

Parties split over Commons reforms (again)

PHILIP COWLEY and MARK STUART*

One of the standard rules of parliamentary reform is that there is an inverse relationship between the importance of any reform and the amount of media coverage it attracts. The decision to allow MPs to make a point of order during a division without wearing a hat attracted considerable media coverage; the introduction of automatic programming of legislation – which has had real consequences for the scrutiny of bills – came into being without almost any external discussion. So it was on 1 November 2006, when MPs voted on a series of reforms to the legislative process and to members' allowances. Many of the changes were passed without any discussion (or even mention) at all outside the House, including the wider use of the Special Standing Committee procedure for the consideration of Government bills, a reform which could do more to improve the quality of parliamentary scrutiny of bills than any other reform in the last twenty years.

Several of the changes – including the wider use of SSCs – passed without a vote. But in addition, MPs divided on four other main issues, summarised in this short briefing note.

The divisions

A Government motion insisting that notice of amendments to bills be submitted not later than three sitting days before they were due to be considered was passed by 323 votes to 172, a majority of 151.[†] MPs also voted in favour of a Government motion that will establish, from 1 April next year, 'a separate Allowance for Members of Parliament to assist in the work of communicating with the public on parliamentary business'. The motion was carried by 290 votes to 200,[‡] a majority of ninety.

Many of reforms of the House of Commons introduced by the late Robin Cook, Leader of the House of Commons in the first half of the 2001 Parliament have bedded down, but not all have survived. The introduction of earlier sittings on Tuesdays (voted upon in October 2002, and introduced in January 2003) was reversed by MPs in January 2005. Likewise, the introduction of September sittings, introduced in the same wave of reforms mentioned above, never really took root. The Commons met for two weeks in 2003 and 2004, but has not met since. An attempt last night by the Labour backbencher, David Winnick, to 'hold regular sittings for a period in September' failed by 122 votes to 354, a wide margin of 232. This has been partly compensated for by the recent introduction of a procedure for the tabling and answering of written questions and the making of written ministerial statements.

In the final vote, MPs voted by 365 votes to 62, a decisive margin of 303, in favour of a Government motion that would give the Speaker the power between certain hours of specified debates to impose a maximum time limit on MPs' speeches of not less than three minutes.

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[†] Not 223 to 172, as recorded in *Hansard*.

[‡] Not 290 to 199, as recorded in *Hansard*.

To a varying extent, all of these issues split the three main parties (as shown in the Table below). Labour was almost completely cohesive in most votes – the largest split came over September sittings, where the party’s MPs split 43/228 against the Winnick amendment. The Conservatives were almost completely cohesive on one vote (the party’s MPs dividing 3/149 against the introduction of the communication allowance), but splintered on two votes – amendments (where the party divided dividing 34/117* against the change) and September sittings, 34/108†) and split pretty much down the middle on short speeches, splitting 71/59 in favour of the change. And the Lib Dems – who have a tendency to split much more than the other parties when it comes to free votes – managed to be absolutely cohesive on two votes (over amendments and speeches), with (two-to-one) splits over the other two, dividing 18/34 against the introduction of the new allowance and 36/17 in favour of September sittings.

Major party divisions over Commons reform, 1 November 2006

	Labour				Conservative				Liberal Democrat			
	For		Against		For		Against		For		Against	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Amendments	283	99	2	1	34	23	117	77	0	0	53	100
Allowance	271	96	10	4	3	2	149	98	18	35	34	65
September	43	16	228	84	34	24	108	76	36	68	17	32
Speeches	234	98	5	2	71	55	59	45	50	100	0	0

Apart from the splits themselves, the other thing about the votes is the way each party voted. We have noted before how many of the ‘modernisation’ votes have ceased to be cross-party affairs, and are instead passed through the Commons thanks largely to the votes of Labour MPs (albeit on free votes).

Only one of the four votes saw a three party consensus: the majority of all three main parties voted in favour of the restriction on speech length. The issue of September sittings produced a consensus between the two major parties, with majorities of both Conservative and Labour MPs voting against their reintroduction. However, the two other issues saw the overwhelming majority of Labour MPs vote down the overwhelming majority of Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs. Both the changes to the amendment procedures and the introduction of the communication allowance are reforms that were supported by very few Opposition MPs.

* In addition, Alan Duncan, the Conservative MP for Rutland and Melton appears to have cast a deliberate abstention by voting in both lobbies.

† In addition, Bob Spink, the Conservative MP for Castle Point, who spoke in the debate against what he called ‘stopping the Government’s 80-day scrutiny holiday’, appears to have cast a deliberate abstention by voting in both lobbies.