

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Procedure under coronavirus restrictions, HC 300

Monday 12 October 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 12 October 2020.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Jack Brereton; Bambos Charalambous; Chris Elmore; James Gray; Andrew Griffith; Rob Roberts; Douglas Ross; James Sunderland.

Questions 338 - 418

Witnesses (in 3 panels)

I: Barbara Keeley MP, Claire Hanna MP and Stephen Farry MP ([Questions 338 – 354](#)).

II: Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing MP, Chairman of Ways and Means, Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton MP, First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means, and Mr Nigel Evans MP, Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means ([Questions 355 – 382](#)).

III: Dr John Benger, Clerk of the House of Commons, and Matthew Hamlyn, Strategic Director, Chamber Business Team, House of Commons ([Questions 383 – 418](#)).

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [CVR 103](#) Barbara Keeley MP
- [CVR 84](#) Stephen Farry MP
- [CVR 112](#) Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing MP, Chairman of Ways and Means
- [CVR 116](#) Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing MP (additional memorandum submitted subsequent to meeting)
- [CVR 115](#) Matthew Hamlyn, Strategic Director, Chamber Business Team, House of Commons (supplementary memorandum)



Examination of witnesses (panel 2 of 3)

Witnesses: Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing MP, Rt Hon Dame Rosie Winterton MP, and Mr Nigel Evans MP.

Q355 **Chair:** This might be unique—having all three Deputy Speakers giving evidence to a Committee. I am not sure that has ever been done before. We are very grateful to you for coming and giving us evidence.

As you know, we are looking as a Committee at the way in which the procedures are operating in the Chamber because of the coronavirus restrictions. We are particularly interested in the way the call lists and time limits operate, and obviously in whether there are opportunities to extend the number of places that people can contribute from in the Chamber, and any other points that are important for us to understand from you. We are grateful that you have come because for Members to understand the way that the call lists work and the mystery behind them will be incredibly helpful to help them to understand when sometimes there are frustrations about the length of call list or not getting in when they thought they would.

Can I kick off with an open question? Can I start with you, Dame Eleanor, and then move to Nigel and Dame Rosie? In terms of how your jobs as Deputy Speakers operate, how has the publication of call lists affected the way in which you chair proceedings?

Dame Eleanor Laing: Thank you very much for that question, Chair, and thank you for inviting us to come before the Committee. We are delighted to have the opportunity to discuss this matter with all of you. If I may say so at the beginning, it is rather important that you are able to hear from people who have been in the House for a very long time, and a medium time, as well as people who are new, because it must be remembered that anyone who was elected for the first time last December has not seen the House working as it should do—as it ought to do.

The straight answer to your question is that the publication of call lists has restricted the discretion that the occupant of the Chair can use at any moment in the way in which the Chamber is being chaired. That discretion, I would suggest, is very important. Like all matters of that kind, it would not be discretion if it was an absolute rules-based system. The fact is that there has to be some trust in the occupant of the Chair to act in a fair and equitable manner—we certainly all do, and Mr Speaker does—in trying to allocate time reasonably and fairly, not just between individual Members but between parties. If the particular debate or Bill that is before the House is one where the divide comes not along party lines, we have to try to make sure that everybody from every point of view has a chance. Sometimes that develops during a debate. A year ago now—people might not know; you have got used to these published call lists—the way it used to work was that we had our own handwritten list



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that was really just a note between the three Deputies and the Speaker as to who we were considering putting next to speak. As a debate developed, it was important to have the discretion to say, "We have just heard from four people of this point of view, so we ought to now have someone who we know is of a different point of view in order to have a balanced debate." We would just do that quietly and without fuss.

Now that we have the call lists, it is all published. There are good reasons for that under the current restrictions. We need to have the call lists in order to operate with very few people in the Chamber. You all know the practical reasons for it, but it definitely restricts the flow of the debate and the discretion that the Chair can use in order to make sure that the debates run fairly.

Mr Evans: I endorse everything Eleanor has said. Flexibility seems to have gone out of the window. Everybody knows where they are on the list. It is very rare, but there are occasions when people are swapped for logistical reasons when they are able to sort out that thing themselves. It is not for the Chair to do that. We cannot, otherwise that is all we would be doing, and we have to listen to the debate and all that sort of stuff.

There was an occasion on Thursday, though, when somebody intervened a couple of times, even though they were on the call list themselves further down. Some people seemed to be taking a punt as to whether they thought they would get in or not. Nonetheless, the fact that they intervened a couple of times meant that somebody else may not have got in on that debate. In fact, that did happen. Bambos, you have seen these things happening yourself. The Speaker as he left said, "Even though that person is on the list, please move them down because they have intervened a couple of times." As it happened, that person did not get in even on the debate. You do have that.

I remember in 1992 when I first got elected, some of the speeches could last 15 to 20 minutes. The time limits that we now put on were not put on in the way that they currently are. I think it is good that we are having these time limits put in, which does mean that more people are able to get in. Some of the best speeches I ever had I never gave, because I sat throughout the entirety of the debate and I was never called. There are a lot more people now getting in and we all try to work out what is happening.

With the call lists, increasingly we have noticed that some people, even though they are on the call list, are not coming into the Chamber and not telling the Speaker's Office that they are not turning up. That makes it way more difficult for us to work out what the time limit should be.

Dame Rosie Winterton: The first thing to say is that, with the call lists, interestingly people understand a little bit more about the difficulties we are facing when we come on to the second issue we are discussing, which they could not necessarily see previously, of what happens when 70 people have put in for a 90-minute event and they have done the sums.



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That is why we have to impose the time limits, and that is why we get a bit anxious about interventions with the current—

Q356 **Chair:** I think there may be a problem with your microphone. We are having difficulty hearing you apparently. Do you want to try again?

Dame Rosie Winterton: Is that better?

Chair: Yes.

Dame Rosie Winterton: I will start again. What we find is that because the call lists are published and, therefore, Members can see how many people there are in a debate, I think they do understand what we are up against when we are trying to get as many people in as possible to speak. That plays into what we are talking about next, which is the issue of time limits. They can understand when we get a bit frustrated when one person might take a lot of time, because they have taken a lot of interventions, and it means that others do not get the opportunity to get into the debate.

The other thing that is happening with debates at the moment, though, is perhaps more to do with the restrictions on the number of people in the Chamber. People are tending to not come in for the opening speeches, as they would have done previously, or the closing speeches. They look at the call list and work out who is as few ahead of them and they come in at that point. That does change the way the Chamber operates, obviously, because there is not so much referring back to what somebody might have said previously and that changes the nature of the debate.

It does mean it is quite difficult for us to move people about in the way that Eleanor and Nigel talked about because people are watching to see where they are and who is before them. As I say, some of the debate has changed, not necessarily because of the call list, but just because of how some of the restrictions are operating.

Chair: I have Andrew Griffith and Rob Roberts who both want to ask supplementaries to that. Andrew.

Q357 **Andrew Griffith:** Thank you very much, Deputy Speakers, if that is the right collective noun.

Do you think more people are putting in for debates than when you constructed the old form of Speakers' list? Is there a sense that people are just putting in for everything?

Dame Eleanor Laing: Yes. There is a very simple answer to that. That is a straight question and there is an arithmetic answer—and the answer is yes. It has become quite ridiculous if it is a 90-minute debate. It is crazy, because under normal circumstances, it used to be that for a 90-minute debate, you might have 10 people, or perhaps 15. Before the current situation, we very rarely had a speaking list of over 100 people or even 60 people. It was very, very rare. Whereas now, maybe it is because people have nothing else to do—



Q358 **Andrew Griffith:** Is there anything the Speaker's Office could do to encourage colleagues to put in less often, but for issues on which they felt more strongly, because one often ends up, as is the way of the odds, not being called on a subject that is very close to one's heart or one's constituency?

Dame Eleanor Laing: I do not know whether Rosie or Nigel will agree but, if I may answer your question frankly, it is not up to the Speaker's Office. Members of Parliament have the individual responsibility—and, surely, the maturity by the time they are elected to Parliament—to understand that it is not all about them and that theirs is not the only constituency in the country. There are 650 Members of Parliament and—what?—500 Back Benchers. How many hours a week do we have debates in the House of Commons? With 500 Back Benchers, why does anybody think that they have a right to be called to speak at least once a week? Obviously they don't. It would be helpful if Members employed self-restraint and some kind of real-world look at the situation, and understood that they do not get to speak every week.

I do not want to give too long an answer, but may I just add this? One of the things that we take into consideration when deciding on the order of speeches is how many times a Member has already spoken in this Session of Parliament. At the moment, the average is five, six or seven, but there are some people who have spoken more than 10 times. They wonder why they are at the end of the list, and that is the reason.

Mr Evans: A lot of responsibility would rest with the Member. If they are putting in to speak in every debate, they should not be surprised if they are sometimes pushed further down a list. That can be pretty tough, Andrew, when, as you said, something is very close to your heart.

I know the Whips encourage Members to put in and every time we have a general election, we have some very new and enthusiastic people, as you can only imagine. They want to speak on everything, and it just does not quite work, particularly for the 90-minute debates. As you know, sometimes debates are squeezed because we do not know until the beginning of the day that there is a statement, or maybe two statements and two urgent questions. All of a sudden, unless it is protected time, you have a problem.

Q359 **Andrew Griffith:** Picking up on Dame Rosie's point, notwithstanding that the Chamber capacity is limited on either side to around 26 or 27, it is very empty a lot of the time at the start and particularly the end of debates. Is there anything, even now, that we could do to encourage Members who have spoken to attend up to the point at which the Chamber is full and we understand that no further Members could be in for the wind-ups?

Dame Rosie Winterton: It is obviously up to individuals and we have made it clear that what we do not want is a situation where there are so many people in the Chamber that we have to ask some to leave.



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Therefore, you are completely correct that you can get a situation where everybody has decided to stay away until then. I suppose our advice, as people who have been parliamentarians for a while, is that it is quite a good idea to just go and soak up the atmosphere sometimes and to see how debates are going, but we do not want to send mixed messages about people staying too long in the Chamber if others are coming in, because that is the problem. If you do have 70 people for a 90-minute debate, people are going to have to move out so that the others can come in. In normal times we would say sometimes that it is quite good for colleagues just to go and hear what others have to say, because you do get the spirit of a debate then.

Q360 Rob Roberts: Picking up on one of the earlier answers and specifically on time limits, there have been instances—we have all had it—when we have been two or three away from being called but not quite managed to get in. That happens, but there are times when there are, for example, three hours for a debate and 60 people on the call list, and if we start with a time limit of six minutes per speaker, it is clearly going to be impossible to get everybody in. Should we be starting with a more equal time for everybody, or should we just have fewer people on the call lists in the first place so that we can have those more substantial contributions?

Dame Eleanor Laing: How to get that balance right is a matter that we discuss almost every day. There are times when there is a debate on the Second Reading of a Bill or on a specific subject, and it is very obvious that of the let's say 60 people who put in to speak, the first 20 are those who are on the Select Committee dealing with that subject, who have a particular constituency interest, or who have been a Cabinet Minister dealing with that subject. There are all sorts of reasons why they have a very legitimate reason to speak on that subject but, at the end, you might have 20 people who just put in every day to speak on everything and, quite frankly, no.

If you have Iain Duncan Smith on some subject that he has dealt with for decades—he has also been the leader of his party—is it right to give him three minutes so that at the end of the debate, you can have someone who is at the end of the list because they have already spoken 10 times in the last three weeks, and who tries to speak on everything, also getting three minutes? I am not telling you what the answer to that is, because it varies from day to day, depending on what we are looking at and what the parameters are. But, no, it certainly would not always be the case that we should give everybody three minutes from the beginning to accommodate everyone who has stuck their name in that day.

That has proved to be correct, because what we would often find in the sort of situation that I have just described is that by the end of the day, we would have put a limit on and 12 people will draw out of the debate because they did not really want to speak, and they only put their names in because the Whips asked them to do so. It is not an exact science.



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Q361 **Chair:** I am going to bring in James Gray, but can I just check—can you confirm—that the call lists for debates include everybody who has said they want to speak in that debate?

Dame Eleanor Laing: Yes.

Q362 **Chair:** You do not remove people. It is just the ordering of the call list.

Dame Eleanor Laing: That is correct.

Mr Evans: Absolutely right.

Dame Rosie Winterton: Except if somebody has got a proxy and, therefore, should not be.

Mr Evans: If it is a statement you will only get a certain number. I think today, for the Prime Minister's statement, 120 Members appear. I suspect way more than 120 put in. But for a debate, no, they all get featured but they may not all get called.

Dame Rosie Winterton: The statements are on a draw. I think people think we do the statements as well, but that is on a draw. It is not our responsibility.

Q363 **James Gray:** My question follows the Chair's. If indeed 70 people have written in for a 90-minute debate, what on earth is the point in publishing all 70, because all that does is say to the bottom 30 or 40, "You must now make sure to intervene on the Minister because otherwise you will not be able to get in".

Dame Eleanor Laing: We can give you a quick answer to that. You might start with, say, 60 people for a 90-minute debate and think, "Well, we are certainly not going to get more than 25 people in here." If we only publish 25 or 30, we then find that six or seven of them might drop out.

Q364 **James Gray:** Well, they could be penalised, surely? You could then say, "Not here", and then that Member could not then be called the following day if they had been on the call list and did not turn up. You could have some extra space, but 70 for a—

Dame Rosie Winterton: I think you would find that Members would say, "I put in for this debate and I do not know where my name has gone. Where has it gone?"

Q365 **James Gray:** In the old days, certainly, there would have been quite a big degree of qualitative judgment when deciding who is going to be called. So you sit down in the morning—I am guessing; I have never been there—and consider who should be called in a debate. Surely it would be perfectly reasonable that the list for a debate consists of 20 or 30 people who have some reason for being on the list and know something about what we are talking about, and you then say to the other people, "Awfully, sorry but I am afraid to say you are not on the list." It is rather like Question Time. It happens every time that 150 people put in for PMQs, but only 20 appear on the Order Paper.



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Dame Eleanor Laing: We do do that. What you have just described is roughly what we do.

Q366 **James Gray:** In which case why do you end up with so many on the call list?

Dame Eleanor Laing: Yes, you are right that those at the end are surplus, but we don't say to them, "You cannot speak," because it might happen that there is some time at the end of the debate. It might be that we put on a time limit of, say, six minutes, and then 10 people speak for four minutes each and you suddenly have an extra 20 minutes, so those people who are the reserves at the end of the list come in. By and large, that has been working reasonably well. Believe it or not, you do find sometimes that people do not speak up to the level of the time limit and that there is spare time.

Mr Evans: Even though I marvel at the Zoom technology—or whatever variant it is—that has allowed us to do our democracy to the level that we have, and we are not happy that it is not 100%, the one thing that everybody must miss during questions is the bobbing up and down. A lot of our constituents used to say, "Why do people stand up and sit down?" That did give flexibility to the Chair to be able to choose people when they had a specific problem, such as the closure of an industry the day before—all that sort of stuff—or an accident or a murder in their patches. All that flexibility has now gone.

Q367 **Chris Elmore:** I have more of a general point following on from Andrew's question about those who might have a specialist or constituency interest—Dame Eleanor will know about this because I spent some time lobbying her about 10 days ago about my particular interest. It is in relation to Westminster Hall.

Of course, having Westminster Hall back allows Members to appeal to senior Members, the parliamentary Chairs or to the three of you to say, "I do have a particular interest. Therefore, could I plead on your good nature to ask that I be put into a Westminster Hall debate?" I have been in the House for four and a half years now, and my question—maybe you will not be willing to answer—is that I get the impression, and this is fine of course, that some Members are simply just putting in to increase their speaking record on TheyWorkForYou. That is a concern. I have been a Whip for four years and it is quite interesting to see how many Members just now put in carte blanche, including Members on my own side. Mr Evans will know from just last week about a Member on my side who he had to, from the Chair, remind what the UQ was about. You know who I am talking about. He had completely missed the point of the UQ, but it was just to get something on the record that was not relevant to the UQ and, therefore, it was arguably blocking a Member with a more important question to put, whether it be about something in their constituency or not.

One of my concerns about the whole thing around the hybrid Parliament is that, because the Government or because the Leader of the House is



not allowing virtual participation in Bills and Back-Bench debates, it is making people almost flock to the UQ and statement system, as the 160 to 170 Members who cannot come in are thinking, "That is the only opportunity I have and I am struggling to get anything on the record."

We heard from Barbara Keeley earlier, who cannot come to the House for very, very good reasons, that she has put in 69 times and only been called three times on a UQ or a statement, which she is not complaining about. It is just bad luck, but it does mean she is very restricted. She mentioned an aviation debate, which was a Backbench Business Committee debate. Something like 20% of her constituents work in that sector and she could not participate because of the limitations. There are maybe three or four questions in there, but I know Mr Evans knows what I am talking about.

Mr Evans: On the aviation debate, that was one of the Backbench Business Committee ones. I made it clear from the Chair that when the Backbench Business Committee decides to have two debates in a day—they were very similar—you have two Front Benchers using up time and two Back-Bench wind-ups using up time, and that throws out a lot of people with amazing knowledge in that particular sector who just basically cannot get in. I implored the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee to look again at this so that when you have something like tourism and aviation, if you do a general debate on tourism, aviation comes into it, and Barbara probably would have got in. There is an issue when they try to pack the day with similar Back-Bench debates on a Thursday and loads of people are not getting in.

Dame Rosie Winterton: We do not have responsibility for the statements and UQs. That is done through a different system, but you are absolutely right that it does require individual colleagues to understand. People can get very indignant and say, "Why am I bottom of the list when this is so dear to my heart?" You say, "Because you have spoken three times more than anybody else who has put in for this debate and it is important that people are given an equal chance to speak". You do have to understand—never mind TheyWorkForYou—that it is common sense that you need to save yourself up a bit for when you really do want an opportunity on the one thing that you really want to speak on. You will get it if you have been a bit clever about not putting in for everything all the time.

Q368 **Chris Elmore:** Unless it is the Strangford case. We all know that the Member for Strangford has his own rule for the whole thing.

Dame Eleanor Laing: That is an exception; leave that one aside. What is also important is that it used to be the case that if you wished to speak, you would write a handwritten letter saying, "Dear Mr Speaker, I would like to speak in the debate on such and such or the Bill about such and such, on such and such a date for a particular reason, which is, blah, blah, blah, and I hope to have the opportunity to catch your eye."—polite. It was not, "I am here and I want to speak and I shall speak every day," but politely explaining why, and we take that into consideration.



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We used to have piles of letters—handwritten letters—and when I say “used to”, I mean within the last three or four years. We would have handwritten letters and we would look at them every morning and say, “So and so has a particular interest in this,” or, “The constituency really depends on this,” and they would come top of the list. Now people say, “Oh, my staff put in an e-mail.” So what we have is a pile of e-mails from people with Christian names. They do not even use their full names. They say, “From Jill,” or, “John would like to speak on Tuesday,” and that is it. What is the point? How rude that is, instead of having the honourable outlook and the simple politeness to say, “Mr Speaker, I would be grateful if I could catch your eye.”

Q369 **James Gray:** We could go back to that.

Dame Eleanor Laing: We do not have to go back. That is still there.

Q370 **James Gray:** Why do you not insist on it?

Dame Eleanor Laing: I suggested. Chris and I have had that conversation. That is why you wrote me that letter. That is why you got to the top of the list.

Q371 **Chris Elmore:** Indeed. I was not going to mention that, Eleanor. I will never leave her alone now.

Dame Eleanor Laing: There was a really good reason for it and we have never stopped that practice. It is just that Members, especially new Members, think, “My staff sent an e-mail,” and that is it. That is not really a request, is it? That is just a tick box.

Q372 **James Gray:** Why do you not go back to them and say, “People will not be called if they do that. They may have a chance to be called if you send a personal letter and explain why you want to be called.” Why do you not say that?

Mr Evans: They have more chance. They should know that.

Dame Eleanor Laing: That has never changed. They have more chance. Let’s get that message out now. Members are more likely to be called, or to be called earlier in a debate, if they take the trouble to send a handwritten note to Mr Speaker explaining why they have a particular reason to speak in that debate.

Q373 **Chair:** They cannot dream up a reason for every debate. And you have a point in time by which you have to have applied to be in the debate, so there is a problem with—

Dame Eleanor Laing: Let’s be clear about this. They could do both. They can apply by e-mail and still put in a handwritten note before the following morning.

Mr Evans: Chris is right by the way, that the unintended consequence of not being able to take part in certain debates means that other people are putting in more often for either statements or questions.



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Q374 **Chair:** Can I bring Douglas in and then James Sunderland, because I am conscious of time and we want to make sure we get all the questions—

Dame Eleanor Laing: I was just concerned about the three-minute time limit.

Chair: Yes, we will definitely come on to that, but Douglas.

Q375 **Douglas Ross:** Thank you very much, Chair. Following the remarks from Dame Eleanor, we will see how many of our colleagues actually watch the proceedings of our Committee through the uptake—more than just the 10 members who sit on this Committee—of writing personal notes to Mr Speaker.

I wonder if I could follow on from the point Dame Rosie made about statements and urgent questions being outwith the remit of the Deputy Speakers and, therefore, I presume the Speaker's Office, because the front face for Members who are on the call list for questions is still the Speaker's Office. Could you just explain the difference between call lists for debates and call lists for urgent questions and oral questions?

Dame Rosie Winterton: Basically, there is a kind of draw for the statements, UQs and questions. The only thing—

Dame Eleanor Laing: As there always has been.

Dame Rosie Winterton: As there always has been. The only thing that comes to the Deputy Speakers is the actual call lists for debates. The slight difference—it is not what we deal with the whole time, and the other Deputy Speakers might correct me—of course, in UQs and statements was that there would not be any call lists and you would absolutely just choose from who was in there and the order in which they were taken from the Chair. Obviously for questions, as in Prime Minister's questions, there is a draw that I think is just done by a computer. People put in and it just spews them out. It is like a lottery really.

Mr Evans: With the Speaker having—it is not just by chance that you will find the Chair of the relevant Select Committee to a statement at the top—some discretion there, which the Speaker's Office uses.

Q376 **Douglas Ross:** I suppose my question is trying to get to: I have been called in the 100—"Your name has been pulled out in the top 100"—but they do not get on a call sheet. Why is there a wider call—a limit of about I think 120 that Mr Evans says appears for the Prime Minister today? That would have been even larger and then it is reduced further. Why is it not just that we know a UQ is going to last for about 45 minutes, so we can get roughly 40 Members in, and we will do a call list of 50 rather than a wider one that is taken down further and then published that does not get through everyone?

Dame Rosie Winterton: If the Speaker has decided that, for example, 45 minutes should be allowed for a statement or a UQ, the call list that is published is reflective of how many people experience has shown you will



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get in in that time. You will see that sometimes the call list will be 30 people if it is suspected that only 30 minutes is going to be allocated. If the allocation is 90 minutes for a UQ or a statement, the call list will be of the first 90 that came out of the hat.

Mr Evans: Douglas makes an interesting point, because I had an MP phone me with exactly the same problem that you have. It took me a little while to get my head round it, which I suspect is that if you are a Conservative in the top 100, you are going to have less chance of getting in than if you are of a party with a lower number because, don't forget, they alternate them. If you were number 99 out of that 100, I am afraid people lower down are going to get in and displace you. It may well be that we need to look again at whether those e-mails are being sent out in the right proportions.

Chair: I think the key is the communication with people about that. It is obviously a matter for the Table Office. There is a memorandum that the Clerk has just shared on the WhatsApp group for members to look at.¹ James Sunderland.

Q377 **James Sunderland:** I have two very quick questions if I can. The first question is that I had a bad run recently when things were being chopped just before me on the call list. To my complete astonishment—I will not embarrass the Deputy Speaker concerned—the Deputy Speaker wrote to me personally and apologised, and said, “Keep going. Your time will come.” I was blown away by that, so thank you very much indeed.

My question really is this: if you are not called in a debate having been on the call list, do you get some credit for not being called? It does not count as a score against you.

Dame Eleanor Laing: Yes. Simply, yes: that is one of the things we take into consideration.

James Sunderland: Thank you.

Dame Eleanor Laing: We always did under the normal system and it still operates to an extent at the moment. If you have genuinely tried and sat there, day after day, believe it, we notice. We have a note and we discover if somebody has sat there not being called. Then, yes, they get extra brownie points the next time.

Dame Rosie Winterton: If somebody is just not getting called because they just put in every day, it is more difficult. If it a time when you think, “That is a real shame because if somebody else had not intervened and reduced the time limit, they would have been able to be there,” and they had written a very nice letter saying, “Look, this is a constituency interest,” it is different. If it is just because they put in for whatever debate there is without any discretion—

¹ Note by the Clerk: The memorandum in question was submitted by the Principal Clerk, Table Office and is [published as P86](#).



Q378 **James Sunderland:** So less is almost more in that sense?

Mr Evans: It is brought to our attention. We know if somebody has not been called three, four or five times.

Q379 **James Sunderland:** Thank you. Very quickly, I think there is a danger, in my view, regarding the new Members in this particular Parliament who have had a pretty good run recently, I think, with the call lists. If you look at the way the Chamber works, if you are sat close to the Speaker or a more senior Member, you tend to get called more frequently, I imagine, when Parliament is running normally. The danger is that Members like me who have had a really good run in this Parliament so far might suddenly not necessarily want to go back to what we had before. What encouragement might you give new Members that the time will be there as well when we return to normal?

Dame Eleanor Laing: I wonder if we will ever return to what normal was. I do not know. We have learned lessons from what is going on now. One of the things I am slightly concerned about is that Members who are here at the moment and are speaking an awful lot will have clocked up a large number of speeches against their names, and there are some Members who have been shielding and have not been here and they will have zero speeches, and they are going to get called all the time.

It is all about balance. We work very hard to get a balance. We never ever say, "Oh, it does not matter." We never ever say, "Oh, too bad." We always try to get the balance right because this is democracy. This is the heart of democracy. If we do not get that balance right, democracy isn't working right, and we do everything we can to get that balance right.

Mr Evans: This is where the time limits do come in handy because we have gone down to three minutes, and 28 years ago, when I was first elected, a three-minute speech would have been an insult to a Member of Parliament. Now people are pining for a time limit to be put in early, as we heard earlier on, so that they can get in.

Chair: That brings us very neatly on to time limits, because I am conscious of time and I want to make sure we get in all the questions. I have Rob Roberts and then Chris Elmore who have particular questions on time limits and how they are operating

Q380 **Rob Roberts:** The written evidence that the Deputy Speakers provided says, "As occupants of the Chair we strive to provide time enough for colleagues to deliver considered speeches, opportunity for challenge or support through interventions and the chance for as many colleagues as possible to participate in each debate." We have touched on similar themes already, so my first question is: how would you strike a balance between facilitating considered speeches on the one hand and allowing as many colleagues as possible to speak on the other? Should there be—this touches on what Nigel just said—a minimum level? I appreciate it is kind of three minutes now, but should there perhaps be a minimum of five minutes so that contributions can always be substantial enough? Is



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three minutes long enough for anyone to make a substantial point?

Dame Eleanor Laing: The answer to your final point is, yes, if somebody can actually bother to prepare a speech rather than just get up and speak, you can say a lot in three minutes, and it is often a more considered speech and all the more effective for it if you actually make three points in three minutes and cut out the waffle. So the answer to that is yes, but at the same time waffle and eloquence, and a bit of rhetorical flourish, is what debate is about. We do not want to cut that out altogether. That would also be quite wrong.

The answer to your first point is that it is not an exact science. What we try to do is to balance things. I gave the example earlier, which I think already answers the question you asked. No, it is not always right to say that a senior Member who might have been a Cabinet Minister, has dealt with a particular issue for the last 25 years and has something very substantial to say should necessarily have the same amount of time as someone who has already spoken 12 times in the previous two weeks and just books in for every debate. That is the balance that we have to try to get right.

Of course, we will not get everyone to agree with us every day because everyone has their own point of view, don't they? That is what we are trying to do. The important point about the written evidence, to which you refer, was evidence that Mr Speaker, Dame Rosie and I, when Mr Speaker was Chairman of Ways and Means, submitted in May 2018. I have resubmitted that to the Chairman last week with Mr Evans's agreement. So the four of us are in complete agreement with what we said back in May 2018, which is when we are trying to get the balance right and to be fair to everybody, the system whereby if you take an intervention, the clock stops for the intervention and then you get an extra minute makes it impossible to manage a debate and to be fair to everybody if we are at the stage where the time limit is five minutes or under.

It does not matter if the time limit is seven or eight minutes. Then you have a lot more flexibility, and adding to speeches of seven or eight minutes at the beginning of a long debate is fine—absolutely fine. We have no problem with that. But once we are at the stage where we are trying desperately to get the final 10 people in and we have taken the time limit down to three minutes, if somebody jumps up and intervenes on his mate to say, "Well, if I intervene you will get an extra minute," what they are actually saying is, "If I intervene and you get an extra minute, Joe Bloggs sitting over there does not get to speak at all." We think that it would work better if we could decide whether Joe Bloggs gets in, rather than if somebody who makes an intervention decides whether Joe Bloggs gets in.

Dame Rosie Winterton: With regard to whether there should not be any time limits imposed below five minutes, there is a point about the mood of the House now. Remember that whatever is proposed would



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have to get through the House, and I think a lot of Members would feel that that might prevent them getting into a debate. People do like to think that there is discretion for the Speaker, or whoever is in the Chair, to say, "There is a three minute limit," because they know that that will allow more people in. Now that we have these very long lists of people wanting to contribute, Members would be unwilling to have that discretion taken away from the Chairs, is my instinct.

Eleanor's point is that it is just about the balance. I do not think we want to stop people intervening and the to and fro of debate, but when you have instances where somebody will say, "I am intervening on you so you get an extra minute," you can just see the resentment in other parts of the Chamber when people are going, "Okay, that's my speech gone out the window." They could have sat there all afternoon waiting to make a speech and feel that somebody has just been a bit selfish. That is why we are talking about below five minutes. Once we are on a five-minute limit, we know that there is real pressure on a debate and we are trying to get as many people in as possible. We can calculate quite carefully, but when you are down to those limits, it can easily push somebody from the bottom of the debate who would have got in. That is why we are saying that at that stage, when there is a lot of pressure—we do not introduce it until there is a lot of pressure—it is not fair to throw others out. It does not prevent somebody from taking an intervention. That is absolutely fine, but they just do not get extra time for having taken it.

Mr Evans: Yes. We do not want to stop interventions, because they are all part of the debate and add to the colour, which I love. That is what Parliament is all about.

I was in the Chair that time Rosie was talking about when one MP said, "I am just standing up to give you an extra minute," and I am sorry now I did not block that. That is what I should have done because that is totally unfair and it is an abuse of the system. Whatever recommendations you make, it is just getting that balance right.

Dame Eleanor Laing: Rob, you asked if somebody make a reasonable speech in three minutes. I argued, yes, you can if you know what your three points are. This also comes down to the fact that people are standing up. You are supposed to not read a speech. People are standing up in the House reading their speech and they cannot take an intervention because then they will not get to the end of it. That is not how a speech in the House of Commons ought to work. A speech in the House of Commons ought to be made with a few notes on a small bit of paper and the speaker should be able to engage in the debate.

There is a difference between engaging in a debate and reading out your essay as if you are reading it for your headmaster at school. Please let's try to keep a reasonable level of rhetoric in the House where people can take an intervention and have the confidence to think they can also finish their speech. It should not be about, "Well, I have it down to five minutes



and I have to read the whole thing.” It makes for a very poor quality of debate to be perfectly honest.

Mr Evans: You see people’s colour drain out of their faces when we stand up and say, “Three minutes,” after they have prepared a five-minute speech, because they haven’t the faintest idea what to do because they haven’t got notes.

Dame Rosie Winterton: On the other hand, we had a situation last week where there were so many people down for a 90-minute debate and they were extremely glad when we said right at the beginning, “Three minutes each.” This was about health restrictions in the north-west and we just wanted everybody to be able to get in because of their constituents and they wanted to say, “I only had two minutes but at least I put my point of view.” At one point there, I said, “We have three minutes on but, to be honest, if you are two and a half minutes we will get everybody in”. We got everybody in, but people would have hated it if we had not been able to put our foot down about things.

Chair: That is the discretion you can give from the Chair. I am conscious that we need to get you done very quickly, but I think we have time for just two more questions. Chris Elmore and Andrew Griffith, perhaps you could ask them together and then you can respond, as I suspect they will be on the same topic.

Q381 **Chris Elmore:** It is very clear that you have given your view around the idea of what would happen with a three-minute limit and the discretion you have with it, but can I ask specifically about injury time—the additional minute? There have been examples since the call lists have come into being of Members knowing they are further down the call list. I have witnessed myself in the Chamber colleagues on both sides intervening two, three or four times almost to get their speech in. It gives their colleague more time, but they are then trying to get their point across. I think that is unfair and not in the spirit of what an intervention is about. Do you think it has been made worse by the call list? I suppose, from a practical point of view, if you were to put the limit down to three minutes, if a Member then intervened would you still suggest that the clock is stopped but then not give a minute on top? In other words, they are given that grace for the intervention, but then the clock starts again. If you have 50 seconds, you are responding to the intervention and finishing your speech in that time. That is a technical aspect of managing the Chamber, isn’t it?

Chair: If we just take Andrew’s question and then address them both together.

Andrew Griffith: Are we managing the wrong end of the stick here entirely? I am staggered, frankly, as a new Member, how little scrutiny and how little rigour is applied to some incredibly important issues and the Government of the day. Do we just need more time? Not fewer time limits; just more Chamber time—more ability to challenge the Government, more ability to hold to account, more ability to profoundly



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and properly debate, and not deliver three-minute monologues on really important subjects that are affecting people's lives.

Dame Eleanor Laing: Yes. I cannot give you an answer to that. As Chairman of Ways and Means, that would be quite improper. If I may say so, I think you make a very good point.

Mr Evans: Chris has made an interesting suggestion, which I am sure you will throw into the mix, as far as the variations are concerned as to how you stop the abuses, but without killing the debate. That is a great balance—

Dame Eleanor Laing: For the moment, what we would like to see happen is that if the time limit is five minutes or less, there should be no injury time at all in current circumstances. It might be that when we get back to normal—I wasn't able to say to Mr Sunderland what normal is—it might be that discretion and a bit more movement comes in and, hopefully, we might get back to some good rhetoric and decent rising speeches, although there have been many, many of those, but it is all restricted at the moment.

What we would like to do is to be able to manage the time better by not having injury time if it is less than five minutes—any injury time at all—because in five minutes you can take a couple of interventions and still finish your speech. In three minutes, if you are just making a quick point, you can also let in one of your friends and still do it in three minutes.

Dame Rosie Winterton: The only danger with what you are proposing is that that means that the speaker with their three minutes could take possibly two interventions that would be 30 seconds each and you would still throw the timing out. That is the problem. Unless you said, "You can only take two interventions." It is cleaner just to say that. If you started stopping the clock, people could game the system still and they could say, "I could take 10 interventions. I still get my three minutes and I get 10 very good new friends because I would let them all in". At the moment, because of the pressure, the best way to control the debate is to know that below five minutes interventions do not stop the clock or get injury time would be my—

Q382 **Chris Elmore:** It is quite important for us to understand that, because there is a clear recommendation in there to allow for there to be a stopping of the clock. If you take the intervention, you are losing 20 seconds from your three minutes and that is a matter for you as an individual Member.

Dame Eleanor Laing: Yes. It depends whether you come to the House of Commons to debate and to take part in a reasonable discussion in rhetorical terms about a subject, or whether you come to the House of Commons just to read your speech.



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Mr Evans: You might get a lot more five-minute speeches in that case where we can manage the time absolutely accurately and give you the opportunity to take the interventions.

Chair: Thank you so much. We really do appreciate it and that has been incredibly helpful. We will be coming forward with our recommendations in the near future, but we are honoured to be the first Committee to have all three Deputy Speakers give evidence.

Dame Eleanor Laing: Thank you very much for inviting us. We are delighted that you are taking the trouble to look at this matter because we care about it enormously. Thank you.

Previous panel:

I: Barbara Keeley MP, Claire Hanna MP and Stephen Farry MP ([Questions 338 – 354](#)).

Subsequent panel:

III: Dr John Benger, Clerk of the House of Commons, and Matthew Hamlyn, Strategic Director, Chamber Business Team, House of Commons ([Questions 383 – 418](#)).