...

⁴ *HC Deb*, 6 February 2012, col. 134.

⁵ Q43

⁶ Q31

⁷ Q51

⁸ Written evidence from John Hemming; Q 43ff.

96. Unless significantly stronger authentication than is currently required for parliamentary questions can be guaranteed, we cannot yet recommend the introduction of e-tabling for EDMs.⁹

6. We have held a number of meetings with staff from the Table Office and the Parliamentary ICT Service on the subject of authentication. In our view the position remains the same with regard to the electronic tabling of EDMs. We therefore do not consider it appropriate to move to a system of e-tabling for EDMs. However, there may well be a benefit to Members in permitting signatures to be added to EDMs electronically. Further work would be required in order to consider the risks and benefits of such an approach.

⁹ Procedure Committee, *E-petitions and Early Day Motions*, paras 94-96.

2 Conclusion and recommendations

7. Early Day Motions remain a popular and worthwhile tool for Members. Whilst we acknowledge that some EDMs may be in danger of trivialising the work of the House, the range of uses which Members make of EDMs demonstrates their continued value. Whilst we would encourage Members to use their judgement when tabling EDMs, to ensure that the procedures of the House are not used frivolously, **we recommend no change to the system of Early Day Motions.**

8. Like our predecessor Committee, we are not convinced that there are sufficient safeguards in place to ensure the secure authentication which would be necessary to allow electronic tabling of EDMs. However, we can see some potential merit in allowing Members to add their names to EDMs electronically. In order to explore the potential benefits, **we recommend that the Parliamentary ICT Service conduct further work with the Table Office to produce a full feasibility study on the electronic signing of EDMs.**

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 19 June 2013

Members present:

Mr Charles Walker, in the Chair

Thomas Docherty
Helen Goodman
Mr James Gray
John Hemming

Mr David Nuttall
Jacob Rees-Mogg
Martin Vickers

Draft Report (*Early Day Motions*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 8 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for placing in the Library and Parliamentary Archives.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 26 June at 3.00 pm]

Witnesses

Wednesday 24 April 2013

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Mr David Crausby, MP, Graham Evans, MP, Robert Halfon, MP, and Dr Sarah Wollaston, MP

Ev 1

List of unprinted evidence

The following written evidence has been reported to the House, but to save printing costs has not been printed and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library, where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Parliamentary Archives (www.parliament.uk/archives), and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to The Parliamentary Archives, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0PW (tel. 020 7219 3074; email archives@parliament.uk). Opening hours are from 9.30 am to 5.00 pm on Mondays to Fridays.

Graham Evans MP (P123, 2012-13)

John Hemming MP (P5, 2013-14)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

Session 2012–13

First Report	Sitting hours and the Parliamentary calendar	HC 330
First Special Report	Reasoned opinions on subsidiarity under the Lisbon Treaty: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 712
Second Report	Review of the Backbench Business Committee	HC 168
Second Special Report	Sitting hours and the Parliamentary calendar: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 790
Third Report	E-tabling of written questions	HC 775
Third Special Report	Review of the Backbench Business Committee– Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2012–13	HC 978
Fourth Report	Explanatory statements on amendments	HC 979
Fifth Report	Statements by Members who answer on behalf of statutory bodies	HC 1017
Sixth Report	Debates on Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall	HC 1094
Seventh Report	Monitoring written Parliamentary questions	HC 1095

Session 2010–12

First Report	Ministerial Statements	HC 602
First Special Report	Ministerial Statements: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2010–12	HC 1062
Second Report	Improving the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny: (a) Select committee amendments (b) Explanatory statements on amendments (c) Written parliamentary questions	HC 800
Second Special Report	Improving the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny: (a) Select committee amendments (b) Explanatory statements on amendments (c) Written parliamentary questions: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2010–11	HC 1063
Third Report	Use of hand-held electronic devices in the Chamber and committees	HC 889
Fourth Report	Reasoned opinions on subsidiarity under the Lisbon Treaty	HC 1440
Fifth Report	2010 elections for positions in the House	HC 1573
Sixth Report	Lay membership of the Committee on Standards and Privileges	HC 1606
Third Special Report	Lay membership of the Committee on Standards and Privileges: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 1869

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Seventh Report	Debates on Government e-Petitions	HC 1706
Fourth Special Report	Debates on Government e-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 1902
Eighth Report	E-tabling of parliamentary questions for written answer	HC 1823
Ninth Report	2010 elections for positions in the House: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 1824

Oral evidence

Taken before the Procedure Committee on Wednesday 24 April 2013

Members present:

Mr Charles Walker (Chair)

Jenny Chapman
Thomas Docherty
Helen Goodman
Mr James Gray

John Hemming
Mr David Nuttall
Jacob Rees-Mogg
Martin Vickers

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Mr David Crausby**, MP, **Graham Evans**, MP, **Robert Halfon**, MP, and **Dr Sarah Wollaston**, MP, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: I am sure Robert is on his way, so can we have a search party for Robert? Thank you, the three of you; Robert will join you soon. You are here and we are going to discuss Early Day Motions. It is going to be like one of those French theatre groups when you just kind of make things up as you go along. We do have some set questions, but I think everybody has their own views around this table, so we will just have at you and see where we end up. Huw has prepared some excellent questions, and let us remember it is Huw—or Lloyd. Well, they will probably be quite good, maybe not excellent if Lloyd has done it. No, Lloyd, they will be excellent as well. However, can we just try to ensure that Lloyd has something to take away from today? However, EDM is a bit like Marmite, you either love them or you hate them. There is a diversity of views among the Committee here today. We come at it with a fairly open mind, but obviously we have some prejudices as well. Although without further delay, I will ask James to kick off, and then, colleagues, as you want to come in off the back of James: short, sharp, snappy questions and short, sharp, snappy answers. Thank you.

Mr Gray: Chairman, you don't want me to ask the obvious question as to whether or not you approve of them. I know that Graham, you particularly disapprove of them and you are well known for that. David, I am not sure if I know your stance here.

Mr Crausby: I am in favour of them. I am never opposed to reform, but I am in favour of the principle of maintaining Early Day Motions.

Q2 Mr Gray: So you are also anti, Sarah?

Sarah Wollaston: I don't sign them.

Mr Gray: That is not the question I asked.

Sarah Wollaston: I am opposed to them, but I wouldn't be opposed to them if they were reformed, I guess—

Mr Gray: Right, so one pro, one anti and one agnostic.

Sarah Wollaston: Opposed.

Q3 Mr Gray: I want to focus on you a minute, Graham. Your argument would be that these are graffiti, a waste of time, a waste of money, a cost to the Government or cost to Parliament of £500,000 a

year, that don't achieve anything. Why are you wearing three wristbands?

Graham Evans: They are all British Legion; support our troops, homeless troops.

Q4 Mr Gray: What does that achieve?

Graham Evans: It communicates to my constituency.

Q5 Mr Gray: It communicates. So you are passing a message out to your constituents by wearing a wristband?

Graham Evans: Yes.

Q6 Mr Gray: What is the difference between that and putting down an EDM that says you support the Royal British Legion or the—

Graham Evans: Well, we live in the 21st century. When I was elected to this place, I was amazed at how we conduct business and the cost of that business. I come from a business background, documents, producing documents using the cloud and so on, so when I started looking at the EDMs and the cost of them, I thought that they could be reformed to make them cost-effective. You talked about communicating with our constituents and colleagues and so on. What I am proposing, Chairman, is a mechanism where we could still do that, but it would strip out the lengthy procedure and the cost. You could still achieve that without the overhead and the cost.

Q7 Mr Gray: The costs are very low nowadays. The cost has come down quite a lot. It has been—

Graham Evans: The printing cost generally has gone down, so there is a lot of cost down, but it is still costing £500,000 to £750,000.

Mr Gray: No, it is not. It is costing £373,251.

Graham Evans: There is an opportunity to strip out virtually the total cost and still be able to achieve what Members want to do, which is some form of communication. In recent years, just in the last two years, we have had Twitter, which some colleagues use quite extensively to communicate. We have the Backbench Business Committee; we have the No. 10 website, so there are many, many more mechanisms than there once were for doing or achieving that communication.

Q8 Mr Gray: Don't you agree that you and Sarah are in a privileged position because you are both Government Backbenchers. I apologise, I did not mean to be aggressive about your wristband, but from the point of view of the Opposition Backbenchers, don't EDMs, rather like the wristbands, have an important role to play?

Graham Evans: No, I don't agree. I just looked through some of the EDMs. There was one to Jimmy Savile. The 26 people who signed that EDM, which recognised the achievements of Jimmy Savile, and how wonderful he was, must feel pretty stupid. However, none of them have removed their names from that EDM, and I think they have been devalued. What I propose, Chairman, is that there is another mechanism. If you have seen the document that has been proposed, you could still achieve everything that you have described but use it as an expression of opinion. I believe you could still achieve that, without the cost and without the overhead.

Q9 Thomas Docherty: I am agnostic on this. Aren't EDMs they a written form of business questions, because aren't a lot of the business questions on a Thursday, "Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate about the traffic island in Whitton" to use that as a good example? Isn't this just an extension of that, relatively frivolous? However, aren't there also some EDMs that then do lead to debate?

Graham Evans: It is a very good point. However, there are more mechanisms now than there once were when this Committee last looked at the matter. There are far more mechanisms to achieve exactly that. You have the No. 10 website, and colleagues can go to the Backbench Business Committee to achieve exactly that, on serious subjects that matter to their constituency, so those mechanisms are now exist. In terms of Thursdays, asking frivolous questions, there is relatively no cost to that, but every EDM is costing £400. It is ridiculous.

Q10 Thomas Docherty: It does cost a few shekels to run the House of Commons.

Graham Evans: However, that overhead is there and it takes a fraction of a few seconds to ask your frivolous question—I am not saying they are frivolous, those are your words—but to table an EDM costs a lot of money.

Thomas Docherty: Sarah and David?

Dr Wollaston: My concern is that they give our constituents a false impression that action is being taken. It is enough of a problem in this place that MPs are busy doing nothing. I also have concerns about the fact that it is clear that some of these EDMs could not have been written by the Member who tabled them. Many of them are very obviously written by lobbyists, professional lobbyists, and I would like to see that identified. Obviously they can contribute by giving oxygen to a campaign, but do they do that in the most effective way? I would agree with Graham that there are now more effective ways of doing it that don't use public funds.

While I completely accept the argument that we do need mechanisms to raise issues, and that Opposition MPs are particularly at a disadvantage in that way, I

look through EDMs and I ask myself: is there any real evidence that these make a difference? I would say that I can't see any evidence they do. I think some of them are highly narcissistic; some of them are very funny. The one from the late Tony Banks on pigeon bombs of course is funny, but is that what we should be using public funds on? Should we be congratulating celebrities on their engagement and suchlike? I just feel uncomfortable that I would be giving my constituents an impression of action when in fact I am taking none.

Graham Evans: Sorry, just on that point, Thomas, can I give you a quick example that happened to me as a constituency MP? A company wrote to me asking me to write to the Minister on a very, very serious issue affecting this business in the constituency. We all do this, we write to the Minister, we get a reply, we write back. It wasn't the answer that we all wanted for my constituent. He phoned me up and said, "Oh, Graham, thanks very much for your efforts so far" but he says to me, "have you thought about tabling an EDM?" He said this to me, so he doesn't know my campaign. I said, "No, I haven't. Could you tell me where you got that from?" He said, "Our PR company. We have a PR company in London and they will sort it out". I asked him how much that would be. Thomas, this is the other side of it. We know that there is an industry within Parliament that uses these EDMs to suggest to their clients that some action is going on—Sarah's point—there was action coming. Largely there is no action that goes on with EDMs, and if a colleague has a serious issue there are other mechanisms through which to raise it.

Chair: Jacob is going to ask a question after Helen. Jacob wants to ask specifically about lobbyists, but I did skip Helen out by mistake to go to Thomas.

Mr Gray: Chairman, can I say, we have not given David time to say—

Chair: David, do you want to come in? David is big enough to come in when he feels like it.

Mr Gray: He is; I am sorry.

Chair: Don't wait to be asked, David.

Mr Crausby: First of all, I don't think you should take them too seriously. I don't think the Members of the House of Commons do take them too seriously. I think that they are frequently the birthplace of a good campaign and some good ideas, but in the midst of it all is a lot of nonsense. That is sometimes the nature of creating things—you create a great deal and some of it is nonsense. I see it a little bit like a football club's youth policy, in that it brings a lot of young people in. Some of them don't play very well and the club puts them aside, but out of it comes some really quite important stars. I think the same principle applies to Early Day Motions. There is a cost on democracy as well and, while I am very much in favour of doing things as cheaply as possible in these difficult times, we still have to recognise that some things very much need to be paid for. I can think of a lot of other savings other than this one, especially if it costs very much below £1 million a year.

I am in favour of anything that delivers more power to Backbenchers, because I think that, over a number of years, the direction that this Parliament has moved further and further to put power with the Executive.

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If there is one thing that Margaret Thatcher effectively bequeathed to this Parliament, it is that every Prime Minister since her has felt that they can completely ignore Backbenchers. I am in favour of pushing power back to Backbenchers. I accept that sometimes EDMs don't go anywhere but it seems to me that the solution for that is not to abolish them but to make them more meaningful, and to take some more notice when an EDM has a very large number of signatures. So I wouldn't abolish them, but I would make them more relevant and put more pressure on the Executive as the result of a very strongly supported EDM.

Q11 Helen Goodman: I would like to ask the panel, what do you think the purpose of EDMs is?

Graham Evans: The original purpose was very much what has just been said, to enable Backbenchers, parliamentarians, to put an important issue forward for their constituents. That was fine then, but we are talking now, the 21st century. Everything that David has just said can be achieved by other mechanisms.

Q12 Helen Goodman: Stop. Do you know that EDMs can also be used to pray against statutory instruments?

Graham Evans: Yes.

Q13 Helen Goodman: So you think that we should still be able to pray against statutory instruments?

Graham Evans: Yes.

Q14 Helen Goodman: Did you know that EDMs can be used to set out detailed allegations against bodies under the protection of parliamentary privilege?

Graham Evans: Yes.

Helen Goodman: So you still think we should be able to do that?

Graham Evans: I mentioned—

Helen Goodman: Do you still think we should be able to do that?

Graham Evans: Yes. The proposed reform would still provide the mechanism for that expression of opinion.

Q15 Helen Goodman: Do you know how many parts of this country have no access to broadband?

Graham Evans: Not off the top of my head.

Q16 Helen Goodman: 2.6 million households. Do you think Members of Parliament ever work when they are in the constituencies as opposed to doing all the work when they are in Westminster?

Graham Evans: Could you just repeat that question?

Helen Goodman: Do you think Members of Parliament do work when they are in their constituencies as well as when they are in London?

Graham Evans: You are talking to an MP. Of course we do.

Q17 Helen Goodman: Right, so what about those people whose constituencies are in places where they do not have any access to all this online stuff?

Graham Evans: Okay.

Q18 Helen Goodman: Do you not think that it is a problem if we have no printed versions, which would

mean, for example, that people couldn't go through these lists when they are in their constituencies?

Graham Evans: Paper lists. So are you suggesting no change, whatsoever, based on the fact that some people don't have access to the internet?

Helen Goodman: You are giving the evidence. I am asking the questions.

Graham Evans: No, I don't see that as a reason particularly not to look at the reform of EDMs.

Q19 Helen Goodman: You think it doesn't matter if MPs who have rural constituencies can't access parliamentary papers?

Graham Evans: No.

Q20 Helen Goodman: So, what are you saying?

Graham Evans: What I am saying is that that isn't the reason why this can't be reformed. You can see this online. One of the proposals is that if you want a printed-off copy, you can have a printed-off copy if you request printed copies, as opposed to having block orders with outside printers who just carry on printing. If you wish to still receive these, if any Member still wishes to receive printed copies, they could still have that. That is part of the proposals.

Q21 Chair: Are you suggesting it is a bit like some of the Select Committees, you can have the papers sent electronically but, for example, on the Liaison Committee, because I lose my iPad, I have asked to have them still sent to me by paper?

Graham Evans: Yes.

Q22 Chair: Although, what it does is it reduces the amount of the print run, right?

Graham Evans: Yes, you largely remove the printing cost. However, what the administrators have said is that any Member who still wishes to have them printed could have that facility. They would still receive the printed copy.

Q23 Helen Goodman: Would you think it would be better to do that or would you think it would be more sensible, simply, to have the printed copies printed less frequently?

Graham Evans: I do think that if we can remove the necessity to print, per se, and have contracts with outside contractors—

Helen Goodman: Yes, but we have just established that some people will need hard copies, haven't we?

Graham Evans: Yes. However, based on the information I was given, the Members who would want printed copies are very few. You are talking about a handful of colleagues. Therefore, they could be printed in-house and you would not need external print contracts to enable that. That could be done very easily, colleague by colleague.

Dr Wollaston: That would be a very expensive way of producing those lists. There are other alternatives, even for those Members who, as you say, are in areas with poor broadband or no broadband when their laptop is plugged in. I would say there are very few Members who have absolutely no access to IT within their constituency offices. In fact, I would be very surprised if you could tell me there were any. What I

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would suggest is that those Members who wanted that could simply have it printed out by their staff, downloaded and printed on their own office stationery. However, really, there are some forms where I would say—

Q24 Helen Goodman: So that is not cheaper, it is just shifting the cost from the House to the Member.

Dr Wollaston: No, it is not.

Graham Evans: No, it is a lot cheaper. I used to work in the industry, and what you need is a minimum order with outside contractors. The House of Commons would have a contract with an outside printer and a minimum amount would be guaranteed. What this means, as Sarah has said, is that either the Member's office can print them out or the Table Office will print them out and post them out.

Chair: Can I just interrupt, Helen? Without meaning to annoy anybody here, the logistics of printing is not for this Committee. It is for the Administration Committee. Okay, next question. Jacob.

Q25 Jacob Rees-Mogg: I want to come back to the issue of lobbyists, because this is probably my greatest concern with EDMs. I think MPs ought to think for themselves and should not put down something that has been sent to them and that they have been pushed into doing. What I want to know is whether there has been any study done that any of you may know of, or any detailed evidence of where this has happened? We all know anecdotally that lobbyists are behind EDMs, and we all think that lobbyists market themselves on the basis that they can get EDMs put down by a tame MP, so to speak, but how certain are we of that and is there any detailed evidence that we might be able to use in our report?

Graham Evans: I do not have any detailed evidence that, to my knowledge, could be used in that way. It is mostly anecdotal and personal experience.

Q26 Jacob Rees-Mogg: You have been asked once through that route. Have either of the other of you been approached in that way, or felt that that was what was underlying an approach to get you to put down an EDM?

Mr Crausby: I have never felt under any pressure from anybody, in all the time that I have been here, to put an EDM down. The pressure is one thing, and asking somebody to help him word an EDM is another. I think the initiative should come from the Member of Parliament. I completely agree with that. That is not to say that a Member of Parliament shouldn't use the expertise of people, who are in whatever business they are dealing with, to put that motion down but I don't see any real pressure.

I think there is a bit of conflict here, in the sense that, on the one hand, we are arguing that EDMs are completely pointless and useless and absolute graffiti, and yet, on the other, that lobbyists feel that they are really important. It is either one thing or the other. Lobbyists either see a value in them or there is no value in them, and I would suggest that there is. If lobbyists are so enthusiastic about them being put down, then there must be some sort of value in them.

Graham Evans: Not necessarily, because they get paid by their clients for submitting EDMs.

Mr Crausby: I have a bit more faith in the clients than that. I accept that lobbyists do try to sell the services, but I think they have to sell action as well. I go back to what I said before; I don't think that you should get yourself too wrapped up with the seriousness of EDMs. You have to take them in the spirit that they are tabled and sometimes they are a bit of a joke, but what is wrong with that? Should we always be that devoted to being completely serious on these things? I think that there is a certain value, as far as the public are concerned, in some humour in EDMs because quite an important aspect of all of this is what the public actually think of us. I think Sarah's point on giving the public the wrong impression is a valid one, in that we may well find ourselves saying to a constituent, who we can't help at all, "We will put an EDM down then" and I think Sarah suggested that that is something of a fraud. I don't entirely see it that way—

Dr Wollaston: I didn't use that term.

Mr Crausby:—I think there is a public expectation for action sometimes, even though it is pitiful action.

Dr Wollaston: My feeling would be that if they are written by lobbyists, it should be transparent to people that that is the case. Some lobbyists of course might have a very benign intent. For example, I draw your attention to EDM 1287, which is on brain tumour research. It is very worthy, but it could not have been written by the Members who have put it down, because it involves quite a lot of technical medical jargon and expertise, and I would be very surprised if it had not been written by somebody outside this place. I have no objection to it, but of course it also draws attention to specific businesses. For example, it is noting research by New Philanthropy Capital. I would say, I think it is a fair bet that somebody connected with that might have been involved in drafting the EDM. If that is the case, I think we should know and it should be printed underneath the EDM.

I do have specific objections, for example, to the drinks industry being involved. I won't bore Members with my views on that, but I think there are examples where there is an influence that I think is unhelpful to Parliament and undermines our credibility as MPs, and I think it should be transparent to people where it exists.

Q27 Jacob Rees-Mogg: If you have specific examples of the drinks industry, it would be very helpful to bring them to the attention of this Committee formally, with parliamentary privilege allowing you to do it.

Dr Wollaston: Indeed, but the point is it is often difficult to identify who it is. If there is a reform I would suggest it would be that, where they are tabled, it should be transparent who has assisted in drafting them or sponsoring them.

Q28 Chair: Would that apply to my researcher? I don't go near these things, but what if my researcher helped me to draft it? I think it is quite dangerous ground, because Members of Parliament are not

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islands unto themselves and it always good for MPs to seek expert advice as widely as possible.

Dr Wollaston: Indeed, but I think if it is being given by a professional paid lobbyist, that is another matter. If they are being remunerated specifically for giving that advice, should that be transparent to people? It is just a point that I would raise.

Mr Crausby: I think you should apply that principle to questions in speeches as well, if you are going to do that. It seems to me that this is an issue about lobbyists, not EDMs. I would also suggest it would be very difficult to police. It is a fact that Members of Parliament do read and deliver speeches that are completely written by other people. If you apply the principle to EDMs, you would have to apply it to speeches, and, in my view, that would be completely impossible.

Q29 Mr Gray: Surely we are galloping down a blank alley, rather as David was saying there. For example, if the Royal British Legion drafted a thing saying, “We believe in the Military Covenant” and gave it to me and said, “Will you put it down?”, it is true that Royal British Legion lobbyists may well be being paid to do that, but it is a perfectly good EDM. I would not do it unless it was perfectly good and I believed in it. I used to be the chairman of the MS Society. The MS Society used to give me EDMs to put down all the time about MS matters; great, I was delighted to do it. I just wanted to slightly pick up on the presumption that, because somebody who had been paid somewhere down the track was involved, that was necessarily a bad thing.

Dr Wollaston: No, not necessarily a bad thing, but I think it should be transparent. I have no objection to the Royal British Legion being involved with drafting things, but of course, is it reasonable, particularly if these things become electronic and the costs are lessened?

Q30 Mr Gray: My local church asks me to put something down about, for example, gay marriage. My local vicar is paid a salary. He doesn’t like gay marriage. He wants me to put down an EDM about it. Do I have to declare that my local vicar has asked me to do it?

Dr Wollaston: What would be the harm in doing that?

Mr Gray: Where would it end? As Jacob said, we are not—

Chair: I think there are dangers in that because we are here to represent people. James represents his vicar as a constituent, and I think we have to be very careful. I am happy to have the conversation, but I am not sure that this is going to find much currency with the Committee.

Q31 Jenny Chapman: I am interested in this idea of the frivolity of EDMs, because it is certainly true that there are many that you could say were a waste of paper to print and you wonder how many people would find them that interesting. Thomas has very helpfully pulled up the list of the most-signed EDMs over this session, and to me the ones that are getting a lot of support are not frivolous at all. There are two in the top 10 about the NHS. There is something about

the beer duty escalator; there is one on rising fuel costs and energy efficiency and one on probation. I know that they can be used to demonstrate cross-party support for issues as part of a wider campaign, so, if there was a way to make them not frivolous and restrict them to issues that were more substantial, would that answer some of your concerns?

Graham Evans: Yes. The point is, if it is a serious issue—and I know colleagues collectively do that—we can have a mechanism by which the most popular could be debated on the Floor of the House. As you say, those EDMs relate to very serious issues and we don’t want to close that avenue that allows colleagues to bring those issues to the attention of the House.

Q32 Jenny Chapman: How might that be done? I suppose that is the question.

Graham Evans: The Table Office will put a proposal together for the nuts and bolts and the detail on how that mechanism would work, but it would be done electronically. We would do that through the intranet and the procedure would be very similar to EDMs. By doing it that way and keeping it very much to very serious issues, it would stop the frivolous ones coming through and it would remove the current cost of having EDMs printed.

Q33 Jenny Chapman: Aren’t you restricting the number that you could have, then?

Graham Evans: Well, restricting it to the most serious issues that our constituents would want us to discuss. What I would say to you is: what is our constituents’ understanding of what the EDM does? What is the effect of having an EDM? What do constituents think that achieves?

Jenny Chapman: That is not the question I am asking.

Graham Evans: To cite the example that Mr Gray used, “My vicar told me to do this about gay marriage”, what was the vicar’s understanding of what that would achieve?

Mr Gray: That issue was being raised in the same way as your wristbands raise the issue by your wearing them.

Graham Evans: I would say the wristband is more effective than an EDM.

Mr Gray: It could be.

Mr Crausby: I would argue that the most important aspect of that EDM from the vicar is to persuade other Members of Parliament to support it and to put their name to it, and that constitutes the involvement of other Members of Parliament. The act of persuading another Member of Parliament to sign that particular EDM is quite an important political act.

Q34 Jenny Chapman: What about having some process, though, where an EDM could be ruled in order or not?

Mr Crausby: Yes.

Q35 Chair: What about signature thresholds? Just for the sake of transparency—because we are into it at the moment—the order of questions will be Martin, John, Thomas and David, just to put you all out of

your misery. What about a threshold, so it is not published until it has 50 signatures?

Graham Evans: Yes.

Mr Crausby: I am in favour of the freedom of it. It seems to me that frivolity is in the eye of the beholder. It is up to the individual Member of Parliament to decide whether it is frivolous or not. What I don't want to see is a committee or a group of individuals, more attached to the Executive, who decide what is serious and what is not serious. It should be up to the Member of Parliament to decide what he or she thinks is serious. That is why I say I accept that, in the midst of all of this, you will get some nonsense, but the value of it is that it allows Members of Parliament the freedom to express pretty well anything that they think and to try to seek support for it.

Graham Evans: What we are proposing is that you can still do that but at a fraction of the cost.

Dr Wollaston: I know that one Member has had a list of the most-signed EDMs. I have here a list of the least-signed EDMs, just to provide a bit of balance. We have, "Congratulations on Edinburgh Airport being the best European airport". We have a lot of them, referring to, among other things, Leeds, rhinos and Twitter. A lot of these are opportunities for individual Members to generate a press release congratulating somebody. Some of them are staggering sycophantic.

Q36 Mr Gray: What is wrong with that?

Dr Wollaston: The point is should the public be funding that at £290 a pop, or whatever they are, for individuals who could actually pick up the phone and speak?

Mr Gray: £76 is correct.

Dr Wollaston: I guess, but I just think, did we really need things on Bradford Odeon, on individuals being congratulated? For example, would we condone MPs being able to use parliamentary resources to be able to congratulate people by perhaps writing individual letters to constituents on their 18th birthday? We no longer do that. We say, "You have to use your own resources to do that because it is a form of back-door electioneering". Is this not the same? If it could be done very cheaply and electronically, yes, perhaps, but I do think the concept of a threshold is important because it would immediately take out some of these EDMs, which I feel are bringing the process into disrepute.

Q37 Martin Vickers: If I just take up the point about the threshold, doesn't that deny Members the opportunity to raise what is essentially a rather localised issue, which might only attract your signature and that of your immediate neighbouring MPs, for example, but which does not take away from the importance of it?

Dr Wollaston: There is a point at which you would perhaps discuss what the threshold would be, but I think to have EDMs signed by one person, using up parliamentary resources, is questionable. It brings them into disrepute because you cannot see the wood for the trees. That is the trouble with EDMs. There are just so many of them, and I think that they could be made more valuable.

The other point is that quite often I read an EDM and I will agree with the sentiment of it, but it will have a whole list of subclauses with which I profoundly disagree. If I don't sign it, my constituents will say, "Well, you are not very interested in that issue", but I might be very interested in the issue. If they are done electronically and less expensively, bearing in mind the points that have been made about the disadvantage of that, could there be a way that you could then indicate that you were in favour of the sentiment but not all of the points listed?

Q38 Helen Goodman: What about amendments to EDMs?

Dr Wollaston: Yes, but I just think that is a very expensive way of doing it.

Q39 Martin Vickers: If I could move on to a different point, in terms of making them more relevant, I am sure if Robert was here, for example, he would say he used the EDM just as a part of his campaign over fuel duty, just one element of it. Should we perhaps consider a way that they can be debated? Supposing they attracted 100 signatures, they should automatically go to the Backbench Committee to see if they are worthy of debate in the same way as an e-petition might. Isn't that a more sensible way of reform, rather than just tinkering at the edges and trying to say what is frivolous and what is not frivolous?

Graham Evans: Chairman, can I just make a point? In 2011–12, EDMs cost £360 each. The one signature, which the example used there, cost £360. The proposal is that we reform it—

Mr Gray: Sorry, that is not correct. It is £128—

Graham Evans: I am going off the figures that I have for 2011–12, which I have just recently got. If we reform them so we can remove the frivolous—

Q40 Mr Gray: I cannot let that go, Chairman, if you do not mind my saying so. Our information is that for 2011–12, it cost £128.68 per page, which may therefore be three or four a year. Roughly speaking, if I am reading this correctly—

Chair: They could be published multiple times.

Graham Evans: You have staffing costs, you have external printing costs and you have IT costs.

Mr Gray: There are three or four per page, though.

Graham Evans: Chair, can we ask the Clerks to provide us with a figure?

Chair: Yes. For the record, for this dispute on the figure, we shall get the definitive figure.

Q41 Martin Vickers: Can I just clarify, Chairman, of the three witnesses, who would favour a mechanism for allowing them to be debated?

Mr Crausby: I would.

Martin Vickers: Yes, so all three, irrespective of whether you are for or against.

Dr Wollaston: As I say, that has to be balanced with the cost and reforming, in my view, the way they are presented, and allowing Members to focus on the ones that are important by trying to get rid of the ones that are clearly rather sycophantic, which some of them are.

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Graham Evans: Chairman, Mr Vickers raises a very good point. What I suggest is that we have that sort of mechanism, which you could then feed into the Backbench Business Committee, to which the EDM would automatically go, in the same way that we have to go in there and sell our wares to then justify having a debate on the Floor of the House or in Westminster Hall. It would still enable—as David has been saying—Backbenchers to have their say about issues within their constituency.

Q42 Chair: So we are agreed. If an EDM gets 651 signatures, it will be debated. All right.

Q43 John Hemming: I am really coming back on this issue of threshold, because I am somebody who very often tables an EDM that I do not expect anyone else to sign.

Dr Wollaston: I have seen one.

John Hemming: There are two. I will cite three and explain what it is all about. EDM 1293 and EDM 835 both refer to a case of a lady called Jacque Courtage. Both of those highlight some major injustice that is going on, although she is banned from talking to the media. She is banned from trying to attract any attention to her case, so it needs a certain amount of privilege. In fact, the wording of neither of those would be contempt of court because they are quite carefully worded. However, without the process of raising them in Parliament, she has no way of having people look at the details of her case. I am not going to go into it here. It is in the EDM. That is one case. Then we have EDM 1141. That criticises a judge, Martin Cardinal of Birmingham. He imprisoned somebody last year in secret. As a result of that EDM, in fact, the *Daily Mail* got involved and they contacted the courts to say, “Why have you locked somebody up in secret?” and suddenly a public judgment came out, and it is on pages 6 and 7 of the *Daily Mail* today. Obviously people are concerned that this country goes around locking people up in secret. That was all stimulated by EDM 1141.

There is a parliamentary rule, which is that you are only allowed to criticise a judge in a substantive motion, so I could not use an opinion to criticise a judge. It has to be a substantive motion. If I am going around criticising the Court of Appeal for locking people up in secret—actually it is mainly suspended sentences in the Court of Appeal—I have to do that in a motion. I am not particularly worried how many other people sign it. What I am worried about is that we are going around locking people up in secret, because I think that is wrong. Would you want to stop me doing that and highlighting that?

Dr Wollaston: I would argue, is it reasonable for you to be able to convince other Members of Parliament? I think that has to be balance because sometimes Members could—I am not saying that you do, but it is possible that Members could—abuse that privilege, and innocent members of the public could find themselves wrongly labelled. Therefore, I think you would have to be able to make your case to other people.

I see your EDM 887 about the marvellously named councillor, Sir Albert Bore—what was that one about? Sorry, I am not asking the questions. Forgive me.

Q44 John Hemming: It is about Birmingham politics. There are some issues going on in Birmingham. Basically, rather than trying to get an Adjournment debate, you write down what you want to say and you put it in an Early Day Motion, and you want to stop me doing that.

Dr Wollaston: No, but should you not have to convince other Members of Parliament that is reasonable? It is a huge privilege we have, parliamentary privilege.

Q45 John Hemming: You are requiring a lot more effort for people to say anything.

Dr Wollaston: Indeed.

John Hemming: What you want to do is stop people saying things. I deal with lots of miscarriage of justice cases, and I would be really stuck if I had to go around getting 50 signatures before I could say anything.

Q46 Chair: David, what is your view on this exchange?

Mr Crausby: I fundamentally feel that I am responsible to my constituents, not other Members of Parliament. There might be occasions when I completely disagree with every other one—and I am entitled to do that—and I should not need to seek their permission. I have to seek the permission of my constituents as to what I do because they are entitled to choose not to vote for me at the election, but in my opinion, other Members of Parliament should have no grip on me in that sense. They do in practice. In fact the truth is, in my opinion, as I said earlier, I think increasingly the leadership of our political parties and our Whips Officers are interfering far too much with the powers of a Backbench Member and their ability and desire to represent their constituents, so I don't think that we should be putting a question like this to other Members of Parliament or some form of committee.

Q47 John Hemming: The point I would make is that Parliament does have control over what is used in parliamentary proceedings, through the Privileges Committee or the Standards Committee. In other words, if you intentionally mislead Parliament, you can be chucked out, and that is an important control. That is article 9 of the Bill of Rights, that only Parliament can control what is said in Parliament. It is not that it is a free-for-all. My argument is that I shouldn't require the permission of another Member of Parliament to say anything. Why should I have to have somebody else's permission? Why can't I just speak on behalf of my constituents?

Graham Evans: Nobody is saying you cannot, but can you do it in other ways? Do you have to use an EDM to do it?

John Hemming: An EDM happens to be very efficient. I thought you were interested in efficiency.

Graham Evans: I am, yes.

John Hemming: If we can reduce the costs of printing them, and if we say, “If you only have a small

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number of signatures it doesn't get printed all over the place", then great. Although this is the threshold point, because if you cannot publish it on the net without getting 50 signatures, you are really gagging people.

Q48 Thomas Docherty: Isn't part of the problem with going to the Backbench Business Committee that the Government is not taking part in Backbench debate votes anymore? We have had issues where the Government simply doesn't take part and therefore you cannot demonstrate the strength of feeling in the House.

Graham Evans: Can you give me an example?

John Hemming: Badgers, and disbanding a regiment.

Mr Crausby: The Second Battalion as well as the Fusiliers and there was a vote in the House.

Q49 Thomas Docherty: The Government just ordered all Government MPs to stay away, which does not discourage some colleagues. If the argument is that there is an alternative way of demonstrating the strength of feeling in the House, I think it is fair to say that—and it was cross-party—those colleagues who wanted to demonstrate their feeling on badgers had to engineer a vote in order to get that on to the record.

Graham Evans: However, they still achieved that objective. How would the reform of EDMs not help with that?

Q50 Thomas Docherty: My point is that that was a particular circumstance that the Speaker is keen not to repeat. The Speaker, not unreasonably, says, "We are taking up vast amounts of time having votes, simply because a group of MPs want to then demonstrate the strength of the view". If the argument is there are alternatives to demonstrate the strength of views in the House that only works if the Government wants to play along with that.

Dr Wollaston: The point is, if you have a debate in the House, it allows many Members to bring in all their nuanced opinions and say exactly what their opinion is, whereas an EDM is relatively rigid. I take the point that of course you can table an amendment to an EDM, but I think that you couldn't argue that an EDM is a better way of allowing the full range of opinion on that subject. I would say that, to my mind, the Backbench Business Committee has surpassed all this, and I think it is a much more effective tool than relatively expensive EDMs.

Q51 Thomas Docherty: I don't know if any of you have talked to Natascha recently, but she would probably argue that she gets a lot of bids anyway, and she could open Westminster Hall on a full-time basis as a second chamber. By the way, I accept the argument that there is a danger that you just fill the space. I will give you an example. Gerald Kaufman I think is a class act on this. He turns up for the Thursday business questions, and says to the Leader of the House, "Have you seen the EDM in my name and any other colleagues?" Gerald is not necessarily asking for a full 30-minute debate but, as a way of demonstrating to the Government the strength of support, isn't it a useful mechanism?

Chair: Robert, can you answer that as well?

Robert Halfon: Yes, and I take a different view from my colleagues. I apologise sincerely to the Committee that I have arrived late. It was unavoidable. First of all, I think EDMs are incredibly important for two reasons. Firstly, the organisations outside that look at them regard them with some importance as a reflection of the strength of opinion. Secondly, they are very, very useful ways of raising parliamentary issues. In terms of the Backbench Committee, one of the reasons why I was successful in getting debates was that I was able to sometimes show to the Backbench Business Committee EDMs to say that we had a number of MPs from all parties who had signed them, so they were valued. They have also been valued by the organisations in my constituency, and I am very honest and explain to them that they are not necessarily debated, but they see them as a parliamentary mechanism through which we have brought attention to issues.

There are two issues that people raise. One is the issue of expense. That can be solved by just publishing them on the internet, and that may have been discussed before I arrived. The other issue is the fact that most of them are not debated, but the way you can change that is by changing their name. I think they should be called the MPs' book of petitions; an MP's petition. In essence, an EDM is an MP signing a petition of some sort giving an expression or opinion, and that is what they really are.

As you have said, I learned from Gerald Kaufman and have done exactly the same week after week in terms of EDMs and getting them in the *Hansard*. I realised that on Thursdays they publish the Early Day Motion in the daily part, which then gives it added value because it is printed again in the *Hansard*. In that way I think they do bring value.

Thomas Docherty: I am conscious that I did not hear from David on that.

Mr Crausby: Just on the point of the Backbench Business Committee, it seems to me that it offers quality but couldn't possibly deliver the quantity of opportunity that the Early Day Motion delivers. It would be wonderful if we could just simply say, "We don't need Early Day Motions. You can do that in a different way". I don't think that it is possible to deliver that in the kind of numbers that Members desire.

Q52 Mr Nuttall: It seems to me that, without prejudging the deliberations of the Committee, there are essentially three outcomes to our inquiry. We either maintain the status quo, we reform what we have or we abolish. There doesn't seem to be much appetite for abolition of EDMs, even among any of the witnesses. Therefore, we are left with maintaining the status quo, no change whatsoever, or reform. I suspect the very fact that we are having this inquiry at all means there is some appetite for reform, and I submit that the reform can really only take two general trends. The first is to reduce the cost, and it seems that from what has been said the only way of reducing the cost is to stop them being printed so often. So my first question is, would the witnesses agree that it would be satisfactory if they were not printed on paper at all and it became a purely

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electronic system, which would seem to me personally to be the best course of action? We could maintain the number. We would not really need to have any quality control. We could still let people put down a motion with one name and so forth.

Then, secondly, how do we make them more effective? It is a bit of blue sky thinking. I don't want to put words into people's mouths, but I would be grateful if we could just deal with those two things.

Dr Wollaston: I agree. I think they should be entirely electronic. If Members don't have access to electronic media, that would cause me great concern. I would love to know which Members cannot ever access IT. I would personally recommend a threshold to get rid of the entirely spurious ones, because otherwise it is difficult to see the wood for the trees and I think they devalue others, but that threshold could be very, very low indeed. That is not for me say. As I have said before, I would like to see use of professional lobbyists identified to the public where they have been used—and it is much easier electronically—and I think there should be a mechanism to allow Members to say which bits of it they don't agree with. Otherwise you can end up in difficulties down the line, having a bit of an EDM you might have signed. For example, Jeremy Hunt has found himself being lambasted as somebody who is not in favour of vaccination, when he is, because he signed an EDM once about homeopathic hospitals, but that is not the same. Later on your views can be misrepresented, so I think it is nice to have the opportunity to exempt yourself from parts of an EDM.

Graham Evans: I agree with all of that. Get it electronic, online, as Robert said. I am talking about reform, and I do believe that there could be a mechanism agreed that would please Mr Gray and please Mr Hemming to enable you to do all the things that you have said, but we can do it efficiently and cost-effectively, and that is mainly my motivation. I think reform, rather than abolition.

Mr Crausby: The only level of reform I would see would be to strengthen its power. I probably have an interest to declare in the sense that before I came here and had a proper job, I was a paper machine engineer, so I have something of a leaning towards paper. While I accept that someday the Members of Parliament in this place may well run paperless offices, we are a distance from it. Until we get there, I don't think we should rush into this kind of change. David Nuttall's point is really reform or status quo. I think that is right. It seems to me important that it should never be reform for the sake of reform. That is why the status quo is quite important. You should have the opportunity perhaps at a future date, when online is appropriate to every Member of Parliament and their constituents. We are not there yet by any means. Even if we get close to it as far as Members of Parliament are concerned, as far as our constituents are concerned we are still a long way for them to be completely paperless.

Robert Halfon: As I said, I think they should be entirely published on the internet and not on paper, for cost reasons. There should be a clear section where people can just look up the latest EDMs each day, and I think that would solve the problem.

I think the problem with EDMs is the name, because they are called Early Day Motions and they are very rarely debated, so that is why I would call it something like—people will think of better words—an MPs' book of petitions or something like that.

Chair: Expression of opinion.

Robert Halfon: Expression of opinion or book of petition or whatever it may be. I don't see—as proposed by my colleagues—the register of lobbyists could work, because if you have a counter-charity, do you register them? However, if a lobbyist is acting for that charity, if there is a management consultant that is not described as a lobbyist, you just get into a minefield of organisations.

Chair: There is a Bill before Parliament that defines what it is.

Robert Halfon: I think it is still very difficult. Anyway, that is a separate argument. I also think that if people just have one signature to an EDM—I have done that on numerous occasions but it has been enormously helpful when I have wanted to raise a constituency case and put pressure on the organisation, and the best judges are the public. If they think EDMs are spurious then they will make that judgment on the MPs themselves. I do think that to make them effective you should say that if there are 100 MPs who sign an EDM then there could be a debate in Westminster Hall. I just think, given that there are no debates in Westminster Hall on a Monday, that Monday could be—

Chair: That is petition day.

Robert Halfon: It is petition day, but you don't have very many things going on in Westminster Hall on Monday, do you? However, I think the principle is that you could have the EDMs that reached 100 people debated on a Monday, perhaps, or another day in Westminster Hall.

Q53 Helen Goodman: I just want to nail on the head the notion that all MPs have access online when they are in their constituencies. I don't. I am sure that my case is also the case for the Member for the Western Isles, for example. However, let us just set that on one side. If you have a threshold approach, don't you introduce a sort of crude majoritarianism, a kind of bias against small groups? This Committee has representatives of the three main parties, but not representatives of the other parties. If we do something about Durham County Council, there are only six of us, whereas if you do something about the GLA, there are five. I would like an answer to this numbers threshold that that is not biased; a convincing answer. If there is a desire to reduce the number of allegedly frivolous issues, have those giving evidence given any consideration to drawing up rules that would be clear about what would be disorderly and how one could make those distinctions?

Chair: Before you answer those questions, we are going to wrap this up in five minutes, so could you answer Helen briefly, and, John, will you be very brief so you can get away? We did say we would let you go at 4.00pm.

Mr Crausby: I think you could argue about the cost, as far as the single signature is concerned. The single signature EDM must be cheaper than the multiple

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signature EDM, in the sense that it disappears pretty well right away. If we are not careful going down this line, we will be saying that longer EDMs are more expensive than shorter EDMs, and I think we are starting to get into an absolute nonsense. While cost is always important and we should always be aware of cost, it occurs to me that to cut in this way in an almost desperate manner could do untold damage and make it even more complicated and expensive than it was in the first place. I say that, and IPSA comes to mind. Sometimes, in seeking to do a cheaper thing we make it more expensive.

Chair: Never shall three Members gather without IPSA somehow entering the conversation. Graham very briefly, Robert very briefly, then John, please, very briefly.

Graham Evans: Having a minimum number of signatures is just one option. I do believe that we could come up with a system that would please all Members, whether it is a single signature or half a dozen signatures. As for the examples that you have used, I wouldn't want to stop Durham County Council being represented in Parliament, so therefore it is just one option. That is all it is.

In terms of the printing, there are ways of getting around these problems with internet access. If you want a paper copy, you can have a paper copy. Whatever the objections the Committee comes up with, I do believe a solution could be found.

Robert Halfon: I agree. I think if one person signs an EDM, it should be as valid. My only argument was if there is a debate on an EDM there should be a threshold. I accept that not every Member is on the internet, but I would think the vast majority are. I think things can be printed out, but with the cost

implication we would save enormous amounts of money and would ward the criticism that these EDMs are just a waste of money.

Q54 John Hemming: I am a member of the Backbench Business Committee, and I don't think it is any secret to say it has ended the session with a number of debates that it thinks qualify to be debated but for which there is no time. Therefore, if you are going to push EDMs into the Backbench Business Committee process, you have to either drop all the EDMs or drop out one of the debates that has happened. If you believe that that is a solution—which I would accept that David and Robert don't—what would you drop?

Graham Evans: I don't know.

John Hemming: The point is either you stop all the EDMs if you are going to put them through Backbench Business in some way, or you have to drop some of the debates. It is a question of control—I think David and Robert basically want to keep the system much as it is at the moment while saving some money, which is a sensible approach.

Chair: I think it is for the Committee now to thank the witnesses for coming. I hope we were not too fierce, although you were quite fierce, Helen, I thought today. James is always fierce. Seriously, Graham, David, Robert, thank you? I know Sarah had to leave a little earlier, with the agreement of the Clerk and the Chair. May I just thank the three of you, and Sarah in her absence, for really giving this a great deal of thought and for being very open and honest with the Committee? Thank you.

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