



House of
Commons

Issued by the Speaker and the Deputy
Speakers

Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons



November 2023

Introduction

This guidance has been agreed by the Speaker and Deputy Speakers and is intended to help Members, particularly those new to the House, in understanding the behaviour expected in the Chamber of the House of Commons and in Westminster Hall.

While open to change, these rules are important in maintaining the good order of proceedings and the civility of debate – so that all Members are able to participate and be heard with respect.



Applying to speak in debates

1. Members wishing to catch the Speaker's eye to speak in a debate in the Chamber should write to the Speaker in advance. Members should also write if they wish to speak in a Westminster Hall debate of an hour or more in length. If Members have not written in, they may still seek to take part in a debate by approaching the Chair or trying to catch the Chair's eye during the debate, but those who have written in advance will usually be called first. Adding a name to a notice of motion or amendment is not enough to indicate an intention to speak: even if their name is on a motion a Member should still inform the Speaker's Office if they wish to take part in a debate.
2. Members should write in advance to indicate a wish to speak on the second or third readings of bills. It is not necessary to do so for Committee of the whole House, report stage or consideration of Lords Amendments.
3. The informal and unpublished list of those who have given notice is used by the Chair to calculate the length of any time limit on speeches and determine the order in which to call speakers. If circumstances prevent a Member from attending a debate for which they have indicated a wish to speak, they should inform the Speaker's Office at the earliest opportunity of their wish to withdraw their name or speak directly to the occupant of the Chair on the day in question.

4. Selection of speakers in debate is at the discretion of the occupant of the Chair. The Chair cannot, however, predict precisely when a Member might expect to be called. The objective at all times is to give all Members a fair opportunity to take part in debate. The Speaker and Deputy Speakers will take account of relevant experience or expertise (in or outside the House, including on select committees where particularly relevant), Members' expressed interests or constituency involvement and the number of times they have previously spoken (or have sought to speak but not been called) during the Session.

Attendance in debates

5. Once a Member has written in to request to speak, they are under an obligation to turn up in the Chamber for the start of the debate and should plan to be present for most of it. Debates in the Chamber should be an exchange of views. If a Member is hoping to be called to speak in a debate, they must be present for the opening speeches. After they have spoken they must, as a very minimum, remain in the Chamber for at least the next two speeches and must also return to hear the winding-up speeches from both the Opposition spokesperson and the minister at the end of the debate. Members who fail to observe these courtesies will be given a lower or no priority on the next occasion they seek to speak. Where there are no formal wind-ups Members must still be present for a reasonable proportion of the debate, and for the conclusion of the debate. If Members are not present for opening speeches or leave the Chamber directly after them without notifying the Chair, it will be assumed that they do not wish to participate in the debate.

Length of speeches

6. The Chair may impose time limits on speeches in order to give as many Members as possible the opportunity to contribute to a debate. It will not always be possible for every Member who has indicated a wish to be called to speak. The Chair will not call a Member after the wind-up speeches have concluded, even if there is time remaining.
7. Even if time limits are not imposed, Members should speak with reasonable brevity and be mindful of others. Brevity in debate will give other Members a greater opportunity to speak and increase the chances of being called early on the next occasion on which a Member seeks to speak. Opening speeches should be of a length which takes account of the numbers wishing to participate and the time available. For Backbench Business debates this should be 10 – 15 minutes, with an additional 2 minutes also permitted for the final contribution from the Member in charge.

Interventions

8. Members may intervene briefly in someone else's speech, but only if the Member who has the floor gives way. If the Member makes clear that they are not giving way, Members must resume their seats. An intervention should relate directly to what has just been said and not be a short speech of its own. Particularly where there are time limits in operation, Members should be conscious of the impact of multiple interventions on the chances of others getting the opportunity to participate. It is a discourtesy to others to make an intervention shortly after arriving in the Chamber, and to leave again shortly afterwards. At the very least a Member must have been present for the whole of any speech that they seek to intervene in. Excessive interventions may prejudice the chances of being called to speak.

End-of-day adjournment and other half-hour debates

9. Half-hour adjournment debates in the Chamber are intended to be an exchange between the Member who has the debate and the Minister. Other Members may make a speech in the debate only with the permission of both the Member and Minister concerned, secured in advance of the debate. If such permission is granted, the Chair must be notified. These restrictions apply also to half-hour debates in Westminster Hall, but not to longer debates there. They may be disapplied in the Chamber, at the Chair's discretion, if an adjournment debate starts unusually early.
10. Members are not required to get agreement in advance before making an intervention in speeches in these debates: it is entirely up to the Member who has the floor whether to accept a request to intervene. But opposition frontbenchers may not intervene in their shadow capacity in either the backbench or ministerial speech in a half-hour adjournment debate, even if it starts early and therefore lasts longer than half an hour. The same applies in half-hour Westminster Hall debates. A Member who intervenes at any point in such a debate should remain in the Chamber for the entirety of it.

Question time

11. Before question time or ministerial statements, Members should only write to Mr. Speaker seeking to be called when they wish to draw to his attention a particular fact (for example, a constituency connection or personal interest), which might properly be taken into account. Members who submit generalised requests to be called will not be given priority.

12. A request to be called at Prime Minister's Questions should be submitted only in the most exceptional circumstances. (An example might be where a particular personal tragedy has occurred in connection with a constituent). Generalised requests to be called at PMQs will be counterproductive.
13. Questions must be brief, and particularly so during topicals. Members may make use of notes but may not read out a question word for word. Supplementaries must be relevant to the substantive question just asked.
14. A Member who has asked an oral question, must not leave the Chamber until all supplementary questions on that question and two subsequent substantive questions (including any relevant supplementaries related to those questions) have ended. Frontbenchers are expected to remain for the whole question session.

Statements and urgent questions

15. If a Member wishes to be called to ask a question following a ministerial statement, urgent question or the business question, they must be present for the whole of the opening statement.
16. Government and Opposition frontbenchers must keep to the time limits set by the Speaker for statements and urgent questions. Frontbench spokesmen must remain present till the end of questions on the statement or urgent question.
17. If a Member is called by the Speaker to ask an urgent question, that question should be asked in the terms that were agreed when the application was accepted. It should not be embroidered. Supplementary questions must take no longer than two minutes. Unsuccessful applications for urgent questions are private between the Member and Speaker and should not be mentioned inside or outside the Chamber.

Participation

18. The Speaker's Office keeps comprehensive records of Members' success and failure in being called in debate, following ministerial statements, urgent questions and at Prime Minister's questions. These statistics are always taken into account on subsequent occasions when deciding whom to call.

Speaking in the Chamber

19. To be called to speak a Member must be seated within the formal limits of the Chamber (the Chair does not call Members sitting on the crossbenches below the bar).
20. Members should face the Chair when addressing the House. It is discourteous to turn one's back to the Chair. It also means that words may be lost. The television cameras and microphones covering proceedings for broadcast have been placed to give the clearest coverage of Members whilst addressing the House through the Chair, and the Official Report (Hansard) relies on the feed from these microphones to record what is said accurately. This applies equally to those speaking from the Despatch Box.

Listening to debates

21. Whether seated in the Chamber or standing behind the Chair or elsewhere Members must take care that private conversations or observations on debate do not disturb proceedings or make it difficult to hear whoever is speaking.

22. Members should remember that the TV cameras do not focus only on the person speaking but also broadcast occasional reaction shots during debates and question time.
23. When listening to a debate Members may not spend longer than a brief period on their phones or electronic devices. Devices should not be used for correspondence and should be used discreetly. Books or newspapers should not be read in the Chamber.

Use of electronic devices

24. The House has agreed to the use in the Chamber of some hand-held electronic devices provided that they cause no disturbance and are not used in such a way as to impair decorum. **Their use should be confined to enabling participation in debate.** They may be used in place of paper notes in debate and may be consulted when Members are not speaking but they must not distract from the debate taking place or make it look as if Members are not listening. All such devices must be in silent mode and the taking of telephone calls or listening to voicemails in the Chamber is strictly prohibited, even during divisions. Members are also prohibited from using laptops in the Chamber.
25. Members must not use any device to take photographs, film or make audio recordings in or around the Chamber.

Parliamentary language

26. Members should always bear in mind Erskine May's advice in *'Parliamentary Practice'* that "good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language".

27. There is no hard and fast list of unparliamentary words. Whether something said is a breach of order depends on the context. The Speaker deprecates personal remarks about other Members. Any abusive or insulting language used in debate will be required to be withdrawn immediately. Accusations of deliberate falsehood or direct criticism of the conduct of a Member of either House may only be made on a substantive motion. No such accusations or criticism should be made in the course of other proceedings: if they are, they must be withdrawn immediately.
28. The privilege of freedom of speech in debate – that is, the protection against civil action or criminal sanction for what is said in proceedings of the House – allows us to conduct our debates without fear of outside interference. But it is a freedom which should be exercised responsibly, in the public interest and taking into account the interests of others outside this House. Members should research carefully and take advice before exercising this freedom in sensitive or individual cases. Similarly, Members should take care to avoid referring to cases which are active before the courts, unless the Speaker has specifically agreed to waive the House’s sub judice resolution.
29. Members must always address the House through the Chair. It is wrong to address another Member as ‘you’. This is not just an archaic convention. It is essential in maintaining the civil tone and objectivity of debate. It also avoids personal attacks as opposed to political criticism. As “You” means the Chair, other Members should not be addressed as ‘you’, but should be referred to as:
- ‘the honourable Member for [constituency] (for a Member on the opposite benches)’
 - ‘my honourable friend (for a Member on your side of the House)’
 - or perhaps ‘the honourable Member opposite’ (where the context makes clear to whom you are referring).

Note that:

- Privy Counsellors are ‘right honourable’.
- Ministers may be referred to by office or as ‘the Minister’.
- “Learned” (for QCs) and “gallant” (for those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces) have largely fallen out of use.
- The House of Lords may be referred to as “the House of Lords” – there is no requirement to call it “the other place”.

References to the Gallery

30. While it is no longer considered out of order to make reference to visitors in the Public Gallery any such reference should be brief and very relevant to the debate. Members must never directly address visitors in the Gallery.

Dress

31. As with the language used, the way in which Members dress should demonstrate respect for their constituents, for the House and for the institution of Parliament in the life of the nation. Members are expected to wear business attire in and around the Chamber. Jeans, chinos, sportswear or any other casual trousers are not permitted. T-shirts and sleeveless tops are not business attire. Smart/business shoes are expected to be worn. Casual shoes and trainers are not appropriate. Men are expected to wear a tie and jackets must be worn. It is a privilege to serve as a Member of Parliament and dress, language and conduct should reflect this.

32. Wearing scarves, T-shirts, or large badges displaying brand names or slogans, or other forms of advertising of either commercial or non-commercial causes, is not in order. The tradition of the House is that decorations (medals, etc) of any kind and uniforms are not worn in the Chamber.
33. Members who fail to show respect to the House will not be called to speak by the Chair, and anyone showing flagrant disrespect in their manner of dress may be asked to withdraw from the Chamber.
34. Members are not required to wear business dress if only attending to vote in a division but in those circumstances may not enter or stand within the Chamber between divisions.

Courtesies and conventions in the Chamber

35. On entering or leaving the Chamber, Members are expected to give a slight bow to the Chair, as a mark of respect to the House. The same courtesy should be extended to the Chair in Westminster Hall and the Chair of a public bill, delegated legislation or European committee.
36. Members may not cross the line of sight between the Speaker and the Member who has the floor or, at Question Time, between a Member asking a question and the Minister responding to him or her.
37. When the Chair stands all other Members must resume their seats (or be standing outside the speaking limits of the Chamber – beyond the bar or behind the Chair) and be silent.

38. Singing and chanting are not permitted in the Chamber. Clapping is also not allowed. As the Modernisation Committee has pointed out, “there is a danger that such a practice might be open to abuse and could lead in certain circumstances to orchestration of what would amount to standing ovations with the success or failure of a speech being judged not by its content but by the relative length of the ovation at the end”.
39. When the Chair is preparing to collect the voices for the second time during a division and name the tellers, other Members may not pass between the Chair and the tellers until the tellers have departed for the lobbies.
40. When the tellers are ready to announce the result of a division, Members must either resume their seats or stand outside the speaking limits of the Chamber (beyond the bar or behind the Chair). The result must be heard in silence.

Bags

41. Space in the Chamber is limited. Laptops, rucksacks, newspapers, briefcases and extra-large handbags may not be brought into the Chamber. Only small bags are permitted.

Food and drink

42. Food and drink may not be consumed in the Chamber, unless the Chair has been alerted that it is required for genuine reasons of health. Water is permitted.

Accompanying children

43. Babies and toddlers may be taken into the division lobby, and – if necessary to get to the division lobby – taken through the Chamber. For safety reasons Members are asked to carry children and not to bring pushchairs through the lobby. Members may not take a seat in the Chamber when accompanied by a child, nor stand at either end of the Chamber, between divisions.

Courtesy to each other

44. Members must inform colleagues in advance whenever:
- It is intended to refer to them in the Chamber (other than making passing reference to what they have said on the public record)
 - A question is to be tabled that specifically affects a colleague's constituency
 - A Member intends to visit another colleague's constituency (except for purely private purposes).

All reasonable efforts should be taken to notify the other Member and failure to do so is rightly regarded by colleagues as very discourteous.

45. It is important that Members can raise matters with the Speaker freely so correspondence with the Speaker is confidential unless agreed otherwise.
46. Members, their staff, and House staff work together to make the House of Commons function effectively. This work is typically undertaken in a constructive manner and there is clear commitment on the part of the House of Commons Commission to ensuring that everyone is, at all times, treated with dignity, courtesy and respect in line with Parliament's Behaviour Code.

47. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) is a support service for anyone experiencing bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct on the parliamentary estate and/or while carrying out parliamentary work. The scheme is available to staff employed by or working for the House of Commons, House of Lords, or Parliamentary Digital Service, staff working for MPs and Peers (including constituency staff), MPs and Peers, as well as contractors employed by external organisations who hold a parliamentary pass and visitors on the Parliamentary estate.
48. All members of the Parliamentary community can call the ICGS Helpline, for free at 0808 168 9281 (Text relay: 18001 0808 168 9281). Working hours are 9-5 Monday-Friday. The helpline can also be contacted by e-mail (support@ICGShelpline.org.uk). An advisor will support anyone contacting the ICGS Helpline by talking with them about their experiences. The advisor will then provide guidance through options for dealing with the behaviour, including the option to make a formal complaint. These conversations are confidential.

Advice

49. The Clerks at the Table are available to assist all Members, and Members should feel free to approach them for advice – either at the Table or in the offices in the corridor at the back of the Chair.

