



DEBATES

HANSARD

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What is a debate?

Debates are an opportunity for MPs to discuss government policy, proposed new laws and current issues. They allow MPs to voice the concerns and interests of their constituents. Debates are designed to assist MPs to reach an informed decision on a subject. Debates take place in the House of Commons Chamber and the Grand Committee Room of Westminster Hall.

Members take it in turns to speak on the subject concerned and the discussion is strictly controlled by a set of rules called the 'Standing Orders'. The Speaker chairs debates in the Chamber and ensures these rules are followed and order is maintained. At the end of the debate, the House comes to a decision, if necessary by means of a vote. In Parliament, this is called a division.

Debates and the Speaker

During a debate, the Speaker, or Deputy Speaker, calls MPs in turn to give their opinion on an issue. MPs must get the Speaker's attention (called 'catching the Speaker's eye') and usually stand, or half-rise from their seat to do so. They may also write in advance to indicate their wish to speak but this gives no guarantee that they will be called.

MPs address their speeches to the Speaker, or Deputy. Normally MPs will speak only once in a debate, although they may intervene with a brief comment on another Member's speech.

Style of debate

The style of debate in the House differs from some overseas legislatures, where set-piece speeches from a desk or podium are more common.

In the Commons, MPs listen to speeches and intervene with opinions, expressions of approval or disapproval, or humour.

It is the job of the Speaker to ensure that MPs observe the courtesies of debate while still allowing vigorous debate to take place and forthright opinions to be expressed.

Adjournment debates

The last half-hour of each sitting day in the Chamber is allocated for an adjournment debate. A backbench MP is chosen by ballot (except on Thursdays when the Speaker selects from among those unsuccessful in the ballot). The subject is often one of particular interest to the MP's constituency. A Minister attends the debate to reply to the points raised.

Westminster Hall debates

Some debates take place in the Grand Committee Room, referred to as Westminster Hall. These debates were inaugurated in 1999 in a specially converted room off the main hall.

The room is arranged in an elongated horse-shoe shape rather than the opposing benches of the Commons Chamber. This is to reflect the non-partisan nature of the debates in Westminster Hall. Private Members' adjournment debates and select committee report debates are held here.

Topical debates

Following recommendations made by the Modernisation Committee in 2007, debates on topical issues raised by Members take place in the Commons every week. They can focus on issues of regional, national or international importance. Topical debates were introduced as a trial but became a permanent feature of parliamentary business in 2008.

Will the honourable Member...?

During debates in the House, there are certain conventions MPs must follow. For example, MPs are not referred to by name. The following terms of address are used instead:

- the honourable Member for (constituency)
- my honourable friend (if in the same party)
- the honourable Member opposite (if in a different party)
- Right Honourable (for Privy Counsellors)
- the Secretary of State or the Minister (for Ministers)

The Speaker and Deputy Speakers are referred to as 'Mr (or Madam) Speaker' and 'Mr (or Madam) Deputy Speaker'.

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