



Hansard Society Briefing Note

The Modernisation Committee report on *Revitalising the Chamber: the role of the back bench Member* and the Procedure Committee report on *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*

Vote on motions in the Commons to be held on Thursday 25 October

Key Points

- The Hansard Society has long argued for changes to enhance the role of MPs. We believe that improved scrutiny by Parliament makes for more effective government.
- It is important that individual MPs are able to make the most of opportunities to improve government accountability to Parliament. Consequently, we support moves towards improved inductions for new Members, greater topicality for parliamentary debates and publicising the work of the Chamber.
- This briefing note provides background information on Hansard Society proposals and research relevant to the debate on Thursday 25 October.

Modernisation Committee – *Revitalising the Chamber: the role of the back bench Member*

1. The Hansard Society welcomes the Modernisation Committee's report, which proposes reforms to enhance the role and impact of backbench MPs and to encourage their greater impact within Parliament. We support moves to make the Chamber more topical and to encourage Members to devote their time and energy to scrutiny and debate.

Topical Questions:

2. The Hansard Society strongly supports increased topicality during Question Time, which we believe is vital if Parliament is to reflect better the concerns of the public.

Debates – topical and urgent:

3. The proposals will provide more opportunities for topical debates, something which is welcome. However, we would argue that mechanisms to allow these debates should not be determined primarily by government. Equally, the provision for urgent debates should be kept under review as the proposed guidelines may not be sufficient to make a difference.

Debates – General:

4. The Hansard Society has proposed that the House of Commons should make specific provision for ‘public interest debates’ motivated, for example, by major policy failure or maladministration. There should be ministerial responses to these debates. The trigger for such debates would be a specific number of MPs (maybe between 100 and 200) drawn proportionately from all parties. The cross party requirement would prevent potential 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 this would only happen in a small number of cases. The current motions for debate on 25 October do not include such mechanisms, which we believe would further strengthen the impact of the back bencher.

Speakers and speeches:

5. The Hansard Society welcomes the proposal to give the Speaker discretion to impose time limits for front bench speakers and more discretion in setting and revising time limits on speeches. We support allowing greater opportunities for back benchers to contribute to debates. The Hansard Society has found evidence that current procedures can discourage back benchers from engaging in the work of the House.

Private Members’ Motions:

6. The Hansard Society agrees with the Modernisation Committee that there should be more opportunities for back bench Members to initiate business. We welcomed the Modernisation Committee’s proposal to experiment with Private Members’ Motions and regret that the Government has not supported this recommendation. We will continue to put forward proposals for change in this area, in order to allow back benchers greater access to the parliamentary agenda.

The role of the Member:

7. The Hansard Society supports moves to further publicise the work of the Chamber. The report of the ‘Puttnam Commission’ (the Hansard Society’s independent Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy) called for the modernisation of parliamentary communication and the establishment of a Communications Service.

Learning the ropes

8. The Hansard Society welcomes attempts by the Modernisation Committee to improve the induction process for new Members. Hansard Society research has found that there is probably less preparation, support and training for MPs than for any comparable professional position. The most recent intake of MPs told us that there is scope to improve the information given at the outset on procedures and processes. Similarly, hiring staff and running an office requires more knowledge and understanding about the administrative side of Parliament.

9. The Hansard Society supports the Modernisation Committee recommendations to improve co-operation between the political parties and the House authorities in the provision of an induction programme. In particular, we agree that the House authorities should provide an overall framework for an induction programme in order to avoid clashes in timetabling between the parties and the House Authorities, as occurred in 2005. The Hansard Society has reservations about the Government’s response to these

recommendations – namely, that official programmes of the House should work around the parties' induction processes.

Using the gap between election and the Queen's Speech:

10. The Hansard Society welcomes the Government's support for the induction process and its acceptance that a longer break may be required between the General Election and the Queen's Speech to allow time for an adequate induction programme.

Supporting continuous development and information for Members:

11. The Hansard Society is pleased that the Modernisation Committee has acknowledged the importance of continuous development and providing greater training for Members in areas relating to procedures. Hansard Society evidence has shown that MPs would welcome greater support.

Procedure Committee - *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*

Petitions Committee:

12. Public petitions are one method by which the House of Commons can engage more systematically with the public. However, at present the methods for presenting petitions to Parliament, and their subsequent consideration by Parliament, are not satisfactory. We therefore welcome changes to improve the system, including those being debated on 25 October. However, these changes do not include the establishment of a Petitions Committee, an innovation that the Hansard Society has consistently supported.

13. A Petitions Committee would assess the merits of the petitions and the issues arising and, if appropriate, make referrals for further consideration, including:

- through a short debate (in the main Chamber or Westminster Hall);
- by referral to a select committee for an inquiry or evidence session;
- by enabling individual Members to speak on behalf of the Petition in the chamber;
- through a referral to a government department for a formal response.

14. A Petitions Committee would provide a clear mechanism by which the public would be able to make a case to influence the parliamentary agenda as well as a means of mediating connection between the public and government.

Early Day Motions:

15. As discussed in paragraph 4, a more effective way for EDMs to make an impact would be to allow them to trigger debates if certain thresholds were reached.

For further information: If you would like any further information on this subject, or have any feedback on this paper, please contact Alex Brazier, Director, Parliament and Government Programme (a.g.brazier@hansard.lse.ac.uk), telephone 020 7438 1211 or Gemma Rosenblatt, Research Fellow, Parliament and Government Programme (g.rosenblatt@hansard.lse.ac.uk), telephone 020 7438 1219.

**Hansard Society
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