

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Call lists, HC 536

Wednesday 5 November 2025

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Members present: Cat Smith (Chair); James Asser; Bambos Charalambous; Sir Christopher Chope; Mr Lee Dillon; Graeme Downie; Mary Kelly Foy; Tracy Gilbert; Gurinder Singh Josan; John Lamont; Mr Tom Morrison; Lee Pitcher; Sir Gavin Williamson.

Questions 20-41

Witnesses

I: Kirsty Blackman MP, Chief Whip, Scottish National Party.

II: Dr Ruth Fox, Director, Hansard Society; Dr Sarabajaya Kumar, Steering Group Member, Centenary Action.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Centenary Action](#)
- [Scottish National Party](#)

Examination of witness

Witness: Kirsty Blackman MP.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Procedure Committee. This is the next evidence session in our inquiry into the potential merits and pitfalls of introducing call lists for public debates in the House of Commons. To help us with our inquiry, we are joined by a representative from one of the smaller parliamentary parties, who has submitted written evidence to our inquiry: Kirsty Blackman MP, from the Scottish National party.

Good afternoon, Kirsty. Could you introduce yourself for the record?

Kirsty Blackman: I am Kirsty Blackman, the MP for Aberdeen North. I am currently the SNP Chief Whip. I was on the Procedure Committee for a reasonable period of time in previous Parliaments, including over the time of covid, when we did a huge amount of work on call lists.

Q20 **Chair:** Welcome back to the Procedure Committee. As you know, it is traditional that the first question comes from me as Chair. Could you briefly outline your view about the introduction of published call lists and things like indicative timings as a variation or alternative to them?

Kirsty Blackman: I am in favour of the idea of published call lists. I am agnostic about exactly how they are published. As long as the Whips Offices have access to them, that would suit me, but as a Whip you would expect me to say that.

Why am I in favour of a call list? We often have oversubscribed debates in which people do not get called at all, so it would be incredibly helpful for people's time if they knew whether they were likely to get called at some point during a debate. I do not think it is a good use of any MP's time to be sitting in the Chamber for three or four hours if they will not get called. There are things we could be doing for our constituents, our parties or external organisations during that time. So I am generally positive about it.

I also think it would have a disproportionate impact on MPs from more unusual backgrounds and more minority backgrounds. If you are further away from Parliament, for example, knowing that you are pretty much not going to get called in the debate on Thursday would be really helpful to know for your travel arrangements for the six-hour journey back to your constituency.

I also think the fact that Speakers call people in order of seniority, as well as those who have an interest in things, automatically disadvantages both new MPs—seniority is prioritised—and female MPs, who tend to be newer. You get men called first more often than women. I think it entrenches some of the inequalities there are already in this place that we do not have call lists.

Since I became Chief Whip, I have discovered that it is very difficult to provide any indicative timings for the start of any debate. For example, I



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am speaking in the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill debate today, and I have no idea when it will start, because that is dependent on the number of votes that follow the previous debate, which started at a time dependent on when the education statement ended. Again, there is all this knock-on impact, so it is difficult to be even vaguely accurate about indicative timings.

In the Scottish Parliament, they have more of an order of speakers—you know that there will be three SNP speakers in the debate, and the order will be me, then Stephen and then Pete during the debate. You do not know exactly what time you will be called, but you know that Pete will not be called until after Stephen and I have been called. I think that works. Although I am not saying that is the best system in the world or the only system we could have, it seems to work slightly better than the system here.

Q21 Chair: Do you think that all types of debates and aspects of parliamentary business would lend themselves to call lists? Do some lend themselves more to call lists, or would you like to see them across the board?

Kirsty Blackman: I think across the board would be helpful. I am tempted to say that they would not be so helpful for general debates or Backbench Business debates, but often those debates are hugely oversubscribed because people are really interested in particular topics—say you have pitched for a three-hour debate in the Chamber and been given a slot, and there are 40 MPs standing. I think making a blanket assumption about whether it would be better to do them only for legislation or only for general debates might be quite difficult, because of the potential variation in how popular a debate can be.

Q22 John Lamont: To follow up the point about the Scottish Parliament and call lists, you are right that there are call lists—they are not published—but they are completely controlled by the party Whips. When I was the Chief Whip for the Scottish Conservatives when I was an MSP, we determined who would get to speak, not the Presiding Officer. Surely it is better to have the Speaker, as somebody who is independent, making decisions about who gets called to speak rather than people like you as a Whip.

Kirsty Blackman: I think Whips should be all-powerful. *[Laughter.]* I think you have more experience of the Scottish Parliament system than I do. Probably what I liked was the order thing, and I am less bothered about who chooses it. If the Speaker chooses it—that is what currently happens, as the Speaker and Deputy Speakers are the ones who say, “We’ll probably have time for two SNP speakers during the debate. Stephen Flynn will get picked first because he’s the leader, and then Kirsty Blackman will come second”—I am totally fine with that. An idea or indication of the likely order is more important to me than who makes the choice. They might decide to put me before Stephen because I have been an MP for longer or because I have more of an interest in the specific topic, whereas Stephen and I might have naturally assumed that he would be called first.



Q23 Tracy Gilbert: Over the course of receiving evidence, we have heard concerns that if we were to publish the call list, there would be less attendance in the Chamber and less debate. What are your views on that?

Kirsty Blackman: I think sometimes you get people not putting in for a debate because they do not think they will get called. That means that they do not turn up for the debate at all, whereas if they had had certainty that they would probably get called, you would increase attendance. So I think it will do both. You might have people who will not show up because they are not on the call list. But if I think that I will be particularly low down the list, or if Seamus Logan or Graham Leadbitter, who are new MPs, assume that they are going to be at the bottom of the list, but then they make the call list, they are much more likely to turn up than to withdraw from the debate if there is a call list there. Publicly publishing it would cause me some concern, but publishing it so that the parties and Chief Whips can see it and advise their MPs would be helpful, and I do not think that it would damage attendance too much.

Q24 Tracy Gilbert: How do you think it would affect the flow of debate if people do not have to be in the Chamber for the whole time?

Kirsty Blackman: I am not sure that there will always be a requirement for people to be in the Chamber. I can already go to the Speaker or Deputy Speaker and say, "I haven't eaten for the whole day. Could I please just nip out for 20 minutes to grab myself a sandwich?" I still have that opportunity just now. It would probably bother the Speaker less if I were to know that I am not going to get called for another two hours and that I can have my 20-minute break without worrying about the fact that I might get called.

I am not convinced that you would want to change the rules around presence in the Chamber. I still think people should definitely be there for the beginning speeches and for the end speeches and whatever you guys choose. But you would know that you would not be sitting there for six hours without ever getting called, because you would have a good idea of the indication on the call lists.

Q25 John Lamont: Although there is no formal call list, there is undoubtedly an informal call list. If you go up to the Speaker's Chair and speak to whoever is in the Chair, one of the Clerks will give you an indication of where you are on the list, especially in popular debates, and whether you are going to get called or not. Is that not a more flexible and agile approach, rather than formalising it too much?

Kirsty Blackman: It is helpful that you can do that. However, it provides slight advantages to certain people. You guys are much closer to the Speaker. It is much easier for you to go and ask the Speaker that question. It is much easier for MPs who can walk easily to go and ask the Speaker that question than it is for ones that struggle with mobility, for example. So there is a built-in advantage to some individuals as a result of having that system.



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The disadvantage is that it is mostly the Whips that do that. The SNP has nine MPs and one Whip. If I am not around, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker can sometimes be slightly awkward about giving the information to somebody who is not me, and I cannot be in the Chamber for every single debate. I just do not have time to do that. If there were more flexibility from the Speakers and they were clear that they would be flexible, or if we could delegate other people to ask those questions, that would make that easier. But it is a bit of an issue if you are the only MP from your party, for example, because then you are having to leave your space empty to go and ask those questions of the Speaker. If there were something published, it would be easier than having to go and ask.

- Q26 **Sir Gavin Williamson:** I just have a couple of minor points. If I recall correctly, the Government Chief Whip is responsible for all the minor parties. I just wonder, if you did go down that informal route, whether you could have a mechanism whereby the Government Whips took on that responsibility for liaising with the SNP. There is the assumption that the Government Whips Office has that sort of responsibility. Do you think that could be a workaround solution if you did continue with the informal route? You could almost formalise the sense that the Labour Whip would, if they had an indication from one of the minor parties, go over and give them that sort of assistance.

Kirsty Blackman: That would potentially be helpful. Generally, the Government Chief Whip takes responsibility for those parties beyond the fourth party. For example, the SNP do our own accommodation, whereas Government Whips do it for Plaid Cymru and the Greens.

Quite often, I will go to the Chair to ask questions on behalf of the Greens or Plaid Cymru, and we provide a level of support if we can. But, absolutely, if we were not to have call lists and there were to be an agreement between ourselves and the Government Whips or the Opposition Whips, I would be quite happy for either of them to ask those questions on our behalf.

- Q27 **Sir Gavin Williamson:** This is a behavioural question. As Chief Whip, you are probably very used to behavioural issues. There could be a published list, or a list that sits with the Whips Office. At the moment, Speakers and Deputy Speakers are always very keen to squeeze in as many people as possible. If we had published lists, do you think that we could end up going the other way, whereby the Whips Office—I am probably speaking about what I would have done—tried to manage the number down, so that you perhaps had a smaller number of people speaking but for longer? You could end up with less diversity as a result of having lists. I am just thinking about how I might have used that information. How do you think that you would use that information—or am I just a bad outlier?

Kirsty Blackman: I would not dare say such a thing.

I think it depends on the debate and on the different calls on time for that debate. For example, in the Black History Month debate last week, we had a significant number of people speaking, from all different backgrounds, and it was brilliant. Whips are generally quite good at recognising that and



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trying to get that diversity. However, it is already the case that, for instance, we will only put one person forward for most debates, because we know that we are only likely to get one person called.

If we had an indication from the Speaker's Office, or from whoever was making decisions around call lists, that we might get two people called in a debate, we would be more likely to put two people in. We would be more likely to put more people in for debates if we had the certainty of call lists than we are in the current situation, where we think, "Dave had to bob for six hours the other day and did not get called at all. We're only going to put one person in for this, because there's no point in us trying two, because we keep getting overlooked on defence", or whatever subject it happens to be. For us, I think it would increase our participation in debates, rather than decrease it.

Q28 Lee Pitcher: You mentioned in your introduction that you were here during the covid-19 pandemic, you were on the Procedure Committee and you had a role to play in the call lists and how they worked. What are your views on how call lists worked in practice during the pandemic? Is there any learning you would like to share with us?

Kirsty Blackman: The pandemic was very, very messy in so many ways, for so many people. The Procedure Committee met a ridiculous amount during the pandemic; we met multiple times a week to try to sort out what was going to happen. A huge number of ad hoc decisions were made about things that had to be put in place incredibly quickly and without a huge amount of planning. I am certainly not saying that what happened during the pandemic is what should happen again.

However, I think it was useful to see that call lists work. Maybe the way that we implemented them could have been better. I certainly do not have a strong desire to have them for question sessions, or even for urgent questions or ministerial statements. When we did some of the work around that, I thought the result was incredibly clunky; it did not feel as if it flowed as naturally as at other times.

For debates, for some of the reasons that have been mentioned about being able to ask the Speaker, sometimes people will have an idea anyway of when they are going to be called, so it would not be that different. It would just give a higher level of certainty around debates.

One thing I would say is that people talk about call lists and about not being present for some of the debate, because we were appearing on Zoom or Skype—I cannot remember which, but it was one of them. We were appearing on screens. You still voted the way that you were going to vote anyway, which everybody does in almost every debate, despite people saying, "I want to hear the whole debate, because then I might change my vote." I can think of one debate that I have been present for in my entire time in Parliament where speeches changed how people voted. It really isn't a factor that I believe is serious in considering things.

Graeme Downie: In your introduction, you mentioned those who travel



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to Westminster from further away—Scottish MPs, and those from Wales and from some parts of England. There are some other groups I would ask you to reflect on, where there may be some benefits or differences to having call lists or more information available, particularly those with caring responsibilities and MPs with disabilities or health concerns. In your time as Whip now, and in previous Parliaments, have you seen any discouragement caused by the fact that call lists do not exist, which has affected those groups in particular? Is there a version of call lists that you think would particularly support those groups?

Kirsty Blackman: Especially because of the size of our party right now and the fact that we don't always get called in all of the debates, I think it is the case that people think, "I've got the choice. Will I be home for my constituents and my kids, and to care for my mother on that Thursday, or will I put in for that debate? If I put in for the debate, I probably won't get called anyway, so there is no point in my doing that—I'd better just go up the road and have that certainty." Because of the nature of it, you do have to plan further in advance. The majority of Scottish MPs will fly to Westminster. All the Northern Irish MPs have to fly, pretty much, in order to get here. Travel is much more difficult, so there is a time element for that.

My children were one and four when I was first elected. Knowing whether or not I was going to be home to pick them up at school on the Thursday was incredibly helpful for me: "Do I need to organise a childminder for a Thursday or do I not?" Knowing that information was helpful.

I would have probably put in for more debates had I had call lists and a certainty of being called. My decision was quite often, "I am not going to bother putting in for this debate, because I don't think I will get called. I've got no certainty, and I could just be hanging around for six hours, achieving nothing for my constituents, and not being able to pick up my children from school." I think that is the general direction that I have seen people take.

On some of the other groups, I think, for example, if you are diabetic and need to eat at certain times, having more certainty on when you are likely to get called means you can better arrange when you eat.

We previously had Amy Callaghan in our group, who had a stroke during her time as an MP. She could not bob and she could not spend extended time in the Chamber, depending on the progress of her recovery at the time. Knowing that she was likely to get called at a certain time would have been incredibly helpful for her and would have made her more likely to put her name in for those debates. I think it would increase the representation and the diversity that we see in the Chamber, as well as allowing people to better balance their lives.

Q29 **Graeme Downie:** With respect to Amy Callaghan, was any accommodation given for her condition? Was she given any indication that she might be called first or later on? Was there an individual accommodation?

Kirsty Blackman: I was not Chief Whip at the time. I can't tell you. I can tell you that they were flexible about proxy votes, for example, and did allow her to speak in the Chamber, after some significant negotiations, as well as to be on a proxy vote, but I don't think it was easy to get that accommodation. Being in the Chamber for a period of time is easier than traipsing round the Lobby four times. It took a bit of negotiating to get to a situation that worked in terms of accommodations.

Chair: If there are no further questions from colleagues—I have not seen any indications—I thank our witness, Kirsty, for her time this afternoon. If there is anything further you want to add, we would be happy to receive anything further in writing.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Ruth Fox and Dr Sarabajaya Kumar.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome back to the Procedure Committee, in which we are continuing our evidence session in our inquiry into the potential merits and pitfalls of introducing call lists for public debates in the House of Commons. To help us with our inquiry, we are joined by today's second panel: Dr Ruth Fox of the Hansard Society and Dr Sarabajaya Kumar of Centenary Action. Good afternoon to you both. Please could you introduce yourselves for the record?

Dr Kumar: I am Dr Sarabajaya Kumar. I am a UCL academic, and I have my own non-profit called Impatience, because we are impatient for change. I am also here as a member of the steering group of Centenary Action. We are a coalition of about 100 member groups; we represent 9 million women and girls. All our answers today have been collated through working with our research advisory group and the APPG on women in Parliament, for which we are currently the secretariat.

Dr Fox: I am the director of the Hansard Society and co-host of the "Parliament Matters" podcast. The society is not the record of parliamentary debates; we are a non-partisan charity founded in 1944 by Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee, who were our first members. We are dedicated to the promotion of public understanding of how Parliament works and how it could be better.

Q30 **Chair:** As is traditional, the opening question will be from me as Chair of the Committee. Could you both briefly set out your views about call lists and any potential benefits or drawbacks you foresee in introducing published call lists in the House of Commons?

Dr Kumar: Our position is that we would like to see call lists for equality, equity and inclusion reasons. How those call lists are shaped is really for the House and the experts here; our position is that we would like to see it. As we saw, they were employed during covid—obviously that was during a specific time. Our view is that you would need to do some research, maybe a pilot, and then a review to see what works. From an

equity and accountability point of view, we would support that as a part of a suite of reforms.

Dr Fox: Our position is that if the Committee and the House are minded to go ahead, it should be on a trial basis, to test out how it would work and the ramifications of it. It is not clear to me at this stage exactly what problem this is trying to solve. It seems to me that there is not a consensus. Some Members want more certainty than others; some Members are suggesting that perhaps the Chair's existing informal speakers list should be published, or at least made available privately to the parties and to Members; some want certainty about whether they are going to be called; some Members want more certainty about when they are likely to be called; some Members want additional certainty about how long they are going to have for their speeches, and so on.

I think you need to define quite carefully the degree of specificity and certainty that you want. That would define the type of scheme that you might then adopt. You would then have to think carefully about the ramifications, which is why we would suggest trialling it.

Q31 **Chair:** Does either of you have a view on whether call lists would have an impact on the participation of Members?

Dr Kumar: When we were preparing to speak today, we found that the evidence was not really there. There were concerns that it might; there were concerns that it would stifle debate or sterilise debate and that it would lead to a public speaking Chamber rather than a debating Chamber. But we found very little research, either to support that or otherwise. We agree with Dr Fox that the best thing would be trialling, testing and seeing what happens. That is our view as well.

Dr Fox: I think it could work both ways. There is some evidence that if you have a call list, it might discourage Members from going into the Chamber and listening to debates. We have had issues with that in the past, with the televising of Parliament. The fact that you could get it on monitors and TV screens meant that Members did not go in as much as they used to; they would do work in their offices and watch the debate on the monitor. There has been criticism of that in the past, and I think that there is some risk of that.

It could be that there is some attempt to game the system by the Whips, either by encouraging Members to flood the system with requests to participate or, conversely, by trying to discourage Members from speaking.

The elephant in the room in this debate is something that has developed over the last 20 years or so in particular: should every Member who wishes to speak in a debate be able to speak in the debate? If they should, that drives you towards a situation in which some Members end up getting two or three minutes. Is that really that valuable? Would it be better for fewer Members to speak but to have longer? Some 20 or so years ago,

various Committees would have recommended that anything less than 10 minutes was not helpful. That was the level! You can sense the problem.

The change happened around 2007-08. There was a Procedure Committee report, I think, suggesting that Members who wanted to participate should be able to do so. That was reinforced during the Bercow speakership—I almost said premiership! He was the Back Benchers' champion, and he very much wanted to get more Members in to speak, which meant driving down the time in the latter hours of the debate.

Clearly, on days with multiple ministerial statements and urgent questions, the timeframe gets ever tighter. I recognise why so many Members want to speak, but there may be a debate to be had about whether everyone who wants to speak should be able to. Should some criteria be inserted? Should some bigger time limits be restored in future?

Q32 Mr Dillon: Dr Fox, you mentioned the change in trends over the last 20 years, but have you seen a trend within each individual Parliament? Half of us are new this time, so in the first year everyone wants to speak. Do you see a trend that that dies down as we get nearer to a general election?

Dr Fox: I have not done special research on that to be able to say definitively. There is a team at the University of Birmingham who have done some academic research on this. They did a blog post, which I can send to the Clerks to make available, that looked at the trends in both the Chamber and Westminster Hall. The sense was that there were more people speaking for shorter periods of time; it was fairly flat until the 2000s, and then it has gone up considerably.

Mr Dillon: So it coincides with the introduction of social media, maybe.

Dr Fox: To some extent, yes.

Q33 Sir Christopher Chope: Dr Kumar, you say that there is no evidence that the proposed introduction of call lists would undermine the debating role and the legislative scrutiny role of the Chamber. Surely, during the lockdown, when we did have call lists, it was just a boring procession of a whole lot of people speaking on their iPhone or other piece of electrical equipment and not engaging at all in any sort of debate. Over the last many years, whatever else has changed, the necessity for the House of Commons to make legislation, hold the Government to account and engage in proper debate that people can understand has never been greater, has it?

Dr Kumar: I cannot answer on whether it has been greater or not, but what I can say is that in Sweden, for example, they have call lists. The Speaker and Deputy Speaker can deviate from those call lists and can manage the debate, so I think there might be a happy medium. It does not have to be a binary yes or no. It is not that there is no evidence; there may be evidence, but we do not know of it.

Q34 Sir Christopher Chope: I speak as someone who was an acting Deputy Speaker for a short time at the beginning of this Parliament. There is, in

practice, an enormous amount of discretion for the Chair or the Speaker to decide who will speak next, taking into account a whole range of considerations. Would introducing call lists not introduce more rigidity and reduce the flexibility? If we are saying that flexibility is good, surely we have the maximum flexibility under the present system.

Dr Kumar: It would potentially introduce rigidity, but these things have to be balanced with who gets to speak. There is research that we know about on how it is very gendered: a lot of women are not able to speak. There is the whole bobbing system. I think you heard about this, Chair, from previous speakers. Ellie Chowns said that she bobbed for four hours. Diane Abbott bobbed 40 times. Other MPs have said that they have had to do that and have then not been called.

Our arguments are around equity and representation. If disabled Members or women MPs are not called, they are not able to represent their constituents effectively. There is a balance, I think. In our view, it is not either/or. We are not saying that we should use call lists; we are just saying that perhaps we should pilot them, do some research and then see.

Q35 Sir Christopher Chope: Perhaps there is a lack of information out there about the discretion that is used. As a member of the Speaker's Panel of Chairs, I always make allowances for people who have particular issues. They may include disability issues or all sorts of other issue, but if those are shared with the Chair or are obvious, the Chair takes those into account. In a sense, it seems to me that this is an academic debate, without everybody understanding the reality and perhaps the pitfalls of the unintended consequences that may flow from having a call list. That chimes very much with the evidence that we have received from former Deputy Speakers and occupants of the Chair in this Parliament. That is more of a comment from me.

Dr Fox, what do you think are the downsides of introducing some rigid call lists?

Dr Fox: Clearly, one of the very worrying and concerning potential downsides—hence why, if you were minded to go ahead, I would trial it—is the infringement on the discretion of the Chair. It is worth saying that the Chair's ability, freedom and discretion to choose people in debates and to manage debates in a way that is responsive to what happens in the Chamber and what emerges in the debate is not unique but is quite unusual. The Presiding Officers of many Parliaments do not have that degree of discretion. Look at the Australian Parliament, for example: it has a much more rigid system. That is something that you would have to be careful about.

You also have to think about what types of business it would apply to. With legislative debates, you could see it applying to the Second Reading of a Bill, but it would be very much more difficult to do at the later stages, particularly Report. At the moment, we have this very baggy single group selection of amendments, and you get this quite baggy debate. That would be something to look at in the context of call lists. That has developed at Report stage over time, but is that actually the most effective way of

having the Report stage debate? Are there ways to change it, to have a more focused and effective debate on groups of amendments?

Although we know that the Speaker is alert to these issues and is concerned about them, we cannot ignore the fact that there are quite a number of MPs, particularly new ones, who feel that they have not had that kind of engagement with the Chair. They have had issues in the Chamber where they have felt that they have had to sit there for a very long time, despite health or access issues.

Likewise, there are also the issues for the smaller parties. Looking at the longer term, if we are going to have an increasingly fragmented politics, this could become a more acute problem, where the smaller parties feel that they do not get any voice in the debate at all until it is very late on and they have two or three minutes. That particularly affects the parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are things to be balanced, but I absolutely take the point that one thing we need to protect as much as possible is the role of the Speaker.

Q36 Chair: The role of an MP has changed a lot over the years. Does either of you have any thoughts about the competing demands on MPs' time and how call lists might be able to interact with that?

Dr Fox: It clearly has changed considerably. If you look at the diaries and memoirs of leading politicians of the day in the '50s, the '60s, the '70s and even into the '80s, you see that they spent much less time in their constituency than you do now. The nature of the role has changed.

My impression is also that the nature of the role has changed since covid. The context of online and virtual parliamentary activity has bled into the constituency. Once, MPs could think that they could preserve Monday to Thursday for Westminster and Friday and the weekend for the constituency, but I have heard some MPs who have been in the House for a number of Parliaments saying, "Once upon a time, I'd be able to tell a headteacher, my local GP or the primary care trust, 'No, I can't take a meeting on a Wednesday at 12, because it's Prime Minister's questions,' but there is now an expectation that you can jump on Zoom." The constituency activity is also clashing with parliamentary business. Short of saying no and being really quite rigid about it, that is incredibly difficult to manage. Obviously, there is a difference in the willingness or ability to say no when you have a major constituency problem or a seat with a small majority.

Members will respond differently to those challenges, but clearly there are pressures on time, added to which there are all these communication routes that now bear down on you and that you need to be responsive to. That has added another layer of complexity.

Dr Kumar: In the evidence that we have collected, women MPs have said that they would prefer certainty, both about whether they will be called and about how long. We have just heard how complex an MP's role is.



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Not every MP has very strong oratory skills, but they may have very strong Committee, policy or constituency skills. Historically, it has been the case that the debating Chamber gives preference to those who might have great oratory skills. That is our view.

Q37 Mr Dillon: Do you think that there are any wider impacts from introducing call lists that could have an impact on the way our parliamentary democracy functions?

Dr Kumar: We are starting from the point of view of accountability to the public. If our disabled MPs, women MPs and perhaps those MPs who live very far from Westminster can participate much more in debate, that is, for us, an accountability issue. They may be less likely to be selected because they are from a smaller party, are further away or are disabled. For example, Daisy Cooper talked about her hidden disability and about how having more certainty is very helpful for her. MPs from all parties who have given evidence to us and who have disabilities, hidden or not hidden, have talked about how helpful that would be for the management of their work.

There are also a number of MEPs who have become MPs, and call lists were used in the European Parliament, so there may be evidence about how that works. We agree with Dr Fox that if you go down that route, everything must be trialled so that you can see the evidence. That is where we are coming from.

Mr Dillon: Thank you, Dr Kumar. Dr Fox?

Dr Fox: I have alluded to some of them. I think you could have a debate about the Speaker, about Report stage and so on. I think it does engage a wider debate about sitting times—dare I enter that dangerous territory? I have argued for quite some time for a review of the parliamentary sitting day, the week, the month, the Session, the year and the Parliament, and of whether time is used as effectively and efficiently as possible and whether debates are in the right location—Westminster Hall versus the Chamber.

You were talking about the importance of the Committee system. I have argued that maybe it is time to think more radically about whether we should have a Committee week, or Committee weeks, and use the Chamber in a slightly different way so that some of these clashes in your diaries could be managed differently.

An immediate issue, for which there is no resolution on the horizon, is that some of these problems arise because of ministerial statements and urgent questions. I don't think anybody would want to lose those, but the degree to which they can expand—they can be quite lengthy at times—is often a feature. That is, to some extent, at the discretion of the Speaker. The number of Members who want to participate in those goes to how long they will go on for.

I do not think that anybody wants to lose that topicality, but perhaps you might want to think about whether there should be constraints on how



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long they can go for and whether there should be absolute certainty about a slot for those things, with legislative business starting at particular times. You might also want to think about whether there should be breaks in legislative business. Do you need to have a solid five hours without a break? In the House of Lords, for example, they have dinner break business. That is what they call it; they used to call it—

Mr Dillon: “Adjourned during pleasure”—it still says that on the boards up there.

Dr Fox: Yes, I know. Don’t go down that route. Don’t call it pleasure—that is not a good idea.

But yes, the Lords has a break for an hour, and it does not interrupt the flow of business to the extent that it is a major problem. You could think about that and whether, without going down the full route of call lists, that would address some of the issues about those Members who have health issues or disability or access issues knowing that they would be able to get out and have that break. It applies to everybody, so they are not being singled out, which is an important factor in how those Members who have those issues feel in terms of how they would be treated and how their concerns would be responded to.

Q38 Bambos Charalambous: Dr Fox, you have partly touched on this point. If call lists were introduced, do you think there would need to be any subsequent or accompanying changes to other aspects of parliamentary procedure?

Dr Fox: Depending on how much how much certainty you are providing and what the model is, you might have to think about the Standing Orders in terms of the Speaker’s role. I hesitate—I think it is Standing Order No. 47, but Sir Christopher might know better than me. Those kinds of things would have to be considered.

You might have to think about how the Order Paper is structured. You might have to think about the organisation of business and the sitting days. Again, it depends on what model there is. You could simply say, “We want more transparency around the Speaker’s existing list. We want that to be made available.” I would be rather doubtful whether that can be done privately without it being leaked publicly. I think you would have to think carefully about that, what rules would be in place and what sanctions you might want to deploy.

Similarly, if you have call lists, there may be concerns about lobbying, for example, or indeed complaints. If Members do not like where they are on the list, that could become incredibly difficult. Members might start lobbying the Speaker or making points of order at the start of debates to complain. They might say, “Why am I 35th? Why am I not 10th?” or, “Mr Speaker, I can’t do this particular time, as I’ve got this. Can I change?” You would need to think very carefully about whether that would simply not be permitted—it would be out of order—or whether in fact there is a mechanism to manage it, and what that would be.

Bambos Charalambous: Does Dr Kumar have anything to add?

Dr Kumar: I defer to my colleague Dr Fox on the constitutional issues.

Q39 **Mary Kelly Foy:** We have touched on the House of Lords, but do you think there are lessons to be learned from other Parliaments that do publish call lists, and their proceedings? I know that the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the European Parliament have some form of published call list.

Dr Kumar: We certainly think so. For example, in Finland there are not call lists, but there is electronic voting so you can put in when you want to speak. That is, of course, managed by the Speaker and Deputy Speaker. Dr Fox has alluded to the Australian case, and I think that is a little bit concerning in relation to Sir Christopher's point. But there are many different ones. We could not find detailed research on this, so we think that the research would have to be done. The Clerks know a lot about procedures and so on, so they would be very good at that too. Yes, there needs to be more research, but it seems, from our perspective, that the Swedish case is certainly one to look at.

Dr Fox: We have not done a lot of comparative research in this area; I don't think anyone has, specifically. To some extent, it is subjective, and it is a product of the culture of the Parliament. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were new, and therefore this was a natural part of their processes. It is subjective in the sense that some Members like it and some don't. They feel it makes the debate quite stilted and there is the heavy influence of the Whips. Obviously they are smaller legislatures, so they have fewer Members trying to get into roughly the same amount of time. It is not that they have more time than you do, or you have a lot more time than they do. We all have the same amount of time in a day, but they have many fewer Members who want to get in and participate, so there are different pressures.

If you look at the House of Lords, there is, again, a different culture. The Government do not control the business agenda. There is no history of the Lord Speaker selecting speakers in the way there is in the House of Commons; the Chair does not have that discretion. It is actually organised through the party Whips, through the Government Whips office, and it applies only to certain types of business.

Again, you have to think about the culture of the House, the existing rules, what it is about the system that you want to change and to protect, and where the balance lies.

Dr Kumar: Let me just add that the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association have recommendations on gender and diverse Parliaments, so it would definitely be worth the Clerks consulting them.

Q40 **Mr Morrison:** We have already talked about how call lists could create certainty for MPs from constituencies far from Westminster, MPs with caring responsibilities or MPs with disabilities. Apart from published call



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lists, are there mitigations that could be made to assist those groups?

Dr Kumar: As a civil society organisation, we are not familiar with all the aspects of the House in the way Dr Fox is, but I am sure there are. I was talking to Kirsty Blackman before we came in, and it was very enlightening because she was talking about small changes that can be made to different procedures in the House and that actually make a huge difference, particularly to disabled MPs.

I am the founder of the Disabled Women in Politics Network, which is cross-party, and we have had 14 women elected to public office—not to the House as yet, but fingers crossed. It depends on which data you consult, but only maybe 12 MPs have disclosed disability. If we were fully represented in the House, we would have 156 MPs. There must be other ways whereby adjustments can be made that are much more inclusive, as Dr Fox said, so that you don't have to make a specific request, but they are built into the system, which is much more friendly, whether it is for family, disability or whatever.

Dr Fox: With 650 MPs, it is quite difficult to come up with a system that suits everybody. There just are going to be winners and losers, as we have with sitting hours.

It is quite difficult to see how a call list will necessarily resolve the concerns of those who have travel issues, other than by people knowing whether they are or are not on the list and whether they are or are not staying. If they are staying, the chances are that those MPs—unless they are Front Benchers, Select Committee Chairs or whatever—might be quite low down the list, in which case the chances are that they are going to miss their plane, train or whatever. So does that solve the problem? It might from a practical perspective, in that you know that you will have to stay over and you can sort the booking out in advance; there may be cost implications and so on. However, it does not necessarily solve the problem if you want to speak and are not on the list. Again, it goes to the point about what the problem is that you are trying to solve.

There is also the question of the smaller parties, or MPs who are further from the Chair and cannot necessarily liaise very easily with the Chair and officials about whether they are on the unofficial call list. I do not necessarily know how that works, because I am not in the Chamber and you cannot always see it terribly well on the TV feed. But is it not possible to have some kind of instant messaging or app system? That may indeed be used already—I don't know.

I have mentioned the idea of having breaks, which might address the issues for those who have health concerns or disabled access concerns. I cannot remember whether it was made here or in the Modernisation Committee, but there was a suggestion that a practical measure might be to make a room near the main Chamber—the Reasons Room has been mentioned—available to Members who might have particular health issues and might need to go out, have a break, get their medication or whatever it might be. If their office is some distance from the main Chamber, it is



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difficult for them to get back and forth in time, but they could go to that room and work.

There must be some practical accommodations that can be made to address these issues, but they could be done separately from call lists.

Dr Kumar: I remember that when Mo Mowlam was very ill, she was able to go and rest there; I think Betty Boothroyd was the Speaker at the time. Using the Reasons Room would be a great idea. There are many reasonable adjustments that could be made, but somebody with the expertise needs to look at it as a whole.

Q41 **James Asser:** This is the last question, so we will give you a chance to indulge your ideas and dreams on this one.

The types of call list used during the covid-19 pandemic were necessarily formulaic, because of the conditions of the time and their aim of restricting physical participation in the main Chamber, but today you have the opportunity to design a brand-new system for call lists. I know you have already mentioned some ideas from other places, but you have a free hand now. How would you envisage the system working on a practical level?

Dr Fox: I would not take the covid model as a useful guide at all, because of course—again, this is about purpose and culture—the objective of the covid call lists was to keep people out of the main Chamber and not in it.

I am not a fan of call lists. My big concern is that we will end up with a long list of people coming into the main Chamber for certain amounts of time. It will not be a debate; it will be a series of speeches being delivered.

I am not naive. I have been watching the House long enough to know that it is no longer a great theatre of Socratic debate, if it ever was. *[Laughter.]* Sorry.

James Asser: We will take that criticism on the chin.

Dr Fox: That is how to offend you all at a stroke! The first couple of hours of a debate can sometimes be interrogatory, with interventions and so on, but once you get into the latter part of the debate and people just have three minutes in which to speak, they really do not want to take interventions. More often than not they say, “I am not taking interventions”, and it looks terrible when you are watching it. The optics are not great.

I would prefer to trial some other things before we trial call lists. I would prefer to think about the nature of the parliamentary day. Are some of the urgent questions that are now being granted genuinely urgent? What do we mean by “urgent question”? I feel sometimes that we have moved away a little from the original intention. On the other hand, you do want to hold the Government of the day to account, so it is about how you balance that. It is particularly acute on certain days, such as Mondays or the first



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day back after a recess. It is worth thinking about the parliamentary day being organised in a different way.

Providing more certainty on the Order Paper is one of the fundamental things that a lot of people come to us about. They say, "I don't understand what these things are on the Order Paper. When are these things going to be debated? When do I need to turn on the TV to watch this debate, because I am interested in this issue?" You cannot provide much in the way of certainty beyond the start time.

I would look at things like voting and how much time it takes, if you are worried about how your time is spent and what your priorities are. I know that this will not be popular in some quarters, but if I were in the House I would be a fan of electronic voting, going back to the experience of covid. We could say that the first of every round of votes has to be done in person on the estate, with more pass machines to speed things up, but if you are on the ninth or 10th vote in a round of Budget resolutions, going round and round for hours does not seem like a particularly productive use of time. It could be dealt with differently.

Thinking about the motions that are now being put, is there more scope for deferred voting? You do not want to separate debate and decision, but are there some things that could be dealt with by an extension of deferred voting these days?

I would prefer to look at those first and then get to call lists if that does not resolve some of the issues. I would trial things like splitting the day, splitting debates, having a break and so on.

Dr Kumar: Does it have to be first, or can it be parallel? Sorry, I know it is your job to ask the questions. I am just wondering whether you could have the suite that you are talking about alongside trialling the call list, and get the evidence that way. I have got my academic hat on here.

Dr Fox: Yes, you could. You would not be able to isolate cause and effect, perhaps—that would be the issue—but yes, you could do it in parallel if you wanted.

Dr Kumar: We anticipated that you might ask us this question, but we are resisting by saying that although you had call lists during covid-19, we realised that that was particular to that time. But we think the expertise is here, particularly among your Clerks and the references that we have shared with you.

We would go back to first principles and ask what needs to be in place to make MPs effective in the House, and what best practice is, given the more diverse body that we have now. We have a very diverse group of MPs from all backgrounds. We just think that you need to go back to first principles, look at practices—I would not say "best practice", but practices elsewhere—take on board the stuff around culture and see what will make a more inclusive Parliament. This is our Parliament, this is our House and we should all be effectively represented.



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James Asser: Thank you. That was very helpful and interesting.

Chair: As there are no further questions from colleagues, let me thank our witnesses for their time this afternoon. If either of you wishes to add anything to the evidence that you have given, we would be very happy to receive it in writing.