

Back to the future? The latest 'modernisation' votes

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The main business in the Commons on Wednesday, 26 January 2005 was the latest series of votes in the process of 'modernisation' of the House of Commons. They constituted a partial reversal of one of the more recent reforms – the new hours - as well as a rebuff for the Leader of the House, Peter Hain. They also revealed interesting splits within the three main political parties. This very short briefing note explains the four issues and shows the extent to which they divided the political parties.

The issues

The vote that attracted most media attention was an amendment moved by George Howarth to the sitting hours.

Great expectations had been raised about the introduction of family-friendly hours in October 2002, but some backbench MPs soon began to complain about the new arrangements, especially those involving a late ending on Mondays, followed by an early start for committees on Tuesday mornings. Two EDMs critical about the changes had both attracted widespread support: 191 MPs (102 of them Labour) signed George Howarth's EDM 607, including 30 MPs who had voted for one or more of the changes. Over 200 - 151 of them Labour put their names to Howarth's later EDM, No. 262 the following session, which had called for an urgent review of sitting hours.

Howarth's amendment called for a return to the hours of business on Tuesday that had existed prior to October 2002: 2.30pm to 10pm. A second amendment in the name of Brian Donohoe called for just one vote on a Thursday evening, and for business to finish at 5pm (or if other amendments were carried, by 6pm at the latest)

The House also voted on the First Report of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Connecting Parliament with the Public* (HC 368), which included plans to upgrade the Parliament website, to embark upon a Parliamentary roadshow and to publish and distribute a new voters' guide. The last vote of the evening was on a proposal from Peter Hain, the Leader of the House, to phase in between 2005 and 2009 the reduction in car mileage rates which Members had voted for in November 2004.

The votes

Howarth's amendment to the hours was carried by 292 votes to 225, whilst Donohoe's was failed by a wide margin of 80 votes to 388.

The House also endorsed *Connecting Parliament with the Public* by an overwhelming majority of 375 votes to 14 (HC 368), but rejected Hain's advice to phase in the reduction in car mileage rates

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The Table below shows the splits within the three main parties. With one exception, every vote saw all three parties divide. Some of the splits were deep indeed.

Main parties' voting on 'modernisation' proposals, 26 January 2005.

	Result	Lab		Lib Dem		Con	
		For	Against	For	Against	For	Against
Old Tuesday hours	Carried	164	165	22	19	90	42
Thursday at 5pm and/or 6pm	Defeated	61	226	8	35	4	120
Making Parliament accessible	Carried	277	0	41	1	40	15
Phase in car mileage reduction	Defeated	74	166	9	29	18	47

Note: figures include tellers, but exclude two double votes[†]

The most dramatic split came amongst the PLP over Howarth's amendment to the hours. The PLP split 164 in favour, 165 against. Most of the Government whips, including the Chief Whip, Hilary Armstrong, voted in favour of Howarth's amendment, along with several members of the Cabinet including John Prescott, John Reid and Jack Straw. But the fact that other Cabinet ministers – including Gordon Brown, Charles Clarke, Alan Johnson and Ruth Kelly – voted in the no lobby indicates that the vote was genuinely free. Despite more Labour MPs voting against it than for it, George Howarth's amendment was carried because it received the support of two thirds of Conservative backbenchers (90/42) and a narrow majority of Liberal Democrat MPs (22/19).[‡]

Donohoe's amendment was opposed by the majority of Labour, Conservative and Lib Dem MPs – but it did attract the support of 61 Labour backbenchers, along with a handful of other MPs. Conversely, the majority of all three main parties (including all Labour MPs who voted) supported *Connecting Parliament with the Public* (although many Conservative MPs absented themselves from the vote).

Hain's proposal to phase in the reduction in mileage rates was opposed by the majority of all three parties, but it attracted the support of 74 Labour backbenchers, along with significant minorities of the other three parties (although again many Conservative MPs absented themselves from the vote).

[†] Hansard records both John McDonnell (Labour) and Sir Michael Spicer (Conservative) as voting twice on the car mileage reduction vote. These could have been tactical (and deliberate) abstentions, or they could merely be mistakes, either by Hansard or by the MPs themselves.

[‡] George Galloway also turned up to vote in favour of the return to the old Tuesday hours.