



Modernisation: Sitting Hours

Standard Note: SN/PC/2854

Last updated: 13 May 2005

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Following a number of experimental changes to the House of Commons' sitting hours, on 11 January 2005 the Modernisation Committee published a report which reviewed the experiments and outlined its recommendations for sitting hours. The Modernisation Committee's proposals broadly followed the experimental pattern of sitting hours, although it stressed the need to "restore Thursday to a full sitting day". It proposed doing so by recommending that the House sits one hour earlier on Thursdays. The Modernisation Committee also took into account the results of a Procedure Committee questionnaire on sitting hours, which was issued in January 2004.

The House debated the Modernisation Committee's report on 26 January 2005. The House accepted the need for the earlier start on Thursdays and agreed to continue sitting from 11.30am on Wednesdays. However, it rejected plans to sit from 11.30am on Tuesdays, instead it decided to revert to a 2.30pm start to business.

Therefore, from the beginning of the 2005 Parliament, the House will sit at the following times (the moment of interruption, rather than the rise of the House is quoted):

Monday	2.30pm – 10.00pm
Tuesday	2.30pm – 10.00pm
Wednesday	11.30am – 7.00pm
Thursday	10.30am – 6.00pm
Friday	9.30am – 2.30pm

Contents

A.	Introduction	3
B.	Thursday sittings – 1998-2002	4
C.	Wednesday morning sittings and Westminster Hall	4
D.	The 2003-2005 experimental hours	5
	1. Rationale for the changes	5
	2. Debate on the temporary arrangements	7
E.	Pressure for a review of the new sitting arrangements	7
F.	Reviewing sitting hours	10
	1. Procedure Committee review	10
	2. Short-term changes	12
	3. Taking private Members' bills on Tuesdays	12
	4. Modernisation Committee review	13
G.	The Modernisation Committee's 2005 Review of Sitting Hours	14
	Appendix – The Evolution of sitting hours since 1997	18

A. Introduction

From the beginning of the 2005 Parliament, the House will sit at the following times (the moment of interruption,¹ rather than the rise of the House is quoted):

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Wednesday	11.30am – 7.00pm
Thursday	10.30am – 6.00pm
Friday	9.30am – 2.30pm

These hours were agreed on 26 January 2005, when the House debated the Modernisation Committee's review of the sitting hours experiment.² Between January 2003 and the dissolution of the 2001-2005 Parliament on 11 April 2005, the Commons sitting hours had been experimental: they were governed by a Temporary Standing Order.

Since 1997, the Modernisation Committee has recommended four changes to sitting hours. First, in 1998, that the time of Thursday sittings should be brought forward – this was done, initially on an experimental basis but subsequently permanently. Secondly, from 1999-2000, that the morning sittings on Wednesdays should cease – they were replaced by opportunities to debate in Westminster Hall. Thirdly, that from January 2003 the time of sittings on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and the conclusion of business on Thursdays should be brought forward – again on an experimental basis. Fourthly, the Modernisation Committee recommended that, with one minor change – an earlier start on Thursdays, the experimental arrangements that were introduced in January 2003 should be made permanent.

Following the debate on 26 January 2005, the House did not support the Modernisation Committee's recommendations in their entirety: the House accepted the recommendation to continue with the arrangements for Wednesday sittings and accepted the proposal for an earlier start on Thursday but decided to revert to an afternoon start for sittings on Tuesdays – the situation before the experiment began.

This note traces the evolution of sitting hours since 1997 – a summary is given in the appendix. It outlines the debate that took place in connection with the changes to sitting hours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, which were much more contentious than the earlier changes. It reports on the reviews of sitting hours that the experiment prompted and the debate that followed the Modernisation Committee's review.

¹ i.e. the time at which the main business of the House is scheduled to finish; business, including the half-hour adjournment debate, can continue beyond this time

² Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Sitting Hours*, 11 January 2005, HC 88 2004-05

B. Thursday sittings – 1998-2002

In its report on *The Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals*, the Modernisation Committee reviewed the perceived defects of the existing parliamentary calendar and recommended three areas in which immediate change could be introduced. First it suggested advancing the start and finish of the sitting day on a Thursday, it also suggested introducing constituency weeks in February and October, and “Committee weeks” in September.³ The report stated the benefit would be “enabling most (though not all) Members to devote a full Friday to constituency business”. The change to Thursday Sittings was put into effect in January 1999 on a temporary basis until the end of the Session,⁴ following agreement in the House on 16 December 1998.⁵

In July 1999 the Modernisation Committee reported on the issue in order to assist the House with its decision later in the year. After seeking the views of the Chairman of Ways and Means and the Board of Management, the Committee recommended that the new Thursday sitting hours be extended for a further session.⁶ A further report on the issue in November 2000 recommended a further extension until the beginning of the next Parliament.⁷

C. Wednesday morning sittings and Westminster Hall

At the beginning of the 1997 Parliament, the House sat from 9.30am to 2.00pm on Wednesdays for private Members’ business, excluding private Members’ bills. These sittings were introduced as a result of the review of sitting hours conducted by a select committee, chaired by Michael Jopling. The Committee’s report was published in February 1992.⁸ However, the report’s recommendations were not implemented immediately. Temporary standing orders allowed an experiment to occur in the 1994-95 Session, and on 2 November 1995 new standing orders, making the Wednesday morning sittings permanent were agreed.

In its second report of 1998-99, the Modernisation Committee recommended that “the Wednesday morning sitting devoted to private Members’ business should be transferred to Westminster Hall”.⁹

The House agreed with the Modernisation Committee’s recommendation on 24 May 1999,¹⁰ and the first sitting in Westminster Hall took place on Tuesday 30 November 1999.¹¹

³ Modernisation Committee, *The Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals*, 7 December 1998, HC 60 1998-99, para 40

⁴ On Thursday 14 January 1999, the House met at 11.30am [HC Deb 14 January 1999 c423]

⁵ HC Deb 16 December 1998 cc986-1058

⁶ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Thursday Sittings*, 19 July 1999, HC 719 1998-99, para 16

⁷ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Thursday Sittings*, 6 November 2000, HC 954 1999-2000, para 6

⁸ Select Committee on Sittings of the House, *Report*, 18 February 1992, HC 20-I 1991-92

⁹ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall*, 13 April 1999, HC 194 1998-99, para 24

Towards the end of the 1999-2000 Session, the Modernisation Committee reported on the experimental sittings in Westminster Hall, and with some minor changes to the timing of sittings and the orientation of the chamber agreed that the experiment should continue into the subsequent Parliament.¹² The House concurred.¹³

As part of its wider reform programme, whilst Robin Cook was Leader of the House, the Modernisation Committee recommended that the sittings in Westminster Hall should become a permanent feature.¹⁴ The House agreed.¹⁵ However, sitting times in Westminster Hall have changed subsequently because of the changes to sitting hours in the main Chamber. Full details of the evolution of sitting times in Westminster Hall are provided in the Appendix.

D. The 2003-2005 experimental hours

In 2001, Robin Cook as Leader of the House made more fundamental proposals to changing the sitting times of the House. In his Memorandum to the Modernisation Committee he wrote that:

28. Sitting hours that related more closely to working practices in the outside world would enable Members of Parliament to better fulfil their duties to constituents and their families. However, the core objective of reform of sitting hours is not to make life easier for MPs, but to make the time they spend in Parliament more effective.¹⁶

In its second report of the 2001 Parliament, the Modernisation Committee put forward proposals, based on those of Robin Cook, for the House to sit at 11.30am with main business finishing at 7pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, with main business finishing at 6pm on Thursdays. Constituency work would take precedence on Fridays with the practice of Government motions on the adjournment on Fridays being discontinued.¹⁷

1. Rationale for the changes

In introducing its proposals for the temporary change in the sitting hours, the Modernisation Committee noted that sitting arrangements were not set in stone:

¹⁰ HC Deb 24 May 1999 cc81-133

¹¹ HC Deb 30 November 1999 c1WH

¹² Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Sittings in Westminster Hall*, 13 November 2000, HC 906 1999-2000

¹³ HC Deb 20 November 2000 cc22-104

¹⁴ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Modernisation of the House of Commons: A Reform Programme*, 5 September 2002, HC 1168-I 2001-02, paras 97-99

¹⁵ HC Deb 29 October 2002 c832

¹⁶ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Modernisation of the House of Commons: A Reform Programme for Consultation*, 12 December 2001, HC 440 2001-02

¹⁷ The full background to the proposals contained in the Modernisation Committee's report is given in Library Research Paper 02/41, *Modernisation of the House of Commons: Sitting Hours*, see: <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2002/rp02-041.pdf>

There is nothing sacrosanct about the times of sitting of the House. They have changed over history to accommodate shifts in social custom and business practice.¹⁸

The Committee argued that for any changes “the important consideration is not whether they will be more convenient for MPs but whether they will enable MPs to do their job more effectively”.¹⁹ It then identified a number of problems that arose because the House did not sit “until well into the afternoon”:

The problem with the traditional times of sitting is that major events such as statements, Prime Minister's Questions, or opening speeches come quite late in the normal working day. As a result parliamentary events do not set the day's agenda of public debate as often as they should, but frequently respond to an agenda that has already been set before the House meets. At the other end of the day the principal vote in the Commons comes at night. The consequence is that the key votes in the House of Commons cannot be adequately reported on the same day or be covered in most editions of the morning papers on the next day.²⁰

The Committee made the following recommendations:

- We recommend that on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday the House should sit at 11.30 a.m. for oral questions.²¹
- We recommend that main business should end on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 7.00 pm. On Thursdays main business should end at 6.00 pm which would better enable Members to travel that evening to their constituencies. We recommend that sitting hours on Mondays remain as at present in order that Members have good time in which to travel down from their constituencies and that the same sitting hours should apply on the first day back after a recess if that should be a Tuesday or Wednesday.²²
- We recommend that committees and Westminster Hall should not meet during Question Time or statements.²³
- We recommend that the facilities of the House, such as the library and the catering services, should continue to be available in the evenings for Members.²⁴
- We recommend that constituency work should take precedence on Fridays and the practice of Government motions on the adjournment on Fridays should be discontinued.²⁵

¹⁸ Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Modernisation of the House: A Reform Programme*, 5 September 2002, HC 1168 2001-01, para 54

¹⁹ *Ibid*, para 55

²⁰ *Ibid*, para 57

²¹ *Ibid*, para 60

²² *Ibid*, para 63

²³ *Ibid*, para 65

²⁴ *Ibid*, para 66

²⁵ *Ibid*, para 67

2. Debate on the temporary arrangements

Before the Modernisation Committee's proposals were voted upon, an amendment proposed by Greg Knight to introduce the following sitting hours, was negated by 441 votes to 94:²⁶

Tuesday	9.30am – 1.00pm and 2.00pm – 7.00pm
Wednesday	9.30am – 1.00pm and 2.00pm – 7.00pm
Thursday	9.30am – 1.00pm and 2.00pm – 6.00pm

Tuesday

The House agreed to meet at 11.30am with the moment of interruption at 7.00pm by 274 votes to 267.²⁷

Wednesday, Thursday and Friday

In a single motion, the House agreed to meet at 11.30am with the moment of interruption at 7.00pm on Wednesday; to meet at 11.30am with the moment of interruption at 6.00pm on Thursday; and to “not sit on any Friday other than those on which private Members' bills have precedence”. These measures were agreed by 311 votes to 234. However, before they were agreed, an amendment, tabled by Chris Mullin, to leave the arrangements for Wednesday unchanged was negated by 265 votes to 288.²⁸

E. Pressure for a review of the new sitting arrangements

Following the introduction of the experimental sitting hours in January 2003, the subject was raised several times in the House, in Business Questions and Questions to the Leader of the House, as well as in written questions. Phil Woolas, the Deputy Leader of the House acknowledged that there were strongly held opinions for changing the hours, and also for retaining them:

In October last year, a majority of Members voted to alter the sitting hours so that the House now sits from 11.30 am on Tuesday and Wednesday. The Standing Orders were changed for the rest of this Parliament, which will allow us a sufficient period to make a considered judgment on the effect of the changes.

My right hon. Friend is aware that some Members have difficulty with the new hours, but that there is strong opinion on both sides.²⁹

²⁶ *Votes and Proceedings*, 29 October 2002

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ HC Deb 2 December 2003 c15W

In the 2003-04 Session, Early Day Motion (EDM) 262 called for adjustments to the existing sitting arrangements in the light of experience:

That this House notes that the revised sitting hours and related arrangements have now been in place for 12 months; believes that there is now sufficient experience of the new arrangements to enable the House to judge what adjustments would be appropriate to enable the business of the House to be conducted more effectively; and calls for an urgent review of the reforms.

By the end of the Session, it had attracted 243 signatures. A similar EDM in the previous session (EDM 1759) attracted 220 signatures.

In the 2002-03 Session, an earlier motion, EDM 607, noted that “the business of the House has been adversely affected” by the change in sitting hours and called for a review. It attracted 191 signatures. An amendment to EDM 607, which welcomed “more normal working hours”, acknowledged that there were problems with the arrangements and asked the House of Commons Commission to address the problems rather than revert to the previous sitting hours. The amendment attracted six signatures.

The subject was also debated in an half-hour Adjournment Debate on 27 February 2004.³⁰

Some of the problems associated with the change in hours were described in *The Times*:

Many MPs say they are now unable to drop their children off at school, undermining claims that the new hours are family-friendly. Members of select committees, which monitor Whitehall departments, also complain that their meetings clash with statements or debates in the Chamber.³¹

The Times also reported:

The extent to which the change would affect the working week in the Commons was not anticipated. The parliamentary week had always been short, with MPs travelling back from their constituencies on Mondays in time for evening votes. Fridays were also rarely business days, so if the Thursday night vote was lightly whipped MPs could head off that day.

With PMQs no longer a Thursday draw, MPs started to absent themselves from the chamber. "The whole tenor of the House of Commons changed," says Moncrieff. "John Major put it well to me. He said that Thursday is now like a Friday and Friday like a Saturday in the House. That's absolutely true.

"MPs bugger off after Question Time. A lot don't come in Monday, are around on

³⁰ HC Deb 27 February 2004 cc589-594

³¹ “MPs hanker after a return to the good old days”, *Times*, 5 January 2004

Tuesday and go home Wednesday afternoon. You get run down in the rush of MPs leaving. The weekend starts on Wednesday afternoon."³²

However, other press coverage has highlighted the problems of reverting to the previous hours:

... Harriet Harman, the solicitor-general, has written to [Peter Hain] warning that parliament would be a laughing stock if the clock were put back. It's a view shared by the majority of the parliamentary Labour Party's women's committee which discussed the matter last month.

...

Meanwhile two women MPs who do not want to be identified yet have privately said they would resign if the hours are made more unsocial again.³³

The Independent reported a much higher figure, saying that "several ministers and MPs have threatened to stand down from Parliament if the Commons votes to scrap its new family-friendly hours".³⁴

Harriet Harman was supported by Patricia Hewitt, who told *The Guardian*:

Late night politics, and the yah boo that goes with it, puts off a lot of potential women candidates, and the wider public. They just think it is a life that they don't want to be part of.³⁵

The Leader of the House, Peter Hain, has also reported that he had received "no representations from outside Parliament in favour of the House reverting to its former hours".³⁶

Writing in *The Table* (the journal of the Society of Clerks-at-the-Table), George Cubie, Clerk of the Modernisation Committee (at the time of writing), made the following observations:

... Earlier rising was seen by some as a test case for bringing the House into the twenty-first century. Others saw it as an attempt further to limit opportunities for parliamentary debate, although in reality the total sitting hours of the House would be little affected by the new proposals. Some argued that time would be used less efficiently by those Members who maintained their main homes far from Westminster and who could not get home on evenings when the House rose much earlier than in

³² Damian Whitworth, "Once it was open all hours, now the weekend starts on Wednesday", *Times*, 11 March 2004

³³ Jackie Ashley, "The retro rebels who spell disaster for democracy", *Guardian*, 6 January 2004

³⁴ Andrew Grice, "Ministers would quit if child-friendly hours were ended", *Independent*, 8 January 2004

³⁵ Patrick Wintour, "Don't bring back yah boo politics, warns Hewitt: Late night sittings must be resisted", *Guardian*, 3 March 2004

³⁶ HC Deb 6 November 2003 c774W

the past. It was predicted that the House would lose its vitality if Members regularly left the building much earlier.

...

It was on that basis that the new sitting hours were brought in when the House met in January. For both Members and staff the changes have had a considerable impact. While some were evidently delighted with a regular earlier end of proceedings other complained about the greater intensity of work, about diary clashes and the difficulties caused by meetings of select committees, standing committees and the Westminster Hall sitting overlapping and causing particular difficulty when votes in the House itself interrupted committee work.

... It remains to be seen whether the new sitting hours which were proposed on an experimental basis until the end of the present Parliament, will remain unchanged for as long as that.

Some claim to have noticed real gains, apart from getting to their beds at an earlier hour. Ministerial statements in the House, previously given at 3.30pm, are now made at 12.30pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays as well as on Thursdays and as a result seem to have received better media coverage.³⁷

He concluded that:

It is too soon to reach a considered verdict on the changes, but not too soon to judge that they will remain controversial for some time to come.³⁸

F. Reviewing sitting hours

1. Procedure Committee review

Before Christmas 2003, the Procedure Committee announced that it would issue a questionnaire to canvass views on the “experimental earlier sitting hours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays”.³⁹

The Procedure Committee published the results of its survey on 30 March 2004.⁴⁰ It received a total of 377 responses to its questionnaire but based its analysis on 368 named replies (accounting for 57 per cent of the 651 Members eligible to reply – it excluded the Speaker and his Deputies, and those Members who had not taken the oath). The Committee summarised its main conclusions:

³⁷ George Cubie, “Changing Times”, *The Table*, Volume 71, 2003, pp85-86

³⁸ *Ibid*, p86

³⁹ Procedure Committee press notice no 1 Session 2003-04, *New Inquiry: Programming of Legislation*, 11 December 2003

⁴⁰ Procedure Committee, *Results of Sitting Hours Questionnaire*, 30 March 2004, HC 491 2003-04

- There is a small overall majority for reverting to the previous times on Tuesdays;
- There is no overall majority for any of the three options for Wednesday, although 57% of respondents chose either the second or the third option (both involving starting at 11.30 am);
- There is some, but not much, support for meeting at 11.30 am and taking business after 7 pm, 13% favouring this on Tuesdays and 17% on Wednesdays (some of whom insisted that it would have to be unwhipped business);
- Most (55% of all respondents, but two-thirds of those who answered the particular question) did not find an 8.55 am start to standing or select committees to be convenient, and 47% (63% of those who replied) would support a 9.25 am start.⁴¹

The Procedure Committee also recommended that, in its wide-ranging review of sitting hours, the Modernisation Committee (see below) should take into account the following points:

- There does not appear to be a single option which will achieve a large amount of cross-party support, although a possible compromise would be to change back to the previous hours on one day (presumably Tuesday);
- In considering hours, it is essential to consider not only the Chamber but also when committees meet (even accepting that this depends partly on the wishes of individual committees) and other calls on Members' time;
- As we mention above, not many other jobs involve a heavy workload in two places hundreds of miles apart, and it is not surprising that a working pattern which would suit the average office is unlikely to suit the House of Commons;
- Decisions should be taken in full knowledge of the implication for staff working patterns and enough notice should be given for these to be changed, if necessary;
- Using Tuesday or Wednesday evenings for extra business (e.g. private Members' bills, transferred from Fridays) would require more staff and would be dependent on the time concerned being regularly available (as it is not at the moment).⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid*, para 6

⁴² *Ibid*, para 13

2. Short-term changes

On the day that the Procedure Committee's questionnaire was issued, the Leader of the House, Peter Hain, announced that he would "consult on a series of common sense alterations to our current arrangements".⁴³ In a letter to all Members, he asked for "other suggestions for changes that could be accommodated forthwith".

Mr Hain's statement during Business Questions provoked a considerable reaction, with more support for the experimental sitting hours being made than hitherto. Mr Hain gave an indication of some of the issues that he was likely to tackle ahead of the full review of the arrangements that had to take place before the end of the Parliament. He highlighted the sitting times of standing committees and the requirements for access for constituents:

... I am concerned about the aggravation caused by early sitting times and other issues—including the fact that hon. Members have not been able to bring constituents into the Chamber after the House has risen in the sometimes relatively early evening, and the fact that Members with constituencies well outside London, such as myself, have not been able to bring constituents to the House for line of route tours in the same numbers as before because they cannot get here early enough.⁴⁴

He considered that EDM 262 had been a "call for a review, not for a reversal" and that it would be possible to find "a new consensus that meets all people's concerns".⁴⁵ He hoped that the "aggravating issues" could be addressed "quite quickly".⁴⁶

However, no changes were made to the sitting hours between Peter Hain's announcement and the publication of the Modernisation Committee's report on *Sitting Hours* in January 2005.

3. Taking private Members' bills on Tuesdays

During Business Questions, on 8 January 2004, Peter Pike supported the experimental hours but asked whether debates on private Members' bills could take place on Tuesday evenings instead of Fridays to allow all Fridays to be constituency days.⁴⁷ He subsequently tabled an Early Day Motion to this effect, which by the end of the 2003-04 Session had attracted 110 signatures.⁴⁸

Mr Hain made the following response to a further request for moving private Members' bills to Tuesday evenings:

⁴³ HC Deb 8 January 2004 c403

⁴⁴ HC Deb 8 January 2004 c404

⁴⁵ HC Deb 8 January 2004 c407

⁴⁶ HC Deb 8 January 2004 c409

⁴⁷ HC Deb 8 January 2004 c410

⁴⁸ Early Day Motion 652, 2003-04

My hon. Friend and others have put to me the interesting suggestion that we could liberate all Fridays and consider private Member's Bills on Tuesday evenings. Arithmetically speaking, we would require 22 Tuesday evenings to have time equivalent to that on the Fridays on which we sit. The suggestion will no doubt be considered during the Modernisation Committee's review.⁴⁹

During questions to the Leader of the House on 26 October 2004, Mr Hain was pressed to extend Tuesday sittings until 10pm to allow debate on private Members' bills and to eliminate the need for Friday sittings; and both to extend the current pilot scheme to allow new Members to take the final decision after the election, and to allow the House to make the decision as soon as possible.⁵⁰

4. Modernisation Committee review

In respect of the longer term review of sitting hours, Mr Hain acknowledged that it would be more complex. He wanted the review to be able to take account of the Modernisation Committee's "exercise to discover how Westminster can be better connected to the average citizen", an exercise which would "go on for some months".⁵¹ And in response to a question from Sir Nicholas Winterton, the chairman of the Procedure Committee, he identified some of the complexities:

... I have a copy of his excellent survey in front of me, which will be dispatched to hon. Members today. I am glad that he is conducting the survey because it will provide an important background to the Modernisation Committee's review. I have identified at least four options in the letter that I have dispatched today to all hon. Members: first, that we should revert to the old hours; secondly, that the new hours should stand; thirdly, that adjustments should be made to improve the new hours, including Committee sitting times; and, fourthly, that the House should sit until 10 pm, as previously, on Tuesdays, but that we should keep the early hours on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Those are not the only options but they show the complexity of the issue. We need to take a bit of time to consider it, and his survey will help us to achieve that.⁵²

In the meantime, during the course of its inquiry into *Connecting Parliament with the Public*, the Modernisation Committee asked a panel of journalists for their views on the change in sitting hours. George Pascoe-Watson of *The Sun* thought that the new hours suited "most people in the press gallery". Elinor Goodman, the Political Editor of *Channel 4 News*, said that "it could not be better", given her 7.00pm deadline. Peter Riddell of *The Times* thought that one result was "better scrutiny" because journalists had longer to think about and analyse issues. Michael White of *The Guardian* agreed and highlighted the benefits of earlier statements for evening papers. However, Elinor Goodman noted one caveat: people were

⁴⁹ HC Deb 8 January 2004 c415

⁵⁰ HC Deb 26 October 2004 cc1290-1294

⁵¹ HC Deb 8 January 2004 cc404-405

⁵² HC Deb 8 January 2004 c412

tending “to slip away from the Commons” on Thursdays which reduced the pool of Members available for interviews later in the week.⁵³

During the summer of 2004, a couple of articles reported on the submissions that individual Members had made to the Modernisation Committee’s inquiry. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that “three of New Labour’s most influential women have launched a Cabinet campaign to prevent a return to late-night sittings in the Commons, complaining that they would no longer be able to eat out with friends, read, or go to the cinema”.⁵⁴ *The Independent* billed the issue as a “battle between the sexes” in the Cabinet.⁵⁵

In the *Guardian*, on 6 January 2005, Jackie Ashley argued that “Parliament does not belong to the plotters and anoraks: if we care about who represents us, then the hours MPs work are crucial”. She argued that “hours and conditions shape the kind of people who do the job, which in turn shapes how the job is done. We are actually talking about how well parliament works for us in the decade ahead”. She acknowledged the traditional aspects of the working arrangements in the House, but compared them to life in other professions.⁵⁶

Paul Tyler wrote to the *Guardian*, in the wake of Jackie Ashley’s article, arguing that “our overriding concern must not just be to make our daily timetable more family-friendly, but to make it more accessible and intelligible to those who send us to parliament, and to improve the quality of our product”. He contended that “since we introduced more sensible hours for the Commons chamber, there has been a noticeable improvement in the quality of information and explanation of key debates and divisions”.⁵⁷

G. The Modernisation Committee’s 2005 Review of Sitting Hours

According to the temporary standing orders that were agreed in October 2002, the experimental sitting hours for Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays would have effect “until the end of the Parliament”.⁵⁸ Unless these arrangements were extended or amended, the House would revert to the previous sitting hours at the beginning of the next Parliament.⁵⁹

⁵³ Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Connecting Parliament with the Public – Minutes of Evidence 24 February 2004*, [Uncorrected transcript], HC 368-I, 2003-04, Q 46

⁵⁴ Benedict Brogan, “Women fight late nights for MPs”, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 June 2004

⁵⁵ Andrew Grice and Colin Brown, “Straw and Hewitt clash in public over Commons hours”, *The Independent*, 31 July 2004

⁵⁶ Jackie Ashley, “Parliament does not belong to the plotters and anoraks: if we care about who represents us, then the hours MPs work are crucial”, *The Guardian*, 6 January 2005

⁵⁷ Paul Tyler, “Benefit of MPs’ new hours”, [Letter], *The Guardian*, 11 January 2005

⁵⁸ *Standing Orders of the House of Commons – Public Business*, 2003 (2), HC 3 2003-04, p144

⁵⁹ This contrasts with the arrangements for sittings in Westminster Hall: an initial experiment lasted for one Session (1999-2000); then on 20 November 2000, the experiment was extended to last ‘from the next Session of Parliament until the end of the first Session of the next Parliament. On 29 October 2002, the arrangements for sittings in Westminster Hall were made permanent.

The Modernisation Committee published its recommendations on sitting hours on 11 January 2005 (and they are outlined in the table in section A). In reaching its conclusions, the Committee received written submissions from more than 100 Members, from the Leader of the House, from the House authorities and from staff of the House. It took oral evidence from Members; the Clerk of the House and the Director of Finance and Administration; House staff; and from the Chairman of Ways and Means and two members of the Chairmen's Panel.⁶⁰

It proposed retaining the 11.30am to 7.00pm sitting arrangements for Tuesdays and Wednesdays. The Committee expected that its recommendation was likely to be more contentious in respect of Tuesday than Wednesday. The Committee also reported that "Thursday has, to some extent, ceased to be a full working day". It concluded:

... we believe that it should be a priority for the House to restore Thursday to a full sitting day.⁶¹

The Committee considered various approaches to find an additional sitting hour on Thursdays. It dismissed the moment of interruption reverting to 7.00pm and moving the Business Question to another day. It recommended that the House should sit an hour earlier (at 10.30am) on Thursdays.⁶²

The Committee also considered the implications of its recommendations on the meeting times of select and standing committees, and Westminster Hall. It reflected on the fact that September sittings had not been an "unqualified success", and suggested that it should be possible for Members to table questions during a two week period in September 2005 although the House would not be sitting. It recommended that the Leader of the House should table a motion to this effect.⁶³ Such a motion has not been tabled by the Leader of the House.

The House debated the Modernisation Committee's report on 26 January 2005. Peter Hain, the Leader of the House, tabled a motion to amend the House's Standing Orders to effect the Modernisation Committee's recommendations. In addition, Phil Woolas, the Deputy Leader, tabled a series of amendments to permit votes on whether the House should revert to sitting from 2.30pm-10.00pm on Tuesdays.

Peter Hain gave the following explanation of the motions that he and Phil Woolas tabled:

The House agreed to our current hours in October 2002 by a narrow margin. Many Members have always been strongly opposed to the change and others have not liked

⁶⁰ Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Sitting Hours*, 11 January 2005, HC 88 2004-05

⁶¹ *Ibid*, para 26

⁶² *Ibid*, paras 26-30

⁶³ *Ibid*, paras 42-46

how it has worked in practice. It was my aim as Leader of the Commons to try to find a consensus, and in the past 18 months the Modernisation Committee has taken extensive evidence from Members of Parliament, parliamentary staff and other interested groups such as the Lobby journalists. We were also helped by the Procedure Committee's survey last spring and I am grateful for that. However, no consensus was achievable. Opinion remains divided, with the principal point of difference being the hours on Tuesday.

The motion is in line with the Modernisation Committee's recommendation. It looks discouragingly complex, but its purpose is simple: to make permanent our current hours on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, to bring forward the start of the sitting to 10.30 am on Thursday and to allow Standing Committees to sit an hour earlier in the afternoon. An explanatory memorandum, which sets out exactly how Standing Orders would be changed, has been made available.

My hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House has tabled amendments to the motion, which would return Tuesday to the old hours—2.30 pm to 10 pm—as on Monday. Those amendments have been tabled to assist the House to come to a clear decision, but both the Deputy Leader and I shall vote against them.⁶⁴

Oliver Heald, the Shadow Leader of the House, put forward an argument for returning to a 2.30pm start to business on Tuesdays:

... whereas under the old hours it was possible to complete one's Committee work and still be in the Chamber for most of the debate, under the current hours it is not. That is why the Chamber is empty on Tuesdays, as I am about to explain.

If we take yesterday as an example, in the morning, 200 Members from all parties were involved in Standing Committees, Select Committees, all-party groups and the busy programme in Westminster Hall. In the afternoon, 350 Members were engaged in Committee activities and all-party groups. In addition, MPs' private meetings were booked in the W Rooms and elsewhere in the Buildings. We know that there are 59 Cabinet Committees, although we are never told when they sit, but I bet that some of them are on Tuesdays. If we add to that external meetings, launches by all parties, particularly in this busy period, lobbies, constituents visiting Members, constituency correspondence, necessary telephone calls and all the rest, the fact is that there is a great deal of bunching, clashing and difficulty on a Tuesday. At one time, one could finish Committee, hope to have lunch and still go to the debate, or finish Committee in the afternoon and hope to catch most of the debate in the main Chamber, now one cannot.

⁶⁴ HC Deb 26 January 2005 c329

The Procedure Committee questionnaire prompted a good response. It showed that less than a third of Members, 31 per cent., said that they wanted to keep the current Tuesday hours. More than half, 52 per cent., wanted to return to 2.30 to 10. Thirteen per cent. wanted a very long day starting at 11.30 and ending with business after 7. Overall, 65 per cent. wanted the House to sit on Tuesday evenings. The same was not true for Wednesdays and Thursdays, when morning sittings were considered more useful, and of course, normally, no Standing Committees sit on Wednesdays.

To request three days of the week when the House sits in the mornings, and two days when it does not, is not unreasonable. It is not a request for a return to old hours but a call for a balanced week.⁶⁵

In speaking to the amendments tabled by Phil Woolas, George Howarth (who had tabled EDMs in support of reviewing the sitting hours) argued that a consensus in sitting hours did exist but that it was not shared by the Modernisation Committee:

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House on a genuine effort to see whether consensus could be forged. The only criticism I make is that, having found out where that consensus was, the Modernisation Committee made a recommendation locating it somewhere else entirely. There is a consensus—it is just not one that the Committee agrees with. The Procedure Committee report more fully and accurately reflected where the consensus lies. I have signed the amendments that, with lead amendment (a), would restore Tuesday sittings to a 10 o'clock finish.⁶⁶

At the end of the debate the House voted for Phil Woolas' amendment, that is to sit at 2.30pm on Tuesdays, by 292 votes to 225. It then went on to agree the amended motion without a further division.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Ibid* cc337-338

⁶⁶ *Ibid* cc343-344

⁶⁷ *Ibid* cc327-386

Appendix – The Evolution of sitting hours since 1997

a) The Chamber

	Sitting hours at the beginning of the 1997 Parliament	Thursday sitting experiment 1999-2002	Experimental sitting hours from 2003-2005	Proposed permanent arrangements (January 2005)	Sitting hours from the beginning of the new Parliament
Monday	2.30pm – 10.00pm	2.30pm – 10.00pm	2.30pm – 10.00pm	2.30pm – 10.00pm	2.30pm – 10.00pm
Tuesday	2.30pm – 10.00pm	2.30pm – 10.00pm	11.30am – 7.00pm*	11.30am – 7.00pm*	2.30pm – 10.00pm
Wednesday	2.30pm – 10.00pm	2.30pm – 10.00pm	11.30am – 7.00pm*	11.30am – 7.00pm*	11.30am – 7.00pm*
Thursday	2.30pm – 10.00pm	11.30am – 7.00pm**	11.30am – 6.00pm	10.30am – 6.00pm	10.30am – 6.00pm
Friday	9.30am – 2.30pm	9.30am – 2.30pm	9.30am – 2.30pm	9.30am – 2.30pm	9.30am – 2.30pm

* if a Tuesday or Wednesday was the first day of sitting after a recess, Monday hours would apply

b) Westminster Hall

	1999-2000 Session	2001-2002 Session and November to December 2002	January 2003 to April 2005	Proposed permanent arrangements (January 2005)	Sitting hours from the beginning of the new Parliament
Tuesday	10.00am-1.00pm	9.30am-2.00pm	9.30am-11.30am and 2.00pm-4.00pm	9.30am-11.30am and 2.00pm-4.00pm	9.30am-2.00pm 9.30am-11.30am
Wednesday	9.30am-2.00pm	9.30am-2.00pm	and 2.00pm-4.00pm	and 2.00pm-4.00pm	and 2.00pm-4.00pm
Thursday	2.30pm-5.30pm	2.30pm-5.30pm	2.30pm-5.30pm	2.30pm-5.30pm	2.30pm-5.30pm