

Judith Boyce Talk

KEY:

J: Judith Boyce

J: I am slightly regretting this slightly grand title that I've given on this talk this morning. I don't have a big thesis or a unifying theory of the UK Parliament from, from Covid to the next election to offer you this morning. Instead, I'm gonna focus on a few things, a few interesting things I hope to pick out of the last few years.

I mean, there have been a few developments to think of in the political sphere since the last election in 2019. I was kind of put in mind of, you know, that old Billy Joel song where he sings. We didn't start the fire any reels off a whole list of names and events and things that have happened during his lifetime. I could probably fill 45 minutes with just reeling off the stuff that has happened in Westminster, but you'll be well aware of all of that. It's, you know, it hits the nightly news. And what I want to focus on a little bit more is some of the things that are maybe less obvious and that particularly relate to the role of back benchers in in a Parliament.

As parliamentary staff we obviously come across ministers and the Prime Minister and all the rest of it, but they have civil servants to support them. And our job is to be there to support the whole of parliament and the whole of functioning of Parliament. And on a day-to-day basis. That often means working with back benchers of every party. So we have a slightly different perspective, I suppose, on, on the politics of, of Westminster.

So these are a few things I'm hoping to be able to talk about. I will keep an eye on the clock. I may move the order around a little bit.

But I'm gonna start where, where I work, select committees maybe touch a little bit on the aftermath of COVID working in Parliament. Talk a little bit about one of the biggest events to happen over the last few years that has touched on Parliament the death of the Queen, and focus on private members bills, which I was interested to hear Gareth shout out the proportion of non-executive legislation that comes through the Northern Ireland assembly. I'm gonna talk a little bit about some of our processes for that at Westminster, which is quite topical at the minute. And then look ahead to the next election and say maybe a little bit about what it's like working in Parliament as an election hoves in to view.

So without further ado, let's start with where I work. So I'm currently clerk of the Transport Committee in the House of Commons. That means a couple of things really. I'm the principal advisor to the chair and the members of the committee both about their program of work, but obviously very importantly about the procedure that they need to follow as well. But it also means probably even more importantly that I manage the team that supports the committee, and we've currently got a team of, of seven with a few additional services like media and social media and so on. And together we provide all of the operational support for the committee, all of the policy support for the committee. It's quite a big job for seven people organising all of our meetings, publications, visits, writing, briefing papers, drafting reports, and all the rest of it.

The remit of the committee, it's one of the departmental select committees that are set up to basically shadow government departments and to hold those departments to account. And the three main areas for that are administration, expenditure, and policy. And we tend to spend an awful lot of our time on policy both looking at what the departments are doing, but also looking at what they aren't doing and maybe trying to nudge them in the right direction on certain policy areas.

This is the, well, I was gonna say, this is the current membership of the committee breaking news at about 10:00 PM last night. The membership of the committee changed and I'll talk about some of the reasons for that. But there are 11 members on all departmental select committees at the nearly all departmental select committees at the moment. And they break down by party group in the house as well. So, according to your strength in, in the chamber, you obviously have a certain number of seats on the committee. That means for us, we have seven Conservatives, four Labour members, and one other, in our case, a member of the Scottish National Party.

Two of our members were replaced last night, so Mike Amesbury and Ruth Cadbury were appointed to front bench positions in the Labour reshuffle in September. More about that sort of thing in a minute. And we have two new members appointed who will hopefully be attending their first committee meeting this very afternoon. We're chaired by a Conservative MP at the beginning of the parliament. It's divvied up which committee is gonna be chaired by which party, and, transport changed actually from the last parliament, from a Labour chair to a Conservative chair.

Obviously the important thing about all of these people is their backbenchers. You can't be on a select committee and be, you know, a major opposition spokesperson or a government minister because you're there to hold the government to account. It's a very different sort of job.

I'm not gonna dwell on, on this slide. I'm sure many of you're familiar with the process of how select committees go about our work. But this is how we do the majority of what we do through inquiries where this takes you all the way through from the committee, choosing a subject and scoping it out, and deciding what to look into all the way through the evidence gathering process. When we hear from experts and the public and people with a particular view on a subject, we take written evidence. Sometimes we do visits and at the end of it, we produce a report.

And then the government by convention has two months to respond to those reports and respond to our recommendations and tell us why they're not going to implement any of our recommendations most of the time.

But we do get the occasional success I have to say other select committees are made to suffer, often made to wait for their, the responses to their reports. I have to shout out the Department of Transport for being particularly good at responding to us largely on time, which is a real pleasure.

This is a sample of some of the stuff that we've been working on over the last while is pretty crowded. That timeline of inquiries that I showed you, there might be three, four or five, even six of those inquiries going on at any one time. So we could be at any point in that cycle.

So some of the things we've been doing and a big inquiry about accessibility in transport. So why is it that despite the massive regulations and law that says that people with disabilities should have equal access to real services and bus services and taxis, why is it still so difficult? Whose fault is that? Is it the fault of the law itself, or is it something else that's going wrong?

As part of that we looked at the recent proposals by train operators to close the vast majority of ticket offices at railway stations throughout the network. And we looked at that from an accessibility point of view, and basically we said, this isn't gonna work for disabled people. And our chair came out with quite a strong quote saying, this is going too far too fast. A week later, the government announced that it was abandoning those proposals. I don't expect that the committee can take all the credit for that, but, we like to take at least a little bit of credit when the timeline works out like that.

We did a, a big report recently into self-driving vehicles. So that's a bit more forward looking, a bit more horizon scanning. What's this gonna mean for the transport system and our roads in the future? If self-driving vehicles eventually become a reality, as people have been saying they're going to for years? Our major recommendation in that was that the government had some pretty good proposals for the legal framework. They just needed to get on and do it. And lo and behold, two months after publishing that report, an automated vehicles bill appeared in the King's speech. So, again, we like to take a little bit of credit for things like that.

We also do topical sessions. Down at the bottom there you can see, you may remember back in the August Bank holiday, there was, a big problem with air traffic control services that grounded hundreds of flights over a couple of days over UK airspace. So we held a, a session in October looking into what went wrong, how well consumers were treated during that whole, difficult passage and what needs to happen in the future. And then right at the, the far corner there, just last week, we had the Secretary of State for transport in for one of his regular six monthly grillings by the committee.

There's been a little bit of transport news recently, so we talked an awful lot about the cancellation of, high speed two, north of Birmingham. We talked about the network north plans that have been put in place since then on transport legislation and all sorts of things.

So that's a sample of our work, and this is probably just over like the last four or five months.

Just to zoom out again a little bit away from committees back to back to the big picture and what is going on around all of this.

So obviously a major feature of the Westminster system is your government is drawn from the MPs who are in the House of Commons. And that means there's a bit of a revolving door between who is a minister and who is a back bencher. And at times over the last few years, it's really felt like that door has been revolving extremely quickly. I put it at about seven major reshuffles in this parliament since 2019. I don't actually know if that's high or low by historical standards, but it's certainly felt like a lot. We've never been that far away from the latest reshuffle.

That includes Liz Truss coming in and appointing all of her ministers, and then shortly afterwards, Rishi Sunak coming in and, and doing the same. And that can happen for all sorts of reasons. You know, desire to sack people, promote people, reward people different policy direction. Sometimes governments want to shake up the structure of government departments as well. And that can be a focus for a reshuffle.

And don't forget in all of this turmoil as well the Labor Party is often also reshuffling its front bench. So that creates quite a lot of churn in who is and isn't a back bencher. And while these sort of things hit the headlines, I think what doesn't hit the headlines so much is the question we should all be asking, which is in all of this, won't somebody please think of the select committees and the effect that all of this has on us.

So those two new members who joined the transport committee last night, they were replacing two people who were appointed to the Labour front bench in September, for example. That's a good two months where we've been carrying some vacancies on the committee and not been helped by recesses. And the end of one session of Parliament and so on.

It takes a while for the reshuffles to work through and for all of the effects to filter down and often replacing members on select committees is quite far down that list of what the parties are doing. So pretty much every reshuffle is gonna result in some vacancies among select committee membership as MPs get promoted. And it, particularly in this parliament, I think it's really striking how much this hasn't just affected regular back bench members on the committees, but it's also affected the chairs.

This is, I think, a comprehensive list of all of the elections that we have had for select committee chairs over the course of this parliament. It starts right at the beginning with the initial elections at the very beginning of the Parliament for who was going to chair the committees. And then you kind of hope that you're gonna have mostly the same chair for the whole of the Parliament. But it was not to be.

And our colleagues who run elections in outta the public bill office have had their work cut out for them, especially some of these, you can see there's lots that are quite close together, like the ones in November, this is when a reshuffle is a bit slow moving, and it takes time for people to be appointed. And if you miss certain cutoffs, then you can't do all of the elections together, and it becomes really quite difficult.

Not all of these were down to Reshuffles, I should say. A couple, so May 2022 Environment Food and Rural Affairs, that was chaired by Neil Parish, who, was accused of misconduct and resigned. More recently, October, 2023, Defence Committee. Tobias Elwood, was the chair of that committee, and he tweeted some views about Afghanistan, which were not appreciated by other members of the committee. And so he ended up standing down to create a vacancy there.

But they have tended to cluster around reshuffles. And we thought we were gonna get off lightly with the latest round of Reshuffles. But then at the last minute, Simon Hoare, the chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee was appointed to ministerial office. So there is another election coming up.

So what happens in the elections is that, well, first of all, you have to be of the correct party to put your name forward. So whichever party the Chairship was allocated to at the beginning of the Parliament. And then you have to gather nominations in a process, which is sort of charmingly like student union elections. As members run around the Palace of Westminster looking for people to support them. You need, um, 15 nominations from your own party, and you need at least five from other parties to be able to stand.

This is how it looks just when we publish it. This was a contested election, uh, for the chairship of the Committee on standards after Chris Bryant was appointed to a Labour front bench position. You can see the nominations there.

And then we have the, there's a period, I think it's about 14 days before the election takes place, assuming it's contested, if only one candidate stands there, there's no election, of course. And in a sort of rare departure from First Past the Post for Westminster culture, these elections are actually held under an alternative vote system.

So members all go along to a committee room somewhere in the palace, and they will rank the candidates in order of preference. And then, I mean, you'll be, probably very familiar with this system. If nobody gets more than 50% on first preferences, then the last place person drops out and their votes are reallocated.

You may have seen the Transport Committee, my own committee on that list that I showed a minute ago. This was in 2022 when Rishi Sunak appointed his first set of ministers. We lost our chair and it was a very hotly contested election. This is one of the most exciting ones that we've had in the last few years. I'm pleased to say lots of conservative members wanting to chair the transport committee. Three of those members were actually on the committee at the time. Three were not, a range of members who were quite new to Parliament and people who'd been there a while. And we went through five stages of voting.

It was nail bitingly exciting, and at the very end, the one elected was Ian Stewart MP who is now my sort of day-to-day boss, if you like. He's Scottish himself, but he's a member for a constituency in Milton Keynes. He had actually been a member of the transport committee in previous Parliaments, so he is kind of coming back to that. He had also been a junior minister and I think a whip at one point as well. So somebody with a real variety of experience.

Now, why does all of this matter if one chair comes and another chair goes? Chairs have a huge amount of influence about on how select committees work, and they have a huge amount of responsibility for how select committees work, and that's reflected in the fact they get an extra payment for this. So I think it's about 17,000 pounds a year at the moment for chairing a select committee.

Good chairs are always going to try and work by consensus, not by imposing their will on the other members on the select committee. But they are the ones who work most closely with the staff team. They have a range of powers delegated to them to do things like set meeting times and agree witnesses. They're often the figurehead for the committee in the media. So you'll hear them talking about our reports on the Today Programme, for example. They have lots of influence over the selection of inquiries that a committee will do.

They also have a lot of influence over how we work. So do we want to do long inquiries or short inquiries? Do we want to, in transport, do we want to focus on maritime or on aviation? Do we want to have just one panel of witnesses every week? Or do we want to have three panels of witnesses like we are having tomorrow morning to talk about accessibility? Do they want to do topical issues or do they want to do more long-term horizon scanning things?

So all of those kind of influences on Higher Select committee works often derive directly from the chair. Draft reports are initially brought forward in their name, so they have the right of initiating a draft report with the committee. And they chair the meetings as well.

So they steer how the evidence sessions and, and the private meetings that we have go. So they really lead and drive the agenda. So it does matter who the chair is. And changing chair mid Parliament is, can be a bit of a challenge for, staff and for members as well.

At this point I have to say working with the Stewart is a pleasure and it was not too difficult a challenge to get his feet under the table on the select committee.

But think about it, at the beginning of a parliament, the chairs get elected first. They have time to get to know the staff. They have time to think about what they want to do before all of the other members are elected. If you come in halfway through a parliament, all of the other members are already there. They have their own relationships with each other. They know the committee's work program, and you're the one who's coming in new, and yet you are suddenly the figurehead. There's a program of work that's already in train oral evidence that you won't have heard for reports that are coming forward, probably a backlog of letters and decisions, 'cause we won't have had a chair for the proceeding, you know, three or four weeks. So there's things to catch up on. And some new chairs haven't ever even been a member of a select committee before. So they have a huge amount of stuff to get up to speed with. So it can be a while before they feel like they're really as, as in charge, as they might be.

Um, and I suppose the question that I would kind of leave you with, with this is, is this good or bad for scrutiny? This kind of churn, both in select committee memberships and in the Chairships?

As Gareth said, I'm, but a, a humble parliamentary servant. And I don't have any personal opinion on this, but you can see on one hand you get an injection of new ideas, new energy, new interests, sometimes new and interesting methods. On the other hand, you think about the value of continuity for scrutiny. The institutional memory of the committee.

One of the things I think committees have got a lot better about is not just writing a report and then forgetting about it, but following it up, coming back to ministers and saying, you said you would do this. Have you done it last time we spoke to you, you promised X, have you done it? And some of that kind of institutional memory then becomes more vested in other members of the committee or even in, in the staff of the committee, especially if the government itself is in turmoil and you're seeing your third Secretary of State for transport in about the space of six months. So all of these ins and outs have created some really interesting effects.

I just wanna briefly introduce these three gentlemen. On the far side is, is Greg Clark. He was a, I think he was a cabinet minister in the government before becoming at the beginning of this parliament, chair of the Science and Technology Committee in the big exit of ministers in July, 2022 under Boris Johnson. He was then appointed Secretary of State, I think, for local government and housing at the time. And so he had to resign his select committee Chairship.

But you may remember that reshuffle was quite short-lived because it, it basically lasted for the summer. And then in September, Liz Truss came into power and appointed all of her ministers. And Greg Clark no longer had his ministerial job. Things had, because of the recess, things hadn't been able to progress that far. So having resigned his post as chair of the committee, he was then able to get himself nominated again to be chair of the committee. Before the end of the deadline. He was the only person who put himself forward. And so he was reappointed unopposed. So he had a kind of interesting trajectory through government and the select committee.

And then the other two, they're in the category of what you might call poacher turned Gamekeeper. Hugh Merriman in the middle there was, was the chair of the Transport Select Committee. He was appointed by Rishi Sunak to be Minister for Rail. And Robert Halon was the chair of the Education Committee. And he was also appointed at the same time to be a minister in the Department for Education. It's actually quite rare for there to be that close an overlap between their interests as a select committee chair and as a minister. And I think, you know, that produces some interesting effects as well. It's put our transport committee in the position of writing to the real minister to hold him to account for things that he as chair of the committee asked his predecessor as the real minister to do.

So it all gets a little bit tricky, and as I say, some, some interesting effects there possibly for Democratic scrutiny. But I think a wider point is what does this say about select committees? And I think it actually says quite positive things about the esteem in which select committees are held since 2010 when chairs were first elected by the whole house.

I think there's a feeling that chairing is quite a high prestige activity. It's a way to make your name. If you think about now ministers like Tom Token Hatt, or shadow Front Benchers like Darren Jones, they really kind of made their reputations through their chairing of select committees. It's also a very respectable job for former heavy hitters on front benches. So we've had Jeremy Hunt, Nikki Morgan, Yvette Cooper, all chairing select committees over the last parliament. So I think it's good for the profile of select committees, if not necessarily the continuity of our work.

So just gonna move on, or rather move backwards a little bit. I rewind a bit to talk about Parliament, and the House of Commons, specifically during Covid times. I did talk about this quite a lot. The last talk I did for this conference, so I won't dwell on it too much. It does seem like ages ago. It really does. And I think that's one of the things that's making this 2019 Parliament feel so long is how many important things have happened in it.

This is a prime minister's questions from the very start of the 2019 Parliament with Boris Johnson in place a few weeks later. This is what Prime Minister's questions looked like when we were in our phase of kind of hybrid parliament working. So you can see they're very strictly enforced social distancing in the chamber, very limited number of members we're able to be there.

Screens have been erected all around the chamber so that people can take part on Zoom in the proceedings. We got one lonely clerk at the table, rather than the three clerks we would normally have there listening out to everything that happens. And somebody down here in the corner helping communicate with the broadcast team. So making sure that the next member due to speak was already queued up on Zoom and hadn't pulled a cable out or wandered off to the toilet or something like that. So it really was very, very different indeed.

And from Easter to the end of May in 2020, most members were participating virtually. We had short sittings, limited business, lots of breaks to make sure that the technology was working. But the evolution in how we worked through Covid.

I'm just gonna go to this slide first, I think is shown quite well by how we coped with divisions.

So votes in the house throughout this period. At the, the top corner there, you've got what, a division, a busy one anyway looks like in normal times, loads of members crowded into those division lobbies. You obviously can't do that during a global pandemic with an airborne virus.

So for a short time we actually had remote voting. We had a voting app that our colleagues in the digital service worked extremely hard to stand up. And it was actually only used for a couple of weeks in the Commons. It was used much, much longer in the House of Lords, but it meant that members could vote in divisions without being physically on the estate.

You may remember, I think people called it the Jacob Reese Mogg Conga line. It was the next evolution in the stage of voting, so socially distanced, but people there in person. And that queue snaked all the way down out through various parts of the palace of Westminster and into Westminster Hall if you know, the buildings. So they're walking through.

And then the kind of next evolution is one that has actually stuck which is pass reader voting. So what we used to do was we had, clerks, and I've done this myself in the past, would run to the division lobbies when a vote was called sit at big sort of Dickensian kind of desks like Bob Cratchit with a massive sheet of paper in front of you. Not quite a quill pen, but a marker pen to mark off names as people went through. Then we went through a stage of and that's within my career in Parliament. And I was doing that maybe 10 years ago. Then there were, we had tablets used for that, but still clerks physically present in the lobbies.

Now we don't have people there. What we have is pass readers for members to tap their passes on as they go through. And that system is also now being adopted in the House of Lords as well. So that is one of the, the long-term legacies, I suppose, of the Covid times in Parliament. But actually there's less of that than you might expect. We have largely gone back, in other ways to business as normal.

There has been an extension of our proxy vote system, so as well as proxy votes for parental leave, there's now provision for members who have an illness or condition, which means they can't attend the estate to also have a proxy vote as well. And that partly came out of pandemic working conditions.

But there's also, if I just go back to this, there is, again, I'm struck by what Gareth said about creating a parliamentary culture. And, this as a challenge kind of pales into insignificance compared to doing it in the assembly these days, I expect. But there has been some concern about the lasting effects on culture in this parliament.

If you think about it, we had 140 new MPs came in December, 2019. They only had two, three months, knocking about the estate until lockdown happened. And then we went into quite a weird and unusual period of business during which things like this happened, where instead of having to turn up in the chamber physically and, do what we call bobbing, you know, standing up to try to be called by the speaker, instead, you would apply to be on a list and it would be listed what order you were gonna be called in. And it would be said whether you're virtual or physical. And it was all very regimented.

This was a subject of great debate at the time. People in Westminster very much prized the kind of spontaneity of debate. And it was thought that this was making things very sterile, very by rote. People were just reading their speeches without listening to what everybody else was saying. No interventions on speeches, was it kind of spontaneous interchanges between members.

On the other hand, members spend an awful lot of time in that chamber bobbing up and down waiting to be called. It plays havoc with their diaries, probably plays havoc with their knees. They don't know when they're going to be called or even sometimes if they're going to be

called to take part in a debate. And I thought there would be a bit more call from members to keep this sort of thing after the pandemic for the certainty it provides.

But actually there hasn't really been a big call for that. And I think that kind of parliamentary culture is reasserting itself a little bit. I think you might see some of the kind of hangover, you will hear quite often complaints from members in the chair, deputy speakers that members aren't routinely coming back to the chamber for windup speeches, which they're supposed to do, or staying in the chamber for the speeches after theirs 'cause it's gonna be a real debate. You've gotta hear what other people are saying. I think some of those kind of customs and courtesies have maybe taken root a little bit less strongly in this cohort of members because of this lack of experience.

To talk briefly again about select committees. This is what a select committee looked like in hybrid sitting. So you have some members taking part virtually over Zoom. You have witnesses spaced out there, other witnesses taking part virtually as well. This has not lasted. We've gone back basically to business as usual. The one thing that has persisted is we are now much better equipped to take evidence remotely from people if, for whatever reason whether it's a reasonable adjustment for accessibility or because they're literally on the other side of the world. We're just much more used to taking evidence remotely if we need to. But generally, members like to do their business in person. So the effect, I suppose my conclusion there is the effect has been sort of surprisingly short-lived, I would say.

I'm just gonna talk very, very briefly about one of the other massive events of this parliament, which does have a parliamentary dimension. And look back at the role of parliament in the days surrounding the death of her Majesty, the Queen.

And this is really, it's not really in my wheelhouse as, as a clerk, because this isn't really a matter of parliamentary procedure. It's more about Parliament's place as a kind of ceremonial location at the heart of the nation's life. And actually, what it reminds me of is the reason we call the Palace of Westminster, the Palace of Westminster, is it was literally a royal residence, for, for several hundred years. I think it was Henry II who finally abandoned using it as a kind of residence. And he moved to Whitehall Palace up the road and left it to the use of lawyers and parliamentarians.

But Westminster Hall, which you can see here, is a shared space between the House of Commons and the House of Lords. It's one of the oldest bits of the Palace of Westminster. It was saved from ruin in the great fire of the 1830s. Parts of it date back to the end of the 11th century, the magnificent roof dates to the time of Richard II. So a magnificent setting for one of the most memorable events of the last few years.

You may remember news about Her Majesty the Queen's health began circulating on Thursday afternoon as Parliament was sitting. We were probably all on a hair trigger for an immediate suspension of parliamentary business if a death was announced. But in the event that news came after we had finished sitting, and, just gonna move about a bit here, and this is what happened the very next day.

So this is very unusual days business, obviously, in the House of Commons, there was no question of us doing any sort of normal business. So the day's business was set aside, and this is what we did instead up to about we met at noon, and this lasted up to about 10 o'clock at night.

Things to point out here, the speaker made a statement about arrangements for future business. And, the item number six there is giving the speaker some power to set the future arrangements for sitting. And during this whole period, it was pretty well agreed that it was reasonable and right for the speaker to have a large amount of control over what would happen next, the times at which the house would sit and what it was going to do. But most of the day was taken up with tributes, to the queen. There was a suspension for the King's broadcast to the nation.

This is where our legacy of covid screens really came into their own, because we used those in the chamber to broadcast that address to MPs that also used for an address by President Zelensky of Ukraine, just about 10 days into the Russian invasion. So we have put some of that technology to good use since as well.

The house that's, quite a striking image of the house observing its moment silence you can't quite see. But for once the clerks at the table are wearing their wigs again, which they don't often these days, and the speaker is in more of his finery as well.

The next day we met on a Saturday. That's a pretty rare occurrence. It's only been a handful of times since the second World War that the house has sat on a Saturday. We did it for a discussion of a Brexit deal back in October, 2019. Before that the Falklands war was the, the previous occasion. And by this time, the Accession Council had taken place. So the, the king was the king from the moment of the death of his mother. But the accession council is where the great and the good of the land get to say, yes, we're happy for you to be our king. So confirming that.

So after the Accession Council, which took place that morning, which involved a lot of parliamentarians, then we were able to start oath taking or swearing the oath or giving the affirmation not actually constitutionally necessary, because the form of the oath includes the words heirs in successors. So it is assumed if you swear allegiance or make the affirmation to one monarch that you're doing the same for their successors.

But it was understood that members would really want to do this, for all sorts of understandable reasons. And a humble address was agreed to his majesty. This is the slightly archaic term for how the House of Commons communicates with the Monarch. Humble addresses are agreed at the end of the King's speech debate, for example, saying, thank you very much for the speech. We particularly enjoyed these parts of it. In this case it's a message of condolence to his majesty. And at the close of business on this day, on the Saturday, again, ran up to about 10 o'clock, I think, parliamentary business essentially ceased until the 21st of September. No committees, no petitions, no parliamentary questions, no papers, et cetera.

But Parliament as a kind of location really, I'm just gonna rewind to this, kind of came into its own over the next few days. And what I just wanna flag up is this isn't a procedural matter, but we became the centre of a really huge operational task that really showcases the multidisciplinary nature of parliamentary working.

Our estates and building works colleagues shut down pretty much every bit of building work on the estate. And you, as you might imagine, there's a lot of that within 24 hours. So scaffolding was cleared away and so on. A massive security operation. Catering was running 24/7. There was a big comms effort, both internally and externally. Visitor services were helping to manage ticketing arrangements and so on. Huge numbers of volunteers doing all kinds of things that they wouldn't normally do in the parliamentary service but stepping up for, for this occasion.

We had a 24/7 control room in the heart of the palace looking after all of the logistical arrangements for the lying in state for which Westminster holds the traditional venue. And they were communicating with the cabinet office, with the palace, with the Foreign and Commonwealth office, who were responsible for all the foreign dignitaries who were coming in. And with the Department for Culture, media and Sport, who had the daunting task of managing the queue and in collaboration with the parliamentary authorities taking that nerve wracking call of when to close the queue so that we, they made the judgment about how many people could get through the lying in state by what point so that they could stop more people joining the queue. So between 14th and 19th of September, more than a quarter of a million people came through at all hours of the day and night.

But when the coffin left Westminster Hall for the state funeral, that basically brought Parliament's role in this to an end. Normal, well, normal-ish business resumed on the 21st of September with more oath taking and then it was back to more normal business the next day with a bit of an adjustment of our recess dates, simply because all of this had changed the timetable.

So the next thing I wanna talk about.

We had talked about non-executive legislation known at Westminster as private members bills. This is pretty topical. I mean, it happens every session, right? The end of a parliamentary session clears the decks for legislation. All of the government bills, if they haven't been passed, need to be formally carried over, or they're lost and private members bills fail as well. And so the whole cycle starts up again with the start of a session, which we've only just had for the government. That's with the King's speech. And for private members or back benchers, that is generally the starting gun is fired with our ballot for private members bills, which I'm going to talk about a little bit.

So, private members here just refers to anybody who's not a member of the government, a backbencher. And it's their opportunity to propose legislation most time and legislation in the House of Commons is very tightly controlled by the government. The standing orders say that the government has precedence for its business in, in all sittings, except in certain circumstances. And every session, a couple of hundred attempts are made by backbenchers to legislate on their own initiative. And the best chance of success for this comes with the ballot.

And so what happens here is that every back bench MP is entitled to enter the ballot for private members bills. There is a literal physical book printed with numbers from one to 650 that sits in one of the lobbies with clerks looking after it. And members come in to sign their name against a number, and they don't have to go sequentially. They can pick whatever number they want within that sequence. So, some members have a preference for prime numbers. Some members have a lucky number. Some members want to pick the number of their favourite footballer or whatever it is. It's quite an interesting insight into their psychology.

The first hundred normally fill up in order, so you don't see any gaps in, in the sequence there. So these were the people who entered the ballot up to Tuesday the 14th of November. So that's just last week. And we had 415 members in total enter the ballot this year. If you think that the number of paid ministers in the commons is capped at 95, and then beyond that, you have parliamentary private secretaries and so on. That's the vast majority of back benchers are taking part in this exercise.

So the ballot book is open for two days. Once you've had your chance, you then get a nice bit of theatre, which happened last Thursday in a committee room in the Commons. And this is the ballot taking place. This is televised. I think it used to be like slightly rubbish raffle tickets, but a few years ago, somebody had the nice idea of getting these lovely wooden bowls printed with the numbers on. We have a big goldfish bowl, and it's presided over by the chairman of Ways and Means, who's the kind of next in command after the speaker. It's one of their special roles.

This is Eleanor Lang in that capacity. And standing beside her is Sarah Davis, who's the clerk assistant, the second most senior clerk.

If you want an idea of a bit how I observed some of this data is Sarah's wearing white gloves and nobody has any idea why she's wearing white gloves. And nobody can remember where that tradition came from. I think it gives her the air of a sort of snooker referee or something like that. But it's just part, just part of the theatre. All the, the bowls go in the bowl, and they get 20 of them get drawn, and the number is matched up with the member and the names are announced. Now this, and these members are the ones who have come out in the private members bill ballot. But this is one of only three ways of members bringing forward their own legislation.

So, what we have is 13 Fridays. Normally the house doesn't sit on Fridays, but 13 Fridays every session are set aside by the government, purely for private members', bills, private members', legislation. And that's the only time on which those bills can be taken as well.

And there are three ways to get your bill on the list for consideration on a Friday, the most effective is the ballot, because the 20 members who get drawn out in the ballot have first precedents, have first choice over those 13 Fridays. So they get a large amount of control over their own destiny. They have to name their Friday that they want to go on.

When they present their bill, which is also known as the first reading a formal stage, no debate happens that takes place on the fifth Wednesday of every session. So that's gonna be on the 6th of December this year.

And then once that takes place, the book's open on the other types of private members bills, presentation bills in 10 minute rule bills, presentation bills is literally just any member can put down a notice of a bill on the order paper for its first reading. You don't get any debate. Nothing more is said about it. It's simply a way of getting it on the list in the hope that it might be debated one Friday.

And then 10 minute rule bills are a slightly weird kind of fictional, almost procedure where Tuesdays and Wednesdays, there's a slot for a member to propose legislation for 10 minutes in absolute prime time in the Chamber. The most important thing about 10 minute rule bills is you're up directly after Prime Minister's questions. On a Wednesday, for example, you get the whole attention of the house, you get to make your case for 10 minutes, and you're making the case for permission to bring in a bill. The reason I say it's a bit fictional is you don't need the permission of the house to bring in a bill. You could just do it as a presentation bill, but this way you get to talk about it first. So, but presentation bills and 10 minute rule bills are behind ballot bills in the queue.

One thing just to highlight about Covid working presentation, bills used to be allocated by first come, first served in physically in the office. That meant we held the world's weirdest

sleepovers at the start of every session, where the really determined members would literally come with camp beds and sleeping bags and sleep in the public bill office for a night or two nights before it opened. Covid put paid to that, and I'm pleased to say these days it's done by a slightly more rational method of sending in emails.

This is this year's Lucky 20 who came out of last Thursday's draw real mixture of members, mixture of parties, mixture of constituencies, former Prime Minister on the list. So Liz Truss is gonna have an opportunity to bring in a private member's bill.

The first seven of these are particularly lucky. That's because the first seven of those 13 Fridays are set aside for second readings of bill. So the first substantive debate on a bill. So if those first seven are all sensible and choose different ones of those days, they will all get a chance to be debated and hopefully decided upon in the chamber.

After that, what happens to the others depends very much on who they're behind in the queue. After when you get to the eighth Friday, a bill that has passed its second reading and has been to committee takes precedence over others that haven't started their journey yet. So you have to file in queue in a queue behind others that have made more progress. So you can see why the top seven are particularly prized.

There, the big challenge, I mean, it's really hard to get a private member's bill through. It's a lot of work. One of the big factors in this is that while government bills benefit from programming or timetabling, as you might call it, there'll be a motion that says, we're gonna have five hours to talk about this bit of the bill, and then we're gonna have a vote.

There is none of that with private members bills. It's completely free and open time. And that means a really determined member who dislikes the bill, can talk about it for long enough to talk it out. So you reach the, the buffers at the end of the day's business, effectively a filibuster. So you have to have a lot of support and work really hard to overcome that procedural obstacle to proceeding.

The bills that have the best chance of success are short, have very limited ambition, are trying to do like one or two very focused things. They don't need any money. So you don't have to worry about the government granting money to put them into place. And they're either uncontroversial or at the very least cross party. So you can, you can count on a degree of support across the house, and ideally you need to get in early.

I mean, if you're number one on this list, well done because you will get the first pick of your Fridays, and that gives you the most time left in the session to make progress with your bill. And don't forget, you don't only have to get through committee and third reading and all the rest of it in the commons. You also have to get through the Lords of course. And that is where some private members bills might, might fall at that hurdle as well.

So these members phones will be absolutely ringing off the hook, will have been ringing off the hook since last Thursday with lots of campaign groups who have ideas for legislation they would like to be brought forward. Many of these members will have longstanding ideas for things they've wanted to do for a long time. And will want to bring forward themselves. They'll also be taking phone calls from the whips, their party whips, and sometimes the government whips.

Every government department basically has a drawer full of bits of law they would like to get passed, but there isn't time for it in the government's legislative program. And a really efficient way of the government to get those very limited measures through is to package them up as private members bills and persuade one of these members to take them on. And it doesn't have to be a government member who takes on, a government inspired bill, let's say. They're very much private members bills they have to be convinced of the right for them and the need for them themselves. But some of those bills have a bit of a following win from government because they're things that the government, doesn't object to. And in some reasons, in some cases, positively would like to happen.

This is just a quick lesson in the art of choosing your Friday. 'cause you get to name your Friday for your bill. This is an extract from the order paper of it was the day in October. I can't remember which date. It's Friday obviously, 'cause it's private member's bills.

The first one of these bills was number 15th in last year's ballot. Vera Hobhouse is a liberal Democrat member of Parliament. There are 28 more bills on the paper. I didn't have room to show them all here. 17 of those are from a member called Christopher Chop. And I think those were all presentation bills. So bills that there was no barrier for him to get through. There's no ballot or anything. He could just present them. He's a very determined and dogged participant in the private members Bills procedures is Christopher Chop. Sir Christopher Chop, I should say.

Now, this was an October, this was actually the 14th Friday last session. It's not unusual when you have a session that is longer than usual for the government to make some provision for extra private members bills Fridays. And in this case, they made one available. And they did it pretty transparently, I think, so that this first bill could get through.

Now, this is from a liberal Democrat member, but I think we can surmise from this arrangement that this is a bill with government support. It had passed all of its stages in the common, it had gone to the House of Lords and a thing happened, which is normally fatal to a private member's bill, which is that the Lords wanted to amend it. And normally there's no more time in the commons for Lord's amendments to private members bills to be discussed. But in this case, the government magicked up a 14th Friday so that that bill could be debated and hopefully put through. So clearly that had a following win from the government.

What so Christopher Chop has did here is he took a punt early in the session. He said, what if there's gonna be more private members bills Fridays than have been announced? I'm gonna put some of my bills down for this random Friday on October, and if it ends up being a private members bill day, then I am in Clover. All of my bills will be on the order paper. And so it proved he got very lucky with this with this manoeuvre.

And so after Vera Hobb house's, bill was agreed enthusiastically by the house, Sir Christopher Chop then basically had the rest of the day, he picked and chose the ones of his 17 bills that he really wanted to talk about and had half an hour's debate on them or an hour's debate on them. Got an answer from government ministers and then moved on to the next one. So it certainly worked out well for him. But it shows you some of the tactics involved in naming your Fridays. And actually getting a debate for many members is the end goal. It's not even necessarily the legislation that might come out of it.

Just gonna skip past to this because this shows you how unlikely it is, I suppose that bills private members bills become law. The numbers are particularly bad for presentation bills.

Remember, there's no bar to you bringing in a presentation bill. So if you've got 17 of them up your sleeve, you can put them all down. So there's loads on that side.

10 minute rule bills very rarely make it all the way through again, largely because the point of them is to get your 10 minutes of debating time in the chamber ballot bills much more successful, much higher rate of success for the ballot bills as you might expect. So the numbers are low, but they're not impossible.

And these were the successful members in the last session. 16 of the 20 ballot bills actually became law last session, which is really high. And if you look at the subjects, there's a lot of stuff about protection from redundancy, sex, employment relations, neonatal care, leave, leave and pay. There's a lot of employment related things there. And really the government had at one stage in this parliament promised a very comprehensive employment bill. And what you might imagine has happened here is that the provisions of that employment bill have been parcelled up into lots and lots of very small, limited bills doing very specific things. And a lot of members from across the house have said, yes, I think that's a good idea. I'm gonna take that up as my private member's bill and pilot it through.

I'll just mention there's a reshuffle effect here as well. If you're, if you have a private member's bill and you get made at a government minister, you have to give it up and you have to give it to somebody else to pilot through. And if you then lose your job in the government two months later, that must be incredibly frustrating. It's not happily, it's not just about passing bills. As I've said, debate is sometimes one of the main points, but there are other ways in which private members legislation can be effective.

This is Carolyn Harris, Labour MP for Swansea East in 2021. She brought in a bill to do two things, to mandate that there should be a new UK strategy for menopause support and to remove prescription charges for HRT. She had her second reading in October, 2021, and you can see from the minutes of the sitting that she withdrew her bill by leave means with the leave of the house, it can't be done without the permission of the member in charge.

Why would Carolyn Harris have been content to withdraw her bill having got that far? Well, the answer is the government basically promised in the debate to do a lot of what she wanted them to do. She used that bill as a focus for campaigning, as a focus for conversations with members and campaign groups to make progress on these issues. So in the debate, the minister promised she didn't, she didn't promise to get rid of prescription charges, but said, we'll have one charge every 12 months, and we'll set up a UK task force for menopause support to be chaired by none other than Carolyn Harris, Labour MP for Swansea East. So this, as far as Carolyn Harris has done this is concerned. This is job mostly done after a couple of hours of debate. Lots of hard work ahead to make this a reality, but I think it just shows there's many ways to be successful in terms of private members legislation. It's not all about actually passing laws.

I just wanna end very quickly with a few reflections about what it's like coming up to an election in Westminster. I've said this session has felt very long with all of the events that have happened in it, and all eyes are turning towards the calendar. Sorry for my rather uninspiring clip art here, trying to illustrate the concept of calendar watching rather than clock watching. I don't have a crystal ball, I'm sorry, I have no more idea than any of you, and maybe less than some of you, but when the next election will actually take place, could be April, May, October, November, January next year.

But the end of the parliament does have a distinct feel, and it definitely feels like we are in the end game of this parliament. Now, I was there for the 2010 election, the 2015 election, and you, you recognise some of the same signs members thoughts do start to turn to their last days in parliament. If they know they're standing down, or to their re-election efforts they will be much more focused on their constituencies if they have a battle on their hands to retain their seats. Some of them, bear in mind, boundary changes will have meant that their seats don't exist anymore in their current form. So they're having to work extra hard to find new seats or, to court new voters.

The vacancies on select committees become harder to fill because members have already done multiple jobs throughout a parliament. We start to find that quorum issues become a bit more of a problem in a lot of select committees as members thoughts are elsewhere. And on the select committee as a team in supporting those members, we'll be thinking, okay, what can we get finished before an election? What scrutiny work do we want to start now that we are confident that we can get an outcome for before an election is called? Do we catch up on our previous reports? Do we try to tie things up in a loose end? Or do we want to capitalise on the energy of new members and new chairs and start lots of new things.

Now, lots of members are very keen to leave a mark in their time parliament. And one thing that has really struck me about talking to members who have lost their seats or have left parliament is a lot of them will look back at the two things I've talked about in detail today. Select committees and private members bills and say well, in some cases I really regret not doing that, but in a lot of cases, the most effective I felt I was as a backbench member of Parliament was either as a member of a select committee or taking private members bills legislation through. And so a lot of those, ballot winners have already made way to, to focus their efforts and, their this last session of parliament. And members will be looking for ways to do that as well.

The legislative cupboard is maybe looking a little barer than it would've done in the early days of a parliament. We saw already at the end of last session, early finishes in the chamber. A slight dearth of business or a dearth of members to take part in that business. Lots more non whipped business so that members can be in their constituencies campaigning instead of sitting bobbing in debates, waiting to be called.

And the last thing just to say is, and this harks back to what I said about the, the great logistical effort for the lying in state. An election is a big logistical effort for Parliament as well, and that is really ramping up now. We've got really good at it over the last few years with the number of elections that we've had. We have a well-oiled machine now for making sure that people are volunteering to be election buddies for new MP. That we have a really good system for new members reception centre. We have lots of literature and booklets that are constantly getting updated for new members coming in. And lots of things for us to do and lots of things for us to think about in select committees, as well as how do we induct and prepare a new set of members at the beginning of the next parliament. So that's where a lot of our focus is going to be over the next three months to 12 months.

Who knows? I wish I could tell you. I probably overrun my time there a little bit. Apologies. I dunno if there's any time for questions now, but I will be hanging around for, a couple of hours today. So if you do have anything you want to ask, please just come up and, and ask me over coffee or over lunch. I'd be delighted to chat to you. Thank you very much.