

No 28

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Revised December 1997

The normal sitting time for the House of Commons is nowadays 2.30 pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, and 9.30 am on Wednesdays and Fridays: the Wednesday sitting is interrupted from 2 to 2.30 pm. The hour for rising is 10.30 pm during the week. On Fridays it is 3 pm: this is generally approximately adhered to, though later sittings are not unknown. (When the House began to sit at 9.30 on Fridays, the Government gave an assurance that the Government would only ask the House to sit beyond the usual time in special circumstances of urgency and importance.) However, on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays there is frequently a motion down under SO No 15 to suspend the Standing Order (No 9) relating to the hour for business to end and to extend the business, either until any hour, or to a specified time, or for a certain time after it has been started. It is the first of these which gives rise to late sittings. There are certain Fridays (currently ten in number) on which the House does not sit.

Some items are automatically exempt by the provisions of Standing Orders either for specified periods or without limit. Instances of these are the proceedings on Statutory Instruments ("prayers" are taken no later than 11.30pm), European Community Documents, or other items in furtherance of an Act of Parliament (90 minutes), money resolutions on Bills (45 minutes or to 10.45 pm), any Bill brought in under a Ways and Means Resolution (eg Finance Bills and other Public Bills dealing with taxation, etc), without limit, Bills subject to the provisions of a timetable order (see *Factsheet* No 22), and (extremely rarely) debates on Petitions (SO No 155) complaining of urgent personal grievance, without limit.

The commonest use of Motions exempting business until any hour is to provide time for the Report Stages of Bills (and for Committee Stages, if the Bill is in Committee of the Whole House). The main debates on Second Reading, Opposition Days, Estimates Days, and general debates on Government motions and on motions for the Adjournment are generally (but by no means necessarily) concluded at 10 pm, though other business may be put on afterwards.

Every day, the last half-hour of the sitting is allocated for an Adjournment Debate, with a Member raising a matter and the Minister responsible replying. Should the main business of the day end before 10 pm, the whole time between its conclusion and 10.30 pm is available for this debate: should it end substantially before 10 pm, another Member or Members may attempt to secure the agreement of a Minister to raise a second or third Adjournment Debate on an additional subject, or other Members may contribute to the scheduled debate.

If the House sits beyond the normal time of sitting the next day, the business scheduled for that day falls. Since 1985, however, Questions down for written answer have not been "wiped out". On occasions in the past, it has been a deliberate tactic to speak in an extended manner on exempted business in order to cancel out the following day's sitting: this can be countered by the Government moving the Closure, or (in the case of a Committee Stage) that the Chairman do report progress.

In the 80s and 90s the House could be reckoned to be likely to sit after the 10.30 pm cut-off on about eight out of ten sitting days (Fridays excluded). The average time of rising on Mondays to Thursdays varied little over those decades with sessional averages ranging from 11.51 pm to 12.35 am. Appendix I gives some relevant figures. The average sitting length varied between eight and a half and nine hours: it has not changed very much from the 1920s (eight to eight and a half hours).

Very long sittings occur relatively infrequently. Appendix 3 gives all sittings since records began which have lasted more than 24 hours. It was not until the later 19th century that really long sittings were experienced: in the eighteenth century, the record was a 19-hour sitting (inclusive no doubt of a meal break) on the Westminster election in 1741. One of the debates on the Great Reform Bill on 18 December 1831, a noon Saturday sitting, lasted until 1.15 am on Sunday morning. The record for a Saturday sitting was for many years that on 18 May 1794 when the House sat until 3 am discussing the Detention of Suspects Bill; but on 15 March 1884, the sitting which began at noon on the Saturday did not finish, unexpectedly, until 5.45 am on the Sunday.

Short sittings are also not unknown - the shortest in recent years being 1 hour 19 minutes on Friday 26 October 1979. The shortest ever is reputed to be Friday 25 November 1910, when the House sat for nine minutes.

It was an aim of the sittings hours reforms of December 1994 to reduce the overall length of time sitting and in particular to minimise the occurrence of very late nights.

TIME OF MEETING

Strangely enough, the House's sitting hours have undergone almost a complete reversal over the centuries. In the 16th century, the House sat in the mornings, and afternoons were reserved to the work of Committees, whereas nowadays the mornings are the times for many Committee meetings, and the afternoons and evenings the main meeting hours of the House itself.

Before 1570, the House met from 8 am to 11 am or noon, and a 7 am meeting time was the norm from 1571 to the Civil War; in 1604 a sitting starting at 6 am was recorded - the earliest ever.

Between 1650 and 1700, the hours of sitting were fixed from day to day: the House met usually at 8, 9 or 10 in the morning. Between 1702 and 1769, the hour was 9 am, and between 1770 and 1806, 10 am. However, from about the third decade of the 18th century, this theoretical meeting hour was largely ignored, and sittings in fact began in the afternoon, often about 3 pm (it being necessary to swear in any new Members before 4 pm, the time then required by law). Sittings in the 17th century had been early mainly because of the general tenor of business, and the difficulty of conducting any work towards evening and the hours of darkness. The cry, *Who goes home?*, which still resounds through the Palace of Westminster when the House rises, is traditionally supposed to derive from the need of Members to return together across unlit countryside or in boats on the river to the City of London. In practice, 17th century business often finished by midday or soon after. The times of sitting were also to some extent dependent on the accepted hour for taking of meals: after the Civil War period, for instance, the midday main meal time became later - instead of noon, it came to be taken at about 2 pm.

From 1760 to 1833 (for public business) and 1835 to 1845 (generally) the House usually sat at 4 pm; in 1833 and 1834, the House sat at 12 noon, met until 3 pm to consider Petitions, and then reconvened at 5 pm for the main business of the day. The latest time ever appointed for the House to meet is thought to be 10 pm, on 11 August 1853 (this was to enable Members to attend the Spithead Naval Review).

From 1845 to 1888, the time for sitting was 4 pm, except on Wednesdays (12 noon). This latter time was established by a resolution in 1846, and by Standing Order in 1852. From 1867 to 1888, the sitting time on Tuesdays and Fridays became often, but not exclusively 2 pm, with a two hour suspension between 7 and 9 pm. In the earlier 19th century, an unofficial adjournment in sittings which went on into the evening was the rule: this enabled the Speaker to have dinner, and was known as *the Speaker's Chop*. The need for this diminished after a deputy to the Speaker was appointed in the mid-1850s.

From 1888 to 1902, the daily time of sitting was 3 pm, but this was varied after 1902 so as to provide for afternoon sittings at 2 pm and evening sittings at 9 pm (providing an approximate 90 minute break for dinner) on Mondays to Thursdays and sittings at noon on Fridays. The Monday-Thursday time was further varied to 2.45 pm. with effect from 24 April 1906: this continued until the Second World War, except that the Friday time became 11 am from October 1939. In 1939-40, Monday and Friday sittings were rare - a similar situation had obtained in the 1914-18 war.

From 18 September 1940, the House met at 11 am and sat until 6 pm every day (Monday-Friday), in order to save fuel: as from 14 March 1945 the times became 2.15 pm on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, (and Mondays from June 1945) and 11 am on Fridays. From 30 April 1946 the Monday-Thursday time became 2.30 pm, which it remains: the Friday time became 9.30 am with effect from 25 January 1980 (as part of a package of reforms; see *Factsheet* No 3).

On 1 February 1967, morning sittings on Mondays and Wednesdays, between 10 am and 12.30 am, were instituted, but abandoned later the same year. They were replaced by a provision, but has not been invoked since 1969, whereby a Minister could move that the sitting be suspended, and proceedings re-started the next morning. Whilst the morning sittings lasted, it was provided that no division could take place during them, and that the House might not be counted out for lack of a quorum.

In 1991, a committee to consider revising the sitting hours were established to review the current practice and suggest changes. On 19 December 1994, the House agreed to meet every Wednesday at 10am [from 1995-96, at 9.30 am] to take Private Members' debates (see below).

WEEKEND SITTINGS

The House at one time sat regularly on Saturdays. It is recorded that the demise of Saturday sittings began in 1732 through the influence of Sir Robert Walpole that he "*might secure at least one day's hunting a week*". Such, perhaps is the origin of the weekend, which spread eventually to the public life of most of the world. It was reinforced from the later 19th century, when Fridays no longer saw long, or very important, debates, and adjournment was at 5.30 pm (hence Gilbert's satire in *Iolanthe* about the "cherished rights" enjoyed on Friday nights). The weekend habit was much reviled by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who accordingly sought to reverse the Friday arrangements in 1906. This proposal the House firmly rejected. During the nineteenth century, Saturday sittings were uncommon, but were provided for as a matter of course until 1861 unless the House approved a motion to the contrary. This century, however, there have been only 21 Saturday meetings, almost all in the first decade of the century.

Those within the last 60 years are:-

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 2 September 1939 | (outbreak of World War II) |
| 30 July 1949 | (summer adjournment debates - last sitting of the summer) |
| 3 November 1956 | (Suez crises), and |
| 3 April 1982 | (Falkland Islands invasion) |

The only Sunday sitting this century was on 3 September 1939. The House had also met on Sundays on 4 May 1856, 22 May 1887 and 20 June 1897, but these were to attend church services relating to the Peace Treaty with Russia and Queen Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilees, respectively. It met on Saturday 30 January 1965 in St Paul's Cathedral, for Sir Winston Churchill's funeral, but this did not constitute a sitting of the House.

SITTINGS ON PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

The House does not nowadays generally sit on public holidays. In the past, however, it has certainly done so, especially in the Commonwealth period (*e.g.* on Christmas Day 1643 and 1656, and Good Friday [23 April] 1641). It sat on Easter Monday in 1689 and in 1913; for August bank holiday, see below.

DURATION OF SESSION

In the 17th and early years of the 18th century Parliament would be assembled in October or November for the King's Speech (as for instance in 1605 when the Opening was due for the 5th November); and commonly sat until spring. In the later eighteenth century, the sittings often lasted into May, and in the nineteenth, the rising date extended more and more into the year, eventually reaching August.

Deprecating the growing practice of sitting into the summer, a Member (Mr, later Sir Charles, Forster) in 1858 bemoaned the fact that Parliament used always to "rise by the King's birthday in June". Now "under the influence of a July sun, ... measures often left the House in a crude and imperfect state". (The influence of the sun on the putrid Thames in June and July 1858 led to Members debating with open windows covered by bleach-sprayed curtains.)

At the same time, the pre-Christmas session was abandoned, and a typical year's business in the later nineteenth century began with the Queen's Speech in early February, with a week or so in recess for Easter - sometimes sitting on Easter Monday, as in 1913. A week or ten days recess at Whitsun ensued. The House sat on into August, not necessarily adjourning for the Bank Holiday Monday, until the middle of the month, when Parliament would be prorogued until the end of October, and then prorogued again until early December, and then again to February. It will be noted that the House did sit into the "grouse and salmon season" as threatened in *Iolanthe*, but not throughout it, save in unusual years such as 1895. In 1909, the House sat right through the summer, dealing largely with the "People's Budget". When business was pressing, as in 1926, the autumn months were sitting months, too.

From 1928-29, a reversion was made to the practice of meeting before Christmas. That year, the King's Speech took place on 6 November instead of in January or February as previously. (This had been tried and abandoned in 1890-91.) Apart from election years, this has remained the pattern to the present day. The present (and recent) pattern has been for the House to adjourn for the Summer Recess about the end of July, and only rarely to sit beyond the first week of August. It is a common myth - but one which has no foundation in fact - that the Queen's Speech will not be made on 5 November. It did, in fact, take place on this date in, *eg*, 1957. Appendix 2 gives Queen's Speech dates of recent years.

The decision as to when to take recesses is the House's - made pursuant to the terms of a motion proposed by the Leader of the House. But in practice the Leader of the House announces the recess dates two or so weeks in advance, at the same time as making a weekly Business Statement. The pattern of the year's business is usually as follows:-

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| November - | Queen's Speech |
| Late December/Early January - | Christmas recess , commonly about 2 or 3 weeks |
| Spring - | Easter recess , usually the Bank Holiday and following week except if Easter is late in April, when the week before Good Friday is common |
| May Day Bank Holiday | Recess - one day only |
| May - | Recess for Late Spring Bank Holiday and following week (rarely, two weeks) |
| Summer - | Recess from the third or fourth week of July (occasionally into August) usually until mid-October |
| Autumn - | Most often a spill-over sitting generally of 1-2 weeks, followed by Prorogation ; alternatively (and only rarely), no spill-over and commensurately earlier following Queen's Speech |

In 1991, the Leader of the House began to make advance announcements of target dates for the start of recesses up to four months in advance, but this by no means became an invariable practice.

RECESSES AND RECALLS

Periods when the House is not sitting are commonly called *recesses*, though they are perhaps more correctly termed *adjournments*. The House normally adjourns for a Recess in accordance with the terms of a motion (debatable for up to 3 hours) which it has passed before the Recess, naming the days of adjournment and resumption. If, however, Ministers represent to the Speaker that the public interest requires either an earlier meeting than the day intended, or a meeting on any weekend, the Speaker may give notice of an earlier sitting. This is permitted by SO No 13, which dates from 1948, and has been used 17 times:-

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 27-9 September 1949 | (Devaluation) |
| 12-19 September 1950 | (Korean War) |
| 4 October 1951 | (Prorogation - followed by dissolution) |
| 12-14 September 1956 | (Suez Crisis) |
| 18 September 1959 | (Prorogation - followed by dissolution) |
| 17-23 October 1961 | (Berlin Crisis) |
| 16 January 1968 | (Government Expenditure Cuts) |
| 26-27 August 1968 | (Czechoslovakia, Nigeria) |
| 26-29 May 1970 | (Prorogation - followed by dissolution) |
| 22-23 September 1971 | (Northern Ireland) |
| 9-10 January 1974 | (Fuel) |
| 3-4 June 1974 | (Northern Ireland) |
| 3 (Saturday) and 14 April 1982 | (Falkland Islands) |
| 6-7 September 1990 | (Kuwait invasion) |
| 24-25 September 1992 | (Government economic policy; UN operations - Yugoslavia, Iraq, Somalia) |
| 31 May 1995 | (Bosnia) |

OTHER ADJOURNMENTS

In the 19th century, the House often adjourned over Derby Day when that did not fall in the Whitsun Recess. This was a settled practice of Palmerston and in the 1860s and 70s was moved for by the Government. The last such occasion was in 1891, when the motion to adjourn was carried by 139 votes to 109. The following year, 1892, it was defeated by 158 votes to 144, but on Derby Day the House was inquorate when counted, on three separate occasions. The motion was not made after 1896. In the 19th century, the House often adjourned over Ash Wednesday or sat at a later time, to allow Members to attend church services.

The House has also adjourned or not sat on the occasion of deaths of the Royal Family, or of eminent statesmen. Indeed, it is a settled practice for the House to adjourn on the death being announced of a former Prime Minister; and on 12 May 1994 the House adjourned following the death earlier that day of the Leader of the Opposition - the Rt Hon John Smith QC. It has usually not sat on the occasions of Royal weddings, coronations, jubilees, etc. The House does not generally adjourn on the death occurring of a Member. It did however on 31 May 1878, when Mr Wykeham Martin (MP for Rochester) died suddenly in the Library.

In July 1991, a Select Committee was appointed to review the hours of sitting of the House and the arrangement of the parliamentary year. In its Report (HC 20 1991-92), published in February 1992, it recommended, *inter alia*, morning sittings on Wednesdays, a certain number of non-sitting Fridays, a more regular 10 pm close, and dates of recesses to be known further in advance. The House subsequently held two general debates on the Report - on 2 March and 13 July 1992, and on 20 June 1994 the subject was raised during an Opposition day debate.

THE CHANGES OF 19 DECEMBER 1994

On 19 December 1994, the House considered six motions relating to sitting times, which were agreed to. The main thrust of these motions was as follows:

a) **Time-saving measures generally**

Consolidation Bills not to require a committee stage; Third Reading to be taken formally

Bills giving effect to Law Commissions' recommendations to be referred to Second Reading Committee

Statutory Instruments subject to the affirmative procedure generally to be referred to Statutory Instruments (now Delegated Legislation Standing Committees)

Question to be put after 90 minutes on EC documents or proceedings under any Act of Parliament, except for deregulation orders

In addition: -

The Leader of the House announced the following changes, which did not require a Sessional Order: -

Second Reading Committees - Greater use to be made by agreement between the parties

Whips to agree which SIs and prayers should be debated on Floor of House. Government will agree to reasonable Opposition requests for affirmative instruments to be taken on floor

Government will '*use best endeavours*' to avoid late sittings wherever possible, give early notification of recesses and advance notice of the dates of some major debates

Second Adjournment debates will be discontinued

Procedure Committee to consider arrangements for 'set piece' debates

Where appropriate, time to be allowed for debates to be fixed by business motions agreed between the Whips and approved in advance by the House

b) **Sitting days**

From 25 January 1995:-

House not to sit on eight Fridays in Session 1994/95 (10 since 1995/96)

House to meet every Wednesday at 10 am (9.30 am in 1995-96) and hold timed adjournment debates, decided by ballot, until 2.30 pm: 2 subjects to be discussed 10.00-1.00 and three 1.00-2.30

Private Members' Fridays to be confined to Bills. No further Private Members' Motion Fridays (and thus the attendant possibility of Bills being passed 'on the nod' at 2.30pm on such days was ended)

Recess Motions (limited to 3 hours since 1982) to be taken forthwith without debate (but time to be made available, from 1995-96, in place of certain timed Wednesday adjournment debates, to raise matters 'requiring attention before the adjournment'.

Consolidated Fund Bills - all-night series of Adjournment debates on a timed basis following proceedings on these bills, had been inaugurated on 19 July 1982. These were abolished. Proceedings on these bills were to be entirely formal

Money Resolutions and Ways and Means Resolutions on Bills had been debatable, the former for 45 minutes, the latter without time limit. To save time they will henceforth be debatable (max 45 min for both) if raised at a time other than immediately after 2nd Reading

c) **Short speeches**

The House first agreed on 31 October 1979 to empower the Speaker to limit speeches to 10 minutes between 7 and 9 pm on certain types of business. This was revised so as to allow limitation at any time to any type of business.

It has been the intention of the writer of this *Factsheet* to bring together a number of facts about the practice of the House on its sittings. Much has been necessarily excluded, but further information can be provided by the Public Information Office on request.

We acknowledge with many thanks the assistance of the Journal Office of the House of Commons in commenting on a draft of these notes.

C C Pond
July 1984
Revised December 1997

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December 1997 No 28 Ed 15 Pr 1 500
ISSN 0144-4689

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Providing information on the work, history and membership of the House of Commons

DURATION OF SESSIONS AND LENGTHS OF SITTINGS

The number of sitting days in each session since 1979-80 was as follows:

| <u>Session</u> | <u>Number of sitting days</u> | <u>Average length of sitting (including Fridays) (hours: mins)</u> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| 1979-80 (long session) | 244 | 8:55 |
| 1980-81 | 163 | 9:07 |
| 1981-82 | 174 | 8:08 |
| 1982-83 (short session) | 115 | 8:34 |
| 1983-84 (long session) | 213 | 8:59 |
| 1984-85 | 172 | 9:06 |
| 1985-86 | 172 | 8:57 |
| 1986-87 (short session) | 109 | 8:32 |
| 1987-88 (long session) | 218 | 9:00 |
| 1988-89 | 175 | 9:04 |
| 1989-90 | 167 | 8:48 |
| 1990-91 | 160 | 8:35 |
| 1991-92 (short session) | 83 | 8:23 |
| 1992-93 (long session) | 240 | 8:03 |
| 1993-94 | 154 | 8:10 |
| 1994-95 | 159 | 8:16 |
| 1995-96 | 146 | 8:45 |
| 1996-97 (short session) | 86 | 8:21 |

(short and long sessions are the result of General Elections being called other than in the autumn).

The average session length in recent decades is 165 days; the average sitting length is over 8¾ hours.

APPENDIX 2

DATES OF STATE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT

| <u>Session</u> | <u>Date</u> |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| 1986-87 | 12 November (Wednesday) |
| 1987-88* | 25 June (Thursday) |
| 1988-89 | 22 November (Tuesday) |
| 1989-90 | 21 November (Tuesday) |
| 1990-91 | 7 November (Wednesday) |
| 1991-92 | 31 October (Thursday) |
| 1992-93* | 6 May (Wednesday) |
| 1993-94 | 18 November (Thursday) |
| 1994-95 | 16 November (Wednesday) |
| 1995-96 | 15 November (Wednesday) |
| 1996-97 | 23 October (Wednesday) |
| 1997-98* | 14 May (Wednesday) |

* following General Election

SITTINGS OF OVER 24 HOURS

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Main item of Business House sat</i> | <i>Time House rose</i> | <i>Time Hours/Minutes</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-------------|--|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| 31.7.1877 | South Africa Bill | 16.00 (Tues) | 18.15 (Wed) | 26.15 |
| 31.1.1881 | Protection of Person & Property (Ireland) Bill | 16.00 (Mon) | 09.30 (Wed) | 41.30 |
| 30.6.1882 | Prevention of Crime (Ireland) Bill | 14.00 (Fri) | 20.00 (Sat) | 30.00 |
| 19.7.04 | Finance Bill | 14.00 (Tues) | 15.35 (Wed) | 25.35 |
| 20.3.07 | Consolidated Fund Bill | 14.45 (Wed) | 17.36 (Thur) | 26.51 |
| 22.7.36 | Unemployment Assistance (Determination of Needs, etc.) Regulations | 14.45 (Wed) | 01.04 (Fri) | 34.19 |
| 11.6.51 | Finance Bill | 14.30 (Mon) | 22.16 (Tues) | 31.46 |
| 13.7.67 | Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill | 14.30 (Thur) | 14.59 (Fri) | 24.29 |
| 12.6.69 | Divorce Reform Bill | 14.30 (Thur) | 14.41 (Fri) | 24.11 |
| 24.7.75 | Remuneration Charges and Grants Bill | 14.30 (Thur) | 16.56 (Fri) | 26.26 |
| 21.6.77 | Price Commission Bill | 14.30 (Tues) | 21.33 (Wed) | 31.03 |
| 28.7.77 | Consolidated Fund (Appropriation) Bill | 14.30 (Thurs) | 15.19 (Fri) | 24.09 |
| 4.8.80 | Consolidated Fund (Appropriation) (No.2) Bill | 14.30 (Mon) | 14.51 (Tues) | 24.21 |
| 1.4.81 | British Telecommunications Bill | 14.30 (Wed) | 15.30 (Thur) | 25.00 |
| 22.5.84 | Local Government (Interim Provisions) Bill | 14.30 (Tues) | 22.43 (Wed) | 32.12 |
| 5.3.85 | Water (Fluoridation) Bill | 14.30 (Tues) | 20.46 (Wed) | 30.16 |
| 10.12.86 | Teachers' Pay and Conditions Bill | 14.30 (Wed) | 16.38 (Thurs) | 26.08 |
| 10.11.87 | Felixstowe Dock & Railway Bill (Private Bill) | 14.30 (Tues) | 20.55 (Wed) | 30.25 |
| 14.6.88 | Housing Bill | 14.30 (Tues) | 20.01 (Wed) | 29.31 |