



HOUSE OF LORDS

Administration and Works Committee

1st Report of Session 2010–11

Use of electronic devices in the House

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The Administration and Works Committee

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First Report of Session 2010–11 from the Administration and Works Committee

Introduction

1. It has become clear that the rules regulating the use of mobile telephones and other electronic devices (in this report referred to collectively as “electronic devices”) in the House are incomplete, outdated and contradictory. We have therefore decided to revise and update those rules. This report is the result of the Committee’s deliberations. It sets out the current rules and makes proposals in respect of the use of electronic devices in the Chamber, Grand Committee, select committee meetings and other parts of the House. **The House is invited to agree the text of the proposed new rules set out at the end of the report.**

Current rules

2. The *Companion* sets out the current rules in paragraph 4.14:

Mobile telephones must be silent in the Chamber, Prince’s Chamber, Peers’ Lobby, division lobbies during divisions, the Moses Room and committee rooms during committee meetings. [Footnote: Also the Library, the Salisbury Room, the Writing Room, and all bars and restaurants. Elsewhere they may be used with discretion]. In the Chamber and in committee rooms, pagers or other electronic devices must not be used to transmit messages to members of the House for use in proceedings.
3. These rules, which embody decisions reached by this Committee almost four years ago,¹ are internally inconsistent. The rule that telephones “must be silent” in certain areas implies that they can be used in silent mode to send text messages or check emails and the internet. But the rule that they “may be used [elsewhere] with discretion” suggests that they may not be used at all (even in silent mode) in the restricted areas. Moreover, the reference to pagers is outdated, and the rules do not address the use of other devices such as iPads and laptops other than in the context of the ban on transmitting messages for use in proceedings.

Use of electronic devices in the Chamber and Grand Committee

4. The main consideration is for what purposes, if any, Members should be able to use electronic devices while in the Chamber or Grand Committee.
5. First, we have considered the use of electronic devices to send or receive messages for use in proceedings. On the one hand, it could be argued that since there is no bar on officials sending handwritten notes to Members (generally frontbenchers) in the Chamber and Grand Committee, the same should apply to electronic messages. But on the other hand, there is a

¹ Announced by means of a Written Statement on 31 January 2007 (HL Deb., col. WS15).

profound difference of scale, and we are persuaded that it would not be conducive to good debate to allow Members to send or receive streams of messages to and from researchers or advisers outside the Chamber or Moses Room. **We therefore recommend retaining the current rule of both Houses that electronic devices must not be used to send or receive messages for use in proceedings.**

6. We have also considered the potential use of electronic devices to provide access to documents relevant to the business before the House. This could have significant benefits for Members, not least in reducing their reliance on paper copies of documents such as the Order Paper, Hansard, texts of bills or explanatory notes, white papers or other Government publications, and reports by external bodies which are the subject of debate. But we are also conscious that internet access could be abused: we do not, for instance, believe that Members participating in proceedings should be permitted to use electronic devices to search the Web speculatively in the hope of finding information for use in debate which is not generally available to other participants.
7. Policing use of the internet, and in particular distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate use, would be difficult; in practice much would depend on self-regulation, and on the common sense and self-restraint of individual Members. But we believe that it is worth making the experiment.
8. **We therefore recommend that, for a one-year trial period in the first instance, Members taking part in proceedings should be able to use electronic devices to access Parliamentary papers and other documents which are clearly and closely relevant to the business before the House or Grand Committee; we further recommend that Members should not be permitted to use the internet to search for material that might be used in the course of proceedings, but which is not generally available to participants by other means.**
9. We have also considered for what other purposes Members might be able to use electronic devices (a) when not speaking and (b) when speaking.
10. On (a), we propose an approach which reflects current practice: in other words, subject to the rules above, **we recommend that Members should be able to use electronic devices, in silent mode, for any purpose not related to the proceedings before the House or Grand Committee, provided they do not distract other Members. However, as a courtesy to other Members, we would discourage repeated use of such devices.**
11. The issue raised in (b) is also important. There is currently no rule against using an electronic device in place of paper notes when speaking; indeed, at least one Member has made a speech in the Chamber using his iPad in recent weeks. Notwithstanding the ban in the Commons on using electronic devices as an aide memoire while addressing the House, we see no qualitative difference between using a pad of paper for speaking notes and using an iPad or other device. **Therefore, subject to the existing rule in**

the *Companion* against reading speeches,² and the other rules set out in this report, we recommend that Members should be permitted to refer to electronic devices when addressing the Chamber or Grand Committee.

12. If the House agrees to allow electronic devices to be used in place of speaking notes in the Chamber and Grand Committee, it will be desirable to ask Members who use devices in this way to email text to Hansard instead of handing over hard copy. The Editor of Hansard has confirmed that he would welcome this.

Which electronic devices should be permitted?

13. A secondary consideration is which types of electronic device Members should be permitted to use in the Chamber and Grand Committee. We believe it is important to avoid too much detail because the rules would rapidly be overtaken by new technology—as has happened with the current rules. **We therefore propose that all hand-held devices should be permitted in the Chamber and Grand Committee provided that they are silent.** This would exclude conventional laptops. But beyond this, we think it inadvisable to define “hand-held devices”. All references to pagers will also be removed from the rules, as these are no longer in common use.

Use of electronic devices in select committee meetings

14. Select committee meetings are different in atmosphere from proceedings in the Chamber, and some Members use laptops to read the papers electronically. **We therefore do not propose restrictions on the use of electronic devices in select committee meetings except to say that they must be silent. We recommend instead that the use of such devices should be at the discretion of the Chairman of each committee. Chairmen should be able to vary the use on a meeting-by-meeting basis, for instance to differentiate between public and private meetings.**

Use of electronic devices outside the Chamber

15. **We propose to retain the current requirement for mobile telephones (and other electronic devices) to be silent in Prince’s Chamber, Peers’ Lobby, the division lobbies during divisions, the Library, the Salisbury Room and all bars and restaurants, with the added clarification that calls cannot be made or received in those areas.** The Peers’ Writing Room will be removed from the list of restricted areas because, in light of the current size of the House, it is now a hot-desking area where mobile telephone use is explicitly permitted.

Conclusion

16. The following rules are proposed. If the House agrees this report, the Procedure Committee will be invited to amend the *Companion* when it is next updated. The *Handbook on facilities and services for Members* will also be revised accordingly.

² See *Companion to the Standing Orders*, paragraph 4.38: “The House has resolved that the reading of speeches is ‘alien to the custom of this House, and injurious to the traditional conduct of its debates’ ... In practice, some speakers may wish to have ‘extended notes’ from which to speak, but it is not in the interests of good debate that they should follow them closely.”

1. Hand-held electronic devices (not laptops) may be used in the Chamber and Grand Committee provided that they are silent, but repeated use of such devices is discouraged. Members making speeches may refer to electronic devices in place of paper speaking notes, subject to the existing rule against reading speeches.
2. Electronic devices may not be used to send or receive messages for use in proceedings. They may be used to access Parliamentary papers and other documents which are clearly and closely relevant to the business before the House or Grand Committee, but not to search the Web for information for use in debate which is not generally available to participants by other means.
3. Electronic devices may be used silently in select committee meetings, subject to the discretion of the Chairman of the committee on a meeting-by-meeting basis.
4. In the following areas of the House, electronic devices must be silent and may not be used to hold conversations:
 - (i) Prince's Chamber
 - (ii) Peers' Lobby
 - (iii) Division lobbies during divisions
 - (iv) Library
 - (v) Salisbury Room
 - (vi) Bars and restaurants.