

8.3 The passage of legislation

Different Types of Bill

Private Bills
Generally affect a particular area of policy or an organisation as opposed to the population as a whole. Some Private Bills only affect one or two people and these are sometimes referred to as Personal Bills.

Personal Bills
Personal Bills normally deal with regulations affecting one or two people. Sometimes they grant individuals a dispensation from existing law.

Public Bills
Public Bills affect the entire population. The vast majority of Public Bills are government sponsored bills but there is also limited time available for Private members bills sponsored by backbenchers.

Government Bills
Government Bills often seek to fulfil manifesto commitments and are much more likely of success because the government controls the parliamentary timetable. Ministers pilot these Bills through the legislative stages.

Private members bills
A private members ballot allocates slots for such bills and MPs who have entered the ballot and been successful can then advance their legislation. Private members bills offer a way of legislating on controversial issues (eg the Abortion Act) without dividing parties.

Passage of a Government Bill

Preparation
Before a bill is introduced it will normally go through a consultation stage. This can start with a Consultation (Green) Paper. This may then be turned into a firm proposal (White Paper) before the bill is eventually drafted.

First reading
Bill introduced. Date set for second reading. Bill printed up ready for second reading.

Second reading
Minister outlines proposals and deals with general questions. Principles of bill discussed.

Committee stage
Bill sent to standing committee. Separate committees formed for each bill.

Report stage
Amended bill reported out of committee and voted through to...

Third reading
No major amendments at this stage. Look at bill as a whole. Pass or reject.

Commons Stages

Lords Stages

Third reading
If the Bills is passed it moves towards the Royal Assent. If it is rejected or significantly amended then it will return to the Commons for consideration. Under the Parliament Act (see Glossary) the Lords can only delay bills.

Report stage

Committee stage
As in the Commons, the bill passes into its committee stage following the second reading. In the House of Lords, however, this is normally done in the Chamber as a committee of the whole House.

Second reading

First reading

Royal Assent
Before a bill becomes law it must receive the Royal Assent. By convention the monarch does not refuse. The last monarch to refuse was Queen Anne (1707) over the Scottish Militias Bill.

The Work of Committees
There are two broad types committee in the House of Commons

Standing committees
Standing committees usually have the role of considering legislation (see left) or documents. They are made up of 15-60 members, the numbers from each party reflecting the composition of the House itself. Where formed to consider a piece of legislation, standing committees can last for several months, suggesting minor changes and more serious amendments before reporting out to the House.

Select committees
Select committees are not often as involved in the passage of legislation. Since 1979 departmental select committees have had the role of scrutinising the work of the various government departments. Of the non-governmental select committees, the Public Accounts Committee is one of the most high profile and has the role of ensuring value for money in government. This Committee has developed a fearsome reputation for making departments accountable for their spending.