



## Parliamentary reform – a brief overview

Standard Note: SN/PC/05848

Last updated: 31 January 2011

Author: Richard Kelly

Section Parliament and Constitution Centre

---

Between 1997 and 2010, much reform of the House of Commons was initiated by the Modernisation Committee, which was chaired by the Leader of the House of Commons. However, proposals for reform were also put forward by the Procedure Committee and the Liaison Committee; and in 2009 by the Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons. The Reform Committee was appointed in the wake of the expenses scandal. Its terms of reference were to bring forward proposals on select committee membership and on scheduling business in the House. Some of those proposals were agreed to and necessary Standing Order changes were implemented before the general election. Other changes were agreed to but Standing Order changes were left to the new Parliament.

Since the general election, the Modernisation Committee has not been re-appointed. However, the Procedure Committee considers the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business. Additionally, the Liaison Committee considers general matters relating to the work of select committees; and since early in the current session, the Backbench Business Committee (recommended by the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons) has been choosing the subject of debates for approximately one day each week.

This note briefly reviews committees that have (or have had) a role in developing reform proposals, then it briefly reviews recent reform proposals that have been implemented or are underway but not fully implemented. Finally it notes legislation before Parliament this Session that is likely to affect how the House of Commons operates.

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

# 1 Committees

The **Modernisation Committee** was unusual for a select committee in that it was chaired by a Cabinet member, the Leader of the House of Commons. However, such a link between the Committee and the Government allowed for Government approval of recommendations from the Committee before they went before the House.

Among others the Committee brought forward proposals that were subsequently implemented:

- to change the House's [sitting hours](#);
- to introduce the systematic [programming](#) of Government bills;
- to allow public bills to be [carried over](#) from one parliamentary session to the next;
- to [defer divisions](#);
- to replace standing committees on bills with evidence-taking [public bill committees](#);
- to introduce additional salaries for select and general committee chairs.<sup>1</sup>

The **Procedure Committee** is chaired by a backbencher (elected by the House, since 2010). In the past its reports and recommendations were only debated if the Government found time to debate them. Some of its ideas were taken forward by the Modernisation Committee and from time to time it reviewed the outcomes of the impact of changes made as a result of Modernisation Committee recommendations.

The **Liaison Committee** (the chairs of select committees) is given a number of functions by Standing Orders but also acts as a forum for select committee chairs. In the 1997 Parliament the Committee brought forward a number of proposals to strengthen select committees. Some of these ideas were taken forward by the Modernisation Committee after initial Government reluctance.

The **Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons** (the Wright Committee) was established in the wake of the expenses scandal. It was appointed in July 2009 and required to report by the end of the 2008-09 Session. Its report, [Rebuilding the House](#) was published in November 2009. The House debated the Committee's report in February and March 2010, and agreed to implement a number of its recommendations. Some but not all the necessary changes to Standing Orders were agreed before the general election.<sup>2</sup>

In June 2010, following the general election, the House agreed to establish a **Backbench Business Committee** (as recommended by the Wright Committee).<sup>3</sup> The Committee determines the business in the House on days appointed by the Government for backbench business. The Committee has provided time for general debates; for debates on substantive motions; for a statement following the publication of a select committee report; a debate on

---

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Library Research Paper, [Modernisation of the House of Commons 1997-2005](#), RP 05/46, 14 June 2005

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Library Standard Note, [The Report of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, Rebuilding the House](#), SN/PC/5294; House of Commons Library Standard Note, [Reform of the House of Commons: Decisions taken on 22 February and 4 March 2010](#), SN/PC/5368

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Library Standard Note, [Reform of the House of Commons: the establishment of a Backbench Business Committee](#), SN/PC/5269; House of Commons Library Standard Note, [The Backbench Business Committee](#), SN/PC/5654

motions to change Standing Orders, following a report from the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Before the current session, the Liaison Committee, the Procedure Committee and the Wright Committee had to rely on the Government bringing forward motions to debate their recommendations and providing time to do so.

As well as parliamentary committees, organisations such as the [Hansard Society](#) campaign for parliamentary reform.

## 2 Current inquiries, past inquiries and current reform proposals

The **Procedure Committee** is currently undertaking inquiries into ministerial statements and into sitting hours and the parliamentary calendar. The Committee is also [monitoring unsatisfactory and late answers to written parliamentary questions](#).

Although many of the recommendations from the Wright Committee have been implemented, its proposals for a House Business Committee to assemble a draft agenda to put to the House in a weekly motion are still to be implemented. Sir George Young, the Leader of the House of Commons, has said that:

... we must not lose sight of the progress that we want to see made in the third year of this Parliament on a House business committee. The creation of a House committee-looking at both the scheduling of Government and Back-Bench time as a single entity-will be better able to balance the time more effectively between debates and scrutiny.<sup>4</sup>

Proposals for changes to the way in which petitions are presented to the House of Commons were made by the Procedure Committee in the past. In the Coalition Agreement, the Government said that:

We will ensure that any petition that secures 100,000 signatures will be eligible for formal debate in Parliament. The petition with the most signatures will enable members of the public to table a bill eligible to be voted on in Parliament.<sup>5</sup>

David Heath, the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, provided some further information on debates on petitions in response to a parliamentary question on 20 January 2011.<sup>6</sup>

In the previous Parliament, the Procedure Committee [reviewed the election of the Speaker](#) and suggested some changes. They were never considered by the House. Since then, the Deputy Speakers were elected by the whole House and the procedures adopted may be further considered.

In November 2010, Caroline Lucas, the first Green Member of Parliament and former Member of the European Parliament, issued [The Case for Parliamentary Reform](#). Following that report she made two applications to the Backbench Business Committee (BBCOM) for a debate on parliamentary reform – ultimately succeeding in obtaining a 3-hour debate in Westminster Hall on 3 February 2011.

In her second appearance before the BBCOM, she asked for a whole day's debate in the Chamber and suggested that a range of issues would be debated:

---

<sup>4</sup> HC Deb 15 June 2010 c782

<sup>5</sup> HM Government, [The Coalition: our programme for government](#), May 2010, p27

<sup>6</sup> HC Deb 20 January 2011 cc1005-1006

... the issues that I would envisage being covered in such a debate include ways of increasing the accountability of the Executive to the legislature, electronic voting, the holding over of Divisions and a mechanism to record abstentions. There were lots of different proposals in my report, and I know that other Members all have a key issue that they would like to see when it comes to modernising this place and reforming the way in which we work.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 Legislation affecting Parliament

Two bills currently before the House of Lords – the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* and the *Fixed-term Parliaments Bill* – could both have implications for how the House of Commons operates, with fewer Member and with more certainty about the date of general elections.

A draft House of Lords Reform Bill is expected “early this year”.<sup>8</sup>

The Government is also planning to introduce a mechanism to allow constituents to recall Members of Parliament. On 18 January 2011 the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, outlined progress:

The Government will bring forward proposals to allow the recall of Members of Parliament: The coalition agreement stipulates that we want to introduce a recall mechanism, as exists in parts of north America and elsewhere, for those parliamentarians who have committed wrongdoing. It is important that it should not be a completely arbitrary mechanism; it should be shown that serious wrongdoing has been committed. We have recently seen various serving or former MPs in court, with one having been convicted and been handed down a prison sentence, and the public have been reminded that they do not want to be left powerless when they see such wrongdoing occurring. They do not want to wait until the next general election to have their say; they want to be able to force a by-election themselves. We will come forward with the detail of our ideas on how to do that shortly. I hear what my hon. Friend says about wanting the mechanism to be extended to other bodies immediately, but I hope that when he sees our proposals, he will recognise that we are taking a significant step in favour of giving people that recall power.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Backbench Business Committee, *Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on 18 January 2011*, Q15

<sup>8</sup> HC Deb 18 January 2011 c715W

<sup>9</sup> HC Deb 18 January 2011 c687