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I am Senior Lecturer in British Politics at the University of Exeter specialising in legislative studies and the political representation of historically under-represented groups. In 2022-2024, I held a Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology Academic Fellowship examining the House of Commons as a working environment for disabled Members.¹ The fieldwork for this project and my wider research on parliamentary representation and accountability have informed this submission.

In this submission, I will focus on exploring the issues around **timing and scheduling of time for Backbench Business debates in the context of the role of Members and competing demands on their time, specifically stemming from constituency duties.**

The submission recommends considering the allocation of time for Backbench Business debates –especially their distribution in the parliamentary calendar – within the wider architecture of Members’ work and their constituency duties. Scheduling these debates on Thursdays introduces an inevitable trade-off between constituency- and Westminster-based activity. This leads to low attendance of other Members who face similar trade-offs, which reduces the value of such debates for proposing Members and for the public. For the latter, observing seemingly low levels of interest in the House (as evidenced by low attendance) in the issues that concern them is likely to feed into the feeling of disconnect and declining levels of democratic satisfaction and political trust.²

To improve Members’ attendance and the optics of Backbench Business debates for the public, this submission recommends considering:

- 1) spreading Backbench Business across the week, including Mondays and Wednesdays,
- 2) introducing options for shorter, 30 mins – alongside current longer, 90 mins – debates and encouraging the use of all formats of debates (general and on a substantive motion),
- 3) increase the public visibility of Backbench Business on Parliament.tv.

The Role of a Backbench Member and Parliamentary Time

Most Members are backbenchers, and their roles – while increasingly diverse³ – share some common features centred upon their work in Westminster and in their constituencies.⁴ Hence, their ability to participate in

¹ Kolpinskaya, E. 2024. *Examining work environments for disabled Members of the House of Commons*. University of Exeter, <https://hass-cornwall.exeter.ac.uk/research/voice-participation-governance/hoc-work-environments/>

² Curtice, J., Montagu, I., & Sivathasan, C. (2024). Political Trust and Confidence in the UK: The Impact of the 2019-2024 Parliament. In Clery, E., Curtice, J. and Jessop, C. (eds.) (2024) *British Social Attitudes: The 41st Report*. London: National Centre for Social Research, <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA%2041%20Damaged%20Politics.pdf>;

Hansard Society. (2019). *Audit of Political Engagement 16: The 2019 Report*, available at

https://assets.ctfassets.net/rdwvqctnt75b/7iQEHtrkIbLcrUkduGmo9b/cb429a657e97cad61e61853c05c8c4d1/Hansard-Society_Audit-of-Political-Engagement-16_2019-report.pdf?utm_source=HansardSociety

³ Holden Bates, S., Bhattacharya, C., & McKay, S. (2026). Backbench roles in the twenty-first century UK House of

discussing – and initiate – debates in a timely fashion is critical for their performance as representatives. Voters need to see that the elected parliamentarians are responsive, proactive and sensitive to issues of the day⁵. The growing visibility of parliamentary activities supported by the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit, with clips and screenshots widely used by Members, their staff, campaign groups and the media, facilitate this.⁶ It improves transparency and accountability of Members' work, which contributes to addressing a sense of disconnect between Members and the public – both nationally and at the constituency level – that translates to stubbornly low levels of democratic satisfaction and of political trust.⁷

This also increases pressure on Members to be active and effective in debating chambers, especially the main Chamber – the most visible of parliamentary spaces.⁸ This pressure includes ability to secure time to raising and discussing issues of concern for their constituents and the wider population. That said, they are only directly accountable to the former. A strong constituency steer based on the direct link between Members and their constituents⁹ stems from the majoritarian electoral system¹⁰ used in general elections and is a prominent feature of British politics.

It shapes behaviours of Members¹¹ ensuring their strong and unwavering focus on their constituencies, which is reflected in over 60% of a Member's time on average being spent on work in a constituency, including casework. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong convergence in the voters' and the Members' own expectations on what the most important facets of the role of a Member are. In both cases, they prioritise constituency-based and constituency-oriented activities, including being active in a constituency, taking up and responding to issues and problems raised by constituents.¹²

Commons: a Latent Class Analysis. *Parliamentary Affairs*, gsag005.

⁴ Holden Bates, S., & Bhattacharya, C. (2025). The Role of a Backbencher. In Leston-Bandeira, C., and Thompson, L., (Eds.) *Exploring Parliament*. Oxford University Press, 269–278; House of Commons Modernisation Committee. (2007). *Modernisation of the House of Commons - First Report*, available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmmodern/337/33702.htm>

⁵ Renwick, A., Lauderdale, B., Russell, M., & Cleaver, J. (2023). Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics. *The Constitution Unit*, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research-areas/deliberative-democracy/democracy-uk-after-brexite/public-preferences-integrity-and>

⁶ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023. All referenced interviews were conducted as part of this project: Kolpinskaya, E. 2024. *Examining work environments for disabled Members of the House of Commons*. University of Exeter, <https://hass-cornwall.exeter.ac.uk/research/voice-participation-governance/hoc-work-environments/>

⁷ Curtice, J., Montagu, I., & Sivathanan, C. (2024). Political Trust and Confidence in the UK: The Impact of the 2019-2024 Parliament. In Clery, E., Curtice, J. and Jessop, C. (eds.) (2024) *British Social Attitudes: The 41st Report*. London: National Centre for Social Research, <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA%2041%20Damaged%20Politics.pdf>; Kolpinskaya, E., & Bennett, O. (2024). Democratic Engagement and Trust in Parliament. *Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology Horizon Scanning*, <https://doi.org/10.58248/HS65>

⁸ Interview 25 on 02 February 2023; Anderson, K., Meakin, A., & Prior, A. (2025). Spaces and places in parliament. In C., Leston-Bandeira, A. Meakin and L. Thompson (Eds.) *Exploring Parliament*. Oxford University Press, 73-86.

⁹ Norton, P., Wood, D.M. (1993). *Back from Westminster: British Members of Parliament and their constituents*. University Press of Kentucky; Norton, P. (2020). The United Kingdom: Building the Link between constituent and MP. In P. Norton (Ed.) *Parliaments and citizens in Western Europe*. Routledge, pp. 19-42.

¹⁰ Hix, S., Johnston, R., McLean, I. (2010). Choosing an electoral system. *British Academy*, available at <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/choosing-electoral-system/>

¹¹ Strøm, K. (2003). Parliamentary democracy and delegation. In K. Strøm, T. Bergman, and W.C. Müller (Eds.) *Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies*. Oxford University Press, 55-103.

¹² Campbell, R., & Lovenduski, J. (2015). What should MPs do? Public and parliamentarians' views compared. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 68(4), 690-708.

The Backbench Business Committee has been a gamechanger that has significantly enhanced the ability of backbenchers to propose debates of their choosing, especially across party lines and including constituency-related matters.¹³ However, scheduling Backbench Business on Thursdays has negated some of the advantages.

Firstly, to maintain visibility and presence in the constituency, most Members use Thursday afternoons either to travel back from Westminster (especially if a lengthy commute is involved¹⁴) or to schedule meetings or other events if their seat is close to the estate. This raises the bar for attending unwhipped or only lightly whipped business, which include Backbench Business, as there is a trade-off between it and constituency business that is usually prioritised. This leads to low attendance in Backbench Business debates – whether in the Chamber or Westminster Hall, thus, reducing opportunities for constructive and vigorous debate between Members that may lead – and has led¹⁵ – to further action. This limits the value of Backbench Business by relegating it to a second-order item on Members’ agendas and hindering the capacity of backbenchers to propose debates in a long run.

Secondly, Backbench Business debates frequently focus on relatively narrow but emotive and personal issues (e.g., relating to health¹⁶), and a visible lack of engagement with such debates may be particularly damaging to the public perception of the House and its level of interest in people’s daily lives and experiences. This risks undermining efforts to address sliding levels of political trust and of democratic engagement¹⁷ and reinforce perceived distance between voters and political elites.¹⁸ This can be addressed by both making Backbench Business debates more accessible to Members by more favourable scheduling (as discussed above) and by increasing the visibility of these debates to the public on Parliament.tv. At present, one can search for these items via the search function, but they tend to be buried on the agenda. This can be rectified by highlighting these items on the web-site.

Recommendations:

Overall, this submission recommends the following steps could be considered:

- Echoing the Wright Committee’s recommendation¹⁹ to avoid scheduling Backbench Business for Thursdays, to allocate it across different days, including Mondays and Wednesdays that are currently days for mainstream business.

¹³ Leston-Bandeira, C., & Thompson, L. *Written evidence – Appendix: 15th anniversary of the Backbench Business Committee* (HC 1548), <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/50745/documents/278012/default/>

¹⁴ Interview 2 on 09 February 2023; Interview 6 on 18 April 2023.

¹⁵ Leston-Bandeira, C., & Thompson, L. *Written evidence – Appendix: 15th anniversary of the Backbench Business Committee* (HC 1548), <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/50745/documents/278012/default/>

¹⁶ Baxter, A. (2025). 15 years of the Backbench Business Committee. *The House of Commons Library Insight*, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/15-years-of-the-backbench-business-committee/>

¹⁷ Kolpinskaya, E., & Bennett, O. (2024). Democratic Engagement and Trust in Parliament. *Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology Horizon Scanning*, <https://doi.org/10.58248/HS65>

¹⁸ Fancourt, D., Steptoe, A., & Wright, L. (2020). The Cummings effect: politics, trust, and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The lancet*, 396(10249), 464-465.

- This may necessitate introducing options for shorter (30 mins) and longer (90 mins) debates – general or on a substantive motion – depending on available time and the levels of interest/demand in the House, as well as the nature and urgency of the topic in question.
- To improve the public visibility of Backbench Business debates that are frequently of direct relevance to specific communities, it would be possible to tag the relevant items on Parliament.tv by applying the tags currently used in the Search function.

¹⁹ Para 213 of the House of Commons. (2009). Reform of the House of Commons Select Committee - First Report, Session 2008-09, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmrefhoc/1117/111702.htm>