

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Ministerial Statements and the
Ministerial Code, HC 1036](#)

Wednesday 16 July 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 16 July 2025.

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Richard Baker; Markus Campbell-Savours; Sam Carling; Lauren Edwards; Peter Lamb; John Lamont; Mr Richard Quigley; and Luke Taylor.

Questions 1 to 82

Witness

[I]: Rt Hon. Lucy Powell MP, Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons.

Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon. Lucy Powell MP.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues, and welcome to an interesting session. A special welcome to the Leader of the House and Lord President of the Council, Lucy Powell. Thank you for joining us this morning.

Lucy Powell: It's a pleasure.

Chair: To set the scene for the record, we are holding this evidence session, and possibly others, following receipt of a letter from Mr Speaker. Although this is not a House matter per se, because it relates to the Ministerial Code, he wrote on behalf of the House, as our eyes and ears. He is increasingly concerned, as you are aware, by the disregard for the importance of Parliament shown by, truth be told, successive Governments when making announcements. I am sure you will touch on that. I thought we could start with an easy pub quiz-type question.

Lucy Powell: I'm quite good at pub quizzes. Make it about sport.

Chair: This is a "Who said?" round. Who said, and I quote—

Lucy Powell: Me, probably.

Chair: Damn. You know the worst thing for a joke is to tell the punchline before time. We will get there in the end. So who said: "The Ministerial Code says that new announcements or policy changes should be made to Parliament first. This should be taken seriously, and we will, not just because we believe Parliament should be respected but because there is no tougher crowd or feared audience than the Chamber of the House of Commons, where many a ministerial career has nosedived. If your announcement can withstand that audience, then it is probably a good one."

Lucy Powell: Great quote! Whoever said that is absolutely right.

Q2 **Chair:** It is fantastic. I'm told it is printed on tea towels, coasters, tea cosies, the whole kit and caboodle.

Lucy Powell: I could sign them.

Chair: You answered my question at the start. It was, of course, you in a speech to the Institute for Government.

Lucy Powell: What I said then was absolutely right; it is what I would say now.

Q3 **Chair:** My next question is: what has changed?

Lucy Powell: Nothing has changed; that is absolutely right. Let me say at the outset, the Prime Minister and I and the whole Government take our responsibilities to Parliament incredibly seriously. We want to restore respect for Parliament, which was diminished under the previous Government. Part of that is bringing important announcements to the

House, where possible. As I said to the IfG, there is no tougher crowd to ensure that what you are announcing is a good policy in the first place.

The Ministerial Code is clear on that—I am sure you have interrogated the wording. We can, of course, do better. We are constantly looking to improve and ensure that we live up to our expectations and high standards.

These are collective decisions, in which we take a number of other factors into account on any given day. We do this not just because it is in the Ministerial Code; it is rightly an expectation of the House. It is an expectation I have as a member of the Cabinet and Leader of the House, and would have as a Back-Bench MP, as part of the House collectively.

Whether or not it is in the Ministerial Code, those are the expectations of the House. The House has a number of devices available to it when those expectations are not being met. I can give you the key stats on the number of statements we have or have not made, and how they compare, but we can come on to that.

Q4 **Chair:** I am sure we will come to that in further questions. You said, “where possible”. What circumstances would make it impossible?

Lucy Powell: As the Ministerial Code makes clear, important statements should be made to the House first when Parliament is in session, when Parliament is sitting. It makes use of the word “should”, as well. When Parliament is in recess, that is obviously difficult. There are challenges, for example, at the weekend, or when the House is not yet sitting, such as first thing on a Monday morning. When there is an international summit or occasion and the timing of that is not done around the House’s statement or sitting times, that is obviously a challenge.

Ministers are very keen to make statements to the House, and at the moment I would say that demand for making statements sometimes outstrips the slots available. On any given day, we also have to weigh up the business of the House that day, how many speakers there might be and any important pieces of legislation. There have been many occasions when having too many statements has curtailed an important debate happening the same day. As you all know, we try not to do statements on the days that Opposition debates are happening, so yesterday, because we knew that a very important statement needed to be made to the House first, I had to put a business of the House motion down to protect the time for the Opposition debate. We take into account a range of factors daily.

That is why we make sure that Ministers tabling written ministerial statements have to give notice of them the day before, so the titles are on the Order Paper for the day, and then the WMS is published on the day. I think we have made over 800 WMSs this Session, which is a huge number. You can also keep Parliament up to date via means other than an oral statement—a written ministerial statement is obviously one of them, as is coming to a Select Committee like this and making an announcement.

Q5 Chair: Before I call Mr Lamb and then Mr Lamont, I am going to ask you a personal question, if I may. The Leader of the House is a slightly peculiar role—

Lucy Powell: Some might say so.

Chair: Each holder of it defines it in a slightly different way, outside the core responsibilities of the Thursday statement, the business and so on. The general theme has always been that the Leader of the House is the representative of the House of Commons at the Cabinet table, and not the Cabinet table's representative in the House of Commons, notwithstanding the fact that you sit as a member of the Cabinet. In a sentence or two, could you flesh out your thinking about how you, if you do, define yourself as the champion, albeit in a party political capacity, of the House as a House?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Actually, I think that the Leader of the House is both those things: the Leader of the House is both the representative of the House sitting in Cabinet, but they are also the Cabinet's representative to the House, especially in regard to House and Government business. If you asked any one of my Cabinet colleagues, including the Prime Minister, whether I regularly—and robustly, at times—remind Cabinet colleagues and other Ministers of how important it is to take their responsibilities to the House seriously, you would not find a member of the Cabinet or Minister who does not say, “Lucy very regularly reminds us of that and enforces it.”

I believe it is very important that the Government of the day are accountable to the House of Commons, and that legislation and policies are better as a result of being scrutinised, stress tested and amended—all those things that House is here to do. That is a good thing about our parliamentary democracy, and it sets us apart from other Governments around the world. We do not operate an Executive order-type Government; things have to be passed and agreed to by a majority of the House, and that is a very high bar. It is everyone's interest that they respect the House and take it very seriously.

Q6 Peter Lamb: I think everyone would accept as a reason why a statement is not given is that Parliament is not sitting. During recess or over the weekend, if something is critical, it makes sense for it not to go to Parliament.

I am a little more concerned about the statement that it would be reasonable for someone not to make a statement to Parliament because something had happening on a Monday morning. The House does not sit until fairly late in the morning, if not the afternoon, on most days.

For a Minister who wished to avoid the scrutiny of the House and to control the media narrative of the day, a morning briefing would be justified purely by the fact that the House did not happening to be sitting first thing in the morning. Surely there is a more stringent requirement while Parliament is sitting, that Ministers should be expected to come to

the House, even if we do not happen at that particular minute of the day to be operating.

Lucy Powell: Maybe there has been a slight misunderstanding. I was not saying that that was a reason not to make a statement; just that it is a reason not to make a statement first, necessarily. If a Minister made an announcement on a Monday morning, for example, I would expect them to come to the House on the Monday afternoon, at the first opportunity.

This is not about this Government at all, but a development over 30 years or more. We now operate in what is not even a 24/7 news environment, but a minute-by-minute one, with stories breaking on social media throughout the day, leaks happening, things happening somewhere else and all that kind of thing. We have to try to manage making sure that the House is informed and statements are made at the earliest opportunity when things are evolving and moving quickly or announcements are being made. That is always the balance.

When it comes to important statements—Budgets or the strategic defence review, which I am sure we will come to—I am strongly of the view that the reports should be laid to the House first and those statements made to the House first. With other announcements made to the media and so on, you just need to make sure that you are coming to the House at the earliest opportunity later that day.

Q7 **Peter Lamb:** But the Ministerial Code says that the first instance should be to Parliament, not that it should come to Parliament on the same day. The Speaker has written to the Committee, I think, because there seems to be a pattern in which it is possible to give the excuse that Parliament does not happen to be sitting at that minute and therefore you can give a statement in whatever format you want, rather than waiting until the House is in session. It has surely always been the case, particularly back in the days when sitting hours were later, that people were waiting all through the day to make the statement first, following the principle at the time.

I fully accept your point about the changing media environment. We have been asked to look into this, and one of the questions that I think needs to be added is whether the convention can operate at this time. But as long as it is operating, surely there is an expectation that Ministers will follow it, regardless of how inconvenient that might be for the media narrative.

Lucy Powell: When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance to Parliament. There are quite a few subjective words in that, I should be clear. You also have to strike the balance between—

Q8 **Chair:** Sorry, but first of all it says “first” and it refers to when the House is “in session”. That is different from when the House is sitting. If you take the SDR, we were still in the parliamentary Session.

Lucy Powell: We were actually in recess.

Q9 **Chair:** No, because recess had finished and we were coming back on the Monday. The SDR was not time-sensitive.

Lucy Powell: We can come on to the SDR; I am sure we will. There are several things to unpack here, so let us unpack a few of them. Can we do better? Yes, we can. Are we doing better than the previous Government? Absolutely we are. It is really important to make that point here.

Q10 **Chair:** You will accuse me of saying this as a Conservative, Lord President, but two wrongs do not make a right. We are looking at the behaviour of this Government in this Parliament.

Lucy Powell: I am just saying that, as a trajectory of improvement, this is not going backwards but upwards. We have made 192 oral statements to the House in 170 sitting days. That is more than one a day. We have also tabled over 800 written ministerial statements. In the last Session, the Government made 72 oral statements in a year over 101 sitting days—way fewer than one a day. What I am saying is that the trajectory is going upwards, because we take this issue incredibly seriously.

Q11 **Chair:** All new Governments coming in, in particular when there has been a change of governing party, have more things to announce, because they have a brand-new legislative agenda. I am not sure whether we need to compare apples and oranges.

Lucy Powell: It is an important comparison. If you look back over that whole Session, what has changed over time—I am sure you will agree—is the expectations about oral statements. The use of urgent questions, even when I was first elected 12 years ago, was very rare. The use of urgent questions has now become much more part of the norm.

The bigger question, which the Modernisation Committee I chair is looking at, is about the use of parliamentary time in the day and balancing all the pressures. I speak to colleagues, and sometimes they would like to participate more in statements and urgent questions than in big debates on legislation. Are we always getting the balance of that right? Should statements come at a different point in the day and so on, because there is much more demand, and the use of urgent questions has gone up?

Q12 **Peter Lamb:** I take the point about precedents. It is useful for us, in considering this, to consider whether the general trajectory is such that the convention should be adjusted, if every Government struggle with it.

We heard the figure, the ratio of announcements made to the House and to Parliament, and it has been put to us a number of times, to explain the Government not making announcements to the House. The Ministerial Code does not specify a ratio that should be made to the House; it specifies that all major announcements should be made to the House, so the overall number of announcements made is not relevant—

Lucy Powell: It does not say “all”. It says “the most important”, which is a collective decision made every day, every week.

Q13 **Peter Lamb:** In which case the statistic that would be relevant here is what proportion of the most important announcements have been made to the House. The figure is not relevant; the point is the repeated breaches, where significant announcements are made at times when they really should have gone to Parliament, and when Parliament was available for those announcements to be made.

Lucy Powell: Such as?

Q14 **Peter Lamb:** I think anyone would have felt that the strategic defence review was one, particularly given the level of briefing and the fact that journalists appeared to receive all the information about it before Parliament did. That was a fairly significant breach of parliamentary privilege.

Lucy Powell: Do you want me to go through that?

Chair: We will come on to the SDR as a separate case.

Lucy Powell: Yes, but to be clear, the SDR was published to the House—published, as opposed to people being allowed to go into a reading room and so on, earlier in the day, in the form of embargoed copies. We can come on to the specifics for journalists, but the SDR was published to the House first.

Another balance that we need to get is that we need to give Members ample time to read a document before the questioning of the oral statement. I have had many criticisms of that not being the case, of it being the other way around—for example, with the announcement about the WASPI decision, responding to the Parliamentary Ombudsman report, that was made to the House first, but the criticism was the other way. Members did not feel that they had had enough time to consider it before questioning the Secretary of State on that matter. Those, too, are trade-offs, which are in the guide to parliamentary work in the Ministerial Code.

May I be really clear? The Ministerial Code is a matter for the Prime Minister—it is the Prime Minister's Ministerial Code. As I said at the outset, however, even if that were not in the Ministerial Code—but it is in the expectations of the House and in the Standing Orders of the House—it would be an expectation of the House. I would still be in front of your Committee being asked whether we were living up to the expectations of the House in coming to the House with important policy announcements, so that members of the Government are adequately scrutinised.

I would not want this Committee to get too bogged down in the Ministerial Code aspect, although I know that is what Mr Speaker has asked you to look at. I strongly believe that the expectation of the House is, rightly, a high one, when it comes to such matters.

Q15 **Chair:** The expectation of the House is for HMG to abide by the rules, regulations, conventions, and checks and balances of this place—

Lucy Powell: Of the House—yes, the Ministerial Code reflects those of the House is what I am saying.

Q16 **Luke Taylor:** I do not know whether you have seen any of our previous omnibus editions of PACAC, but relying on statistics is not going to be popular with many of us. The point here is about the first instance. I am slightly frustrated that you seem to suggest that looking into the Ministerial Code, which is the subject of this session, in respect of the particular issue of the first instance—I admire the attempt to obfuscate, divert away and talk about numbers and totals, but can we be really clear that we are talking about the announcement of information to parliamentarians first? Going forward, can we focus on that particular issue in answers, please?

Lucy Powell: It is very important to set the context of a trajectory going upwards, and of a Government that takes these matters seriously, and demonstrating that—

Luke Taylor: That is not the question.

Lucy Powell: I will come on to your question. I think that is an important context for this Committee to appreciate. This is not a trajectory going downwards; it is one going significantly upwards and one that we take incredibly seriously.

As I say, a range of things are taken into account. The most important Government announcements are made to the House first. I am sure we will have a much deeper discussion about the strategic defence review and what was or was not given to who, when, and how that was done, but there has been the strategic defence review, a Budget and important policy documents.

For example, on the publication of the NHS 10-year plan last week, is that to say whether a trail of that document, a visit relating to that document, or media handling was done elsewhere in advance, which is often the case? That was the case in that situation, and has been the case for many years now. But however many pages the NHS 10-year plan is—I think it is about 169—that document was published to the House first, with the Secretary of State coming 45 minutes later, giving enough time for Members to consider that document, for a two-hour statement.

The most important statements—the significant statements, especially where there is significant documentation sitting alongside them, such as the national policy planning framework—and things that are important matters to the House are made to the House first. Often, responses to inquiries or responses to other reports are also made to the House first. Can we constantly review that and make sure we are doing that better? Yes, we can. Are there things where you might take a view about what is the most important of that day? Are there announcements that might be done via press release and then in a statement in the House later? That

has always been the case and that still is the case, but for the most important ones it is not.

Q17 **Chair:** Was the prisoner recall important?

Lucy Powell: The response to the sentencing review was given to the House first. I accept that there was an issue in respect of the prisoner recall. My understanding—I obviously asked about it myself—was that that was not supposed to be said in that press conference in that way, because there were later things. On that occasion, we fell short.

Chair: So the Secretary of State for Justice misspoke, or spoke prematurely.

Lucy Powell: I think she had not understood it to be as significant as it was. As I say, there are times that we do not always get this right.

Q18 **Chair:** That is not particularly encouraging. What about the UK- US trade deal—is that important?

Lucy Powell: It was very important. As you know, that was jointly signed by the President of the United States and the Prime Minister. The timing of that was completely out of our control and was subject to the availability and timing of the US President.

Q19 **Chair:** The Chagos Islands?

Lucy Powell: International treaties are routinely signed and delivered jointly elsewhere, and then a Minister comes straight to the House.

Q20 **Chair:** Tuition fees?

Lucy Powell: The tuition fees statement was made to the House first.

Q21 **Chair:** Planning reforms?

Lucy Powell: Planning reforms were as well. Tuition fees was made to the House first.

Q22 **Chair:** Fiscal rule changes?

Lucy Powell: Budget statements—

Q23 **Chair:** All were trailed, in considerable detail, in advance.

Lucy Powell: No. With tuition fees, there was an unauthorised leak, which was investigated and which was about 20 minutes before. The statement had already been advertised and agreed, and that was being made to the House first.

Budget statements are always made to the House. Since time immemorial, Governments have, for various reasons, often to do with laying grounds with the markets and all that kind of thing, trailed aspects of Budgets before they are given to the House, but they are given to the House first, and we are all here to hear them. We know that that is an important thing.

On the UK-US trade deal, the statement was given to the House at the earliest opportunity, at the end of the day. That was quite a difficult thing to manage at the time, but that trade deal was not actually signed until 3 pm.

We strain every sinew to try to do this and, on occasions where there have been unauthorised leaks, those matters have been investigated. The most important statements to the House have, for the most part, been made to the House first, but as I said on the Floor of the House and I will say again now, we are constantly looking at ourselves and making sure that we are doing that where we can.

Chair: Mr Taylor, had you concluded?

Luke Taylor: No, but that is the best I am going to get, I think.

- Q24 **John Lamont:** Good morning, Leader of the House. It is very good to see you. Thank you very much for the exceptionally good and helpful responses I get to business questions each Thursday.

You referred to paragraph 9.1 and said that some of the words are a bit subjective. Do you think that paragraph is sufficiently clear and understood if some of the words are subjective?

Lucy Powell: I do, because we also produce for Ministers a guide to making legislation and a guide to Parliament, and they set out a clear process by which Ministers should consider these things and the steps they should take.

As I say, that also involves making sure that Ministers table written ministerial statements as well, because it is not just through oral statements that announcements are made to the House. A written ministerial statement is also an important tool for making the House aware of issues, and the titles of those go on the Order Paper the night before, so people know they are coming. We set out in the guide the process for Ministers making statements.

- Q25 **John Lamont:** We know that, ultimately, it is the Speaker's decision as to which UQs are granted and which statements are allowed—

Lucy Powell: It is not, actually. For statements, it is not the Speaker—

John Lamont: It is entirely the Government?

Lucy Powell: It is entirely the Government; it is nothing to do with the Speaker. Even though we routinely say, "With permission, Mr Speaker", that is a courtesy. The Government of the day decide which statements are happening.

- Q26 **John Lamont:** It would be helpful to understand the process a bit more clearly. Back-Bench MPs put in urgent question requests.

Lucy Powell: Yes, they are for the Speaker.



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John Lamont: Is there a meeting between you and the Speaker to discuss them? Are you involved in that?

Lucy Powell: No. I have regular meetings with the Chief Whip and No. 10, because the three people who have to agree to a statement happening are me, the Chief Whip and the Prime Minister. I oversee that process and I communicate the outcome of that process; I receive the bids and manage that process.

We notify the Speaker in the morning of which statements are coming that day. Obviously, I work very closely with the Speaker in general, so I will try to let him know in advance, as well as other colleagues, what I am expecting later in the week, just to give people a sense of what is happening.

But we formally notify the Speaker's Office in the morning. He has his Speaker's conference, the timing of which depends on the sitting hours and which is made up of him, the Deputy Speakers, the Clerks and so on. They consider urgent question applications at that point. They already know, going into that conference, what statements are planned, and then it is up to the Speaker and the Speaker's conference to agree to urgent questions.

Q27 **John Lamont:** Let us focus a bit more on the statements process. There is obviously a grid that is run by No. 10 in terms of how the announcements are going to be made over a week or a month. Who in No. 10 runs that grid?

Lucy Powell: I am not going to mention individual staff members. I do not think that—

John Lamont: No, but is it effectively the Prime Minister's office?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, it is No. 10. I meet with that team, the Whips Office and other relevant people every Monday. We go through announcements, the grids and parliamentary business for the subsequent weeks—two or three weeks hence. Officials in No. 10 meet with my team as well, every Thursday, and then we have a decision-making process every morning to finalise the statements every day.

We are in lockstep on that, and I will look at things that are in the grid and make sure that we have statements on them or, where they are the most significant things, that they are coming to the House first. We will work together to make sure that those things work in tandem. For example, during recess or on Fridays and so on, we try to avoid things that really should be published to the House first as best we can.

Q28 **John Lamont:** I want to go back to the urgent question process, accepting that it is entirely a matter for the Speaker. On a Monday, for example, Back-Bench MPs have to get their bids in by 10 o'clock. The Speaker's conference then meets and determines whether the application is granted. If the urgent question application went in at 3 o'clock on a

Monday, for example, it would not then be considered until the next Speaker's conference the next morning. Is that at the Speaker's discretion, or is it set down in Standing Orders?

Lucy Powell: I don't know—you would have to ask the Speaker about that.

Chair: It is not in the Standing Orders.

Lucy Powell: We make sure we notify the Speaker of statements well in advance of his Speaker's conference, because he needs to know what is coming that day to decide whatever else. For Members, going on the annunciator and getting sent round by all the various Whips is the business of the day, the statements and any urgent questions that have been granted, so Members would need to know about that in advance.

We obviously have had a situation—for example, the Chair mentioned the UK-US trade deal, and there have been some other issues. There was a Northern Ireland statement we needed to do at the end of the day because things had evolved during the day.

Sometimes we know those things are coming, so I will speak to the Speaker, because I need the Speaker's permission to put on a statement at a different time of the day. If we know something is coming, or if something evolves very quickly during the day, I will speak to the Speaker about whether we can put that on at a different time in the day, often at the end of the day.

Q29 **John Lamont:** There are stories from Victorian times, when the sitting hours of the House were much longer, of Ministers being dragged out of their beds, restaurants and goodness knows what to go and respond to urgent questions that were being considered by the House.

Chair: Marvellous!

John Lamont: In terms of a Monday scenario, where you might get a story developing at 6 pm or 7 pm, and the Government have decided, for whatever reason, not to put forward a statement, if I put in an urgent question application at 6 pm on a Monday, the House is still sitting until 10. As the rules stand, that urgent question application, as I understand it, would be not be considered until the following day. Is there anything to stop the Speaker convening the Speaker's conference at 6 pm when my application goes in, and then granting the urgent question for later that evening?

Lucy Powell: You would have to ask him about that, but if something really major happens through the day—a terrorist attack or something awful happening—conversations would happen between myself, the Chief Whip and the Speaker very quickly. On some occasions, that might be initiated by the Speaker, who says, "I really think the House should have a statement later today. Can you arrange one?" and that kind of thing. It is an evolution, and we have—



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Q30 John Lamont: I accept that, but I am thinking more of the scenarios that the Chair gave, where the House felt that it should have been told about something and the Government had not scheduled a statement at that particular point. It did maybe come the next day, but—

Lucy Powell: I think for all the examples the Chair gave me, a statement had been scheduled. For the strategic defence review, there were obviously questions about who had access to what information earlier, and we can go into that detail.

On the tuition fees statement, we were absolutely planning to make that to the House first. As the Secretary of State was on her way over here to make the statement, the media outlet got hold of it and put it on Twitter, but she was standing on her feet 20 minutes later. On the UK-US trade deal, we had made it clear that there would be a statement later that day, which there was. With the Budget, everyone knows it is coming, and it is scheduled long in advance.

In my time overseeing these things—I cannot speak for previous times—I do not think there has been an occasion when a statement had not been scheduled or was not going to happen, apart from when there has been something fast moving. As I said, I think there was a Northern Ireland statement that we needed to make at the end of a day, which we did not know about at the start of the day, because a court case came to a quicker conclusion that left some question marks open. There are those occasions, and we will make every effort to keep the House informed.

As I said earlier, when I was first elected 12 years ago, which is not that long ago, urgent questions were a device that was very rarely used. The previous Speaker started to make really strong use of urgent questions, which existed in Standing Orders but were not used. Previously, Back-Bench MPs had much fewer devices to hold the Government to account, and now they are used far more widely. I think the applications for urgent questions are going up significantly year on year.

Q31 John Lamont: Do you think the Ministerial Code is the right place for the rules on this to be set out, or should it be put in a different forum?

Lucy Powell: As I have said before, I think the Ministerial Code reflects the expectations of the House, and vice versa. The Ministerial Code is a document for the Prime Minister; he has a constitutional role, on behalf of the King, to inform, appoint and dismiss Ministers. Therefore, it is his code for upholding the standards, behaviours and expectations of Ministers and Government as a whole.

I think the Ministerial Code reflects what the House would expect anyway. Even if there were not anything in the Ministerial Code about making announcements to Parliament, we would still be having this hearing now on whether you think we are doing that well enough compared to the expectations of the House. Those expectations actually exist in the conventions and Erskine May as well.



Q32 Chair: You will recall that on the day the strategic defence review was published, the Speaker also granted an urgent question on the future of the nuclear deterrent, which was a nod as good as a wink to a blind man. The Speaker wrote to this Committee, not the Committee on Standards, because it is not a House matter, and he has very limited weaponry in his arsenal to demonstrate the House's displeasure.

I appreciate your valued comments about the timeframe of the increase in urgent questions, but apart from a Speaker's statement given from the Chair, one of the few ways in which the Speaker can effectively illustrate or demonstrate his and the House's irritation is by granting a disproportionate number of urgent questions, particularly the one on the SDR day. That was effectively a conflation of the two issues, and it was a way of saying to the Government, "You are the authors of your own misfortune." Ministers do not necessarily want to be in the House; they want to be in their Departments doing good stuff on behalf of the country. Such an urgent question allows the Speaker to say, "The House will drag you here for a UQ unless you get this element of the Ministerial Code to a level that meets the legitimate expectations of both the Speaker's Office and the House."

Lucy Powell: I am sure will hear from the Speaker on this issue. Obviously, the Speaker is the Chair of the House, and he is there, with the will of the House, to reflect its views, rather than his own.

Chair: "I have neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak".

Lucy Powell: What I would say about that particular instance was that two were urgent questions granted. An urgent question was granted on a particular aspect of the SDR, and there was an urgent question granted against me on the process of the SDR, both of which, as it turned out, delayed the SDR coming to the House. Otherwise, the SDR would have been the first statement to the House at 3.30 pm. As it was, it came to the House at 5.30 pm. Therefore, there was a delay in the opportunity for MPs to question.

They are a matter for the Speaker; I am not going to criticise him for granting those urgent questions. I would not want it to be taken as a criticism, but—

Q33 Chair: I was not asking you to criticise. I was asking whether somebody in the machinery of government has joined the dots and thought to themselves, "Gosh, there's a really interesting correlation between occasions where this element of the Ministerial Code is set aside, breached or ignored and the trajectory of the rise of urgent questions as a way of Mr Speaker saying that the House can and will bring Ministers to the Dispatch Box to answer questions of the House's choosing."

Lucy Powell: I would say a couple of things. The proportion of UQs granted in this Parliament is significantly lower than in the previous Parliament. The number of applications is going up significantly as it is seen as a more topical and more everyday device than it once was. I think

the use of UQs is going up because people want to use them, but the proportion being granted is significantly lower than it was in the last Session.

Secondly, your opening question to me was: what is my job? I am very well aware of the devices that the House has at its disposal when it is not satisfied that a Minister is appropriately coming to the House, not just to make announcements but to make themselves available, to be open to scrutiny and so on. I will advise Ministers that if they do not come forward on such a day or with such a topic, I feel that an urgent question might be granted, and therefore they should do it. Back Benchers can also apply for SO24 emergency debates. They can table written parliamentary questions. They can raise matters with me at business questions, as they do regularly. They can raise points of order. There are lots of embarrassing ways for the House to bring those things to the fore.

Chair: I am conscious of time, of Prime Minister's questions and everything else. I call Mr Baker.

Q34 **Richard Baker:** Thank you, Simon. Good morning. My questions are also on how we can have effective accountability of Ministers in terms of parliamentary scrutiny. The Ministerial Code, of course, has a role in that too. You said that you take the Ministerial Code and the principles set out in chapter 9.1, in particular, very seriously. What do you think should be the sanctions for breaches of that section of the code, if there should be any sanctions?

Lucy Powell: As I said, the Ministerial Code is a matter for the Prime Minister. As you know, there is an Independent Adviser on the Ministerial Code. The Prime Minister, in taking office, wants to make sure that we are a Government of service and that we uphold the highest possible standards. That is why he has given the Adviser on the Ministerial Code additional powers to instigate their own investigations, which was not the case previously.

We have also upped the ante in terms of the transparency of ministerial declarations, for example. Outside interests are now to be declared once a quarter, instead of once every six months. Gifts and hospitality declarations are now published every month, which is something the previous Government promised to do for three years, and we did that within our first few months of coming into office.

I just want to paint the picture that we are strengthening transparency on ministerial accountability and standards. We have given extra powers to the Adviser on Ministerial Standards. As the Adviser has made clear to you in correspondence, he sees his role, I think rightly, as looking at the behaviour and standards of Ministers individually, and not those decisions for which the Government as a whole have collective responsibility. Whether a statement does or does not take place on a particular day is, for the most part, not a decision for a particular Minister.



It is a decision that is taken collectively. For example, just in the past few weeks, a number of bids were made to me for oral statements that people wanted but that had to be made through written ministerial statements because there was a lot of competition for statements on the day, and they could not all be granted. Ministers may make themselves available, but it might not be their decision. They are collective decisions of the Government, rather than individual decisions.

Q35 Richard Baker: As you said, the Independent Adviser has told us that he does not view it as falling under his remit to assess whether there has been a breach of the principle set out in chapter 9.1 that “the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.” Who should therefore determine whether there has been a breach of those principles?

Lucy Powell: Obviously the Prime Minister would determine those. If there was a wilful attempt by a Minister to give information to the media that had not been agreed, or if a Minister was absolutely refusing to come to the House on an important matter on which the Prime Minister wanted that Minister to come to the House, then I can tell you—knowing the Prime Minister well, as I do—that he takes an extremely dim view of Ministers behaving in that way. I cannot think of an example where anybody has behaved in that way, because I can tell you now that if they did, they would no longer be a Minister.

It is a matter for the Prime Minister to determine whether the Ministerial Code is being upheld. The process around giving oral statements—I think that is the thing we are focusing on here, rather than written ministerial statements and so on—is a decision taken collectively by me, the Chief Whip and the Prime Minister on behalf of the Cabinet. They are not therefore decisions for a Minister. If the Chief Whip, I or anybody else discovered there were misdemeanours going on in relation to a Minister’s responsibilities to Parliament, those would be relayed to the Prime Minister, I am sure.

Q36 Richard Baker: But in terms of chapter 9.1 specifically, Mr Speaker has raised concerns directly with this Committee. It is obviously something he takes very seriously and is worried about, so would you accept that there have been breaches of the principles set out in 9.1 in this Session?

Lucy Powell: No, I would not, actually. This comes from the top, from the Prime Minister, and what I would say is that he takes his responsibility and the responsibility of this Government to Parliament, and to respecting Parliament, incredibly seriously. That is why he and I remind Cabinet colleagues of that on a regular basis.

I write to Cabinet colleagues. I raise these matters in person with people. There are ongoing discussions and negotiations about when things will happen, how they will happen and so on, making sure that the most important announcements of Government policy are made to the House first, and in good time for Members to consider them. As I say, there are a

range of factors that we take into account every day that might mean a particular announcement cannot be made on the Floor of the House on that particular day. We would then expect a WMS to be tabled, which is the way it would be done.

The Chair has given some examples, and we have gone through them, where statements were advertised and planned, where some information may have been inadvertently—with the right intention—or in other ways made available to other people in advance. I am happy to go through some of those examples in more detail. We are endeavouring to do what we set out.

Q37 Richard Baker: In principle, do you think it should be the Prime Minister or Parliament that decides whether Ministers are failing to honour their obligations to the House, given that there may well be differences of view on this issue between Government and Parliament?

Lucy Powell: The Ministerial Code, Ministers' behaviour and the appointment and dismissal of Ministers is a constitutional role for the Prime Minister, who is tasked with doing that on behalf of His Majesty. That is the constitutional role of the Prime Minister. As we have discussed, whether or not this particular matter is in the Ministerial Code, it would still be an expectation of the House that Ministers make themselves available to the House regularly and often, particularly when they have something new to say, and to bring that to the House.

The House has a range of devices at its disposal. They are all the ones we have discussed: urgent questions, points of order, written questions, Prime Minister's questions, business questions and so on. It also has much more serious ones, as we saw in the last Parliament, when a Committee of the House—the Privileges Committee, the majority of which were Government MPs—held an inquiry on whether the Prime Minister of the day had misled the House. They found that the Prime Minister of the day had misled the House, which had incredibly serious and huge consequences for that Prime Minister, who resigned as a result.

Where the House feels that a Minister has misled it, has not been forthcoming or has not made themselves available, it has a range of tools at its disposal to deal with that, but the Ministerial Code is a matter for the Prime Minister.

Q38 Chair: Hugh Dalton resigned for inadvertently announcing. Hugh Dalton was an honourable man, wasn't he?

Lucy Powell: I can't remember who Hugh Dalton was.

Q39 Chair: A Labour Treasury Minister, who resigned in 1947.

Lucy Powell: Forgive me for not knowing—

Q40 Chair: One of the great giants of the Labour Government under Attlee. There was a time when doing something inadvertently was no defence, in

the same way as “I was only obeying orders” or ignorance of the law is no defence.

Lucy Powell: More recently, a good friend of mine, Bev Hughes, who is now in the Lords, resigned as an immigration Minister because information she had been given by her officials turned out not to be correct and she repeated it to the House, so it does happen. Let us not underestimate what the Privileges Committee did. I know it is not particularly about this issue, but it was about things that were said at the Dispatch Box to this House by the Prime Minister. This House has high expectations and high standards. Even in this Parliament, we have seen Ministers have to correct the record.

- Q41 **Chair:** I think Mr Baker’s questions and your answers have distilled down to the nub of this conundrum. The Ministerial Code is authored and owned by No. 10, in the broader sense of the term; it is both author and invigilator. The Speaker of the House of Commons, every Opposition party and a large number of Government Back Benchers, including senior figures such as Dame Meg Hillier, Chair of the Treasury Committee, believe that the element of the Ministerial Code that we have under consideration this morning has not always been followed, and that there are no particularly compelling reasons to justify not following that element of the code.

It is a very perverse situation whereby the author, or the custodian, of the Ministerial Code says, “Well, I hear all that, but I don’t agree with you. I think you are all wrong. I think you’ve all got the wrong end of the stick, and I am the only one who has the right end of the stick.” We would not put up with that in terms of standards for Members of either House, and rightly so—we stopped marking our own homework a long time ago—

Lucy Powell: Well, we still do, actually, because the Standards Committee does.

- Q42 **Chair:** Yes, but there are lay members, codes, legal advisers and all the rest of it. Is it a fair assessment to suggest that who guards the guards—who polices the implementation and the following of the Ministerial Code—might best be vested in a body or an individual other than the Prime Minister? That might just make everybody sharpen their pencils.

Lucy Powell: I disagree with your characterisation of the situation. Nobody here has given me an egregious example of where one of the most important Government announcements has not been made to the House.

- Q43 **Chair:** Leader, with the greatest of respect, could I just say to you gently, on behalf of this Committee, that if the fact that Mr Speaker has made three or four statements from the Chair and has taken the unprecedented step of writing to this Committee asking us to look at it, does not ring just the teeniest of alarm bells in HMG—

Lucy Powell: No, I don’t—look, I think we are talking at slight cross-purposes here. Obviously, from Mr Speaker, who I speak to regularly about these matters—and I fully respect his role as Speaker in holding us



to account for these things—there is this question about, on some occasions, for some types of announcements, how much is given, trailed, done at the weekend or whatever in the media, and how much is given to the House first.

On the big issues, like the strategic defence review, the NHS 10-year plan or a Budget, where there is a big report, a White Paper or something like that—a serious Government document—those statements have been made to the House, and they are made to the House. I suppose the issue is the word “first” in some cases—

Chair: So there are no grounds—

Lucy Powell: But there isn’t an example where a Minister has wilfully—

Q44 **Chair:** Leader. Therefore, in your assessment—you are perfectly justified to arrive at this assessment—there were no grounds whatsoever for Mr Speaker to write to this Committee—

Lucy Powell: No, that is not what I am saying at all. I absolutely welcome—

Chair: You have just told us—

Lucy Powell: No, no, I was just going on to make another point. So, look, can we do better? Believe me, I am the person in Government who is constantly reminding Ministers to make sure they factor these things in completely into any comms plan—any plans they have—and that, as you said in your opening, coming to the House is not only important in itself, but is incredibly important for making sure that that policy is the best it can be and is properly scrutinised. That is something that a Minister should relish and factor into any comms plans for those announcements.

Can we go back to the world of the 1940s, where there are no press releases, no Sunday morning political shows that need filling, no social media avenues and no 24/7 news avenues, where we then have to wait until 12.30 to issue a press release—

Chair: Yes, you can.

Lucy Powell: On every single thing that the Government is saying.

Chair: Yes. If you want to abide by the Ministerial Code, yes.

Lucy Powell: No, because I do not believe that is the interpretation of the Ministerial Code. But as I say, and as I have said throughout—

Chair: The code does say “first”.

Lucy Powell: It says “When Parliament is in session, the most important”—that is a judgment that we will make—“announcements of government...should”—should—“be made” to the House first. That is what it says.



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There are many times when that would not apply, or there are many times when we would make different judgments about what that is or is not. By the way, “announcement” is not just an oral statement; it is a written ministerial statement; it is coming to a Select Committee to make it known; or it is answering a parliamentary question. There are many other ways in which those announcements can be, and are, made.

Chair: As long as it is first, yes.

Lucy Powell: As I say, you can have a look at what I would regard as far more egregious examples under the previous Government—

Chair: No, we are not going there, Leader—

Lucy Powell: When statements were never even forthcoming.

Chair: No, two wrongs—

Lucy Powell: Well, no, it is not about two wrongs.

Chair: Two wrongs do not make a right. You are the Leader of the House of Commons—

Lucy Powell: I know. It is not about two wrongs—

Chair: And you are President of the Council in this Parliament, and in this Government.

Lucy Powell: Yes, absolutely. And I take these things very seriously. However—

Chair: If—

Lucy Powell: No, I think what is—

Chair: Sorry, but—

Lucy Powell: Fine. Yes.

Chair: If this Committee chooses to ask previous Leaders of the House, under the previous Government, to give evidence on this—and heaven knows, there are plenty of them to invite—we will. This Committee is here to question you, as a representative of the Government, on this issue.

Lucy Powell: Just to be clear—

Chair: We are now going to turn to Mr Lamb and then Mr Quigley.

Q45 **Peter Lamb:** I do not think Mr Baker was saying that the Ministerial Code ought to be handed over the House. The Ministerial Code has existed only since 1992. The expectation has been there for much longer; it predates anything that the PM may have in place.

It is perfectly fine for it to remain with the PM, but ultimately we have



rules, systems and safeguards not because any one PM is not a good chap, but because we do not always believe that everyone will be. If we have a situation in which Ministers can, entirely through their own interpretation, determine what is significant enough to bring to Parliament and what is not, and if a present or future PM is prepared to back them up on that, regardless of how serious the announcement is, there may be a potential issue.

Should there be some measure of sanction, within the control of the House, in relation to ministerial conduct in the House? Or are we saying that if we have to fill Sunday shows, this convention is outdated and we should do away with it? At the moment, we seem to be in this purgatory between two different positions. One is that we have an absolutely certain commitment that has to be fulfilled, and the other is that it is no longer suitable for the modern era and we should change it.

Lucy Powell: Again, I do not accept the characterisation. First of all, it is not for Ministers themselves to decide. These are collective decisions that are taken by the Government all the time. Those decisions are taken weekly and daily, and they are collective.

I ask colleagues to consider the big difference between someone making a big announcement, especially on an big issue, but not coming forward with a statement to the House at all—so far, no one can give me an example of that—and the situation, which I thought we were going to get on to, in which a statement is advertised and is forthcoming, but some of the details or information is not given to Opposition parties in advance of it.

In the case of the Speaker granting two urgent questions on the day of the SDR, the SDR was coming to the House, and the document was being published to the House first on that day. The UQs were granted in lieu of that. That is significantly different from a number of occasions that I remember in the past—this is why I hold these things up greatly—when announcements were made during recesses, on Sundays and so on, and there was no statement.

These were really big statements around the cancellation of HS2, for example, or the proposed abolition of the BBC licence fee. No statement was ever forthcoming. It was not that they were made when Parliament was not in Session; there was no attempt to bring that to the House. That is quite significant. When you are doing a statement—

- Q46 **Peter Lamb:** I do not believe that either the Speaker or any member of this Committee has given any indication that we believe that a subsequent statement to the House means in any way that the failure to make the first announcement to the House is forgiven.

Lucy Powell: It is about the most important statements. We can have different views about that. There is a certain amount of subjectivity to that. Can we improve? Yes, we can improve. Do we take them very seriously? Yes, we do. They are subjective.

Chair: “Can we improve?”—that is encouraging to hear.

Lucy Powell: I have said that many times.

Q47 **Chair:** Do we agree that the SDR was important?

Lucy Powell: The SDR was incredibly important, and the SDR was published to the House first.

Chair: Well, hang on. The SDR was important, but it was not time-sensitive, and the Government decided to announce it on the first day back after recess—fine. Picking up on Mr Lamb’s important reminder about the word “first”, the SDR was shared: not in part, not through inadvertent briefing and not through a Secretary of State or Minister speaking loosely in private conversation with a journalist.

It was shared in full—bearing in mind that it contained what would have been market-sensitive information—with, inter alia, principal defence contractors, trade unions, trade bodies and defence media correspondents. It was not a glimpse of ankle, or a “Watch this space, something’s coming”, but the whole kit and caboodle shared with them first, second, third and fourth. Parliament was about seventh down the line.

This is always a difficult question for any Minister to answer, because we all know that your batting orders are that you defend the crease to the last ball. Can you assure us, without throwing anybody to the wolves or falling on your own sword, that the Government recognises that that was not its finest hour? Can you assure us that lessons have been learned, and give us, to the best of your ability, a pledge that such an egregious breach of both the letter and spirit of the convention of the Ministerial Code as it relates to Government announcements will not be repeated?

Lucy Powell: As I say, I have looked into this very closely. The Secretary of State himself has apologised for some of that. Let me just go through with you what happened when, and why it happened. I also make it clear that the Secretary of State, after discussions with me and the Speaker, undertook to write to the Speaker—he has since done so—to look into exactly what happened and, more importantly, set out a future process for how SDRs would be shared in advance and with whom, so that it is public knowledge and understood by everybody.

As was the case with the three previous SDRs, embargoed reading rooms were established in the Ministry of Defence for security-cleared individuals to read—not take away a copy, not have a copy, but read—the SDR in advance. I have a list here of exactly who was invited to that. They were defence industry companies, industry bodies of course, representatives of the defence sectors, and a small number of journalists. They were embargoed; they were not allowed to say what they saw in the reading rooms. That was also offered to Opposition spokespeople from both parties and to the Select Committee Chairs and so on, some of whom declined the offer; others took it up.



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The copies of the full SDR, published and made public, were made available to the Vote Office just beforehand. Traditionally with an SDR, the copies are made available at the end; it is a bit like a Budget. They are usually made available when the Minister sits down. The Secretary of State took the view that that was not in the best interests of the House, so he made it available in advance.

Chair: Which was welcome.

Lucy Powell: I think the intention was right. Some members of the Opposition parties did not take those offers to read through the document in advance and to get the briefings in advance. That was up to them, and I can see that. I have said, at the Dispatch Box on the Floor of the House and in private, that the intention of ensuring that the key people had an opportunity to read it in advance, so that they could question the Secretary of State both on the Floor of the House and subsequently, was too broad.

That is why the Secretary of State has reviewed that. He has set out a process for who would have the embargoed copies in reading rooms. People did not have hard copies; the hard copies were made available to the House. The permanent secretary at the Department has been clear that no commercially sensitive information was given to any industry leaders as part of that. It is not for me to adjudicate on that.

Chair: Except, I think, that Babcock's share prices went up by a noticeable amount about an hour and a half after defence correspondents had seen it.

Lucy Powell: Obviously there was a notable breach of the embargo, which was not by somebody who had been invited into the reading room. I think it was raised on the Floor of the House at the time by Iain Duncan Smith and others that Tom Sharpe, a freelance columnist for *The Telegraph*, wrote a piece that went up online about two hours before the Secretary of State spoke to the Commons. That journalist had not actually been invited to the reading room; that journalist who broke the embargo had had an authorised verbal briefing by the Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff.

Chair: Sorry—did you say “authorised” or “unauthorised”?

Lucy Powell: I think it was authorised, but it was under embargo—a verbal briefing—so he had not actually read the report. He said in the article that he had read it, which he had not, because he had not been in the reading room. He broke the embargo, which was obviously very serious.

The Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey, takes these things incredibly seriously. We saw that again yesterday, when he came to the House first with an incredibly serious and important matter.

Chair: Can I just say that I yield to nobody in my respect for and



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admiration of John Healey as a politician and as a Secretary of State? You do not need to—

Lucy Powell: No, but that is why I say it: because it is used as a proof point that somehow Ministers like John Healey are breaking the Ministerial Code. That is where I do, quite genuinely, push back.

Q48 **Chair:** I do not think that anybody is suggesting that the Secretary of State for Defence wandered around with some embargoed copies of the SDR, pushing them under the noses of journalists or anybody else, security-cleared or otherwise. What is clear and demonstrable, which I think you accept—and which the Secretary of State has accepted, by definition—is that the whole process was too wide and too lax.

Lucy Powell: It was not too lax, but it was too wide, in my humble opinion. In endeavouring to let people know, there were too many people—

Q49 **Chair:** If you have a senior military figure briefing a journalist who clearly did not clear the benchmark of being security-cleared or warranting a reading room briefing, that suggests to me a certain degree of laxity.

Lucy Powell: As I say, not by the Minister or anybody like that.

Q50 **Chair:** No, but I am sure David Williams, as permanent secretary, and others will be looking at that.

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, but I think it is really important to set the context, because the letter from the Speaker came to this Committee as a result of the SDR. The two UQs that you mentioned, which were on the day of the SDR and which delayed the Secretary of State from making his announcement, were about the SDR. I do not think we can have it both ways. Either there is a suggestion that he broke the Ministerial Code, and therefore we need to have this conversation, or there is a suggestion that we had the right intention but we could have done some things better, but actually we were making a statement to the House.

Q51 **Chair:** With respect, if the Ministerial Code had been followed, the necessity for and the appropriateness of the two urgent questions on that day, which I accept disrupted the timetabling of the announcement and their appropriateness—

Lucy Powell: That is a judgment for the Speaker.

Q52 **Chair:** The necessity for and the appropriateness of those two UQs would not have made themselves manifest.

Lucy Powell: They are a matter for the Speaker, and it is not a judgment we share.

Q53 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** You mentioned that there were a number of people invited to the reading rooms. I was in the Chamber on the day. I remember what I thought was quite convincing anger from the official Opposition. How many Opposition Members were invited in, and how many

actually took part? There appeared to be some denial of that when it was raised from the Dispatch Box by the Minister.

Chair: It was denied in a point of order by Mr Cartlidge, as shadow Defence Minister.

Lucy Powell: He was offered a briefing, which he declined.

Markus Campbell-Savours: Anyone else from the official Opposition?

Lucy Powell: The Lib Dem spokesperson accepted the briefing and had the briefing. The Defence Committee Chair had the briefing. The Speaker declined the briefing. As I say, the establishment of a reading room for industry leaders and media and so on was the normal practice for SDRs up to that point.

Chair: I am conscious of the time, and we still have a lot of territory to go. I will just say to you, Mr Norman, that we will endeavour to have your session immediately after this, but do not take it personally if, with an eye on the clock, we may need to invite you back in September. The Committee apologises for that, but I hope that you will understand and that the Committee will agree that this is important stuff. While we have the Leader of the House, rather than asking her to come back, I would prefer to go through everything.

Q54 **Mr Quigley:** It appears that for everything that we say is an alleged breach, there is a reason, which would imply that you do not think that there is a problem. Why do you not just rewrite the Ministerial Code?

Lucy Powell: It is not my code to rewrite. Again, I do not think that taking a binary view of these things is necessarily helpful. I certainly do not feel that there has been a breach of the Ministerial Code, but that is a matter for the Prime Minister to adjudicate, not me.

Do I feel that, on all occasions, we are as forthcoming as we should be to the House? Are we getting the balance right? Are we getting those judgments right on all occasions? Absolutely not, and we can improve. I want the Committee to be really clear about that.

Have we improved things from what we inherited? Yes, we have. I know that you do not want to have that conversation, but I do, because I think it is really important, and that is what I am judging myself on. Are we doing this better than what we inherited? Yes, we are. Have we got further to go in doing that? Can we think of more creative ways of potentially doing that, so that there are other ways in which the House can be informed about things?

There is a limited time in every day that we can use for oral statements, and this Government is doing a lot. As the Chair said at the beginning, we are an incoming Government. We are doing a lot, so we are making those trade-offs every day in how we best manage those kinds of announcement. We can definitely improve.



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I would not want to make this a binary thing where somehow you are saying that there are breaches. A breach is a thing for the Prime Minister to determine, and I personally think that it is a very serious allegation for someone to make. As the Chair has just said, there is no suggestion that the Secretary of State for Defence breached the Ministerial Code, yet we are here today because of the SDR. Let's not make it so binary. Can we improve? Yes, we can.

Chair: Let me just clarify that we are not here solely because of the SDR.

Lucy Powell: No, but the letter from the Speaker came as a result of that.

Chair: Yes. I am sure the Government have reflected on this: that was probably the straw that broke the Speaker's back, but it was not the only straw. You will be aware that he had already written to this Committee in advance of the SDR. It was the SDR that escalated it all.

Q55 **Mr Quigley:** To follow on from what you said, the Speaker has made it very clear that an announcement should not go to the press first. Is that actually realistic, given the current media landscape?

Lucy Powell: Those are the trade-offs, and we have to balance them all the time. As I say to him regularly, if we want the House to start sitting at 6 am so that someone can come here and say something before they appear on the "Today" programme, let's have a conversation about that. We are trying to get our messages out to the public. The House of Commons is also an important vehicle for doing that, as it can amplify those messages, as well as being a really important thing in itself in terms of the opportunity for scrutiny.

But that is with trailing things. It is one thing where there is a trail of a much bigger document or plan, and that has happened since time immemorial, certainly since the media became such a thing—we are talking decades, not weeks. Where there are big important Government documents, like Budgets, strategic defence reviews, NHS 10-year plans or Government announcements like those on tuition fees, the WASPI response or a response to a big independent review, they should come to the House first, and we are endeavouring to do that.

With everyday announcements—some of which, with hindsight, can feel bigger than they were intended to be—we just have to make those judgments and get the balance right. I would expect the House to be informed, ideally through an oral statement, but that is not always possible, which is why written statements and other vehicles are available.

Q56 **Lauren Edwards:** You have talked a lot about the trade-offs that you have to make with the Ministerial Code, and you have particularly spoken about developments in social media and how the pace of things has increased. Given the conversation that we have been having this morning, would you consider making a recommendation to the Prime Minister that,



in the light of all these things, he should consider revising the Ministerial Code to make it fit for the modern age?

Lucy Powell: I think it has got some of that flexibility in it, but they are judgments for him. I talk to him all the time about how we approach Parliament and how we can do that, but we all need to recognise that, for example, even 15 years ago, Facebook was hardly invented. I have been an MP for nearly 15 years; you have been an MP for longer than that.

Chair: Ten.

Lucy Powell: Oh, are you later than me?

Chair: Yes, I have just had a harder life than you.

Lucy Powell: It is not that long ago when I was elected in 2010, and we hardly even had Facebook. If a journalist was given an unauthorised leak of something as the Secretary of State was on their way over to the House, it would take that journalist 24 hours to get it published somewhere, or certainly 12 or 14 hours. They would have to wait for a newspaper to be printed the next day, or for a news bulletin or something like that to come on air.

Nowadays, a senior journalist puts that on Twitter as breaking news and the whole House of Commons knows about it. It is just very different. Where there are those kinds of leaks and when things like that happen or people break embargoes, it is just very here and now in a way that it did not used to be. We do have to reflect the House's expectations.

It is not so much about the Ministerial Code but perhaps about the House's expectations about that and how we manage that better, because those comms can go around colleagues very quickly. People can be very irritated about that, which I totally understand, but even 15 years ago, that would not have been the case.

Q57 **Lauren Edwards:** Do you not think that you have set out a bit of an argument for how the House's expectations have changed as well and that there is perhaps a case for recommending that the Ministerial Code be revisited?

Lucy Powell: I actually think the House's expectations have changed the other way. It was not that long ago—the Clerks might remember it—that you gave two weeks' notice of a statement. If something happened, you would give two weeks' notice of that statement. That only changed in the late 1990s. The emergence of urgent questions is very recent. The House, 25 years ago, was not discussing topical issues of the day. It was discussing pre-planned business two or three weeks hence that might have been completely irrelevant by the time it considered it.

I want the House of Commons Chamber to be the fulcrum of national debate and to be the place where topical issues and the things that are of concern that day and on other days are discussed in a relevant and timely



manner. I actually think the expectations of the House have increased, and I would agree with that; MPs today want to discuss topical issues, and that is why we see so many people going in for statements and UQs. Statements used to last only an hour maximum. Urgent questions used to last a maximum of 45 minutes. Nowadays, both of those go well over that.

The media landscape has changed, but I think the expectations of the House have changed, and that is as it should be. As I said, I know that is what you are looking at, but even if we change the Ministerial Code to delete the word “first”, would you still all be really annoyed that we were giving stuff to the media first? Yes, you would, so let us just be honest about that.

Q58 Lauren Edwards: You have talked a little bit about the distinction between what are and are not the most important Government policies. Do you have criteria for how you determine that?

Lucy Powell: There are those big set-piece moments—those big White Papers, big new plans, defence reviews, Budgets and so on—which are taken as read. Then, on a daily or weekly basis, it can depend on other things that are happening at the time. It can depend on demands of the House as well.

For example, the Foreign Office and the Foreign Secretary have given something like 35 oral statements—I have the numbers here, but I can’t find them. The Foreign Office team has made a huge number of oral statements to the House. Do not forget that in the last Parliament, the Foreign Secretary was in the House of Lords and we could not question him at all, even though the Procedure Committee produced a report on how the House could do that, which was ignored by the previous Government.

I would say that there was quite an egregious disregard for these matters in the last Parliament. In this Parliament, the Foreign Secretary has been very forthcoming. A lot of the time, the oral statements made by him or his Ministers are not announcements, but important updates to the House. Nothing significant might have changed in the situation in the middle east, but the House wants the opportunity to debate it with the Foreign Secretary, so sometimes we might commission a statement and suggest that a Minister comes forward with an update that is not necessarily an announcement.

Then there are trade-offs on the day. If we have an important piece of Government legislation in which there is huge interest in the House, we will have fewer statements. That means we might not be able to do all the oral statements on that day, and so on. It is important to say that we have had some big debates that have really been impacted by statements. Just recently, we had lots of colleagues wanting to speak on remaining stages of the Football Governance Bill, and a very short time limit was put on that, because we had three statements that day.



Even in the Pride month debate—not a piece of Government legislation, but a general debate—the Speaker had to introduce a three-minute limit, because we had three statements that day. There was a two-minute limit in the VE Day and VJ Day debate—it was massively oversubscribed—because we had three statements that day. That is why we have scheduled another debate on VJ Day next week.

These are trade-offs that we are having to make. Lots of disappointed colleagues who have given time and attention to writing speeches and want to make contributions in later business are inhibited because of the number of oral statements, so that is a big consideration.

Q59 Lauren Edwards: If you had a lot of major Government policy being announced and some of it, unfortunately, due to those trade-offs and timetable pressures, needed to come through a written ministerial statement, would you still consider that the Ministerial Code had been met?

Lucy Powell: The statement is still being made to the House. Announcements are not just made in oral statements. In written ministerial statements, in answers to parliamentary questions, either orally or in writing, and in coming to a Select Committee, you are making those announcements to the House.

Just recently—I know this is of great interest to the House, because it is raised with me at business questions all the time—we had an announcement on maternity services and some of the scandals we have seen. The Secretary of State was really keen to come to the House to give the update, but we had loads on that week and we also had lots of other business—Opposition business and things like that—so unfortunately we just could not get that in, which was a real shame. He did a WMS on that and hopefully there will be other opportunities for colleagues to raise it. Obviously, he has oral questions, and we knew the announcement of the 10-year plan was coming up, so people could raise those issues then. We do have to take these things into account, even when it can be quite disappointing because, as I and others know, these subjects are really important to the House.

Q60 Lauren Edwards: I take your point, and it is helpful to understand that the Government are listening and learning as we go through this process. I appreciate that these can be quite difficult judgments that you need to make collectively, but reflecting on your time in the role so far, are there any decisions about which, on reflection and with the benefit of hindsight, you think, “Actually, I would have gone a different way on that one”?

Lucy Powell: As I said, on the strategic defence review, both myself and the Secretary of State—he apologised to the House for this—probably could have been more explicit and narrower about who had access to a reading room beforehand, making that clearer for people. Maybe some of the media handling around that as well, and some of the timing issues. On the tuition fees announcement, someone leaked that to the media as the

Secretary of State was on her way over here to make that announcement to the House.

Sometimes it is the other way, for example with the WASPI statement. I had a lot of colleagues very unhappy that they did not have prior notice of what was coming, to have time to prepare questions and look into that further. It is a constant evolution of weighing that up.

Sometimes there are issues that are very important to the House, which perhaps are not as important to the media. We do try to ensure, as a Government, one major announcement of the day. That would take precedent as an oral statement. Other things might be done as written ministerial statements. But I, and perhaps the Chief Whip, would say, "Actually, those are more important to the House," for whatever reason. It is just weighing that up.

Q61 Luke Taylor: To respond to some of your points, I do not think there is any suggestion that the number of statements and answers that the Government are giving is not a good thing. Yes, there is that compromise between time given to debates and challenges around the balance between the two, but the focus of this session, and the letter from the Speaker, is on announcements of policy that will change things before the House has been able to see it, and then to react and to scrutinise.

The example given was on Thursday 3 July, when the Government announced their 10-year plan for the NHS. A statement was scheduled in the House; however, as you were on your feet doing business questions, the Prime Minister, the Health Secretary and the Chancellor were in east London launching the policy at a press conference. Why was the press conference held in the morning, prior to the statement to the House? That press conference could have been held in the afternoon. In the first instance it should have been held, as per the Ministerial Code, in Parliament. That was not compliant with the spirit, the intention and the word of the code.

Several times, you have made the feeling known that you do not know why you are here.

Lucy Powell: That is absolutely not a feeling that I have made known.

Luke Taylor: That is my take.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry if you have had that impression, because I am really happy to be here and to answer these things.

Luke Taylor: My take is that you do not seem to see why you're here.

Lucy Powell: Not at all.

Q62 Luke Taylor: What happened in that instance of the 10-year plan, and how do you stop it from happening again?



Lucy Powell: The 10-year plan, which was a 169-page document, I think, was published to the House first. It was not a press conference about the whole document itself; it was about plans for the NHS. I don't not take your point. These are balances to get right, but the plan itself was published to the House.

The statement was advertised to the House that morning, so colleagues had time to go to the Vote Office, get the full document, prepare, look at page 89 and find something in it that they did not like or wanted to ask about, and put those to the Secretary of State, whose oral statement lasted for about two hours. Every colleague got in on that. I understand what you are saying, completely. I really do not want to give anyone the impression that I do not want to be here. I am here for a good, long while, and I am happy to do that, because these are important matters to discuss and debate.

I am just trying to make the point that these things are subjective to some degree. There are trade-offs. We are endeavouring to do that in a way that balances the needs of Members to have adequate time to study such documents, and therefore come in and ask of a statement, and for notice to be given of that statement to the House in advance, so that people can be aware and be around and all that kind of thing. That is versus the need to do media, trail things in the media and have media moments as well. Obviously, we could not have a joint occasion with the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State all appearing at the Dispatch Box simultaneously because that is not how we work.

Q63 **Luke Taylor:** You could have had that afterwards.

Lucy Powell: We could have had that afterwards. That is something we constantly stress test and consider—the logistics of that. The reverse of that would be that parliamentary business is not as predictable. Let us say that that day, a press conference with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, at a hospital, near London, had been booked in at 2 o'clock, but two urgent questions had been granted, then we had business questions and a statement from the Secretary of State. Either he would miss the press conference altogether, or he would have asked Mr Speaker to curtail the statement.

Q64 **Luke Taylor:** So it was a logistical thing, to get the message out first and allow them to come to the Chamber to give the announcement.

Lucy Powell: Yes. There are logistical things to do. But what I want to be really clear about, what would have happened previously and was suggested—not by the Secretary of State—was that the Secretary of State would do that conference somewhere, while a junior Minister gave the statement in the House. Sometimes Mr Speaker will make such a suggestion to me. Personally, I want the Secretary of State in the House giving the statement. I think colleagues will want to interrogate the Secretary of State. That is the debate we had in covid: lockdown was announced to the media; the lifting of lockdown was announced to the

media; and closing the borders of the country was announced to the media.

All the time in covid, all that was announced to the media, and never to the House. The Speaker at that time got very cross about that and would suggest that a junior Minister come and simultaneously make those announcements to the House, and towards the end of covid, that started to happen, but it was not quite simultaneous. Personally, I would rather—this would be my judgment—the Secretary of State had two hours. He would not be under time pressure. He cannot judge when that will come in the day, but two hours on the Floor of the House answering for a 169-page document.

Q65 **Luke Taylor:** You could see when it was coming in the day, because it was scheduled.

Lucy Powell: But a statement, you cannot. If there are urgent questions, they go first; and business questions can last for as long as it lasts. If two urgent questions were granted, that could have been two hours, and business questions is often an hour and a half, so that is three and a half hours. Then you would have the health statement, which was is hours, so you cannot judge. I would have to say to Mr Speaker, "Can you not grant any UQs? Can you curtail business questions, because I need the Secretary of State to leave the building by 1 o'clock to go off and do a press conference?" I can tell you now, he would be far more annoyed by that.

Q66 **Chair:** In essence, that happens. Yesterday, it was unusual to have a statement on an Opposition day—

Lucy Powell: Which is why I protected time for the Opposition day.

Q67 **Chair:** But through the usual channels, those technical issues of logistics and who is where and when are resolvable. Any Government—

Lucy Powell: No, because urgent questions are not in my gift. It is not for me to influence, or to suggest to the Speaker that he is under pressure to not grant an urgent question—because, I can tell you now, if I even suggested that, he would grant many more.

Q68 **Peter Lamb:** On that point, I do not see the relevance of the fact that the Ministers have a press conference organised or that they have gone off to visit somewhere. The convention is that the House has to be informed first. If the House has not been informed, in those circumstances, they should not hold the press conference or they should not take questions after that visit. The fact that it is inconvenient for them is not relevant to the convention. We come back to the point: is the convention simply no longer fit for purpose, in which case, we should be looking at reform of the convention openly, or is it the case that they should not be doing any of those things, because the House has to take precedence?



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Lucy Powell: I think you have to use your words carefully, because convention is not quite the same thing. A convention would be the custom and practice that for many, many years, announcements would go to the media, with statements made to the House later in the day, or when the House is sitting—big announcements are made in recesses and many of them in conference recesses, and at other times. The balance of that would be a convention, which is a different thing from what you are talking about, which is the Ministerial Code.

There is a balance to be struck so that colleagues have time to read full documents, which are published to the House first, and that document was published first on that occasion. Documents are published in time to allow colleagues to read through them, really consider the issues and then come to the Secretary of State, who will be there for two hours answering questions on them. I do not see that as a breach of the code—I just do not. I see that as being forthcoming to Parliament. Of course, we will have media and comms plans around that, which mean we can get our messages out to the wider public.

Q69 **Peter Lamb:** It may not be your interpretation, but from a plain reading of the text, that would clearly be a breach. There will be a problem here, if Ministers are allowed to have their own interpretation of what these things mean. If we look back at the Labour manifesto—

Lucy Powell: Ministers do not have their own interpretation. It is a collective agreement.

Q70 **Peter Lamb:** It is very clear here that, in the first instance, all these announcements should be made to the House. The fact that they will come to the House later, or that you might want a Secretary of State to be there, is not the current wording of the code.

Lucy Powell: That document was published to the House first.

Peter Lamb: It may well have been published to the House first, but we did not have any announcement.

Lucy Powell: It was published to the House first, so we are now having a different conversation.

Chair: Leader, please allow Mr Lamb to ask his questions.

Q71 **Peter Lamb:** We have instances where announcements were made without documents having been published to the House first. Even if you do not accept that, the general principle here appears to be that there are complications with the current arrangements because we now live in a 24-media environment. I accept that, and I accept that the current code and arrangements for this may not be acceptable.

What is incredibly frustrating for members of this Committee here today is we are being told that, on the one hand, Ministers are entirely in keeping with the provisions that are currently set out in the arrangements, but at

the same time, these arrangements are no longer operating in line with the realities of the modern world of politics.

I think those two positions are incompatible. Either we need to have an open and transparent conversation about changing the nature of these principles, because they are no longer suitable, or Ministers have no excuses for not coming to the House first to present major announcements before going off and dealing with the press. That needs to be resolved.

Lucy Powell: Yet again, I gently say that we are throwing up binary straw men. As I hope I have tried to explain over the last hour and a half, that is not how things actually work or what they are subject to. The Ministerial Code and the conduct of Ministers is a matter for the Prime Minister.

However, the expectation of this House would always be that, whatever is in the Ministerial Code, senior Ministers would be forthcoming to this House and would be making available announcements of major policy to this House first. If we are not accepting the premise that publishing a document to the House first is it coming to the House first, it is hard to see where that conversation goes.

Q72 **Chair:** According to the official documents, the 10-year plan for the national health service was published at 10.27 am.

Lucy Powell: To the House?

Chair: It was published at 10.27 am.

Lucy Powell: Yes, for colleagues to read it. Absolutely.

Chair: Sorry, I thought I heard you say that you could not remember the time.

Lucy Powell: No, I said that it was published to give colleagues time to read it. It is a big document and, as I say, you get the opposite if you have the Secretary of State on their feet and a document has just been passed around at that moment.

I have been in the Chamber many times over the years when that has happened. Obviously, there is a huge amount of disquiet about that because colleagues have not had time to read it and to come forward with their analysis, questions and what it means for their constituencies. It was published for colleagues in good time, and part of the code of practice is that statements are issued in advance.

Q73 **Chair:** Was that a lesson learned subliminally from the SDR? It is a large document that is important for our constituents. Even the best KC speed-reader is not going to go through 100-odd pages while listening to a Secretary of State and bobbing at the same time to try to catch the Speaker's eye. Was that a lesson learned?

Lucy Powell: As I said, I do not know why, but the tradition with the SDR is that, like the Budget, it is actually published when the Minister sits

down. Obviously, the Secretary of State felt that was not adequate for the House and that is why he authorised it to be distributed in advance.

Q74 **Chair:** In response to a heightened temperature.

Lucy Powell: Yes, absolutely. And now, he has developed a new process, for future SDRs, whereby they will be published in advance. I think big documents should be published to the House first, but not in such a way that colleagues have not got time to read them, digest them and come up with questions.

Q75 **Sam Carling:** A lot of my planned questions were about whether the code needs to change, but a lot of people have dipped into that as we have gone through, so if you think you have already answered anything I ask, please just say so.

Lucy Powell: And by the way, if the Committee wants to recommend to the Government that they change the code, that is obviously entirely a matter for the Committee.

Q76 **Sam Carling:** That is useful. On the point about giving Members appropriate time to scrutinise documents before their question, I personally find that to be the most important factor. I would rather have it the day before—that would be the situation if it were up to me—so that I could come with a properly informed question to the Minister.

What weight do you currently give to that? I ask because it has been a bit hit-and-miss. We have just talked about the issues with the SDR. The 10-year plan was released that morning. What is the pipeline and thinking within Government as to how you factor that in?

Lucy Powell: The guidance—the guide to Parliament that is produced by my office and goes to Ministers—is that statements being given should be given to the Opposition spokespeople, for example. This is not a document, but a statement of any given kind. It should be given to the Opposition spokespeople and the Speaker at least 45 minutes before the Minister is on their feet.

Again, the House has devices at its disposal when that is not the case. I don't know whether you remember it happening in this Session, but it has happened a couple of times in this Session and in the past that the Speaker has suspended the House to give people time to read something because it was not given to them in time. Obviously, we also take a dim view of that when it happens and Ministers get a ticking-off.

Your point is a really valid one about big important policy documents and getting the judgment right between giving Members ample time to read and digest them and the fact that obviously, once something is published to the House, it is effectively published. Anyone—a journalist with a Lobby pass—could pick it up from the Vote Office as well, and then we would have the other problem, which is, "You have published it before you have said it on the Floor of the House."

And now, in the age of social media, all its contents would be out on social media; there would be that kind of thing as well. So it is a question of getting that balance right. You are not alone, in that I get colleagues saying to me, "I would have liked a bit more time to consider that document before the statement."

Q77 Sam Carling: I am just making the point generally. There is probably a diversity of views on this, and it is difficult to ascertain exactly what the best way forward is.

Lucy Powell: I always think that one of the hardest jobs in Parliament is for the Leader of the Opposition to respond to the Budget. It is effectively an announcement to the House first and a statement, because there nearly always is some big thing; rabbits out of the hat are what people call them.

The Red Book and all the detail, which has been published the day before or something by whoever it gets printed by, is not actually made available in the Vote Office until the Chancellor sits down. The job of scrutinising the Budget is incredibly hard, because you have not got all the information in front of you. That is an example of the fact that we make the announcement to the House first, but is it in the interests of the House to do it in that way?

Q78 Sam Carling: In terms of factors, your pipelines and processes within Government for thinking through these things and how you balance things, we said earlier that an announcement in the House is not the most interesting to members of the public a lot of the time. This is the whole point of a press conference; the media gets interested in that, and that then helps messaging to cut through more. How do you balance the need to inform Members of the House of policy announcements with making sure that they cut through to the public?

Lucy Powell: These are trade-offs, as we have been saying. There is perhaps a difference to some degree between everyday announcements, news management and amplifying your message, and big important Government documents and big important announcements.

Personally I think the House of Commons is a much tougher crowd than a media press conference. Especially if someone has got something a bit off, or they have not got the detail, they have not got the answer, that gets exposed very quickly indeed in the House of Commons, because colleagues then come in off each other and ask supplementary questions. Often, in press conferences, each member of the media wants to ask the same question, because they need to show it on their own bulletins; they don't want to show another person's question. That is just my own view.

Yes, these are trade-offs and we are coming up to a summer recess. On the idea that the Government of the day are not going to say anything for the length of a six-week recess is obviously not, we have to ensure that we find ways to do that in other ways. There won't be big Government



documents published over recess—I can assure you of that—but of course there will be a news grid over the recess and there will be announcements and so on. Then we will have the conference recesses, where Governments of the day make big announcements at conference, and the House isn't sitting.

Q79 Sam Carling: I don't think there is any dispute that that's fine, because the House isn't sitting; that's how things need to work, realistically. To conclude, in the light of all these factors that you have to balance, and this Ministerial Code which is quite clear in what it says, and may be quite difficult to balance sometimes, this section of the code dates back to Thatcher's premiership, and the text has been identical since, I think, 2005. Would recommend any change to the text, or are you completely happy with it?

Lucy Powell: It's not my document.

Sam Carling: I know it isn't.

Lucy Powell: It's not for me; it's for the Prime Minister to decide if he wants to reopen the Ministerial Code. You generally do updates to the Ministerial Code once a Parliament—either once at the beginning of a Parliament or when a new Prime Minister is coming in and they have their own particular views about that.

We did update aspects of the Ministerial Code at the start of this Parliament. I have given you a few examples of that in terms of expectations around standards, around gifts and hospitality, around outside interests—not just transparency but what it is appropriate to accept or not accept—and about meetings: a range of things were changed at that point in the Ministerial Code. It is not for me to say; it doesn't get updated all that often, but that would be a matter for the Prime Minister to consider.

I still don't think that custom and practice and the expectations of the House and Members of the House and the Speaker would be all that different, were this not even to be in the Ministerial Code. I still think the expectations of the House would be that Ministers would be forthcoming and would be here, making important announcements to the House. That is respectful.

Q80 Peter Lamb: On that point, one reason why it is an expectation of the House is presumably because it is part of "Erskine May", and consequently forms part of what the judicial system would consider to be the correct practice of the House were anything ever to be judicially reviewed.

It is not simply up to whether the Prime Minister chooses to incorporate this within the Ministerial Code. There is a principle here as to how our democracy operates, which appears to be no longer felt to be operating in a correct manner. Given that the Speaker ultimately has the duty to safeguard those procedures, do you accept that until we can get to an area of common understanding between the House and Ministers over

what is expected in making these statements to the House, or that they are made first, we shall continue to run into this issue over and over again?

Lucy Powell: The resolution of the House is a broader—I don't know whether you have seen paragraph 11.40, but it is worth having a look at the resolution of the House which makes clear about truthfulness, correcting the record, misleading Parliament and so on, disclosure of information and being forthcoming.

It is not the same wording as the Ministerial Code, but it is respect for the House of Commons and respect for Parliament, and coming forward with things and being forthcoming and being held to account by Parliament is what Ministers are expected to do. They are expected to do that by the Prime Minister—the current Prime Minister and previous Prime Ministers—but actually they are very much expected to do that by the House. That is as it should be.

Q81 **Peter Lamb:** It is broad, but it is also specific that announcements need to be made to the House first.

Lucy Powell: The resolution of the House isn't—

Peter Lamb: No, but "Erskine May" is.

Lucy Powell: Not that section of "Erskine May".

Peter Lamb: I would have to go back and find it again, but certainly it is covered within the document.

Lucy Powell: As I say, these are expectations, in any case. As I say, there is no need to get into a semantic argument about it. And we are making judgments about how that is done, when it is done, and about what is "the most important", what is "first", and what is "in session". These are all things that we are having to consider.

Chair: Maybe we can have some correspondence on that.

Lucy Powell indicated assent.

Q82 **Chair:** I have two closing comments on this. First, I actually think it is the job of Select Committees to get into semantic arguments and to scrutinise in some detail, and something tells me that this Government are going to be no different to any other Government in recent times, which echoes the daily prayer of St Augustine. For those who do not know the reference, it is: "Lord, make me pure, but not yet!"

Lucy Powell: I've never been accused of being pure, Chair.

Chair: Well, I am sure you have at some point. We are obviously not going to hear from the shadow Leader of the House. He did ask just a few moments ago whether I thought it would be discourteous for him to leave. On your behalf, colleagues, I thought it wasn't, so don't think that he



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walked out in a huff. We will see him after the summer recess, when I am sure these issues will still continue. Leader of the House, thank you for your time. I appreciate that it is now long over that which was timetabled—

Lucy Powell: I need to get in for PMQs.

Chair: I think your seat is reserved.

Lucy Powell: It is, but I can't be late!

Chair: Okay. Thank you.