



PRESS NOTICE

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House of Commons votes to be more internally democratic: based on UCL Constitution Unit research

Late yesterday evening the House of Commons made a historic decision to democratise its own working, and hand more power to backbench MPs. It voted to create an elected 'Backbench Business Committee', to schedule business in the chamber roughly one day per week. This proposal can be directly traced to research by the Constitution Unit at University College London.

The Commons has already decided to democratise itself through the election of select committee chairs and deputy speakers (acted on last week). The Backbench Business Committee adds to these moves to give MPs more control of their own institution and reduce the power of party whips. All these proposals came from the 'Wright committee' in the last parliament, but the Backbench Business Committee decision was delayed until yesterday. The new committee will be elected shortly.

Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit, Dr Meg Russell, was the original author of the Backbench Business Committee proposal (see notes below). Today she said: "The term 'historic' is overused, but is genuinely fitting in this case. For over 100 years government has had overwhelming control of the Commons agenda. This decision changes that, giving members back greater control of their own institution. Along with new members, and new elected select committees, this is a fresh and exciting start for parliament."

The Wright committee, which recommended these changes, was established in the wake of the MPs' expenses crisis. **Meg Russell continued:** "The expenses crisis was hugely damaging in the last parliament, but these changes show how from the depth of crisis can come new opportunity. These changes will make parliament stronger in holding government to account, better able to debate topical issues, and therefore more deserving of public respect."

Notes for editors

- The Constitution Unit is an independent and non-partisan research centre based at University College London (www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit).
- Dr Meg Russell was lead author on the research report [*The House Rules? International Lessons for Enhancing the Autonomy of the House of Commons*](#), published in October 2007. This was the principal output of a research project on the Governance of Parliament funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Meg was later specialist adviser to the Wright committee. This research report was the first (and only) publication to recommend establishment of a Backbench Business Committee before the Wright committee was set up.
- The [Wright committee](#) (officially titled the Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons) was established in July 2009, and reported in November 2009. Its chair was the Labour MP Tony Wright. The Backbench Business Committee was one of its central recommendations, along with electing select committee chairs and members.
- The Commons voted in principle to create a Backbench Business Committee in the last parliament, but ran out of time before the election to debate the necessary "standing orders" to set it up. This decision was instead taken last night.
- The Backbench Business Committee will have eight members, uniquely all elected by the House of Commons as a whole in a secret ballot. It will be responsible for scheduling 35 days of business per parliamentary session (roughly 1 per week), which will include general and topical debates as proposed

- by members. These are currently scheduled by government whips. Election of the chair of the new committee is expected shortly, and election of its members shortly after that.
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