

View from the Commons: a new Parliament in 2024 – Judith Boyce

KEY:

JB: Judith Boyce (House of Commons Select Committee Team)

JB: So, Gareth said no pressure on him, but I think the pressure is on me to justify cutting the Director of Parliamentary Services down to one minute. So try to make the most of this hour, first of all thank you so much, Anne-Marie for the welcome, and to Marina and Connie and James and all, the staff here for having me over. It's always a pleasure to have the excuse to, as I say, work from home instead of working from home for a change. So I really enjoy being here.

And so what I'm hoping to cover today is, well, I sat down to think about, you know, what are the interesting things that have happened in Parliament over the last year? And you'd be surprised how long it took me to come up with the fact that there was an election, because there's been an awful lot happening. But I'm going to hopefully spend most of my time today talking about what it's like, when a Parliament ends, what it's like when a new Parliament begins.

Talk about some interesting features of the New House of Commons, particularly from a kind of procedural management point of view. I'll talk a bit about select committees, which is, my kind of domain. And maybe finish with a couple of quick words about things to look out for, in terms of upcoming Private Members' Bills and the possibility of further modernisation of the Commons.

So just to reintroduce myself, so I was in this post already when I was here last year, so I won't say too much. I'm the Clerk of the Transport Committee, which means a couple of things. It means I manage the team of, seven core staff and some additional staff who bring other resources that provide services to the Chair and the Members of the Transport Committee to, help them manage their scrutiny. And I'm the Principal Procedural Advisor to the Chair and the Committee.

But in the select Committee context, we often say there isn't an awful lot of Parliamentary procedure in select Committee work. A lot of it is about, you know, small 'p' politics and policy and, managing the scrutiny programme and so on. I've worked in the Commons for about 16 years in a variety of roles in different select committees as well.

So, Transport Committee, just to reintroduce, it's one of the departmental select committees. So, it's a committee of back benchers, which is there to scrutinise the Department for Transport and all of its public bodies. So for us, that includes like the Civil Aviation Authority and National Highways and so on across all transport modes. And we do our work through inquiries where we set out a subject that we want to look into. We call for written evidence on those subjects. And then we'll take a programme of oral evidence as well, which is the bit that makes it onto TV, where we're questioning people in public. And all of our inquiries will finish with a Government Minister coming to account for their policy.

We also intersperse that with one-off sessions. Some of those are regulars. So our very first oral evidence session of the Parliament is happening next week, and that is a regular work of

the Secretary of State for Transport session. So we've got Lou Hague coming in next week. But we can also do one-offs on specific topics. And I'd really like to emphasise the fact that select committees are one of the main ways in which Parliament informs itself through external expertise.

So this is not just parliamentarians talking to themselves in an echo chamber. This is a way of bringing people with their own personal lived experience, or expert stakeholders or researchers or whoever it is, to come in and inform the members of the committee about the subjects we're looking into. And then they can take that knowledge through into the rest of their parliamentary work and use it to scrutinise the Government.

And the upshot of most of our work is intended to be reports with recommendations, although some of that's been rather interrupted this year. This is a bit of a sample of some of the work we were doing towards the end of the last Parliament. So a variety of things like pre-legislative scrutiny on the Government's rail reform plans.

We were looking at an incident that happened with air traffic control services that went down for a crucial period, one bank holiday Monday. And what went wrong there? We issued a big report a few years ago on smart motorways, and we kept coming back to that because the committee was very sceptical about the safety record of smart motorways. And of course, we regularly look at the progress or sometimes lack of progress on, High Speed 2.

A few more bits and pieces - we had a big inquiry running about accessibility and whether public transport was being delivered in a way that worked for people with disabled access, with disabilities. Spoiler, no. I think all of our evidence said that it wasn't. As part of that, we looked at the plans to close railway ticket offices, which were announced, you know, that pretty much every physical ticket office across the network in England was slated to close.

And after taking evidence, the committee wrote a very strongly worded letter saying that this really hadn't been thought through. And, you know, our intervention but from other bodies as well led to those plans being cancelled. And self-driving vehicles was an example of a slightly more kind of forward-thinking inquiry we did, where we were looking at future technologies and how they could assist transport.

But all of our work over this Parliament was really done under the shadow of a ticking clock and a looming election. I think I used this graphic last year when we knew an election was coming, but we really had no idea exactly when it would arrive. So we were always very aware that time was running out on the Parliament and working with the committee, we were always encouraging them to think about, you know, you have a limited amount of time left.

What do you want to use that for? How do you want to manage your inquiries to come to an end? The reason, of course, is that the fixed term Parliaments Act, which was put in place by the 2010 Government, was repealed in 2022. And so we reverted to the system of having no fixed date for an election. We knew that the latest polling date could therefore be on the 28th of January 2025.

And so the latest dissolution of Parliament would be the 17th of December this year. I don't think anybody really expected it to go quite that long. And after a certain point earlier this year when the opportunity was missed to sync up Westminster elections with local elections in May, an expectation began to solidify that there would be an election in the autumn time.

So we were kind of, we knew we couldn't count on it, but we were sort of, half planning with that in mind. So let me take you to the morning of the Wednesday the 22nd of May.

Earlier this year, this is what my committee was doing on that morning. We were taking evidence from this chap, Hugh Merriman, then MP, then Minister for Rail, actually a former chair of the committee. So chairing the Transport Committee gets you into high places, and he was there to give us evidence about the Government's rail reform legislation. It was the last evidence session.

We'd taken about five mornings worth of evidence throughout the preceding months. And this was intended to be our last evidence session, after which we would go away and write a report about what the committee thought about the rail reform plan.

So to give you an idea of how little clue we still had at that point of what was going on, you can see the chair at the top there is saying "Minister, you've previously said you want to see full legislation introduced before the election. Given that we're now within six months or so of that election." He said, optimistically. "Is there a realistic chance that it could happen?" And the Rail Minister sort of says, you know, six months, bit tight. In all honesty, we're probably not going to have the final version of the legislation in this Parliament. A dose of realism is probably required.

30 odd questions later, you can see in the transcript towards the end of the session, our SNP member, Gavin Newlands comes in and says, I think he's been looking at his phone through the session. He says, well, if rumours are to be believed, there'll be an election called anyway.

So this entire thing is moot. And the Minister says, there's rumours around every day. And I think what he says, it's like the end of the world. What he means is people are always predicting the end of the world, rather than that he felt personally that the world was coming to an end. So you know, so much for being Westminster insiders. This was the conversation on the morning of the 22nd of May, and this meeting ended at 11:35 AM, and then at just after 5:00 PM the Heavens opened on the Prime Minister as he stood outside Downing Street and announced that there would be an election on the 4th of July.

So we couldn't call this a snap election necessarily. We all knew an election was coming, but the precise timing of it really was a bit of a surprise. And what it did was kick off this whole process of winding down a Parliament and electing, a new House of Commons. So, from the point the election is called, we then have a period called wash-up, which I'll explain in a moment.

Then you have the Prorogation of Parliament. Prorogation is a bit like state opening, but in reverse, it's the sort of connoisseur state opening. There's the same business of processing up and down to the House of Lords. There's a Royal Commission of Lords who sit in their robes and doff their caps. There's a bit of Norman French spoken in the Chamber.

Royal Assent is given to the last bills to go through, and there's an address delivered from the Monarch, though not by the Monarch himself. And Prorogation happens every session. That's how every session of Parliament comes to an end. And it's a pause really, in the business.

There are certain things that have to be done before Prorogation, like passing a bill, unless you pass a carryover motion, which allows you to take it into the next session. But the work of select committees, for example, is just brought to a temporary halt, and you can then resume

when the new session opens. But the definitive end of the Parliament is the next stage, which is the dissolution of Parliament, and that is what brings the Parliament to an end and kicks off the period of 25 days to polling day.

Now, back to the wash-up, generally there is, a few days between the announcement of the election and the time when Prorogation is supposed to happen. It's been up to a week in cases or even a little bit more. And this is known as the wash-up. It's a chance to tie up parliamentary loose ends, because otherwise all of the business, you know, once the house Perros and then dissolves, all the business would otherwise just be lost.

So after the Prime Minister's announcement, the Leader of the House of Commons came to the house to announce the Prorogation would actually be on Friday the 24th of May. By that time, that was no more than 48 hours away. So our kind of state of mind at that point was, a little bit of panic about how we were going to get everything wrapped up before the end of that wash-up period.

Why so short a time? You know, it didn't have to be that short a time. Dissolution didn't happen until Thursday the 30th of May. There was probably just a lot of practicality in it. The next week was already scheduled to be a parliamentary recess. It's one of the half term weeks. It syncs up with the schools' half term. Many members were not planning to be at Westminster. There wasn't any parliamentary business planned for that week, etc. So, my personal view is it was probably just practicality of saying, right, we'll just sit this week and then we can go away as we all planned next week.

So let's talk a little bit about the effects of that wash-up on certain key areas of business. I've put parliamentary questions and early day motions in there. That's a bit of a cheat, because actually those come to an end at the end of every session. So if you've got an outstanding parliamentary question, or you've got an early day motion on the paper, they all fall at the end of a session, and they have to be revived if you want them to at the beginning of the next.

That's not unique to the end of a Parliament. But the real purpose of wash-up is, dealing with bills. And the select committee inquiries are what I think of, possibly from my own point of view as the sort of collateral damage in the parliamentary wash-up period. So if I talk about bills first of all, sometimes there is an administrative necessity to get a particular bit of legislation through.

So there was a finance bill, for example, which was outstanding, a finance bill is what gives legislative effect to all of the Government's tax measures that are in financial statements and budgets. So that has to be passed otherwise there's certain things that can't happen in terms of collection of income tax and things like that. So there was a finance bill that needed to be done, but when it comes to other bills, you need to bear in mind all the usual procedural requirements still apply.

All the same stages have to be gone through. Both houses have to agree to the legislation. You can't skip a step before Royal Assent, but nor do you have time in this period for prolonged debate or lots of rounds of ping pong between the houses. So the only bills or parts of bills which will be passed in this period are generally those on which you can reach consensus.

So what you have is kind of horse trading between the main parties. The Government will give concessions or drop parts of bills that the opposition can't agree. Sometimes it will drop parts of bills that its own back benchers can't agree to as well, because it doesn't want to be dealing

with a rebellion in these last couple of days. And through these deals, normally lots of bills get through, but with minimal debate.

And actually one of the things that emphasises is how much consensus there often is at Westminster as well. You know, often the core of legislation can really be agreed to, but there's some bits around the fringes that need to be dropped, and I'll kind of leave it up to you to decide whether this sounds like a kind of backroom stitch up that's, you know, contrary to our normal parliamentary democracy, or whether it's just a practical way not to lose valuable legislation that everybody agrees on.

So what happens with bills in these couple of days, we had a business of the house motion, moved in the house, which suspended or changed some of the usual rules. Notably, we weren't supposed to be sitting on that Friday the 24th of May, but the motion said not only are we going to sit on Friday, but we're not going to do the usual things we normally do on a Friday.

Instead, Government bills will have precedents, and it set out how long the Commons would spend on each thing, like considering Lord's amendments and so on. And without opposition agreement to that, that business of the house motion itself could be talked out. So it really does all have to be kind of agreed in advance. And what happened then was on Thursday day one of the wash-up, the finance bill went through, there were Lord's amendments on two more bills. One bill was conceded by the Lords. Three more bills came back to the Commons for further consideration.

Friday, day two, there was a whole host of statutory instruments, so secondary legislation that went through, there were Lord's amendments on two more bills, and there was a whole clutch of bills that were agreed in the Lords. These are really hectic days for our colleagues in the public bill office, long days, late nights printing and re-printing of bills and amendments in every version that they come back from the Lords finding people to, because we still have a system.

We do send the bills by email, I promise, but we also have a system of a clerk having to dress up and literally walk a copy of the bill from one end of the building to the other when it goes between the houses. So organising all of that, really you know, a huge amount of work and stress in those couple of days. And the outcome of all of this was that a grand total of six Government bills were passed and received Royal Assent in this period.

Now, pre 2010, generally you would expect the number in wash-up to be about double figures. And I say pre 2010 deliberately. because in 2015 we knew when the Parliament was going to end because of the fixed term Parliament's Act. And elections since then have been a little bit, not standard, if you like.

One of the notable bills to be passed in this period was the Post Office Horizon System Offences Act. That's the one that would seek to overturn criminal convictions in relation to the Post Office Horizon scandal. And overturning criminal convictions by primary legislation is quite a big deal constitutionally. And it's notable that the House of Lords Constitution Committee was all set to publish a report about this bill. But the Commons, it had its final stages on the Thursday. And the Constitution Committee said, oh, well we've written this report now, so we'll publish it on the Friday after it had already passed.

So six Government bills passed, 10 Government bills dropped. One of the most notable was the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which was something that Rishi Sunak had been keen to claim as a policy success, a bold policy of continually raising age, which people were able to purchase,

tobacco. In all only 18 of 30 Government bills introduced in this session received Royal Assent, which is quite a small number. So this very compressed wash-up period definitely had an effect on that. Now, I'll just talk briefly about Private Members' Bills.

This, I think you'd also put these in the kind of collateral damage bucket if you like. These are bills introduced by individual backbenchers. And I talked quite a lot about these last time, and I might mention them a bit later on as well. But what I'll just note at this point is that we had been in a period of historically high numbers of Private Members' Bills being passed. The Government was cooperating with backbenchers to pass lots of uncontroversial, but useful measures for which no Government time would be found.

So, for example, in 2022/23 23 Private Members' Bills were passed, which historically is very, very high, and we were on course for a similar sort of outcome this time. But in the end, with the wash-up happening the way it did, only five made it through, all of which were already reaching the stage of waiting for the Lord's third reading. It was four ballot bills. I'll explain that again, if I've time, one of which was Gavin Robinson's British Nationality Irish Citizens Act, which made provision for Irish citizens resident in the UK for five years to be entitled to British citizenship.

And just to prove that all life is present in Private Members' Bills. Another one was the Pet Abduction Act. Another one was Paternity Leave Bereavement Act, and one presentation bill, the sole purpose of which was to allow London Zoo to have a longer lease period.

So a real mixture of, you know, very constitutionally significant and very limited, kind of practical legislation going through in this time. So select committees I mentioned also face the wash-up period. It's not possible for committees to meet or agree anything during Prorogation. So there was less than two days to tie up any existing inquiries. You can't publish anything after that, that hasn't been agreed.

And to give you an idea, on transport we had four ongoing inquiries, the one I mentioned on rail reform, where we'd literally just taken our last oral evidence, our report on inquiry on accessibility, where again, we'd finished the evidence and we're moving towards having a report and a couple of other longer term inquiries. And in the time we had available, it simply wasn't possible to report on any of them.

So what we did do, you know, different committees manage this in different ways. Some decided to publish a letter rather than a report, which is quite, you know, a lot quicker to agree. Some of them had reports that were literally ready to publish, and they just needed the final agreement. But what we did was on the morning of the Thursday, we spent two hours writing a report from scratch, called the Work of the Transport Committee in the 2019 Parliament.

The sole purpose of it was to put on record some of the committee's views about the inquiries that it hadn't been able to complete. And we also published a bit of evidence and an annex to it as well. And we just about managed to get three members of the committee together, which is a quorum on the Thursday afternoon in order to get that agreed and get it published. Most members by that time had scattered to the winds to go off and campaign if they were standing again. So, to give you an idea of the scale of this across all committees, between the election being called and dissolution, there were 27 committee reports published. There were 163 pieces of correspondence published, and 264 pieces of written evidence.

So it was a huge job for our colleagues in the publishing and digital departments as well. Now I don't want to get too sentimental, but this also meant a very hurried goodbye to a committee with whom we'd been working very closely for years. And, as we saw, we really had no idea there was going to be an election when we had our last regular meeting with them. And many immediately disappeared to campaign.

Between members, this is a list of the members of the Transport Committee at the end of the last Parliament between those who weren't standing again and others losing their seats, only three of these members have returned in the present Parliament. So it's a very strange and abrupt way for everything to end.

All in all, there was quite a strange atmosphere in the house over these couple of days. There were not many members around. As I say, most people went off to campaign. Many of those who did stick around to transact the business were those who had already decided to stand down, or those who had been forced into an unexpectedly quick decision to stand down. Many of those would've anticipated having several more months to make that decision, or to make their goodbyes in Parliament and finish off different bits of work.

And on the Friday between rounds of waiting for Lord's messages on bills to be delivered they squeezed in a valedictory debate in the chamber. And these are some images of some MPs you may recognise who were all standing down, who took part in that valedictory debate with a chance to say their last few words as an MP. In total 132 MPs did not stand for re-election, and that is much higher than any election since 2010. And then they were gone.

So at dissolution Parliament ceases to exist. Every seat is vacant. MPs are former MPs, and they're not allowed to describe themselves as MPs. Honestly, if you work with MPs every day, it's quite a giddy feeling knowing that there are no MPs for at least 25 days. And some things are definitely easier without MPs cluttering the place up. Essential maintenance works on the buildings are immediately cranked up so that we can take advantage of that period.

And personally I was able to take a bit of annual leave without worrying about the inbox being flooded when I came back. This is my kind of time passes slide. So I think you all know what happened in the interim, but while members were away campaigning, a huge amount of work was going on back at the house to prepare for the new house. There had been a general election planning group meeting already for well over a year, developing all sorts of resources, literature, and online, overseeing a massive mobilisation of volunteers, many of whom had already been trained months earlier, because we were preparing for the possibility of a May election.

The Digital Service were preparing for hundreds of new accounts to be set up. The security department was prepping for thousands of new passes to be issued to MPs and their staff. There's help for MPs who are winding up their offices. Accommodation, we're working on setting up temporary hot desking facilities in committee rooms so members don't just rock up and immediately get an office. There's a process of allocation through the whips, so they need somewhere to work in the meantime.

And the focus of all of this was the new members' reception area, which was set up in Portcullis House, which is the modern building next to the Palace of Westminster. That was operational from the morning after the election. So, we actually had people working overnight on doing things like assembling biographies of new members and so on. So the new members reception area was open on the morning of Friday the 5th, and it kept going until Wednesday

the 10th of July. There was a kind of call centre there with people making contact with elected MPs.

We had buddies in a sort of waiting as if in a cab rank, waiting for new members to walk through the door, and then you'd be assigned your buddy and off you would go for a tour of the building. And members were put through a sort of sheep dip of going through HR advice, digital security, and IPSA who look after expenses. There is limited room in all of this for trying to teach members anything about parliamentary procedure or how parliamentary business works.

And in the first stage, you really have to concentrate on what they need to know immediately. So the guidance was focused on how to swear in maiden speeches, how to get yourself into the Private Members' Bill ballot, which would only be held the week after the King's speech, and how to participate in votes or divisions. So we always think of state opening as the beginning of the parliamentary year, but if at a new Parliament, there's preliminaries to that, the Speaker has to be returned or challenged, in this case returned without challenge.

And then the Speaker then presides over periods of swearing in for members that take about three or four days. Members are required by law to swear or affirm. You can see the text that they have to use there. If you don't do this, you can't take your seat. The only thing you can participate in is the election of the Speaker, which I suppose you have to do otherwise, nobody can make the first move if you like. If you try to take your seat without having sworn in, the legislation says that your seat is immediately vacated as if you were dead, which is fairly definitive.

And so what you can see here is parts of the sort of assembly line of members coming through to swear in, on the table, we have a range of religious texts which people can choose to swear on. We also have the oath cards in braille in large print and in languages, including Irish, Scottish, Gaelic, Ulster Scots, Welsh, and Cornish. But only the English version is legally effective. So you can say the oath in whatever language you want or affirm in whatever language you want, but you have to say the English version afterwards.

A few members, as they often do, chose to register an objection to being made to, you know, affirm or swear to the Monarch. Often by prefacing their affirmation with a few words of explanation. You know, I'm doing this because I need to do it in order to represent my constituents in the house. That is not a problem as long as they then say the words of the oath or affirmation in full. And there was one member who left the bit out about King Charles's heirs and successors and was made to come back a couple of days later to say the whole thing again.

So swearing in done, you proceed to the pageantry of state opening, King's speech, and we're off to the races. And who is we in this context? While you'll all be familiar with the rather dramatic election results, I don't need to tell you that labour won a massive majority. But maybe even more notable from a parliamentary point of view is that we now have an official opposition in the Conservative Party that in numbers is much closer to the third party than it is to the Government. And another feature of interest is the number of small groupings on the opposition benches.

So, you know, Caroline Lucas had been the sole Green representative for a number of years. She stood down and four Green MPs entered the Commons. Previously we'd had, you know, the odd UKIP MP, but this time we have a group of five Reform MPs. There was also a significant caucus of back bench independents, either because they were elected in as

independents or have since become independent. So that number now is up to 15 independents, I think, through a combination of those roots, including people having the whip removed voluntarily surrendering it.

So the numbers of those groupings are small, but I think the opposition benches do feel more pluralistic in quite an important kind of way. But one thing that it highlights is that in parliamentary procedure, there aren't that many formal ways in which small parties can be accommodated. Most of the accommodation is through convention and through, you know, what you might think of as kind of scraps from the table.

So, for example, opposition days are overwhelmingly weighted towards the official opposition. Of the 20 opposition days, 17 are at the disposal of the leader of the opposition. Three out of the 20 are at the disposal of the second largest opposition party, so the Liberal Democrats. And then there is a sort of expectation that the second largest party will do a little bit of sharing out amongst some of the other parties. So this is how, occasionally smaller parties get their own opposition days, but it's kind of, in the gift of the bigger parties making it available.

So, I just want to go back to that Conservative figure of 121 members and think about what it means in a parliamentary context. This is the new Shadow Cabinet by the way that was appointed earlier this week. Those numbers mean that the Conservatives have only 52% of the opposition seats, and the Liberal Democrats have 31%. And this is going to cause certain logistical problems we'd expect over the course of this Parliament. Those 121 members are going to have to work very hard, being the official opposition brings with it certain responsibilities that have to be fulfilled.

First of all, they have to provide a Shadow Cabinet, but also lots of other Shadow Ministers. The Prime Minister has appointed 111 Ministers, that includes whips and it includes Ministers in the House of Lords. In the Common, there's a limit of 95 Ministers. And all of them, their portfolios all have to be shadowed in some way.

Now, it doesn't have to be a one-to-one relationship, and already some of the Shadow Cabinet are double jobbing, I think. But you know, that's 95 Ministers versus 121 opposition MPs is quite a tall order. And there are certain parliamentary functions that they have to fulfil as well, so the Speaker is a Labour Member of Parliament.

So the convention would be that two of his deputies would be drawn from the opposition. So that takes them out of the equation. They have to provide members for the panel of chairs, which preside over public bill committees and sittings in Westminster Hall. They were allocated five select committee chairships. So they have to provide members for that. And they also need to provide a functioning back bench.

And what I mean by that is they literally need people who will speak in debates from the back bench. They need people who will ask questions and put in for oral questions. They need to provide select committee and bill committee members, not in huge numbers, but they need to fill those seats and provide an opposition in those forums. And then after all of that, of course, they're also there to represent their constituencies as every MP is.

So those Conservative MPs I'm anticipating are going to be absolutely run ragged and pulled in a million directions over the course of this Parliament. So another really standout feature of the Parliament is just the sheer number of new MPs on both sides. The image here is of some of the hottest property in Westminster in the days after the election, which is little picture

books of all of the elected MPs, in different formats, depending on whether you know, who, what party they are or things like that. They've got my initials on because people try to steal these in the early days, they're so valuable.

A fun game to play is watch some footage from the Chamber of Westminster Hall and see if you can spot the Clerk subtly picking up one of the books and frantically thumbing through trying to identify who the members are. Honestly, Hansard colleagues have saved my bacon so many times because, I just... it'll be a long time before I know who they all are.

335 members of the house are brand new. So, you know, a very large proportion, 15 are returning members who, used to be known rather unflatteringly as retreads. But members who were elected in a previous election and 300 are coming back, from the immediately preceding Parliament. And for them, it's going to take them a long time to get to grips with navigating the house's, procedures and conventions. There are so many unwritten rules, and even if they are written down, there's almost no time to read any of it.

If you watch debates at the moment, you'll see a lot of irritation from chairs about how often MPs are referring to each other as you, for example, they really haven't got the hang of the convention that you address the chair. And you should be talking about other members in the third party. Members not understanding that once they've spoken, they're expected to stay for subsequent speeches or return for the windups. Not realising they should be notifying in advance if they want to speak or bobbing in the chamber if they want to be called.

Getting to grips with speaking limits being imposed at short notice in debates, and getting to grips with, you know, debates constantly being, you know, the flow of a debate constantly being interrupted by the maiden speeches, which are still going on. There's still 12 maiden speeches left to be delivered in this Parliament. And I think often what this serves to highlight is just how opaque a lot of Parliamentary procedure and convention is. And also the fact that with the numbers being as they are, there's just a dearth of old hands around to watch and learn from. And there's a new team presiding over all of this.

So the Speaker hasn't changed. Lindsay Hoyle, Labor MP for Chorley but he has an entirely new team under him. The chairman of ways and means, who's his first deputy is Nus Ghani. And then, Judith Cummins is the next deputy. And Caroline Nokes is the next. They're all themselves experienced members and experienced in chairing other types of parliamentary business, but all new to sitting in the chair in the chamber, which is also a fun experience. So, let me talk a little bit, if I go back to select committees, so all of this ramped up in July, right? So, you're then thinking, well, surely select committees can't be far behind.

My committee met for the first time last week, and most committees met for the first time last week. Why on earth has it taken so long? Well, you have to go through this process every time, and it can be very protracted. After the election, you have the state opening. The first step is for the house to agree which party will chair which committee. And that is done in rough proportion to the strength of the parties in the house. But it is agreed by the parties and the Speaker sort of behind the scenes, and then a motion putting that formally is put to the house, and then they agree. So I think the majority of the chairships now are obviously Labour.

There are five Conservative chaired committees. There are three Liberal Democrat chaired committees. That happened just before the house rose for the summer recess. And we only squeezed it in then because the Government elongated the sitting. In September then we had the elections for chair. So you obviously can't elect until you know which party you're electing from. That happened in September, then we went on recess again. So the motion to appoint

members was only tabled, the first motions were only tabled a couple of weeks ago. And they've actually happened in a rather stop start fashion.

We've had motions going forward, which have had some Conservative names on them, but no Labour names. We've had a party set up with, committee set up with only Labour MPs. We've had, you know, some Liberal Democrat names and not others. So motions are actually still coming through to fill spaces on committees. And then it's the house itself which passes those motions to appoint the members, and only then can the committees start their work.

So a reasonable question is what we have all been doing in the meantime, while we haven't had select committees to work for. Honestly, it's been so busy, I kind of have worried about how I would fit a functioning select committee into my working life. Because, you know, well at the beginning, as I said, an opportunity for a little bit of stress free holiday, but lots of election prep and volunteering, lots of members of my team were volunteering for the library research services over this period, or were buddies in the new members reception area. People also went on secondments and placements. People on my team were at the National Audit Office, in the Office of Rail and Road. And lots of other activities, which are sort of vaguely represented here.

Lots of strategising, lots of research, lots of talking to stakeholders. So for us, that was talking to lots of people in the transport sector to find out what the policy issues they thought were going to be important in the new Parliament. So we've kept ourselves more than busy. Turning to how the election of committee chairs happens, so since 2010, the chairs of all Commons Departmental Committees have been elected by the wider group of MPs.

So the House agree which parties chair, which committees, candidates put themselves forward, they need a minimum level of support for their own party and optionally they can say that they have supporters from other parties. The elections are held on the alternative vote system, and they happened this year on the 11th of September. And if you want to know what this early September period was like in Parliament for MPs, I would direct you towards the candidate statement made by Cat Smith, who was an experienced Labour MP standing for Chair of the Procedure Committee.

And all of the candidates get a chance to issue a statement. Cat Smith did not talk at length about lots of ins and outs of parliamentary procedure and things she'd want to change or how she would run the committee. Instead, her campaign slogan was, stop this nonsense. Are you feeling bombarded with WhatsApps? Have all these diary invites clogged up your Outlook? Have you slipped on all the leaflets under your office door? Let's stop this nonsense.

She was so frustrated with how annoying the campaigns to be elected as select committee chairs were, that she made this the sole focus of her candidate statement. She wants to reign in over-excitable colleagues. I like that. She was successful in her campaign for Chair of the Procedure Committee. So, interested to see now what she's going to do to stop this nonsense. So very much a feverish campaigning atmosphere for that early September period.

And this is what a result sheet looks like. This is the result in for the Transport Committee, we had a four way contest, between three returning members who had all previously been on the Transport Committee, Ruth Cadbury, Fabian Hamilton, and Grahame Morris, and one brand new MP, Catherine Atkinson. Although it was a four-way contest, you can see that Ruth Cadbury had a pretty decisive lead from the start, and she was duly elected as chair of the committee. So that's who I am now working with on a daily basis.

I am proud to say that transport was the most highly contested of the committees. A few others had three candidates. There were seven unopposed elections, probably most surprisingly treasury, where Dame Meg Hillier, who's the chair, previously the chair of the Public Accounts Committee, had put herself forward. And maybe, you know, she's got a pretty formidable reputation, maybe colleagues thought that they wouldn't stand a chance. This was actually the lowest percentage of unopposed posts since 2010. And that makes sense because we had the fewest incumbents, what with the change in party.

And so many members standing down, only three chairs in fact, have continued in the same post from the last Parliament. They are across the board quite an experienced bunch. Only two of the new chairs have no front bench experience of any sort, whether in Government or opposition. Four of them have previously chaired another committee. Eight newly elected MPs did put themselves forward for election.

Only one of them was successful. That was for the Scottish Affairs Committee, where it was two new MPs, facing off against each other in a very tight contest. Really, you know, one of the reasons for that is that amongst Labour backbenchers, there were only new MPs who were able to stand for that.

59% of committees are now chaired by a woman, which is by far the highest proportion we've ever had. It was 32% at the start of the last Parliament, and 18% of those chairs are from black and minority ethnic communities. I have to thank Marc Geddes and Stephen Bates in a Hansard Society blog for some of those statistics. So looking at the composition of the Committees, Transport is typical. We have our chair, Ruth Cadbury, who's Labour.

We have six more Labour MPs, two Conservatives and two Liberal Democrats. So big change from the last Parliament. We no longer have SNP members represented on most committees. We have Liberal Democrats for the first time in a number of years, and obviously just two seats for the Conservatives. On transport every single member of this committee, apart from the chair, is a brand new MP. So, you know, while they're on a steep learning curve about everything else in Parliament, they're also going to be learning how to be on a select committee.

And it's notable that this committee is non-majority female. Which, you know, for most of the last Parliament, we only ever had one woman on the Transport Committee. And we have to thank for that, well, there's the Conservatives nominated two women, but the Labor Party also this time adopted a policy of having gender balanced delegations to select committees.

So as I said, the process has been a little bit stop start, we're not done yet. We still don't have a backbench business committee up and functioning, for example. That means that they can't yet schedule any backbench business debates. The Petitions Committee was only recently set up, and that means that the e-petitions system that they supervise was only opened last week. And there are some other committees that still need to be constituted, like some of the internal ones, the ones we call domestic committees like administration and finance. And until those are sorted out, we can't then constitute the liaison committee, which is the committee that brings together the chairs of all of the other committees.

The divvying up of seats between the parties is, you know, it can only ever be rough. because with 11 members, you can't have 0.25 of an MP sitting on your committee and so on. But there is some tinkering in some spots to make sure that smaller parties do get some representation, in particularly appropriate committees. So there is now an SNP member on Scottish Affairs.

There are three applied committee members on the Welsh Affairs. There's still one vacancy on that committee. Northern Ireland Affairs. It has 13 members, explicitly so that it can have a slightly broader representation.

So there's representation from SDLP, Alliance and DUP on that committee. And the Greens have retained a seat on the Environmental Audit Committee as well, which used to be held by Caroline Lucas. Now thinking ahead, we're only at the beginning of working with our select committees. A huge amount of work is going on that won't necessarily be visible to the outside world in terms of them getting to know each other, them getting to understand their remits, taking briefings from stakeholders, having round tables about various policy issues to get their head around what they think their scrutiny priorities might be for the next Parliament.

As I say, we only started meeting last week on transport. And the really exciting thing is that select committees have complete control over their own agendas. So we don't yet know which of these transport modes or some as yet, uninvented transport mode, the Transport Committee might want to look at. But it has complete freedom to kind of choose within that remit what it wants to inquire into. When we think about what new committees might do, I think there's two things that every committee will definitely do. Regular scrutiny and accountability hearings. So that's, you know, the work of the Secretary of State for Transport, bringing in major organisations like the regulators to account for their work.

We'll also respond to events. So, you know, that air traffic control disruption for example that I mentioned earlier, when something big happens in the transport sphere the committee will want to respond. A couple of years ago when P&O Ferries sacked 800 workers overnight the committee held a joint session with the Business Committee responding to that. But there's, you know, there's a whole lot of other things that we could do. Scrutinising the proprieties of the new Government as set out in the King's speech, or looking the other way and looking at policy topics we think are being neglected by the new Government.

We could suggest future policy priorities, and we can also continue work from the last Parliament. So, there is some hope that some of the things that committees were doing when Prorogation happened, new committees may choose to revisit and may choose to bring forward reports, on those kind of topics, so that not all of that work is lost, but obviously we're in a very different situation. Some of that work was done because we were scrutinising the last Government's policies. The new Government has a completely different set of policies.

So how valid is that work in this new scenario? So, I'm going to finish with a couple of quick things to look out for. I've mentioned Private Members' Bills a couple of times, and as ever, there's a massive flurry of Private Members' Bills that come through three main routes. One is the ballot, which I'll talk about in a sec, one of which is Presentation Bills, which is on any sitting day, any MP can decide to present a bill to Parliament. Won't get a debate at that point, but they can bring it forward if they like and put it on the paper. And then there's what we call 10 minute rule motions, which is a bit of a fiction of MPs asking the house's permission to bring in a bill. You can tell from what I've just said, that they don't need the house's permission to bring in a bill. They can do it anytime they like, but the value of the 10 minute rule motion is they get 10 minutes of prime time in the chamber to talk about it. But the ballot bills are the ones that are up first. And the Private Members' Bill ballot is one of the great sort of parliamentary set pieces at the beginning of every session.

This happened, the ballot was drawn on Thursday, the 5th of September this year. And in the previous two days, what you have is MPs dropping into the division lobbies to pick their

favourite number and write their name beside it in a big book There's so much that we do now by email in digital means But for the Private Members' Bill ballot, you still have to show up and write your name in a big book beside a number that you think might be lucky for you. And why do you want to be in this ballot? Well, there are 13 Fridays throughout the parliamentary session for consideration of Private Members' Bills. The first seven of those are reserved for second reading of bills.

So a substantive debate on the principle of the bill. Eight to 13 are for bills which have reached a later stage. So ones that are coming back from committee have precedence at that point. So the top seven who are drawn in the ballot, that means as long as they all choose different days for each other, because they choose the day for their second reading, they're guaranteed a full day's debate if they want it. Now if they want to make further progress, they're going to have to engineer it so that the debate ends a little bit before the full day because if you're still talking when the music stops at 2:30 PM, then your bill is talked out and it goes back on the list at the end of the queue.

So what you want is to engineer a situation where, you're able to bring the debate to a close, maybe about 2:00 PM is probably ideal. And if you're lower than that, if you're kind of eight to 20 on the list, it's a good idea to pick a slot where you're going. You're going to be second, but you want to pick a slot after somebody whose bill is generally agreed by everybody to be a good thing, because then that debate might happen quickly and you might get the remaining time for a debate on your bill. So it's a valuable commodity, but these ballot bills are just the tip of the iceberg. But you have a much better chance, usually of your bill being debated, first of all, and then getting through if you come out in the ballot.

So this is the new Chairman of Ways and Means, Nusrat Ghani, drawing the ballot with the help of the Clerk Assistant Sarah Davis. We literally have little wooden balls with numbers on, and they go into an old fashioned goldfish bowl and they get drawn out. I don't know why they're wearing white gloves, it is lost in the midst of time, they don't normally. And these were the 20 members who came out of the ballot this time. And if you look at the list after a little while, something rather odd about the list begins to become apparent, which is that there's not a single Conservative MP on that list.

Now, given what I said earlier about the pressures on Conservative MPs' time, it's possible that they might be slightly relieved that they're not going to have to pilot Private Members' Bills, through the Commons as well. But it's not that they didn't enter, the names of everybody who entered the ballot are published as well, and they entered in just the same strength, proportionately as they normally would. But there are a few parliamentary processes like this where instead of things being divided up proportionately by party, it is entirely random.

And this is one of them, and this is an extremely unlikely but very random result where simply no Conservatives were drawn out in the first 20. On the other hand, if you look at number seven, the TUV had a 100% success rate in being drawn out at this in the top seven of the Private Members' Bills ballot. So Jim Alistair will have that chance to have his bill debated. The other sort of big random event of the parliamentary week is probably the draws for oral questions, especially Prime Minister's questions. And there again, sometimes you just get really odd results because again, it's randomised on a system. Somebody presses a button on a computer and it spits out the result.

And, you know, sometimes you would just get a long list of members from one party or one or two parties, and that's why you see the Speaker interspersing questions on the paper with

other questions just from people who are bobbing because one of the things he's trying to do is to even out the party balance of the questioners at Prime Minister's questions. So the ballot bills were presented on 16th of October, so that formally kicks off the parliamentary process, but no debate at that point. The first Private Members' Bill Friday is coming up on the 29th of November.

Top of the list was Kim Leadbeater and, this is the bill that she has chosen to introduce the Terminally Ill Adults End of Life Bill. It's, I mean, it's an interesting bill for all sorts of reasons. I think one of the, you know, it's notable that maybe one of the most talked about, one of the potentially most significant pieces of legislation in this session is not a Government bill at all. It is a Private Members' Bill. So, I think an early version of this might have been called the Assisted Dying Bill, so you can understand what it's about. And because this is not a Government bill, it will be handled differently. Private Members' Bills do go through, they go through all the same stages, right? You've got first reading, second reading, committee, third reading, off to the House of Lords for them to do their thing, maybe comes back with amendment, at the end you get Royal Assent.

So the fundamentals of the process are the same, but the way it is handled are different. And that is going to apply to this bill. Well, there probably won't be whipping on this bill. Opinions are divided on it within the Government. I think the Health Secretary has come out and said that he personally doesn't support it. But there's plenty of other people on the Labour benches who do. This will probably be treated as a kind of matter of conscience in the same way as legislation about abortion has been done in the past, for example. And then Private Members' Bills are not programmed. There is no active timetabling of how this happens. And this used to be how all bills were considered.

And what this means is I've talked about a bill being talked out on a Friday. Now that wouldn't happen to a Government bill because the Government would put down a program motion that says, we're gonna spend five hours talking about this, and at the end there will be a vote. But you don't have that provision for Private Members' Bills. So it all is managed in a much more fluid way, and it means that really determined backbenchers who want to talk at length about something, can deliberately talk a bill out and make sure that it doesn't make any formal progress.

But if it does pass its second reading, it then goes into a public bill committee. Same as other sorts of bills. But again, that is not programmed. So a Government bill in Bill Committee, they will say, we're gonna talk about this for four weeks, and here's the bits we're going to consider on which days, and then we'll bring it to an end. We'll report back to the house. Public Bill Committees could go on indefinitely if the members on them want to prolong it. The other difference is that it's Kim Ledbetter herself who will be sort of responsible for, recruiting the members to go on this Bill Committee.

There's a very strong convention that, you know, you don't just pick the people who agree with you, that the composition would reflect the range of opinion expressed in the house at second reading. And another quirk is that there can only be one Private Members' Bill in committee at one time. So if this gets to committee and the debate, you know, progresses over a number of sittings, none of the other Private Members' Bills could make progress in the meantime.

So it's going to be really, really interesting to see how this goes on the 29th of November and whether this is a bill that is making further progress or not. Last thing I just wanted to mention. We have in this Parliament a Modernisation Committee which has been set up. This is in some

ways a bit of a blast from the past, which is an odd thing to say about modernisation. But it was a manifesto proposal of the Labour Party to set up a committee to look at modernisation of the House of Commons.

One of the things they wanted it to focus on was the matter of members having second jobs that were detracting from, they thought were detracting from their role as MPs. The committee has been set up by temporary standing order. So, it's only valid for a certain period of time. It's not like one of the departmental committees, which you will automatically have every Parliament.

And I say a blast from the past because we've had modernisation committees before. They were set up by Labor Governments in 1997, 2001, 2005. And they have brought forward some really quite significant, reforms to Commons procedure in that time. They introduced Westminster Hall, the secondary debating chamber, where members can discuss lots of topics that you'd be unlikely ever to make time for in the chamber. They altered the sitting times of the Commons. So every sitting used to start at 2:30 PM and would finish, you know, just before midnight. They modernise the kind of working hours. They're still a bit quirky, but now Monday is the only day that has that kind of late start to allow members to travel down from their constituencies. They introduced the programming of bills, which I've just talked to, that was investigated by them before it was introduced. And they also proposed the introduction of topical oral questions.

So if you look at a departmental question time, there's a certain number of questions that are on the paper, you'll spend maybe 45 minutes talking about those, and then you switch to 15 minutes of quickfire topical questions at the end. So they have been very significant in the past, and we wait to see what this, modernisation committee will come up with. It has an unusual membership and particularly unusual situation with the chair. The chair is Lucy Powell MP. She is not just a Labour MP, but she is the Leader of the House of Commons. So she's a Government Minister. And it is not at all usual for a select committee to be chaired by a Government Minister. This, it has been true of previous modernisation committees.

And, you know, you could argue, well, does this mean it's just going to be Government dominated? But on the other hand, you could say, well, if the proposals are going to go anywhere, they will need to have Government support and the committee has a better chance of getting things done. With, you know, the stamp of approval from the leader of the house already in place The shadow leader of the house is also on the committee, although, I noticed that was Chris Philp and he has a new job as Shadow Home Secretary, so he's no doubt about to be replaced on Mod Comm as we call it. The other thing about the membership, which is notable in fact of this being a modernisation committee, is again, there's no space for the smaller parties on this committee.

And this was raised at the debate when the committee was set up and the leader of the house said, look, if we made the committee big enough that we could have representation from all the smaller parties, it would simply be unwieldy and we wouldn't be able to take decisions. So, you can make your own judgements about that argument. But what she did commit to was very intensive engagement with smaller parties about their views and to feed those in other ways. She was also questioned about what the relationship of this committee would be with other Commons committees that are already there to consider reforms to Commons procedure. We have a Procedure Committee, we have a Standards Committee, we have an Administration Committee, and her response is that she wants Mod Comm to be a kind of clearing house for proposals from those other committees. So they will kind of expedite some

of those things and make sure that they get agreed. So we wait to see how that will work as well. They've agreed these three strategic aims, driving up standards, improving culture and working practices, and reforming working procedures to make the House of Commons more effective. That's obviously a very broad remit indeed.

So they have just recently issued a call for views on what topics to prioritise, potential A Level Politics project to write a submission to the modernisation committee. I'm sure my colleagues will thank me for encouraging you to do that. And one of the things that really caught my eye in the memorandum that the leader wrote to the committee in which they've subsequently published is, and I'm a former Clerk of the Backbench Business Committee, so I'm always interested in what people say about backbench business. And she said, look, if you look at backbench business debates allocated by the committee over the last few years, some of them haven't been that well attended.

Sometimes the house has risen almost embarrassingly early because these debates are folding early and maybe wouldn't some of that time be better spent on legislative scrutiny. So there might be a little bit of a rebalancing of the kind of shape of the week in the Commons ahead if the leader of the house gets the Modernisation Committee to look at that.

I'm going to leave it there. I hope that wasn't too quickfire.

I'll look to Anne-Marie to tell me if there's any time for questions. But as ever a pleasure to be here.

Thank you very much indeed. And I'll hand back over.