

HOW PARLIAMENT WORKS

9th edition

NICOLAS BESLY AND TOM GOLDSMITH

City of Westminster



"Anyone wanting an insider's account of how Parliament really works should read this book."

Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP, Speaker of the House of Commons

ROUTLEDGE



“Anyone wanting an insider’s account of how Parliament really works should read this book. Parliament is a complex institution – but there is no clearer explanation of how it functions.”

Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP, *Speaker of the House of Commons*

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How Parliament Works

Written by expert insiders, *How Parliament Works* is a straightforward and readable analysis of one of the country's most complex – and often misunderstood – institutions. Covering every aspect of the work, membership and structures of both Houses, this key text provides a unique insight into the work and daily life of Parliament.

The ninth edition has been substantially revised to take account of recent changes in both Houses, and to cover all the key issues affecting Parliament and politics, such as:

- Changes in membership of both Houses since the 2019 general election
- Developments on Brexit, including Parliament's scrutiny of post-Brexit arrangements
- Coverage of recent issues such as the Cherry/Miller prorogation case and its implications for the constitutional role of Parliament, the role of the Speaker in the Brexit process, dissent in Parliament and disagreement between the Houses
- Updates on developments on restoration and renewal
- New material on representation of different groups in and by Parliament
- Explanations of Parliament's response to allegations of bullying and harassment
- How Parliament adapted to carry on functioning during the covid-19 pandemic
- New in-text features, case studies and photographs

How Parliament Works is essential reading for anyone who has anything to do with the Westminster Parliament: journalists, civil servants, lawyers, lobbyists, business and trade associations, diplomats, overseas parliaments and international bodies – and indeed members of both Houses. *How Parliament Works* is also an invaluable companion to the study of politics at A, A2 and university level, and provides a wealth of source material for teachers.

Nicolas Besly became a clerk in the House of Lords in 2002. He has worked in the Committee Office, Public Bill Office, Table Office and Journal Office. He became the first private secretary to a Lord Speaker and edited *The Table*, a journal on Commonwealth parliaments. He is currently the Registrar of Lords' Interests, advising on compliance with the House's code of conduct.

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How Parliament Works

Ninth Edition

Nicolas Besly and Tom Goldsmith

Designed cover image: © Getty Images

Ninth edition published 2024

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First edition published by Pearson Education Limited 1987

Eighth edition published by Routledge 2018

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-01505-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-01501-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-17891-0 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003178910

Typeset in Galliard and Frutiger

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Foreword

When we published the eighth edition of *How Parliament Works* in early 2019, we thought the events it described of the previous few years were fairly tumultuous. Parliamentary developments since then have been yet more dramatic.

Legislating for Brexit tested parliamentary rules and conventions in both Houses nearly to breaking point. The principle that the government has control of the House of Commons' agenda was turned on its head at key moments, with backbenchers taking over. Ultimately, Parliament approved the government's Brexit agreement, but not before different versions of the agreement were rejected several times (including by a record margin), a prime minister was pushed out by her party, a prorogation was found to be unlawful and a general election produced a government with a large majority. That large majority suggested parliamentary waters might become less turbulent: two prime ministers have been forced from office since then.

Aside from Brexit, there have been significant changes in the rules governing how Parliament works, with recent constitutional innovations such as the Fixed-term Parliaments Act and English Votes for English Laws being reversed.

Like every other part of society, Parliament had to rise to the challenge of the covid-19 pandemic, not only making laws framing the nation's response to that crisis but quickly and dramatically rewriting its own working practices to ensure it could carry on functioning while most members and officials were required to stay at home.

While all this was going on, an ugly problem which has persisted in Westminster for many years came again to the fore: that of bullying and harassment.

If the years since the last edition of this book have been stormy, it is a storm which Parliament has weathered. While Parliament might have felt like it was edging towards breaking point during the Brexit battles, it never broke – ultimately, once a new House of Commons was elected, the issue was decided speedily using established procedures. The relatively quick reversals of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act and English Votes for English Laws arguably demonstrate the benefits of a constitution which is uncodified and which can be refined without too much upheaval. Parliament's rapid adaptation of

its ways of working to respond to covid-19 was world-class, being amongst the first legislatures to adopt remote participation by its members. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, introduced in 2018, is designed to tackle bullying and harassment, and is the first of its kind in any parliament in the world. While still a work in progress – there are concerns about the time taken to investigate cases, for example – it has been repeatedly strengthened and improved since its introduction and it has been shown to have teeth, not least in the finding that the former Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, had bullied staff.

This book describes these challenges and how Parliament responded to them. More importantly, perhaps, it seeks to explain the daily work of Parliament which doesn't necessarily attract headlines: the various forms of debates, parliamentary questions, legislation, select committee inquiries and much more. This quotidian work isn't always dramatic, but anyone seeking to understand Parliament needs to know how it operates. We hope this book helps all who interact with either House – members, parliamentary officials, civil servants, journalists, students, academics, teachers and many others – as well as those who just want to know more about how their Parliament works.

We want to thank our predecessor authors, Robert Rogers (now Lord Lisvane) and Dr Rhodri Walters CB, not just for their expertise distilled in the many earlier editions (and still reflected in this one) but for trusting us to carry the baton on the next leg of its journey, and for their friendship and encouragement. We are also grateful to Sir Paul Silk for all his work on the earliest editions of *How Parliament Works*.

We are indebted to our colleagues who helped us prepare this edition. In particular, we want to thank Dr Ariella Huff for sharing her expertise on all things European; and Anikka Weerasinghe and Mark O'Brien for providing an image. Our special thanks are due to Sean Kinsey, for once again being so helpful in sourcing the images.

We thank our agent, Charlotte Howard, for her work and express particular gratitude to Andrew Taylor and his colleagues at Taylor & Francis for their support and patience.

Parliament: its home and origins

Mid-Victorian masterpiece: Parliament in its setting

The Palace of Westminster is probably the United Kingdom's most famous landmark. Like the Parliament it houses, the palace comprises mediaeval origins, Victorian reinventions and modern flourishes. Just as Parliament itself has developed, the palace has grown and changed over nearly 1,000 years. Much of the change has been evolutionary and incremental, sometimes even make-do-and-mend. At other times the change has been drastic.

Almost two centuries after the fire of 1834 which ravaged most of the palace, the Victorian Gothic masterpiece which was built in its aftermath is in need of restoration. The final scope and nature of that renewal is being debated, but some urgent work has already started. For example, from 2017 to 2022 the Elizabeth Tower at the north end of the palace, which houses the iconic Great Clock, was covered in scaffolding while it was substantially renovated; the most famous bell in the world, Big Ben, fell silent for most of the works. Yet, for all that it needs substantial ongoing maintenance, the palace is one of the greatest achievements of 19th-century architecture and art, and even those who work there every day remain awed by its power and confidence. It is at least arguable that that confidence has been reflected in recent years in the work of Parliament itself – for example in the renewed willingness of committees and independent-minded backbenchers to hold the government to account.

If the Palace of Westminster were empty, it would still be one of the great tourist attractions of Europe. But this Grade I listed building, part of the World Heritage site that includes Westminster Abbey, contains a Parliament that is one of the biggest and busiest in the world. This is a source of tension. The constraints of conserving and caring for such a building mean that any structural change for parliamentary purposes – from new door locks to constructing an education centre – must gain the approval of English Heritage and the planners of Westminster City Council, with keen interest from countless others who love the building for its art and history. The building is

expensive to maintain precisely because everything must be done to the highest standards for the benefit of future generations.

The palace is a perfect example of how buildings shape the activity within them. As we shall see, the nature of the buildings of Parliament has a powerful influence on how business is conducted and the way that members of both Houses work.

The King's palace

It may seem odd that a Parliament should meet in a palace; but the Palace of Westminster has been a royal palace for well over 1,000 years. Before the Norman Conquest it was the residence of Edward the Confessor, and it continued to be used by the monarch until the reign of Henry VIII, who bought Whitehall from Cardinal Wolsey in 1529 and then built St James's Palace in 1532. Although Westminster was thereafter no longer a royal residence, it continued to be a royal palace. Property in what is now London SW1 was clearly as much in demand in the 16th century as it is now, and the buildings huddled around the great bulk of Westminster Hall were rapidly taken up for use by the two Houses, the law courts (which remained at Westminster until they moved to the Strand in 1882), courtiers, placemen and shopkeepers – and others plying less reputable trades.

The King's summons

Although parliaments have met at Westminster for some 750 years, there is no statutory requirement to do so. Parliament has met, and could meet, elsewhere and still conduct its business with constitutional and legal propriety. Second World War bomb damage forced the two Houses from their chambers; were something to make it necessary, Parliament could meet elsewhere with the minimum of infrastructure – indeed, there are contingency plans to do so. Modern technology facilitates more radical options too: during the covid-19 pandemic, Parliament functioned with many of its members contributing remotely.

The word 'parliament', from the French *parler*, to speak or talk, was first used in England in the 13th century, when it meant an enlarged meeting of the King's council, attended by barons, bishops and courtiers, to advise the King on law making, administration and judicial decisions. The origin of the modern institution can be traced back to the parliament summoned on Henry III's behalf by Simon de Montfort in 1265, when representatives from the towns were present for the first time. Parliaments still meet in response to a royal summons; the parliament that met after the 2019 general election was summoned by a proclamation from the then Queen, which in part said:

Whereas We . . . being desirous and resolved, as soon as may be, to meet Our people and to have their Advice in Parliament . . . do hereby make known unto all Our loving Subjects Our Royal Will and Pleasure to call a new Parliament.

Those words may fall strangely on a modern ear, but the purport of Elizabeth II's proclamation was the same as those issued in the reigns of 34 of her predecessors.

The development of the two Houses

By the middle of the 14th century the King's parliaments were attended by knights of the shire and burgesses from the cities and boroughs (the Commons), the magnates (the Lords Temporal) and the bishops and abbots (the Lords Spiritual). At this time, the reign of Edward III, the Commons began to claim that their agreement was required for any taxation by the monarch, in particular the tax on wool. By now the Commons and Lords had emerged as two distinct houses. Once settled at Westminster, the Commons met in the Painted Chamber or in the refectory or the chapter house of Westminster Abbey; they moved to St Stephen's Chapel in 1547. The Lords settled in the White Chamber of the old palace, moving to the larger White or Lesser Hall in 1801 when the Union with Ireland introduced extra members into the House. After the fire of 1834 they moved to the re-roofed Painted Chamber until they were able to move into their present accommodation in 1847.

The fire

The night of 16 October 1834 was fine, with some high clouds. By 7.00 pm the London sky was lit by flames. Two workmen had been told to dispose of large quantities of Exchequer tallies – notched hazel sticks used from early mediaeval times to show what each taxpayer owed; the stick could be split to provide both a record and a receipt. The workmen burned the tallies in the furnaces that heated the flues under the floor of the House of Lords. Their enthusiasm, or possibly their impatience, led to the destruction of the mediaeval palace and the meeting places of both Houses. Thousands watched; JMW Turner painted the scene. One contemporary observer wrote:

An immense multitude of spectators assembled at Westminster to witness the ravages of the fire, the lurid glare of which was visible for many miles around the metropolis. Even the river Thames . . . was covered with boats and barges . . . and the reflections of the wavering flames upon the water, on the neighbouring shores and on the many thousands thus congregated, composed a spectacle most strikingly picturesque and impressive.

The winning design

The destruction of a large part of the old palace and of much of its contents, including irreplaceable manuscripts, paintings and tapestries, was a great loss. Westminster Hall survived, as did other parts of the building that today would undoubtedly have been preserved or restored. But the authorities of the day saw the fire as an opportunity to start afresh. A competition was held for the design of a completely new parliamentary building, which resulted in an extraordinary architectural and artistic partnership. The scheme produced by the architect Sir Charles Barry and the interior designer Augustus Welby Pugin was chosen from among 97 designs submitted, and the foundation stone was laid on 27 April 1840. The palace that was built over the next 20 years is huge.

It covers 8 acres (3.24 hectares), and has 1,100 rooms, 100 staircases and three miles (4.8 km) of passages.

A Victorian Parliament

The Barry and Pugin palace had, apart from its visual merits, one great advantage: it was a purpose-built parliamentary building. As well as the two chambers, it provided residences for the principal officers and officials, dining rooms, smoking rooms, writing rooms, committee rooms, libraries and all the paraphernalia of a grand country house and London club combined.

This was all a mid-Victorian Parliament needed. At the time there were 658 members of the Commons and some 500 members of the Lords, no more than 350 of whom turned up to speak in any session. An MP or peer wrote his correspondence in longhand, and if he wanted to find something out, he went and looked it up, just as he would have done in his library or study at home. Members of the Commons were careful to keep on the right side of local political magnates, but modern constituency pressures were unknown. Indeed, illuminated addresses survive that were presented to the local MP ‘on his visit [sometimes *annual* visit!] to the Constituency’.

The new palace today

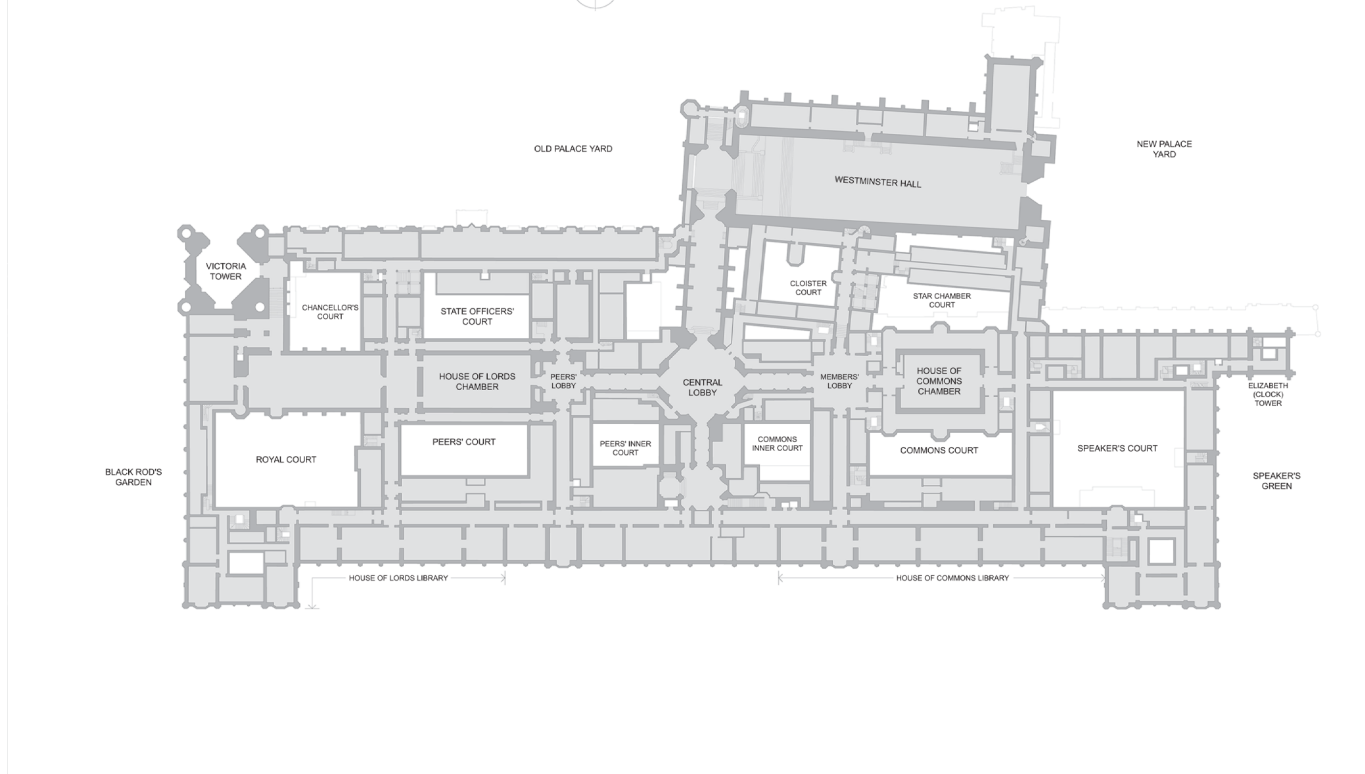
Sadly, the ever-present threat of terrorism has meant that public access to the Palace of Westminster has to be closely controlled. During term time, the parties of constituents and other visitors who tour the principal parts of the palace must be sponsored by an MP or peer, although visitors may pay to take a guided tour of the palace (in nine different languages, or a tactile tour for blind and partially sighted visitors) during the commercial opening on Saturdays, during most summer recesses and on non-sitting days at other times of the year.

Those who visit the Palace of Westminster follow the King’s route at the State Opening of Parliament, in the part of the palace still devoted to the monarch. With the exception of the Commons chamber, much of what they see has changed little and would have been familiar to Gladstone or Disraeli. A plan of the palace is on page 7.

The Robing Room and Royal Gallery

When Parliament is opened in state by the sovereign the King’s state coach drives under the great archway of the Victoria Tower, the 323-foot (98.5-metre) tower at the south end of the palace that houses the parliamentary archives. He then ascends the Royal Staircase and passes through the Norman Porch (so called because it was intended to place statues of the Norman kings there, but somehow busts of prime ministers supplanted them) to the Robing Room, where he puts on the state robes and Imperial State Crown before walking in procession through the 110-foot (33.5 m) long Royal Gallery, into the Prince’s Chamber and then into the chamber of the House of Lords. This ceremony was modified in recent years due to the late Queen Elizabeth’s advanced

PALACE OF WESTMINSTER PRINCIPAL FLOOR PLAN



Palace of Westminster – principal floor

Source: Copyright House of Commons, 2014. Artwork by Jonathan Rix

age. In 2017, 2019 (after the general election) and 2021 the then Queen arrived by car and not a state coach; she did not wear the state robes and crown, though the procession still took place. In 2022 mobility problems meant the Queen was unable to attend the State Opening of Parliament. The then Prince of Wales and the Duke of Cambridge were appointed counsellors of state to enable them to open Parliament on Her Majesty's behalf. The then Prince of Wales read the speech from the throne.

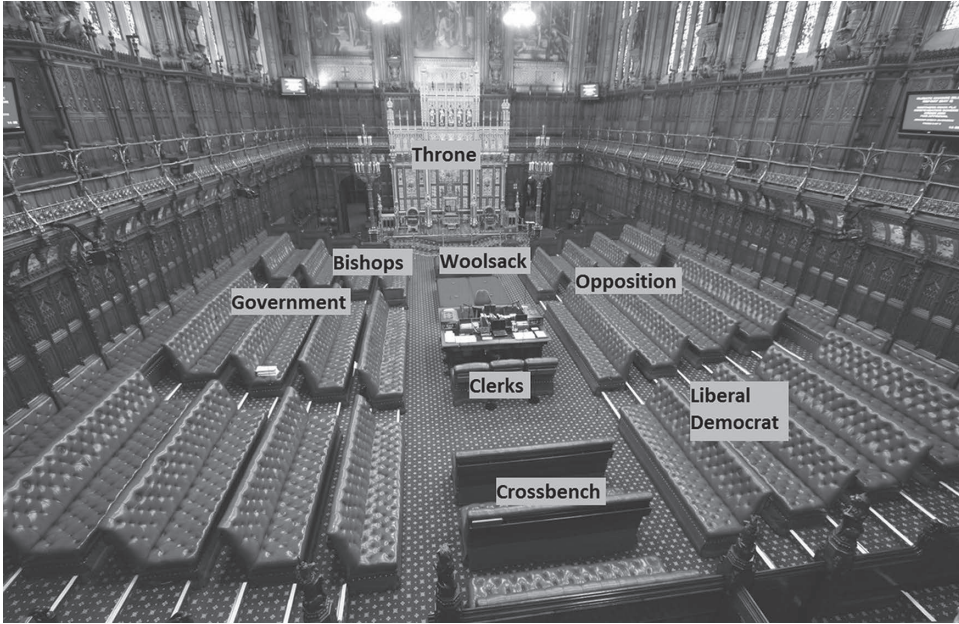
This southern end of the palace is magnificent and ornate – deliberately conceived as a backdrop to state ceremonial. The perfect proportions of Barry's rooms are complemented by the sumptuousness of Pugin's decoration. His themes of portcullis, rose, lily and lion, together with Queen Victoria's VR cipher, run throughout the palace's decoration, with its Gothic features and linenfold panelling, but his 'graceful fancy' is nowhere more evident than at the south end of the building – the Robing Room and the Royal Gallery.

Although the chief purpose of these two great rooms was to impress, they can be used for other purposes. Following the destruction of the Commons chamber by enemy bombing, the House of Lords sat in the Robing Room between 1941 and 1949 to enable the Commons to use the Lords chamber. Both rooms are used when a visiting head of state – or occasionally head of government – addresses members of both Houses of Parliament. As there is no concept of joint sittings of the two Houses, the Royal Gallery and Robing Room provide a convenient place for such events – such as in 2022 when the President of the Republic of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, gave an address in the Royal Gallery.

The chamber of the House of Lords

The visitor then moves to the chamber of the House of Lords, which is fitted out in the same rich style. At one end, the throne faces north under a gilded canopy and Cloth of Estate. In front of it is the Woolsack, on which sits the Lord Speaker as presiding officer of the House of Lords. The Woolsack is a seat stuffed with wool from the different countries of the Commonwealth. Stuffed sacks or cushions were a standard form of mediaeval furniture, but tradition has it that Edward III decided that a sack of wool would be a useful reminder to their lordships of the pastoral basis of the country's economy – and the chief source of his revenue – and the practice has persisted. In front of the Woolsack are the two judges' woolsacks. These remind us that Court of Appeal and High Court judges still receive Writs of Assistance to attend the House. Nowadays they attend only in a representative capacity on the day of the State Opening. To the left and right of the Woolsack are four rows of red benches for peers, divided into three sections. In the centre of the floor is the Table of the House, and on the far side of the Table from the Woolsack there are three further benches.

Looking from the throne, the right of the House is known as the *spiritual side* because the bishops sit there, in the front two rows of the section nearest the throne. The left is called the *temporal side*, while beyond the Table are the crossbenches. As well as the bishops, government peers sit on the spiritual side, with ministers in the front row of the central section. Opposition parties sit on the temporal side. Peers who



Chamber of the House of Lords

Source: Copyright House of Lords, 2018



House of Lords in session

Source: Copyright House of Lords, 2022. Photography by Roger Harris

do not belong to a party sit on the crossbenches, which also spill over to the spiritual side. A labelled view of the chamber and a photograph of the House paying tribute to Queen Elizabeth II are on page 9.

Beyond the Lords chamber, the visitor passes through Peers' Lobby to the Central Lobby, a large octagonal room at the very centre of the palace, beneath the third largest of the palace's towers. Almost all visitors on business come to the Central Lobby; it is the place where constituents who wish to lobby an MP come to fill in a green card requesting an interview. It lies directly between the two chambers; and when on State Opening day all the doors are open, the King sitting on the throne in the Lords can see the Speaker presiding over the House of Commons more than a hundred yards (91m) away.

Members' Lobby and the chamber of the House of Commons

Moving towards the Commons chamber, the visitor passes into Members' Lobby. This is a much larger space than Peers' Lobby. When the House is busy, especially before and after votes, it is thronged with MPs and is the haunt of 'lobby' journalists; it is then a clearing house of opinion, news and rumour. It contains a message board with a slot for each member's messages (less used in these days of mobiles), pigeonholes for members' select committee papers (also less used now that committees are predominantly paperless), a counter where members can get a wide range of parliamentary and government papers, and a post office that deals with some thousands of items every sitting day. The whips' offices of the major parties adjoin the Members' Lobby.

The Commons chamber was destroyed in an air raid on the night of 10 May 1941. Barry's original chamber was less ornate than that of the Lords; and the rebuilt Commons chamber, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, is austere by comparison with that of the Lords. A labelled view of the chamber and one of the House in session are on pages 12 and 13. From the public gallery one looks down through a massive 7-tonne glass screen, installed in 2005 on security advice. Below, the Speaker's canopied Chair is the focal point. During question time and ministerial statements, the Speaker's Secretary stands to the right of the Chair (as seen from the gallery) helping the Speaker to identify members and keeping a record of those he has called. To the left of the Chair, against the far wall, is the officials' box for civil servants advising ministers. In front of the Chair is the Table of the House, at which sit the clerks at the Table, who advise the Speaker and his deputies, whips and any other member, on the conduct of proceedings, and who also compile the legal record of the House's decisions.

On each side of the chamber are five rows of green benches, divided by a gangway into two sections. On the left, as seen from the gallery, are the benches occupied by the government party. On the right, as seen from the gallery, are the opposition parties, with the smaller parties sitting nearest to the gallery. Ministers sit on the front bench by the Table, and the main opposition party's spokesmen and women (or shadow ministers) sit opposite them. Ministers and their shadows are thus known as frontbenchers; all other MPs are backbenchers.

On each side of the Table are the despatch boxes at which ministers and their counterparts from the main opposition party speak; and at the near end of the Table is the Mace, which symbolises the authority of the House.

At our observer's eye level, above the Speaker's Chair, is the press gallery, with seats in the centre for the *Hansard* reporters who compile the record of what is said. Other galleries are for members of the House of Lords and distinguished visitors, as well as for the general public. Two galleries are reserved for MPs and are technically part of the floor of the House, although Speakers have indicated that they will not call members to speak from there (and there are no microphones). Down below, but not visible except from the front of the gallery, sits the Serjeant at Arms, responsible for order around the House and in the galleries. There, too, are the crossbenches; but as there are, apart from the occupants of the Chair, few members with no party allegiance (at present there are seven, though all were elected on a party ticket), these are in practice extensions of the seating for government and opposition members.

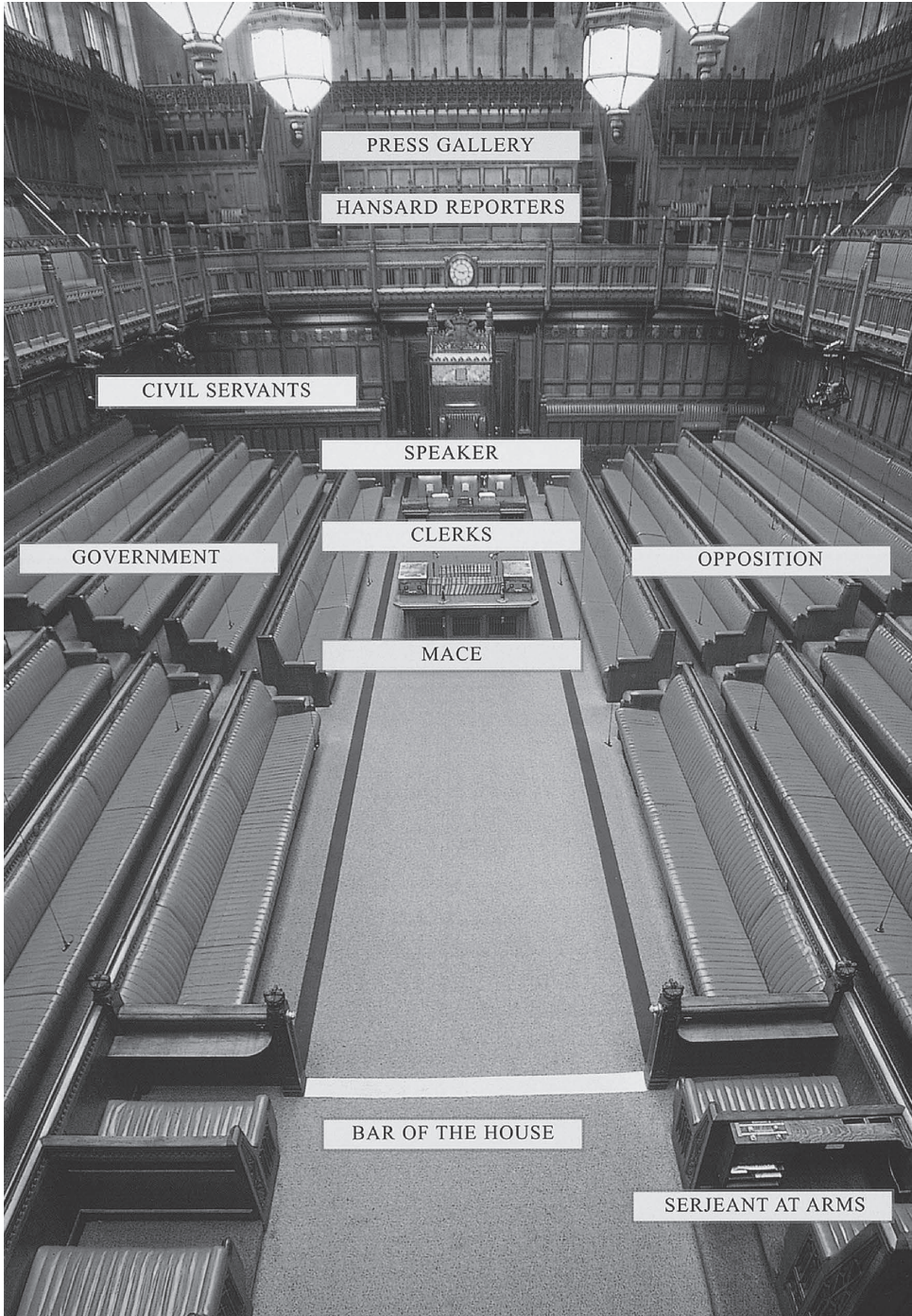
Westminster Hall

The final place of this brief description of the Palace of Westminster is one of the finest rooms in Europe – Westminster Hall, the great hall of the mediaeval palace and, along with the crypt Chapel of St Mary Undercroft, the only part of the original building to remain. The hall has been much restored over the years including, recently, work to clean and conserve the internal roof, install a fire detection system and improved lighting, and to repair the lead lantern. At its core, however, it remains an 11th-century building with a late 14th-century hammerbeam roof. It is used today for ceremonial occasions. The lying-in-state of Queen Elizabeth II took place in Westminster Hall in September 2022; a couple of days earlier in the same Hall, the new King received the Humble Addresses of condolence of the two Houses of Parliament. The Hall is sometimes used instead of the Royal Gallery to hear addresses from visiting heads of state – most recently, President Obama in 2011 and President Zelensky in 2023. The regular sittings of the House of Commons ‘in Westminster Hall’ (see page 273) take place not in the Hall itself, but in the Grand Committee Room at the north end.

The palace and parliamentary vocabulary

The layout of the chambers, derived from earlier meeting rooms of the two Houses, is reflected in the vocabulary of Parliament, which in many cases has passed into general everyday use and has been adopted around the world with the spread of the Westminster model of parliamentary government.

The *opposition* parties sit physically opposite the government party (as well as opposing it). A meeting of the House is a *sitting*, at the end of which the House *rises*. Matters considered by either House are debated *on the floor*. If a member changes parties, he or she is said to have *crossed the floor*. When MPs and peers hand in questions, amendments to bills or notices of motions, or when ministers place documents



Chamber of the House of Commons, looking down from the public gallery

Source: Copyright House of Commons, 2014. Photography by Deryc R. Sands



The House of Commons in session, 2022

Source: Copyright UK Parliament, 2022. Photography by Jessica Taylor

formally before either House, they are said to have *tabled* them, even if they do not place them on the massive Table in either House. If a bill has its committee stage in a Commons public bill committee, it is said to be taken *upstairs* because most of the palace's committee rooms are on the first floor. When either House votes, it is said to *divide* because those voting divide physically into two groups ('ayes' and 'noes' in the Commons, 'contents' and 'not contents' in the Lords) and walk through separate lobbies on either side of both chambers to be counted. Securing something *on the nod* – that is, without debate or division – may derive from a member's brief bow to the Chair when moving a motion formally.

Some supposed parliamentary derivations are bogus. *In the bag* stems not from the petition bag on the back of the Speaker's Chair but from the much older idea of a game bag. As fanciful is the myth that the red lines on the floor of the Commons chamber are two sword lengths apart, although there is a rule that a member speaking from the front row of benches (above or below the gangway) should not step over the lines. And *toe the line* has nothing to do with these lines; it comes from the Royal Navy of Nelson's time, when barefooted seamen lined up for inspection on the seams, or lines, in the deck planking. A more frequent error is the description of Westminster as 'the mother of parliaments'. When John Bright coined the phrase in 1865, he was referring to *England* as the mother of parliaments; but given the immense influence Westminster has had on the development of parliaments around the world, perhaps the mistake is understandable.

'We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us'

From the start, the club-like rooms and communal spaces of Barry's palace have encouraged members of both Houses to congregate and meet informally. In the Commons, the Smoking Room (like the rest of the palace, now a no-smoking area), the Tea Room and Members' Lobby after a big vote (as well as the division lobbies themselves during it) are places where opinions are formed and exchanged, support is canvassed and tactics planned. This informality and personal contact also produces volatility: rumours travel quickly, even through so large a membership; views – and perhaps backbench rebellions – can gather momentum with surprising speed. The use of social media and WhatsApp groups has increased the speed with which such views are disseminated, though many members noticed how essential face-to-face contact is to the business of politics when they were largely deprived of it during the covid-19 pandemic.

A first-time visitor almost always finds the Commons chamber smaller than expected; for an assembly of 650 members, it is surprisingly intimate – its floor area is not much more than that of a tennis court. Its seating capacity (together with the galleries reserved for members) is usually said to be 427; but as there are no individual seats and members inevitably take up varying amounts of the green leather, this is an approximation.

There are no individual places, so also no desks or computer terminals; and members speak from their places, not from a podium. When the House is full, perhaps towards the end of a major debate or during Prime Minister's Questions, the atmosphere is made tense by the crush of MPs, and one can appreciate the way in which the House can become great political theatre. On such occasions the noise can be overwhelming, with members straining to hear what is being said, often leaning close to the small speakers in the benches behind them. The small size of the chamber means that, even when only a few MPs are present for some abstruse debate, the feeling of speaking to empty space, which is a problem in many foreign parliaments, is minimised.

It is likely that the rows of benches facing each other derive from the use by the Commons of St Stephen's Chapel in the old palace. The clergy faced each other in choir stalls on each side of the altar, and the arrangement was unchanged when the Tudor House of Commons took over the chapel. Some feel that this encourages adversarial politics (and even, perhaps fancifully, a two-party system). The Commons, unlike the Lords, has no crossbenches spanning the width of the chamber. It may be significant that public bill committee rooms, where legislation is debated in the same way as in the House, are laid out as in the chamber; but for select committees, where there is often a more consensual approach, members sit around horseshoe tables, and MPs and peers do not necessarily sit on party lines.

The idea of replacing the chamber with a hemicycle, of the sort found in many continental parliaments and in the European Parliament, has its supporters, especially among those who shun confrontational politics. A hemicycle could bring with it individual desks and seats, but accommodating a chamber of that size in Barry's palace would be impossible. The House of Commons had a chance to make the change after

the old chamber was destroyed in 1941. However, neither a hemicycle nor a larger traditional chamber found favour. Churchill represented the majority view in the House when he said in the debate on the rebuilding:

if the House is big enough to contain all its members, nine-tenths of the debates will be conducted in the depressing atmosphere of an almost empty or half-empty chamber . . . We wish to see our Parliament as a strong, easy, flexible instrument of free debate. For this purpose a small chamber and a sense of intimacy are indispensable . . . The conversational style requires a fairly small space, and there should be on great occasions a sense of crowd and urgency . . . We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.

Time and space

The way any parliament operates is dictated by time and space. *Time* to allow full scrutiny of government, examination of proposed legislation, airing of concerns affecting constituencies and constituents, and the causes pursued by political parties and individual members. *Space* is almost as important: space to provide meeting rooms for committees, political parties and lobby groups; space for library and research facilities; adequate office accommodation for MPs and their staff to provide the service that their constituents expect, and for members of both Houses to support their parliamentary duties.

Add to that the space that is needed for the infrastructure of Parliament: support for the work of the two chambers and of legislative and investigative committees; provision of IT, security, catering, housekeeping, maintenance, and administration of pay and personnel. Then there are those who are in Parliament but not of it: TV, radio and print journalists, and civil servants supporting ministers. Last, but emphatically not least, are constituents and visitors, who may want to bring problems to their local MP or have a cause taken up by a member of either House, or who may simply want to see Parliament at work.

These demands fluctuate. Parliament must react to expectations of it, as well as to events. We consider below how the two modern Houses have tried to cope with the constant pressure on their accommodation.

The shoe pinches

The new Palace of Westminster was largely completed by 1852, although it was not finally finished until 1860. The Lords occupied their chamber on 15 April 1847; the Commons first sat in theirs on 30 May 1850 but did not move in permanently until 3 February 1852. In 1854 Sir Charles Barry produced plans to build additional offices surrounding New Palace Yard, but these were never pursued. By 1867 a select committee was examining how the size of the Commons chamber could be increased and, in 1894, another Commons select committee was looking at the adequacy of accommodation more generally.

The pressures

The shortage of accommodation was a recurring theme over the next 100 years. In the Commons it became particularly acute during the last 20 or 30 years of the 20th century with the increasing burdens of constituency work, the need to house larger numbers of MPs' own staff, and the growth in select committee work and in research facilities. The administration and support of the House became more professional and better resourced, needing more staff and office accommodation. Every new facility, however desirable in itself, has imposed new strains, from the introduction of broadcasting (with its need for control rooms and archive space) to the establishment of information offices for the public and educational facilities. The growth in the use of IT has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of officials working in that area.

A visitor following the route from the Victoria Tower to the Commons chamber has an impression of lofty ceilings and spacious rooms, but on the floors above and below (except along the Committee Corridor on the river front) the story is rather different and includes subdivided rooms, mezzanine floors and even temporary huts on flat roofs.

For many years in the Commons, members were prepared, however reluctantly, to share offices – even with nine or 10 of their colleagues – or to do much of their constituency work around the House, writing letters in the library or dictating to their secretaries in the Committee Corridor while waiting to vote. That this did not lead to changes may have been partly because of the ‘never did me any harm’ principle, but also because the scope for change was limited.

New buildings

The only realistic possibilities lay to the north of the palace, across Bridge Street towards Whitehall. Various schemes blossomed, were rejected and withered. Between 1984 and 1991, however, the buildings in 1 Parliament Street, at the end of Whitehall, were converted to provide some 90 offices for MPs, together with library, catering and meeting facilities. Nearby, the old Scotland Yard police headquarters (the Norman Shaw buildings) were taken over and the next-door Canon Row buildings adapted for office accommodation.

Portcullis House and recent additions to the parliamentary estate

This was followed by the construction, between 1998 and 2000, of Portcullis House overlooking the river, to provide offices for MPs and their staff, together with a variety of meeting rooms. Designed by Michael Hopkins and Partners (now Hopkins Architects), from the outside the building appears austere, even forbidding, but inside it shows a confident and innovative style.

Although at the time it was built the cost was controversial, the building has now become a thriving part of the House of Commons. It contains modern, relatively



Portcullis House

Source: Copyright UK Parliament

spacious, offices for MPs and their staff, committee rooms and smaller meeting rooms, and support services such as an IT centre and a “one-stop shop” for MPs. Perhaps just as significantly, the open-plan, airy atrium containing contemporary eateries and a coffee shop is home to a café-style culture quite different from the narrow corridors and grand restaurants in the palace.

It is safe to say that those who commissioned the new palace after the fire of 1834 would not have recognised any part of this description of the uses of a parliamentary building.

More recent additions to the parliamentary estate have been less eye-catching than Portcullis House but provide much-needed space. Richmond House on Whitehall was acquired from the Department of Health. Elsewhere in Westminster, 14 Tothill Street contains most of the staff of Commons select committees and most of the Library’s researchers. In 2021 the Commons acquired 10 floors of 64 Parliament Street, accommodating officials from digital, human resources, finance and other support teams.

Lords accommodation

As with the Commons, the House of Lords has outgrown the 40 per cent of the original palace that it occupies and has acquired office space for staff and members in nearby streets. In 1994, 7 Old Palace Yard – an elegant Georgian house opposite the west

front of the palace – was returned by the Commons to Lords use; and in 2005, Fielden House, an office building in Little College Street, was occupied. From 2001 Millbank House was gradually occupied for mixed member and staff use – starting with 2 Millbank then, from 2011, 1 Millbank and, from 2018, the remaining portion of 5 Great College Street. This requirement for space reflects the increased level of activity of the Lords, with greater daily attendance by members. In addition, members' expectations of desk space, IT facilities, research and information, and procedural support are always rising. Unsurprisingly, as in the Commons, this scattering of staff and members' offices has made the Lords seem less of a homogeneous organisation.

Restoration and renewal

Until recently, modernisation of the Palace of Westminster over the 170 years of its existence tended to be piecemeal and reactive. As new requirements and new technologies emerged, they were accommodated somehow, but with no strategic plan; and the fabric of the Palace is showing its age. Although the visitor to the main or Principal Floor of the Palace would not guess it, the services in the basement and in the 98 'risers' between floors (water, air-conditioning, steam, sewage, electricity, communications, IT), carried by many miles of pipes and wires, are in poor condition, with the possibility of a catastrophic failure, which could make it impossible for either House to sit. Over the years, the fabric has deteriorated, and roofs and stonework receive ongoing attention.

In 2013, following a preliminary study by officials, an independent options appraisal was commissioned from a team of consultants led by Deloitte Real Estate to assess the state of the building and its services, and to consider how to set about a programme of restoration and renewal. Two options were ruled out from the beginning: doing nothing; and constructing a new parliamentary building. Three options remained: first, tackling the problems while the business of both Houses continues, which might mean decades of work; second, 'decanting' first one House, its members and staff to another building acquired for the purpose, then the other House; and third, decanting both Houses and all the occupants of the Palace for what was initially estimated to take five or six years.

In 2015 the consultants' Independent Options Appraisal was published. It found that option 1 – continuous occupation but with 12 areas of the Palace fully decanted one by one – would cost the most (estimated at £5.67 billion) and take the longest (estimated at 32 years). Option 2 – one chamber decanted at a time – was estimated to cost around £4 billion and take 11 years. Option 3 – full decant – came in at an estimated £3.5 billion and six years. In each case the cost and time involved would vary according to the level of improvements made.

Following the 2015 general election, the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster was established to consider these three options. It was co-chaired by the then Leaders of both Houses (incidentally the concept of co-chairs of a committee was an innovation in Westminster) and comprised their opposition 'shadows' in each House and senior backbenchers. In its 2016 report, it found that there was a 'clear and

pressing need to tackle the work required to the Palace of Westminster . . . to prevent catastrophic failure in the next decade.’ It concluded that in principle full decant of the Palace was the best option, but that an arm’s-length delivery authority should be established to validate the preferred option and then to oversee the work.

If both Houses are to move out from the Palace of Westminster, they need somewhere to go. The joint committee recommended that, subject to further feasibility work, the House of Commons should occupy Richmond House. The House of Lords could meet in the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, opposite Westminster Abbey.

The joint committee recommended that the next step should be for each House to pass a motion endorsing, among other things, the recommendation for a full decant.

After that progress slowed, with a date for debating the report being promised but not delivered. But in early 2018 it was finally debated, and both Houses agreed that the ‘best and most cost-effective way’ to carry out the restoration and renewal of the building was to move out temporarily and allow the works to be carried out in one single phase. The Houses also gave their approval for the establishment of a shadow Olympic-style Delivery Authority and Sponsor Body which were formally independent of Parliament – the idea being that sufficient expertise did not exist in-house and that independence would guard against constant (and expensive) political interference.

In 2019 the Parliamentary Building (Restoration and Renewal) Act created the Delivery Authority and Sponsor Body in statutory form. They set about working up the options into more detailed schemes. In March 2022 the Sponsor Body published updated estimates of the cost and time involved in each option. A full decant was now estimated to cost between £7 billion and £13 billion and to last between 19 and 28 years (so at least a doubling of cost from the original estimate and at least three times as long). A partial decant would cost £9.5–18.5 billion and last 26–43 years. Continuous occupation of the Palace by both Houses was estimated to cost £11–22 billion and last 46–76 years.

Alarmed by these dramatic increases from the original estimates, the Commissions in each House (essentially their governing bodies – see Chapter 3) decided to reassess the programme. They proposed, and the two Houses agreed, that the Sponsor Body should be disbanded and its sponsor function transferred to the two Houses, led by the Commissions. A new approach to the works would be adopted, prioritising value for money and focusing first on safety-critical works (such as fire safety and removing asbestos). The signs are that some of the more far-reaching ambitions for revamping the Palace will not be pursued; clearly there will be more direct political control over the programme.

In 2021 the House of Commons Commission had already decided to pause work on plans to decant the Commons chamber to Richmond House. In May 2022 the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, whose department owns the freehold to the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, said that he would not support the House of Lords decanting to it. He believed that any decant should be to outside London, in keeping with the government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda. This provoked a backlash from some peers, who viewed it as the government seeking to decide on the future of a House of Parliament.



Elizabeth Tower after refurbishment, 2022

Source: Copyright UK Parliament, 2022. Photography by Jessica Taylor

Few dispute the necessity of making substantial repairs to the Palace. But the politics of it are fraught. The options which until recently were on the table would cost billions, at a time of continuing pressure on the public finances, and last years. Given the history of large public-sector infrastructure projects, many fear that the forecast cost and time will end up being underestimated. Politicians being portrayed as spending money on themselves is not a good look, especially at a time of high inflation and cost of living pressures. Some point – with varying degrees of relevance – to other old buildings which have been comprehensively renovated while maintaining continuous occupation.

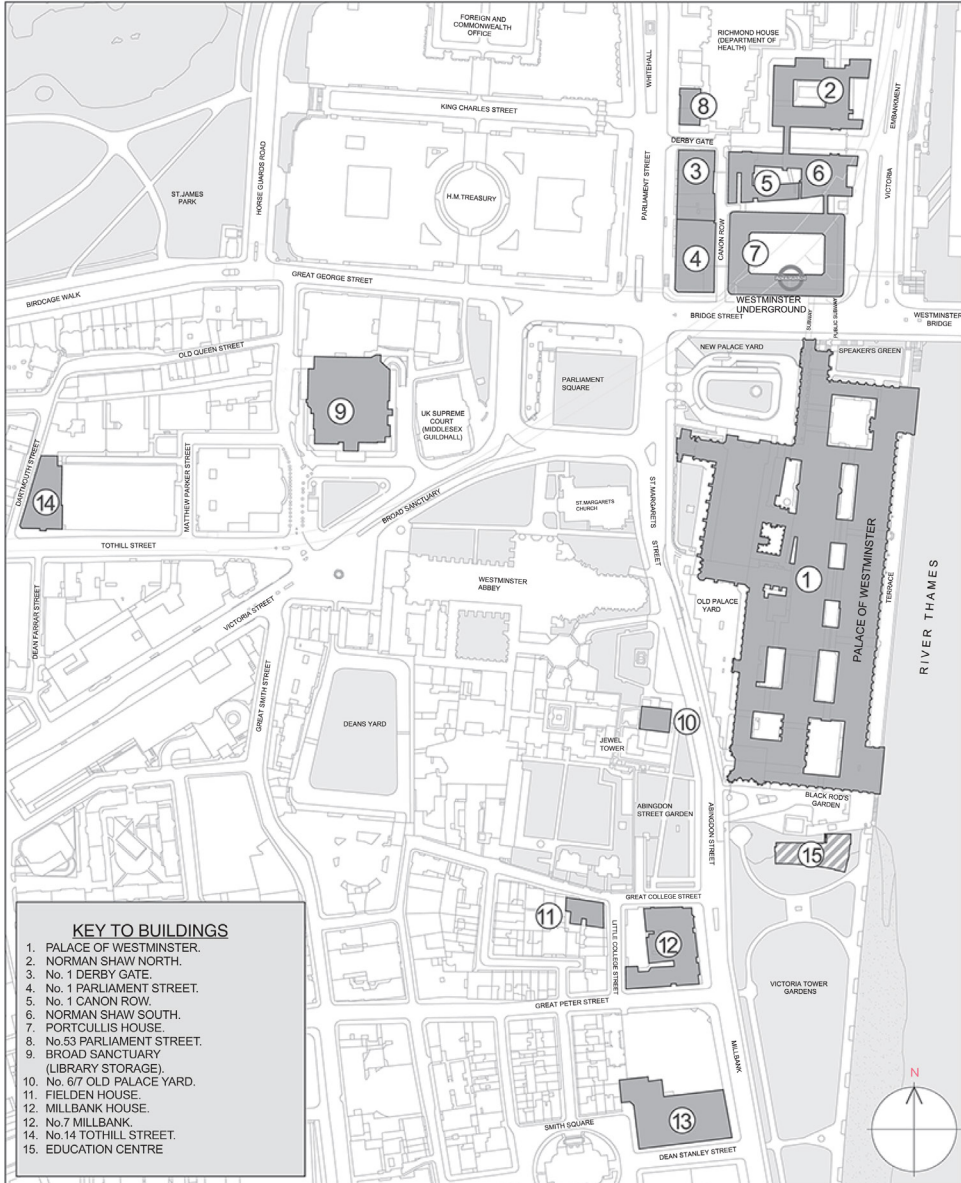
Meanwhile, major programmes to re-roof the Palace, to clean stonework, to support the mechanical and electrical services, and to replace the thousands of worn and damaged encaustic floor tiles continue.

The parliamentary estate

Today's parliamentary estate is akin to a small town. It spans 16 buildings, excluding residences, retail and storage facilities, houses 26,000 heritage items, serves 8,000 meals a day in the catering outlets and there are 18,000 passholders entitled to access the estate – plus those from outside Westminster who have business in Parliament each day. A plan of the parliamentary estate appears on page 22.

We now move on to consider the institution housed in those buildings.

THE PARLIAMENTARY ESTATE



Parliamentary estate and its surroundings

Source: Copyright House of Commons, 2014. Artwork by Jonathan Rix

Who is in Parliament?

The Commons

The size of the Commons

In the early 15th century, there were more than 250 members of the Commons – two knights from each of 37 counties, two citizens or burgesses from each of the 80 or so cities and boroughs and 14 members from the Cinque Ports. More were steadily added by statute and royal charter, and by 1673 the membership of the House – at that time only from England and Wales – was 513. Union with Scotland in 1707 added 45 members, and a further 100 came from Ireland with the Union of 1801, making 658.

The House grew to 670 members in 1885 and to 707 – the most at any stage – in 1918. Irish independence reduced the numbers to 615 in 1922. The upward trend during the rest of the 20th century produced a House of 659 members by 1997; but the post-devolution reduction in Scottish seats at Westminster from 72 to 59 meant that there were 646 members of the Commons in 2005. This was increased to 650 by the boundary review that took effect at the 2010 general election and is now the number fixed in law. The number sitting for constituencies in England is currently 533; and there are 59 in Scotland, 40 in Wales and 18 in Northern Ireland. There is thus one MP for every 103,201 people (or for every 71,631 people entitled to vote).

Too big?

Even for a population of some 67.1 million, this is a large House. By comparison, the Italian Camera dei Deputati has 630 members, or one for every 93,623 people, the French Assemblée nationale has 577 members (one for every 117,672 people) and the Spanish Congreso de los Diputados has 350 members (one for every 135,574

people). A comparison with the US House of Representatives is even more striking (435 members, one for every 762,974 people).

A big House of Commons has some disadvantages – at least from the point of view of the individual member. Parliamentary time is at a premium. The backbencher must compete with colleagues to ask questions or to be called in debate, and the individual MP's share of both influence and parliamentary resources is less than in a smaller House.

However, from the point of view of the electorate, a large House means that an individual MP represents a relatively small number of people. An MP's focus on the constituency is very sharp, not only because it is a power base, and he or she must woo the electors to be re-elected, but also because, especially in the social media age, the expectations of members to respond quickly and constructively to their constituents' problems are greater than ever. Your chances of engaging an MP's attention on an issue are much greater if it is something that directly affects his or her constituency. The close and valued relationship between a single MP and a single constituency has undoubtedly been a factor in opposition to some forms of proportional representation.

In addition, the historically large numbers of MPs have led to a large number of ministers. In August 2022, 93 ministers sat in the Commons out of a total of 119 in both Houses. (The maximum number of MPs who may be ministers is set by law at 95; the total number of ministerial salaries that may be paid is 109, so there were 10 unpaid ministers.) This means that many individual members get ministerial experience (although the proportion – 14 per cent – might well be the same in a smaller House). A large House provides more backbenchers to undertake the scrutiny of government through select committee work, with approximately 390 MPs serving on committees.

The constituencies

Legislation passed under the coalition government in 2011 sought to reduce the size of the House of Commons to 600 members. However, disputes between the political parties meant that the reduction was never implemented, and the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020 retained 650 seats. One argument put forward by the government for keeping the additional 50 MPs – the cost of which it estimated to be approximately £116 million over 10 years, adjusted for inflation – was that the UK's exit from the European Union means that MPs have more work to do.

Four Boundary Commissions, one for each part of the UK, keep under review the size and boundaries of parliamentary constituencies, making recommendations for changes. The 2020 Act requires them to undertake the next such review by July 2023, with subsequent reviews every eight years. The Act provides that ministers cannot alter recommendations from the commissions and that those recommendations will be implemented automatically, without the need for parliamentary approval.

The commissions must ensure that the electorate of each constituency is within 5 per cent of the electoral quota for the UK (currently 73,393). Five island constituencies (Orkney and Shetland, Na h-Eileanan an Iar (the Western Isles), Ynys Môn (Anglesey) and two seats on the Isle of Wight) are exempt from this parity rule and

constituencies in Northern Ireland may deviate from the quota by slightly more than 5 per cent in certain circumstances.

Seats are allocated between each of the nations of the UK based on the proportion of the UK registered electorate in each one. This will result in the following changes in 2023:

England	543 (+10)
Scotland	57 (-2)
Wales	32 (-8)
Northern Ireland	18 (no change)

The Boundary Commissions published their initial proposals in 2021. These will be followed by further public consultations, with final proposals published in 2023. If the final decisions reflect the initial proposals, then the degree of change for constituencies will be significant. For example, the House of Commons Library estimated that only 72 seats (just under one in seven) in England will have minor or no changes. The extent of changes in other constituencies will vary, but 57 seats (one in nine) will experience the most significant redrawing of boundaries, with less than 60 per cent of their current population included in a successor seat.

This is not just a mathematical exercise: changes in boundaries will affect political outcomes. The political consultancy *Electoral Calculus* estimated that if the results of the 2019 election were rerun using the boundaries set out in the commissions' initial proposals, the effect on seats held at Westminster would be as follows:

Party	New seats	Abolished seats	Seats changing hands – gained	Seats changing hands – lost	Total change
Conservative	+21	-15	+14	-7	+13
Labour	+7	-9	+6	-12	-8
Liberal Democrat	—	-1	—	-2	-3
Scottish National	—	-2	+3	-1	0
Plaid Cymru	—	-1	—	-1	-2
Total	+28	-28	+23	-23	—

The candidates

Anyone may stand for election to the Commons if they are a British subject or citizen of the Republic of Ireland, aged 18 or over, and not disqualified. Those disqualified include people subject to bankruptcy restrictions orders (or, in Scotland, those against whom sequestration of estates is awarded), people sentenced to more than one year's imprisonment, members of the House of Lords (but hereditary peers not sitting in the Lords are eligible; one, Viscount Thurso, was an MP from 2001 to 2015, and two who left the Commons in 2010, Douglas Hogg and Michael Ancram, succeeded to peerages while MPs but did not lose their seats) and holders of offices listed in the

House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975. These last, often described as those ‘holding an office of profit under the crown’, include civil servants, judges, members of the regular armed forces and police, some local government officers and members of some public bodies.

Independent candidates are occasionally elected. The first for many years was Martin Bell as the ‘anti-sleaze’ candidate in Tatton in 1997, followed by Richard Taylor in Wyre Forest in 2001 on a platform of saving Kidderminster Hospital (beating a sitting member, who was also a minister, by the large majority of 17,630). Peter Law was elected as an independent in Blaenau Gwent in 2005 after the imposition of an all-women shortlist stopped him from standing as a Labour candidate; and shortly before the 2010 election Sylvia Hermon left the Ulster Unionist Party but retained her seat as an independent.

These results are very much the exception: normally, you need to be the adopted candidate of a major political party to have a realistic chance of election to the House of Commons. In the 2019 general election there were 3,327 candidates altogether, an average of 5.1 per constituency; 1,877 of these were from the three major UK-wide parties. The Conservative party contested the most seats – 635 – which included all 632 seats in Great Britain (except Chorley, represented by the incumbent Speaker) and four in Northern Ireland; Labour (631) was represented in every constituency in Great Britain (except Chorley); and the Liberal Democrats fielded 611 candidates. The Green Party (498) and the Brexit Party (277) were the next most prolific and the SNP (59) and Plaid Cymru (36) contested every seat in Scotland and all but four seats in Wales, respectively. There were 224 independent candidates, as well as nearly 40 or so further parties, ranging from the Yorkshire Party with 28 candidates to an intriguing collection of single-candidate ‘parties’, including the Psychedelic Future Party, the Church of the Militant Elvis Party and the Touch Love Worldwide (UK) Party.

Candidates are chosen by the party organisations in the constituency concerned. The exact process for selecting candidates changes fairly frequently – for example, between 1979 and 2019 the Labour party changed its rules about how incumbent MPs might be re-selected to stand again six times – but in general both the Labour and Conservative parties have usually given a committee of the local party the power to draw up a shortlist of five or six candidates from as many as 100 names, who will usually also be on the party’s approved list or otherwise endorsed by the central party. Candidates are interviewed at a meeting of local party members and then selected by eliminating ballots. At various times, the parties’ leaderships have introduced centralised schemes designed to attract a more diverse range of candidates. For example, the Labour party introduced all-women shortlists for certain seats in 1993. The policy was challenged in the courts and legislation introduced to confirm the ability of parties to use all-women shortlists, although it was reported in 2022 that the Labour party was to stop using the system for the selection of candidates for Westminster now that more than half of its MPs are female. Under David Cameron’s leadership, the Conservative party adopted an ‘A’ list of candidates, intended to increase the numbers of BAME and female MPs. In any event, the central party organisations have considerable power, and it is possible for them to impose their own shortlists. All parties have tended to exercise

greater control over by-election selections, where candidates usually have to withstand extensive media coverage.

Once elected to the Commons, an MP can normally expect to remain the party's candidate at the next election. However, sometimes sitting MPs are deselected, usually because they have fallen out with the party leadership at Westminster or with their local party association. On 3 September 2019, 21 Conservative MPs had the whip removed because they rebelled against the government on a key Brexit vote. MPs from whom the whip is withdrawn are not allowed to stand for the party in elections. On 29 October 2019, 10 of the MPs had the whip restored; of the 11 remaining suspended MPs, six stood down at the election in December 2019 and the remaining five stood as independents or Liberal Democrats and lost. Anne McIntosh (Conservative, Thirsk and Malton) and Tim Yeo (Conservative, South Suffolk) were deselected ahead of the 2015 general election; after their local associations' executives refused to endorse them, all association members voted on whether they should be re-selected. While the Labour party requires sitting MPs to be re-selected by a trigger ballot of their local party, in recent years this has not tended to bite: in the 1980s, 15 Labour MPs were deselected. None were deselected between 2011 and August 2022, although ahead of the 2019 election a few MPs who were unreconciled to the leadership 'jumped before they were pushed', announcing their departure from the party and standing as independents or some other designation.

Elections: when?

General elections are held after Parliament has been dissolved, either by royal proclamation at the request of the prime minister or because the maximum life of a parliament – five years – has expired. Between 1945 and 2010 no parliament ran its full term, although the 1992–97 parliament came within a fortnight of doing so. The average length of parliaments between 1945 and 2010 was a little over three years and seven months. The ending of a parliament by royal proclamation – in effect, by decision of the prime minister, was thought to give him or her a tactical advantage in the timing of the election, although this did not profit the party in government in June 1970 nor February 1974. This contrasted with the fixed terms of the US Congress or the practice in countries such as Belgium or Germany, where parliaments are dissolved early only in exceptional circumstances.

The coalition government in 2011 introduced the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, which ended the prerogative power of dissolution and instead stipulated that a parliament ran for a five-year fixed term unless a parliamentary procedure for an early election was used. A general election duly took place on 7 May 2015, as stated by the Act. It was expected that the next election would take place five years later, but on 19 April 2017 the House of Commons voted by the necessary two-thirds majority for an early election, which took place on 8 June 2017. Another early election was held on 12 December 2019 under special legislation dispensing with the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. Following the Dissolution and Calling of Parliaments Act 2022, the dissolution of Parliament and calling of an election is once again done by the King at the request of

the prime minister. We examine the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 and its repeal in more detail in Chapter 5.

A by-election takes place when a seat becomes vacant because the MP dies or is no longer eligible to sit. A by-election is not required if an MP changes party, although there have been recent instances where MPs changing parties have voluntarily triggered by-elections. An MP cannot, in terms, resign from the House but, in effect, does so by accepting one of the ‘offices of profit’ of steward or bailiff of His Majesty’s three Chiltern Hundreds of Stoke, Desborough and Burnham, or of the manor of Northstead, which are in the gift of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. These are not real jobs, but purely symbolic offices used to allow an MP to stand down. Unusually, in 2011 Sinn Féin’s Gerry Adams sought to resign by writing to the Speaker. Adams was made steward and bailiff of the Manor of Northstead without his having requested the post or, indeed, having accepted it. He wished to leave the Commons and so was content with the disqualification that flowed from his ‘appointment’, but denied that he had, in fact, accepted an office of profit under the crown.

By convention, a by-election normally takes place within three months of the vacancy occurring and the process (‘moving the writ’) is initiated by the chief whip of the party which had the seat (although any MP may move a writ). Until a new MP is elected, constituency matters are normally handled by a neighbouring MP of the same party.

Elections: who can vote?

The United Kingdom has a wider franchise than many for its parliamentary elections. There is no property qualification, since 1928 no sex discrimination, and there are voting rights for Britons who live abroad and choose to register. Commonwealth and Irish citizens resident in Britain are entitled to vote, and the only main categories excluded are those under 18, convicted offenders still in prison, people detained under mental health legislation for criminal activity and members of the House of Lords. You do not have to have an address in order to vote; homeless people may make a ‘declaration of local connection’. However, you must be on the register of parliamentary electors in a constituency. A new system of individual electoral registration was introduced in 2014; instead of being registered as part of a household, voters are now registered individually. The Elections Act 2022 introduced a requirement for voters to provide photographic identification before being allowed to vote, in an attempt to ‘protect the integrity of the UK’s democracy’, in the government’s words.

Elections: the timetable

The timetable between parliament being dissolved and a general election taking place was lengthened in 2013 from 17 to 25 working days. The timetable is set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. In part, this was in response to the increasing practice of combining parliamentary with local elections, which already had a timetable of 25 days, but a longer timetable allows more time for late registration of voters and to apply for, receive and return postal votes.

The date of the general election is decided by the prime minister. It follows automatically from the date of dissolution, with various processes in between the two.

In 2019, Parliament unusually passed an Act to determine the date of the general election. The timetable ran as follows:

Thursday 31 October 2019	Early Parliamentary General Election Act 2019 received royal assent
Tuesday 5 November 2019	Both Houses conclude business and adjourn
Wednesday 6 November 2019	Parliament dissolved
Friday 8 November 2019	Royal proclamation summoned meeting of new parliament on 17 December 2019
Thursday 12 December 2019	Polling day
Tuesday 17 December 2019	Parliament met to swear in members and, in the Commons, to elect a Speaker
Thursday 19 December 2019	Opening of Parliament and Queen's Speech

Election expenses

Personal wealth is not a prerequisite for standing for Parliament. Indeed, however well-off a candidate or party may be, the law limits what may be spent in each constituency during an election. The general election limits in 2019 were £8,700 plus 9p per elector in a county constituency (that is, one which is partly rural) and £8,700 plus 6p per elector in a borough constituency. For a by-election, the overall limit is £100,000.

The total of a party's campaign expenditure over the 365 days before a general election is £30,000 times the number of constituencies that party is contesting: a maximum of £19.5 million, if all 650 constituencies are contested. There are also limits on third-party campaigning at general elections. Each candidate needs to pay a deposit of £500, which is returned if they gain 5 per cent or more of the votes cast. In 2019, 1,273 candidates lost their deposits. A general election also involves public expenditure; the government has stated that the cost to the public purse of the 2017 election was £140 million.

Voting patterns in the 2019 general election

In the 2019 general election, 32,014,110 votes were cast. Of those 27,931,924 (approximately 87 per cent) were for one of the three main UK-wide parties.

These parties share the vote with nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, and with a variety of smaller parties across the UK. The Labour and Liberal Democrat parties do not stand in Northern Ireland, although the Labour party enjoys a close relationship with the Social Democratic and Labour Party, whose MPs informally accept the Labour whip. The Conservative party historically had close ties to the Ulster Unionist party (which failed to win any Westminster seats in 2019), including fielding joint candidates in 2010. The Conservative party fielded four of its own candidates in Northern Ireland in 2019.

The number of votes received, share of vote and number of seats won for the 11 most successful parties (in terms of numbers of votes) in the 2019 election are in Table 2.1. Those parties account for all the MPs elected in 2019, except Sir Lindsay Hoyle, who was standing as the incumbent Speaker and was unopposed by the main parties. The table also shows the number of seats each party would have won had that been based solely on their share of the vote.

The election delivered a commanding 80 seat majority for the Conservatives – the largest majority since Tony Blair’s second general election victory in 2001 with a majority of 167. The Conservatives’ 43.6 per cent share of the vote was the highest of any winning party since Mrs Thatcher led the Conservatives to her first victory in 1979, with 43.9 per cent. While 2019 was the fourth successive election in which the Conservatives gained the most seats, it was the only such election which delivered a commanding majority: in 2010 the Conservatives needed to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats in order to obtain a majority in the Commons and form a government; in 2015, the Conservatives won a slender overall majority of 12 seats; and in 2017 the Conservatives (the largest party with 317 seats) entered into a ‘supply and confidence’ agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party (with 10 seats) in order to secure a majority in the Commons.

First-past-the-post and calls for reform

The British electoral system uses the relative majority method, usually called first-past-the-post (FPTP). The voter marks a ballot paper with one X against the name of his or her favoured candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins. In this system there are no prizes for coming second; it also means that the proportions of MPs

Table 2.1 Voting patterns in the 2019 general election (figure in brackets in final column represents the number of seats which would have been won if vote share was directly reflected in seat numbers)

Party	Candidates	Votes	Vote share	Seats
Conservative	635	13,966,454	43.63%	365 (283)
Labour	631	10,269,051	32.08%	202 (208)
Liberal Democrat	611	3,696,419	11.55%	11 (76)
Scottish National	59	1,242,380	3.88%	48 (25)
Green parties	497	865,715	2.70%	1 (18)
Brexit	275	644,257	2.01%	0 (13)
Democratic Unionist	17	244,128	0.76%	8 (5)
Sinn Féin	15	181,853	0.57%	7 (4)
Plaid Cymru	36	153,265	0.48%	4 (3)
Alliance	18	134,115	0.42%	1 (3)
SDLP	15	118,737	0.37%	2 (2)

of each party are not the same as the parties' shares of the votes cast across the nation as a whole. It has the merit of creating clear winners and losers, and giving the elected MP a decisive link with the local electorate. The system is, in essence, descended from the historical composition of the Commons as a set of local representatives.

Calls for reform of the voting system and for its replacement with a system of proportional representation – where the number of seats awarded to a party more closely reflects the total number of votes received by that party – have been made for decades. Those arguing for change say that FPTP unfairly rewards some parties with more seats than their share of the vote alone would merit, while other parties have fewer seats than they would be entitled to if seats reflected votes cast proportionately. So, as Table 2.1 above shows, in 2019 the Conservatives won 365 seats while their share of the vote would have translated to only 283 seats under an entirely proportionate system. The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, won 11 seats, but would have been entitled to 76 under a fully proportionate system. The Brexit Party, which won no seats, would have merited 13. Therefore no party would have commanded an overall majority, and a coalition of some kind would have needed to be negotiated. Such a result is an almost inevitable consequence of proportional representation: a strength or a weakness of the system, according to taste. For some people, the propensity of FPTP to deliver a result giving one party an overall majority means a mandate for strong and decisive government, without the need for backroom deals held in private between parties to agree coalition programmes. For others, such a system appears to ignore the preferences of the majority of voters, giving the potential for one party to drive through unpopular and divisive policies. Perhaps one of the strongest arguments advanced in favour of first-past-the-post is that it is a simple system – no preferences, or second and third choices – which is easily understood by voters.

In 2010, when no party had enough seats to govern on its own, a series of negotiations between the parties resulted in the Conservatives (as the party with the most seats) forming a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, with a formal coalition agreement and Programme for Government, and ministers from both parties serving alongside each other. The Liberal Democrats made it a condition of entering into the coalition government that there should be a referendum on a proportional electoral system: the alternative vote method, also known as ranked choice voting. Under it, the voter ranks candidates in order of preference; a candidate with more than half the first preferences is elected outright, but otherwise in successive rounds of counting the lowest-scoring candidates are eliminated and their preferences redistributed among the surviving candidates. The referendum was held on 5 May 2011 when voters rejected a move to AV by a decisive 67.9 per cent to 32.1 per cent, seemingly closing off the likelihood of changing the electoral system for many years.

Are the members of the Commons representative?

Despite a local democratic element in the choice of candidates, the MPs who sit in the Commons are not a microcosm of the electorate as a whole.

Age

The House of Commons is overwhelmingly middle-aged. The average age of MPs elected to the House in 2017 was 50.5; it was almost exactly the same in 2019. In fact, the average age of MPs has remained remarkably constant since 1979 (when it was 49.6). In the House elected in 2019, 376 MPs were aged between 40 and 59 (58 per cent of the total compared with approximately 30 per cent of the population of the UK as a whole). Twenty-one MPs were younger than 30 when elected in 2019; the same number were aged 70 or over. The youngest MP elected in 2019 was Nadia Whittome, aged 23, and the oldest was Sir William Cash, aged 79. The average age of the House is perhaps not surprising. Few young aspiring politicians are lucky enough to be selected for a winnable seat; constituency parties often prefer candidates with some experience outside politics.

Occupation and education

As well as being predominantly middle-aged, MPs are more middle class than the population as a whole (assuming class can be measured by education and occupation). Of those elected in 2019, 29 per cent of MPs had been privately educated (the same percentage as in 2017), compared with 7 per cent of the UK population. Conservative MPs were most likely to have been privately educated (44 per cent); in 1979 almost three quarters of Conservative MPs had attended fee-paying schools. Eighty-seven per cent of MPs are graduates and 23 per cent studied at Oxbridge (compared with an estimated 1 per cent of the UK population).

The vast majority of MPs worked in white-collar jobs before being elected. In 2015, 31 per cent of MPs had previously been in one of the professions, with 14.2 per cent having been lawyers. Just over 30 per cent of MPs had previously been businesspeople, an increase from 22 per cent in 1979. Perhaps the most striking rise is that of the professional politician: in 1979, just 3 per cent of MPs defined their previous job as politician/political organiser; in 2015, that figure was 17 per cent. Conversely, in 1979, 16 per cent of MPs had previously been employed in manual jobs; by 2015, only 3 per cent of MPs had such jobs before being elected. The figures collected for the 2017 and 2019 parliaments are calculated on a different basis, and so it is difficult to make direct comparisons. However, the trend for MPs to have come from political or quasi-political roles seems if anything to have hardened. Of those MPs newly elected in 2019, 55 per cent of Conservatives, 74 per cent of Labour and 64 per cent of both SNP and Liberal Democrat MPs were employed in political or quasi-political roles immediately before their election (for example, as councillors or other elected officials; as political or policy researchers; in the media; for political parties or trades unions; or as lobbyists). It is perhaps ironic that while MPs have become more representative of the nation as a whole, for example in terms of gender and race, they increasingly share an homogenous employment background.

Women in Parliament

In 2019 more women than ever before were elected to the House of Commons – 220, or 34 per cent of all MPs. The Labour party passed a particular milestone, with women accounting for more than half its MPs for the first time (104, or 51 per cent). Although still underrepresented in the Commons, the increase in the number of women MPs in recent years has been dramatic. In 1979, only 3 per cent of MPs were women. A significant increase came in 1997, with Labour's large majority, when women accounted for 18 per cent of the House, compared with 9 per cent after the 1992 election. Progress towards the current situation began more than a century ago.

After decades of campaigning, culminating in the suffragette movement, the bill to allow women to stand for Parliament was passed on the day that Parliament was dissolved for the 1918 general election. Paradoxically, it allowed women to be candidates at the age of 21, although women did not then have the right to vote until the age of 30 (reduced to the same age as men, then 21, in 1928).

The first woman elected to the Commons, Countess Markievicz, was elected in 1918 for the St Patrick's division of Dublin as a Sinn Féin member but, in protest against British policy on Ireland, never took her seat. It was ironic that the first woman to do so, Viscountess Astor, who was elected at a by-election on 15 November 1919, had never campaigned for women's rights. Since 1918, 559 women have been elected as members of the House of Commons.

While significant progress has been made, the House of Commons lags behind other UK and international legislatures. Forty-five per cent of the Scottish Parliament are women; 43 per cent of the Senedd Cymru; and 36 per cent of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Inter-Parliamentary Union ranks the House of Commons 45th for the proportion of women in the lower (or single) House of different countries' legislatures. Rwanda (61.3 per cent) is first, followed by Cuba (53.4), Nicaragua (50.6), Mexico (50.0) and the United Arab Emirates (50.0). Three countries in the rankings have no women legislators, and women represent less than 10 per cent of members in 24 countries' lower or single chamber.

Ethnic minorities

The 2019 election represented a landmark year for non-white MPs. Sixty-five MPs elected (10 per cent of the House's membership) were from minority ethnic backgrounds: 22 Conservatives, 41 Labour and two Liberal Democrats. The House is still not entirely representative of the UK population which, according to the 2011 census, was 87 per cent white, with 13 per cent of people belonging to a black, Asian, mixed or other ethnic group.

There were non-white members of the House of Commons as early as the second half of the 18th century, when James Townshend and Richard Beckford were elected in 1767 and 1780, respectively. They, and other MPs after them, were descended from the slave trade. A handful of other non-white MPs were elected in the second half of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century (including a Liberal, a Conservative