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# Modernisation Committee

## 1 Establishment of the Modernisation Committee

On 25 July 2024, the House of Commons agreed to establish the Modernisation Committee, to “consider reforms to House of Commons procedures, standards, and working practices; and to make recommendations thereon”.<sup>1</sup>

The establishment of the Modernisation Committee followed a commitment in the Labour Party manifesto for the 2024 general election, which said that:

Labour will establish a new Modernisation Committee tasked with reforming House of Commons procedures, driving up standards, and improving working practices. The absence of rules on second jobs also means some constituents end up with MPs who spend more time on their second job, or lobbying for outside interests, than on representing them. Therefore, as an initial step, Labour will support an immediate ban on MPs from taking up paid advisory or consultancy roles. We will task the Modernisation Committee to take forward urgent work on the restrictions that need to be put in place to prevent MPs from taking up roles that stop them serving their constituents and the country.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc856–913](#)

<sup>2</sup> Labour Party, Change – Labour Party Manifesto 2024, [Serving the country](#)

The King restated the tasks of the Modernisation Committee in the King’s Speech on 17 July 2024, saying it would be “tasked with driving up standards, improving work practices and reforming procedures”.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.1

## The debate

In the debate on 25 July 2024, Lucy Powell, the Leader of the House of Commons, restated the manifesto commitment, saying “The Committee will be tasked with driving up standards and addressing the culture of this House, as well as improving working practices”.<sup>4</sup>

She then outlined how the Modernisation Committee would approach its work on reforms “to make Parliament more effective”. It would bring forward recommendations and respond swiftly to the views of the House:

It is intended to bring a more strategic lens to these matters and, where necessary, address the pace of change.

Lucy Powell said rather than cut across the important work of existing committees, it would “highlight interdependencies and facilitate closer working”. She described it as “a clearing house, drawing on all the good work of other Committees”.<sup>5</sup> She continued:

The Government want to build consensus for any reforms, and bring the House together by consulting widely. The deliberations of the Committee will be transparent and published, so that the thinking that has informed any recommendations for change is made clear to Members—a very important aspect of the Committee. I intend to listen to colleagues, regardless of their party affiliation, as we take this work forward, drawing on the diverse range of views and experiences represented in this House.<sup>6</sup>

Lucy Powell confirmed that existing committees, Procedure, Standards, Privileges and Administration, would have a “vital role to play” in the work of the Modernisation Committee. It would draw heavily on their recommendations.<sup>7</sup> In her winding-up speech, following representations from Chris Philp, Lucy Powell said that “On the whole, [it] is the intention and the hope” that the Modernisation Committee would invite relevant committees to prepare a report for the Modernisation Committee. She did not expect the Modernisation Committee to be doing or duplicating the work of other committees.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [HC Deb 17 July 2024 c41](#)

<sup>4</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c859](#)

<sup>5</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c859](#)

<sup>6</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c859](#)

<sup>7</sup> As above

<sup>8</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c912](#)

The value of the committee would be to speed up the implementation of change. Lucy Powell saw the committee as “a task and finish Committee”, taking a strategic look at recommendations from others.<sup>9</sup>

For the Official Opposition, Chris Philp, the Shadow Leader of the House, said they had no objection to the principle of the Modernisation Committee, and they would ensure proposals were carefully scrutinised. In relation to holding the government to account, Mr Philp highlighted existing mechanisms, such as Private Members’ Bills, Backbench Business Committee debates, and Westminster Hall debates. He hoped their effectiveness would not be undermined.<sup>10</sup>

He sought assurances that when Modernisation Committee work related to the work of another committee, that committee would report to the Modernisation Committee (see above); that views of the Speaker and deputy speakers would be taken into account; and that the Modernisation Committee would not usurp the functions of the House of Commons Commission.<sup>11</sup>

For the Liberal Democrats, Wendy Chamberlain also said it was important to ensure the Modernisation Committee did not supersede the work of other committees.<sup>12</sup>

Kirsty Blackman (SNP) described the Modernisation Committee’s remit as “incredibly woolly”. She said she would be more supportive if its remit was to modernise the House.<sup>13</sup>

Jim Shannon (DUP) cautioned that traditional practices should not be thrown away just because they were aged. Modernisation should be undertaken with “wisdom and sensitivity”; and “it must be for a clear purpose and not for ease of operation”.<sup>14</sup>

## 1.2

## Work Programme

Lucy Powell outlined plans for the committee’s initial work. She identified the following topics:

- MPs’ outside employment
- Holding the government to account – maximising the time available for scrutiny of the government’s legislative programme

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<sup>9</sup> [HC Deb 25 July c860](#)

<sup>10</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc865–866](#)

<sup>11</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c867](#)

<sup>12</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c870](#)

<sup>13</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c893](#)

<sup>14</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc896–897](#)

- Making Parliament accessible to all MPs
- Taking forward Paul Kernaghan’s recommendations on the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme.<sup>15</sup> (Paul Kernaghan’s review was published in May 2024.<sup>16</sup>)

Wendy Chamberlain welcomed plans to take forward Paul Kernaghan’s ICGS review and urged the Leader of the House to take forward recommendations from the Speaker’s Conference on the employment conditions of MPs’ staff.<sup>17</sup> (The Speaker’s Conference’s recommendations were published in July 2023.<sup>18</sup>)

Wendy Chamberlain also suggested the Modernisation Committee should revisit proposals from the Wright Committee on how the House determines the use of its time.<sup>19</sup>

In 2009, the Wright Committee was appointed after the MPs’ expenses scandal in the context of restoring trust. Among other things it recommended that the House should establish a House Business Committee to give the House more control over the scheduling of business. Recommendations to establish the Backbench Business Committee and to elect select committee chairs, made by the Wright Committee, were implemented but a House Business Committee was not established.<sup>20</sup>

Green MP Ellie Chowns welcomed the establishment of the committee. She suggested the committee should consider the space in the Chamber and called for all MPs to have their own seat. She asked for consideration to be given to the allocation of speaking time and for electronic voting to replace voting in division lobbies.<sup>21</sup>

Stella Creasy (Lab) supported called for implementing Paul Kernaghan’s review of the ICGS. She also called for work to make the House of Commons more family-friendly; and to ensure a gender-sensitive Parliament review happened.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc862–863](#) and [c912](#)

<sup>16</sup> UK Parliament news, [Parliament publishes latest independent review of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme](#), 13 May 2024

<sup>17</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc871–872](#)

<sup>18</sup> Speaker’s Conference on the employment conditions of Members’ staff, [Second Report](#) (PDF), 20 July 2023, HC 1714 2022–23

<sup>19</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c872](#)

<sup>20</sup> Select Committee on reform of the House of Commons, [Rebuilding the House](#) (PDF), 24 November 2009, HC 1117 2008–09

<sup>21</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc889–890](#)

<sup>22</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc907–908](#)

## 1.3

## Composition of the committee

The House agreed that the Modernisation Committee would have 14 members. This would comprise nine Labour MPs, three Conservatives and two Liberal Democrats.<sup>23</sup>

Lucy Powell said it was proposed that she would chair the committee; and she indicated that the Shadow Leader of the House would also sit on the committee.<sup>24</sup>

Alberto Costa, a member of the Standards and Privileges committees in the 2019 Parliament, could not believe that a committee that would consider standards matters, “even at a strategic level”, would not include lay members. He asked the Leader of the House to reconsider this.<sup>25</sup>

Kirsty Blackman said the size of the committee meant that no Northern Ireland MPs would be on it, nor any members from the smaller parties. She welcomed the Leader of the House’s commitment “about trying to ensure that all voices are heard”.<sup>26</sup>

In response to an amendment that the chairs of the Procedure, Standards, Privileges and Administration committees should be members of the Modernisation Committee, the Leader of the House said that chairs of relevant committees would be able to ‘guest’ on the committee.<sup>27</sup> Under Standing Order No 137A (1)(e), select committees have powers to invite members of other committees to attend meetings, and “at the discretion of the Chair, ask questions of witnesses or otherwise participate in its proceedings”.<sup>28</sup>

In response to calls for representation of the smaller parties, the Leader of the House committed to “regular meaningful engagement with any and all parties represented in this House and with Members who want to contribute”.<sup>29</sup> In her winding up speech, Lucy Powell commented that “Going bigger still would not bring the smaller parties into the mix, which is why I have made a very firm commitment to have ongoing dialogue and meaningful engagement with them”.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c911](#)

<sup>24</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c860](#) and [c911](#)

<sup>25</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc880–882](#)

<sup>26</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c893](#)

<sup>27</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c860](#)

<sup>28</sup> House of Commons, [Standing Orders – Public Business, 2024](#) (PDF), 23 May 2024, HC 829 2023–24, Standing Order No 137A

<sup>29</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 cc860–861](#)

<sup>30</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 2024 c911](#)

## 2

# Modernisation Committee in previous Parliaments

Following a manifesto commitment in its 1997 general election manifesto, the incoming Labour government set up a Modernisation Committee in 1997.

It was given the following remit:

To consider how the practices and procedures of the House should be modernised.<sup>31</sup>

The committee was reappointed at the beginning of the 2001 Parliament with the same remit.<sup>32</sup> It was also reappointed in the 2005 Parliament, with a slightly different remit:

To consider how the House operates and to make recommendations for modernisation.<sup>33</sup>

Before the Modernisation Committee was first appointed in June 1997, the government held a debate on “Procedure (Modernisation)”, on 22 May 1997.<sup>34</sup>

The 1997 manifesto commitment said:

We believe the House of Commons is in need of modernisation and we will ask the House to establish a special Select Committee to review its procedures. Prime Minister’s Questions will be made more effective. Ministerial accountability will be reviewed so as to remove recent abuses. The process for scrutinising European legislation will be overhauled.<sup>35</sup>

In the course of the 2005 Parliament, the Modernisation Committee ceased to meet; and neither the coalition government from 2010, nor Conservative governments from 2015 established a Modernisation Committee.

## 2.1

# The committee’s composition

Select committees of the House of Commons are generally committees of backbench MPs and most have a membership of 11. The Modernisation Committee, however, was larger than this with 15 members, and it was

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<sup>31</sup> [HC Deb 4 June 1997 cc500-518](#)

<sup>32</sup> [HC Deb 16 July 2001 cc88-88](#)

<sup>33</sup> Modernisation Committee, [The Legislative Process](#), 25 July 2006, HC 1097 2005–06

<sup>34</sup> [HC Deb 22 May 1997 cc901-941](#)

<sup>35</sup> Labour Party, *New Labour: because Britain deserves better*, 1997, p33

chaired by the Leader of the House of Commons. The committee also included the Shadow Leader of the House (except during 2001-2003 when Eric Forth declined membership of the committee) and a front-bench spokesperson from the Liberal Democrats. The committee has included the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the House, and the chair of the Procedure Committee. The committee's membership made its method of working different from others of the House.

Its first members were nominated in the same motion that appointed the committee on 4 June 1997.<sup>36</sup>

## 3 Procedures and practices changed by the Modernisation Committee, 1997–2010

### 3.1 Legislative process

The regular timetabling of bills in the House of Commons through the introduction of programming and the carry-over of public bills were both implemented following recommendations from the Modernisation Committee.

Public bill committees replaced standing committees and the regular practice of taking oral evidence from people with interest in or knowledge of the issues raised in bills was introduced as a result of the recommendations in the Modernisation Committee's July 2006 report on [The Legislative Process](#).<sup>37</sup>

The Modernisation Committee promoted pre-legislative scrutiny of draft bills.

### 3.2 Westminster Hall

The establishment of a second debating chamber was first proposed by the Modernisation Committee in a report on the Parliamentary Calendar in 1998.<sup>38</sup>

The Modernisation Committee's initial proposal was generally welcomed, and in response a further report was produced on "Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall". The report attempted to address the concerns voiced by

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<sup>36</sup> [HC Deb 4 June 1997 cc500-518](#)

<sup>37</sup> Modernisation Committee, [The Legislative Process](#), 25 July 2006, HC 1097 2005–06

<sup>38</sup> Modernisation Committee, [The Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals](#), 7 December 1998, HC 60 1998-99

Members and to come up with detailed proposals for implementation, initially on a trial basis.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.3 Sitting hours and the calendar of sittings

In 1997, the House sat from 2.30pm on Mondays to Thursdays, with an additional sitting on Wednesday mornings for backbench adjournment debates.

The now regular pattern of sittings commencing at 2.30pm on Mondays, 11.30am on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and at 9.30am on Thursdays, followed various trials of alternative times and reports from both the Modernisation Committee and the Procedure Committee.

The move to usually sit on Fridays to consider Private Members' Bills and the introduction of a "constituency week" in February<sup>40</sup> also originated with the Modernisation Committee.

Deferred divisions were introduced as a result of recommendations from the Modernisation Committee, with the aim of giving more certainty to the parliamentary timetable.

### 3.4 Select committees

The Liaison Committee made a number of recommendations about the operation of select committees late in the 1997 Parliament. The Modernisation Committee's major report in 2002,<sup>41</sup> brought forward proposals to change the way in which MPs were nominated to select committees and to enable more MPs to participate. However, the House rejected its proposals on nominations at the time. Some proposals, including the introduction of core tasks for select committees were proceeded with.

Later developments, like the election of chairs by the whole House, were proposed by the Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons ('Wright Committee') in 2009.

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<sup>39</sup> Modernisation Committee, [Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall](#), 13 April 1999, HC 194 1998-99

<sup>40</sup> Now the February recess

<sup>41</sup> Modernisation Committee, [Select Committees](#), 12 February 2002, HC 224-I 2001-02



## 3.5 The role of backbench MPs

The Committee considered the role of back bench MPs in the 2007 report, , [Revitalising the Chamber: the role of the back bench Member](#) (PDF).

Topical questions (and topical debates) were introduced, following the recommendations of this report.

## 3.6 Information for the public

Recommendations from the committee led to the development and expansion of educational facilities at Westminster and the improvement of visitor facilities more generally.

# 4 Assessments of the Modernisation Committee

In a commentary on parliamentary reform proposals in the 2024 general election manifestos, Professor Meg Russell, Director of the Constitution Unit at UCL, said that the Modernisation Committee (from 1997) was a “relatively controversial body”. It was “sometimes criticised as government-dominated” as it was chaired by the Leader of the House of Commons.<sup>42</sup>

In a book, *Parliamentary reform at Westminster*, Alexandra Kelso reviewed the work of the Modernisation Committee and other committees that were engaged in matters related to parliamentary practice and procedure.<sup>43</sup>

Much more recently, a study by the Constitution Unit has examined four different previous approaches to developing and delivering proposals for Commons reform:

- Government initiative
- Permanent backbench select committee
- Temporary backbench select committee

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<sup>42</sup> Meg Russell, “[Parliamentary reform in the 2024 party manifestos](#)”, The Constitution Unit Blog, 19 June 2024. Meg Russell was a special advisor to Robin Cook while he was Leader of the House of Commons and chair of the Modernisation Committee

<sup>43</sup> Alexandra Kelso, *Parliamentary reform at Westminster*, Manchester University Press, 2009

- Government-chaired select committee

In a blogpost the authors set out the goals of their report, its key findings and the implications for the next parliament. They found that major proposals for reform were developed by committees. Of the committees it studied, the Modernisation Committee (1997-2010) was most successful in getting its proposals implemented. While other committees struggled to get their proposals debated, “having the Leader of the House chair the Modernisation Committee made it more able to get support from government, and therefore to secure the necessary parliamentary time and votes for implementing its proposal”.<sup>44</sup>

They found “no clear evidence” that the Modernisation Committee’s proposals were “tailored to suit the interests of ministers over the rights of backbenchers or opposition parties”. But the Modernisation Committee was often “internally divided and externally divisive” with more votes in the committee and in the Commons Chamber, when its proposals were debated, than other committees. They thought this was because of the perception that the committee simply endorsed proposals which benefited the government.<sup>45</sup>

Their full report is available online:

- Thomas Fleming and Hannah Kelly, [Delivering House of Commons Reform: What Works?](#) (PDF), UCL Constitution Unit, June 2024

## 5

### Other committees that consider procedures and practices of the House of Commons

The [Procedure Committee](#) is appointed under standing orders to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of its public business.

The [Committee on Standards](#) is appointed under standing orders to consider any matter relating to the conduct of Members and recommending changes to the Code of Conduct for MPs.

The Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons (the ‘Wright Committee’) was appointed on 20 July 2009 until the end of the 2005 Parliament (April 2010). It had the following remit:

to consider and make recommendations on the following matters:

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<sup>44</sup> Tom Fleming and Hannah Kelly, “[Delivering House of Commons reform after the general election](#)”, UCL Constitution Unit Blog, 3 June 2024

<sup>45</sup> As above

- (a) the appointment of members and chairmen of select committees,
- (b) the appointment of the Chairman and Deputy Chairmen of Ways and Means;
- (c) scheduling business in the House;
- (d) enabling the public to initiate debates and proceedings in the House; and
- (e) such other matters as appear to the Committee to be closely connected with the matters set out above, and to report on these matters by 13 November 2009.<sup>46</sup>

The committee's report, [Rebuilding the House](#), was published on 12 November 2009.<sup>47</sup>

## 6 Further reading

A Commons Library research briefing, [Modernisation of the House of Commons 1997-2005](#), provides information on:

- the background to the establishment of the Committee and the Modernisation Programme
- the nature of the Modernisation Committee
- the key changes to the practices and procedures of the House of Commons during the 1997 and 2001 Parliaments
- themes emerging from the modernisation process and [then] possible future developments.

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<sup>46</sup> [HC Deb 20 July 2009 cc687-719](#)

<sup>47</sup> Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, [Rebuilding the House](#), 12 November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09

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