

No. 39

A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Revised January 1997

The following is a selective list of some of the important dates in the history of the development of the House of Commons. *Entries in italics refer to the building only.*

- 1097-
1099 *Westminster Hall built (William Rufus).*
 [1215 Magna Carta]
- 1254 Sheriffs of counties instructed to send Knights of the Shire to advise the King on finance.
- 1265 Simon de Montfort Parliament met in Westminster Hall, composed of Bishops, Abbots, Peers, Knights of the Shire and Town Burgesses.
- 1292 *St. Stephen's Chapel begun (finished c.1365).*
- 1295 Model Parliament. Summoned by Edward I, and generally regarded as the first representative assembly - 2 Knights from each county, 2 Burgesses from each borough, 2 citizens from each city.
- 1341 Commons deliberate apart.
- 1352 *House of Commons sit in Chapter House of Westminster Abbey (Afterwards in Refectory).*
- 1362 A statute of this year established that Parliament must assent to all lay taxation.
- 1363 First recorded Clerk of the House, Robert de Melton.
- 1376 Good Parliament. Very critical of royal government, accusing officials of corruption etc. - important also for the use of impeachment procedure whereby the Commons as a body prosecuted offenders before the Lords.
- 1377 Thomas Hungerford, generally recognised to be the first Speaker to be so called, elected.

- 1394-1399 *Hammer-beam roof of Westminster Hall built (Richard II).*
- 1401 Commons claim right of granting supply only after redress of grievances.
- 1407 Henry IV acknowledged that taxes must originate in the Commons.
- 1414 Henry V undertook that "nothing be enacted to the Petition of the Commons contrary to their asking". Full equality of Commons and Lords on legislation.
- 1415 First Serjeant at Arms, Nicholas Maudit, appointed.
- 1513 Strode's Case formally recognised that the Commons and its business, as part of the High Court of Parliament, were privileged against inferior courts of the realm.
- 1515 Speaker empowered by Act of Parliament (6 Henry VIII c16) to license Members to absent themselves - previously this power had lain with the Crown.
- 1523 First known request by a Speaker for free speech (Speaker Thomas More).
- 1536 Wales first represented in the House of Commons.
- 1543 Ferrers' Case - the Commons released one of its Members, George Ferrers, by dispatching their Serjeant at Arms and claiming that his mace was sufficient authority to secure release.
- 1547 *Edward VI handed St. Stephen's chapel over to the Commons for their use.*
- 1547 Commons Journal starts.
- 1571 Strickland's case. Strickland was detained by order of the Queen but soon released following protests from the Commons about a breach of Parliamentary privilege.
- 1576 Peter Wentworth (Burgess for Tregony) made a famous speech for liberty on 8th February, for which he was subsequently punished and committed to the Tower. Queen remitted sentence 12th March.
- 1586 Case of the disputed Norfolk election: Commons decided in favour of the disputed first election. Beginning of the custom to appoint Standing Committees at the opening of each Parliament to decide disputed elections.
- 1604 Goodwin's case - Commons re-asserted its right to settle questions of disputed election.
- 1605 Gunpowder plot.

1610 Great contract. Lord Treasurer Salisbury came to a provisional agreement with the Commons that the Crown be granted a fixed annual sum of £200,000 in place of the profits of fiscal feudalism, eg. profits of wardship. Contract failed.

1621 Protestation of 1621. Commons were asked to provide funds to support opposition to Spain in the Palatinate. Against the King's wishes, the House debated the much wider issues, finally made an assertion of the "ancient and undoubted birth-right" of Englishmen to debate any subject in Parliament without fear of arrest or punishment.

James I tore up the protestation and dissolved Parliament.

1640-1660 Long Parliament. The fifth and last Parliament of Charles I.

Summoned November 1640 on advice of Council of peers when Scottish invasion forced Crown to brink of bankruptcy. After attainting Strafford, prolonging its own life against involuntary dissolution, enacting a bill for triennial parliaments and abolishing prerogative courts, Parliament set about religious and constitutional reformation, embodied in Grand Remonstrance November 1641, gradually driving many moderates to support King. Led by John Pym and others, Commons gradually developed into an executive body. It soon lost faith in King who, after initial assent to reforms, attempted on 4 January 1642 to arrest Commons ringleaders. The five Members had escaped by river, Speaker Lenthall's reply when questioned by the King has been seen as the embodiment of the Speaker's relationship with the Crown and Commons:

"May it please Your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here, and I humbly beg Your Majesty's pardon that I cannot give any other answer than this to what Your Majesty is pleased to demand of me".

Failure of King and Parliament to agree on control of troops for repression of Irish rebellion (November 1641) led to final breach in relations and outbreak of Civil War August 1642. Purged of moderates in 1648 ("Pride's Purge"), and expelled by Cromwell in 1653, the "Rump" of the Long Parliament was twice recalled after Oliver's death. When members "secluded" in 1648 were readmitted, February 1660, Long Parliament finally dissolved itself and prepared way for Convention Parliament to restore Charles II.

1681 Last time a Parliament met outside London (Oxford - for one week).

1688 Glorious Revolution.

1689 Bill of Rights. This ratified the revolution of 1688, declaring William and Mary joint sovereigns. The Bill also incorporates the "Declaration of Rights" - see below.

"That the pretended power of suspending of laws or the execution of laws by regal authority without consent of Parliament is illegal;
That the pretended power of dispensing with laws or the execution of laws by regal authority, as it hath been assumed and exercised of late, is illegal;
That the commission for erecting the late Court of Commissioners for Ecclesiastical Causes, and all other commissions and court of like nature, are illegal and pernicious;
That levying money for or to the use of the Crown by pretence of prerogative, without grant of Parliament, for longer time, or in other manner than the same is or shall be granted, is illegal;
That it is the right of the subjects to petition the king, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal;
That the raising or keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with consent of Parliament, is against law;
That the subjects which are Protestants may have arms for their defence suitable to their conditions and as allowed by law;
That election of members of Parliament ought to be free;
That the freedom of speech and debates or proceedings in Parliament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament;
That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted;
That jurors ought to be duly impanelled and returned, and jurors which pass upon men in trials for high treason ought to be freeholders;
That all grants and promises of fines and forfeitures of particular persons before conviction are illegal and void;
And that for redress of all grievances, and for the amending, strengthening and preserving of the laws, Parliaments ought to be held frequently."

(Source: Bill of Rights 1689 c.1)

1694 Triennial Act. Designed to ensure regular meetings of Parliament, at least once every 3 years, and to limit the life-span of Parliament to 3 years. Act superseded in 1716.

1701 Act of Settlement. Provided for the Protestant succession and restricted the sovereign from leaving England without parliamentary permission.

1707 Last royal veto on a bill passed by both Houses (Queen Anne). (Scottish Militia Bill).

1707 Union of England and Scotland. Scottish Parliament abolished and 45 Members for Scottish counties and burghs sent to Westminster. First Parliament of Great Britain met 23 October 1707.

- 1715 Riot Act. The statute supplemented the Common Law offence of riot.
- 1716 Septennial Act. By extending the length of Parliaments to 7 years, this Act gave stability to 18th Century political system, but tended to increase electoral corruption.
- 1721-42 Robert Walpole, first Lord of the Treasury, usually regarded as the first Prime Minister, and a brilliant political manager, well aware of the importance of the House of Commons. In a speech on 21st November 1739 he said, "I have lived long enough in the world to know that the safety of a minister lies in his having the approbation of this House. Former ministers, Sir, neglected this and therefore they fell; I have always made it my first study to obtain it, and therefore I hope to stand." (Cobbett vol. 11 c.224)
- 1768-69 Middlesex elections. John Wilkes elected to Parliament as a Member for Middlesex demanding parliamentary reform and voicing the many grievances of the middle orders. Wilkes repeatedly expelled by a privilege-conscious Commons - remained excluded until 1774.
- 1785 Reform Bill. William Pitt's proposed disfranchisement of 36 rotten boroughs defeated in the House of Commons. Bill failed.
- 1801 Act of Union (with Ireland). Irish Parliament abolished in return for Irish representation at Westminster. 100 Irish MPs added to the House.
- 1803 Newspapers first allocated seats in the public gallery.
- 1806 Cobbett's Parliamentary History appears. Continued by and later known as *Hansard*.
- 1818 House of Commons Library established.
- 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act repealed most civil disabilities, included prohibition of sitting in the House.
- 1832 Reform Act. 56 English boroughs disfranchised totally; 30 deprived of one Member; 22 new two-Member boroughs and 19 single-Member boroughs created in England. £10 residential franchise supplemented by £10 copyhold and £50 tenant-at-will franchise. Electorate increased by about 50% in England and 57% overall. Approximately 20% of English adult males could now vote. Act also provided for the annual compilation of an electoral register of those entitled to vote. The process of distributing seats in proportion to population began.
- 1834 *16th October. Palace of Westminster almost totally destroyed by fire, apart from Westminster Hall and the Crypt Chapel. A public competition to design a new building was won by Charles Barry. He was assisted by Augustus Welby Pugin.*

- 1844 1st edition of Erskine May's **Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usages of Parliament** published.
- 1852 *New Houses of Parliament opened.*
- 1858 Jews finally admitted as Members.
- 1867 Second Reform Act. Proposed male household suffrage with various minor conditions and additions. Added approximately 1.12 million to the existing electorate of 1.4 million.
- 1866 Parliamentary Oaths Act. Requiring Members of Parliament to take the oath of allegiance before sitting or voting.
- 1872 Secret Ballot introduced for Parliamentary Elections, at first as a temporary measure, subject to annual review. Established as a permanent measure only as late as 1918.
- 1884 Third Reform Act. Extended household and lodger franchise, and instituted franchise for the occupation of land or tenements worth £10 p.a.
- 1885 Redistribution of Seats Act. Major revision of constituencies, creating mostly single-member constituencies.
- 1909 Operation of Hansard was taken over by the House of Commons and it became known as the Official Report. It had previously been known as Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates, Parliamentary Debates or Hansard's Parliamentary Debates.
- 1911 MPs first paid a salary by the state.
- 1911 Parliament Act. Prompted by the House of Lords' rejection of the People's Budget, this Act removed the right of veto from the Lords except on bills to extend the life of Parliament. Lords permitted delaying powers of one month for money bills, and 2 years for other legislation. Duration of Parliament reduced to 5 years.
- 1918 4th Reform Act. Representation of the People Act. This increased the electorate from its pre-war level of 8 million to 21 million; gave the vote to men over 21 fulfilling 6 months' residence qualification, and to women over 30 meeting occupancy requirement. Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act making women eligible to become Members of Parliament.
- 1918 Constance, Countess Markiewicz elected as the first woman MP. In common with other Sinn Fein Members she did not take her seat - St Patrick's, Dublin.
- 1918 Redistribution Act increased size of House of Commons and adopted principle of equal constituency sizes.

- 1919 Nancy, Viscountess Astor the first woman to take her seat, following a by-election in the Plymouth Sutton division.
- 1920 Government of Ireland Act.
- 1922 Withdrawal of the Irish MPs except 12 from Northern Ireland.
- 1928 Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act. Voting age for women lowered to 21.
- 1941 *10th May Commons Chamber destroyed by enemy action.*
- 1948 Representation of the People Act. The remaining 12 double-member constituencies abolished, also the University seats.
- 1948 Mrs Florence Paton became the first woman to preside over the House.
- 1949 Parliament Act. Reduced still further the House of Lords delaying powers over bills.
- 1950 *New Commons Chamber, (designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott) is finished. First meeting 26th October.*
- 1958 Life Peerage Act. Provided for the appointment of life peers and peeresses, giving women the right to sit and vote in the House of Lords.
- 1963 Peerage Act enabled peers to disclaim peerages, and admitted all female hereditary peers.
- 1967 Parliamentary Commissioner Act. To make provision for the appointment of a Parliamentary Commissioner for the investigation of administrative action taken on behalf of the Crown.
- 1968 First experiment in sound broadcasting proceedings of the House.
- 1969 Voting age reduced to 18.
- 1970 Rt Hon Betty Harvie Anderson appointed Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.
- 1978 House of Commons (Administration) Act, setting up House of Commons Commission, passed.
- 1978 Radio broadcasting of proceedings on a permanent basis.
- 1979 Reform of the select committee system.

- 1979 First British woman Prime Minister elected, Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher.
- 1989 The House of Commons agreed that proceedings should be televised. An eight month experiment began in November.
- 1990 The House of Commons agreed that proceedings should be televised on a permanent basis.
- 1991 War Crimes Act passed in accordance with the provisions of the Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949.
- 1992 Rt Hon Betty Boothroyd elected as Speaker. One of 60 women elected at the General Election.
- 1993 22 July, debate on the Treaty of Maastricht (Social Protocol)
- 1994 December, the House of Commons agreed to six motions relating to sitting times. From 25.1.96 the House began to sit at 10am on Wednesday mornings. This was changed to 9.30 am during the 1995-96 session. The Speaker was given the power to limit speeches between 7 and 9 pm on certain types of business.
- Scottish Grand Committee powers and functions change. The Committee now regularly meet in Scotland and meetings include Question Time, Statements and debates.
- 1997 May General Election, 120 women elected and 1 Independent Member.
Modernisation of the House Select Committee set up.
Prime Ministers Questions moved to Wednesday 3.00 - 3.30pm

This Factsheet was originally drafted by Gillian Howarth

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