

Modernisation Committee

Oral evidence: Access to the House of Commons and its Procedures, HC 755

Tuesday 20 May 2025

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Members present

Lucy Powell (Chair); Mr Alex Barros-Curtis; Sarah Coombes; Kirith Entwistle; Marie Goldman; Paulette Hamilton; Joy Morrissey; Chris Vince.

Examination of witnesses

Questions 41-62

Witnesses: Lord Blunkett, Baroness Brinton, Baroness Grey-Thompson and Lord Shinkwin.

Q41 **Chair:** Hello, everybody. I am Lucy Powell, Chair of the House of Commons Modernisation Committee.

Thank you all so much for coming to our sitting today.

To be clear to those watching and for everyone else, we are the Modernisation Committee of the House of Commons, so we do not have a remit for House of Lords procedures or practices. We have invited our witnesses today because we think there might be some learnings for the House of Commons in how things operate in the House of Lords—perhaps some good learnings and possibly some bad. That is the spirit in which we are having this conversation. I wanted to be clear about that before anyone thinks I am overreaching my remit as Leader of the Commons and Chair of the Modernisation Committee.

We will all indicate who we are as we ask questions and look at some of the topics. We have had a few good evidence sessions so far. We have met current and former Members of Parliament, and members of staff

from across our range of staff—from MPs' staff through journalists to Clerks of Committees and so on. This is our third public session on this topic, so thank you very much for coming.

Apart from asking whether you wish to make any general opening remarks for our inquiry, I have an opening question: how well do you think the House of Lords has been able to adapt to your needs? What, if anything, do you think are the learnings for the House of Commons, whether that be physically or in procedure? I ask because we are also looking at things like call lists, virtual participation and other such things that you do in the Lords. David, shall I start with you?

Lord Blunkett: Thank you, Chair. I would like to set my comments in the context of what can be done between now and the eventual decisions on restoration and renewal. I served on the Joint Committee that scrutinised

that Act, which was passed in 2019, and I need to say that in the discussions of restoration and renewal it would be helpful if people went back to what is an Act of Parliament, rather than ignoring it. That might be very helpful.

Each of us will have very different experiences. One overarching thought I have—it applies to the Commons and the Lords—is that if we clarified who makes decisions in this place, it would be really helpful. I do not mean the Commissions, but in terms of accountability in management. The previous Speaker, who of course got a great deal of acrimony for this, wanted a chief exec, and we got a COO. The Clerks to the Houses are theoretically in charge, but I see no coherent, joined-up approach to management decisions and accountability.

In the Lords, the most recent iteration is the fiasco—because that is what it has been—of the millions

spent on Peers' Entrance, with the difficulty that that has caused, particularly for those with motor disabilities. The current situation has not yet been resolved. I only use that as an example, Chair. If we had clear lines of management and contractors were clearly held to account, other things that get in the way of disabled people could have been set aside. It is like William Blake's poem, "London", where it is the "mind-forg'd manacles" that get in the way—where either people do not see what you could do were you supported in doing it, or they put obstacles in your way that actually make the disability much more tangible. I am sure colleagues will comment.

I am in a better position because I have a dog, although there are no facilities for dogs in either the Commons or the Lords, though I think some sawdust has been put down for Steve Darling's dog. When I am not being harangued by a

gardener, I use some facilities off the House of Lords. I only throw that in because we have come a long way over the past 40 years, but not that far.

The second thing I want to say is that we did learn some lessons during covid—I think Sal sometimes uses this now—in terms of being able to connect electronically from a distance. Some people really don't like it. You can feel the antagonism in the House of Lords when people come online into the Chamber, and some people are arguing that we should not allow that for Committee meetings generally. I see no reason at all why. If it is not abused, connecting for Committees when other people are pulled out is a sensible thing. It also helps those who have special needs or special assistance requirements as well.

Chair: I agree.

Lord Blunkett: During covid, we did temporarily have the ability to use

common sense about voting, but that went by the board. You will be familiar with this in the House of Commons. The argument about modernising how we vote has been going on for the last century. For some people, that would be a great boon—not least because in the House of Lords, we have the card reader, but we also have to troop through the Lobby and be counted as well. We moved from doing one, which was the idea with the card reader, into doing both. We have taken a step backwards, in my view.

Those are my opening thoughts. There is good will about modernisation, but there is not good practice. It has taken a long time before, for instance, those operating IT have had the least idea of how to cope with variations and requirements for those who have special needs. It is getting there and there are some very good people trying very hard, but it has taken a long time.

Chair: Thank you so much. That was excellent. I agree with most of what you said, David.

It was remiss of me to not ask Committee members to quickly introduce themselves so that you know exactly who is here. Marie, shall we start with you?

Marie Goldman: Hi, I am Marie Goldman. I am the Liberal Democrat MP for Chelmsford.

Chris Vince: I am Chris Vince. I am the Labour MP for Harlow.

Mr Barros-Curtis: Good morning, I am Alex Barros-Curtis, the Labour MP for Cardiff West. Apologies for lateness—my previous Committee overran significantly.

Sarah Coombes: I am Sarah Coombes. I am the Labour MP for West Bromwich and PPS to the Leader of the House.

Kirith Entwistle: I am Kirith Entwistle. I am the Labour MP for Bolton North East. My apologies for being late as well: I had a meeting that overran.

Joy Morrissey: I am Joy Morrissey. I am the Conservative MP for Beaconsfield, and I wasn't late today, for once.

Chair: You are an Opposition Whip as well, aren't you?

Paulette Hamilton: And I am Paulette Hamilton. I'm the Labour MP for Birmingham Erdington.

Q42 **Chair:** Sal?

Baroness Brinton: I arrived in the Lords in 2011 with a walking stick. As I arrived, I was perceived as non-disabled, perhaps just carrying a stick. My transition over the next two years to being a wheelchair user permanently opened my eyes to attitudes. You might want to ask a question on that later.

I am still congratulated by elderly Peers when I walk, as if it is the most extraordinary gift that I have been given for that brief moment. I am able to walk, and it is important for my heart health and other things that I have short journeys, and I try to do two minutes every hour—but I am talking about attitude, which is something we need to approach.

That picks up on David's point about voting. I do use virtual contributions, although rarely. If there is a train strike, I cannot get in. If it is snowy and icy, I am not safe on the pavements and I certainly cannot get on a bus. I need to be able to contribute and to say that I should not be able to because of my disability is ridiculous.

I think there are about eight of us. You have to have a pretty clear assessment by occupational health to say you are disabled, although I am not quite sure why health should say you are disabled. I think it is to

prevent those who might just be getting older. I am 70—I am not even the average age in the Lords. So there is an issue.

There are some good things, and perhaps we will talk later about our Chamber, where we have a different system. Our Speaker does not direct who is speaking. Whoever is the Whip on duty on the Government Benches, they look out to see if wheelchair users are bobbing—by that I mean that we are just leaning forward and knocking. They will say, “I think it’s time for Baroness X to come in,” or whoever it is. That is helpful, but it can be frustrating at questions.

I also am really grateful for voting electronically, because even though it is possible to get in through the Division Lobbies, it is extremely difficult.

Q43 Chair: Can you do that on any vote?

Baroness Brinton: I can do it on absolutely any vote, even if I am in the Chamber, because it is so crowded and my chair is fairly large.

Lord Blunkett: Where do you do it?

Baroness Brinton: I can do it absolutely anywhere, David. I can do it at home as well.

Lord Blunkett: Oh, I did not know that.

Baroness Brinton: If I have a day when I cannot come in because of a rail strike or snow, I can vote there as well.

Q44 **Chair:** Is that a special dispensation?

Baroness Brinton: Yes. The whole thing is special dispensation. Given how much most of us work at home anyway, it should not really be an issue, but it is.

The big thing for me has been the balance between fire safety and practical arrangements, and the

acceptance of disability. Corridors are very difficult in both PCH and the older Palace. My condition has worsened, and I now cannot pull heavy doors open. I am almost at the point of needing a carer to get me around the House because the doors are shut for security reasons.

Chair: Doors have been a big theme of our evidence so far.

Baroness Brinton: We have been asking the team and others to have them hooked back electronically in the event of an emergency or any security threat—they can be released immediately—but it is “too expensive”. Given the millions being spent on other things, that really should be addressed. I have had to ask for arrangements in Peers’ Lobby for the doors not to be closed until 10 minutes after the House is up, because I cannot leave. They now do that. Occasionally it goes wrong, because the staff just disappear and

they shut all the doors, and then I literally cannot leave.

There are practical things like toilets. I will come on to the details, but this is the big thing. The design theory is often okay. It changes when it is implemented, but worse than that, the practical day-to-day approach of facilities means that what was designed as a disabled space becomes absolutely unusable. That is particularly bad with toilets, but there are other areas as well.

Q45 **Chair:** That is really interesting.
Thank you, Sal. Tanni?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: I came to the House of Lords in 2010 as a Cross-Bench Peer, which probably opens up a whole other discussion about the ability of disabled people to get into politics. I would say that this building—Portcullis House—is fine, but that is probably because I have worked in far more inaccessible places. It has changed, however, as I have got older, in terms of how we

get around. A bit of a final straw for me was what happened with our doors at Peers' Entrance, and the travesty that is the car park.

Q46 **Chair:** What is that? We do not know about these things here.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: There was a whole redesign of Peers' Entrance because of putting security pods in. The car park was re-laid. It is not level access. There is a very small step that rises as you get to each side of the pod entry. As there is no differentiation in the colour of the paving, people were tripping up or down the step. As you come through and look at the door, it looks like it is step-free, and people walking just turned to go through and were not noticing the step. So they have had to put in barriers. We have been told it is impossible to re-lay the car park.

Lord Blunkett: Forgive me for interrupting, Tanni, but from the last

estimate I saw, it has cost £9 million. Just absorb that for a minute.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: The door has not worked all the time. About two weeks ago, they closed off access to the door.

How we get around the building is quite complicated anyway, and you tend not to think about it. I only realised it when I was showing a new member of staff the routes that I use to go around the building. She is non-disabled, and she realised that the routes she walks around are completely different. You tend to just get used to walking the way that you know and that is accessible. It is about things that have changed recently, like the re-laying of the carpets. I am still relatively strong, but the carpets are virtually impossible for me to push on. You cannot push in a straight line, because the way they are laid sends your wheelchair in all sorts of odd directions. Quite often it feels like, as

Sal said, some of the things have been tried to make access better but have actually made it worse.

If you come up in the lifts in the corner from the underground, there is a pass-access door-opener there. That has never worked. Quite a lot of money has been spent putting in a pass-access door-opener and it does not work. It is things like that. As David said, you do not know who to go to. When I came here, there was no induction. Literally, you got your staff pass and they went, "Off you go." We are all incredibly busy in the Chamber. We are doing a million different things, so having time to know even how this place works is not like any other company or business I have ever worked in.

This is probably the most frustrated I have ever been, which has then triggered lots of other things about where we sit in the Chamber, because I cannot sit with any of my colleagues. I am quite isolated, but it

is probably better than in the Commons.

Baroness Brinton: I'm a Front-Bencher and nobody knows that because I do not sit on the Front Bench.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: You have probably got us at our most frustrated, which in some ways is potentially quite useful. Considering that the House of Lords has a reasonable number of people who have some form of disability or impairment, it is hard to do your daily business. I am not signed up to the virtual proceedings because I do not believe there is any reason why I cannot be in the Chamber the same as any other non-disabled person, but the process that a disabled colleague has to go through to get access is really difficult.

I will briefly mention Baroness Campbell of Surbiton. She is now on a ventilator full time. She has eventually been allowed somebody in

the Chamber with her to take over her speeches when she runs out of air and cannot breathe. It took years to get that in place. She was told that other Peers would get confused. For quite a long time I used to read her speeches when she was running out of air, mostly because I can speak really quickly to get things into Hansard. She just needed a basic, reasonable adjustment. I am probably more frustrated now than I was at the time, just because of everything else that is happening.

Q47 Chair: That is a really helpful overview for us. We thought we were getting you in because you were doing it much better than we were over here. I think perhaps you are, but it is perhaps quite not the picture that we thought, so that is really helpful. Lord Shinkwin?

Lord Shinkwin: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you so much for holding this inquiry; it is very therapeutic for us, too.

Chair: It has been very eye-opening for us.

Lord Shinkwin: Can I put on the record my appreciation to the Lord Speaker and to the director of facilities Mathew Chandler? They are really battling the system to try to drive change, but it is a cultural and attitudinal problem that we are all encountering.

Every time I come in to work—I have been here almost 10 years; it will be 10 years come November—I am reminded that this is an institution that was designed and built by non-disabled people for non-disabled people, and is still run by non-disabled people for non-disabled people. It is therefore a bit unfair of me to say, “Why do you not understand?” Equally, I do not really understand why they do not think, as in the case of other protected characteristic groups, whether it is women or people from minority ethnic backgrounds, “Let’s get a real-

life disabled person in at a senior level who has lived experience.” They could harness that resource and address many of the issues that we encounter.

If there is one recommendation that I would love the Committee to consider making, it would be to have a designated person to address some of the issues that Lord Blunkett and others have raised about the need for clarity, but also accountability. I can give you one example, which Baroness Grey-Thompson and Lord Blunkett mentioned: the horrendous cost of Peers’ Entrance. I have heard £11 million, but I’ll settle for £9 million. It is a fiasco.

There are also other problems. For example, in the time that I have been here we must have had three or four disability access audits that have simply gathered dust on some shelf, after probably hundreds of thousands of taxpayers’ money has been spent on having them done. If they got a

real-life disabled person in post at a senior level, maybe on the board for a year to drive change across both Houses, it would be a very good value for money project.

Chair: That is really helpful. The message has come through very strongly from current MPs, former MPs and others about having a single point of contact for reasonable adjustments on an ongoing basis. For a lot of our new MPs coming in, navigating this has been nigh on impossible, so that is really helpful. We will come on to some of the issues you mentioned.

Q48 Chris Vince: Thank you all for coming along today and for your opening statements, which have been useful, albeit frustrating and sadly not surprising to hear. Are there any aspects of your role that we have not discussed yet which are challenging due to a lack of reasonable adjustment, or to the physical estate itself?

Lord Blunkett: This is really tricky to talk about, but the biggest is support. As we described earlier, people will need different kinds of support. Many of us have taken a step back rather than be belligerent about this, but understandably, historically, we only get an allowance for times when we are either in the Chamber or in Committee, and for no other days. If Parliament is not sitting or we are not here, we do not get it. Fair do's, let's leave it at that, but the only physical support services offered are attached to those sitting days and to your attendance. Some people with special needs assistance requirements get a supplement, but it is attached to the daily allowance.

I can live with that, because I am very fortunate to have outside earnings, so I can afford to top up my daily allowance to pay my assistant, who is brilliant and without whom I could do nothing at all, but other people cannot afford that. I am fortunate. I do not mind having the

argument about it behind the scenes. I do resent the feeling that they think they are doing people a favour. I think the worst feature of some of the attitudes in this place—I have been here 37 years, man and boy—is the supercilious pretence of being understanding while actually being patronising and not understanding at all. In the Lords, finance are the worst.

Q49 Chair: David, you obviously have the experience of having been an MP as well. Is there anything you could share with the Committee in terms of your time as a Member of Parliament versus that transition into the Lords? Are there things about the procedures in the Commons that we still do today that you think are impossible?

Lord Blunkett: Perhaps I can cheer you up, in the sense that things have improved enormously. I will tell you this anecdote—sorry, Sal, Tanni and Kevin. When I came in, in 1987, I

said, "Look, the only way I am going to be able to work on equal terms is if I can have the Braille transcription equipment and sufficient reading capacity," to stay on top of a situation that has worsened for you all with email. God knows we get enough emails down our end. How I would cope down here now, I don't know. I needed that resource. They said, "We cannot do that, but we will set up a working group".

They set up a joint Commons and Lords working group that was chaired by Patrick Jenkin, who I'd had the most enormous row with before I came into the House of Commons because he was the Secretary of State imposing rate capping and the end of the freedoms that we had in local government and I was the leader of Sheffield. So we had a really interesting group. Nine months later they came up with exactly the same package that I had requested in the first place and then—hold your breath—it was voted on, on the Floor

of the House. A colleague who was later in Cabinet with me said as I came out, "Well, you've done pretty well there, haven't you?" I replied, "I'll swap you". [Laughter.]

All that changed when Robin Cook became Leader of the House. Things were dealt with sensibly behind the scenes. Of course, although IPSA has had its ups and downs, at least it can handle these matters with a degree of seemliness. We do not have an IPSA—I understand we are not going to—and do not deal with it in quite that way, but it is about the sensitivities. We have come some way in those years, because that was gross.

Q50 Chair: Yes, we have come some way since those years, but we still have a lot further to go. Would others like to come in on Chris's question?

Baroness Brinton: Yes, but I am going to go completely from big strategic issues to the horribly practical, which is toilets.

Chair: Yes, toilets have been a feature.

Baroness Brinton: If you think about Maslow, it is absolutely fundamental to your day at work to be able to access toilets. I mentioned a problem earlier. The design theory is fine, but the disabled toilet on the ground floor of Portcullis House is right beside the entrance to the gents, and if the door is open, men cannot get into the gents. The room, without furniture, is probably just about big enough for my chair to get in and possibly turn round.

In their wisdom, the suppliers of the bins have provided three bins, all of which are massive. I used it earlier. I go in frontways and can then transfer back. I then have to turn the handle behind me, push the door open, hoping I do not hit anyone in the face, and then reverse out. That day-to-day experience, multiplied across virtually every disabled toilet in this place, except the Changing Places

one, is really infuriating. You just feel you are doing a battle with the building every day.

Q51 **Chair:** That is really helpful, thank you. Tanni?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: I have two things to pick up on. One is about coming in and out of the building. Each of the exits is quite different. I can only get in through the Portcullis House entrance when it is staffed. If I come in during recess—I prefer to work here than at home—I cannot get in through Portcullis House.

Chair: Yes, we have heard that you can only come in between 8 am and 8 pm, when there is guard on, because the door does not open otherwise.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Some staff are brilliant. They will see you and open the doors. My experience of the security staff has always been very good. They always try to be

incredibly helpful. Again, though, you end up using different ways to get in and out than you would normally do, so everything takes longer than it normally would.

When I came here, we weren't given any maps. Not everybody knows where the toilets are. I had been here quite a long time when Lord Shinkwin told me there was an accessible toilet on the ground floor near the Strangers, which I never knew about. If you come in as a passholder and with a red stripey badge, you are probably treated better than most. If you are a block-coloured passholder it is harder. I would say that in the Chamber, the Chief Whip, or whoever is on the Government Front Bench, is very good in terms of bobbing. When I threatened the previous Government with a judicial review, they were happy and called my name, even though they knew that was what I was going to do.

For staff members who want to come into the Chamber, we haven't done vaguely enough. I have only ever seen two wheelchair users who have come into the Box. They have had to sit down in the corner with a little table. They cannot sit with their colleagues, yet they are providing advice to Ministers. It is not brilliant in the Chamber but by now we should have a lot more disabled people coming through the civil service, and they are just not able to do their job in the Chamber.

Chair: We heard from a senior Clerk in the Commons whose career progression would take him to sit at the table in the House of Commons Chamber as part of his clerking experience. He literally cannot do that; and that is just not good enough. That is a good point, well made.

Baroness Brinton: Can I come in on the end of that? You might want to inquire what the plans are under

restoration and renewal for someone in a wheelchair to be able to speak from the Dispatch Box or, even more shocking, to be Speaker or Lords Speaker.

Q52 Chair: Do you not speak from the Dispatch Box when you are on the Front Bench?

Baroness Brinton: We cannot; there is no space.

Chair: Do you just speak from where you are?

Baroness Brinton: I'm a Lib Dem and we do not speak from the Front Bench, but even if I were a Front Bencher, I could not get into the space. My worry is that the consultants doing the design work do not fully understand these issues.

Chair: No.

Baroness Brinton: And it would be outrageous if we came back to a brand-new building, presumably

expected to last for 200 years, and there is nothing to ensure that a politician in a wheelchair could either use the Dispatch Box or be Speaker or Lord Speaker.

Chair: Or even a senior Clerk.

Baroness Brinton: Or a senior Clerk.

Q53 **Chair:** Is there anything you want to add to that, Lord Shinkwin?

Lord Shinkwin: If I may, briefly. Mr Vince mentioned reasonable adjustments. On a strategic level, there is no real recognition that, as a body that passes laws on disability discrimination or inequality, we might just have a duty to be a beacon of best practice. I totally agree with what Baroness Brinton has said.

I have been to the Icelandic Parliament, the Althingi, in Reykjavik. Not only does Iceland have a majority of women in its Parliament, or did at that point, but there is a

platform behind the dais that Ministers address Members from. It rises for wheelchair users. Rather than an R&R team member thinking, "Well, we can't do this; this is beautiful Pugin furniture," we could have a device where someone presses a button, up or down would pop some wheels, and there would be quite literally a slice of a Front Bench, to be moved down a position to accommodate the space of Baroness Brinton's or someone else's wheelchair.

Going back to the perennial problem of toilets, in advance of this meeting, I popped into the disabled toilet off Peers' Lobby. Six months ago, I asked that every toilet could have at least one bin that was not foot-operated. That is pretty logical for wheelchair users. There is no bin that I can use in that toilet. There are some very big bins, as Baroness Brinton mentioned. There is no turning circle, and neither is there a small bin that I could lob some hand

tissue into. I am not blaming Mathew Chandler, the director of facilities. It brings me back to my point that, unless you have a dedicated person with lived experience—just monitoring it and reporting upwards—change is not going to happen.

Chair: Now. I am going to bring in Sarah Coombes, and then Paulette.

Q54 **Sarah Coombes:** Ideally, we want everything to be accessible by design, but we heard from a lot of MPs who were talking about the processes in the Commons being inaccessible by design, and you have mentioned a few things that I want to pick up on.

Some disabled MPs talked about the pain of having to sit in the Chamber for eight hours—people who had musculoskeletal issues being asked to bob or, if you cannot bob, setting yourself up by waving an Order Paper. One MP said that they could not walk after they voted 10 times

over a period of two and a half hours. There is just a huge list of things.

I want to ask a bit more about some of the adjustments that have been made, particularly for call lists, to give you a bit more certainty about when you are going to speak. That matters not only for people who have musculoskeletal issues, for whom sitting in the Chamber for that period is really painful, but for people who need to take medication and things like that, for whom it is very difficult. I want also to ask about electronic voting. We have not really got anywhere with that so far, so it would be great to hear about how you have managed to move forward a bit more with it.

Chair: Sal, you are taking advantage of a lot of that, aren't you? Could you explain the procedure for being allowed to do that? Is it cumbersome?

Baroness Brinton: It is, and I think Tanni described a bit of it. First of all,

I want to say that the system we had before the electronic one—voting in your place—is absolutely brilliant. For the people who cannot manage that repeated walk, the Clerk looks around the Chamber, sees someone waving their Order Paper, comes over and takes their vote in their place. It is by agreement, so their Whips have to say that they can do that. That transformed the year before I went into a wheelchair. It is easy to do—no problems at all.

The electronic system that we have is fantastic. It is extremely efficient, and could be used by everybody. It takes me 30 seconds to vote. I am on the PACE delegation—to the Council of Europe—and I promise you that it is even faster than that electronic system. It is really good. But we are facing the attitude of some senior politicians who say that walking through the Lobbies is important. That is ridiculous when you are trying to do 10 votes on the hop.

The only issue with the electronic system is if you are in a part of the premises where you do not have good wi-fi—you do need good wi-fi—but that also stops you abusing the system. It is quite difficult to use it elsewhere, which is probably a good thing. It is certainly possible to limit it to only being used on site, except perhaps for the few occasions, for example, when I will vote from home because I cannot get in.

The process for being approved is that there is a very clear distinction between having an illness or being elderly, versus having an illness that has given you a disability that means that you cannot take part. As a result, there is a complex system. I have found it fairly easy to navigate, but I suspect I am a fairly straightforward example. It should be reviewed, I think, probably every three to five years, but I am not going to be out of my chair, so I do not think they worry.

Q55 Chair: Who is the arbiter of that?

Baroness Brinton: Occupational health. I think that the Commission in the Lords has the strategic overview of it, and your party Whips have to put you forward for assessment. By the way, that same assessment also helps with taxi costs if there is no public transport available, and things like that. In the days before buses had ramps, I needed to use taxis because I could not get from Euston to here—I live outside London. I think that attitudes are a big thing. I think your House was even worse than ours during covid with the arrangements.

But it does not change the discussions—I have many discussions with other Peers around the time that we are voting, because I am usually around. I usually sit at the Bar, because the other problem is that where the wheelchairs sit in our House is where the Tellers go and where everybody walks past. If you

stay there, you get banged the whole time, so we end up usually back behind the Bar anyway. It does work and it is effective, and I suspect it is much more effective in terms of the time of the House as well. If you look at modernising your procedures, I absolutely recommend it.

Q56 Chair: That is really clear. Does anyone want to talk about call lists?

Lord Blunkett: Very quickly, we have a list for Second Reading, so you know where you are going to be, even if it is hours down the line. Obviously, that is not the case for Committee and Report. I think that it works for Second Reading. It is transparent.

We always had this myth when I was in here that nobody knew who would be called until they were called. We all knew: you used to go behind the Chair and talk to the Speaker. What it lacked was transparency. I happen to be a bit more of a moderniser than many in the Lords. I think we will

have to have a much clearer timetable and speaking times, and we are going to have to stop voting late into the night. We will have to have deferred voting the following day, but that is not your worry this afternoon.

Q57 **Chair:** Because you do not have the programming and some of the things that we have here.

Lord Blunkett: No, we don't. It is causing havoc at the moment, because filibustering can take you into the early hours of the morning. Nobody's going to have any sympathy for Peers, but it is one way of slimming down the Lords because we will all peg out eventually. It is a difficult one, getting the balance right. Talking about these things in the Lords is a nightmare—the tortoise and the hare is nothing.

Chair: We have some similar issues here, shall we say.

Q58 Kirith Entwistle: We have had a bit of pushback on call lists, because the argument is that if we were to have them, it would have an impact on the quality of the debate in the Chamber. What are your thoughts on that?

Lord Blunkett: I think there was some laughing at that.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: The joy and the pain of the House of Lords is that we can talk as long for as we want. We do not have agreed voting times. When I first came in as a Cross Bencher, I basically had no clue what we were going to vote on. Now, at least, we have a bit more of an idea. I think the fact that anyone who wants to can speak on an amendment is, by and large, useful, because you will hear lots of different opinions. However, we are still in very strange times. It feels like there is lots of filibustering and lots of delaying. We are in a process where there are so many updates to our groupings on amendments.

Everything is getting degrouped or talked out. It feels as if the debates are going on for much longer than they normally would. As David said, there has to be some limit on speaking. People are making 18 or 19-minute speeches at Committee stage, which is not great because you should not have to spend that long explaining something.

I do not mind the fact that anyone is allowed to speak. I would say that, generally, the Chamber is pretty good to me. If it is a question on sport or disability rights, you look around and there is lots of nodding across the Chamber. It is agreed at what point you are going to speak. That takes some getting used to. As I mentioned briefly earlier, I am not on the virtual voting list. There is no medical reason why I cannot be in the Chamber until 2 o'clock in the morning. I would not choose to be, but there is no reason why I cannot do repetitive votes. Sometimes, the view is that because I am a

wheelchair user, I must need reasonable adjustment, rather than there being an understanding of what reasonable adjustment is there for.

In terms of something like fire evacuation, I have a PEEP. I am not sure how that would ever work in practice, because it is such a big and complicated building. There are Peers who would have much greater difficulty getting out of the building, if there was an emergency situation, than I would, but because they are deemed non-disabled, they do not have a PEEP or they do not have the same support. I think that because my impairment is so visible, there are some assumptions that go with that. I would generally say that I have had really good treatment here, but there are still assumptions that go with being a wheelchair user.

Chair: We heard that message quite strongly from MPs. They did not want to be viewed as different because they needed some reasonable

adjustments to what are seen as the more routine procedures, whether that is bobbing, seating—the seating is quite bad in the House of Commons Chamber—or the allocation of seats, because you have to be in Prayers, and so on. There is a range of issues.

Q59 Marie Goldman: I understand that your Select Committees can sometimes be hybrid or virtual with the permission of the Chair. Lord Blunkett, you mentioned it earlier, but could you expand on how that works, whether it works well, the drawbacks and the good side of it?

Lord Blunkett: I think hybrid works well. Some people do not like it because they think that everybody should make the effort to be there, but I think that it allows people to adjust their working practices in a sensible way. If nobody turns up, the system falls down, so you need a degree of moral responsibility yourself and your own Whips keeping

an eye on it. But it seems to me that it has worked well on the Select Committees that I have been on and has continued to work after covid.

On the other aspect that we were just touching on, I ought to say that the more you have reasonable adjustments for everybody, the less you need reasonable adjustments for the few.

Q60 Chair: Absolutely; I agree. On virtual participation, as you were saying earlier, Sal, we in the Commons went right back. You cannot appear virtually as a Member of Parliament at a Select Committee—although you can as a witness—and a range of other things.

Baroness Brinton: I was going to make a slightly different point, but hybrid is extremely helpful because we have two Peers, Baroness Campbell and Baroness Thomas of Winchester, who require oxygen and various other things and cannot particularly go out at night. It gives

them a chance to participate, and both of them participate in everything else that they can do virtually. It is not that they are not doing things—we know that they are. Both of them are extraordinary campaigners.

As a House, we operate in a completely different way from you because the Lord Speaker or the Deputy Chairman does not manage the business. As Lord Blunkett said, there is no priority in Committee because there is no list. We are much more in the habit of calling out if we think that someone is jumping in. If we wanted, for example, to hear from Lady Grey-Thompson, people would say, “No—Lady Grey-Thompson, because her amendment is next.” The House respects that and it works. I am not sure that would translate for you.

Chair: No, probably not.

Baroness Brinton: That has also helped when those of us in

wheelchairs are trying to bob. Even if there is not a Whip on it, other people will say, “I think Lady Brinton’s trying to get in”, which is very helpful. That mindset change has really worked for us.

Chair: So there is a good culture of respect.

Q61 **Paulette Hamilton:** I’m Paulette Hamilton, Labour MP for Birmingham Erdington. My question is about the difference between the adjustments and tradition, because the House of Lords has a really long tradition so that, even where I am from, in the midst of Birmingham, everybody seems to know maybe not how it operates but its importance. Do you feel that some of the tradition is being lost through the adjustments that you have to do?

Baroness Brinton: We respect the history and tradition in our House, which goes back way beyond yours—the barons from Magna Carta glower down at us every day—but we are a

functioning Parliament, and we need to have a House that can work effectively, and, sometimes, I am afraid, the building gets in the way.

Lord Blunkett: Kevin is very good on tradition, aren't you?

Lord Shinkwin: I would like to think, Mrs Hamilton, that we can balance the two. It comes down to a question of effectiveness, so how can we best effect proper scrutiny of Government and challenge the Executive? I am still struck by the fact that disabled people constitute only about 1% of our Chamber, so there is a massive deficit of lived experience.

I know that the House of Lords had a tradition of being made up of, if you like, the top social elite, but I would like to think that the tradition of effectiveness and being committed to sustaining democracy means that we can balance the two. I think that it comes back to what we have been discussing in this meeting, which is

recognising that we have a duty to be a beacon of best practice and make those reasonable adjustments, and, crucially, make them proactively, which is the duty under the law.

If I may, Chair, I will just quickly mention a Peer who has a hearing impairment. Some of you may remember a Labour parliamentary giant, Lord Ashley of Stoke, whom I was privileged to work with when I was in the charity sector before I came to the Lords—Lord Blunkett, I am sure, will remember him well. He was a fantastic champion of people with hearing impairments, and there were great reasonable adjustments made for him, but we have gone backwards. For example, last week, we had a meeting, which the Lord Speaker convened, very kindly, looking at disability access issues. There was no Palantype—there was no means of this Peer being able to follow the meeting, and she was reduced to asking for a future

meeting to look at issues affecting deaf and hearing-impaired Peers. I just thought—because my first job was at the Royal National Institute for Deaf People—we have really gone backwards.

I am sorry to labour the point, but that made me think that, unless and until we address the issues of clarity and accountability through a dedicated person with lived experience, we will probably just continue going round in circles.

Q62 **Chair:** Thank you; that is a really good point. Tanni, did you want to say something?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Some of the tradition of this place is slightly amazing and funny, like what colour carpets guests can stand on at certain times of the day, and it only becoming the afternoon when the Mace is in the Chamber. I remember my first three days here, when I rang my husband and said, “I think everyone’s senile; they don’t know

what time it is,” because, at 1 o’clock, they were saying good morning. Then, some of the rules are really quite sweet. I am not sure that the language in the Chamber is always terribly helpful, but it actually governs behaviour.

I would say that I have experienced very little discrimination here. There is something about being a Peer—with a big P or a little p—that is helpful. But on what Kevin was saying about one of our colleagues, given the amount of energy it takes to cope in the Chamber—to lip-read for eight hours—it is absolutely crazy that there has not been any reasonable adjustment. That makes it difficult for more people to come into the Chamber. It should not be a daily fight just to do your job. I am not sure whether it is because I am getting older, but it feels as if it takes more and more energy just to be able to do the things that others maybe take for granted.

Lord Blunkett: I am an out-and-out moderniser. I believe that tradition is often used as an excuse for inaction.

Chair: That is a really good point on which to end our Modernisation Committee meeting. As you pointed out, not everybody is on this journey with us as a Modernisation Committee, but we are determined to make some progress. The contributions you have all made today have been really eye-opening, and I thank you so much for the spirit in which you have come to the meeting. We will let you know our findings, which will reflect your evidence. Thank you so much.