



Factsheet G3 General Series

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House of Commons Information Office

A Brief Chronology of the House of Commons

The following is a selective list of some of the important dates in the history of the development of the House of Commons. Entries marked with a “B” refer to the building only.

This Factsheet is also available on the Internet from:

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Origins of Parliament at Westminster: Before 1400

1097-99	B	Westminster Hall built (William Rufus).
1215		<i>Magna Carta</i> sealed by King John at Runnymede.
1254		Sheriffs of counties instructed to send Knights of the Shire to advise the King on finance.
1265		Simon de Montfort Parliament met in Westminster Hall, composed of Bishops, Abbots, Peers, Knights of the Shire and Town Burgesses.
1292	B	Building work on St. Stephen's Chapel commenced (finished c.1365).
1295		Model Parliament. Summoned by Edward I, and generally regarded as the first representative assembly - 2 Knights from each county, 2 Burgesses from each borough, 2 citizens from each city.
1341		Commons deliberate apart
1352	B	House of Commons sit in Chapter House of Westminster Abbey (Afterwards in Refectory).
1362		A statute of this year established that Parliament must assent to all lay taxation.
1363		First recorded Clerk of the House, Robert de Melton.
1376		"Good Parliament". Very critical of royal government, accusing officials of corruption and fraud – resulted in the use of impeachment procedure whereby the Commons as a body prosecuted offenders before the Lords.
1377		Thomas Hungerford, generally recognised to be the first Speaker to be so called, elected.
1394-99	B	Hammer-beam roof of Westminster Hall built (replacing William Rufus' original construction).

15th and 16th centuries

1401		Commons claim right of granting supply only after redress of grievances.
1407		Henry IV acknowledged that taxes must originate in the Commons.
1414		Henry V undertook that "nothing be enacted to the Petition of the Commons contrary to their asking". Full equality of Commons and Lords on legislation.

- 1415** First Serjeant at Arms, Nicholas Maudit, appointed.
- 1513** *Strode's Case* formally recognised that the Commons and its business, as part of the High Court of Parliament, were privileged against inferior courts of the realm.
- 1515** Speaker empowered by Act of Parliament (6 Henry VIII c16) to license Members to absent themselves from the House - previously this power had lain with the Crown.
- 1523** First known request by a Speaker for free speech (Speaker Thomas More).
- 1536** Wales first represented in the House of Commons.
- 1543** *Ferrers' Case* - the Commons released one of its Members, George Ferrers, by dispatching their Serjeant at Arms and claiming that his mace was sufficient authority to secure release.
- 1547** B Edward VI handed St. Stephen's chapel over to the Commons for their use.
- 1547** Commons Journal starts.
- 1571** *Strickland's case*. Strickland was detained by order of the Queen but soon released following protests from the Commons about a breach of Parliamentary privilege.
- 1576** Peter Wentworth (Burgess for Tregony) made a famous speech for liberty on 8th February, for which he was subsequently punished and committed to the Tower. Queen remitted sentence 12th March.
- 1586** Case of the disputed Norfolk election: Commons decided in favour of the disputed first election. Beginning of the custom to appoint Standing Committees at the opening of each Parliament to decide disputed elections.

Treason, revolution and the Bill of Rights: The 17th Century

- 1604** *Goodwin's case* - Commons re-asserted its right to settle questions of disputed election.
- 1605** Gunpowder plot (see Factsheet G8)
- 1610** *Great Contract*. Lord Treasurer Salisbury came to a provisional agreement with the Commons that the Crown be granted a fixed annual sum of £200,000 in place of the profits of fiscal feudalism, eg. profits of wardship. Contract failed.

1621 Protestation of 1621. Commons were asked to provide funds to support opposition to Spain in the Palatinate. Against the King's wishes, the House debated the much wider issues, finally made an assertion of the "ancient and undoubted birth-right" of Englishmen to debate any subject in Parliament without fear of arrest or punishment.

James I tore up the protestation and dissolved Parliament.

1640-60

Long Parliament. The fifth and last Parliament of Charles I.

Summoned in November 1640 on advice of Council of peers when Scottish invasion forced Crown to brink of bankruptcy. As well as attainting Strafford, prolonging its own life against involuntary dissolution, enacting a bill for triennial parliaments and abolishing prerogative courts, Parliament set about religious and constitutional reformation, embodied in Grand Remonstrance November 1641. This gradually drove many moderates to support the King. Led by John Pym and others, the Commons gradually developed into an executive body. It soon lost faith in the King who, after initial assent to reforms, attempted on 4 January 1642 to arrest Commons ringleaders. The five Members had escaped by river, Speaker Lenthall's reply when questioned by the King has been seen as the embodiment of the Speaker's relationship with the Crown and Commons:

"May it please Your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here, and I humbly beg Your Majesty's pardon that I cannot give any other answer than this to what Your Majesty is pleased to demand of me".

The failure of King and Parliament to agree on control of troops for repression of Irish rebellion (November 1641) led to final breach in relations and outbreak of Civil War August 1642. Purged of moderates in 1648 ("Pride's Purge"), and expelled by Cromwell in 1653, the "Rump" of the Long Parliament was twice recalled after Oliver's death. When members "secluded" in 1648 were readmitted in February 1660, the Long Parliament finally dissolved itself and prepared way for Convention Parliament to restore Charles II.

1681

Last time a Parliament met outside London (Oxford - for one week).

1688-89

Glorious Revolution.

1689

Bill of Rights. This ratified the revolution of 1688, declaring William and Mary joint sovereigns. The Bill also incorporates the "Declaration of Rights" - see below.

"That the pretended power of suspending of laws or the execution of laws by regal authority without consent of Parliament is illegal;

That the pretended power of dispensing with laws or the execution of laws by regal authority, as it hath been assumed and exercised of late, is illegal;

That the commission for erecting the late Court of Commissioners for Ecclesiastical Causes, and all other commissions and court of like nature, are illegal and pernicious;

That levying money for or to the use of the Crown by pretence of prerogative, without grant of Parliament, for longer time, or in other manner than the same is or shall be granted, is illegal;

That it is the right of the subjects to petition the king, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal;

That the raising or keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with consent of Parliament, is against law;

That the subjects which are Protestants may have arms for their defence suitable to their conditions and as allowed by law;

That election of members of Parliament ought to be free;

That the freedom of speech and debates or proceedings in Parliament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament;

That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted;

That jurors ought to be duly impanelled and returned, and jurors which pass upon men in trials for high treason ought to be freeholders;

That all grants and promises of fines and forfeitures of particular persons before conviction are illegal and void;

And that for redress of all grievances, and for the amending, strengthening and preserving of the laws, Parliaments ought to be held frequently."

(Source: Bill of Rights 1689 c.1)

1694

Triennial Act. Designed to ensure regular meetings of Parliament, at least once every 3 years, and to limit the life-span of Parliament to 3 years. Act superseded in 1716.

The Act of Settlement to the Great Reform Bill: 1701-1832

- 1701** *Act of Settlement.* Provided for the Protestant succession and restricted the sovereign from leaving England without parliamentary permission.
- 1707** Last Royal veto on a bill passed by both Houses (Queen Anne, the Scottish Militia Bill).
- 1707** Union of England and Scotland. Scottish Parliament abolished and 45 Members for Scottish counties and burghs sent to Westminster. First Parliament of Great Britain met 23 October 1707.
- 1715** *Riot Act.* The statute supplemented the Common Law offence of riot.
- 1716** Septennial Act. By extending the length of Parliaments to 7 years, this Act gave stability to 18th Century political system, but tended to increase electoral corruption.
- 1721-42** Robert Walpole, first Lord of the Treasury, usually regarded as the first Prime Minister, and a brilliant political manager, well aware of the importance of the House of Commons. In a speech on 21 November 1739 he said, "I have lived long enough in the world to know that the safety of a minister lies in his having the approbation of this House. Former ministers, Sir, neglected this and therefore they fell; I have always made it my first study to obtain it, and therefore I hope to stand." (Cobbett vol. 11 c.224)
- 1768-69** Middlesex elections. John Wilkes elected to Parliament as a Member for Middlesex demanding parliamentary reform and voicing the many grievances of the middle orders. Wilkes, repeatedly expelled by a privilege-conscious Commons, remained excluded until 1774.
- 1785** *Reform Bill.* William Pitt's proposed disfranchisement of 36 rotten boroughs defeated in the House of Commons. Bill failed.
- 1801** *Act of Union* (with Ireland). Irish Parliament abolished in return for Irish representation at Westminster. 100 Irish MPs added to the House.
- 1803** Newspaper reporters first allocated seats in the public gallery.
- 1806** Cobbett's Parliamentary History appears. Continued by and later known as **Hansard**.
- 1812** Prime Minister Spencer Perceval was shot by John Bellingham in the Members' Lobby of the House of Commons. Bellingham, a bankrupt had been imprisoned in Russia and blamed the Government for failing to come to his assistance. Spencer Perceval holds the distinction of being the only British Prime Minister to have been assassinated.
- 1818** House of Commons Library established.

- 1829** *Catholic Emancipation Act* repealed most civil disabilities, including prohibition of sitting in the House.
- 1832** *Reform Act*. 56 English boroughs disfranchised totally; 30 deprived of one Member; 22 new two-Member boroughs and 19 single-Member boroughs created in England. £10 residential franchise supplemented by £10 copyhold and £50 tenant-at-will franchise. Electorate increased by about 50% in England and 57% overall. Approximately 20% of English adult males could now vote. Act also provided for the annual compilation of an electoral register of those entitled to vote. The process of distributing seats in proportion to population began.
- 1832** Joseph Pease became the first Quaker to be elected to the House of Commons. On seeking to affirm instead of taking the oath, he was ordered to withdraw until a parliamentary Committee allowed him to affirm and thereby retain his seat, the Southern Division of Durham.

Developments to 1945

- 1834** B 16 October. Palace of Westminster almost totally destroyed by fire, apart from Westminster Hall and the Crypt Chapel. A public competition to design a new building was won by Charles Barry. He was assisted by Augustus Welby Pugin.
- 1844** 1st edition of Erskine May's *Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usages of Parliament* published.
- 1852** B New Houses of Parliament opened.
- 1858** The *Jews Relief Act 1858* permitted the omission of the words 'on the true faith of a Christian' from the oath in individual cases, allowing Jews to sit as Members of Parliament.
- 1866** *Promissory Oaths Act*. Established the form of oath still used today.
- 1867** *Second Reform Act*. Proposed male household suffrage with various minor conditions and additions. Added approximately 1.12 million to the existing electorate of 1.40 million.
- 1867** The first debate in the House of Commons on women's suffrage was initiated by John Stuart Mill
- 1872** Secret Ballot introduced for Parliamentary Elections, at first as a temporary measure, subject to annual review. Established as a permanent measure only as late as 1918.
- 1884** *Third Reform Act*. Extended household and lodger franchise, and instituted franchise for the occupation of land or tenements worth £10 p.a.

- 1885** *Redistribution of Seats Act.* Major revision of constituencies, creating mostly single-member constituencies.
- 1909** Operation of Hansard was taken over by the House of Commons and it became known as the Official Report. It had previously been known as Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates, Parliamentary Debates or Hansard's Parliamentary Debates.
- 1911** MPs first paid a salary from central government.
- 1911** *Parliament Act.* Prompted by the House of Lords' rejection of the People's Budget, this Act removed the right of veto from the Lords except on bills to extend the life of Parliament. Lords permitted delaying powers of one month for money bills, and 2 years for other legislation. Duration of Parliament reduced to 5 years.
- 1918** *4th Reform Act. Representation of the People Act.* This increased the electorate from its pre-war level of 8 million to 21 million; gave the vote to men over 21 fulfilling 6 months' residence qualification, and to women over 30 meeting occupancy requirement. *Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act* making women eligible to become Members of Parliament.
- 1918** Countess Constance Markiewicz elected as the first woman MP. In common with other Sinn Fein Members she did not take her seat - St Patrick's, Dublin. (see factsheet M4)
- 1918** *Redistribution Act* increased size of House of Commons and adopted principle of equal constituency sizes.
- 1919** Viscountess Nancy Astor the first woman to take her seat, following a by-election in the Plymouth Sutton division. (see factsheet M4)
- 1920** *Government of Ireland Act.*
- 1922** Withdrawal of the Irish MPs except 12 from Northern Ireland.
- 1928** *Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act.* Voting age for women lowered to 21.
- 1941** B 10 May. Commons Chamber destroyed by enemy action.

The post-war years:

- 1948** *Representation of the People Act.* The remaining 12 double-member constituencies abolished, also the University seats.
- 1948** Mrs Florence Paton became the first woman to preside over the whole House in Committee.
- 1949** *Parliament Act.* Reduced still further the House of Lords delaying powers over bills.
- 1950** B New Commons Chamber, (designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott) is finished. First meeting 26 October. (Strangers were allowed to be present for Prayers against the usual practice of the House).
- 1958** *Life Peerages Act.* Provided for the appointment of life peers and peeresses, giving women the right to sit and vote in the House of Lords.
- 1963** *Peerage Act* enabled peers to disclaim peerages, and admitted all female hereditary peers.
- 1967** *Parliamentary Commissioner Act.* To make provision for the appointment of a Parliamentary Commissioner for the investigation of administrative action taken on behalf of the Crown.
- 1968** First experiment in sound broadcasting proceedings of the House.
- 1969** Voting age reduced to 18.
- 1970** Rt Hon Betty Harvie Anderson appointed Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means, the first woman to hold such a position.
- 1978** *House of Commons (Administration) Act*, setting up House of Commons Commission, passed.
- 1978** Radio broadcasting of proceedings on a permanent basis.
- 1979** Reform of the select committee system.
- 1979** First British woman Prime Minister elected, Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher.
- 1979** Airey Neave MP killed by a car bomb as he drove from the underground car park in New Palace Yard.
- 1989** The House of Commons agreed that proceedings should be televised. An eight month experiment began in November.
- 1990** The House of Commons agreed that proceedings should be televised on a permanent basis.

- 1992** Rt Hon Betty Boothroyd elected as first woman Speaker. One of 60 women elected at the General Election.
- 1994** December, the House of Commons agreed to six motions relating to sitting times. From 25.1.95 the House began to sit at 10am on Wednesday mornings. This was changed to 9.30 am during the 1995-96 session. The Speaker was given the power to limit speeches between 7 and 9 pm on certain types of business.
- 1995** Scottish Grand Committee powers and functions change. The Committee now regularly meet in Scotland and meetings include Question Time, Statements and debates.
- 1997** Further changes to the sittings of the House were introduced at the start of the 1995-96 session to reduce the number of late-night sittings. Bills were timetabled following second reading, more business was conducted in committee and other business conducted without debate. 10 non-sitting Fridays were introduced.
- 1997** 1 May. The 1997 General Election was the first to be fought on a new set of boundaries, with 659 seats in the UK compared with 651 in 1992. The number of women candidates elected in 1997 was 120, double the number elected in 1992.
- 21 May. Prime Ministers Questions moved to Wednesdays, from 3.00pm to 3.30pm.
- 1999** The Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons set up. As a result of its recommendations changes were made to sitting hours, the legislative programme, European business, and the setting up of an additional Chamber in Westminster Hall (see under 1999).
- 1999** Devolution of powers. On 1 July 1999 extensive powers were transferred to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. In the Commons there were implications for the responsibilities of ministers concerned, the grand standing committees and legislation on devolved matters. Devolution to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive took place on December 2 1999.
- 1999** B 30 November. Sittings in an additional chamber known as Westminster Hall start. It is the first time in parliamentary history that MPs have sat in a parallel chamber. The debates are on constituency matters and other matters the House would normally be unable to debate such as select committee reports. The layout of Westminster Hall chamber differs from the main Chamber in that it is set out in an elongated horseshoe, rather than in opposing benches, to reflect the non-partisan nature of the debates taking place there. Wednesday morning sittings, introduced in 1994, ceased.

- 1999** *House of Lords Act*, given Royal Assent on 11 November 1999, restricted membership of hereditary peers in the House of Lords to 92.
- 2000** B 7 August. Tours of the Line of Route started on an experimental, timed, ticket-only basis. The programme ran until the end of September and has been repeated for subsequent Summer recesses.
- 2000** B Autumn. Completion of the new Parliamentary building, Portcullis House. For the first time all Members now have their own office facilities.
- 2000** 6 December. A new procedure – deferred divisions – introduced whereby certain late-night divisions are postponed until Wednesday afternoons. Also this session, all government bills became subject to programme motions

The House of Commons in the 21st Century

- 2001** December: The ban on the use of Commons' facilities by Members who had not taken the oath was lifted. This enabled the 4 Sinn Fein Members to use facilities and claim allowances but not salaries.
- 2002** January: An experiment of webcasting proceedings in the House of Commons was launched. A new website, www.parliamentlive.tv, was established to offer live audio-visual coverage of debates in both main chambers as well as coverage of a variety of Select and Standing Committee and sittings of the House of Commons in Westminster Hall.
- 2002** 23 October: House of Commons debates further wide-ranging changes recommended by the Select Committee on Modernisation. Among those changes agreed to were:
- New sitting hours:
- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Monday | 2.30pm - 10pm |
| Tuesday | 11.30am - 7.00pm |
| Wednesday | 11.30am - 7.00pm |
| Thursday | 11.30am - 6.00pm |
| Friday | 9.30am – 2.30pm (Private Members' Bill Fridays only) |
- The notice for tabling of oral questions reduced from 10 to 3 sitting days (5 for devolved countries)
 - Electronic tabling to be investigated with a view to implementation
 - Cross-cutting questions to be introduced in Westminster Hall
 - The option for Public bills to be carried over for one session
 - Prime Ministers questions to be moved to 12 Noon on Wednesday
 - Written ministerial statements to be introduced to replace 'planted' questions
- 2003** January 7. House of Commons implements new sitting hours and other changes agreed on 23 October

2005

January 26. House of Commons decides to revert to a 2.30pm start to business on Tuesdays & to start one hour earlier at 10.30am on Thursdays

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For your purposes, did you find this Factsheet

- | | | | | | |
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| 1. Very useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Fairly useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not much use | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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