

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Status of resolutions of the House of Commons, HC 1587

Tuesday 30 October 2018

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Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Ronnie Cowan; Dame Cheryl Gillan; Kelvin Hopkins; Dr Rupa Huq; Mr David Jones; David Morris.

Questions 136-192

Witness

[I:](#) Rt Hon Dame Margaret Beckett MP, Former Leader of the House of Commons, 1998-2001.

Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Dame Margaret Beckett MP.

Q136 **Chair:** I welcome our witness to this further session about the status of resolutions of the House of Commons in our broad inquiry into the role of Parliament in the UK constitution. Could I ask you to identify yourself for the record, please?

Margaret Beckett: I am Margaret Beckett. I am the Member of Parliament for Derby South, and at one time I was Leader of the House of Commons.

Q137 **Chair:** That is why we wanted you to be with us on this occasion. How would you describe, in a few sentences, the role of the United Kingdom Parliament in our constitution?

Margaret Beckett: The place where decisions are taken as to how we are governed. That is a gross oversimplification, and I am sure it is not constitutionally proper, but that is how I always think of it.

Q138 **Chair:** How do you think the role of Parliament might change in response



to the evolving nature of our constitution?

Margaret Beckett: Obviously, the role of Parliament may change to some extent when we leave the European Union. That may make a difference to the second thing I was about to say about how it might change. I suspect that over time there be fresh thinking, yet again, not only about the Upper House—I do not know about you, Sir Bernard, but my spirit quails slightly at the thought of going through all that again—but also the way in which devolution is evolving and the way that that and the existence of two Houses here interact one with another. I suspect these things may mean change ultimately, but probably not next week, as they say.

Q139 **Chair:** We are not expecting you to comment in detail about the Fixed-term Parliaments Act or the European Union (Withdrawal) Act and the procedures in section 13 about meaningful votes and so on, but what do you think about the general debate on the idea that somehow, whatever the legislation is, Parliament should be able to decide what happens step by step as a consequence of the EU negotiations?

Margaret Beckett: You separated out the two. Could I say one thing about the Fixed-term Parliaments Act? The words that spring to mind are: it is another fine mess you have left us with. The more I read and hear and think about the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, the more I think it is a real dog's breakfast that could cause more problems than it was intended to solve.

You and I may not see eye to eye about the consequences of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act but equally I think it will mean considerable change. There still appears to me to be quite a degree of dispute about how exactly we might give effect to the notion of the House having a meaningful vote on whatever is the outcome, if there is an outcome, of negotiations, but I have to admit it does seem to me that ultimately the House will, one way or another, have to have a decisive role.

One of the things that struck me forcibly, looking at the evidence that you had the other day from the Clerk and others, is the extent to which in fact it is politics, rather than simply the statutes or the rules or the conventions of the House, which governs what happens. I am reminded of an occasion under the previous Labour Government, on the issue of Gurkhas and whether or not they were allowed to settle in this country. If I recall correctly, we did not vote in a debate on an Opposition Day motion. We, the Government, did not vote against the Opposition Day motion and simply accepted that this was a change that was probably going to have to be made. If you look back through the annals of the House, you will quite often find that whatever the exact numbers and so on, in the end it is the politics that determines how things are decided.

Q140 **Chair:** We will come to that particular instance later in this session. Thinking about the comment made by one of my colleagues that we have



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parliamentary Government but we do not have Government by Parliament, how do you draw the boundary between those two ideas?

Margaret Beckett: Parliament cannot instruct the Government. I do not know whether this is entirely apposite, but I was reminded of it once or twice when I was thinking about this hearing. When I was quite a new MP, Speaker Weatherill was talking to me about some of his personal history. You will not all recall Speaker Weatherill. He had been a Whip—in fact, he was Deputy Chief Whip at one point for the Conservative party—and he told me that when he was made a new Whip there were a number of people who were brought into the Whips' office together. Willie Whitelaw was then the Chief Whip. He said to them various things about their duties, but he said, "One of the duties that may fall to you at some point is that you may have to explain to those who you are whipping—to those who are your charges—that we may fight and struggle and do our best to get the policy changed, and so on, but in the end the Queen's Government must get its business." It sounds arcane, and probably a lot of people would disagree with it, but I have always thought it was quite significant.

Q141 **Chair:** In that either the Government obtain their business or—

Margaret Beckett: The governance of the country must be allowed to be continued.

Chair: —or they forfeit the authority to govern?

Margaret Beckett: Yes, but my feeling about that remark was that it was not just about the Government losing their authority to govern, but about Parliament itself. You can push it so far but you should not be trying to destroy the basis of governance.

Q142 **Chair:** The House of Commons has a supportive role as well as a scrutiny and holding-to-account role?

Margaret Beckett: I would almost say a role of being charged with responsibility.

Q143 **Chair:** Can you say a bit more about this? I think it is very interesting. It is not very fashionable.

Margaret Beckett: No; I rarely am.

Chair: Supposing the British Government wants to leave the European Union without a deal and the law is arranged in that way for that to happen, what is the role of Parliament?

Margaret Beckett: We are now definitely straying into the realm of politics rather than the rules of the House. My instinctive reaction is that it would be the duty of Parliament to prevent it. I am not saying that that is the policy of my party or that my party's Front Bench would agree with me.

Chair: I understand that.



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Margaret Beckett: Given the chaos that seems likely to follow if we were to leave without a deal, I think that is one of the considerations that Members would have in their minds.

Q144 **Chair:** How would Parliament stop that?

Margaret Beckett: That is another matter. That is in terms of the mechanics of how resolutions would work or whatever, but I think people would look for ways. I suspect, looking back, that somehow or other a way would be found.

Q145 **Mr David Jones:** Exploring the issue of resolutions of the House, it has been said that a resolution of the House of Commons expresses the opinion and purposes of the House. What would you say that means in practice?

Margaret Beckett: That has always been my understanding—that it allows the House to express an opinion. What does it mean in practice? It means an opportunity to convey concerns that are held, not just in the House but across the country, usually. It means generally giving a steer if it is thought that the Government are going astray in some way. What else? I think it is an opportunity to test the water, if you like—to test and to reconsider the political climate of the day.

Q146 **Mr David Jones:** Would you say that the significance of a resolution of the House has changed over time and, if so, in what way?

Margaret Beckett: To a degree, yes. If I recall correctly—and no doubt if I do not at some point somebody will tell me—there were occasions under the Callaghan Government, for example, when we did not have a majority, where the Government accepted defeat. They did not necessarily do precisely what the Opposition were calling for, but basically moved policy in the direction of, or gave a clear indication of respecting, the opinion that had been expressed in the House and not ignoring it.

Indeed, there was an occasion that I have been reminded of over the last day or so when one of our Ministers, I would almost say inadvertently, and no doubt perhaps responding with anger to something that had happened, said, “We may have lost that vote, but we are going to ignore the fact that we lost it.” Shortly afterwards—not that day—he was brought back and reprimanded by the Speaker, and he apologised and said, “I should never have said that. It is completely constitutionally improper, and I apologise to the House.”

So it is quite clear there are limits to how far a Government can stray. We are in somewhat uncharted waters at the present time where we seem to be developing some kind of new convention that is itself a convention of variety in how we treat resolutions, and whether the Government vote or whether the Government do not vote. I do not think anybody could say it is not changing. What it is changing to is another matter.



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Mr David Jones: There are some more questions about that, so I look forward to hearing what you have to say.

Q147 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** Can I take you to Government defeats on Opposition Days, because you alluded to the Gurkha vote? I think the Opposition motion on the Gurkhas on 29 April was in fact the only defeat of the Labour Government between 1997 and 2010 on an Opposition Day motion. The division on the motion was 267 to the ayes and 246 to the noes. Our colleague Damian Green raised a point of order and I understand it resulted—I did not remember this myself, but Phil Woolas, who was the Minister for Borders and Immigration, came back that evening at 7.43 pm to the Floor of the House and said the Government would respect the will of the House of Commons, so it was a defeat. When you were Leader of the House, how did you view Opposition Day motions?

Margaret Beckett: I would not regard that as a defeat. I suppose in a sense you are right. The Government chose not to vote but accepted the will. I think there were other occasions when we did actually lose votes. What I am trying to say is the Government didn't not vote because they expected to be defeated. When the Government did not vote, they accepted that they had been defeated and accepted the will of the House. We did not avoid voting in order to avoid defeat—that is what I am trying to say—which is where we seem to me to be wandering at the present time.

Now that I have slightly queried that, remind me again what your end point was.

Q148 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** I wanted to know how you viewed Opposition Day motions when you were Leader. What was your opinion of them?

Margaret Beckett: One of the difficulties of this kind of discussion is it does depend very much on what kind of Parliament you are serving in. When I was Leader of the House we had a majority of about 100, I think, so on the whole I am afraid I did not expect defeat on Opposition Days. Certainly I did take very seriously the question of the Government not being able to carry on its business in the House, or being defeated in the House, very seriously.

There was a moment during my tenure as Leader when we had problems with a piece of legislation and I was very, very seriously worried about it indeed and moved heaven and earth to make sure that those problems were resolved because I thought it was, apart from anything else, politically fatal to be a Leader of the House with one of the biggest majorities that we had ever had and not be able to resolve problems over some piece of Government business.

Q149 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** Are you saying that the size of the majority really affects the way the Leader of the House, or you as Leader of the House, looks at it?



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Margaret Beckett: I think the Leader of the House would and should always take it seriously if the Government were to be defeated, but I have a slight difficulty in that that did not really arise. I cannot say how I felt contemplating it, because I did not really contemplate it.

Q150 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** On the last phrase you used, where does the role of the Leader of the House cross over with that of the Chief Whip of the Government party? Surely you were worrying about something that, as Leader of the House, was not strictly in your bailiwick. You are being very political. The Chief Whip is the person who should be worrying about it.

Margaret Beckett: No, I can understand why you would think that, and I am sorry I phrased it inaccurately, but I am trying not to get into a discussion about what it was.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Sorry; I am not trying to press you on what it was.

Margaret Beckett: It was literally a matter of the construction of the legislation and how that was proceeding and being dealt with in both Houses. It was not a matter for the Chief Whip; it was something that the machine and the administration had to sort out so that both Houses could come to a proper decisions.

Q151 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** If your fears had been realised and a resolution critical of Government policy had been passed, what would your advice have been to the Prime Minister at the time? You must have thought this through, with this looming large in your mind.

Margaret Beckett: I must admit that I did take it for granted that unless I could sort this out, I would be out of the Cabinet and probably out of political life very shortly after. I thought it was a disaster, potentially.

Q152 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** You felt that the implications were for you personally as Leader of the House as opposed to anything else.

Margaret Beckett: I do not think I would have needed to resign, either.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: My father said never volunteer and never resign. Thank you very much.

Q153 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I want to come a bit more up to date. I have only been here since 2015 and there seems to have been this pattern of behaviour from the current Government to whip its MPs to abstain on our Opposition Day motions. I think it started with the "people, not pawns" one that Andy Burnham did when he was Shadow Home Secretary. Do you not think it is healthy in a democracy not only to have turnouts in elections but for voting to take place in Parliament? What effect do you think it has when Government abstain from resolutions like this?

Margaret Beckett: When Government abstain?

Dr Rupa Huq: Yes. Is it a sort of arrogance, dereliction of duty and undermining of Parliament, and those kinds of things?



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Margaret Beckett: Yes. First of all, I feel very sorry for the Whips. I cannot, obviously, speak for whipping the Conservative party but I think if you were continually whipping the Labour party to abstain, you would have trouble because people do not much like abstaining and you are bound to have somebody, I am sure, who would insist that they came here to vote and they were going to vote. So it cannot be an easy prospect for the Whips' office.

I think the waters have been muddied a bit by the whole Back-Bench motion issue. I take your point entirely. I do not want to drag you back into ancient history too often, but there was a procedure for debate that I think, if I recall correctly, was called private Members' motion, or something like that, which used to occur at the end of the week. To be perfectly blunt, from the point of view of Government business managers, they were a nuisance because people did vote on them and so you would have to whip people to come and vote on something that you felt was perhaps sometimes people being awkward about some issue or policy, or whatever. Yet it had to be done, because the Government could not be defeated, so it was taken sufficiently seriously.

Over time, successive Governments found this, because it was not really part of business, it was not intended to lead anywhere. It was, as you said earlier on, an expression of opinion—strong opinion—calling on Government to make a change.

Q154 **Dr Rupa Huq:** It was always an Opposition Back-Bencher, was it?

Margaret Beckett: No, it could be a Government Back-Bencher. But, to be honest, that did not always help when you had Labour Governments. There was this procedure that did mean people being whipped to vote on something that was just a motion, and not part of legislation and so on. It was not an Opposition motion officially; it was an individual MP's motion. Gradually the decision was made that this was a procedure that had outlived most of its usefulness.

I am speaking now from memory, but if I recall correctly what happened was that instead of that procedure, by then we had introduced the Westminster Hall debates, and people were given the opportunity to go for an adjournment debate on, I think, a Wednesday morning in Westminster Hall. That then morphed again into the present Back-Bench debates, but along the way the notion of a vote that might in any way bind the Government had gone. Now we have Back-Bench motions that are not formal Opposition motions, on which the Government do not vote. I can understand the Government not voting. I am sure some people do not approve, but I can see why Government do not want to vote on Back-Bench motions.

Then we are straight into territory where Members are whipped to abstain on Opposition Days. I disapprove totally. I hope I am not pre-empting any later line of questioning. I think we are moving in a very bizarre direction, because it appears to me from recent events that it is not that



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the Government do not vote, but that the Government do not vote unless they think they can win. When they think they can win, they do vote. That seems to me to be a very weird new convention to be being developed, and I am not sure I approve of it at all.

Q155 Dr Rupa Huq: The next thing I wanted to ask you is: when does a convention become a convention? What would you say the potential consequences are for future Governments to follow this unhealthy trend of disregarding resolutions of the House?

Margaret Beckett: I think there is a real danger of it looking as if Parliament is being held in contempt, because if the opinion of Parliament only matters when it agrees with the opinion of the Government, where are we going?

Q156 Chair: Can I just chip in? I was going to ask you why you think Governments whip to abstain on Opposition Days, but I think one of the reasons is that quite often, even if the Government would win the vote, the Opposition motion is not something that is very attractive to vote against, like, for example, more funding for mental health care. The Government defeated an Opposition Day motion on more funding for mental health care and every Conservative MP was then deluged on social media and in their constituencies for having voted for cuts in mental health care, when in fact an Opposition motion is merely an expression of opinion and does not have any effect. So it would be quite logical for the Government to say, "Do not bother to vote in that. We will just get pilloried and it does not make any difference in substance anyway." Rather than having to explain to your constituents that it was only an Opposition Day and does not count, you are not forced on to the defensive in that technical explanation of something that generally is misinterpreting the effect of the vote in Parliament.

Margaret Beckett: I completely understand your point, Sir Bernard, and as an individual I sympathise. It is called politics. It will be within your memory, I am sure, that there is always a wrangle about things like if you think a benefits increase—not that that matters at the moment, because we do not get benefits increases on the whole—is not sufficient but you vote against it, your opposing party, and it is usually your party, Chair, will say, "You voted against that increase in child benefit." Actually, you did not vote against that increase in child benefit; you voted against it because you did not think it was enough.

Chair: That would be misconstruing the meaning of the expression of opinion.

Margaret Beckett: That would be shocking, yes.

Chair: I am saying something different.

Margaret Beckett: I take your point completely. All I am saying is that that is life.



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Q157 **Chair:** There never used to be Opposition Days, and I imagine there never used to be private Members' motions either; there used to be supply days—

Margaret Beckett: That is right, which were given to the Opposition.

Chair: —that served the same purpose. The profusion of opportunities for Members of Parliament to use the Order Paper procedure as a kind of graffiti wall—coming back to what you described in your opening—is not what Parliament should be about, should it? Parliament should be about making decisions within the context of recognising that the Government have the right to obtain their business. What has grown up in Parliament over recent years is a completely different idiom of discussion. It seems to me that seeing as these motions have no legal effect, it becomes inevitable that they will be treated in a different way by the Executive.

Margaret Beckett: I do not think it is inevitable, but I think we are straying very much into the by-waters of very contemporary politics. It seems to me that one of the reasons there is so much room for all these expressions of opinion is because the Government are rather bogged down in a major issue—Brexit—and do not really have very much else that is legislative to do.

Chair: I shall not respond to that.

Margaret Beckett: Other things expand to fill the space.

Chair: I shall not respond to that because I am not here for political discussion, but I respect the point you are making.

Q158 **Kelvin Hopkins:** To reinforce the point you were making, I think a major factor in not voting against Opposition Day motions is the fear of political and popular opprobrium. That is what they want to avoid—as well as, obviously, being defeated—because a small number of Members of the Government party have been known to rebel against their party on these sorts of social issues anyway.

Margaret Beckett: No Government and no Whips' office likes that, but it happens.

Q159 **Kelvin Hopkins:** It is interesting how things have changed. I will just take you back to I think it was the 1960s when Michael Foot and a few other MPs of the left voted against a supply day motion on providing money for defence, because they were opposed to nuclear weapons, and they had their Whip withdrawn from them for some time. It was taken very seriously in those days.

My question is something different. The current Leader of the House has committed the Government to respond to an Opposition Day resolution within 12 weeks. Is it your view that this is an appropriate response?

Margaret Beckett: I accept that it is an attempt to provide a response. I do not myself think it feels adequate. It feels to me like a bit of an excuse



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for not accepting an opinion in the House that the Government do not like. I accept that it is better than nothing, shall we say?

Q160 **Kelvin Hopkins:** Did it look like a panic response? Was 12 weeks just clutched out of the air?

Margaret Beckett: Probably, yes. It ties in with a whole lot of other things. For example, if you were talking about public consultations, quite often there is a 12-week period for response, so it is probably just one of those numbers that the Clerks or civil servants say, "Let's make it 12 weeks like we do with other things".

Q161 **Kelvin Hopkins:** In a sense, there might be a precedent for the 12-week figure.

Margaret Beckett: I should think you would find a precedent for a 12-week period all over the place.

Q162 **Kelvin Hopkins:** What if, at the end of the day, even after those 12 weeks, the Government do not want to respond? What happens then? Do they say, "Well, it was just a figure and we are not going to respond yet, or ever"?

Margaret Beckett: What they would probably say is that the response is being prepared. You are right. That is partly why I said it is better than nothing, but it is not necessarily all that much better than nothing. It is part of an atmosphere in which the Government say, "Yes, Parliament may express its opinion or Parliament may have a view, but never mind, we are too busy to bother about that, and we are just going to carry on anyway."

Q163 **Kelvin Hopkins:** I am a member of the European Scrutiny Committee, together with one of the other members of the Committee.

Margaret Beckett: Lucky man.

Kelvin Hopkins: From time to time the Committee refers matters to the Floor of the House or to Standing Committee for debate. On one or two of these issues, where they are very hot potatoes, the Government have chosen not to programme a debate or not taken any action on referring it to a Standing Committee. This has caused a lot of concern on the Committee. Again it is the Government not responding where they do not want to discuss something that is a hot potato, for example over Brexit matters, particularly free movement of people—free movement of citizens. Isn't this drifting in a direction that is not really desirable as far as democracy is concerned?

Margaret Beckett: Without being familiar with the detail of the examples that you have in mind, yes, I have to admit I do find that worrying. Again, I completely understand why any Government does not want to get involved in such dialogue, because when you are already involved in negotiations at the European Council and so on, you want to try to resolve that. If you have an outstanding commitment in your



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Parliament and cannot resolve it, that creates its own difficulty, so I understand why a Government would prefer not to do it. If it is yet another example of us moving in the direction that if the Government do not like how things are supposed to work, they just ignore it. I would find that quite alarming.

Q164 **Kelvin Hopkins:** I am digressing slightly, but in the previous Committee to this, some 10 years ago, we had before us Tom King—Lord King—the former Defence Secretary. He talked about how in his youth they called it honour. Governments are not acting quite so honourably perhaps as they used to. Is that the case?

Margaret Beckett: That is interesting. Yes, Lord King was a member of the Select Committee that I chaired, so I can well imagine that that would be his view. There is a problem here, I think, in that we do not have a written constitution. Personally, I am quite glad about that because one of the reasons I think that we do get on and get by with things, however difficult, is because of the degree of flexibility that we are able to deploy. But if we go on with Governments disregarding the conventions that have been built up, then it will fuel the desire for a written constitution, which would be much more inflexible and which I personally would not like to see. I think it is a very dangerous trend.

Q165 **Chair:** What would be the appropriate response to an Opposition motion that is carried by the House of Commons?

Margaret Beckett: Accept it.

Q166 **Chair:** What does accepting it mean? It is not a law; it is an expression of opinion.

Margaret Beckett: No, that is right. It depends very much, as you said yourself a little while ago, on what the tenor of the motion was. I cannot remember what your example was.

Dr Rupa Huq: My one was the Andy Burnham debate on the idea that people are not pawns. That was for the EU nationals after the referendum. You said, Sir Bernard, that it looks bad to not support the principle that people are not pawns. That is why 100% of us voted for it and none of you did.

Q167 **Chair:** You said earlier that the Government have to be able to obtain their business. If it is an instruction to change a level of tax, introduce a new tax or abolish a tax, that is a matter for the Budget. I gave the example of increased spending on mental health. If a Government cannot determine their own level of expenditure, they are not in charge of their own policy. If they have to respond to every spending demand produced by a motion in the House of Commons, I would submit that we are moving towards government by Parliament rather than parliamentary Government. What is the right response to a motion passed by the House of Commons?



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Margaret Beckett: Certainly the right response is not to ignore it, in my view. If, as you say, there is a call for greater attention to be paid to mental health, then one could look for ways in which that can be demonstrated without simply saying, "Okay, we will rewrite the whole health service budget".

Chair: But we are in a kind of grey area, are we not?

Margaret Beckett: Greyish, but if this is moving towards saying it is all right for Government not to vote on Opposition Day motions, I am afraid I cannot accompany you there.

Q168 **Chair:** What you are saying is it may not be possible for the Government to implement to the letter an Opposition motion, but it should not be completely disregarded.

Margaret Beckett: Yes, that is what I am saying.

Q169 **Mr David Jones:** Is it arguably not the case that the Government are not disregarding it by coming forward with a written response within 12 weeks?

Margaret Beckett: That is why I said it is something. It is better than nothing, but an awful lot depends on whether the Government really do come forward with a written response in the 12 weeks and whether that looks serious, or whether they say, "Yes, we have considered what you said and we have decided we do not agree with you. Push off."

Q170 **Mr David Jones:** The Leader of the House declared that this process whereby there would be a response within 12 weeks was a new convention. Is it possible for a Government Minister to declare a convention of the House of Commons?

Margaret Beckett: They can say it. Whether it will have any effect is quite another matter. I would have said no.

Mr David Jones: Is it fair to say your view is that that convention—

Margaret Beckett: My view is that a convention is just that. It is something that is a feeling in the House that has grown up where everybody thinks, "Yes, okay, that is probably a good way to continue," but a Government edict would be unprecedented and I suspect it is not likely to be a precedent.

Q171 **Mr David Jones:** You said a few moments ago that on balance you were suspicious of written constitutions. It has been suggested that it might be helpful to codify the status of resolutions of the House of Commons, and indeed the conventions around them, so that people know what they mean. What is your view about codification?

Margaret Beckett: If somebody wants to spend their life doing that, good luck to them, but I have nothing to do with it whatsoever. I cannot think of anything more likely to result in—inheriting disputes within a



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family would be nothing compared to it. My view is: feel free, but do not ask me to join in.

Mr David Jones: Thank you for that very trenchant response.

- Q172 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** Can I turn you on to the question of resources for this place? In the time that you and I have been in Parliament, there is no doubt that the resources that are available have improved, and of course Short money makes a great deal of difference to the Opposition.

Margaret Beckett: I trebled it.

- Q173 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** Yes. You and I have both been in opposition, so we know the shortcomings of Short money as well. What is your general opinion about Opposition parties and Back-Benchers and the way in which they are resourced? Do you think that that is sufficient to allow them to hold Government to account effectively?

Margaret Beckett: Yes, I think it should be, to be honest. Obviously, the way people use their resources will vary. We all know that the demands on every Member are different because every constituency is different. But it does seem to me, broadly speaking, that the level of resources available now is getting close to what will work, and it should be sufficient and should be adequate.

- Q174 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** In your experience within your party, was Short money directed to the whole of the Front Bench, or was it kept tightly by the Leader and distributed according to the way in which the Leader wished to distribute it?

Margaret Beckett: When we were in opposition running up to the '90s, we had an elected Shadow Cabinet. Every elected Member of the Shadow Cabinet had a special adviser—a research post funded from Short money. I will not dispute that. I think there were little pots that were kept for special projects and so on. Obviously, a lot did have to go into the Leader's office because that was the period of time in which, speaking as somebody who had at one time a good deal to do with the organisation of campaigns, it became more and more clear that the focus at election time was on the Leader, massively more than on anybody else at all. That was a changing phenomenon, to a degree.

I made an off-the-cuff response to your remark. When I say I trebled Short money, obviously that was the Government, but it was my recommendation to the Prime Minister, who was very willing to accept it. Also, we deliberately, within that framework, set aside money specifically for the Leader of the Opposition's office because we recognised the growing weight of responsibility that that office had to face and the need for it to be as well-resourced as possible. The fact that we did that meant that there was a recognition that others had to be funded in a similar way. There was pressure, incidentally, from the Liberal Democrats to make the same arrangement for them, to have their Leader with ringfenced money, which we resisted.



Q175 Dame Cheryl Gillan: What about Back-Benchers themselves? Because the role of a Back-Bencher is constantly evolving and a lot of pressure, in my experience, goes on to Back-Benchers in terms of their constituency work and also in ways that take them away from their scrutiny role. People forget our primary function is to be legislators or to hold the Government to account, depending on whether we are in opposition or in government.

However, for example, in my own office over the last week I have had 500 e-mails in on various subjects, most of them on any one subject absolutely identically worded, but now under GDPR rules we have to file those away, make a note and make sure that they are on. It is taking away from the resource that is given to Back-Benchers for their correct and proper scrutiny of legislation and the Government's role in this place.

Margaret Beckett: Yes, that is a very powerful point, and I do not dissent from it at all. When you and I were new MPs, I at least had colleagues—in a particular kind of seat, to be fair—who were able to handle their own correspondence and would write handwritten letters to the occasional constituent who came with a problem. None of our contemporaries now would recognise that world.

I accept entirely the plethora of requests and demands—not simply an expression of opinion about an issue, but, “You must go and speak in this debate. You must go to this exhibition,” and so on—has changed out of all proportion. I take your point entirely. I think it is perhaps something that the House authorities should think about and consider because there is a risk that Members will be so caught up in the surroundings, if you like, of political life that the principal reason why we are here, and our role as legislators, will come under pressure. I do not think there is any doubt about that. The 24-hour media thing simply adds to that in a way that is not helpful.

Q176 Dame Cheryl Gillan: How would you suggest that we go about getting a suitable level of resource for Back-Benchers to enable them to fulfil this scrutiny role, which is of great importance?

Margaret Beckett: It is the classic thing. Someone will have to amass the evidence and then someone else will have to go and lean on the Treasury.

Q177 Dame Cheryl Gillan: Do you think the Clerk of the House is the correct route to take it through?

Margaret Beckett: It is the obvious route. Ultimately, it would be the Clerk. Having said that—I say this with the utmost respect to the Clerk, and I genuinely mean that; these are not weasel words—the Clerks are not politicians. I recall a time when I had something of a dispute with the then Clerk. It was during the time we were developing the Short money. He queried whether Opposition Front-Benchers should be allowed to take particular steps to provide themselves with resources that they were



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holding in common. He said he was not sure that was a proper use of their parliamentary money.

I very strongly disagreed and said that if by any chance the motions that we had put before the House imposed such a restriction, I would put a fresh motion to the House that made sure there was no such restriction, because it seemed to me that the way in which your colleagues were choosing to operate as Opposition Front-Benchers was absolutely entirely proper, and very much what people expect politicians to do. With the best will in the world, our wonderful Clerks do not always see eye to eye with us about what is politically practical and necessary.

Q178 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** Also, is there not a truism that to improve Government, you need a sharp and well-resourced Opposition to keep you on your toes?

Margaret Beckett: Absolutely.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: That is true no matter what the parliamentary arithmetic is. Is it not important that IPSA looks at this and continuously reviews the resources available to Back-Benchers? Otherwise, we find there is a role-limiting effect on what we can do in this place, which is our primary job?

Margaret Beckett: I think that is absolutely right, but again I would be very cautious indeed about how great a role I gave to IPSA. I sometimes have the impression what IPSA would really like is to devise a formula for what an MP's job is and what each of us should do, which is identical, and then we can be measured against this formula. I suppose it has nothing better to do with its time than think about how to monitor MPs.

You and I have wildly different constituencies and wildly different reactions from our constituents and expectations from our constituents. None of us fits into a simple, individual mould, but there are people who would like to put us in them.

Q179 **Dame Cheryl Gillan:** Lastly, can I ask you about Select Committees? What is your opinion about the resources available to Select Committees and do you think there is any scope for any increased resources for Select Committees that would improve their powers of scrutiny on the Executive?

Margaret Beckett: Yes, I think there is. I am reminded, now you have said that, that there was a point when there was a dispute with IPSA, if I recall correctly. IPSA took the view that if, for example, a subcommittee of this Committee wanted to go and study something—actually, let's not take this Committee; let's say the Home Affairs Committee. IPSA took the view that if a subcommittee wanted to go and look at what was happening in prisons, or whatever, that should be funded totally by the Select Committee in a way that the Select Committee was not at that point resourced to do. It was expressing a view about where resources should come from, which seemed to be to be outside its remit.



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I am afraid that most of my political career has been on the Front Bench and I have not had sufficient involvement for long enough with Select Committees to be able to say how well they are resourced. I suspect you are right that additional resource for Select Committees would, again, strengthen the possibility of effective scrutiny, and that should be one of the things that we are here for.

Q180 Dame Cheryl Gillan: Would it be unreasonable to suggest that all these matters should be reviewed annually, or would that be over the top?

Margaret Beckett: I am not sure it would be over the top. One of the reasons I say that is because the way that Short money used to work when we were in opposition in the 1980s was rather different from now. We were given a sum of money at the beginning of the Parliament and we had to manage it over the Parliament. Parliament in the run-up to one of the mid-1990s elections was a Parliament during which inflation hit 15%. I always felt that it was one of the greatest testaments that the Labour party was in fact able and fit to govern, and that we managed our money over that five-year period when nobody at all had expected there to be inflation of those levels. We did not go bankrupt and we did keep the show on the road.

Q181 Chair: If something needs to be reviewed, where does the initiative come from? You may not be aware there is something called the Inter-parliamentary Forum on Brexit, which is the Chairs or representatives from Select Committees from this Parliament, from the Scottish Parliament and from the Welsh Assembly who have been meeting on a regular basis. It is a very poor substitute for the kind of inter-parliamentary scrutiny there should be of the Joint Ministerial Council and its subsidiary Committees about what is being decided about joint frameworks and how Brexit powers are going to be distributed, and all this sort of thing. Yet the Minister says that that is a matter for the House. Is it realistic to expect any step change in resources for scrutiny to come from anywhere except from the Government?

Margaret Beckett: No, it is probably not, but I am sure the Government would not volunteer it. What I would envisage would be that it is a House matter, and that there would be some discussion around the machinery of the House about how one takes account of these things. After all, there are new pressures that come along all the time.

I am trying to think back. In the late 1980s when we were in this period where we had to manage our money over a five-year period, it came to the attention of the then Leader of the House, Tony Newton, that Opposition Front-Benchers dealing with, for example, international development, who wanted to look into various events that were happening, were having to pay out of their own pockets because there was no resource.

Chair: You are talking for travel?



Margaret Beckett: Yes, and to his great credit he took an initiative to provide a relatively small fund, but a fund, to which Opposition Front-Benchers could bid. It was the Opposition that made the decisions about where the money went for that kind of necessary international travel, for which up to that point there had been no funding and no resource at all. These things do change as circumstances change. As I say, it would seem to me to be a House matter—the kind of thing that perhaps the Liaison Committee might institute some sort of inquiry into and come forward with proposals, which no doubt the Government would fight every step of the way, but in the end ultimately something might change.

I say that, by the way, not as a criticism of this Government. Any Government would.

Q182 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I take the point that a lot of people have made that transparency has been boon as well as bane because, with technology, constituents are very demanding. You get those pictures of an adjournment, end-of-day debate on a worthy subject and people say, “This is how many MPs turned up for this, and this is how many turned up when they debated their own pay.”

Margaret Beckett: It was not true. It was a lie.

Q183 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Yes, I know; it is not fair. Also, people ask you to vote on something like a Westminster Hall debate where there is no vote. People are completely misinformed.

I am glad you trebled Short money, because that has been cut since then. Even I, in the last Parliament, was part of one of the Front-Bench teams for about five minutes. I think there was an assumption that we were resourced. In the one I was in, the Front Bencher had, I think, two extra people. It did not seem to filter down, so it felt like I was googling my own speech on the day for a Westminster Hall debate. I think there is an opacity about how Short money is distributed. Do you think that there should be more transparency about where it goes? It is a bit of a mystery.

Margaret Beckett: It is difficult. Parties must be able to manage their own resources. I take your point entirely about some of the stuff about what people attend. Again, I am saying that things change and move on. Tony Newton and I, when I was Shadow Leader, were the first two people to have the clean feed from the Chamber. We were the only two people in the whole Parliament who had a clean feed. Nowadays, you do not have to go and sit in the Chamber to listen to a debate. You can have it on in your office and hear the whole thing. People do not realise that, and of course nobody tells them that.

Yes, I have mixed feelings. There is proper accounting for the Short money. There has to be proper agreement as to how it is used. When I get one of these things that says, “You must go and vote in this debate”, where there is not going to be a vote and so on, I always think that there



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are a lot of people and organisations who make their living “informing” the public about what happens in Parliament.

When I get a plethora of stuff saying something like that, I know that somebody has told people, “This is the way to get your way. Write to your MP and demand that they do X, or demand that they visit this,” or whatever it is. Often it is really misplaced, and I think it is very unfortunate because all it is doing is giving people a false impression of what Parliament does and what it can do.

Q184 Dr Rupa Huq: Where would you put those party research schemes? They could easily send us all an identical response if we have all had 1,000 identical e-mails with the party position, but you have to pay for those.

Margaret Beckett: Yes.

Dr Rupa Huq: That is a strange status. I do not know if it is some big money-making scheme for someone.

Margaret Beckett: I must admit that suspicion sometimes crosses my mind.

Q185 Dame Cheryl Gillan: As a point of information, I understood that the Short money was uprated annually on 1 April by the Consumer Price Index in the year to the previous December, so there has been no cutting, but of course it is apportioned according to how many Members you have. The amount for qualifying parties from 1 April 2018 is, I think, £17,670.

Margaret Beckett: Inflation proofing is another principle that I introduced, but George Osborne did make a cut in the Short money a few years ago. Since then it has continued to be uprated with inflation.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: There has not been a cut.

Dr Rupa Huq: It stays flat in this Parliament and the last one. It is 17% and 15%.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: But there has not been a cut in the Short money in this Parliament, as far as I am aware.

Margaret Beckett: I have not been following it in this Parliament. That may be right, but if we are talking about over that period, there certainly has been a reduction.

Q186 Dame Cheryl Gillan: Also, there will have been a reduction because of the increase, for example, in the SNP Members that have come in, because the Short money is divided according to the numbers of MPs.

Margaret Beckett: Yes. I had correspondence with the then Leader of the House about it, so I can assure you there was a Government proposal.

Q187 Dame Cheryl Gillan: What was the amount of the cut?



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Margaret Beckett: I cannot recall; it was a few years ago. There was a Government proposal to make quite a substantial reduction in Short money.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: But it was not a cut.

Margaret Beckett: It was resisted, and in the end there was some change.

Dr Rupa Huq: The Government were saying it is because of the internet that research does not cost so much, and we were saying: that is very short-term thinking, because one day you will be in opposition, too.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I wanted to make it clear that it was not in this Parliament that there had been a cut, and that it is the number of MPs that makes the difference, although the Leader of the Opposition still gets a sizeable sum over and above the other smaller parties—I think of over £800,000. That is correct, I hope.

Q188 **Kelvin Hopkins:** Could I touch on the question of resourcing for Select Committees before I ask my formal question? A serious problem for some Select Committees is recruiting Members and attendance, because the pressures on Members from their constituencies now are much greater; I have seen that over 22 years here. There is also the expansion of the payroll vote. There are many, many more PPSs, and so on, and people with specialist roles and that kind of thing. Membership of these Committees is very important. I personally think it is the most interesting thing I do in this place, but not everybody is quite as keen on Select Committees as I am. Do you have any thoughts on how that might be improved?

Margaret Beckett: I think it is difficult. It is a matter for the Government of the day. I take your point entirely. After the 1997 general election—I do not know whether I should say this, but now that I have started the sentence, I might as well finish it—there was a very real problem, which we recognised, for the Conservative party because their numbers had been so reduced. There were a number of procedures that it had intended to introduce, for example about European Scrutiny, and we were asked not to do it because there simply were not enough people to staff such Committees and nobody wanted to look as if there was dereliction of duty, so we did not go ahead with those different procedures. It is not unknown for there to be problems.

I think it is something that we have to live with. What we perhaps should be doing in our own parties is encouraging leaders towards a bit of a self-denying ordinance not to have quite so many people on the payroll—or, in the case of the Opposition, not on the payroll but nevertheless tied up with particular duties. It is a continuing problem.

Q189 **Kelvin Hopkins:** It is a particular problem for European scrutiny. When I first came here in 1997 there was permanent membership of Standing Committees, and they used to meet very regularly. There were lots of



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referrals to those Standing Committees and they were rigorously debated and even voted on.

Margaret Beckett: If I could introduce a disgracefully controversial note into this conversation, if the number of Members decreases as a result of the boundaries Bill, the problem you identify will be worse.

Q190 **Kelvin Hopkins:** I most strongly agree, of course, as I would.

You were part of a Government that “significantly modernised” the workings of the House of Commons. Looking back, how do you think these changes have affected the relationship between Parliament and the Government?

Margaret Beckett: In some ways. Not all of them were done in my tenure, although many of them were done during the time in which we were in government. There was a lot of resistance—including, as it happens, from the present Speaker—to the setting up of Westminster Hall because people thought it would detract from the main Chamber. Partly as a result of some of the things we have been saying, there is so much more business for the House now and so much more demand for things like adjournment debates—for Members to have opportunities to raise issues—that time in the main Chamber was coming under enormous pressure and never going to be met. Things like Select Committee reports were hardly ever debated. That was, I think, a really useful addition.

The other principal change that springs to my mind is in the sitting hours of the House, where there has been a substantial change. To my mind, it is a result of pressure from ordinary Members—from individual Members—where those changes did in fact ultimately get made. It was a balance between Government and Members as to what could be agreed and still allow the House to continue to perform the functions for which we were all elected.

Q191 **Kelvin Hopkins:** Of course there were changes under the previous Labour Government, as we know, but there were also the Wright reforms, which made a significant difference.

This is a question I have asked in previous Committee meetings. Our electoral system is first past the post, with two major parties, despite the problems we have had in recent years with minority Governments and so on. I met some Danish politicians many years ago and they said, “Oh, yes, we have strong Parliament and a weak Government; you are the other way around.” I remember as a student of politics over 50 years ago the British Prime Minister was described as an elected monarch and we had limited five-year dictatorships. That is how we were governed. Other countries with PR systems with much more diffused power saw our systems as very distinctly different from them.

Chair: What is your question?

Kelvin Hopkins: Do you think we ought to be modernising in that direction? It is an open question.



Margaret Beckett: I am tempted to say, "Over my dead body."

Kelvin Hopkins: I happen to agree with you, but that is neither here nor there.

Margaret Beckett: I did not think you would, to be honest. I am very strongly of the view that it is one of the strengths of our unwritten constitution that when the British people go to the ballot box they know they are likely, should they wish to, to make substantial change and they know exactly how to do it. Despite all the criticism over many years about how inflexible our voting system is, when they did not like any of us, they did not give any of us a majority, which I thought was a tribute to their subtlety and their understanding of how our voting system works.

It is imperfect, of course. I accept that all the criticisms of it are valid, and all the criticisms of the various PR systems are valid too. One of the things I most dislike is this irritating argument that people say that what we need is a fair electoral system. All electoral systems are fair in different ways. Our gives excessive power, if you like, to the majority. To my mind, the alternatives give even more excessive powers to minorities and I am not in favour of that.

What is more, I have always held the view that the British people, if they were sold the idea that a different electoral system would give them individually more influence and then found that they ended up, as many PR systems do, with coalitions in which smallish parties were perpetually in power and nothing ever really changed, I think then you might get a revolutionary reaction among the British people because they would really have been sold a pup.

I am particularly minded of that very long period in Germany when the FDP were in government. They never managed to win a single parliamentary seat and they were in government in perpetuity with different partners, and they had the Foreign Secretary's role almost in perpetuity. I did not think that was fair and I suspect the British people would not think so. I always say to people who are passionately in favour of these various PR systems, "Be careful what you wish for."

Q192 **Kelvin Hopkins:** I am pleased I asked that question. You mentioned a number of changes in the last 20 years—those made under the previous Government, and possibly the Wright reforms. Could you pick up on one or two of the most significant changes and how they have affected the effectiveness of Parliament?

Margaret Beckett: Changes in the way that Parliament itself works?

Kelvin Hopkins: Yes; the most significant changes.

Margaret Beckett: I think one of the most significant does in fact come back to the exchange that I had with Dame Cheryl, which is about the way Parliament is resourced, which has enabled people to carry out potentially a much greater scrutiny role in a way that was quite hard.



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I shadowed social security in the '80s for five years and every year there was at least one, and usually more than one, piece of social security legislation. I recall in particular the 1985 Act, I think it was, which changed and in fact cut every single benefit from maternity grant to death grant and everything in between. It was a hugely complex piece of legislation and very, very detailed.

We were fortunate enough, as a result of a goodwill gesture on the part of the Trades Union Congress, to have one person to assist the Opposition team, against the whole of the DWP—or whatever they were called then; DHSS I think, it was—civil service. He was better than most of them, because he was an absolute expert on social security and a lovely man who was prepared to work every hour God sent in order to keep us going, and did so very effectively. I had also a very, very hard working group of members who were the Standing Committee team. But it was ridiculous, to be honest, that the imbalance of resources was so great, so I think that is one of the things that has changed very dramatically and changed for the better.

What else will I say? I do think that the changes that have been made in the hours have changed the culture of Parliament a lot, in ways that I think you cannot undo. It was very different when we were all here day and night. Many people would say it was less desirable, but it did create a different atmosphere in terms of scrutiny, legislative capacity and so on. I do not think there is any doubt about that.

Kelvin Hopkins: As someone who spent five years working at the TUC, I am pleased you mentioned the TUC in such a complimentary way. Thank you.

Chair: Dame Margaret, thank you very much indeed. Over your extensive career, you have had a huge impact on Parliament and a huge influence, and I hope that will be reflected in the report that we are doing on the status of resolutions in the House of Commons.

Margaret Beckett: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.