



UK Parliament

CORRIDORS OF POWER UK

The objectives of this Guidance Note are as follows:

- To explain the workings of Parliament.
- To increase awareness of the roles and responsibilities of the different parliamentary actors.
- To explain the legislative process.
- To provide advice on influencing the political process.

PARLIAMENT

With its origins in the 13th century the United Kingdom's Parliament is one of the oldest representative assemblies in the world. Since the 14th century, parliamentary government in the United Kingdom (UK) has been based on a two-chamber system. The House of Lords (the upper House) and the House of Commons (the lower House) sit separately and are constituted on entirely different principles. The relationship between the two Houses is governed largely by convention, but is also defined, in part, by the Parliament Acts.

Between 1997 and 1998 the UK Parliament at Westminster devolved different powers to three bodies: the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the Northern Irish Assembly. These devolved institutions have power to enact legislation, although not in all spheres (for example, they cannot enact legislation on defence, foreign policy or national security).

PARLIAMENTARY CALENDAR

Each Parliament has a maximum duration of five years. At any time up to the end of this period a General Election can be held to establish a new House of Commons.

Parliament is divided into sessions, which are usually one year long. The State Opening of Parliament normally takes place in October or November. During this official ceremony the Queen makes a speech outlining the legislative priorities of the government during the coming session.

The main functions of Parliament are to:

- Make UK law.
- Provide, by voting for taxation, the means of carrying on the work of government.
- Protect the public and safeguard the rights of individuals.
- Debate the major issues of the day.
- Scrutinise government policy and administration, including proposals for expenditure.
- Examine European proposals before they become law.
- Hear appeals: the House of Lords is the highest Court of Appeal in the UK.

THE PARTY SYSTEM

The system of political parties, which has existed in one form or another since at least the 18th century, is an essential element of UK politics. For the past 150 years the UK Parliament has effectively worked as a two-party system, with one party forming the government of the day, and the other the opposition.

Members of the House of Commons are elected, usually in a General Election, which must take place at least every five years. The political party that wins the most seats (usually but not necessarily the party which gets the most votes in the General Election) or which has the support of a majority of MPs usually forms the government. The largest minority party becomes the official opposition. UK politics has been dominated, for more than 50 years, by two parties: the Conservatives and Labour.

House of Commons Timetable

Main Chamber

Monday: 2.30pm - 10.30pm

Tuesday and Wednesday: 11.30am - 7.30pm

Thursday: 11.30am - 6.00pm

Friday (selected dates only): 9.30am - 3.00pm.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday and Wednesday: 9.30am - 11.30am

and 2.00pm - 4.30pm

Thursday: from 2.30 to 5.30pm

House of Commons

Elected 7 June 2001

Total number of MPs: 659

Labour: 410

Conservative: 164

Liberal Democrat: 53

Current government majority: 165

House of Lords

Approx. 700 members

Bishops and Archbishops: 26

Hereditary Peers: 92

Membership under review

Seating arrangements in both Houses reflect the nature of the party system. Both debating chambers are rectangular in shape. At one end is the seat of the Speaker (in the House of Lords the Speaker is the Lord Chancellor and the seat is known as the 'Woolsack'), and at the other end a formal barrier, known as the 'Bar'.

Benches for the members run the length of the chamber, on both sides (*see below*). The government and its supporters occupy the benches to the right of the Speaker; the opposition and members of the other parties occupy those to the left. Leaders of the government and the opposition sit on the front benches, with their supporters - 'backbenchers' - sitting behind them. In the House of Lords there is also the Bishops' bench on the government side and a number of crossbenches for peers who do not wish to be associated with a political party.

THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT

The government is primarily responsible for arranging the business of both Houses. As the initiator of policy, it indicates which action it wishes Parliament to take, and explains and defends its position in statements and public debate.

THE OPPOSITION IN PARLIAMENT

The effectiveness of the party system in Parliament rests largely on the relationship between the government and the opposition parties. In general, the aims of the opposition are to:

- contribute to the formulation of policy and legislation by providing constructive criticism
- oppose government proposals it considers objectionable; seek amendments to government Bills
- put forward its own policies in order to improve its chances of winning the next General Election.



Debating Chamber, House of Commons

Legislation and parliamentary rules accord few official functions to the Leader of the opposition; in practice she or he, through control of the opposition whips, plays an important role in deciding, with the government, the business arrangements of the House of Commons.

THE ROLE OF THE WHIPS

Whips have an important role in party business within Parliament, particularly when the voting strengths of the main parties are similar, as in the 1992-1997 Parliament. When a vote on a major issue is scheduled the whips try to ensure that every member of their party turns out to vote.

The government chief whip is directly answerable to the prime minister. She or he attends the Cabinet and makes the day-to-day arrangements for the government's business programme.

The opposition chief whip receives advance notice of the government's business programme each week, and the government takes no final decision until after consultation with the opposition chief whip. The chief whips together constitute the 'usual channels', often referred to when the question of finding time for debating a particular issue is discussed.

THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The legislative process involves both Houses of Parliament and the Monarch. Legislation announced in the Queen's Speech has to pass through both Houses before being given royal assent. A government Bill may start in either House, although Bills that deal with finance must start in the House of Commons.

Bills are drafted by a team of lawyers in the Cabinet Office on the instruction of the government department concerned. A Bill may be preceded by a Green (i.e., consultative) or a White (i.e., a statement of policy) Paper, or it may simply be presented without any prior announcement. In recent years more Bills have been published in draft in order to allow for pre-legislative scrutiny.

Bills typically take weeks or months to complete their passage through Parliament. The legislative process for a government Bill originating in the House of Commons is outlined below:

FIRST READING - No debate

The government minister or whip responsible merely places a 'dummy' copy of the Bill on the table in the House. Shortly after the First Reading the Bill will be printed along with explanatory notes, which include a summary of the purpose of the Bill and its clauses.

SECOND READING - Debate on the principle of the Bill

The Second Reading is a debate on the main principle and objectives of the Bill. The report of the debate is published in Hansard. See Hansard Online at: www.parliament.uk/hansard/hansard.cfm.

COMMITTEE STAGE - Detailed clause-by-clause scrutiny

The Committee Stage is normally taken in Standing Committee (see box text) but sometimes as the Committee of the whole House. The Committee must consider each clause and schedule of the Bill, agreeing to or disagreeing with it. The Committee may also consider amendments to the Bill. Opposition amendments are rarely accepted although governments often table their own amendments if flaws in the Bill are shown up in Committee.

REPORT STAGE - Further opportunity to debate and amend

The government and those Members who were not involved in the Committee Stage are able to table further amendments. The House may reverse or amend changes made by the Standing Committee.

Standing Committees

- Scrutinise legislation line by line.
- House of Commons' committees usually comprise 15 - 20 members reflecting party composition of the House.
- Committee members selected by whips on the basis of interest, loyalty and availability.
- Standing Committees normally include at least one minister who is in charge of the Bill, and opposition spokespeople.
- Standing Committees sit on Tuesday and Thursdays.

THIRD READING - Final stage debate

No amendments may be made at this stage and debates on Third Reading are usually very short.

IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

Once a Bill has passed its Third Reading in the Commons, it is sent to the Lords. The process is similar although Committee Stage is normally taken on the floor of the House (not in Standing Committee) and amendments can be made at Third Reading stage.

AGREEING A TEXT FOR ROYAL ASSENT

The House that began the legislative process considers the other House's amendments. The Bill may travel backwards and forwards between the Houses several times as amendments are considered. A deadlock may be reached if each House insists on its own position without proposing some alternative amendment. The provisions of the 1911 Parliament Act mean the House of Lords can delay legislation but cannot block it indefinitely or insist upon amendments.

ROYAL ASSENT

Once a text has been agreed, the Bill is submitted for Royal Assent. The Queen must give her assent for a Bill to pass into law - such assent has not been withheld since 1707. Following Royal Assent the Bill becomes an Act - although the legislation may not come into force until a date specified in the legislation.

Private Legislation

Private Members Bills

- Bills introduced by backbenchers or private Members rather than by the government.
- 20 Members are chosen by ballot each session (over 400 Members usually enter the ballot).
- Those at the top of ballot are beset by pressure groups or may be asked to take on government legislation - known as a 'handout'.
- Little parliamentary time devoted, easy to oppose.
- Little chance of success.

Ten Minute Rule Bills

- Frequently not serious attempts at legislation.
- Used to highlight the need for legislative change or to test parliamentary opinion on a subject.
- Allows brief speech for and against the Bill.

LOBBYING MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Lobbying Members of Parliament (MPs) can be a very effective way of raising the profile of an issue or even of instituting policy or legislative change. In order to effectively lobby MPs it is important to understand the workings of Parliament and the entry points for lobbying.

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS (PQs)

MPs and Members of the House of Lords (peers) can 'table' questions to the government. These questions can be answered either orally or in writing. MPs and peers who are interested in your issue may table a question on your behalf. MPs must table oral parliamentary questions in advance. They can only table one question to one department at any one time. The list of questions is published in advance of the question time. Because of time constraints usually only half of the questions published actually receive an oral answer; the remainder receive written answers.

Tabling a Parliamentary Question

- Write to MP or peer, or call their researcher. Set out who you are, the information you need or the problem you have faced in getting it direct from Whitehall. Request that the attached PQ is tabled.
- In the case of an oral question offer to meet the MP or peer to brief them further.

Oral parliamentary questions have the advantage of allowing the MP to ask a supplementary question. This can be more specific than the opening question, and the minister will not have had prior warning of it. Oral parliamentary questions have the potential to embarrass the government and are more likely to attract media attention than written questions.

While parliamentary questions raise issues and attract media attention it is worth noting that the officials who draft the answers to parliamentary questions are trained to give little away. If you are seeking detailed information it may be better to write to the relevant department directly, at least in the first instance.

EARLY DAY MOTIONS (EDMs)

Early Day Motions are parliamentary petitions. They allow MPs to put their opinions on the record, and to canvass the support of others. Only Members of the House of Commons can sign EDMs. Members of the government or the opposition frontbenches will not usually sign EDMs.

EDMs are often used by pressure groups and NGOs. They can be useful in determining the level of support for an issue, but there is little prospect of EDMs being debated and they do not lead to legislation.

To have any influence with government an EDM needs a large number of signatories, cross-party support and the support of respected Members. Hundreds of EDMs are tabled every parliamentary session; only six or seven attract more than 200 signatures, but perhaps 70 or 80 EDMs achieve 100+ signatures.

ADJOURNMENT DEBATES/WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATES

Every day the last half-hour of the sitting is allocated to an adjournment debate; a backbench Member raises an issue, often a matter that is of interest to their constituency, and the responsible minister replies. The backbench member is chosen by ballot, except on Thursdays when the Speaker chooses from amongst those unsuccessful in the ballot.

Other Members may participate in these debates only with the agreement of the Member opening the debate and the minister.

THE ROLE OF SELECT COMMITTEES

Departmental Select Committees are the parliamentary bodies responsible for scrutiny of each government department. Select Committees examine 'the expenditure, administration and policy' of the relevant department and its associated public bodies (e.g., regulators and quangos).

Committees determine their own subjects of inquiry, gather written and oral evidence and report to the House. The government is obliged to respond to select committee reports and some reports are debated on the floor of the House. The prime minister meets with the chairs of the Select Committees (who together form the Liaison Committee) twice a year to answer questions.

Most of the 18 Commons Select Committees have 11 members. Chairs are chosen by the Committee members and have considerable influence over the committee work programme. Committees have their own staff, including a subject specialist who supports their work.

LOBBYING THE HOUSE OF LORDS

The House of Lords plays an important role in revising legislation and scrutinising the government's activities. Members of the House of Lords have a wide range of experience and provide a source of independent expertise. About two-thirds of the Members of the House of Lords are aligned with a political party. A distinctive feature of the Lords is the presence of crossbench peers who are not affiliated to any party, including 26 Bishops known as Lords Spiritual.

Some Members of the House of Lords are former Members of the House of Commons who have been elevated to the Lords in recognition of distinguished service in politics or because one of the political parties wishes to have them in the House.

People who have distinguished themselves in other areas of public life, such as industry, the trade unions, education, science, the arts, and local government, are often brought into the House of Lords. Many senior diplomats are awarded peerages when they retire, and consequently there is considerable interest in international issues in the Lords, including in issues that may be overlooked in the Commons.

House of Lords Timetable

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday: from 2.30pm until around 10.00pm
Thursday: 11.00am until lunch (adjournment for legal judgements to be taken) and then from 3.00pm until 7.30pm
Fridays (occasional sittings) from 11am onwards.

QUESTIONS AND DEBATES

Members of the House of Lords can question ministers and debate policy. Oral questions, called 'Starred Questions', can be asked each day. Four questions can be asked on Mondays and Thursdays and five on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. They allow ministers to be cross-questioned for about 30 or 40 minutes at a time. In addition 'Unstarred Questions' (mini-debates which last between 60 and 90 minutes) provide opportunities to raise issues of concern and have the minister respond. On Wednesdays general debates are held on topics suggested by backbench or crossbench peers. One Wednesday per month is set aside for two 'Short Debates' (maximum two and a half hours). Topics are selected by backbench or crossbench peers and are chosen by ballot.

Written questions have become increasingly popular over the last 20 years and over 4,000 written questions are asked each year.

COMMITTEES

House of Lords' committees are subject-focused. The two main committees are the European Union Committee and the Science and Technology Committee. A Constitution Select Committee and an Economic Affairs Committee were established in 2001. The House of Lords also appoints *ad hoc* committees to look at specific issues.

JUDICIAL ROLE

The House of Lords is the Supreme Court of Appeal for the United Kingdom in all civil and criminal cases, except Scottish criminal cases. Twelve Law Lords, who are life peers, carry out this function. The Law Lords also take part in the legislative work of the House.

POWERS OF THE LORDS

The powers of the House of Lords are limited by a combination of law and convention. The Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949 define the power of the Lords in relation to public Bills. The Lords has no role in Bills relating to taxation and public spending: Bills to raise taxes or authorise expenditure always start in the Commons and cannot be amended by the Lords.

The Lords can hold up a Bill it disagrees with for up to a year, but ultimately the elected House of Commons can reintroduce the Bill in the following session and pass it without the Lords' consent. Under the Salisbury Convention the Lords will not vote against a Second or Third Reading of a Bill that was mentioned in an election manifesto, thus ensuring that key government legislation can get through the Lords when the government of the day has no majority in that House.

REFORM OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS

The House of Lords Act 1999 removed the right of most hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House. An amendment to the Bill enabled 92 hereditary peers to remain in the House until it was fully reformed.

In 2001 the Labour government published its White Paper, 'House of Lords, Completing the Reform', which proposed a partly elected House and an end to rights of membership for the remaining hereditary peers. The White Paper was not well received and a cross-party committee was formed to come up with proposals. In February 2002 a vote was held on reform of the Lords and MPs failed to agree on any of the options presented to them. In May 2002, the Government announced a joint committee of both Houses to consider options for reform.

The committee began work in July 2002. Information on its work can be found at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/parliamentary_committees36.cfm

European Union Select Committee

The Committee was set up in 1974 to scrutinise and report on proposed European legislation. It involves over 70 peers and has six sub-committees:

- 1) Economic and Financial Affairs, Trade and External Relations
- 2) Energy, Industry and Transport
- 3) Common Foreign and Security Policy
- 4) Environment, Agriculture, Public Health and Consumer Protection
- 5) Law and Institutions (always chaired by a Law Lord)
- 6) Social Affairs, Education and Home Affairs

TOP TIPS FOR LOBBYING PARLIAMENT

1. HAVE A CLEAR OBJECTIVE

What is it that you want to achieve? Working with Parliament can help to raise the profile of an issue and get questions raised - but if you want to change a policy or legislation the power lies with the government.

2. DO YOUR RESEARCH

a) Draw up a target list of MPs and peers who may be interested in your issue

Start with members of relevant Select Committees, All Party Groups and Backbench Committees. Use the POLIS database (<http://www.polis.parliament.uk>) to identify parliamentarians who have asked questions, spoken in debates and signed parliamentary motions on your issue.

b) Do further research to identify a parliamentary champion(s)

Whilst a number of parliamentarians may potentially be interested in your issue - by researching further you can identify those who have demonstrated their commitment. Use the information sources listed at the end of this Guidance Note; have a look at their biographies and their backgrounds.

c) Be aware of what is going on in Parliament

Make sure that you are aware of parliamentary processes which are relevant to your issue - select committee inquiries, debates and questions, etc.

d) Make it easy for parliamentarians to help you

All of your communications should be concise and clear (letter under a page with supporting information attached if necessary). What are you asking them to do? Provide the appropriate tool: attach a draft question, letter to the minister, or EDM for them to consider.

3. USE EFFECTIVE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Sending briefing papers to 659 MPs and over 700 peers is not an effective use of resources. MPs receive around 20,000 letters a year and write 10,000. To ensure that your briefing doesn't end up in the bin make sure the parliamentarian could, potentially, be interested. Alternatively call the MP's researcher and alert them to the fact that the briefing or letter is in the post. Offer to email a copy. Researchers are an MP's gatekeeper - build relationships with them and you will make better progress.

Party conferences and local party speaker meetings can also be good opportunities to approach parliamentarians informally. If you have a meeting with a parliamentarian make sure you only take the time you need.

4. COMBINE WORK WITH PARLIAMENTARY, MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT TARGETS

MPs like good publicity and press attention. Journalists are more attracted to a story if they can get a quote from a parliamentarian. Be aware of the synergies. Remember members of the government are MPs too.



ABOUT BOND

BOND is the network of over 280 UK-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in international development and development education.

BOND aims to improve the extent and quality of the UK and Europe's contribution to international development, the eradication of global poverty and the upholding of human rights.

Training

This Guidance Note is based on BOND's 'Corridors of Power in the UK' training course, which is run twice yearly. For further information see: www.bond.org.uk

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The Guidance Notes Series aims to provide 'how-to' information for the development sector. This Guidance Note covers the UK parliamentary system. It was written by Jenny Ross, BOND Advocacy Officer.

Information Sources

Parliament Website
<http://www.parliament.uk>

Hansard Online
<http://www.parliament.uk/hansard>

POLIS (searchable parliamentary database)
<http://www.polis.parliament.uk>

Early Day Motion Database
<http://edm.ais.co.uk>

Epolitix - useful for tracking legislation, biographies, has an e-list for daily updates and agendas
<http://www.epolitix.com>

Guardian politics website
<http://www.politicsunlimited.co.uk>

RECOMMENDED PUBLICATIONS:

Dod's Parliamentary Companion - comprehensive information on MPs and Peers including biographies (but expensive)

Vachters Parliamentary Companion
Up-to-date basic information about UK Parliament, devolved institutions and Government.

House Magazine - the Palace of Westminster's in-house publication.

The Politics Guide to Political Lobbying by Charles Miller

TO PURCHASE PARLIAMENTARY PUBLICATIONS:

Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO)
<http://www.hmsso.gov.uk>

Politicos (political bookshop)
<https://www.politicos.co.uk>

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