



Modernisation: Westminster Hall

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This note gives a chronological account of the events that have led to proceedings in Westminster Hall becoming a permanent feature of the House of Commons.

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A. Background

The establishment of a second debating chamber was first proposed by the Modernisation Committee in their report on the Parliamentary Calendar in 1998.¹ The report mentions “The Main Committee” a similar chamber established in the Australian House of Representatives in 1994. The Australian example was in effect a second or parallel chamber in which Members could consider non-controversial legislation, Government reports and then finally expanded to include short adjournment debates.² It was considered that this then freed up the main chamber to have longer debates on more controversial issues and enabled more effective scrutiny of the Government.

B. Initial Proposals

In the same report the Modernisation Committee suggested a number of initial proposals, they were:

- As with the Australian model, the proposed chamber should be chaired by the Chairman of the Ways and Means as Deputy Speaker, supported by the Clerk Assistant.
- Procedure would largely follow that of the main chamber, although decisions would only be taken unanimously.
- The proposed chamber should be located in Committee Room 14 or the Grand Committee Room, Westminster Hall. The Committee expressed a preference to the Grand Committee Room as it was seen to offer greater flexibility for several layouts.
- The layout of the “Main Committee” could be in a horseshoe shape to accentuate the new consensual style of debates.
- The “Main Committee” would meet on days when the main chamber was sitting, but have greater flexibility on timings than the Australian version
- Proceedings should be televised throughout.
- All business would be announced by the Leader of the House on Thursday afternoons in exactly the same way that business for the House is.
- Possible types of business could be debates on non-controversial legislation, select committee reports, private Member’s time and Government adjournment motions. With a view to possibly including secondary legislation in the medium term.

The “Main Committee” was seen as a way of freeing up space in the main chamber’s calendar, and to allow further debating time for more controversial issue. It would also provide the opportunity for some Fridays to be designated non-sitting or constituency days.

While some Members cautiously approved the initial proposal, others like Peter Pike MP were resoundingly in favour:

¹ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals*, 7 December 1998, HC 60 1998-99

² Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals*, 7 December 1998, HC 60 1998-99, Memorandum submitted by the Australian House of Representatives, xlix-liv, appendix 7

...The Modernisation Committee's proposal for a main Committee provides major new opportunities and is the most important part of the report.³

C. Review and Revisions

Following the general approval to the Committee's first report, a second report was produced specifically on the "Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall".⁴ The report attempted to address concerns voiced by Members and to come up with some solid proposals.

The report recommended that this "parallel chamber" should be located in the Grand Committee room, Westminster Hall. It was favoured over the other possible location, Committee room 14, due to its greater potential for experimentation with different layouts. From this recommendation also arose the suggestion for the parallel chamber to be referred to as "Westminster Hall". Other possible names were "Main Committee" but it was not considered appropriate to refer to it as a committee, or "Second Chamber" however MPs were concerned about possible confusion with the House of Lords.

In consultation with the Chairman of Ways and Means, it was recommended that sittings in Westminster Hall should be chaired by the Deputy Speakers, and that the four members who have served longest on the Chairmen's Panel should be formally appointed by the House as additional Deputy Speakers to sit in Westminster Hall.

The Committee considered it appropriate that Westminster Hall debates should take place only on days when the House was sitting, as long as they did not clash with either Question Time or Ministerial Statements. Suggested sittings in Westminster Hall were; Tuesdays between 10am and 1pm, Wednesdays between 9.30am and 2pm and Thursdays between 2.30pm and 5.30pm, with the option of later sittings between 4.30pm and 7.30pm on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday to be left open.

It was expected that Tuesdays and Wednesdays would be reserved for private Members' business. On Tuesdays this would consist of one general debate and three half hour debates selected by the Speaker's ballot. The Wednesday sitting would be made up of two general debates and three half-hour debates selected in the same way, except that the general debates would be replaced three times each session by debates on select committee reports chosen by the Liaison Committee.

Thursday sittings would be decided through the 'usual channels' and would include debates on select committee reports and other appropriate business.

Westminster Hall was seen primarily as a forum for private Members, to enable them to hold the Government to account on a wider range of issues. Requests to the Speakers' Office for adjournment debates were reported to be outstripping the capacity of the House to accommodate them. It was thought that by staging some of these adjournment debates in Westminster Hall, they could alleviate the pressure on the main Chamber's time.

³ HC Deb 16 December 1998 c989

⁴ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall*, 13 April 1999, HC 194 1998-99

The report was debated in the Chamber on 24 May 1999.⁵ Throughout this debate many varying opinions were heard, for example, Gwyneth Dunwoody MP said:

...although I am fond of Mr. Ian Harris, the Clerk to the Australian Parliament, who gave evidence to the Committee, I know that for all his gentle tone he is a great persuader. I have debated with him whether the establishment of a separate Committee will enhance the work of the Chamber or detract from it. I was not persuaded by him, so I am hardly likely to be persuaded by the report.⁶

However, the fear that a second debating chamber would have a detrimental effect on the work of the Chamber was not shared by most MP's. Dr Phyllis Starkey MP believed that in creating the second chamber it would increase the opportunities for back bench MPs to participate more fully in adjournment debates:

This House has a tradition of evolutionary reform and this proposal is part of that approach. It is a response to changing times and expectations. It offers an excellent opportunity to the House to respond to those changes and I enthusiastically urge support for the proposals.⁷

The report was approved by 145 votes to 36, and the experiment ordered to begin at the start of the new session. The first sitting of the Westminster Hall debating chamber took place on 30 November 1999 in the Grand Committee room. The first debate was on a motion for the adjournment, on the subject of Palestinian refugees.⁸

D. Evaluation of Success

In a report published in November 2000, the Modernisation Committee evaluated the effectiveness of Westminster Hall.⁹

Westminster Hall had sat normally on Tuesday, Wednesday mornings and Thursday afternoons as scheduled. Tuesday and Wednesday sessions were dedicated to private Members' business, in the form of adjournment debates. On three Wednesdays of the Session there were debates on select committee reports. Thursday sittings were devoted in equal shares to debates on select committee reports and other business.

In comparison to the previous Session the Westminster Hall experiment had given private Members' an extra 134 opportunities to raise issues with Ministers. Select committees were afforded a further 13 debates on their reports.

The issue of MPs' attendance was also looked at, and found that it could vary between 5 and 30 (excluding the opening day when 40 MPs attended). The average figure across the entire session was between 10 and 12 MPs per debate. As the Grand Committee room could hold just over 50 Members it was reaching, on average, between 20-24% of its

⁵ HC Deb 24 May 1999 c81-132

⁶ HC Deb 24 May 1999 c91

⁷ HC Deb 24 May 1999 c100

⁸ HC Deb 30 November 1999 c1WH-24WH

⁹ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Sittings in Westminster Hall*, 13 November 2000

capacity. This was seen as unimportant by the Modernisation Committee, as many of the debates were short and could only be participated in by the initiator of the debate and the Minister answering.

A main aim of the experiment was to increase supply for the overwhelming demand from private Members for debating time in the Chamber. The report sought advice from the Speaker's Office to ascertain whether it had been a success in these terms. Figures from the Speaker's Office showed that even though Westminster Hall had increased the number of private Member debates, the demand for general debates was still high.¹⁰

In conclusion they stated:

We recommend that sittings in Westminster Hall should be continued beyond the end of the current experiment, and that the next Parliament should decide whether or not they should be made permanent.¹¹

Recommendations made by the report were;

- The Westminster Hall chamber should be re-arranged into a "long" hemicycle, as it was observed that disturbance was often caused if large groups of visitors entered or left the room.
- Within this new layout there should be two seats in the public gallery reserved for the Member initiating the debate; this would be to ensure any of their constituents with a specific interest were given priority.
- Sittings on Tuesdays should be between 9.30am and 2pm, beginning with three hour long debates.
- Two-thirds of Thursday afternoon debates should be given over to debating select committee reports.
- Six Thursday afternoons instead of three Wednesday mornings should be designated for debates on select committee reports.
- The Speaker should have the power to allow a debate to continue for up to three hours if he believed there was sufficient material for a fuller debate.
- Sittings of Westminster Hall should resume as soon as the debate on the Queen's Speech had finished.

The debate on the report took place on 20 November 2000.¹² Although the general consensus was for the report to be approved, this was shown as the House divided 283 to 18 in favour, there were some dissenting voices among the MPs. For example, Eric Forth MP referred to the "ghastly Westminster Hall".¹³

¹⁰ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Sittings in Westminster Hall*, 13 November 2000, Para. 16

¹¹ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Sittings in Westminster Hall: Report, Proceedings and Appendices of the Committee*, 13 November 2000, HC 906 1999-00

¹² HC Deb 20 November 2000 c22-108

¹³ HC Deb 20 November 2000 c52

E. Westminster Hall made permanent

The second report from the Modernisation Committee in Session 2001-02 on the Reform Programme for the House of Commons,¹⁴ only had a small section on Westminster Hall. It recommended that Westminster Hall was made permanent:

We recommend that when the House next considers the extension of [the innovations recommended by our predecessors which were introduced for an experimental period that expires with the end of this Session] that the arrangements for Westminster Hall and Thursday sittings are put on a permanent basis

This report was accordingly debated on 29 Oct 2002.¹⁵ At the end of the debate it was approved by the House on division (ayes 411, noes 47), and the Westminster Hall experiment was ordered to be made permanent from the start of the new session.

Other recommendations made and agreed to by MPs were:

- That during the House's process of altering sitting hours for the House of Commons chamber there should not be a reduction in the sitting time of Westminster Hall.
- A rota should be drawn up for Westminster Hall, to ensure Ministers can attend debates.

F. Cross-Cutting Questions

The report also suggested the introduction of cross-cutting questions on an experimental basis:

We recommend that for an experimental period there should be an occasional question session in Westminster Hall on cross-cutting issues to junior Ministers from different Departments.¹⁶

They went on to say:

In principle we believe that the greater informality of Westminster Hall would make it an attractive forum for a question session on a cross-cutting issue involving a number of Ministers from different Departments.¹⁷

The proposal was thought to offer MPs the opportunity to cover wide ranging issues that spanned the responsibilities of more than one department within one sitting. This recommendation was approved by the House of Commons, and the first cross-cutting

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

¹⁵ HC Deb 29 October 2002 c689-844

¹⁶ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *A Reform Programme*, 5 September 2002, HC 1168-I 2001-02, para. 99, p23

¹⁷ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *A Reform Programme*, 5 September 2002, HC 1168-I 2001-02, para. 99, p23

questions in Westminster Hall took place on 23 January 2003 on the subject of youth policy.¹⁸

¹⁸ HC Deb 23 January 2003 c143WH-163WH

Appendix 1: Debating time in Westminster Hall

	Time Spent (Hours and Minutes)					
	Session 99-00	Session 00-01	Session 01-02	Session 02-03	Session 03-04	Session 04-05
Adjournment						
Government	45.28	18.51	48.15	31.31	19.22	13.28
Balloted	249.20	142.07	360.52	317.07	307.25	111.28
Debates on Select Committee reports	53.44	21.58	61.06	59.33	64.19	21.24
Cross-Cutting Questions	-	-	-	6.06	2.06	-
Points of Order	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	-
Suspension	4.06	2.53	4.24	16.49	18.04	7.56
Total	352.40	185.49	474.38	431.06	411.16	154.16

Source: Information taken from Sessional Returns for each session.

Appendix 2: Timeline of events

7 September 1998	Westminster Hall debates were first proposed by the Modernisation Committee report <i>Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals</i> , HC 60 1998-99
16 December 1998	Report debated in House of Commons Chamber (c986 - 1060)
13 April 1999	Modernisation Committee report, <i>Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall</i> , HC 194 1998-99. Establishment recommended, on an experimental basis
24 May 1999	Report debated in House of Commons Chamber (c81-132)
30 November 1999	First Sitting of Westminster Hall
13 November 2000	Modernisation Committee report, <i>Sittings in Westminster Hall</i> , HC 906 1999-2000. Experiment reviewed and recommended that it should continue
20 November 2000	Report debated in the House of Commons Chamber (c22-108)
5 September 2002	Modernisation Committee report, <i>A Reform Programme</i> , HC 1168 2001-02. Recommended making Westminster Hall arrangement permanent
29 October 2002	Report debated in House of Commons chamber (c689-844) – Westminster Hall ordered to be made permanent at the beginning of new session, and that cross-cutting questions are introduced on an experimental basis
23 January 2003	First cross-cutting questions took place in Westminster Hall on youth policy