

How 2 Lobby the House of Commons

Introduction

The Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is the supreme law making body in the United Kingdom and British overseas territories. It is made up of two houses – the (lower) House of Commons and the (upper) House of Lords. It alone has parliamentary sovereignty and is headed by the British Monarch.

The House of Commons is a democratically elected body, consisting of 646 members, who are known as 'Members of Parliament' or MPs. Members are elected by the first-past-the-post election system and hold office until Parliament is dissolved (a maximum of five years). Each member is elected by, and represents, an electoral district known as a constituency.

Powers

The House of Commons makes and passes UK law; sometimes for only one nation within the UK. It also acts as an effective scrutiny body by checking the work of the government and ensuring that any abuse of power is prevented.

Composition

The party with the largest number of MPs will usually form a government to run the country. They are collectively led by the Prime Minister with their Cabinet (senior ministers) and Ministers.

Due to the electoral system in the UK, it is most common for a single party to form a government, but it is also possible for more

than one party to form a coalition, effectively sharing power.

Traditionally, the party with the second highest number of MPs is known as the official opposition and its primary role is to scrutinise the work of the government.

Coupled with the larger parties, the House of Commons also consists of smaller parties and independent MPs, the latter of which often stand for election based on a single issue rather than an ideology.

How does it represent me?

- Each MP represents a geographical area known as a constituency – each with an average electorate of about 80,000 constituents (people who live in that area).
- MPs are elected for one term in office (a maximum of five years) and they are allowed to stand as many times as they wish.
- Your MP is there to represent your views and concerns (whether or not you actually voted for them).
- MPs come from all walks of life. Many come from a business or legal background, but many others are trade unionists, farmers, journalists, youth workers, teachers or even actors.

How can I influence my MP?

- MPs usually run weekly 'surgeries' where you can visit them to discuss any issues and concerns that you have (whether these are local,

national or even international). They tend to be advertised in local newspapers and usually happen on a Saturday or weekday evening, taking place in a public building such as a library or a more relaxed place like a supermarket or pub.

- If you write to your constituency MP, they are obliged to respond as soon as possible, although the length of time will depend on the amount of existing casework staff are dealing with. MPs pay a great deal of attention to their postbag, so just writing to your MP expressing your concerns and encouraging others to do the same can have a massive effect, especially if it's regarding a local issue.
- You can invite your MP to discuss a certain issue with your group or alternatively, you can arrange to visit them at the House of Commons if you make an appointment with staff in their parliamentary office. MPs usually spend the first three days of the week in London and the rest in their constituency, therefore if you wish to meet with them, make sure you schedule your meeting accordingly.
- Nearly all MPs are members of political parties and tend to stick to their party's policies on certain issues. It is therefore worth finding out what the overall party position is on an issue before talking to your MP. Ministers are obliged to follow their party's policies, irrespective of personal feelings.

- Occasionally, parties allow their MPs a free vote (or 'conscience' vote) on an issue that is particularly sensitive or moral, such as abortion. When a free vote takes place, MPs are sometimes more open to influence by their constituents. If the law that concerns you relates to this kind of issue and your MP doesn't have strong personal view about it, your arguments could have a significant effect on how they vote.

Can I influence other MPs?

- It can be worth contacting other MPs who may have a particular interest in your issue, especially if their own constituency is affected. The most prominent of these would be the government Minister, the Opposition spokesperson and the other party spokespeople responsible for the area you want to influence people on.
- A number of MPs sit on Select Committees, which are responsible for scrutinising their respective government departments through enquiries into topical areas of work.
- Many MPs are also members of All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs), which meet regularly to discuss specific issues they are particularly interested in, such as young people or homelessness.

How do I contact my elected representative?

Go directly to www.writetothem.com to search for your MPs contact details.

You can contact MPs through their local constituency office or directly at the House of Commons by calling the switchboard (020 7219 3000) and asking for their office. You may speak to an MP directly but are more likely to get their researcher or secretary.

You can also write to your MP at:
Their Name MP
House of Commons
Westminster, London
SW1A 0AA

For electronic information:
The parliament website, www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/alcm.cfm, provides details of all MPs names, titles and qualifications.

Can I visit my MP at the Houses of Parliament?

You can visit your MP at the Houses of Parliament and to avoid disappointment it's advisable to write to them in advance requesting an appointment. Having said this, it can be possible to just turn up and wait in the lobby queue outside the House of Commons to meet your MP.

Once allowed in, make your way to the central lobby where you can fill out a green card requesting a short meeting.

This will be passed to them if they are in the building, but they are under no obligation to speak with you and may be busy with other meetings and events.

Where can I get further information?

Visit www.writetothem.com or www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/alcm.cfm

For more information

about BYC training:

www.byc.org.uk/training

or to download further resources:

www.byc.org.uk/resources

British Youth Council

We empower young people across the UK to have a say and be heard.

www.byc.org.uk

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