



Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Business in Westminster Hall, HC 236

Wednesday 18 June 2014

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Members present: Mr Charles Walker (Chair); Jenny Chapman; Nic Dakin; Thomas Docherty; Sir Roger Gale; John Hemming; Mr David Nuttall; Jacob Rees-Mogg; Martin Vickers.

Questions 1-53

Witnesses: **Paul Evans**, Principal Clerk of the Table Office, House of Commons, gave evidence.

Q1 Mr Charles Walker (Chair): Thank you for coming to see us to discuss business in Westminster Hall, Paul. People have differing views of Westminster Hall and the role it should play in Parliament. From the written evidence we have received, it seems most people do not believe it should become a competitor to the main Chamber, and there would be a reluctance to see votable business taken in Westminster Hall. I know you have done a lot of thinking about this matter. I also know that within the Clerk's office there is an understandable desire to clean up some of the procedures and Standing Orders about the use of Westminster Hall, and perhaps to be a little bit more expansive in the type of business that is put before the House via that Chamber. Over to you.

Paul Evans: Thank you, Mr Walker. I think you are right: the original report from the Modernisation Committee played fairly loosely with ideas about using Westminster Hall for non-controversial legislation—SIs and things like that—but there has been no evidence over the 15 years that the House wants to do that. Part of what we are recommending in the memorandum is merely tidying up the Standing Order to strip out the now redundant provisions that would have provided for that. If your Committee feels when making its recommendations that we are not going to go down that path in the next 15 years, either, we might as well get rid of those cluttering-up provisions.

As a group of Clerks, watching it from the dais, our experience is that Members obviously find it a satisfactory way of holding Ministers to account, and there are plenty of applications coming into the Table Office every week for debates in Westminster Hall. As far as it goes, then, the evidence is that a body of Members, at least, in the House enjoy it and find it a useful procedure, but generally speaking I do not get the impression that Members see it as an alternative to the Chamber. They see them as quite distinct activities in many ways. The less formal atmosphere in Westminster Hall is also quite appreciated both by the participants and by the people who watch it from outside, as well.

None of those things needs to change very greatly. The tidying up of the Standing Orders is about removing extraneous and unused provisions, by and large, if that is the point that you think we have reached.

One problem I have identified—and again, this is from I and my colleagues watching from the dais—is an imbalance between the number of Members applying for debates and the length of time available. The Clerk of the House has made a suggestion about one way in which we might address that, which is that rather than having the fixed idea of half-hour and 90 minute debates, we could go for something a little more flexible. That would involve the Chairman of Ways and Means making some judgments, and so on, in a way that he has not been required to do so far, but he has indicated that he would be quite willing to take that on and give it a shot if that is what the Committee wanted.

The only other substantial recommendation, really, is that we ought to change the form of the motion. As the memorandum points out, substantive Adjournment debates, as we used to call them, were abolished in the main Chamber in 2007 at the initiative of the Modernisation Committee. It was felt that the House debating a motion on whether to adjourn, then deciding not to, then immediately moving on to another Adjournment motion—on a bad day you could have three Adjournment motions—made the House look rather indecisive; also, it was not at all clear to onlookers why the House was, for example, debating going to war in the Falklands on the question of whether or not it should adjourn. The idea of general debates was therefore introduced.

I think it would be perfectly plausible to marry up the procedures now in Westminster Hall and have general debates there. The memorandum sets out how that would not be complicated to do, and if we went down the path of ensuring that Westminster Hall did not pretend to be a place where substantive decisions were taken, it needn't, as it were,

threaten the Government of the day with the possibility of unwelcome substantive motions being agreed there.

Q2 Chair: There was also talk about changing some of the sitting hours around.

Paul Evans: Yes. Thursday sittings are divided between the Liaison Committee and the Backbench Business Committee. I suggest we recognise the flexibility between those two Committees and let them get on with dividing the time between them rather than specifying the number of days each has; that will be much easier, I think.

As we know, Thursday has become a different kind of day in the House over the past 10 years or so, but the main problem is that because it is now the main day for Back-Bench business, quite often there will be a Select Committee-inspired debate in the main Chamber at the same time as something on quite a similar topic is going on in Westminster Hall, or vice versa. Not having the Whips and business managers controlling everything in quite the same way makes co-ordination a bit difficult, especially since notice is short.

One way of dealing with that—it is only a suggestion, but it strikes one immediately as a possibility and the Chairman of Ways and Means feels that it is a runner—is to swap those Thursday sittings for Monday sittings. We now have the Monday 4.30 to 7.30 sittings, but we have used only one in 10 Mondays for those sittings, which are set aside for e-petitions. You could have those as the regular sittings, and if you want to continue the e-petitions experiment, you could have those on Thursdays.

Q3 Chair: As you know, the Committee is doing some work on an e-petitioning system for the House, so if we were to formalise the e-petitions process, Thursday could be the time to take those e-petitions and debate them.

Paul Evans: It could be—effectively you could just swap Mondays and Thursdays.

Q4 Chair: Two final brief questions from me. There is capacity to lengthen the day slightly in Westminster Hall. You can't lengthen it to the same length as the parliamentary day because there is injury time for Divisions, so you could find it running beyond when the House is sitting. That has happened before, when the House rises early, but it would be nice if we could coincide the conclusion of both Chambers at the same time or as near to the same time as possible. The second thing I have now completely forgotten—it will come back to me. So what about the opportunity to lengthen the day?

Paul Evans: Obviously there are some resource implications for the House Service, and we can have a look at those. If that was decided to be done, I am sure we could meet them, but there might be some costs for the doorkeepers and the Clerks.

Q5 Chair: Finally, you have suggested that there should be some flexibility in the timing of debates, depending on interest. I think that is a very difficult thing to do, I really do. However, one thing that is possibly attractive is that we have half-hour and hour-and-a-half debates, and there does seem room between those two times to have one hour debates, too. I know Roger would like to come in on that.

Sir Roger Gale: That is exactly the point I was going to make. I don't share your view, but I cannot see any reason why not, as long as it is planned in advance. If you just say, "We'll let this debate run for three quarters of an hour, and if it runs out of steam we'll take the next one," you cannot plan that, because you have to have the contenders present to do it. I cannot see any reason why the Chairman of Ways and Means should not determine that, provided we can educate Members to write in and indicate that they want to participate in a debate.

There might be scope for making that mandatory—for saying, as one does in the Council of Europe, "If you want to take part in a debate, you have to put your name down, otherwise you don't take part in the debate." If the Chairman of Ways and Means, acting for the Speaker, sees that he has a dozen people who want to take part in debate A and only two who want to take part in debate B, I cannot see any reason why, within the allocated time, he should not say, "Well, I'm allocating an hour and a half, or even two hours, to that debate and half an hour to something that might normally be allocated an hour and a half because only a couple of people want to speak." I cannot see any reason why that shouldn't work. Is that what you had in mind?

Paul Evans: That is broadly what I had in mind, yes. It would require a bit more planning, and you would probably have to move things forward a week so that there is time to do that.

Q6 Sir Roger Gale: Would you buy into the idea that, in that case, Members should be required to indicate in advance that they wish to participate in a particular debate?

Paul Evans: In the end that is a matter for the Chairman of Ways and Means, but we are already coming to a position in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall where it is pretty much a principle that if you are not on the list, you don't get called until the end and therefore you may not get called at all. You could crank that up to a sort of, "You won't get called at all anyway," but that would be a matter—

Q7 Sir Roger Gale: As an addendum, would you time limit speeches?

Paul Evans: We have introduced time limits in Westminster Hall, which has been successful. I think Members are now very familiar with that. Time limits are, of course, ideal. If 12 Members want to take part, you give them five minutes each, or whatever, and you can calculate pretty much the exact length of the debate to within a few minutes either way. You could manage things much more than we do at the moment if you wished to go down that path. There is no doubt about that.

Q8 Nic Dakin: If you pursue this, presumably in order for it to work—I am not arguing for or against it—you would have to produce a list. Everything would have to happen a week earlier, wouldn't it?

Paul Evans: Yes.

Q9 Nic Dakin: You would have to publish a list of debates for the following week so that you could have bids from people who want to speak, and you then determine the length of each debate accordingly. Otherwise it just wouldn't work, would it?

Paul Evans: I think you would have to take everything forward a week, but you could perhaps reserve a couple of slots for last-minute debates, which would have a fixed time of 30 minutes or 90 minutes, and say that those slots will be drawn a week later or there will be some other opportunity. We do not have to be wedded to the ballot. If the Committee wanted to encourage the Chairman of Ways and Means to have criteria for picking debates other than the ballot, that is fine. The Chairman is open to that idea, too. You can have a mix. You could have a topical debate that is held open until the last minute, or relatively to the last minute, and you can have the planned debates that you bring forward a week in planning terms so that the Chairman of Ways and Means can fix the time, within a short menu of options, according to the level of interest shown.

Q10 Jenny Chapman: One of the beauties of Westminster Hall that appeals to some Members is that you don't have such mechanisms in play. You can just look at the Order Paper in the morning and think, "Oh look, there is a debate. I'll go along to that. If there are not too many people there, I might speak." A lot of debates are like that in Westminster Hall. Some are oversubscribed and a whole half day could be spent on them, but often they are not. One of the things that I think is to be valued about Westminster Hall is that you don't have all of these processes that mean you have to do stuff in advance. I just want to know what you think about that and whether you think we could be losing something by over-managing it.

Paul Evans: There is always a risk that you will crush some of the spontaneity and fun out of Westminster Hall by over-managing it. The problem is more with the wasted time. It is rather a pity when you have an hour-and-a-half debate and only three people turn up.

Q11 Jenny Chapman: I have applied for debates. A half-hour debate basically involves you, the Minister and a couple of interventions if you're lucky, so half-hour debates are really only for stuff that only you are obsessed with. An hour and a half is actually quite a lot of time to fill. There is no middle ground for a sub-regional issue that might attract three or four people but not six.

Paul Evans: I think that is where you are trying to balance the flexibility that we are talking about and the spontaneity that you want to preserve.

Q12 Jenny Chapman: Making an hour slot available would give you—

Paul Evans: Someone would have to choose. If I may say so, the trouble is that Members—this is perhaps slightly indiscriminate—know how to game the system and apply for half-hour and one-and-a-half-hour debates without thinking about whether they will necessarily interest a lot of other people. That is where you have the problem. They come out of the hat for an hour-and-a-half debate, but it may not actually be something with which they want to fill an hour and a half and there are not enough other people to fill it either.

Q13 Jenny Chapman: They should be banned from the ballot for a period of time.

Paul Evans: So the Chairman should ban them from the ballot afterwards and put them in the box.

Q14 Thomas Docherty: The one actor we have not touched upon in this interesting exchange is the Minister. I am aware of occasions when, due to a Select Committee appearance or other genuine parliamentary reasons, Ministers have had to phone up and say, "Look. I can't do this allocated slot." How often do you get the sense that such clashes occur? If we start extending or shortening particular debate periods, what are the dangers that Ministers will more often, perhaps through the Leader of the House, complain and say, "Looked, I blocked off an hour and a half for this," or indeed the reverse? Is that a serious concern?

Paul Evans: I do not think so. I do not actually get a lot of that kind of feedback from Ministers. It seems to work relatively smoothly. We have rarely had a debate cancelled. At the moment, they effectively get a week's notice that they will have to sit there and listen to an hour-and-a-half debate. If you were going to go for a more flexible system, you

would anyway need to bring that notice period forward a week, so they would get a fortnight to clear their diaries if necessary, and they would know a week later how long the debate was going to be. There are undoubtedly some details to be worked out about how it would work, which would have to be done with the business managers, but I see no reason why it should be more difficult for Ministers. They seem remarkably capable of having their diaries rearranged at pretty short notice. I have not come across many examples—and obviously sometimes a Minister stands up who is not actually the lead on the matter.

Q15 Thomas Docherty: On topicality, is there not a danger that you would lose the topicality of Westminster Hall debates, because you could in theory end up waiting four or six weeks, or even longer, before raising an issue due to the rota system. You may not be lucky enough in the first round.

Paul Evans: I think that is a danger now, but it might be increased. There would still be a ballot every week, so you are not reducing the number of occasions. It is just that you are bringing the first ballot forward a week, as it were; after that, everything goes week by week, so there would be a fortnight gap, which you might wish to fill by having some kind of arrangement for a preserved topical slot, but I do not think that it would necessarily have the effect that you suggest.

Q16 Chair: Paul—Mr Evans, sorry I am being terribly informal, which will concern some members of the Committee.

Paul Evans: No, I feel that I am among friends at the Procedure Committee.

Q17 Chair: Sir Roger is looking at me and I know that he is thinking that I am a very low, vulgar garagiste.

You have 30-minute Adjournments and hour-and-a-half Adjournments. What do you think about the idea of piloting one-hour Adjournments or whatever we want to call them and injecting a bit of flexibility?

Paul Evans: I see no difficulty, as long as Members calibrate their applications, so if it is an application about street lighting in Hemel Hempstead, they go for a half-hour debate; if it is about FGM, they go for a one-and-a-half-hour debate; and if it is about bus services in East Anglia, they go for an hour debate. It is up to Members, if we had those sorts of slots—

Q18 Chair: We can pilot it. I would be tempted to look at the days. I am quite attracted to the idea of changing Monday and Thursday around, but

that would be for the Committee to decide. There is capacity to lengthen the days slightly and run a pilot of two one-hour debates a week.

Paul Evans: Lengthening the day is fine. You made a point about a clash between the two Chambers occurring, though, and how it is not desirable to have Westminster Hall regularly running later than the main Chamber. You would probably agree with that.

Chair: I would agree with that.

Paul Evans: But we could fiddle with the injury time provisions. I am not sure that the injury time provisions are absolutely critical. If people have bad luck and get a Division, perhaps we shouldn't be too worried if they lose 15 minutes of their debate.

Q19 Chair: I don't think I am calling for radical surgery. It might not need to be an hour added to the day. It could be half an hour, or getting rid of one of the thirties and making it an hour.

Q20 Thomas Docherty: We don't start until 1.30 pm on Thursday, and then we run to 4.30 pm. I don't know about other colleagues, but I get feedback from Members, who say, "It's Thursday afternoon. Why can't we start earlier in the day? We are not the House of Lords; we don't have to have a good lunch before we get to our feet."

Paul Evans: I don't think it is a problem about having a good lunch. One can detect the underlying principle, which is that Westminster Hall does not sit for the first two hours of any sitting in the Chamber. On Thursday, since we brought that forward, that would be 11.30 am, although business questions, which Members—Back Benchers especially—like to attend, often goes on beyond 11.30 am. I suppose the feeling when it was changed was that if you get to midday, it is lunchtime and you need to give people time for lunch, so you start at 1.30 pm. I guess that is the reasoning behind it.

Q21 Thomas Docherty: There are not many colleagues who are as diligent as Mr Dakin, who does a full morning session in the Chamber, needs a break, and then goes to Westminster Hall to do a full afternoon, so surely we could bring it forward. I take your point about the old hours, starting at 10.30 am. Surely bringing it forward by an hour to 12.30 pm, wouldn't be—

Paul Evans: I don't have a strong view, to be honest.

Sir Roger Gale: I am sorry, but because of the insane hours that we are now sitting, it is virtually impossible to hold legislative Committees as it is. We are trying to pack everything into about five minutes on a Thursday. It is ridiculous. You get an hour-and-a-half sitting on a

Thursday because you can't have a Committee sitting when Question Time is on, so you get a very short Committee sitting on Thursday morning. A recommendation was made yesterday, which will come to this Committee, to change the rules so the Chairman has the right to adjourn a Committee sitting. You then have an hour's break, and then the Committee sits again at 2 o'clock. With the best will in the world, people can be in only so many places at any one time.

Thomas Docherty: Sorry, Sir Roger, but if you are in a Bill Committee in the afternoon, you can't be in Westminster Hall anyway, because Bill Committees typically run from 2 o'clock on Thursday, so there is already a clash. I take your point entirely, but—

Sir Roger Gale: We are getting to a point at which you won't be able to be on a Bill Committee and attend business questions, Westminster Hall or virtually anything else.

Thomas Docherty: But you can't attend Westminster Hall as it is, because it is 1.30 pm to 4.30 pm. The House rules are very clear that you must attend the whole debate; you can't dip in, make an intervention and go away.

Chair: But isn't that a good reason for swapping the Monday and Thursday sittings around?

Sir Roger Gale: I think it is.

Q22 Thomas Docherty: What time would Monday start then?

Paul Evans: 4.30 pm.

Sir Roger Gale: 2.30 pm—sorry, do you mean the sitting of the House or Westminster Hall?

Chair: We are talking about swapping the content of the business around, not the hours. It is the business that is taken in those hours. E-petitions would be taken on a Thursday, as opposed to being taken on a Monday, which is a sensible idea. We are going to be thinking a lot about e-petitions over the next few months.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: If e-petitions feel that they are getting the graveyard slot, that is not exactly the message we want to be giving to the general public when they put in for an e-petition debate.

Chair: No slot in the House of Commons or Westminster Hall could be described as a graveyard slot. It is a privilege to be there.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Westminster Hall is, to some extent, the graveyard of the House of Commons business and if you give the graveyard of the graveyard, it really is the tombstone, isn't it?

Chair: All these things are to be decided but, in principle, there is scope. There is a degree of warmth in the Committee for this idea. It is not hot but there is warm approval of looking at the idea of one-hour Adjournments, as an experiment even.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Change? I think it's bad enough.

Chair: We are doing an inquiry into improving Westminster Hall debates. On that basis, we would not do any inquiries, we would just shut up shop, go and say, "It is all very satisfactory, thank you very much."

Q23 Sir Roger Gale: May I just pick up on Mr Evans's point about the tidying up exercise? I agree entirely that the concept of an Adjournment debate is just not understood. It is archaic—one of the leftovers from somewhere or other that could very easily go, as it has in the Chamber, as you rightly say. Are there any other tidying up things? You mentioned one or two things that were effectively not used and therefore we might as well get rid of.

Paul Evans: The other thing is that there is a provision—this was a concept at the beginning—for four Deputy Speakers specifically appointed to do Westminster Hall. That has never really taken off and has never been used.

Q24 Chair: That is uniformly regarded as being a bad idea.

Paul Evans: So we might as well get rid of that provision in the Standing Order. The other major change suggested here relates to the complicated set of provisions, which makes the Standing Order very complicated to understand. They are effectively designed to allow Second Reading of a non-controversial Bill or whatever to be put into Westminster Hall and go through its stages there. Since that is never going to happen, and as it makes the Standing Order very complicated to understand, I am suggesting that you strip all those provisions out.

Q25 Chair: So we are deregulating. Look at that—it warms the cockles of the hearts of those to my right.

Paul Evans: Absolutely. It is simplification and deregulation—cutting corners and so on.

Q26 Chair: These are all eminently sensible ideas. They are largely uncontroversial.

Paul Evans: Yes.

Chair: Until they reach the Procedure Committee—then somebody will find fault with them.

Q27 Jenny Chapman: In case we forget about it, what about the idea about written ministerial statements? Could we allow a mechanism by which Members could request a Minister to come to Westminster Hall, give an account of their written statement and be asked questions on it?

Paul Evans: One of the things that I stressed in the memorandum is that the Standing Order is incredibly unrestrictive, and the Chairman of Ways and Means can do anything, really. Obviously the Chairman of Ways and Means wants to do things that he feels the House is supporting him in doing. He does not want to go off, careering down experimental paths or on his own initiative; he is waiting for a cue. For example, you could suggest that he could keep a half-hour slot and say, "If any Member comes to me and says, 'I want a requisition—an explication of the written statement from last week', I will give that slot to them." You could do that. It is possible. I am not saying that it is desirable, Mr Docherty. I am saying that it is possible.

Jenny Chapman: You are too sympathetic to these Ministers, Mr Docherty.

Q28 Thomas Docherty: I hope to be one, one day. Isn't there a danger that you end up with a power play between the Chairman of Ways and Means and the Speaker? I appreciate that we have a Chairman of Ways and Means and a Speaker who get on perfectly well, I should add, but, in the future, isn't it possible that they might start granting, in effect, UQs over each other?

Paul Evans: I think if a Chairman of Ways and Means started granting UQs—

Q29 Thomas Docherty: In effect, that is what they would be. For example, on Tuesday, the FCO announced that the embassy in Tehran was going to reopen. The Speaker made it clear, reasonably I think, that as there were FCO questions that day, written ministerial statements did not need to be taken. The Foreign Secretary made it clear to the Speaker that he would obviously touch on the issue in topical questions. What if the Chairman of Ways and Means got pressure from colleagues saying, "Actually, we think this is noteworthy"?

Paul Evans: I think there are risks, yes. The mechanism I would envisage is that by Thursday, let us say, if there had been a written statement and you wished to requisition a short explanation, you would apply to the Chairman of Ways and Means, and it would take place the following week. It would not be immediate. I do not think that we can

expect there to be any mechanism whereby it would be pulled in straight away. It is simply a way of choosing a debate, effectively.

Q30 Sir Roger Gale: Then it just becomes another debate, effectively, doesn't it?

Paul Evans: Or you could have a question, or the Chairman of Ways and Means could—

Q31 Sir Roger Gale: You can't have a written statement and then turn it into an oral statement.

Paul Evans: You could have a procedure whereby people asked questions, like a statement, rather than debating stuff.

Nic Dakin: It is a lower order of test.

Q32 Chair: These are just suggestions. We don't have to be overtly concerned by them yet, because they are suggestions.

Paul Evans: I give the entire credit for the idea to Ms Chapman. The point I want to stress is that as the Standing Order currently stands, the Chairman of Ways and Means could do almost anything. If the House felt it wanted him to do anything in particular, we could find a way of organising it.

Q33 Chair: One other question—sorry, I need to move things along—is the matter of discipline. Occasionally, very infrequently, a Member behaves poorly in Westminster Hall. There are few powers open to the Chair other than to ask the Member to remove themselves from the Chamber.

Paul Evans: Only to ask.

Q34 Chair: Do you think that those powers could be beefed up a wee bit?

Paul Evans: There is a suggestion in the memorandum for a way of beefing them up moderately. It does not fit with the procedure in Westminster Hall to have the full powers to name there and then and expel, but we could give a power in a Standing Order for the Chair to order the Member to withdraw. If the Member defied the order to withdraw, the Chair could suspend the sitting and make a report to the Chair in the House; the Member would then be subject to an Order of the House if the House chose to make it. But that is a back up. At the moment the Chair has no options. If you have complete defiance of the Chair's authority the Chair has no option but to suspend the sitting.

Q35 Jenny Chapman: Has that happened?

Paul Evans: Not that I am aware of.

Q36 Nic Dakin: It is a solution to a problem that is not there.

Paul Evans: In a sense, Mr Dakin, it is a solution that would never be used to a problem that would never occur, because the very existence of the solution would prevent the problem occurring.

Chair: Thomas is chewing on wasps again.

Thomas Docherty: As I vegetarian I would never chew on wasps. I can think of two examples of poor behaviour. One was from the one-woman band in Brighton, who wore a T-shirt or something, and the powers were quite limited. I—

Jenny Chapman: Is that it?

Thomas Docherty: The rules are quite clear: you cannot wear T-shirts that have political statements or other statements on them.

Jenny Chapman: Oh, for goodness' sake.

Thomas Docherty: Well, you either have rules or you don't.

Q37 Chair: I will side with Thomas on this. It is important that if you have rules they are respected until they are repealed, regardless of whether you think they are ridiculous.

Thomas Docherty: The Chair had quite limited ability to—

Jenny Chapman: Remove the T-shirt? Demand that she take it off?

Paul Evans: The Chair has moral authority only, effectively.

Q38 Thomas Docherty: I remember an occasion when in the heat of debate an ex-Minister used some very unparliamentary language about a former Prime Minister, and despite the Chairman asking him three times to withdraw the language, he refused to do so. Surely if we are going to say that Westminster Hall is held in its own regard—whether or not we all believe that—we have to expect the same rules to apply across both Chambers, otherwise we are just reinforcing the view of colleagues who say that the rules do not apply across both Chambers.

Paul Evans: There is a modest suggestion for how that might work if you wanted to do that.

Chair: I think it is in the mix now—it is off and running, thanks to Mr Docherty's intervention, so we shall take it into consideration.

Q39 Jacob Rees-Mogg: It is very complex, because Westminster Hall cannot itself vote on a motion, and a Member cannot be expelled without

a motion being passed. You therefore have to suspend the sitting; report to the Speaker; get the Speaker to support the Chair of the sitting in Westminster Hall; interrupt the current business; and then vote to suspend the Member. It is not nice and simple—

Paul Evans: It is not, no. I don't know whether it would ever be used, except as a very last resort. If you give the power to the Chair to order the Member to withdraw, it seems logical, although perhaps not necessary, to have a power in reserve if the Chair is utterly defied.

Q40 Jacob Rees-Mogg: Other than suspend the sitting.

Paul Evans: Yes.

Q41 Jacob Rees-Mogg: What happens in other Committees? What if Mr Docherty decided here and now to behave in an outrageous fashion?

Q42 Thomas Docherty: You mean if I took my jacket off without the permission of the Committee?

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Well, that would certainly shock me, but probably not everybody else.

Chair: I actually gave permission to the Committee before you arrived.

Q43 Jacob Rees-Mogg: What reserve powers?

Paul Evans: If he is not a member of the Committee, you can ask the Serjeant to remove him. If he is a member of the Committee and he behaves impossibly, the only recourse for the Chair is to adjourn the sitting—or suspend it, potentially—make a report to the House, and ask the House for powers to then expel Mr Docherty, or to punish him, or otherwise deal with him, which is a similar mechanism, essentially.

Q44 Chair: We framed this discussion at the start in talking about an Adjournment debate of 90 minutes, an hour, 30 minutes. They are not really Adjournment debates, are they?

Paul Evans: No.

Q45 Chair: We could change that.

Paul Evans: Absolutely.

Q46 Chair: If we did, perhaps it would not require a Whip there, so we could release some of the Whips to deal with more useful things.

Paul Evans: It would look much more sensible to the world.

Chair: So it would be, "That this House has considered".

Jacob Rees-Mogg: That is a votable motion.

Q47 Thomas Docherty: To be fair to our whippets, there is a requirement for the Government to always have a Whip present, because they take notes of what is said to report back to the chief.

Paul Evans: That is not true, Mr Docherty, I am afraid.

Chair: In Westminster Hall, they will come in, move it and skedaddle.

Paul Evans: Mr Rees-Mogg, you said it is a votable motion, but only technically, as long as it is not amendable.

Q48 Jacob Rees-Mogg: But they do get voted down periodically in the main Chamber.

Paul Evans: Yes, and it would still in theory be possible for them to be negatived by a single voice in Westminster Hall.

Q49 Chair: Even now.

Paul Evans: Under the suggested scheme, but even now, anyway.

Q50 Chair: But if we progress this idea, will we have to change Standing Orders?

Paul Evans: You would, but not putting in new provisions; only taking out redundant provisions. At the moment, and what we suggest remains in the suggested version, is the single voice veto. So if the Chair of Westminster Hall puts the question, "That this House has considered the matter of street lighting in Hemel Hempstead", and a Member shouts no, the Question is negatived.

Q51 Chair: So there does not have to be a Division.

Paul Evans: You cannot have a Division.

Q52 Thomas Docherty: It suddenly occurs to me that we do not have a mechanism to sit in private in Westminster Hall.

Paul Evans: No, you don't.

Q53 Thomas Docherty: And the world has not crashed down around our ears in the years that we have used it.

Paul Evans: No, though occasionally I suspect Westminster Hall has sat in private.

Thomas Docherty: It may have felt that way during one or two debates.

Paul Evans: It has not produced any serious problems, as far as I am aware.

Chair: Any other burning questions? No? Thank you very much. It has been extremely useful.

Paul Evans: I am happy to provide you with any more input that you require.

Chair: We might demand a little more of your time.

Paul Evans: Perhaps I should end by saying I have organised an informal census of attendance at debates in Westminster Hall by Members, which I hope to give you the results of at the turn of the summer recess.

Chair: Thank you.