

Overview of visit

Background

- 1.1 In November 2005 members of the Procedure Committee discussed the possibility of travelling together to various overseas parliaments to study developments in parliamentary practice and procedure. The period selected for the study program was a fortnight during the 2006 Easter break in sittings. Members decided to use their individual study leave entitlements for the purpose. The alternative of requesting the Prime Minister to include the visit as part of the official delegation program was not pursued because of likely delays in approval and planning.
- 1.2 All members of the committee expressed an interest in participating in the visit but varying circumstances prevented some from joining the study group. The following committee members took part in the visit:
 - Mrs Margaret May MP (Chair);
 - Mr Luke Hartsuyker MP;
 - Ms Kelly Hoare MP; and
 - Hon Roger Price MP.

Because of the nature of the issues to be studied, the committee decided to invite the Chief Government Whip, Mr Kerry Bartlett, to be

part of the study group. Mr Bartlett was not available for the whole visit but he was able to join the group for its meetings at the House of Commons, House of Lords and Scottish Parliament.

- 1.3 The Clerk of the House approved the participation of a staff member to act as secretary to the group because of the procedural significance of the program.

The program

- 1.4 At the committee meeting on 10 November 2005 the Chair invited members to suggest themes and issues to be included in the study program. On 1 December 2005 the committee approved a program and list of issues to be studied. The final program is at Appendix A. The preliminary issues list (which was sent to the parliaments to be visited to help them develop suitable programs) is at Appendix B. Background information on the committee which was also sent to the parliaments to be visited is at Appendix C.
- 1.5 The visit commenced on 14 April and continued until 3 May. Meetings were held on each working day where possible (i.e. there were no meetings on weekends or public holidays and one possible working day was used for travel to the Isle of Man). In hindsight, the program itself and the number of legislatures included might be regarded as somewhat ambitious.
- 1.6 While the committee had indicated to the parliaments to be visited the matters it wished to study, the programs were in fact developed by the host parliaments and partly reflect the priorities of those parliaments as well as the availability of Members and senior parliamentary staff. The timing of the visit was planned to include as many sitting days of overseas parliaments as possible. The committee was therefore able to observe sittings of the parliaments at Westminster, Edinburgh, Douglas (Isle of Man) and Paris. Sadly, it was not possible to schedule the visit to Cardiff on a sitting day. However, this turned out to be a benefit as the committee was able to explore thoroughly the technology of the ultra modern chamber of the National Assembly for Wales (which was opened in March 2006).

Major themes

- 1.7 The committee had firm views about what it hoped to learn and achieve during the study program (see Appendix B). The visit turned out to be considerably richer in terms of procedural development and the practice of other chambers than expected and a number of additional/alternative themes commanded the interest and attention of members.
- 1.8 The committee considers that it was successful in collecting relevant information on a number of issues identified at the planning stages of the visit including:
- The use of parliamentary committees for scrutinising legislation and other roles of committees;
 - The involvement of Members of Parliament in the administration of parliaments;
 - Resources allocated to parliamentary committees;
 - The work of comparable committees (procedure and modernisation committees);
 - Question time;
 - Electronic voting;
 - Processing of petitions including electronic petitions;
 - Arrangements for the election of Speakers;
 - Opportunities for private Members to speak.
- 1.9 A study of six chambers (counting both the Lords and Commons at Westminster) was bound to reveal additional matters of interest relating to practice and procedure and, of course, this visit did just that. Amongst other issues the committee developed new lines of inquiry including:
- The amount of time available for individual Members to speak – particularly on bills;
 - The conduct of Members and codes of conduct;
 - The interactive nature of debate in other chambers compared with the use of our chamber to deliver speeches to an often sparsely populated chamber (and the methods by which Members are encouraged to spend more time in the chamber);

- Innovative methods of communicating with the public and the resources allocated to this endeavour;
- The use of technology in modern parliaments (including information screens in chambers and public areas and the use of computers in chambers);
- Sitting hours; and
- Timetabling of formal votes.

Overview Conclusion

- 1.10 The committee set itself a formidable study program and learned a great deal (including things it did not know it needed to learn). It has yet to determine how best to process this information but it is likely that one or more inquiries will follow. In the meantime, a brief summary of some of the more significant issues follows in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 provides an introduction to the Parliaments visited.