

# 09 Parliament

The activities of Parliament in Britain are more or less the same as those of the parliament in any western democracy. It makes new laws, gives authority for the government to raise and spend money, keeps a close eye on government activities and discusses these activities.

The British Parliament works in a large building called the Palace of Westminster (popularly known as 'the Houses of Parliament'). This contains offices, committee rooms, restaurants, bars, libraries, and even some places of residence. It also contains two larger rooms. One of these is where the House of Lords holds its meetings. The other is where the House of Commons holds its meetings. The British Parliament is divided into these two 'houses' and its members belong to one or other of them, although only members of the Commons are known as MPs (Members of Parliament). The Commons is by far the more important of the two.

## The atmosphere of Parliament

Look at the pictures of the inside of the meeting room of the House of Commons. Its design and layout differ from the interior of the parliament buildings in most other countries. These differences can tell us a lot about what is distinctive about the British Parliament.

### The Speaker

Anybody who happened to be watching the live broadcast of Parliament on 23 October 2000 was able to witness an extraordinary spectacle. They saw an elderly male MP being physically dragged, apparently against his will, out of his seat on the back benches by fellow MPs and being forced to sit in the large chair in the middle of the House of Commons.

What the House of Commons was actually doing was appointing a new Speaker. The Speaker is the person who chairs and controls discussion in the House, decides which MP is going to speak next and makes sure that the rules of procedure are followed. (If they are not, the Speaker has the power to demand a public apology from an MP or even to ban an MP from the House for a number of days.) It is a very important position. In fact, the Speaker is, officially, the second most important 'commoner' (non-aristocrat) in the kingdom after the Prime Minister.

Why, then, did the man in that scene (Michael Martin MP) appear to be resisting? The reason is history. Hundreds of years ago, it was the Speaker's job to communicate the decisions of the Commons to the king (that is where the title 'Speaker' comes from). Because the king was often very displeased with what the Commons had decided, this was not a pleasant task. As a result, nobody wanted the job. They had to be forced to take it.

These days, the position is a much safer one, but the tradition of dragging an unwilling Speaker to the chair has remained.

MPs in the House always address the Speaker as 'Mr Speaker' or 'Madame Speaker'. Once a new Speaker has been appointed, he or she agrees to give up all party politics and normally remains in the job for as long as he or she wants it.



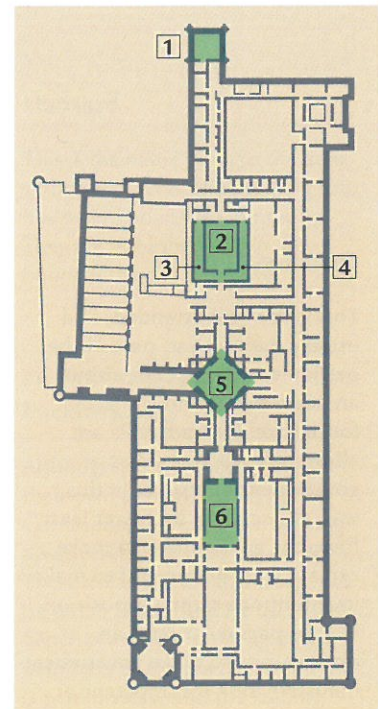
Michael Martin MP



First, notice the seating arrangements. There are just two rows of benches facing each other. On the left of the picture are the government benches, where the MPs of the governing party sit. On the right are the opposition benches. There is no opportunity in this layout for a reflection of all the various shades of political opinion (as there is with a semi-circle). According to where they sit, MPs are seen to be either 'for' the government (supporting it) or against it. This physical division is emphasized by the table on the floor of the House between the two rows of benches. The Speaker's Chair, which is raised some way off the floor, is also here. From this commanding position, the Speaker chairs (that is, controls) debate (*The Speaker*). The arrangement encourages confrontation between government and opposition. It also reinforces psychologically the reality of the British two-party system (see chapter 6). There are no 'cross-benches' for MPs who belong neither to the governing party nor the main opposition party. In practice, these MPs sit on the opposition benches furthest from the Speaker's chair (at the bottom right of the picture).

Second, the Commons has no special place for people to stand when they are speaking. MPs simply stand up and speak from wherever they are sitting. Third, notice that there are no desks for the MPs. The benches where they sit are exactly and only that – benches, just as in a church. This makes it physically easy for them to drift in and drift out of the room – something that they frequently do. Fourth, notice that the room itself is very small. In fact, there isn't enough room for all the MPs. There are about 650 of them, but there is seating for fewer than 400. A candidate at an election is said to have won a 'seat' in the Commons, but this seat

### Palace of Westminster floor plan



- 1 clock tower (Big Ben)
- 2 House of Commons
- 3 'Aye' Division Lobby
- 4 'No' Division Lobby
- 5 central lobby
- 6 House of Lords

### House of Commons



- 1 Speaker's chair
- 2 government benches
- 3 opposition benches
- 4 galleries for visitors
- 5 press gallery



### Question Time

This is the best attended, and usually the noisiest, part of the parliamentary day. For about an hour, there is no subject for debate. Instead, MPs are allowed to ask questions of government ministers. In this way, they can, in theory at least, force the government to make certain facts public and to make its intentions clear. Opposition MPs in particular have an opportunity to make government ministers look incompetent or perhaps dishonest.

The questions and answers, however, are not spontaneous. Questions to ministers have to be 'tabled' (written down and placed on the table below the Speaker's chair) two days in advance, so that ministers have time to prepare their answers. In this way, the government can usually avoid major embarrassment. The trick, though, is to ask an unexpected 'supplementary' question. After the minister has answered the tabled question, the MP who originally tabled it is allowed to ask a further question relating to the minister's answer. In this way, it is sometimes possible for MPs to catch a minister unprepared.

*Question Time* has been widely copied around the world. It is also probably the aspect of Parliament best known to the general public. The vast majority of television news excerpts of Parliament are taken from this period of its day. Especially common is for the news to show an excerpt from the 15 minutes each week when it is the Prime Minister's turn to answer questions.

is imaginary. MPs do not have their 'own' place to sit. No names are marked on the benches. MPs just sit down wherever (on 'their' side of the House) they can find room.

All these features result in a rather informal atmosphere.

Individual MPs, without their own 'territory' (which a personal seat and desk would give them), are encouraged to cooperate. Moreover, the small size of the House, together with the lack of a podium or dais from which to address it, means that MPs do not normally speak in the way that they would at a large public rally. MPs normally speak in a rather conversational tone and, because they have nowhere to place their notes while speaking, they do not normally speak for very long either. It is only on particularly important occasions, when all the MPs are present, that passionate oratory is sometimes used. On these occasions, the fact that some 200 MPs have to stand (because there is no seating room left) makes it clear that it is an important occasion!

It should be noted that the House of Commons was deliberately designed like this. Historically, it was an accident: in medieval times, the Commons first began meeting in a church, and churches of that time often had rows of benches facing each other. But after the House of Commons was badly damaged by bombing in 1941, it was deliberately rebuilt according to the old pattern (with one or two modern comforts such as central heating added). This was because of a belief in the two-way 'for and against' tradition, and also because of a more general belief in continuity.

The ancient habits are preserved today in the many detailed rules and customs of procedure which all new MPs have to learn. The most noticeable of these is the rule that forbids MPs to address one another by name. All remarks and questions must go 'through the chair'. An MP who is speaking refers to or asks a question of 'the honourable member for Winchester' or 'my right honourable friend'. The fellow MP concerned may be sitting directly opposite, but the MP never says 'you'. These ancient rules were originally formulated to take the 'heat' out of debate and decrease the possibility that violence might break out. Today, they lend a touch of formality which balances the informal aspects of the Commons and further increases the feeling of MPs that they belong to a special group of people.

### An MP's life

Traditionally, MPs were not supposed to be specialist politicians. They were supposed to be ordinary people who gave some of their time to keeping an eye on the government and representing the people. Ideally, they came from all walks of life, bringing their experience of the everyday world into Parliament with them. This is why MPs were not even paid until the beginning of the twentieth century. Traditionally, they were supposed to be doing the public a service, not making a



career for themselves. Of course, this tradition meant that only rich people could afford to be MPs so that, although they did indeed come from a wide variety of backgrounds, these were always backgrounds of power and wealth. Even now, British MPs, in comparison with many of their European counterparts, do not get paid very much and, for such a high-status role, their working conditions are somewhat cramped.

This earlier amateur ideal does not, of course, reflect modern reality. Politics in Britain in the last half century has become professional. Most MPs are full-time politicians. If they do another job, it is only part-time. But the amateur tradition is still reflected in the hours of business of the Commons. Until 2003, the House never 'sat' in the mornings. This is when, in the traditional ideal, MPs would be doing their ordinary work or pursuing other interests outside Parliament (*When the Commons sits*). The House also gives itself quite long holidays, similar to those of schools in Britain (including half-terms).

But this apparently easy life is misleading. In fact, the average modern MP spends more time at work than any other professional in the country. The prepared timetable of sittings sometimes has to be extended and occasionally the House debates all through the night and through the next day without a break. MPs' mornings are taken up with committee work, research, preparing speeches and dealing with the problems of their constituents (the people they represent). At weekends MPs are expected to visit their constituencies (the areas they represent) and listen to the problems of anybody who wants to see them. It is an extremely busy life that leaves little time for pursuing another career. It does not leave MPs much time for their families either. Politicians have a higher rate of divorce than the national average.

### Hansard

This is the name given to the daily verbatim reports of everything that has been said in the Commons. They are published within 48 hours of the day they cover.

### Frontbenchers and backbenchers

Although MPs do not have their own personal seats in the Commons, there are two seating areas reserved for particular MPs. These areas are the front benches on either side of the House. These benches are where the leading members of the governing party (i.e. ministers) and the leading members of the main opposition party sit. These people are thus known as frontbenchers. MPs who do not hold a government post or a post in the shadow cabinet (see chapter 8) are known as backbenchers.

### When the Commons sits

The day in the main chamber of the House of Commons normally follows the following order:

- 1 **Prayers** (one minute).
- 2 **Question Time** (one hour).
- 3 **Miscellaneous business**, such as a statement from a minister (up to 45 minutes).
- 4 **Main business** (up to six and a half hours). On more than half of the days, this is a debate on a proposal for a new law, known as 'a bill'. Most of these bills are introduced by the government but some days in each year are reserved for 'private members' bills'; that is, bills introduced by individual MPs. Not many of these become law, because there is not enough interest among other MPs and not enough time for proper discussion of them.
- 5 **Adjournment debate** (half an hour). The main business stops and MPs are allowed to bring up a different matter for general discussion.

The parliamentary day used to run from 2.30 p.m. to 10.30 p.m. But in 2003, the hours were changed, with sessions starting in the morning and finishing by early evening. The intention was to allow MPs more time with their families and to present a more normal, sober, nine-to-five image to the public.

The change was also a recognition that, with so many more women MPs than before, some of them with young children, the Commons is no longer a gentleman's club.

But the new hours were very unpopular, and not only with male MPs. Mornings have always been used for committee work, and now these committees had to start working before 9 a.m. Some MPs complained they no longer had time to drop their children off at school. Others, who did not live near London and so could not return to their homes anyway, wandered around in the evening like lost souls. The new system meant MPs had to cram all their other duties into a much shorter period.

At the time of writing a compromise has been reached. The old hours are used for Mondays and Tuesdays and the new ones for Wednesdays and Thursdays, as follows:

Monday 2.30 p.m. – 10.30 p.m.  
 Tuesday 2.30 p.m. – 10.30 p.m.  
 Wednesday 11.30 a.m. – 7.30 p.m.  
 Thursday 10.30 a.m. – 6.30 p.m.  
 Friday 9.30 a.m. – 3 p.m. (the House does not 'sit' every Friday)



### How a bill becomes a law

Before a proposal for a new law starts its progress through Parliament, there will have been much discussion. If it is a government proposal, either a Green Paper (which explores the background and ideas behind the proposal) or a White Paper (the same thing but more explicit and committed) or both will probably have been published, explaining the ideas behind the proposal. After this, lawyers draft the proposal into a bill.

Most bills begin in the House of Commons, where they go through a number of stages:

#### First Reading

This is a formal announcement only, with no debate.

#### Second Reading

The House debates the general principles of the bill and, in most cases, takes a vote.

#### Committee Stage

A committee of MPs examines the details of the bill and votes on amendments (changes) to parts of it.

#### Report Stage

The House considers the amendments.

#### Third Reading

The amended bill is debated as a whole.

The bill is sent to the House of Lords, where it goes through the same stages. (If the Lords make new amendments, these will be considered by the Commons.)

After both Houses have reached agreement, the bill receives the royal assent and thus becomes an Act of Parliament which can be applied as part of the law.

## Parliamentary business

The basic procedure by which the Commons conducts its business is by debate on a particular proposal, followed by a resolution which either accepts or rejects the proposal. Sometimes this resolution just expresses a viewpoint, but most often it is a matter of framing a new law or of approving (or not approving) the government's plan to raise taxes or spend money in certain ways. Occasionally, there is no need to take a vote, but there usually is, and at such times there is a 'division'. That is, MPs have to vote for or against a particular proposal. They do this by walking through one of two corridors at the side of the House – one side for the 'Ayes' (those who agree with the proposal) and the other for the 'Noes' (those who disagree).

But the resolutions of the Commons are only part of its activities. There are also the committees. Some committees are appointed to examine particular proposals for laws, but there are also permanent committees whose job is to investigate the activities of government in a particular field. These committees comprise about forty members and are formed to reflect the relative strengths of the parties in the Commons as a whole. They have the power to call certain people, such as civil servants, to come and answer their questions. They are becoming an increasingly important part of the business of the Commons.

## The party system in Parliament

Most divisions take place along party lines. MPs know that they owe their position to their party, so they nearly always vote the way that their party tells them to. The people whose job is to make sure that MPs do this are called the Whips. Each of the two major parties has several MPs who perform this role. It is their job to inform all MPs in their party how they should vote. By tradition, if the government loses a vote in Parliament on a very important matter, it has to resign. Therefore, when there is a division on such a matter, MPs are expected to go to the House and vote even if they have not been there during the debate.

The Whips act as intermediaries between the backbenchers and the frontbench of a party ([Frontbenchers and backbenchers](#)). They keep the party leadership informed about backbench opinion. They are powerful people. Because they 'have the ear' of the party leaders, they can influence which backbenchers get promoted to the front bench. For reasons such as this, 'rebellions' among a group of MPs (in which they vote against their party) are very rare.

Sometimes, the major parties allow a 'free vote', when MPs vote according to their own beliefs and not according to party policy. Some quite important decisions, such as the abolition of the death penalty, allowing TV cameras into the Commons and the banning of foxhunting (see chapter 5) have been made in this way.



## The House of Lords

Most parliamentary systems have a second chamber. The British one is called the House of Lords. Like some other second chambers, the House of Lords has no real power and only limited influence. Although the Lords can delay a bill, they cannot stop it becoming law in the end, even if they continue to refuse it. Its role, therefore, is a consultative one. In the Lords, bills can be discussed in more detail than the busy Commons has time for – and in this way irregularities or inconsistencies in these proposals can be avoided before they become law. In addition, the Lords act as a forum for discussion, and can sometimes bring to attention matters that the Commons has been ignoring. Most importantly of all, it is argued, the Lords can act as a check on any governments which, through their control of the Commons, are becoming too dictatorial.

But who are the members of the House of Lords and how do they get there? Its name suggests that its members are aristocrats. In fact, only a very small proportion of them are there by hereditary right and even these are unlikely to be there for much longer. It took Britain a long time to reform this undemocratic aspect of its political system. Until 1958, all of the Lords were indeed aristocrats. Then the first step was taken. A law was passed which made it possible to award ‘life peerages’ through the honours system (see chapter 7). These gave people entitlement to sit in the Lords but not the children of these people. During the second half of the twentieth century, the life peerage system established itself as a means of finding a place in public life for distinguished older politicians who no longer wished to be as busy as an MP in the Commons but still wished to voice their opinions in a public forum. At the time of writing, four of the last six Prime Ministers, as well as hundreds of former ministers and other respected politicians, have accepted the offer of a life peerage. Political parties are, in fact, especially keen to send their older members who once belonged to the leadership of the party to the House of Lords. It is a way of rewarding them with prestige but removing them from the Commons, where their status and reputation might otherwise create trouble for the present party leader and party unity. Informally, this practice has become known as ‘being kicked upstairs’.

By the end of the twentieth century, so many life peers had been appointed that it was common for them to form a majority over the hereditary peers at most sitting of the Lords (since many aristocrats are not, of course, interested in politics). The next step was taken in 1999, when the number of aristocrats with the right to sit in the Lords was limited to 92 (about 15% of the total members). At the same time, the numbers of life-peerage appointments was increased.

At the time of writing, it is not clear what the next step will be. The problem is that, while almost everybody agrees that further reform is necessary, nobody can agree on the best way to compose the House of Lords. Many people believe members should be elected. But how?

### The Lords Spiritual

As well as life peers (and, at the time of writing, the remaining hereditary peers), there is one other kind of peer in the House of Lords. These are the 26 most senior bishops of the Church of England. (By tradition, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York are also given life peerages on their retirement.) Until 2009, there was also a group of ‘Law Lords’, who fulfilled the Lords’ role as the final court of appeal in the country. But this role is now in the hands of the Supreme Court (see chapter 11).

### How the House of Lords lost its power

In 1910, the Liberal government proposed heavy taxes on the rich. The House of Lords rejected the proposal. This rejection went against a long-standing tradition that the House of Commons had control of financial matters.

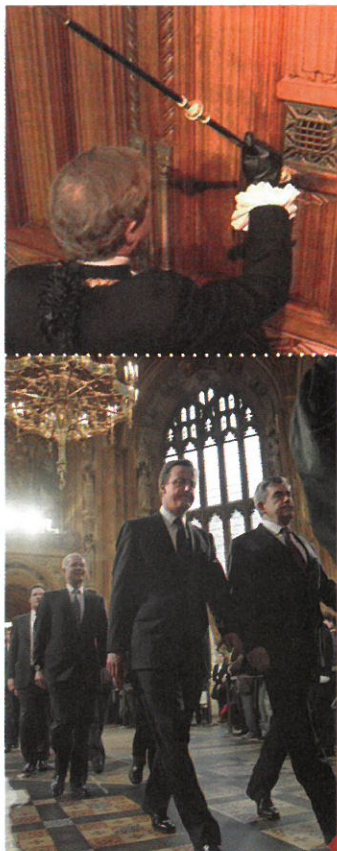
The government then asked the king for an election and won it. Again, it passed its tax proposals through the Commons, and also a bill limiting the power of the Lords. Again, the Lords rejected both bills, and again the government won another election. It was a constitutional crisis.

What was to happen? Revolution? No. What happened was that the king let it be known that if the Lords rejected the same bills again, he would appoint hundreds of new peers who would vote for the bills – enough for the government to have a majority in the Lords. So, in 1911, rather than have the prestige of their House destroyed in this way, the Lords agreed to both bills, including the one that limited their own powers. From that time, a bill which had been agreed in the Commons for three years in a row could become law without the agreement of the Lords. This was reduced to two years in 1949.



### The state opening of Parliament

These photographs show two scenes from the annual state opening of Parliament. It is an example of a traditional ceremony which reminds MPs of their special status and of their togetherness. In the first photograph, 'Black Rod', a servant of the Queen, is knocking on the door of the House of Commons and demanding that the MPs let the Queen come in and tell them what 'her' government is going to do in the coming year. However, the Commons refuses her entry. In the seventeenth century, Charles I once burst in and tried to arrest some MPs. Ever since then, the monarch has not been allowed to enter the Commons. Instead, the MPs agree to come through to the House of Lords and listen to the monarch in there. This is what they are doing in the second photograph. By tradition, they always come through in pairs, each pair comprising an MP from two different parties.



And how long should they stay as members? (There would be no point in simply replicating the model of election of MPs in the Commons.) It is widely believed that the value of the Lords lies in the fact that its members do not depend on party politics for their positions. Because they are there for life, they do not have to worry about losing their positions. This means they can take decisions independently, purely on the merits of a case. Indeed, it is noticeable that, since the hereditary element became so small, the Lords has been more assertive, more willing to challenge the decisions of the government-controlled Commons. So others argue that the life-peerage system should remain. This, however, raises the question of who appoints them. At present, they are appointed either on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, political parties or an independent body (set up in 2000) called the House of Lords Appointments Commission.

So the small hereditary element of membership of the House of Lords remains, a fascinating relic of older times. One last thing is worth noting. It is perhaps typically British that there has been no serious discussion about changing the name of the House of Lords. So, whatever happens in the future, the British second chamber will remain as a testament to tradition.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 In what ways do the seating arrangements in the House of Commons differ from those in the parliament of your country? Why are they different? What difference does this make?
- 2 When the Commons decide to vote, they do not vote immediately. Instead a 'division bell' rings throughout the Palace of Westminster, after which MPs have ten minutes in which to vote. Why?
- 3 Everybody in Britain agrees that the House of Lords needs further reform. How do you think it should be reformed?

### SUGGESTIONS

If you can, watch the late-night, light-hearted political discussion programme *This Week* on the BBC. Another programme worth watching is *Question Time*, which is a public debate and discussion modelled loosely after the real thing in Parliament. But if you want to see the real thing, there is a dedicated TV channel called Parliament Live.