



BRIEFING PAPER

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House Business Committee

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Summary

In November 2009, the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (the Wright Committee) recommended the establishment of a House Business Committee to “assemble a draft agenda to put to the House in a weekly motion”.

On 4 March 2010, the House endorsed the establishment of a House Business Committee in the next Parliament (the 2010 Parliament).

The Coalition Agreement committed the Government “bring forward the proposals of the Wright Committee for reform to the House of Commons in full” and said that “A House Business Committee, to consider government business, will be established by the third year of the Parliament”. Early in the current Parliament, ministers confirmed this intention and answered questions on the remit, operation and composition of the House Business Committee. However, in 2013, the Government decided not to bring forward proposals.

In the Mid-Term Review of the Coalition Agreement (January 2013), the Government noted that the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee was undertaking an inquiry into the implementation of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons reforms, “which the Government will engage with as usual”.

In May 2013, Andrew Lansley, Leader of the House of Commons, told the Committee that he did not see the possibility of consensus in establishing a House Business Committee because of the diversity of views on function and composition. He had set a number of tests to evaluate options for such a committee but had not identified a proposal that met them.

In its July 2013 review of the impact of the Wright reforms, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee put forward a proposal for a House Business Committee. In its December 2013 response, the Government said that it did not believe that a consensus could be built around the proposal; and told the Committee that, given the absence of consensus, it did not plan to pursue the establishment of a House Business Committee at the time. This remained the Government’s view in July 2014.

On 9 July 2015, Dr Thérèse Coffey, the Deputy Leader of the House, told the House that the Government had no intention of bringing forward proposals to establish a House Business Committee.

There is a separate Standard Note on [The Backbench Business Committee](#) (SN/PC/5654).

1. Recommendations of the Reform Committee

In July 2009, the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons was appointed, among other things, to consider “scheduling business in the House”.¹ The Committee was also known as the Wright Committee, after its chairman, Tony Wright.

The Reform Committee’s report, *Rebuilding the House*, was published on 24 November 2009.² The Reform Committee recommended that backbench business should be organised by a Backbench Business Committee, responsible for all business which was not strictly ministerial. That committee would then join with the representatives of the Government and Opposition in a House Business Committee which would be obliged to come up with a draft agenda for the week ahead. This agenda would then be put to the House for its agreement.³

Business Motion

The Reform Committee argued that the House should determine its own agenda, and therefore a motion should be put to the House on its business on a set day and time each week. The motion would:

- set out the basic details of the agenda in the House for the week ahead, including the next Thursday in Westminster Hall;
- be available for inspection by Members by the middle of the previous day;
- be open to amendment, subject to the Chair’s powers of selection;
- be put formally to the vote after the elapse of a period set out in Standing Orders, such as 45 minutes;
- if an amendment were selected, give rise to a debate with specific speaking time limits following the 45 minute question and answer session, and would if need be end in a non-deferrable decision.⁴

Although it would be possible to divide on the motion, there was no reason why there should as a rule be a vote on it, as it would have been subject to wide discussion and have been seen in draft as the Committee also recommended that a draft agenda for the second week should also be announced at the same time as the formal agenda

¹ Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, [Rebuilding the House](#), 24 November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09, para 95

² Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, [Rebuilding the House](#), 24 November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09

³ For more information see Library Standard Note SN/PC/5294, [The Report of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons: Rebuilding the House](#)

⁴ Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, [Rebuilding the House](#), 24 November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09, para 169

motion. The motion would take the place of the current Business Questions.

Backbench business

The Committee recommended that backbenchers should schedule backbench business.⁵ The Committee argued that a Backbench Business Committee should be established:

...it is in our view time for Members of the House, through a committee of their elected colleagues, to take some responsibility for what the House debates, when and for how long; and also for what it does not wish to debate, either at all or at its current length.⁶

Later in the report, the Committee looked at the time available for the Backbench Business Committee to fill.⁷ They stated that from the figures available, one day a week could be devoted to backbench business, leaving enough time for ministerial business; and the Committee considered various options available.⁸

Ministerial and Opposition Business

The Committee stated that:

Ministers should continue to have first call on House time for Ministerial business, meaning Ministerial-sponsored primary and secondary legislation and associated motions, substantive non-legislative motions required in support of policies and Ministerial statements on major policy issues.⁹

The Committee also recommended that Opposition parties should continue to have a pre-emptive right to their fixed number of days, to be spread evenly through a session, but that there was a case for Opposition parties to be given more say on when they can take a day or half day. In addition, the Committee suggested that a wider range of business could be taken on such days. Lastly, on Opposition Days, it was recommended that the subjects of Opposition Day motions should be laid down with at least two days' notice.¹⁰

A House Business Committee and a Backbench Business Committee

The Reform Committee, after reviewing the needs of backbenchers, Government, Opposition and select committees to have opportunities to secure debates on the floor of the House, set out proposals for a House Business Committee "which would assemble a draft agenda to put to the House in a weekly motion".

The Committee rejected three models:

- a single Business Committee deciding all business;

⁵ *Ibid*, para 176

⁶ *Ibid*, para 178

⁷ *Ibid*, p63-64

⁸ The Backbench Business Committee was established on 15 June 2010. For further information, see House of Commons Library Standard Note, [The Backbench Business Committee](#), SN/PC/5654

⁹ *Ibid*, para 182

¹⁰ *Ibid*, paras 188-190

- the existing system with a Backbench Business Committee bolted on; and
- a House Business Committee with two sub-committees (a backbench business sub-committee and government business sub-committee).

Its preferred solution was to have two committees: a House Business Committee and a Backbench Business Committee:

... The task of assembling a draft agenda to put to the House should be undertaken by a unified House Business Committee comprised of representatives of all parts of the House with a direct interest: backbenchers, Government and Opposition. The members of this committee would comprise the elected members of the Backbench Business Committee, together with frontbench Members nominated by the three party leaders. We would expect the Leader and shadow leaders to be among these nominees. **The House Business Committee should be chaired by the Chairman of Ways and Means (the Deputy Speaker), who would have been elected by the House as a whole to that office with this function partly in mind. It would have a secretariat combining the House officers who support the Backbench Business Committee and the Government officials who currently support the usual channels.**¹¹

The Committee reported that "The single greatest cause of dissatisfaction which we have detected with current scheduling of legislative business in the House arises from the handling of the report stage of government bills".¹² It envisaged a House Business Committee being "a forum for agreeing the length of time to be devoted to a report stage" and that it would "decide where, if at all, knives should fall bringing debate to an end on each group of selected new Clauses and amendments".¹³

¹¹ *Ibid*, para 200

¹² *Ibid*, para 109

¹³ *Ibid*, paras 115-116

2. Implementing the Reform Committee's recommendations: Labour

On 4 March 2010 the House of Commons agreed that a Backbench Business Committee should be established to schedule non-ministerial business in time for the new Parliament. The House also approved the establishment of a House Business Committee during the course of the next Parliament. Although the original Government motion did not mention the House Business Committee, during the course of her speech, Harriet Harman, the Leader of the House of Commons, announced that she would support an amendment endorsing the establishment of a House Business Committee.¹⁴

The House agreed, after the motion was amended, among other things that:

[That this House] approves the establishment during the course of the next Parliament of a House Business Committee comprising the backbench business committee and representatives of Government and Opposition which, while guaranteeing that the Government has the time and first choice of dates to get its legislative programme through, and to make whatever statements it wishes, would improve scheduling of business to ensure more effective scrutiny of legislation at Report Stage and consideration of Lords Amendments, ...¹⁵

On 11 March Members of the Reform Committee tabled motions on the Remaining Orders and Notices section of the Order Paper in order to give effect to the resolution of the House on the Backbench Business Committee, and to set a timetable for the establishment of the House Business Committee. On 15 March the Committee published a report, *Rebuilding the House: Implementation*, which set out the explanation for the proposed Standing Order changes.¹⁶

The Labour Government published their proposed Standing Order changes on 25 March. The Standing Order changes were not brought to the House for a decision before the dissolution in April 2010.

¹⁴ HC Deb 4 March 2010 c1066

¹⁵ HC Deb 4 March 2010 c1099

¹⁶ Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, [Rebuilding the House: Implementation](#), 15 March 2010, HC 372 2009-10

3. Reform Committee's recommendations: Coalition response

The Coalition Agreement between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties stated that the new Government would implement the recommendations of the Wright Committee "in full – starting with the proposed committee for management of backbench business" and committed to establishing a House Business Committee "by the third year of the Parliament":

We will bring forward the proposals of the Wright Committee for reform to the House of Commons in full – starting with the proposed committee for management of backbench business. A House Business Committee, to consider government business, will be established by the third year of the Parliament.¹⁷

On 15 June 2010, the House agreed motions to establish the Backbench Business Committee.¹⁸ During the course of the debate, both Sir George Young, the Leader of the House, and David Heath, the Deputy Leader of the House, confirmed that the Government intended to establish a House Business Committee. Sir George said that:

In implementing one part of the Wright report, it is important not to undermine what another part of the same report says. In addition, the Back-Bench business committee is only half of the picture, and 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.¹⁹

David Heath, in closing the debate, also confirmed that "of course we firmly intend to move to a House business committee within three years. That will mean that we have a totally different way of managing the House's business, which will be a good thing".²⁰

¹⁷ HM Government, [The Coalition: Our Programme for Government](#), May 2010, p27

¹⁸ HC Deb 15 June 2010 c842

¹⁹ HC Deb 15 June 2010 cc781-782

²⁰ HC Deb 15 June 2010 c833

4. Review of the options for a House Business Committee

After making those commitments, the Government was asked about establishing a House Business Committee on a number of occasions. It provided responses to questions about the timetable for establishing the Committee; about its remit and operation; and on its composition (see Appendix B). In the summer of 2012, the House was told that a House Business Committee would be introduced in the 2012-13 Session.²¹

On 13 December 2012, the Political and Constitution Reform Committee announced that it would review the impact of the Wright reforms (i.e. reforms proposed by the Committee on Reform of the House of Commons in 2009) and issued a call for written evidence.²²

Then shortly afterwards, the Government published a mid-term review of the Coalition Agreement. It set out the commitments made in May 2010 and alongside each noted “What we have done”:

Commitment	What we have done
We will bring forward the proposals of the Wright Committee for reform to the House of Commons in full – starting with the proposed committee for management of backbench business. A House Business Committee, to consider government business, will be established by the third year of the Parliament.	The Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry into the implementation of the Wright Reforms, which the Government will engage with as usual.

Source: HM Government, [The Coalition: together in the national interest – Mid-Term Review – Programme for Government Update](#), to end 2012, p92

In January 2013, during an oral evidence session in connection with a separate inquiry into “Ensuring Standards in the Quality of Legislation”, the Leader of the House was asked about the commitment in the Coalition Agreement to a House Business Committee:

Q282 Chair: Wanting to ensure that things are dealt with before the end of the Parliament-and it is now a five-year Parliament-and keen to make sure that the Coalition ticks off a lot of the commitments that it has made to the public, one of the key things that has been raised with me by Members of the Committee was that, the other day, when the mid-term review was published, there was a mention of the creation of a House business committee, which should apparently, according to the pledge, have taken place by the coming May. It has not quite happened yet, but will happen-it is being held up because this Committee is

²¹ HC Deb 10 July 2012 c272

²² Political and Constitution Reform Committee news release, [Committee announces new inquiry – Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright reforms](#), 13 December 2012

having a look at the concept. I just needed to make clear to you, Andrew-I will drop you a line about this, obviously-that the Committee would not want to be the excuse for the Government not meeting its Coalition pledge to deal with this issue in a timely way and create a House business committee as it promised to do.

Andrew Lansley: But I hope the Committee's expectation, which I welcome, would be, looking at the Wright Committee recommendations and reviewing them-substantial progress has clearly been made through the Backbench Business Committee on giving Members of the House considerably extended opportunities to bring forward debates of a kind that are not at the behest of Government but at the behest of Backbench Members. That has clearly substantially improved that. It therefore seems perfectly reasonable to look at the Wright Committee recommendations in the light of the experience of those changes. We have made progress. The question is, how can we add value to that? I would not want to do things that pre-empt and negate the purpose of your further look at what this might consist of.

Chair: I can guarantee you, Andrew, that we will move with great expedition on this issue, so that you are enabled, if you wish, to meet the Coalition promise of bringing something forward before 10 May 2013. That will be a matter for Government, whether it wishes to meet those promises or not, but this Committee will not stand in your way and will not be an excuse for inaction, which I am sure we can explain at greater length in writing.

Andrew Lansley: Very good-I look forward to hearing from you.²³

In written evidence to the Committee, Mr Lansley outlined some tests which a House Business Committee would need to meet in order to be able to operate effectively:

I have identified a number of tests which any such committee needs to meet in order to be able to operate effectively and add value to our existing arrangements. For example, any committee needs to be able to guarantee to provide Government control of its legislative programme; respect the remit of the Backbench Business Committee; take into account the views of all parts of the House without becoming unwieldy in size; co-ordinate business with the House of Lords; and retain the flexibility to change the business at short notice in response to fast-moving events. In that context, I am continuing to work on proposals.²⁴

Then on 16 May 2013, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee took oral evidence from Andrew Lansley in connection with its inquiry on the impact of the Wright reforms. In his opening statement, Andrew Lansley noted that:

Back in January, I said I believed the proposed Business Committee should be able to operate effectively and add value to our current arrangements. As you know, I set a number of tests I thought would help us to evaluate different options. Since January I have given the matter further detailed consideration, including on a visit to the Scottish Parliament, and canvassed the

²³ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Ensuring Standards in the Quality of Legislation: Evidence given by Rt Hon Andrew Lansley MP, Leader of the House of Commons, and Adam Pile, Cabinet Office, Thursday 10 January 2013](#), [Corrected Transcript of oral evidence] HC 74-vii, Q282

²⁴ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright Reforms*, Volume II, 18 July 2013, Ev w2

views of colleagues across the House. In doing that, I have not been able to identify a proposal that meets those tests, nor have I had suggested to me a means of doing so. Such is the diversity of views on the composition and role of a House Business Committee, I do not at the moment see the possibility of establishing the level of consensus necessary for a proposal to have a realistic chance of success. I wanted to tell you upfront that I do not have any proposals to give you today—ones that would meet the tests that I believe are required to be met before a House Business Committee can be established. Equally, I am afraid I cannot say that I am able to proceed with the establishment of a House Business Committee by the third year of this Parliament, as has been our intention.²⁵

In response to a later question, he indicated that it had been difficult to assess how the House Business Committee would operate while “still trying to understand what the impact of the Backbench Business Committee is”:

There is a very simple reason for that. It is because it was immediately apparent, with the establishment of the Backbench Business Committee, that the relationship between the Backbench Business Committee and the House Business Committee, in whatever form it was established, would be instrumental to the question of its effectiveness. It was actually very difficult. To be fair to my predecessor, the idea that he could have shaped a House Business Committee while still trying to understand what the impact of the Backbench Business Committee is and how it works was not practical. We have simply arrived at a point where what I am expressing to you is a practical proposition. We have looked very carefully at trying to ensure that the House Business Committee adds to the effectiveness and the value of what we do here. I just do not see at the moment how we can do it and I have looked at a range of mechanisms for how it might be done.²⁶

He noted, however, that the Government would continue in its commitment to pursue the principle of a House Business Committee:

... the Coalition programme commitment to the establishment of the House Business Committee in the third year of Parliament will not be met. From my point of view it is not the abrogation of the commitment to pursue the principle of a House Business Committee, but what I am saying is we are now exercising a reality check and recognising we are not in a place to do this yet. In that sense I am looking for further guidance, not least from the report of this Committee.²⁷

4.1 Political and Constitutional Reform Committee proposals

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee’s review of the impact of the Wright reforms was published on 18 July 2013. The

²⁵ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The impact of the Wright Reforms – uncorrected transcript of oral evidence, 16 May 2013](#), HC 82-ii 2013-14, Q276

²⁶ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The impact of the Wright Reforms – uncorrected transcript of oral evidence, 16 May 2013](#), HC 82-ii 2013-14, Q285

²⁷ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The impact of the Wright Reforms – uncorrected transcript of oral evidence, 16 May 2013](#), HC 82-ii 2013-14, Q297

Committee highlighted the principles behind the Wright Committee recommendations that there should be a House Business Committee and noted that:

Wright also made an important distinction between “Ownership of the time of the House” and “responsibility for sponsoring or promoting the business before the House”. Thus, the Wright Committee said “There is a strong case for regarding all time as the House’s time. It is not the Government that seeks a debate but the House: what the Government needs are the decisions which enable it to carry out its programme”.²⁸

It then considered the degree of control the Government exercised over the House of Commons, noting that some, particularly front benchers, “saw virtues in the current system”. It concluded that:

65. Despite all the recent advances, it was clear from our evidence that the Commons is as far away as ever from implementing the basic Wright principle that all time should be regarded as “the House’s time”.

66. The present procedure for setting the agenda for most of the House’s business is inadequate, remaining in clear violation of the principles set out in the Wright Report. The Business Statement consists of a series of questions usually restricted to one hour, based on a schedule which has only just been presented to the House. This is no longer an acceptable way for a modern legislature to arrive at its agenda. The need for reform is obvious and urgent.

The Committee then addressed how to move forward, respecting the two main proposals examined by the Wright Committee “for reform of what has been described as ‘Government time’: a House Business Committee and a votable agenda”.

The Wright Committee had proposed establishing a House Business Committee, which included backbenchers, Government and Opposition, to assemble a draft agenda to be put to the House. However, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee said it bore in mind “the need to avoid anything that would undermine the advances already made since Wright reported”. It considered what should be the function and purpose, and the composition of a House Business Committee.²⁹ However, citing the Leader of the House, the Committee said that “the prospects of early progress look slim”:

83. The balance of the evidence we received was that a House Business Committee with a limited role, its work clearly distinguished from that of the Backbench Committee, could be set up and could do useful work. A pledge to establish a House Business Committee in the third year of this Parliament is contained in the Coalition Agreement. However, the prospects of early progress look slim. The Leader of the House told us that he had identified

a number of tests which any such committee needs to meet in order to be able to operate effectively and add value to our existing

²⁸ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The impact of the Wright Reforms](#), 18 July 2013, HC 82 2013-14, para 58

²⁹ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The impact of the Wright Reforms](#), 18 July 2013, HC 82 2013-14, paras 71-82

arrangements. For example, any committee needs to be able to guarantee to provide Government control of its legislative programme; respect the remit of the Backbench Business Committee; take into account the views of all parts of the House without becoming unwieldy in size; co-ordinate business with the House of Lords; and retain the flexibility to change the business at short notice in response to fast-moving events.[Ev w2]

Mr Lansley told us that after consulting colleagues across the House:

Such is the diversity of views on the composition and role of a House Business Committee, I do not at the moment see the possibility of establishing the level of consensus necessary for a proposal to have a realistic chance of success. I wanted to tell you upfront that I do not have any proposals to give you today—ones that would meet the tests that I believe are required to be met before a House Business Committee can be established. Equally, I am afraid I cannot say that I am able to proceed with the establishment of a House Business Committee by the third year of this Parliament, as has been our intention.[Q 276]³⁰

It also noted the doubts of Angela Eagle, the Shadow Leader of the House, about “the feasibility, and indeed the purpose” of a House Business Committee.

The Committee was “disappointed” that the Government had failed to honour a Coalition Agreement pledge. However, it argued that the Wright Committee proposal “for a House Business Committee sharing its membership with the Backbench Business Committee could undermine the authority of that Committee”. The Committee accepted that there was no agreement at present but said that discussions should not be closed off.³¹

It then set out the arguments for and against a number of models for a House Business Committee. It considered:

- A. The Status Quo - The Usual Channels
- B. More transparency about the business managers' meeting
- C. Informal Bureau
- D. A Consultative House Business Committee
- E. A House Business Committee that scrutinises the agenda
- F. A select committee which itself proposes an agenda for the House

It concluded that any of the models could form the basis of a House Business Committee but there was “not at present the political will, on the front benches at least, to take forward many of the options”.

Nonetheless the Committee believed that a consultative House Business Committee (similar to its option D) was “an immediate practical option

³⁰ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The impact of the Wright Reforms](#), 18 July 2013, HC 82 2013-14, para 83

³¹ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The impact of the Wright Reforms](#), 18 July 2013, HC 82 2013-14, paras 85-89

for the House". It then outlined the function and procedure, and composition for its proposed House Business Committee:

House Business Committee - Function and procedure

93. The House Business Committee should be established as a select committee of the House.

94. The House Business Committee should provide a forum in which the House's business managers consult, in a timely fashion, representatives of opposition parties and backbenchers about all business except that controlled by the Backbench Business Committee.

95. We recognise that Ministers will continue to be decisive in drawing up the agenda for non-Backbench Business Committee business which is discussed at Business Questions each week.

96. The remit of the House Business Committee should be clearly separated from that of the Backbench Business Committee.

97. The Leader of the House should continue, as now, to be responsible for drawing up and presenting the Business Statement to the House on Thursday. The Leader would be at liberty to reject any suggestions or counter-proposals made at the meeting of the House Business Committee, but would be open to more informed questioning on his or her decisions at Business Questions.

98. The House Business Committee should publish summary minutes, but proceedings should be in private. It should have a joint secretariat, with elements from both the "usual channels" and the House service.

House Business Committee - Composition

99. The House Business Committee should have backbench representation which reflects the composition of the House, including minority parties.

100. There are strong arguments for election of House Business Committee backbench members on a whole-House or party group basis, but we do not believe that election is the only way for backbench representation to be decided. The chairs of the existing party backbench committees could instead be co-opted.

101. A suggested list of members of the House Business Committee, including co-opted party backbench representatives, is set out in Annex A [The Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, the Government Chief Whip, the Opposition Chief Whip, the Chief Whip of the third largest party represented in the House, the Chair of the backbench members organisations of each of the three largest parties represented in the House, a representative of members of other parties and no party, and the Chairman of Ways and Means shall be the Chair of the Committee] as part of the draft Standing Order.

102. The Chair of the House Business Committee should be the Chairman of Ways and Means.

103. No member of the Backbench Business Committee should simultaneously also be a member of the House Business Committee.

104. The consultative nature of the House Business Committee will allow and encourage flexibility and responsiveness to urgent developments.

The Committee also set out a proposed Standing Order to reflect its proposals.³² It argued that a House Business Committee constituted as it envisaged would remove the need for the House to vote on its agenda.

4.2 The Government's response to the Committee's proposals

The Government's response to the Committee's report was published on 9 December 2013. Rather than considering all business as taking place in "the House's time", the Government argued that "The division of time in the House reflects the different constituent parts and interests within it. There is no single 'House' interest or 'House time'".³³

Neither did the Government accept that the present process for setting the agenda for the House's business was inadequate. It argued that few questions following the Business Statement directly related to the details of it "suggesting that current arrangements for the scheduling of business have generally proved satisfactory to the House".³⁴

Although the Government welcomed the Committee's "attempt to devise a realistic and workable proposal" for a House Business Committee it did not think that a consensus could be built around it. The Government identified a number of problems with the Committee's plans:

- politicising the role of the Chairman of Ways and Means;
- such a committee was not the forum for discussing politically sensitive (to either the Government or the Opposition) matters;
- no provision for accommodating the interests of the Backbench Business Committee or taking account of progress of business in the House of Lords; and
- no mechanism to cope with sudden changes in business.

The Government concluded its response to the Committee's proposals for a House Business Committee by saying that:

In these circumstances, given the absence of consensus, the Government does not plan to pursue the establishment of a House Business Committee at the present time, while remaining open to the possibility of revisiting at a later date.³⁵

4.3 The Government's position, July 2014

In July 2014, in response to a parliamentary question from Peter Bone, William Hague, the Leader of the House confirmed that the position had

³² Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The impact of the Wright Reforms](#), 18 July 2013, HC 82 2013-14, Annex A

³³ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright Reforms: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2013-14](#), HC 910 2013-14, para 37

³⁴ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright Reforms: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2013-14](#), HC 910 2013-14, para 39

³⁵ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright Reforms: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2013-14](#), HC 910 2013-14, para 68

not changed since the Government responded to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in December 2013:

Mr Bone: To ask the Leader of the House with reference to the commitment in the Coalition Agreement, when he plans to introduce a Parliamentary Business of the House Committee.

Mr Hague: Given the absence of consensus, the Government has decided not to pursue the establishment of a House Business Committee at the present time.³⁶

5. Will there be a House Business Committee in the 2015 Parliament

5.1 The Government's position

On 9 July 2015, in response to a question asking whether the Leader of the House would “take steps to establish a House business committee”, Dr Thérèse Coffey, the Deputy Leader of the House, told the House that “There was an absence of consensus on this issue at the end of the previous Parliament, and there is still no consensus at the beginning of this Parliament. The Government therefore have no intention of bringing forward proposals”.³⁷

5.2 Debate in the 2015 Parliament

Westminster Hall, 14 October 2015

On 14 October 2015, Graham Allen secured an half-hour debate in Westminster Hall on the subject of a House Business Committee. He restated the case for a House Business Committee and Dr Coffey restated the Government's position. She reviewed how the Coalition Government's position had changed through the previous Parliament.³⁸

From the beginning of the current Parliament, debates in Westminster Hall have taken place on motions that “This House has considered [the matter]”, previously they took place on a motion to adjourn. At the end of the debate, Graham Allen challenged the question when it was put.³⁹

Standing Order No 10 provides that:

(13) If at a sitting in Westminster Hall the opinion of the Chair as to the decision of a question (other than a question for adjournment) is challenged, that question shall not be decided, and the Chair shall report to the House accordingly; and any such question shall be put forthwith upon a motion being made in the House.⁴⁰

At Business Questions on 22 October 2015, the leader of the House announced that “A motion in the name of the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) relating to a House business committee” would be considered in time provided by the Backbench Business Committee on 29 October 2015.⁴¹

³⁷ [HC Deb 9 July 2015 c448](#)

³⁸ [HC Deb 14 October 2015 cc169WH-175WH](#)

³⁹ [HC Deb 14 October 2015 cc175WH](#)

⁴⁰ House of Commons, [Standing Orders of the House of Commons – Public Business, 2015](#), March 2015, HC 1154 2014-15, Standing Order No 10 (13)

⁴¹ [HC Deb 22 October 2015 c1135](#)

Appendix A: Resolution approving the establishment of a House Business Committee

On 4 March 2010, amendments to the Government motion on the establishment of the Backbench Business Committee provided for a House Business Committee to be established in the current Parliament. The following extract from Hansard records the Government's initial proposals and amendments proposed and made:

BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House approves recommendation 17 of the First Report of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, Session 2008-09, HC 1117, and looks forward to the House being offered the opportunity within 10 sitting weeks of the beginning of the next session of Parliament to establish a backbench business committee and a new category of backbench business, in the light of further consideration by the Procedure Committee. *-(Ms Harman.)*

Amendment proposed to motion 7: (b), leave out from 'opportunity' to end and add

'in the light of further consideration by the Procedure Committee, to establish in time for the beginning of the next Parliament a Backbench Business Committee and a new category of backbench business, comprising initially the 15 days allotted to set piece debates; and subsequently days allocated for general debates.- *(Sir George Young.)*

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 106, Noes 221.

[Division list – not reported]

Amendments made to motion 7: (c), leave out from 'opportunity' to end and add

'to establish, in time for the start of the next Parliament, a backbench business committee, constituted in accordance with the principles set out in recommendation 18 of the Committee's Report, to schedule non-ministerial business as described in recommendations 22 (select committees), 23 and 28 (backbench substantive motions), 30 (protected time for backbench business) and 39 (Estimates days) of the Committee's Report.'

Amendment (a), at end add

'and approves the establishment during the course of the next Parliament of a House Business Committee comprising the backbench business committee and representatives of Government and Opposition which, while guaranteeing that the Government has the time and first choice of dates to get its legislative programme through, and to make whatever statements it wishes, would improve scheduling of business to ensure more effective scrutiny of legislation at Report Stage and consideration of Lords Amendments.'

Amendment (d), at end add

'and also looks forward to the following recommendations of the Committee being given further consideration in the next Parliament:

- (a) 19 and 20 (Ministerial business);
- (b) 21 (Opposition business);
- (c) 26 (notice and flexibility);
- (d) 27 (timetabling);
- (e) 32 (sessions and carry-over);
- (f) 35 (Ministerial statements);
- (g) 36 (general committees);
- (h) 37 (public bill committees); and
- (i) 40 (Private Members' bills).'- (*Dr. Tony Wright.*)

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves recommendation 17 of the First Report of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, Session 2008-09, HC 1117, and looks forward to the House being offered the opportunity to establish, in time for the start of the next Parliament, a backbench business committee, constituted in accordance with the principles set out in recommendation 18 of the Committee's Report, to schedule non-ministerial business as described in recommendations 22 (select committees), 23 and 28 (backbench substantive motions), 30 (protected time for backbench business) and 39 (Estimates days) of the Committee's Report, and approves the establishment during the course of the next Parliament of a House Business Committee comprising the backbench business committee and representatives of Government and Opposition which, while guaranteeing that the Government has the time and first choice of dates to get its legislative programme through, and to make whatever statements it wishes, would improve scheduling of business to ensure more effective scrutiny of legislation at Report Stage and consideration of Lords Amendments, and also looks forward to the following recommendations of the Committee being given further consideration in the next Parliament:

- (a) 19 and 20 (Ministerial business);
- (b) 21 (Opposition business);
- (c) 26 (notice and flexibility);
- (d) 27 (timetabling);
- (e) 32 (sessions and carry-over);
- (f) 35 (Ministerial statements);
- (g) 36 (general committees);
- (h) 37 (public bill committees); and
- (i) 40 (Private Members' bills). [HC Deb 4 March 2010 cc1095-1099]

Appendix B: Responses to questions on the House Business Committee, 2010-13

Before deciding in 2013 that it did not intend to establish a House Business Committee, the Government answered a number of questions about the timetable for its establishment; its remit and operation; and its composition.

Timetable

On 25 October 2010, David Heath confirmed that “The Government are committed to establishing a House business committee”⁴²

On 8 September 2011, Sir George Young said that “As set out in the coalition agreement, the Government are committed to establishing a House business committee in 2013”.⁴³

On 14 June 2012, Sir George Young said that “we plan to honour our commitment in the programme for Government to establish a House business committee by the third year of this Parliament”.⁴⁴

Mark Harper, speaking at the conclusion of the second reading debate on the *House of Lords Reform Bill* stated that the House Business Committee would be introduced in the 2012-13 session.⁴⁵

Following his appointment as Leader of the House in September 2012, Andrew Lansley acknowledged the commitment to introduce a House Business Committee in the Coalition Agreement and said that he “look[s] forward to constructive discussions about it”.⁴⁶

In January 2013, he was asked “whether the Government intends to introduce a House Business Committee by the third year of this Parliament”. He restated the Coalition Agreement’s “commitment to establish a House Business Committee by the end of the third year of the Parliament”. But then continued:

As I explained in my evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee on 10 January, in developing proposals we will want to take into account the developments in the work of the Backbench Business Committee and consider how a House Business Committee will add value in the management of business.

We will give careful consideration to any views put forward by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee on the implementation of this.⁴⁷

Remit and operation

As noted above, the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons proposed a solution in which a unified House Business Committee, which included the members of the Backbench Business Committee and frontbenchers, would be responsible for drafting the House’s agenda. Ministers were questioned on the relationship

⁴² HC Deb 25 October 2010 c17

⁴³ HC Deb 8 September 2011 c546

⁴⁴ HC Deb 14 June 2012 c464

⁴⁵ HC Deb 10 July 2012 c272

⁴⁶ [HC Deb 13 September 2012 c419](#); see also [HC Deb 29 November 2012 cc367-369](#)

⁴⁷ [HC Deb 15 January 2013 c685W](#)

between these two committees. In October 2010, David Heath was asked whether the two committees would “carry on in parallel”. He told the House that:

Mr Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question. It is a fairly complex matter. If he re-reads the Wright Committee report, he will see that there is a degree of ambiguity about the precise interrelationship. I think the assumption is that the two Committees should sit alongside one another, with some common membership, but it is an area we need to discuss in detail with him and his hon. Friends on the Backbench Business Committee, and more widely in the House, so that we establish a system that will work for the whole House and make sure that both Back-Bench business and the interests of the House as a whole are protected.⁴⁸

In January 2011, Sir George Young suggested that both functions could be dealt with by one committee.⁴⁹

However, in June 2012, Sir George Young confirmed to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee that it and the House Business Committee would be two distinct committees:

Sir George Young: I am very happy to give the hon. Lady the assurance she seeks. We plan to keep the Backbench Business Committee in its current form. The [House business] committee ... would look at Government business, and the two would work in parallel; the second would not displace the first.⁵⁰

Composition

Concerns have been raised about the representation of the smaller parties in the House of Commons on the Backbench Business Committee and on the House Business Committee. Pete Wishart (Scottish National Party) raised the matter on 25 October 2010:

Pete Wishart: Will the hon. Gentleman assure me that the House business committee will be a Committee of the whole of the House, not just the Government parties and the Labour Opposition? What is he and the Leader of the House doing personally to ensure that smaller parties are properly represented on the new Committee?

Mr Heath: The hon. Gentleman knows, because we discussed the matter very early in this Parliament, that the Wright Committee was not terribly helpful in its proposals to him and his colleagues. Having committed ourselves to implementing the Wright Committee, we were left in some difficulties. However, we need to ensure that the voices of smaller parties in the House are clearly heard. I hope that he will take part in the necessary discussions about the establishment of the House business committee to ensure that that is done in good order and in a way that is consistent with the Wright Committee proposals while reflecting best practice in the House.⁵¹

⁴⁸ HC Deb 25 October 2010 c17

⁴⁹ HC Deb 27 January 2011 c455

⁵⁰ HC Deb 14 June 2012 c464

⁵¹ HC Deb 25 October 2010 c22

At Questions to the Leader of the House on 14 June 2012, Nigel Dodds of the Democratic Unionist Party and Pete Wishart, again, raised concerns.⁵²

⁵² HC Deb 14 June 2012 cc464-465

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