Creating a working Parliament
Reform of the Commons Chamber
Greg Power
Commission on the Scrutiny Role of Parliament

The Commission on the Scrutiny Role of Parliament was established by the Hansard Society in September 1999. Under the chairmanship of Lord Newton of Braintree, it is examining how effectively Parliament scrutinises the Executive and holds the Government to account for its actions.

The Commission is conducting an overarching review of Parliament's scrutiny role. The investigation will concentrate primarily on the House of Commons but will also take into account the role of the House of Lords and the impact of possible reforms on the Second Chamber. The Commission's final report will be published in the spring of 2001 and will endeavour to establish a set of core principles for the scrutiny of Government.

This is the second in a series of discussion papers published by the Commission. The discussion papers are intended to stimulate interest about the reform of Parliament and Government. Those wishing to comment on the paper's conclusions or submit evidence to the Commission should write to Alex Brazier, Commission clerk at the Hansard Society address or at hansard@hansard.lse.ac.uk.

The views expressed in the discussion paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Commission or the Hansard Society.
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Introduction

Westminster is often characterised as a 'debating Parliament' rather than a 'working Parliament'. The principal focus for political activity is the plenary sessions of the Commons chamber, rather than the detailed work in the committees. However, the chamber is in decline. In terms of influence, interest and attendance it is waning. It is no longer the cockpit of the nation, no longer central to the national political debate.

This is partly the result of internal parliamentary reform. As the recent report from the Liaison Committee noted the gist of recent changes has been to free more time on the floor of the House by moving some of its traditional functions to other forums, such as select committees or, more recently, the parallel chamber in Westminster Hall. However, unlike other Parliaments that have developed complex committee systems, at Westminster the links between the committees and the chamber are weak. There is little direct interaction between the select committees and the chamber and little complementary activity.

Whilst certain functions have been ceded by the chamber, it is not clear that they are being compensated by activity elsewhere in the Palace of Westminster. Rather, power appears to be ebbing away from Parliament and to other, external bodies. The chamber's primacy as a forum for political debate and holding Ministers to account is now being challenged by the media, the judges, devolved Parliaments and Europe.

The failure to recall Parliament during the fuel crisis of September 2000 was interpreted by many commentators as evidence of its irrelevance and the extent to which direct action has now superseded parliamentary representation. Although most of these articles overstated the case, the crisis illustrated the problem for Parliament. The chamber's work can often appear irrelevant to most voters. It rarely sets the day's news agenda and is often slow to respond to issues of public concern.

This has serious implications for democracy. Through parliamentary debates, questions to ministers and statements to the House the chamber oversees the work of government on behalf of the electorate. The support of MPs legitimises government activity and the Government derives its authority from its ability to carry majority support in the chamber. The chamber is the ultimate forum in our parliamentary democracy for calling ministers to account for their actions. Parliament needs to retain and protect its role, as the 1996 report from the Public Service Committee into ministerial accountability noted, but 'to do so, it has to be more effective in fulfilling it'.

This paper assesses the chamber's role in scrutinising and holding government to account. It investigates the causes and extent of the chamber's decline. By examining parliamentary procedure and practice, and the culture of Westminster it analyses how well equipped MPs are to ensure systematic accountability from government. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations designed to reflect the challenges to Parliament's role and the variety of tasks that today's MPs are expected to perform. The recommendations seek to create a Parliament where debate is topical and where the committees and the chamber better complement each other in the pursuit of accountability. In short, it aims to create a working Parliament.
Summary of recommendations

Improving the ability of the chamber to oversee the work of government requires a change in the procedure and the culture of the House of Commons. In both areas Parliament has been slow to adapt to changes in government and society. Future parliamentary reform is likely to continue at a slow pace, but this should not prevent creative, long-term thinking about the role of Parliament. The recommendations focus on four main areas - hours, the value of debates, parliamentary questions and training.

Modernising the chamber’s hours
Betty Boothroyd argued that MPs should ‘be prepared to put in the hours necessary’ to scrutinise Government. Yet for most backbenchers the arguments are not about shorter hours, but about a more effective use of the chamber’s time so as to improve oversight and accountability.

1. All business should be timetabled. The principal benefits of timetabling are that it brings a greater certainty to parliamentary business (providing benefits for Government, Opposition and individual Members), reduces the use of the guillotine and therefore improves the quality of scrutiny. It would also give the opposition an influence over the structure of parliamentary business. (p.23)

2. The House should have fixed-length sessions. If business is timetabled at the beginning of the year, this should also include (at least provisionally) dates for each of the recesses and the end of the session. (p.23)

3. Parliamentary business should be arranged formally by a ‘bureau’, such as that in the Scottish Parliament, rather than by the ‘usual channels’. The bureau would consist of the Speaker and the business managers from each of the main parties. The Government would still have a majority, but it would give the Opposition a formal role in the management of business. (p.23)

4. The chamber’s hours should be reduced. There are numerous demands on MPs’ time, but the sittings of the chamber make few allowances for this. Parliament sits in almost permanent plenary and, as a result, attendance is low for most debates. There needs to be a systematic evaluation of the use of time in the chamber. It should meet less often, perhaps one less day each week. This day could then be used for committee work and other activity, reflecting the importance of this work to Parliament. (p.23)

5. The House should sit earlier in the day and allow for morning statements from ministers. Whereas the Government machine, and many individual MPs, are attuned to media requirements, Parliament is not. The chamber’s hours work against any meaningful coverage of Commons activity. Morning statements would improve coverage of both Government and Opposition policy. Morning sittings would also allow the House to finish earlier in the day and improve the news coverage of Parliament. (p.24)

Improving parliamentary Proceedings
As a general principle there should be more statements and fewer debates. The opportunity to question a Minister for half an hour can often be more valuable in scrutinising Government than a six hour debate. There should be greater flexibility in use of time in the chamber.

6. Opposition parties should be able to trade some of their Opposition Day Debates for Ministerial statements. Debates have a limited value in holding government to account. It may be more effective to allow the Opposition greater opportunity to question ministers and call for ministerial statements on topical issues. This could also reduce the hours of the chamber. (p.25)

7. There should be greater use of Private Notice Questions. Scrutiny is a task for all MPs and not just the opposition. PNQs are a tool available to all MPs, but their use is
8. **There should be specific provision for 'public interest debates'.** Many of the debates in the Chamber bear little relevance to the day's news agenda, and few help to set the agenda. There should be specific provision for a cross-party grouping of MPs to force a debate on a topical issue. These would be distinct from emergency or adjournment debates. (p.25)

9. **There should be a weekly opportunity to debate reports of select committees.** The thrust of most parliamentary reform has been to turn Westminster into a more committee-based Parliament. The chamber should reflect the importance of this work by allowing half an hour each week after Questions to debate a committee report. (p.26)

10. **There should be time limits on the length of debates and the contribution of individuals.** The Speaker already has the power to impose time limits but a standard time limit on every contribution would encourage a more effective debating style, ensure the participation of more MPs and make the discussions generally more accessible. (p.26)

**Improving Questions and Answers**

The existing system of questions is one of the more effective ways in which MPs can hold Government to account. They are well attended and allow many MPs to participate. Yet there remain problems in the topicality of many questions, the length of time between tabling questions and a response, and the quality of many answers.

11. **Prime Minister's Questions should be reformed.** The current system of open-ended questions should be abolished. Instead Members would give notice of their intention to ask a question ten days in advance, the choice of MPs would be by ballot and those chosen would table their (substantive) question by noon two days before PMQs. (p.26)

12. **Ministerial Question Time should focus more on quality than quantity.** Reform should aim to create a dialogue between ministers and MPs, to allow a subject to be more fully investigated. In order to minimise the number of planned questions, no more than ten questions should appear on the Order Paper for each Question Time and no duplicate questions should be allowed. (p.27)

13. **The topicality of Question Time also needs to be improved.** The current two week notice period means many important issues are not raised during questions. The two-day notice period for PMQs would not be suitable for Question Time given the greater number of questions and the level of detail which will be expected from ministers. The period of notice should be reduced from ten working days to five. (p.27)

14. **There should be enforceable standards for Departmental responses to written questions.** Official guidance given to civil servants answering PQs stresses that departments should be as open as possible. Yet refusals to answer questions, although helpfully published in the Table Office's 'pattern of answering', are frequently not fully explained by departments. If ministers are to be held to account in Parliament the reasons for not answering must be made more transparent; so that a denial of information is accompanied by a reference to the relevant section of the Code of Practice on Open Government or the Freedom of Information Act. Where departments send a holding answer, they should indicate the date by which an answer will be provided, the reason for the delay and the telephone number of the official preparing the answer. (p.27)

**Training**

15. **All MPs should be properly trained for their work in Parliament.** The House authorities should provide an obligatory induction course for new MPs and regular and on-going training for all MPs about the role of Parliament and changes to parliamentary procedure. (p.28)
I - The decline of the chamber

In 1855 Gladstone told MPs that their job was 'not to govern but to hold to account those who do'. This remains as true today as it was then - one of Parliament's principal tasks is to scrutinise and check the Executive. Government has changed beyond recognition in the last century, but the pace of change in Parliament has been slower, and the current House of Commons bears a remarkable similarity to the one of which Gladstone was part. Government activity now touches the lives of every citizen on a daily basis, but in trying to secure accountability from Government, MPs are using Parliamentary mechanisms that were originally designed for a state with much more limited responsibilities. Increasingly, politicians, commentators and academics are questioning the extent to which Parliament is able to secure accountability from Government.

Defining the role of the chamber

The decline of the chamber appears to have gone hand in hand with that of Parliament as a whole. Indeed, for much of Westminster's history the two have been synonymous. However, any assessment of the chamber's effectiveness requires a realistic definition of its functions and how they fit in with those of Parliament as a whole. A former senior Commons clerk has commented that much of the 'criticism of Parliament may in part reflect a failure to appreciate what roles Parliament may reasonably be expected to perform'.

The focus of the Hansard Society Commission is the scrutiny role of Parliament, the extent to which it holds government to account, rather than its legislative role. The functions of the chamber in scrutinising government can be identified as containing three main components:

Authority

The chamber is the ultimate source of authority for the Government. In order to carry through any decision the Government must maintain the confidence of the House and its majority in the voting lobbies. Through the activities of elected representatives it remains the ultimate democratic forum for legitimising or questioning government decisions. In theory, no government (or individual minister) can continue without the support of the House.

Debate

According to Leo Amery the principal function of Parliament is 'to secure full discussion and ventilation of all matters'. Debates in the Commons perform a number of functions, not least of which is providing a platform for party politics. However, they have a distinct scrutiny value in that they seek to shed light on the activities of government and open them up to public view. The chamber is the main parliamentary focus for public attention, and the government's accounting for its actions in debates is not solely to the MPs present, but also to the wider public. Therefore, the number of MPs present in the chamber is one indicator of the scrutiny value of such debates, the other is the level of public awareness and interest.

Calling to account

The chamber also provides specific opportunities for all backbenchers to question Government ministers about their activity - to which Ministers are obliged to respond. The prime role of these opportunities is not so much to do with the detailed scrutiny of Government activity (the chamber is not suited to the sort of forensic investigation which can be conducted by a select committee) but to ensure that ministers explain in full the reasons for particular Executive decisions. The chamber's role is thus one of securing accountability through explanation, information and clarification.

The chamber's role can be defined more in terms of oversight than scrutiny. Whereas the select committee's role, as set out in standing orders, is to monitor the policy, administration and expenditure of government departments, the value of the floor of the House is a broader, but more public, form of accountability. The structure of debates, questions and statements do not lend themselves to detailed investigation of a particular issue. Instead, debates tend to be broad in scope and are typically dominated by a few major policy issues, resulting in what Dunleavy et al
describe as 'wide-ranging and generalised accounting for government actions by ministers'.

The chamber can be judged in terms of its centrality to authorising government decisions, how far parliamentary debates illuminate political issues and the extent to which ministers give full account to Parliament for their activity. The next three sections deal with three of the main challenges to the chamber's ability in these areas; the growth of Executive dominance over Parliament; the changing role of the MP; and the burgeoning influence of the mass media.

**The growth of Executive dominance**

Unlike many Parliaments, the principal forum for parliamentary activity at Westminster has traditionally been the chamber. It is common, for example, in European legislatures (and in Scotland) for committees to generate the bulk of the work, and for that work to be debated in a plenary session of the Parliament. The thrust of parliamentary reforms in the last century has removed some tasks from the chamber to other parliamentary forums, such as committees. However, the distinctive feature of this process is that, despite the changes, the chamber still continues to meet in almost permanent plenary. Moreover, with the notable exception of the select committees introduced in 1979, the reforms have occurred only because they were in the government's interest. The last century and a half has been marked by the growth of Executive dominance over Parliament and the waning influence of the individual backbench MP.

The process of formalising Parliament's procedures in the late 19th century shifted the balance in favour of the government. Reforms including the closure motion and the guillotine allowed government to dictate the length of most debates, the right of MPs to raise adjournment debates was curtailed and the powers of the Speaker were strengthened. These, along with the other rule changes, limited the power of the individual member and consolidated the control of government, protected by its parliamentary majority. In return the opposition was given a ration of 20 'supply days' per session where they could choose the topic for debate. As around the same time, the 'usual channels', consisting of government and opposition whips and business managers, established itself as the principal means for determining parliamentary business.

Further procedural changes such as the introduction of Standing Committees (taking the detailed scrutiny of bills off the floor) and increased use of the guillotine enhanced government power, and the development of mass political parties and elections on the basis of party manifestos gave the majority party virtually absolute control over Parliament. By the end of the nineteenth century most votes were whipped and party discipline strong. The extent of government dominance of Parliament is highlighted by part of Standing Order 14, which states that 'save as provided in this order, government business shall have precedence at every sitting'.

In 1978 the Procedure Committee expressed its concern at the level of executive control, stating, 'the balance of advantage between Parliament and Government in the day-to-day working of the Constitution is now so weighted in favour of the Government to a degree which arouses widespread anxiety and is inimical to the proper working of Parliamentary democracy'. Its recommendations resulted in the introduction of the departmental select committees in 1979 which provided Parliament with a permanent mechanism for scrutinising departmental 'policy, administration and expenditure' and provided a counterweight to the Executive's control of the chamber. More recent reforms, such as the introduction of the parallel debating chamber in Westminster Hall in 1999 have continued the process of removing work from the floor to other arenas, but few reforms have been implemented to improve the effectiveness of the chamber itself.

Most of the recent reforms have been justified on the grounds that they relieve some of the pressure on the chamber's time. But it is not clear what purpose this serves. There is no strategic view as to what specific functions the chamber should be fulfilling with the 'extra' time. The chamber still meets as often, but its purpose is now less clear. Whereas the chamber was originally synonymous with Parliament, the siphoning off of tasks has confused the purpose of debates on the floor and the specific role of the chamber.
Although Parliament still revolves around the chamber, it has not adopted so that these alternative mechanisms feed directly into the plenary, and it is not clear how they help the chamber as a forum for holding government to account. For example, very few select committee reports are debated on the floor, and even fewer are voted on. Although Westminster Hall has increased the opportunities for backbenchers and select committees to initiate debates, it is moot as to whether they have improved scrutiny, given the level of attendance at these debates and the level of public interest. Rather, it could be argued that the effect of the committees and Westminster Hall has been to deflect attention away from the chamber, further undermining its authority.

This is, of course, to the Government’s advantage. It is in the chamber where the Executive benefits most from its full parliamentary majority, and according to Philip Norton it is the Government dominance of the House that has ensured it remains a chamber-oriented institution. The Executive’s control of the floor means that its ability to get the House’s authorisation is almost always assured. As Norton comments, the dominance of a single party in the House ensures that the government gets its way. As long as government supporters remain united, there is little that opposition parties can do to constrain a determined government.¹⁰

The MP in Parliament

The overall effect of these procedural and political developments has been to increase the pressures on MPs’ time, rather than relieve it. Parliamentary reform, along with party discipline, has reduced the opportunities for individual backbenchers to have an influence in the chamber. There are now numerous tasks which compete for the MP’s attention, and the chamber is by no means the most appealing.

In the first place, the chamber provides few opportunities for all of Parliament’s 659 members to make a meaningful contribution. The average backbencher speaks only three times a year on the floor and this is a source of immense frustration for many politicians. For a recently-elected backbencher, the chances of being called in an important debate are slim. The description by Radice, Vallance and Willis of a day in the life of a fictional Government backbencher (‘Mr Able’) will resonate with many MPs.

He enters the chamber behind one of his friends just as the backbench opposition Member concludes his speech. Immediately over half the members rise to their feet, waving their papers, Mr Able among them. Not surprisingly, he is not called and settles down to listen to his neighbour who has been lucky enough to catch the Speaker’s eye. The speech is far too long - over twenty minutes - as the angry rustling of papers on the benches opposite indicate. It is now 6pm and Mr Able, having failed to be called, works out that, if every speech is about fifteen minutes, then only ten more speakers will be called, five of whom will come from the government benches. He is depressed at the thought that all the work he has put in on his speech in the last few days may come to nothing. All the same, each time a speech comes to an end, he jumps up hoping his turn might come. But it is not Mr Able’s day. He is not called. It is therefore with a feeling of deep frustration and depression that he decides not to bother to listen to the winding-up speeches but to have a quick bite to eat before the division.¹¹

Given that an MP might spend several days preparing a speech for delivery in the Commons and not get called, many MPs now believe that it is a far better use of their time to write a pamphlet for a think-tank or an article for a newspaper. This would not only be likely to ensure their thoughts reach a wider audience, but also generate interest amongst their colleagues.

Westminster Hall has improved the opportunities for MPs to contribute in debates, but the limited opportunities in the main chamber still generate some resentment. Backbenchers might have the chance to intervene or to ask a question of a minister, but these opportunities are more limited and, in the case of parliamentary questions (PQs) heavily influenced by the whips from both parties.

The influence of the parties is pervasive in everything that happens at Westminster, but especially
so in the chamber. According to Peter Riddell, the principal purpose of debates in the chamber is now a party political one. Speeches and interventions are aimed at parliamentary colleagues and party whips, designed to show that the MP is a sound hard-working chap, who deserved favours and promotion. This may serve a party political purpose but it reduces the relevance of Parliament to the wider political debate. MPs find it difficult to raise issues of concern to their constituents other than in sparsely attended adjournment debates. The procedures of the House mean that it is difficult for substantive topical debates to be raised on anything other than party political grounds.

Given the constraints it is not surprising that MPs are increasingly looking for other ways of exercising their role as representative. The vast majority of politicians seek election because they are interested in policy issues and, specifically, changing policy. Yet in the chamber there are few avenues for MPs to pursue inter-party activity or policy interests. The advent of the select committee system provided an alternative focus for activity and the support amongst MPs for the committees reflects their value in providing backbenchers with a non-partisan policy role. At the same time it illustrates MP frustration at the lack of opportunities for such pursuits in the chamber. As Norton points out, the introduction of the select committees was in part because, by the end of the 1970s, there was thus a large body of MPs who wanted to have some impact on public policy but, as the Procedure Committee recognised, were frustrated by the lack of opportunities provided to exert such influence.

The other outlet for MP activity is the constituency, which has increased dramatically in recent decades. In 1964 there were 10,000 letters in and out of the House of Commons each week. By 1997 that figure had increased to 40,000 letters coming in each day. Part of this increase is a reflection of the greater demands being placed on MPs by their constituents. The growth in the state’s responsibilities means that people often need help in dealing with government, and in Britain there are few other obvious routes of redress. To most voters MPs are the most obvious accountable and apparently powerful public figures to whom they should turn.

However, the growth of the constituency caseload is also due in part to the greater willingness of MPs to take up such cases. Politicians seeking a valued and valuable role can often find it by helping their constituents. Whereas it is rare that their parliamentary activity gives MPs the sense they have achieved something tangible, finding accommodation for a local family or helping with a benefit entitlement provides MPs with a sense of purpose and outcome. Although some MPs are finding the level of constituency work burdensome, it is an area where even the humblest backbencher can exert influence and, as such, in the words of one MP, it keeps you sane.

All of these developments combine to diminish the importance and centrality of the chamber. The other areas of activity, inside and outside the House, mean that MPs can find more interesting and rewarding work elsewhere. The resulting low attendance in the chamber enhances the impression that it contains little of note, providing little impetus for journalists to cover debates in the House. Knowing this, ambitious backbenchers keen for coverage are increasingly turning their attention to other activities to generate publicity, either in the constituency or from their Commons offices, further emphasising the drain away from the chamber.

The influence of the media

The most significant development outside Parliament, which has directly affected the role of the chamber, is the growth of the media. As Peter Riddell has noted, ‘The main arena of British political debate is now the broadcasting studio rather than the chamber of the House of Commons.’ Television allows politicians to communicate directly with voters more effectively than anything they say in the chamber. Unsurprisingly, parties keen to promote a particular policy are more likely to focus their attention on media coverage, so that proceedings in Parliament become almost a subsidiary feature of the main political debate. 

Whilst most MPs accept this trend as inevitable many are concerned about its implications for accountability, and specifically the tendency for Government ministers of both parties to announce
policies on the Today programme instead of to Parliament. At a recent Select Committee hearing, Trade and Industry secretary of state Stephen Byers was criticised for attempting to manipulate the news. Chair of the Committee Martin O'Neill complained that the minister’s desire to generate weekend coverage deprived Parliament of any chance to digest government policy. Betty Boothroyd, the former Speaker of the House, has also reprimanded Government ministers for revealing new initiatives before the House has had a chance to discuss them. By the time MPs get to question ministers, journalists and their political interviewees have usually discussed the most salient political issues in detail. With the politics sucked out of the issue the parliamentary debate provides little of note for news coverage.

Yet as Andrew Tyrie MP comments, Parliament has no practical means of restoring a monopoly over government announcements, still less can it exert direct control over the relationship between the Executive and the media. The incentives on the Executive to ignore parliamentary strictures will always be too great and penalties - at worst an apology - always too small. Such pleas for better Executive behaviour, although worthy, largely miss the point.

Although individual politicians have adapted to the needs of the broadcasters Parliament has not. The structure of the Westminster day means that it starts work too late for Government announcements to be made in the House and still make the lunchtime news bulletins or even the early hours of the morning, not only beyond any television and radio, but also missing the deadlines for the following day’s newspapers.

The shift from the chamber to the TV studio can be seen as an attempt to overcome the sorts of procedural and political problems that contributed to the dominance of the executive and the changing role of the MP. As noted above, there are few opportunities for MPs to raise topical debates in the Commons, and the few debates that do generate coverage are conducted in the hectoring style of political hustings which, polls suggest, most voters find off-putting. TV coverage tends to emphasise the atypical and gladiatorial aspects of Parliament, but in general the style of debates is not viewer-friendly nor do they obviously demonstrate the value of parliamentary scrutiny. It is more likely that a Paxman or a Humphrys will get a straight and fulsome answer from a minister than a backbench MP during Question Time. As Andrew Tyrie comments, the task for Parliament is to ensure that oversight ‘should only be more thorough, it should be more digestible to a wider public.’

**Conclusion - Clarifying the role of the chamber**

The context in which the chamber operates has changed. The media provides numerous other attractive forums for political debate, MPs now have many calls on their time and the opportunities for backbenchers to contribute to the work of the chamber are limited. There is now a lack of clarity as to what the Chamber is for. A number of the tasks traditionally carried out in the chamber have been ceded, but the ebb of influence away from the chamber has not been matched by a concomitant increase in the power of the committees. Nor is it clear how the chamber should complement or reflect the other spheres of MP activity.

The role of the chamber remains central to parliamentary democracy; it is the one place where elected representatives can oversee government activity and hold ministers to account on our behalf. Its basic function is still one of authorising, debating and calling to account. Yet the effect of political and procedural changes means that it is no longer clear how effectively the chamber carries out these roles.

The next two chapters examine in detail how parliamentary procedure and party politics influence MPs' attempts to secure accountability in the chamber. Chapter two assesses the use of time in the chamber and the effectiveness of the procedural devices that MPs use to call Ministers to account. The following chapter looks at the doctrine of ministerial accountability and the impact of political parties on parliamentary oversight.
2 - Procedure and practice

The role of the chamber - oversight and accountability
This chapter examines the way in which the time is used in the chamber and the impact of parliamentary procedure on the three main functions set out in the last chapter (authority, debate, calling to account). In broad terms the chamber’s principal role is one of oversight rather than scrutiny; it is the forum for securing information, explanation and clarification from ministers. However, in so far as it is still the main public focus for parliamentary activity its value also lies in bringing public attention (mainly through the media) to political issues. All of this would suggest that the activity of the chamber should be topical, relevant and conducted in a manner that is understood by those outside Westminster.

The mechanisms to achieve these aims tend to fall into the category of either ‘debates’ or ‘statements and questions’. The value of these procedures in securing accountability, raising topical issues and generating public attention is examined below. However, the chapter begins with an assessment of the chamber’s hours and the use of that time by MPs.

The use of time in the chamber
As mentioned in the previous chapter the thrust of much parliamentary reform in recent years has been to relieve the pressure on the chamber. The most significant reform, the introduction of departmental select committees in 1979, provided a major alternative to the chamber in holding government to account. However, the impact on the hours of the chamber appears to be limited. As figures 1 and 2 show, over the last 40 years the total number of sitting days or sitting hours has not fallen significantly. In figure 1 the peaks in the graph are sessions following election years and are therefore unusually long, (and the preceding session unusually short). But ignoring election years, the variation in the number of sitting days is small.

Figure 1 - Total number of sitting days per session, 1960-1999

![Graph showing total number of sitting days per session, 1960-1999.]

Figure 2 eliminates election years and takes a mid-term year from each of the Parliaments since 1960. Again it shows that there is no significant drop in the number of hours that the chamber sits for each year. But, over the same period the pressures on MPs to be active outside the chamber have increased. Some MPs serve on select committees, many more serve on standing committees and research suggests that the amount of constituency work faced by the average MP has grown dramatically in recent years. Moreover, the introduction of Westminster Hall in 1999 has increased the amount of time overall for MPs to debate matters.
A combination of factors has made the chamber simply one option among many for the active politician. The creation of 'extra' time in the chamber has not been accompanied by a clarification of its role and it is therefore not surprising that attendance at many debates is so low. Research conducted by the Hansard Society during March 2000 measured attendance at two points each day. The first measure was at a peak period when attendance was likely to be high, such as just before Prime Minister's Questions; the second measure was taken later in the day when attendance was likely to be lower.

Although it is difficult to draw too many conclusions from an analysis of just one month in the parliamentary year, the figures suggest that the only activity likely to secure the attendance of more than half the House is Prime Minister's Questions. This partly reflects the lack of opportunities for the average MP to make an impression in the chamber. As figure 4 shows their involvement will be limited to debates, questions or statements, and in each case participation is seldom guaranteed. As a result the floor of the House can be an unfulfilling place for MPs. Whilst a week in politics might be a long time for Prime Ministers, for most backbenchers the parliamentary week can seem like an eternity.
Figure 4 - The parliamentary week

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<th>Thursday 22 June</th>
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<td>3.30 - Statement - Air Traffic Services</td>
<td>3.31 - Point of order</td>
<td>3.00 - Prime Minister’s Questions</td>
<td>12.31 - Business of the House</td>
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<td>3.32 - Statement - Deaths at Dover</td>
<td>3.22 - 10 minute rule</td>
<td>3.32 - Statement: European Council</td>
<td>1.23 - Adjournment Debate: Security and Intelligence Services</td>
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<td>5.11 - Govt. Adjournment debate: Lords reform</td>
<td>4.45 - Adjournment debate: Regional policy</td>
<td>8.50 - Adjournment debate: regional policy</td>
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<td>10.00 - Adjournment debate: Crotshark Report</td>
<td>1.14 - Adjournment debate</td>
<td>9.46 - Adjournment</td>
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The other feature of parliamentary sittings, which comes across in figure 4, is that Parliament starts late in the day and finishes even later. Both ends of the parliamentary day are out of kilter with the needs of many MPs and those of the media. Since 1997, partly as a result of the high number of new MPs, the issue of hours has come to the fore. Media coverage has tended to focus on the fact that MPs are expected to stay up until the small hours, but the bigger problem for politicians is the fact that on such occasions there is little indication of when the sitting will adjourn. MPs are expected to wait around until their papers tell them a vote is expected - the vast majority do not spend the time debating in the chamber and it is difficult to get on with any other constructive work in these hours.

However, the question of the chamber's sittings raises the hackles of many MPs and ministers and has only been addressed in a piecemeal fashion. The Modernisation Committee broached the issue of morning sittings in 1998 and changed the timing of Thursday sittings so that it now meets at 1.30pm and finishes at 7pm. In July 2000 the same committee published a further report which looked at the other end of the political day and made a series of recommendations which will timetable the floor's activities and bring a greater predictability to the end of the day. However, such tinkering at the edges will do little to improve the effectiveness of the Commons, and the committee split along party lines with the Conservatives, and some political commentators, arguing that the report's proposals for timetabling would simply increase government control over Parliament. The Commons hours do need to be overhauled, so that they reflect changes elsewhere in society and the needs of the media. But any reform must address the amount of time the chamber sits throughout the year, not just each day, and identify the value of this activity.

Debates
There are two principal types of debate on the floor of the House in which MPs can participate - adjournment debates and Opposition Day debates. Both types of debate contribute to the holding of government to account in that they force Government ministers to address certain issues, often chosen by the opposition parties or individual politicians. However, adjournment debates can highlight very specific issues of limited interest, Opposition Day Debates are principally a forum for party politics.

Adjournment Debates
There are three main types of adjournment debate - backbench, government or emergency. The distinctive feature of all the debates is that almost any subject can be debated, but votes can only be taken on whether the House should adjourn. The vote at the end of each debate is therefore
symbolic rather than towards some concrete purpose.

Backbench adjournment debates take place at the end of each day's sitting and last half an hour. In these instances the MP speaks for 15 minutes and is responded to by a minister. In 1995 Wednesday morning adjournment debates were introduced, providing an extra 4½ hours debating time each week for issues chosen by backbench MPs. These debates were moved into the new Westminster Hall in November 1999, which further extended the available time by sitting for three hours on Tuesday and Thursday. The subjects discussed are often parochial, reflecting the interests of a minority, and debates are usually poorly attended. The lack of interest may in part reflect the fact that the outcome of such debates is inconclusive, with the House coming to no clear view on an issue.

Despite their limited audience they are an important weapon in the backbencher's armoury. They allow MPs to highlight the concerns of their constituents in Parliament and are able to re-assure their electorate that the matter was 'raised in the House'. In addition, such debates are often used by MPs as a method of attracting media coverage in their area. Adjournment debates can raise important issues and do force ministers to address the MP's concerns and provide a government response. For three Wednesdays each session select committee reports are debated, these are selected by the Liaison Committee.

There are usually around 30 Government-initiated adjournment debates each session, which often cover major topics and can generate a higher level of attendance. Recent debates have included those on reform of the House of Lords, the report of the Neill Committee and the security and intelligence agencies. The advantage to the Government of raising a subject as an adjournment debate is that there is little danger the Executive will be seen to 'lose'. The vote on whether to adjourn cannot be said to reflect the opinion of the House over a substantial policy issue, and frequently the House does not vote at all on such debates.

Emergency adjournment debates are exceptional. Standing Order No. 24, which dictates the use of emergency debates, states that the subject should be a 'specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration'. It is rare for there to be more than one a session and their choice is at the discretion of the Speaker.

**Opposition Day Debates**

Opposition Day Debates are the principal weapon of the Opposition in forcing the Government into debate on political terrain not of its own choosing. The main opposition party is entitled to 17 days per session and the third party entitled to 3 days. These tend to be taken as half-day debates allowing the Opposition to maximise the number of issues on which they can attack the Government.

The debates revolve around a substantive motion, which is usually critical of the Government's policy. In response the Government tables an amendment removing the critical parts of the original motion. The results are predictable; the opposition motion is rejected and the Government's amendments accepted. The quality of debates is similarly formulaic with speakers sticking to the party line and typically delivering prepared speeches. Any spontaneity in proceedings comes from interjections rather than from speeches responding to previous contributions.

Their main weakness is not that they are dominated by party politics, but the quality of the political debate they tend to engender. The debates allow the Opposition parties to raise contentious issues, test the arguments of ministers and occasionally illuminate a particular public problem. By exposing the key elements of government policy to sustained criticism, the adversarism of the Commons should highlight the strengths and weaknesses of that policy. However, the ritualistic nature of most contributions and the low quality of debate in general means that there is little public interest in Opposition Days. Their merit is purely for the benefit of those attending. It is the debate which counts, and the general approach and commitment of the main speakers.
The oversight value of debates
The structure and content of parliamentary debates limit their oversight value. There is a limited interest in many debates because of their highly-specialised nature and the sheer length of many debates means that few people are willing to sit through the entire discussion, especially when the outcome will be inconclusive. This, of course, might not matter - much of what Parliament debates should be technical and of limited interest. However, there is a question as to whether these issues should be discussed in the main chamber. The rows of empty green benches are not a convincing advert for the centrality of Parliament and it may be that many debates could be moved from the chamber into Westminster Hall, so that the floor of the House is reserved for those issues of most importance, likely to generate maximum interest.

A potentially bigger problem is that opposition parties and backbenchers have limited opportunities to initiate debates on relevant and substantive issues. The case of the Passport Agency highlights the problem. The first sign of difficulties was in February 1999 when the Passport Agency decided to prioritise applications by date of travel. By the end of April it was clear that most MPs were dealing with constituency cases relating to passports. A question to the Leader of the House, Margaret Beckett, revealed the extent of the problem when she replied that 'I think that the whole House... will be aware of how great are the difficulties being experienced by the Passport Agency and of their serious effect on the service available to people.'

However, Parliament did not discuss the issue properly until the Conservatives held an Opposition Day debate on 29 June 1999, two months after it was originally raised and by which time the situation was reaching crisis point. The only reason the Opposition Day debate was suitable in this case was because the problems of the Passport Agency were long-standing, and the issue a slow burning one. By the end of June there was clearly a political value in the Conservatives holding such a debate.

The case highlights the difficulties for MPs to force debates on topical and substantive issues. MPs had known of the problems for some time through the sheer number of constituency cases with which they were having to deal, yet there was no effective way of translating these concerns into a constructive debate.

Questions and Statements
Oral questions
Questions should have a greater interrogative value than debates, but in practice this is rarely the case, especially for oral questions. In theory, Parliamentary Questions (PQs) should elicit information from Government. In practice, although the daily question time of Ministers can be informative, it is often motivated more by the desire for political point-scoring. Certainly PQs do not fulfil the same purpose they did at the end of the 19th century, as Norman Chester points out.  

'In 1901, and indeed for some years after, a Member could hand in a Question at the Table as late as 11pm or 11.30 on, say, Monday for answer the next afternoon. His Question would be certain to be reached. If he did not like the answer he could come out of the Chamber, think out one or two further Questions, hand them in and be certain of the Minister having to reply to him on the Thursday. If the Minister again failed to satisfy him he could put in another Question which would be reached on Friday and so on, day after day if he so wished.'

This sort of repeated oral questioning is impossible today given the volume of Questions and the increase in the scope of Government. The sheer number of PQs being tabled (in the last session there were 5,008) prompted the introduction of the 'Order of Questions', whereby each department faces concerted questioning during their allotted Question Time, but only once a month.

The ability to raise issues of wider public concern and get a straight answer from Ministers is further constrained by the fact that Questions have to be tabled ten working days (effectively a
fortnight) in advance. If recess intervenes the gap between the question being tabled and the Minister's reply is even longer. This problem was starkly illustrated during Home Office questions in January 2000. The two issues gaining most headlines at that time were the Home Office decision to allow boxer Mike Tyson a work permit to fight in this country (and in so doing, overruling the Immigration department) and Jack Straw's announcement the previous week that he was 'minded' to let General Pinochet return to Chile. Tabling of questions was before Christmas when nobody could have anticipated either decision.

Partly as a result of these constraints oral questions have now become another feature of the 'permanent election campaign' on the floor of the Commons. Equally, the style and tone of Question Time lends itself more to political argument than monitoring the work of government. As a result the process is now heavily influenced by PPSs and whips who plant pre-arranged questions amongst backbenchers in the hope that these 'favourable' subjects will dominate. For their part the opposition will often orchestrate questions around a particular policy failure.

Prime Minister’s Questions
PMQs was formally introduced as a distinct part of the Parliamentary timetable in 1961 when two 15 minute 'prime-time' slots were set aside at 3.15 on Tuesday and Thursday. The questions were submitted two weeks in advance and were selected by lot. However, Harold Wilson when Prime Minister began transferring many specific questions to the relevant Cabinet colleague. In response MPs instead started tabling open questions about the PM’s schedule for the day, which allowed them to ask a topical supplementary question (thus getting over the two-week gap between tabling and asking the Question). Despite the change to one half-hour instead of two fifteen minute slots in 1997, PMQs is dominated by point-scoring, with the vast majority of questions planted on their backbenches by either Government or Opposition whips. The high level of political management of questions is illustrated by the fact that in the first 21 PMQs in 1997 the Prime Minister’s 'standard reply to [planted] questions - 'My honourable friend is absolutely right' - was used 35 times.32

However, PMQs remains the only opportunity for Parliament to question the Prime Minister. This is all the more important given the drive towards joined-up government and the increasingly powerful role of the centre of government in determining policy across a range of departments. Parliament has yet to develop a way of holding the centre to account for its activities. The convention that Prime Ministers do not appear before select committees has undermined recent attempts by the Public Administration Committee to exercise greater scrutiny over the centre.

PMQs also remains the most easily digestible feature of Parliament for the general public. Although it tends to emphasise the adversarialism of Westminster, it provides a useful (although sometimes misleading) gauge of the political situation. The Sun’s 'Blair swingometer', for example, appears in their Thursday edition and gives a verdict which runs from 'Blair romps home' at an extreme to ' Hague romps home' at the other, and highlights the appeal to the media of such politics. As such, PMQs remains an important part of debate at Westminster; and the most significant means for Parliament to question the PM. However, its contribution to meaningful accountability is small.

Ministerial Statements
Statements are used by the Government to announce new policy initiatives or to respond to events. They are a means of presenting the Government’s views to Parliament and the public. The Government position is followed by a response from the main opposition spokesperson and a question and answer session that normally lasts between 30 minutes and an hour.

Because of their nature, statements cover highly topical issues and although the Government chooses the substance of the debate, they do allow MPs to engage in a debate on an issue of public interest. The problem is that Parliament is only notified of the statement at 1pm that day and many MPs complain that they do not have access to the relevant documents far enough in advance to ensure a proper questioning of the Minister.33
Private Notice Questions
The system of Private Notice Questions (PNQs) does allow MPs to raise topical issues at very short notice; however, they are allowed only at the discretion of the Speaker and are rare. They must cover a topic that the Speaker regards as sufficiently urgent to be asked without written notice. They provide MPs with the chance to question a Minister on an important issue at very short notice as they are tabled before noon and the Minister must respond at 3.30pm. In the 1998-9 session there were 12 PNQs, covering issues such as General Pinochet, Kosovo, and US trade sanctions. They are an effective method for calling government ministers to account, but only allowed in exceptional circumstances.

Written questions
Written questions differ qualitatively from oral questions with MPs often genuinely seeking information. By using written Parliamentary Questions Members can obtain information which they may use as the basis for a campaign, for further inquiries, or for exposing errors or inconsistencies in the activities of the executive. However, the 1998 Public Administration committee noted that,

The effectiveness of the system, however, depends crucially on the acceptance by Ministers of the principle that they should be as open as possible in responding to questions. The report of the Scott Inquiry on the Export of Defence Equipment and Dual-Use Goods to Iraq and Related Prosecutions; expressed concern about the failure of Ministers to discharge the Government’s obligation to give Parliament and the public ‘as full information as possible’, and not to deceive them about government policy and actions.34

The Scott Report had raised concerns about the approach adopted by civil servants in drafting replies to questions. It appears that some officials regarded it as a matter of professional pride that answers were so worded as to give away as little as possible.

The Public Administration Committee also raised concerns about the amount of questions that were either ‘blocked’ or that received ‘holding answers’. Although there were good reasons for using both of these - not least the volume of questions now being asked of departments - the committee expressed concern at the extent of their use. Their report highlighted the implications of blocking answers, which not only mean that an answer is refused, but prevent others from asking questions on the same subjects, and recommended that departments explain more fully their reasons for using holding answers.

The system of questions has a number of defects that work against effective scrutiny and accountability, not the least of which is the fact that backbench MPs have no effective means of recourse if they are dissatisfied with an answer.

Conclusion
The chamber does not allow many substantive opportunities for Members of Parliament to scrutinise and hold government to account. Overall, the procedures are too blunt to provide any detailed scrutiny and many of the debates have no conclusive outcome. The levels of public interest are low for most debates in the chamber because, put bluntly, they don’t matter. They are often of limited interest and the content of most speeches is aimed at the small number of MPs in the chamber rather than the wider public. This insularity is compounded by the fact that even those debates that are of interest tend to last too long and/or are at the wrong time of day to generate much media coverage.

It may be that, as Peter Riddell has suggested, debating is no longer suitable for today’s politics.35 Political rhetoric has little relevance or interest for the vast majority of the public and the long-windedness of Members does not suit the soundbite needs of the media. Moreover, as Betty Boothroyd noted, following her resignation as Speaker, the length of some speeches prevents more MPs from participating and, as such, deters some Members from attending at all.

The questioning of ministers gets a higher turnout, perhaps because it allows greater opportunity
for MPs to contribute and because it occurs at mid-afternoon. If debates are to be well attended they need to give MPs more incentives, either the hope of media coverage or at least a chance to participate. A listed order of speakers or greater use of time limits on contributions would help, but in general debates need to be made sharper and more topical. In an effort to improve quality and attendance, recent suggestions for reform have included a greater use of ministerial statements or, in the case of the Norton Commission, experimentation with 'Unstarred Questions' as used in the House of Lords.36

However, the activity of Parliament should not be judged solely in terms of public attention - MPs should spend time examining technical issues which are of limited interest. However, the floor of the main chamber is not the proper forum for such discussion. There are now a number of alternatives for the fulfilment of parliamentary duties - standing committees, select committees, Westminster Hall. The chamber should be used to illuminate the major political issues. The task in this respect is to ensure that activity on the floor combines party political debate with a constructive form of oversight. This is the subject of the next chapter.
3 - Party politics and the pursuit of accountability

Reform of parliamentary procedure is an important element in the revival of the chamber, but equally important is the culture and ethos of Parliament. In this the fact that there is no separation of powers is fundamental. The House of Commons must create and sustain government, but also hold government to account. Parliament is not a corporate body separate from Government; rather, it is dominated by government. The norms and values of the chamber reflect the interests of the most powerful actors. The role of individual Members is therefore not determined by a 'corporate' parliamentary ethos. Their activity will be the result of a combination of party, constituency and parliamentary considerations, each of which is influenced by their own position in relation to government. This chapter examines how far the party political culture affects the pursuit of accountability.

The role of the MP

Every Member of Parliament must balance three overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, interests. These are representation of the constituency, supporting party policy and scrutinising the executive. The principal allegiance of most MPs is to their political party. Politicians are elected not as individuals but as representatives of a political party and on a set of policies contained in a manifesto. If their party is elected to government their task is to deliver those policies during the time in office.

The increasingly professional approach to politics by Members and their pursuit of politics as a career tends to emphasise the importance of the party. The first task of the career politician is to get re-elected and they are judged by party members when it comes to re-selection, and rely on the party machinery for their re-election campaign. After the last election the Labour Party issued a 'contract' to its new MPs (the vast majority of whom, by definition, were in the more marginal seats) which stated that if they contacted 100 voters each week (or 26,000 households by 2002) they would be accorded 'key seat status' at the next election.

Once in Parliament an MP's career will be shaped by the party. In the first place, the knowledge that party leaders and whips control appointments and awards encourages loyalty. The ambitious MP is likely to conceive a political career in terms of government rather than Parliament, aiming at joining the ministerial ladder at the earliest opportunity. The first step in developing a political career rests on the patronage of the whips, and being appointed PPS or being given a Shadow post relies on MPs displaying distinctly partisan qualities - toeing the party line, asking the right questions, scoring points off the opposition.

Political advancement is also principally a party matter, as there is no realistic parliamentary career. At present the select committees provide no extra remuneration and little extra status for their chairs and tend to be regarded as either a step towards office or a resting-place for ex-Ministers. The rapid turnover of MPs on select committees so far in this Parliament has highlighted the lure of office, particularly with high-profile backbenchers such as Home Affairs chair Chris Mullin giving up the post to become a junior Minister in the Home Office.

It is therefore difficult for MPs to balance their party role with the parliamentary task of scrutinising and holding government to account. Effective scrutiny will inevitably mean criticising and undermining the Government, but religiously toeing the party line undermines the efficacy of Parliament. It is a dilemma faced by politicians in many legislatures and one which is resolved usually - almost invariably - in favour of party.

Scrutiny, as such, is often regarded as a task for the opposition, rather than for government backbenchers. Research by the Study of Parliament Group shows that MPs tend to define their role according to their party's position in government or opposition. MPs were asked to rank the constituency role, influencing policy, supporting the party or scrutinising government, in order of importance. In 1994, the most important role for Conservative MPs was representing the constituency, and scrutiny of government the least important. By 1999 the constituency was the second most important role, after the scrutiny of government.
Adversarialism of the chamber

If political roles are largely determined by the party, they are reinforced by the structure of Parliament. The chamber is characterized by an adversarial relationship, the task of the opposition defined in terms of conflict, and procedures largely premised on the existence of two parties. The adversarial nature of proceedings combined with the dominance of government over the chamber determines the quality of scrutiny and accountability.

In so far as the task of scrutinising the executive is a job for the Opposition, its pursuit of accountability is circumscribed by the power of government. The Government is always likely to win a substantive debate by virtue of its superior numbers in Parliament. As such, although the conflict between the parties ensures that government is subject to critical debate, the dominance of a single party in the House ensures that the Government gets its way. There is little that opposition parties can do to constrain a determined government.

The main task for the Opposition therefore becomes less a matter of aiming for a meaningful form of scrutiny so much as criticising the Government, and where possible, opening up to public view flaws or mistakes in the decision-making process. The fact that Parliament has only a limited impact on policy outcomes, though, means that the media and others judge its effectiveness in terms of opposition. The complex task of securing accountability is defined in party terms, with voting a matter of political loyalty.

Parliament reinforces the partisan aspects of the MP’s job at the expense of the parliamentary duties. There is no corporate sense amongst MPs of the chamber’s role in getting ministers to account for their actions. As Weir and Beetham explain,

“Notably absent are those values enhancing detailed scrutiny and criticism of executive actions by Parliament. The chamber is a political force, and in so far as it is constituted, the collective. The dominant ethos of the Commons thus fragments MPs into either supporters or opponents of the government, into front-benchers or back-benchers, party loyalists or dissidents, and in each case asserts the primacy of the former over the latter. The idea of Parliament as a political force, or as a whole, is therefore simply a myth. Parliament in this sense simply does not exist.”

Reform could not, and should not, attempt to remove the adversarialism of the chamber. The party political battle is an essential part of the political process and, at its best, can crystallise public opinion during the most important debates. Unfortunately these occasions are rare. In general, the quality of debates is low. Members’ concern for petty point-scoring means that the underlying objectives of a debate are all too frequently lost.

A more effective Parliament would balance accountability with party politics. At present there is little space for cross-party activity, as most discussions (and particularly those where there is a substantive motion) are drawn along strict party lines. No reforms to the chamber will eradicate the adversarialism, but there should be clear opportunities for backbenchers from different parties to raise issues whose origin is non-partisan. These could be select committee reports or issues that have come to light through the constituency casework of a number of MPs.

Ministerial accountability

The pursuit of accountability is also undermined by the interplay of adversarial politics with the doctrine of ministerial responsibility. Government’s accountability to Parliament rests heavily on this doctrine. Yet it is overlaid with party politics and has tended to be conceived almost solely in terms of attaching blame. Since the Scott Report it has come under sustained criticism as opaque and incoherent, and failing to provide the proper means for allowing Parliament to hold government to account.

In the first place, because it is a political doctrine, as opposed to a legal one, there is no comprehensive or authoritative statement defining ministerial accountability. As such it is not clear what precisely individual ministerial responsibility means. The doctrine has been used as much to distort and obscure the accountability of ministers as it has to clarify it.
Sir Edward Bridges, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury at the time of the Crichel Down affair in 1954 set out the classical idea of ministerial accountability.

It is upon Ministers, and not upon civil servants that the powers of Government have been conferred; and it is Ministers - who are Members of one or other House of Parliament, whose dismissal from office Parliament can bring about if it so chooses - who are answerable to Parliament for the exercise of those powers. Save in special cases, not relevant in this context, civil servants have no powers of their own. They can take no decisions or do anything, except in so far as they act on behalf of Ministers, and subject to the directions and control of Ministers. The fact that Ministers alone exercise the ultimate powers of executive government and that they can be and are called to account both for their own acts and for those done on their behalf is our best safeguard against the abuse of those powers.42

However, this theory is based on the assumption that ministers are directly involved in the work of their departments. It rests on ministers taking full responsibility for everything that goes wrong in their departments and implies that Ministers can, in practice, be forced to resign by Parliament if something goes wrong in their departments. In practice, none of these things are true. It may have been possible in the early 19th century, but not by the end of that century, and it has certainly not been the case since the expansion of the welfare state this century. Modern government is so complex, and a Minister's functions so various, that Ministers must delegate most of them. Much of the work of each department is carried out with little reference to the Minister.

It is naive to believe that the resignation of ministers is dictated by personal culpability than party politicking. The single most important factor in avoiding resignation is maintaining the confidence of certain Members of Parliament, as the Public Service Committee inquiry into Ministerial Accountability notes.

Ministerial responsibility and resignation is not a formal matter, in which certain particular actions or omissions will result inevitably in a Minister's departure from government. A Minister's survival in his job depends primarily on the satisfaction of his Ministerial colleagues - particularly the Prime Minister - and of his fellow Members of Parliament. Parliament has no formal ability to remove a Minister; and members can only place pressure on him, and the rest of Government to ensure his resignation or removal. Many in the House may regard a Minister as personally culpable in one way or another for some mistake or mishap. But so long as his Ministerial and party colleagues are prepared to defend him, the chances of obtaining his removal are minimal. If he loses their support, however, his fall is inevitable.43

In the same era that Sir Edward Bridges was setting out the classic doctrine, Thomas Dugdale, an agriculture minister, resigned on the basis that he was taking responsibility for the mistakes of officials in his departments. In fact his resignation was 'for the age-old reason that he had lost the confidence of his colleagues.44

As part of the party political battle the opposition parties will attempt to attach responsibility to a particular minister because it is politically expedient to have a scapegoat, whether or not that minister could realistically be held responsible for an action. Resignation is more a reflection of battle between the parties than it is government accountability. Although at one level the purpose of accountability is to secure information, clarification and explanation from government, in a political context it is also a means of attaching blame and exerting pressure for change.

Performing this oversight role the chamber ensures that ministers are aware that they could be called to account. It should, therefore, keep ministers 'on their toes' and responsive to the wishes of Members of Parliament. In this sense the cut and thrust of the party political battle has a real value for Parliament and the public. In cases such as Westland, the Arms to Iraq affair and Sierra Leone the parliamentary debates reflected public concern, illuminated the issue and set the tone for a wider political debate. Although such debates may not result in ministerial resignation they can force government into giving a public account of its actions and defend its policy. The adversarialism of the Commons means that debates can generate wide public interest, expose the weaknesses (or strengths) of the party policy and highlight key political issues in their starkest form.
Yet this version of accountability is imbedded in the idea that culpability equals resignation. As such, the main sanction is for the opposition to call for a minister to resign. This may be suitable for dealing with issues of the scale of those highlighted in the Scott Report, but not every matter over which ministers should be called to account is a resigning matter.

This lack of proportion carries with it the danger that the public will simply become inured to the extremes of political debate if every government mistake results in the opposition demanding a sacrificial ministerial lamb. But, more importantly, this interpretation of ministerial responsibility loses sight of the purpose of holding ministers to account. Accountability should, in the long run, be about improving the performance of government, ensuring that mistakes are not repeated and that lessons are learnt. Evidence from Peter Shore to the Public Service Committee reflected these concerns:

'we undervalue accountability to Parliament and put far too high a premium on responsibility of Ministers'; 'the ability of Parliament to correct things as they go wrong seem to me to be, in the long-term, in the wider picture, much more important, frankly than being able to pinpoint blame on a particular minister'. We agree. Proper and vigorous scrutiny and accountability may be more important to Parliament's ability to correct error than forcing resignations.43

Conclusion: Politics with a purpose

The inadequacies of the current system are summarised by Weir and Beetham, who state that the idea of ministerial accountability to Parliament:

'pre-supposes that an assembly of some 560 non-ministerial MPs, overworked and under-resourced men and women with a conflicting variety of duties, of which scrutiny of the executive is just one, can ensure that ministers fulfill a duty of responsibility across the whole range of executive action. In fact such scrutiny is not a priority in a modern House of Commons, which is generally the creature of a government sustained firmly in office by a disciplined party majority. Frequently, it is not even a primary objective of the opposition parties, for they know very well that they can only rarely gain any direct advantage in Parliament from their activities there. The political reality is that ministers can generally avoid giving a full account of their or their officials' actions, and can rely on the loyalty, ambition and discipline of their party majority to ensure that no sanctions are applied to them...

In the chamber, because of the quality of party politics, attempts at accountability tend to lack subtlety, relying on the nuclear option of ministerial resignation. This is only likely to happen in the most extreme cases and in general, the debates tend to reinforce party divisions with each debate being seen as a test of government virility. More often than not the result is a foregone conclusion.

The adversarial style of politics means that it is aimed more at attaching blame than ensuring mistakes are corrected. This may be inevitable; it is a by-product of our electoral system and an integral feature of Westminster. Moreover, there is a value in highly-charged political debate if it illuminates a political issue, guarantees a high attendance and generates public interest. Parliament needs to combine the attachment of blame with a more iterative approach to accountability, identifying the causes of failure and ensuring that mistakes are not repeated.

However, the chamber provides very little space for substantive debates that cut across party lines. Although adjournment debates are mainly non-partisan, they have no substantive motion and there are few opportunities to discuss the cross-party work of the select committees or to call government to account for non-party political issues. The task is to find a way of bringing the politics of the chamber to the technical scrutiny of select committees, judicial enquires or other external investigations.
4 - A Parliament that works: Recommendations for reform

Improving the ability of the chamber to oversee the work of government requires a change in the procedure and the culture of the House of Commons. In both areas Parliament has been slow to adapt to changes in government and society, and MPs have shown too much attachment to tradition and convention. This, combined with the varying interests of Government and Opposition parties, and of backbench MPs with those of backbenchers, has stymied previous attempts at more radical reform. The result is a patchwork of incremental change with few guiding principles or long-term objectives. Recent reforms may have made Parliament more efficient, but they have not made it more effective.

In practice, any future parliamentary reform is likely to continue at a slow pace, but this should not prevent creative, long-term thinking about the role of Parliament. The recommendations focus on four main areas - sitting hours, the relevance of debates, parliamentary questions and training.

The proposals aim to

- clarify and enhance the role of the chamber. The measures will improve the mechanisms for information, clarification and explanation from government. Implicit in this is the belief that the chamber’s role is one of exercising oversight and not detailed scrutiny.
- provide incentives for MPs to participate and acknowledge the fact that there are numerous calls on MPs’ time other than debating in the chamber. The chamber should be reformed so that it complements the other parts of the MP’s work.
- improve public interest in Parliament and emphasise the importance of the chamber to political debate.

TIME’S UP - MODERNISING THE CHAMBER’S HOURS

The large number of new MPs elected in 1997 reinvigorated the long-standing debate about the hours of the House of Commons. The late start to the parliamentary day, the structure of business and the unpredictable late nights seemed to many an absurdity. Yet as Speaker Betty Boothroyd pointed out in her resignation speech, MPs should ‘be prepared to put in the hours necessary’ to scrutinise Government and ‘if that means long days, or rearrangement of the parliamentary year, so be it.” Although some would disagree with Boothroyd’s sentiments, for most backbenchers the arguments are not about shorter hours, but about a more effective use of the chamber’s time so as to improve oversight and accountability.

Part of the problem is that long hours are equated with effective scrutiny. This is not necessarily the case. Attempts by opposition MPs to keep the House sitting into the small hours and disrupt the Government’s business invariably result in the Government introducing a closure motion which cuts short debate, and thus acts against fulsome examination. It is often said that time is the Opposition’s only weapon, and although filibustering might occasionally provide the Opposition with a negotiating position, the returns are often marginal.

Late nights result in low attendance and little media interest. They devalue the often important work being carried out and, overall, work against proper examination of government activity and legislation. As the Modernisation Committee has noted, ‘it is a fact that the House still sits at hours which are not conducive to effective scrutiny’, the ‘hours bear little relation on occasions to the number of Members present or to the significance of the business being transacted.”

The hours should be revised to reflect the importance of the chamber so that the most important business is conducted on the floor of the House and so that these debates are well attended. The less important business should be moved into other forums, such as Westminster Hall or committees. The content value of what goes in the chamber needs to be assessed and the amount of time the chamber meets should be reduced accordingly. In highlighting the importance
of the chamber and changing the hours it meets, reform should also improve media interest.

Business should be timetabled

The biggest gripe amongst newer MPs is not the number of hours they are expected to work but their unpredictability. Not knowing when the day’s business will finish (or indeed when the House will go into recess) makes it difficult for MPs to get on with other work, fulfill constituency obligations or to plan ahead. Early on its work the Modernisation Committee noted the case for a more reliable timetable and although informal agreements between the parties have helped to reduce some of the irregularities, in July 2000 the committee put forward detailed recommendations for the formal timetabling of parliamentary business.

The principal benefits of timetabling are that it brings a greater certainty to parliamentary business (providing benefits for Government, opposition and individual Members), reduces the use of the guillotine and therefore improves the quality of scrutiny, and it allows the opposition to influence the structure of parliamentary scrutiny. Whilst there will be a need for some flexibility in its operation, to allow for unforeseen circumstances, all business should be timetabled.

Timetabling means that the Government is assured of getting its business by a set date and as such will bring a greater certainty than currently exists to the entire parliamentary year. The corollary of this is that the House should have fixed-length sessions, such as used in Canada. If business is timetabled at the beginning of the year, there is no reason why these timetables should not include (at least provisionally) dates for recess. Again, they would need to be applied flexibly to allow for exceptional circumstances but these changes would make MPs and Parliament more effective.

The problem of timetabling is ensuring that the needs of both Government and opposition are met. The Modernisation Committee split along party lines in their recommendations for the programming of legislation. The Conservative members argued that timetabling simply allowed the Government to secure the passage of too much badly drafted legislation and allowed insufficient scrutiny. However, it can be argued that every Government introduces too much bad legislation, and that timetabling will, at least, improve the chances of scrutinising more of each bill.

There is though a real concern about Government control of the process, especially as such decisions are taken in private via the ‘usual channels’. To address these concerns parliamentary business should be arranged by a ‘bureau’, such as that in the Scottish Parliament, consisting of the Speaker and the business managers from each of the main parties. The Government would still have a majority and would therefore be assured of getting its legislation, but it would give the Opposition a formal role in the management of business.

The chamber should meet for fewer hours each week

The side effect of timetabling business is that it will require a rigorous assessment of the value of what goes on in the chamber (either by a bureau or by the Modernisation Committee). As noted the trend of recent reform has been to move business from the floor of the House into other arenas. There is now more work being done in standing and select committees, and Westminster Hall has provided an alternative forum for debate. However, the effect has been to obscure the purpose of the chamber’s work, reduce attendance at debates and divert MPs’ attention elsewhere. There is a strong argument that the chamber should meet for fewer hours each week, but for a clearer purpose.

Conservative MP Andrew Tyrie has suggested that the chamber should meet one less day a week so that this day could be devoted to other parliamentary activity such as committee work. There is much to commend this idea. There are numerous demands on MPs’ time, but the sittings of the chamber make few allowances for this - the House sits in almost permanent plenary, so that the chamber is not the prime focus for the Parliamentarian’s work but provides a backdrop for other activity - be it committee, constituency or Westminster Hall. This is in marked contrast to other legislatures where the bulk of the work is generated by the committees, and MPs then
meet in a plenary session to debate that work and question ministers.

More business could be shifted from the floor, such as moving more non-substantive debates to Westminster Hall and the committee stage of all bills into standing committees. However, it is not clear that these changes alone would create enough time to allow the chamber to meet less often. There needs to be a more systematic evaluation of the use of time in the chamber. The value of many debates is questionable, and it may be that debate is no longer the most effective way of carrying out parliamentary business. As the Norton Commission recommended there should be a greater number of shorter, sharper debates so that, for instance, some Second Reading debates could conclude early.52 (Such suggestions are examined in more detail below.) There is also scope for shortening recesses and extending the parliamentary year to accommodate this change.

Reducing the hours of the chamber each week would require its role to be clarified. This clarification would raise the status of its work, improve attendance and make the chamber more of a focal point for MPs' other activity.

The chamber should meet earlier in the day
The modernisation of hours should also take account of the needs of the media. The chamber’s sittings are out of kilter with the rest of society, so that they work against any meaningful coverage of Commons activity. Historically, the House of Commons has been notoriously slow in adapting to the requirements of the press (especially compared with the House of Lords) and despite the objections of some parliamentarians, this is a problem for Parliament, not the broadcasters.

There are precedents though for altering Commons procedure to improve coverage. The introduction of standing orders in 1902 moved Question Time to earlier in the day so that, according to Balfour, then Leader of the House, proceedings may be reported in the newspapers that have currency in the country.53 The House needs a similar shift now. Whereas the Government machine, and many individual MPs, are attuned to media requirements, Parliament is not. Government announcements are trailed in the press and on the Today programme, so that by the time the minister makes a statement the House is already aware of its content. The House should sit earlier in the day and allow for morning statements from ministers.

Most press conferences tend to take place at around 10.30 in the morning. By opening the chamber at 10.30, ministerial announcements could be made at the start of the day. The House would need to be informed the previous day that the Government intended to make such an announcement. This would not differ greatly from the current system where the vast majority of statements are indicated to journalists at the Monday morning lobby briefing.

The system would be likely to ensure greater coverage of the statement, by providing TV pictures for the news bulletins, but also improve coverage of the opposition’s point of view. The present system of ministerial announcements at 3.30, followed by a press briefing at 4.30 means that the opposition’s view is rarely covered in much detail. It is very unlikely that such a change would prevent the trailing of government initiatives, but it would lower the incentives, give Parliament a greater role and would mean that the chamber became the focal point for political activity.

The morning sittings would also allow the House to finish earlier in the day and improve the chances of the media covering other parliamentary activity. In the past objections to morning sittings were that they would prevent MPs from getting on with constituency or committee work, and ministers work in their departments. However, if the chamber sat for one less day a week such problems would be alleviated. Alternatively, committee work could be re-arranged so that they sat in the early evening or in recess. For most ministers, the pressures of their work means that most attend the chamber only when they are obliged.
IMPROVING PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Regardless of whether the hours of the chamber are revised, the value of what goes on in the chamber does need to be assessed. There is scope for making much of the chamber's proceedings shorter, sharper and more to the point. Although it is important for the Commons to deal with subjects at length and in detail, it is not clear that six-hour debates make for rigorous analysis. They generate little public interest, and the lengthy contributions of some MPs combined with the limited opportunities for participation make them equally unattractive to other backbenchers. The content of many debates is dictated more by party politicking than scrutiny, and contributions are often more for the benefit of parliamentary colleagues than the public good. Consequently, engagement with the real issues is seen to be overshadowed by political point scoring simply for its own sake.34

More statements, fewer debates
In the first instance, the principal tool of the shadow cabinet, the Opposition Day Debate, is not regarded as a particularly effective weapon in holding the government to account. MPs should have more opportunities for short debates on substantive issues. A common feature of European legislatures is the 'interpellation' or 'short debate' where an opposition party (or an equivalent number of MPs) can call a debate on a topical issue. The system obliges a government minister to attend and provide an official statement on a matter of public concern. The debates are more substantial than adjournment debates in that they cover important topical issues and generate a high level of attendance. The closest equivalent in the Commons is probably Standing Order 24, which allows for emergency debates. However, the practice is very rarely used. In the 1998-9 session there were only three applications for a debate, none of which were successful.

The key is to provide opportunities for MPs to introduce topical and substantive issues, which allow a number of MPs to participate. In this vein, the Norton Commission recommended experimentation with 'unstarred questions', a practice used in the Lords allowing for 90-minute debates, and also 60 minute 'emergency debates'. Both suggestions would improve the quality and topicality of debates in the chamber.

However, debates have a limited value in holding government to account and it may be more effective to extend existing arrangements in the Commons for questioning ministers and calling for ministerial statements. The first recommendation is that opposition parties should be able to trade some of their Opposition Days for the chance to call for statement on a topical issue. At present Opposition parties have 20 days (or 120 hours) of debating time on issues of their choosing. A straight trade of hours for ministerial statements would probably be unacceptable to government. Ministers are rarely present throughout Opposition Days, it would dramatically increase the amount of time they had to spend in the House, and the ability to question a minister for an hour is arguably more valuable than three hours of debate. It would need to be on a ratio therefore of, say, four statements for one full day's debate. The main opposition party would be able to trade a quarter of their time (five days) for twenty extra statements. This, in turn, would reduce the hours of the chamber.

This extra time could be used for the second recommendation in this area - greater use of Private Notice Questions. Given that scrutiny is a task for all MPs and not just the opposition, PNQs have an advantage over Opposition Days. The current rules governing the use of Private Notice Questions mean that few are permitted and most go to frontbench MPs or Privy Councillors. The solution may be to use the ten extra hours created by trading ODDS for statements for PNQs. There would therefore be an upper limit on the number of PNQs, but this 'space' would increase their likelihood of being granted. The decision would still be at the discretion of the Speaker, and the practice relatively infrequent, but along with other changes they may be a more effective weapon for the backbench MP.

Public interest debates
The chamber should also complement other spheres of MP activity. A very high proportion of MPs regard the constituency as their most important role and, for Parliament and the
Government, the constituency experience of Members is an important valve for alerting MPs to policy failure. MPs knew about the problems of the Child Support Agency and the Passport Agency long before they were debated in Parliament, but there were limited opportunities to raise issues on substantive motions. Adjournment debates tend to be sparsely attended and deal with parochial issues, whilst Opposition Day means that important issues can be obscured by political point-scoring. There should be specific provision for ‘public interest debates’ motivated by policy failure or maladministration on a broad scale (as opposed to constituency-specific concerns).

MPs should have the opportunity to call a short debate and require a ministerial response on such issues where there is a clear case of policy failure. These would be similar to the emergency debates under SO 24, but they should be specifically linked to the concerns of constituents. The trigger for such debates would be a specific number of MPs (it is suggested between 150 and 200) drawn proportionately from all the parties. The cross-party requirement would prevent their abuse by pressure groups or manipulation by the whips. The system would effectively allow Early Day Motions to force a debate, but given the number of signatures and the cross-party balance, they would only happen in the rarest of cases.

Debates on committee reports
In a similar vein the chamber should also reflect some of the valuable work done by MPs in committees. The thrust of most parliamentary reform has been to turn Westminster into a more committee-based Parliament. The chamber should reflect the importance of this work. There should be a weekly opportunity to debate reports of select committees. At present, they tend to be debated only during adjournment debates and get little interest from those outside the committee. One suggestion made by the Liaison Committee was to allow a select committee report to be introduced once a week after questions for half an hour.53 Allowing this period would not greatly affect the business of the chamber, and given that this is a period when the chamber has a good attendance it would put the work of the committees more fully into that of the chamber.

Time limits and order of speakers
In addition, to provide greater incentives for MPs to attend the chamber there should be time limits on the length of debates and the contribution of individuals. The Speaker already has the power to impose such limits but a standard time limit on every contribution would encourage a more effective debating style, ensure the participation of more MPs and make the discussions generally more accessible. Provisions would have to allow for ‘injury time’ where the speaker gives way for other’s interjections. Following Lords practice there should also be an ordered list of speakers chosen in advance so that MPs know whether they are likely to be able to participate.

IMPROVING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
The existing system of questions is one of the more effective ways in which MPs can hold Government to account. They are well attended and allow many MPs to participate. Yet there remain problems in the topicality of many questions, the length of time between tabling questions and a response, and the quality of many answers.

Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs)
Prime Minister’s Questions receives a great deal of criticism for its overly-adversarial style, and as such, the desire for accountability is often sacrificed for point-scoring. The format of PMQs fosters this approach. Open-ended questions mean that the PM cannot be certain which questions he will be asked and although this keeps the PM on his toes, it tends not to provide detailed, thoughtful or substantial responses. The gladiatorial atmosphere means that the questions aim to embarrass, and the PM’s reply designed to worst his opponent.

The recommendations of the Procedure Committee in 199556 should be implemented. The committee recommended that open-ended questions should be abolished. Any questions relating to the PM’s engagements would be ruled out of order by the Speaker. Members would
give notice of their intention to ask a question ten days in advance. As now, a ballot would decide the MPs, but MPs would table their (substantive) question by noon two days before PMQs. Supplementaries would have to relate to the original question. This would improve the topicality of PMQs, and provide a greater obligation for the PM to provide a detailed response.

However, changes made to PMQs may not dramatically improve parliamentary oversight. PMQs is dominated by point-scoring between the political parties and too deeply embedded in the adversarial tussle for any reforms to entirely remove this element. Despite its serious deficiencies as a mechanism of scrutiny PMQs has a value in distilling some of the key political issues for consumption by the public at large. For good or ill it provides the most memorable moments of political theatre and is more effective than any other parliamentary mechanism in providing a focus for the public. There are few other countries where the Prime Minister is regularly questioned on a weekly basis.

Although improvements should be made, the equally important task is to bolster the accountability of the emerging Prime Minister's department to the select committees. The centre of government is becoming increasingly important in determining policy across a range of departments. Although the Committee on Public Administration (CPA) is responsible for scrutinising the work of the Cabinet Office, much of the work of the Prime Minister and the No 10 policy unit goes unscruinised. Attempts to get the Prime Minister to appear before the CPA at the end of the 1999-2000 session failed, but it is worth reiterating the recommendation made in Systematic Scrutiny by Alex Brazier[57] that the Prime Minister should appear before a select committee to give evidence on a regular basis.

Oral Questions

As the Norton Commission report notes, during departmental Question Time there is a tendency to try to get through as many questions as possible. The Commission argues that 'the emphasis should be on depth rather than breadth, allowing the House to pursue a particular question in some detail.' The effect of syndicating questions by whips around particular policy issues has been to allow prolonged questioning, but the motivation for this is almost entirely party politics and not a quest for accountability.

Reform should aim to create a dialogue between the ministers and MPs, to allow a subject to be more fully investigated. Following the recommendations of the Norton Commission, and aiming to minimise the number of planted questions, no more than ten questions should appear on the Order Paper for each Question Time and no duplicate questions should be allowed. Each question would be pursued for five to eight minutes, with any MP able to ask a supplementary question on the subject.

The topicality of the questions also need to be improved, but the two-day notice period for PMQs would not be suitable for Question Time given the greater number of questions and the level of detail which will be expected from ministers. As such, the period of notice should be reduced from ten working days to five.

Written Questions

Concerns about the system of written questions revolve almost entirely around the quality of answers from departments. The Committee on Public Administration (CPA), and its predecessor the Public Service Committee, raised their concerns about the standard of ministerial replies to questions. The committees questioned the use of blocking and holding replies, and the lack of recourse open to an MP if they are not content with the answer.

Official guidance given to civil servants answering PQs stresses that departments should be as open as possible. Yet refusals to answer questions, although helpfully published in the Table Office's 'pattern of answering', are frequently not fully explained by departments. Evidence to the CPA from David Clark, then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, suggested that the Freedom of
Information Act might be an easier way to get information than a parliamentary question. This combined with the availability of information on the internet means that the common argument of disproportionate cost becomes less convincing. If ministers are to be held to account in Parliament the reasons for not answering must be made more transparent, so that a denial of information is accompanied by a reference to the relevant section of the Code of Practice on Open Government or the Freedom of Information Act.

It is further recommended that where departments send a holding answer, they should indicate the date by which an answer will be provided, the reason for the delay and the telephone number of the official preparing the answer, so that the Member concerned may discuss with him or her the nature and timing of the answer.

TRAINING

Underlying the success of any reforms will be a change in the attitude of MPs. One of the biggest stumbling blocks is that prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs) are prepared only by their political parties to represent the party and constituency. Many enter Parliament with little idea of how the place works, or what is expected of them inside the Palace of Westminster. For new MPs (and many older hands) the procedures are arcane and nonsensical.

If MPs are to be effective in holding Government to account they should have a better understanding of their role, the role of Parliament and the procedures available to scrutinise government. The party political training of candidates shapes the context of debate in the chamber and undermines Parliament's attempts at accountability. It needs to be counter-balanced by training stressing the 'corporate' role of Parliament. The House authorities should provide an obligatory induction course for new MPs and regular and ongoing training for all MPs about the role of Parliament and changes to Parliamentary procedure.

CONCLUSION

In her farewell speech as Speaker, Betty Boothroyd expressed her concern about the low public perception of Parliament, but described the chamber as 'the chief forum of the nation - today, tomorrow and, I hope, for ever.' If it is to retain that role it needs to be reformed so that it performs its core tasks more effectively. The chamber is the one place where the Government is legitimately called to account on behalf of the public, yet other mechanisms are superseding Parliament in this respect. The media, the courts and a host of Commissions and regulatory bodies stand in judgement over Government performance and the delivery of public services. Parliament needs to reflect these changes so that it draws on and complements the work of these other bodies. The chamber should be at the centre of political debate, but to do so it must address the question of what it is for and thereby clarify its role, improve its procedures and reflect more closely the public interest.

Footnotes
1 The concept of a 'working Parliament' comes from comparative political science literature. It is used to distinguish committee-based Parliaments, such as that in Germany, from the chamber-dominated Westminster Parliament. For examples see Norton, P (Ed) (1998b), Parliaments and Governments in Western Europe, Frank Cass: London; Muller, W.C., & Saffield, S. (Eds) (1997), Members of Parliament in Western Europe, Frank Cass: London; Saffield, T, Government and Politics: in Sakwa, R., & Stevens, A. E. (Eds.), (2000); Contemporary Europe: An Introduction, Macmillan: Basingstoke, chapter 6
2 Liaison Committee: (1999-2000), First Report, Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive, HC 100
3 Public Service Committee, (1995-6), Second Report, Ministerial Accountability and Responsibility, HC 3131
5 Amery, L. (1947), Thoughts on the Constitution, p. 12
6 Dunleavy, P. et al (1995), 'Leaders, Politics and Institutional Change' in Dunleavy, P & Rhodes, R.A.W., Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive, p. 276
7 Whereas between 1946 and 1961 there were never more than two guillotine motions per session, in 1988 there were 12 and in 1998 there were 14. This does not though reflect a linear increase: for example there were only two motions in 1991, none in 1995, one each in 1996 and 1997. However, there is a general trend towards greater use.
8 Select Committee on Procedure, First Report, (1977-8), HC 589-1, para I.5
9 The Modernisation Committee published their report on timetabling the work of the chamber in July 2000. Its recommendations are discussed in chapter 4.
13 The rise of 'interchanges' or short debates, which can be initiated by a political party or equivalent group of MPs, is an important part of parliamentary democracies such as Germany, Portugal and Belgium. They are examined in more detail in the final chapter.
14 Norton, P. (1998a), op cit, p. 10
16 Riddell, P., op cit, p. 162
17 Times, 16 Feb 2000.
18 For example, the Speaker upbraided sports minister Kate Hoey on 5 April 2000 for announcing policy initiatives on the Today programme. H. Deb. 5 April 2000, col. 167.
20 ibid. p. 39
22 Attendance was recorded at 2.45 and 8pm on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday at 11am and 2pm on Thursday, and at 10am on Friday.
23 The figure shows one week's business taken at random during the summer of 2000.
26 Some of the more parochial debates in May 2000 included economic development in the Isle of Wight; the seaside chemical industry and mental health services in Saxon.
27 In recent years the number of government adjournment debates each session has been as follows: 1994-5: 26; 1995-6: 33; 1996-7: 11; 1997-8: 36; 1998-9: 27.
28 Norton, (1998b), op cit, p. 23
30 H. Deb. 29 April 1999, col. 487
33 The most extreme example of recent times is probably the publication of the Scott Report; when shadow Foreign Secretary had only a few hours to digest a document which (including appendices) ran to five volumes and more than 2,000 pages.
34 Select Committee on Public Administration, (1997-8), Fourth Report. Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions. HC 820, para 1
35 Riddell, P. Early to bed isn't the point. Times. 7 July 2000
36 Unstarred Questions provide the opportunity for a short debate on a substantive motion. Unlike the backbench adjournment debates they tend to focus on broad political issues, allow many peers to participate and therefore often generate a high turnout.
38 Power, G. op cit, p. 13
39 Norton, P. (1998), op cit, p. 194
40 Evidence submitted to the Commission from Professor Michael Rush, Exeter University.
41 Weir, S. & Beetheman, D. op cit, p. 376
42 Quoted in Public Service Committee, (1995-6), Ministerial Accountability and Responsibility. HC 313-L para 8
43 HC 313-L (1995-6), para 22
45 HC 313-L (1995-6), para 26
46 Weir, S. & Beetheman, D. op cit, p. 367
47 HC deb. 26 July 2000, col. 1114
48 HC 60 (1998-9), para 27
49 Select Committee on Modernisation, (1997-8), First Report. The Legislative Process, HC 190
50 HC 589 (1999-2000)
51 Tyrer, A., op cit, p. 58
54 Rt Hon Barry Sheerman MP, Speaker's resignation statement. HC deb. 26 July 2000 col. 1114
55 HC 300, (1999-2000), para 40
56 Select Committee on Procedure, (1994-5), Seventh Report, Prime Minister's Questions. HC 555, para 61
58 Norton Commission, op cit, p. 27
59 HC deb. 26 July 2000, col. 1114
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