No 52

SOME TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Revised July 1999

There are a number of traditions and customs employed in the House that the House of Commons Information Office is frequently asked to explain. Some of these are ceremonies or aspects of official dress; these are described in Sir Peter Thorne's *Ceremonial and the Mace in the House of Commons* (HMSO, 1980). This ***Factsheet*** concentrates on certain practices and traditions that are not primarily ceremonial in nature. Many of these are unrelated to each other, and the ***Factsheet*** is therefore necessarily rather diffuse. But it is hoped users of the series will find it valuable to have descriptions of them readily accessible.

Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee

A Select Committee to recommend the modernisation of the processes of the House was established after the 1997 General Election, and has made a number of reports since. Some of the House's tradition and customs have been changed following the recommendations of this Committee, and it is possible that others may be affected in the future. The most important from the point of view of this ***Factsheet*** is the Committee's 4th report of 1997/98, *Conduct in the Chamber* (HC 600, 1997/98) (the Committee is hereafter known as the Modernisation Committee).

1. Description of Members in the Chamber

During debate in the Chamber, Members refer to each other only by the name of their constituencies or by their official position, not by their actual names. The only time (apart from calling to speak) when these are used is the disciplining (or "naming") of a Member by the Speaker (see *Section 6* below).

In general, the description used is "the Honourable Member for . . .". However, Privy Councillors (senior Ministers, past or present, and other senior Members) are "the Right Honourable Member for ... ". Less frequently heard these days are "the Noble Lord, the Member for ... ", which is used for a Member with a courtesy title (*e.g.* the son of a duke, marquess or earl) who sits in the House of Commons, or an Irish peer, "the Honourable Baronet for ... ". Following recommendations made by the Modernisation Committee the House agreed that "some of the embellishments which are added to the standard form of address, such as "gallant" (used for Members who have been commissioned officers in the forces) and "learned" (used for Members who are senior barristers) should be abandoned". Often the constituency is omitted, and a Member will be described as "the Honourable Member who spoke last", "the Right Honourable Lady opposite", "the Honourable Member below the gangway", etc. In most cases *Hansard*[1] will expand these phrases into the form "the Honourable Member for Ockendon (Mr Bloggs)" in order to avoid ambiguity in the printed record of debates. Ministers are usually described by their titles (e.g. "the Secretary of State", or "the Minister" or as "the Right Honourable Gentleman, the Prime Minister" etc).

[1] The Official Report of the proceedings of the House of Commons – see also ***Factsheet 42 – The Official Report, House of Commons***

Members of the same party are most often called "my Honourable (or Right Honourable) friend", etc. From time to time, some have inferred political messages from the use, or non-use, of these terms. The use of these formulae is of long standing, and was certainly the general rule at the time of the first reliable verbatim reports over 150 years ago. The purpose of this style of address using "Honourable" is to maintain the dignity of the House and its Members, to make criticism and comment less direct, and to reduce the asperity of debate, as well as showing respect to the Chair. A Member persistently offending against the tradition, and using "you" or a Member's name, is likely to be corrected by the Speaker and to be interrupted by shouts of "order" from other Members. Members do, however, sometimes inadvertently omit "Honourable": this often goes unchallenged, but is always corrected by *Hansard*. "You" refers to the occupant of the Chair alone, who is traditionally addressed as "Sir" when a man, "Madam " if a woman.

People outside Parliament often think that the use of "Honourable" in the Chamber translates into the style of address to be used when writing to Members. It should be stressed that this is not the case: in the UK, unlike certain other Commonwealth countries, a Member is simply addressed as "Henry Smith MP", or "Ms (Mrs) Jane Smith MP"; not "the Hon Henry (or Jane) Smith MP"; this last would be used only for the son or daughter of a peer who was not entitled to any other courtesy title. A few Members of both sexes have requested that no title be used (*e.g.* Jennifer Jones MP, ... "Dear Jennifer Jones").

Former Members are sometimes referred to by their names or as "the previous Member for ... ". Members of the House of Lords may be referred to by name, or as "my noble Friend the Minister for ... ". The House of Lords itself is usually called in debate "Another place", or "the other place" (this appears to have been a nineteenth century development, and was a commoner usage in the Lords than in the Lower House at that time). Previous practice that recent speeches in the Lords could not be quoted in the Commons, unless they were ministerial statements, was abandoned after the Modernisation Committee's report.

2. How Members are called

Members may speak only if called by the Chair. They are called by name, and must sit down if the Speaker rises to his or her feet (e.g. to call for order, or to interrupt the debate). To catch the Speaker's eye, Members commonly rise or half-rise from their seats, but if they are not called, they have no redress. They may, of course, write or speak in advance to the Speaker or her staff to indicate their desire to be called during a particular debate. The Speaker is likely to give precedence to prior requests but no guarantee can be given if the subject is a popular one. Until 1998 Privy Councillors were given precedence in debate, but this was abolished following the Modernisation Committee's recommendations.

In asking a Question, the Member, once called, replies merely "Number one, Madam" (referring to the numbering of the Question on the Order Paper). He or she does not read out the text of the Question.[2]

3. Prayers

Each sitting of the House begins with prayers. Members stand for prayers, facing the wall behind them - a practice which has sometimes been attributed to the difficulty Members would once have faced of kneeling to pray whilst wearing a sword. The Speaker's Chaplain, who is usually the incumbent of St Margaret's Westminster, the House of Commons church, reads the prayers, though in his or her absence another member of the clergy of the Church of England may deputise. A woman minister has occasionally so deputised. On rare occasions, in the absence of clergy, the Speaker has read the prayers. The form of the main prayer is as follows:-

[2] See also ***Factsheet 46 - Questions***

"Almighty God, by whom alone Kings reign and Princes decree justice, and from whom alone cometh all counsel, wisdom and understanding; we thine unworthy servants here gathered together in Thy Name do most humbly beseech Thee to send down Thy Heavenly Wisdom from above, to direct and guide us in all our consultations: And grant that, we having Thy fear always before our eyes, and laying aside all private interests, prejudices and partial affections, the result of all our counsels may be to the glory of Thy blessed Name, the maintenance of true Religion and Justice, the safety, honour and happiness of the Queen, the publick wealth, peace and tranquillity of the Realm, and the uniting and knitting together of the hearts of all persons and estates within the same, in true Christian Love and Charity one towards another, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour."

Since 1997, an additional prayer has been used the day after the death of a Member has been reported to the House.

Although information on the origin of daily prayers is sketchy, it is believed that the practice of having such prayers started about 1558, and was a settled practice by 1567. The substitution of fixed forms for extempore prayer and the appointment of a clergyman to read them appear to have been developments of the 1580's or later. The present form of prayers probably dates from the Restoration.

4. Where Members sit and speak; the form and style of debate

By convention, Ministers sit on the front bench on the right hand of the Speaker: the Chief Whip usually sits in this row immediately next to the gangway. Elder statesman and former Prime Ministers have often sat on the first front bench seat beyond the gangway. Parliamentary Private Secretaries usually sit in the row behind their minister. Official Opposition spokesmen use the front bench to the Speaker's left. Minority parties sit on the benches (often the front two) below the gangway on the left, though a minority party that identifies with the Government may sit on the right-hand side. There is nothing sacrosanct about these places, and on sundry occasions, when a Member has deliberately chosen to occupy a place on the front bench or on the opposite side of the House from normal, there is no redress for such action. Indeed, the latter may happen when a large Government majority means there are too few places for its supporters on its own side. "Crossing the floor", which has come to mean permanently changing party, is possible but naturally very uncommon. If a Member leaves one opposition party to join another, he or she may well not *literally* cross the floor, but would sit with their new party when they next entered the Chamber. A few Members (for instance John Horam, Reg Prentice and Alan Howarth) have served as ministers in governments of both major parties.

Members may speak only from where they were called, which must be *within the House*: that is, in front of the Chair, and not beyond the Bar (the white line across the width of the Chamber). They may not speak from the floor of the House between the red lines (traditionally supposed to be two sword-lengths apart). They may speak from the side-galleries, but due to the lack of microphones there is a strong disincentive from doing so. Also, the Speaker will not call a Member in the Gallery if there is room downstairs. They must stand whilst speaking, but a disabled or incapacitated Member is naturally allowed to address the House seated.

The style of debate in the House has traditionally been based one of cut-and-thrust; listening to other Members' speeches and intervening in them in spontaneous reaction to opponents' views. It is thus very different from the debating style in use in some overseas legislatures, where reading of set-piece speeches from a podium or from individual desks is much more often the norm. This style of debate can make the Commons Chamber a live, rather noisy place, with robustly expressed opinion, many interventions, expressions of approval or disapproval, and sometimes of repartee and banter.

There is, of course, a fine line to be drawn between vigorous debate and forthright expression of views, and the deliberate attempt to intimidate an opponent. Members have the right, when speaking, to be heard without unendurable background noise (deliberate or accidental), and the Chair will call for order if it appears there is an attempt to drown out a Member or, for instance, when a number of Members are leaving the Chamber, or conversing loudly. The Speaker also has the right to inform a Member who has failed to observe the courtesies of debate that he or she need not expect to get priority in being called to speak. But successive Speakers have taken care not to bridle the traditional vigour and forthrightness of the expression of opinion in the House, for the style of the House of Commons has never thrived on excessive politeness and restraint. The profound deference towards Ministers and Prime Ministers apparent in some overseas parliaments is generally lacking in the Commons.

To maintain the spontaneity of debate, reading a prepared speech is not allowed. Not every Member, however, is a good extempore speaker, so copious notes are allowed. Notes are not permitted at all in putting Supplementary Questions, although the absolute ban on direct quotations has recently been lifted. Ministers, however, have notes on possible supplementary questions, drawn up by their Civil Servants.

5. Unparliamentary language

Language and expressions used in the Chamber must conform to a number of rules. Erskine May states "good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language". Objection has been taken both to individual words and to sentences and constructions - in the case of the former, to insulting, coarse, or abusive language (particularly as applied to other Members); and of the latter, to imputation of false motives, charges of lying or being drunk, and misrepresentation of the words of another. Among the words to which Speakers have objected over the years have been blackguard, coward, git, guttersnipe, hooligan, rat, swine, stoolpigeon and traitor. The context in which a word is used is, of course, most important.

The Speaker will direct a Member who has used an unparliamentary word or phrase to withdraw it. Members sometimes use considerable ingenuity to circumvent these rules (as when, for instance, Winston Churchill substituted the phrase "terminological inexactitude" for "lie") but they must be careful to obey the Speaker's directions, as a Member who refuses to retract an offending expression may be named (see below) or required to withdraw from the Chamber.

6. Naming of a Member

If a Member has disregarded the authority of the Chair, or has persistently and wilfully obstructed the House by abusing its rules, he or she (after generally being given every opportunity to set matters to rights) may be named. That is, the Speaker says "I name Mr George White" (or whoever). Thereupon, the Leader of the House, the Government Chief Whip, or the senior Minister present, moves "that Mr George White be suspended from the service of the House". A division may follow: if the motion is agreed to, the Member is directed to withdraw, and suspension (for five sitting days for a first offence), follows. A second offence in the same Session will lead to suspension for 20 sitting days, and a third, to suspension for a period the House has to decide. Any Member so named loses their parliamentary salary for the period of their suspension. Should a Member refuse to withdraw, and then resist removal, suspension for the remainder of the Session ensues.[3]

[3] For more details see ***Factsheet No. 62 – Disciplinary and penal powers of the House of Commons***

7. Sitting in Private

The House nowadays allows members of the public (everyone who is not a Member or Officer of the House is a "Stranger") to be present at its debates, though not at prayers. This, however, was historically not always the case; and the right to debate a matter in private is maintained. Should it be desired to conduct a debate in private, a Member moves "That this House sit in private", whereupon the Chair must put the motion "That this House sit in private" without debate. The House has not gone into private session since the Second World War, and it is difficult to envisage peacetime conditions when it would be the general will to do, but if the House did go into private session, no verbatim, sound or television record of that session would be made. Previously, a Member could achieve the same end by declaring "I spy Strangers", but as Members tended to use this as a device, much deprecated by the Chair, of expressing political indignation on a subject, or to delay proceedings, the Modernisation select Committee recommended its abolition. In previous times a Member "spying strangers" meant that they had to withdraw automatically - there was no division. On one famous occasion in the 1880s, Mr Biggar, an Irish Nationalist Member, caused the Prince of Wales to be removed by use of this device.

8. Points of Order

Members who believe some breach of the rules of the House has occurred, or who may wish clarification of them, rise (they may interrupt another Member for the purpose, if necessary) and say *"Point of Order, Madam Speaker"*. A point of order should then be put and the occupant of the Chair gives a ruling (or may undertake to do so later). Points of Order should not develop into a debate on the merits of some matter of public concern, or an issue over which the Chair has no control (*e.g.* the fact a Minister has decided not to make a statement on an issue). Speakers have deprecated the tendency (which is said to occur more frequently nowadays) to make spurious points of order.

9. Activities out of order during debate

Briefcases are not allowed in the Chamber, and the reading of newspapers, magazines, letters or other material (except when connected with the issue under discussion) is not permitted. Members must not pass between the Chair and the Member who is speaking. The Speaker has deprecated[4] the noise of distracting electronic pagers, telephones and other electronic devices in the Chamber, although they are acceptable provided they are silent. However, any Member using such any such device as an aide memoire will be told to resume their seat. The Speaker also made it clear that this ruling was not intended to affect Members with a declared disability who may require technical support to carry out their duties. Their requirements will be individually determined in the light of their particular circumstances.

Eating and drinking (save for discreet sips to ease the voice) are not permitted, in contrast to what must have obtained in previous centuries, when visitors observed Members sucking oranges and cracking nuts.

10. The Police

The police shout *"Who goes home?"* when the House rises. This is often explained as an invitation to Members to join together in bands to cross what in the past were the dangerous unlit fields between Westminster and the City, or to hire boats homeward on the Thames as a party in order to save the individual fares (the same may apply to taxis nowadays). The Speaker, on leaving the Chair, will say to the Serjeant *"usual time tomorrow"*, or *"usual time this day"* if it is after midnight.

---

[4] The Speaker uses this word when she wishes to strongly criticise an occurrence in the Chamber

Another call is made during the Speaker's procession, when the inspector on duty in the Central Lobby shouts *"Hats off, Strangers"*. There are of course few wearing hats; but the police remove their helmets. This is another relic of the elaborate hat wearing and doffing etiquette of former centuries (see *Dress* below).

The Police, though on duty in and about the Palace, do not enter the Chamber when the House is sitting. If the House sits beyond midnight, they remove their helmets.

11. Greeting to the Chair

Members generally bow to the Speaker on leaving the House - usually when they cross the Bar - and elsewhere in the Palace, at other times, for instance, during the Speaker's procession. Bowing to the Speaker in the House is supposed to derive from obeisances made to the altar (the Speaker sat in front of the altar) in St Stephen's Chapel, which the Commons occupied from about 1550 until 1834, but evidence for this is lacking. After Prorogation[5], and especially on the dissolution of Parliament before a General Election, Members shake the hand of the Speaker on leaving the Chamber.

12. Relations with other Members

By convention, a Member intending to make an accusation against or reflection on another must notify the other Member in advance.

A Member who intends to speak in another's constituency will generally inform the other Member in advance. This is regarded as essential between Members of the same party, but is not always observed to the same extent where political opponents are concerned. *Ministers* always inform the constituency Member of such a speaking engagement.

Members will in general take up constituency cases only from their own constituents. If they receive a letter from a non-constituent they will forward it to the constituency MP concerned (The House of Commons Information Office has access to a database, "Locata"[6], as well as indexes which allow Members and the public find out in which constituency a particular address is located). Members are not definitely precluded from referring the cases of non-constituents to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, but in view of the convention just mentioned, it is doubtful whether this happens very often.

13. Dress

The official dress of the Speaker and Officers of the House is described in Sir Peter Thorne's book mentioned on page 1. The dress of Members these days is generally that which might ordinarily be worn for a fairly formal business transaction - the Speaker having on a number of occasions taken exception to informal garb, including the non-wearing of jackets and ties by men. Practice and usage has, however, varied, and at certain periods of the past, non-conformity with the ruling fashion has been a political statement, as with Cromwell *["His linen was plain and not very clean ... his hat without a hatband ... a plain cloth suit ... made by an ill country tailor"*] and the Puritans. In the eighteenth century, formality was the rule and the fashion of wearing wigs caught on: they are retained today in the wigs of the Speaker and Clerks (although the present Speaker has chosen not to wear a wig).

Hats were another aspect of parliamentary etiquette. They were generally worn in the Chamber, but not when addressing the House, nor entering or leaving it. In the late nineteenth century, the

---

[5] the act whereby the Sovereign brings a session of Parliament to an end

[6] available at the following website: http://www.locata.co.uk/commons

tall hat was *de rigeur*. It also served as a place reservation in the Chamber for its owner, the thinking being that the wearer could not leave the Palace without it, and would therefore soon return. This system was defeated by some Members bringing two silk hats into the Palace; and so the present device of "prayer cards" was adopted. One Irish Member, it is said, once arrived with a cabful of hats.

The wearing of tall hats was challenged by Keir Hardie, who always wore a soft cap, and also through the Speaker's allowing a soft hat to Joseph Cowen, 'since the rigidity of the top hat subjected him to headache'. At this time, the Whips were the only Members to go bareheaded.

Alfred Kinnear MP, in 1900, summed up the hat-wearing rules as follows:-

> *"At all times remove your hat on entering the House, and put it on upon taking your seat; and remove it again on rising for whatever purpose. If the MP asks a question he will stand, and with his hat off; and he may receive the answer of the Minister seated and with his hat on. If on a division he should have to challenge the ruling of the chair, he will sit and put his hat on. If he wishes to address the Speaker on a point of order not connected with a division, he will do so standing with his hat off. When he leaves the House to participate in a division he will take his hat off, but will vote with it on. If the Queen sends a message to be read from the chair, the Member will uncover. In short, how to take his seat, how to behave at prayers, and what to do with his hat, form between them the ABC of the parliamentary scholar."*

In order to avoid the appearance of debate and the better to be seen, a Member wishing to raise a point of order during a division was, until 1998, required to speak with his hat on. Collapsible top hats were kept for the purpose. This requirement was abolished following recommendations from the Modernisation Select Committee, which also recommended that Members raising such a point of order should do so by standing in the normal way but from a position on the second bench as close to the Chair as possible, so they could be heard by both the Speaker and the Official Report. Male MPs may still not address the House whilst wearing a hat: women Members are exempt from this rule, though the different rules in society generally relating to female hat-wearing may well have caused a few problems when women first sat in the House in the 1920s.

Although it was at one time common for Members to wear swords in the Chamber (there is a record of an incident in the eighteenth century when one Member's sword impaled and removed another's wig), it is not now permitted to carry arms of any kind into debate. The Serjeant at Arms does, however, wear a sword whilst in the Chamber. Medals, being possibly a sign of favour from the Crown, are not worn in the House.

14. Snuff and Smoking

Another curious survival of the eighteenth century is the provision of snuff, in recent years at public expense, for Members and Officers of the House, at the doorkeepers' box at the entrance to the Chamber. Very few still avail themselves of the facility. Snuff, however, is the only form of tobacco the use of which is tolerated in or around the Chamber: smoking has been banned there and in committees since 1693.

15. Dogs

Dogs, save guide dogs, are not generally allowed in the Palace of Westminster. One present Member, Mr David Blunkett, is blind, and regularly brings his guide dog, Lucy, into the Chamber. Mr Blunkett's previous dogs, Ted and Offa, also used to accompany him.

There is absolutely no truth in the theory, often quoted to us as fact, that King Charles spaniels are exempt from this ban.

16. Endorsements on Bills - use of Norman French

The idea of this part of the ***Factsheet*** is to describe some of the conventions and practices governing the sending of Bills between the House of Commons and the House of Lords, which often puzzle outside enquirers.

The processes of legislation, described in ***Factsheets*** Nos 1, 4, and 33, require that the same text of every Bill be approved by both Houses. The transmission of Bills between the Houses always involves a formal procedure.

If the House of Lords has passed one or more Bills, they send a message to the Commons by one of their senior Clerks. Messages have taken the same form for more than 200 years: "The Lords have passed a Bill, intituled ... to which they desire the concurrence of this House". However, endorsements on the Bills themselves are made in Norman French (in this case "soit baillé aux communes") a relic of the very early days of Parliament. On a Commons Bill to which the Lords have agreed, is endorsed "A ceste Bille les Seigneurs sont assentus"; if amended "avecque des amendements" is added after "Bille".

If a Commons Bill has been amended by the Lords, and the Commons subsequently disagree with the Lords Amendments, Reasons for the disagreement are stated in the message to the Lords. The Bill is endorsed "Ceste Bille est remise aux Seigneurs avecque des raisons". These Reasons are drawn up by a Reasons Committee that is nominated and directed to withdraw forthwith after the votes on the merits of the amendments have been taken. The Reasons - in English - are usually extremely terse. Before the mid-19th century, the Houses held a conference to present or discuss these reasons.

Bills sent by the Commons to the Lords that are Money Bills in the meaning of the Parliament Act 1911 are endorsed (in English) by the Speaker. Bills sent for the Royal Assent under the Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949 without the agreement of the Lords are endorsed in English, and the enacting formula scored through and altered by the Commons.

A Bill, passed by one House and sent to the other, should not be withdrawn by the Member in charge in the second House, out of courtesy to the first. However, should the Commons reject, or decide not to proceed with, a Lords Bill it does not inform the Lords of this fact, nor do the Lords in the case of a Commons Bill.

The formulae for ***Royal Assent*** are also given in Norman French at the Prorogation ceremony. *La Reyne le veult* is the formula for public (and since 1850, also for most private) bills, and *Soit fait comme il est desiré* for private bills due to become personal Acts.

C C Pond
Revised C M Sear
July 1999

Acknowledgements

The House of Commons Information Office is extremely grateful to Mr W R McKay, Clerk of the House, Andrew Makower and Jennifer Tanfield who commented on a draft of the original version of this ***Factsheet*** and to Edward Wood for suggesting certain points on this revision.

PARLIAMENTARY COPYRIGHT
(HOUSE OF COMMONS) 1999
May be reproduced for purposes of private study or research without permission.
Reproduction for sale or other commercial purposes not permitted.

July 1999 No 52 Ed 9 Pr 1 300
ISSN 0144-4689

House of Commons Information Office
Tel: 0171-219 4272 **e-mail: hcinfo@parliament.uk**

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