

**Additional written evidence submitted by Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing MP,
Chairman of Ways and Means (CVR 116)**

The Deputy Speakers and I were delighted to give evidence to the Committee last week. Thank you for inviting us to do so.

I have consulted with Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers on the question about the length of frontbench contributions. We agree that there is indeed a balance to be struck between frontbench and backbench speeches. Standing Order No. 47 (3) and (4) gives the Speaker the power to impose a time limit on frontbench speeches. It remains our preference to do this on an informal basis. We will continue to make it known to frontbenchers that we have the power to impose time limits if necessary. We also have the option of announcing backbench time limits before frontbenchers have started speaking to make clear the time constraints of the debate.

Under SO No. 47 the occupant of the Chair must apply the same time limit to all frontbench speeches, and that time limit must be either twenty minutes (for debates) or ten minutes (for topical debates). There are many contexts where applying an identical time limit to all frontbenchers is simply not appropriate and where the time periods specified would be either too long or not long enough. It is also worth noting that, as I am sure the Committee is well aware, Members respect informal time limits if they are so encouraged from the Chair.

I note that when the predecessor Committee considered time limits in 2018, it recognised that “over-long frontbench speeches may unnecessarily curtail the ability of individual backbenchers to contribute” but that it was nevertheless “valuable to the House for Ministers and those speaking for their parties to be able to set out their positions in some detail”.¹ This is precisely the balance we must strike.

That Committee made a similar recommendation to the approach I outline above:

“We encourage the occupants of the Chair to continue to make known to the front benches those occasions when a debate is known to be heavily subscribed, in the expectation that they will adjust their remarks accordingly”.²

Of course, the current existence of call lists under pandemic proceedings makes clear to frontbenchers those debates which are heavily subscribed. Nonetheless, the Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and I agree that is something we must continue to raise from the Chair when necessary.

In the same report, the Committee identified that it had not “undertaken a systematic examination of the use of speaking time by frontbenchers” and committed to “analysing the balance between the frontbench and backbench speeches in time-limited debates”.³ I would strongly encourage the Committee to pursue this line of analysis, which would be extremely useful to the occupants of the Chair and wider House in striking the balance between frontbench and backbench time that underpins this discussion.

¹ Procedure Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2017-19, [Time limits on speeches in the Chamber](#), HC 1157, paragraph 26

² *Ibid.*, paragraph 27

³ *Ibid.*, paragraph 28