

Reforming when MPs work is not about making their lives easier, but ensuring the most effective balance between constituency and Parliamentary time

With outrage over the parliamentary expenses scandal and public respect for MPs lower than ever, any discussion of MPs working less hours can be spun as yet another example of 'work-shy' MPs. But this is not the case argue [Sarah Childs](#) and [Rosa Malley](#), who here examine the importance of reforming how MPs' time is balanced between constituency and Parliamentary business, how time in parliament might be reformed, and how this may make the House a more diverse place.



The Problem: 'Glorified social workers' vs Executive Scrutiny

The House of Commons Procedure Committee is currently [undertaking an inquiry](#) into the sitting of the House and the Parliamentary calendar. It asks, what are the roles of current MPs, and what should they be? And how might revised hours and parliamentary calendar maximize MPs' effectiveness? MPs' roles and functions are multiple – and there is no one type of MP. But if there has been a 'turn to the constituency' by MPs over the last few decades – and there is an unfortunate lack of systematic research on this, although it looks likely – there is potential that constituency representation (the rise of MP-constituent correspondence; the MP as 'glorified social worker') trumps time spent in Parliament.

The concern here is that MPs are failing to hold government sufficiently to account and that scrutiny of the executive could and should be more robust. For many MPs the Parliamentary week is too pressurized. One rushes to and from the constituency and has competing demands whilst in Parliament. The Chamber too often seems empty; few MPs appear present around Westminster on Fridays; Committees are not always well attended; MPs frequently have to stay in Parliament until 10pm and sometimes beyond (the [debate on the 28/06/11](#) went on until 2.19am); and there is a lack of 'family' and 'down' time at the weekends.

The goals of good legislation, holding the government to account and representing one's constituents are not a zero sum game. The 'good MP' in Westminster would be one who draws on their constituency representation to make better laws and is better at holding government to account. A re-balancing of this relationship, one that preserves constituency representation at the same time as delivering more efficient and effective legislative process and scrutiny of the Executive, is possible.

The Reformed Houses

[Evidence given this week to the Procedures Committee](#) by one of the authors recommended the following:

- **Fewer and fuller weeks in Parliament.** This permits a radical revision of the parliamentary timetable. No longer would parliamentary activities be squashed between MPs arriving and departing to their constituencies. This should make for better scrutiny of the government, and better law making. MPs would also be seen to be working more effectively.
- **Modern, professional sitting hours**, with core parliamentary business taking place between, say, 10 or 11am to 6pm. There is no reason for the House to be sitting the hours of 19th century parliamentarians, nor in the evenings.
- **Set holidays**, comparable with other professions. Accordingly, 'recess' would no longer be regarded as MPs having the long summer 'off'. MPs' esteem, and that of the parliament more generally, might rise.
- **'Constituency weeks' rather than 'constituency Fridays'**. Constituency case workers would still be present continuously in the constituency to respond to constituent demands but the introduction of constituency weeks, spread out throughout the year will better enable MPs to engage in less reactive and more proactive interactions. Such constituency weeks might open up new forms of engagement – perhaps deliberative ones – with constituents. In this way such reforms might also improve the legitimacy of the House.

The Process of Reform: How Many Days Should MPs be in Parliament?

It should not be impossible to establish how much time Parliamentarians need to be in the House over a session. What is the average number of bills per year? How many days should be devoted to each of the legislative stages of a Bill? Times this by the total number of bills. How much time is prudent for pre- and post legislative scrutiny; to ensure that committees have sufficient time to undertake their enquiries? Reserve time for questions, and add in all the other activities that go on in the House. This should give us the total number of parliamentary hours that MPs need. The rest of the time – other than holiday – MPs would be devoted to constituency work.

Parliamentary Hours: A House for all the People

The above reforms will also make the Commons more friendly to those with family commitments and should impact positively on the diversity of people seeking to become MPs. Professional, family friendly working hours are not about MPs working less when they are in Westminster, but rationalizing work in ways that permit and rebalance work/family life. Reforming the hours is a practical issue, but it is also a symbolic issue that indicates to the public ‘who belongs’ to parliament. And this is not just about MPs with children/other familial responsibilities. Don’t the public demand MPs who are in touch with real life? They cannot be so if they are trapped in the Westminster village.

A recent study of MPs and MSPs (one part of a Leverhulme Trust funded project into [Ceremony and Ritual in Parliaments](#)) found that Commons’ sitting hours are amongst the most important factors explaining the hostility of Westminster culture to women. Interviews with men and women MPs from the three largest parties indicate that many think that opposition to reform of the hours is not about the effective scrutiny of legislation or holding the government to account, but because of a desire amongst parliamentary old-timers to keep alive the ‘old boarding school’ nature of Westminster. The hours ‘were established when being a Member of Parliament was a second job, and they just don’t fit in with family life at all’, said one. A Tory woman MP with a young child recalls accidentally missing a vote soon after she was elected, while she raced out to do the food shopping during the afternoon in the knowledge she would be subject to a running whip all evening. For many of these MPs reforming the sitting hours to make them more predictable and less subject to an erratic parliamentary timetable is the highest priority for making parliament more hospitable to those MPs with caring responsibilities.

Reform: the Time is Ripe

Reform to the sitting hours and the parliamentary calendar will not be easy – small ‘c’ conservative forces will be in play. But in a context where parliament is held in low esteem by the public the time is ripe for a process of reform that de-mystifies what MPs do; that enhance MPs effectiveness within Parliament; and makes them more visible and better representatives of their constituents.

*On Monday, 18 July, the Constitution Society, CentreForum and British Government @ LSE hosted the debate, **The future of the House of Lords**. The debate brought together MPs, peers and academics to discuss the proposals set out in the Draft Bill and the prospects for reform of the House.*

The speakers were:

- [**Mark Harper MP**](#), Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform, who was in favour of the proposed reforms;
- [**Professor Patrick Dunleavy**](#), London School of Economics, who was also in favour, but urged the reforms to go further;
- [**Professor the Rt Revd Lord Harries**](#), who was skeptical of the proposals and advocated a hybrid system;
- [**Professor Tim Bale**](#), University of Sussex, who was against the proposals.

[Click here for more details and to download “The End of the Peer Show?”](#)