



## BACKGROUND GUIDE

# *WAMUNC XXIV*

The British House of Commons  
Suez Canal Crisis

# *LETTER FROM THE CHAIR*

Dear Members of Parliament (MPs),

I have the honour and pleasure of welcoming you all to the British House of Commons (BHOC) Aberfan Crisis Committee at WAMUNC's 24th Conference. My name is Amelia Shaw, and I will serve as your chair for this committee, or more appropriately, I will be the Speaker of the House. I am a second-year student at George Washington University studying International Affairs, concentrating in International Development and International Environmental Studies. I am on George Washington University's Model UN team, and I have participated in Model UN since my freshman year of high school. I myself was a Member of Parliament in a BHOC committee at my last high school MUN conference, and since I had so much fun in that committee I decided to keep the BHOC legacy alive at WAMUNC for the past year!

I am from Frederick, Maryland, and was born into a half-Jamaican family which entails many of my family members living in the United Kingdom. Thus, I am fascinated by British history, politics, and culture. I intend on studying abroad in London later on in college, and can't wait to finally put all my anglo knowledge to practice! I am so excited to witness you guys debate this upcoming March! You will be a Member of Parliament in 1966 when the British House of Commons must figure out what went wrong and how to reach a difficult resolution to the Aberfan crisis. For the most stimulating debate, thorough research must be done, but for the best experience, I urge you all to be creative and passionate in committee! I hope this background guide provides you with the information you need to do your best this March. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns regarding this committee.

Best,

Amelia Shaw

ashaw18@gwu.edu

# *COMMITTEE OVERVIEW*

## Speaking Rules and Practices

The rules of the British House of Commons (BHOC) are somewhat different from those of the United Nations or other bodies. Therefore, many of the rules regarding the speakers' list, moderated and unmoderated caucuses, questions, and comments will diverge from other committees at WAMUNC. Members should review Parliamentary etiquette before our first session, as well as the speaking procedures listed below.

### Addressing the House:

When addressing the House of Commons as a whole, Members should refer to the Chair, as 'Mister (or Madam) Speaker' or 'You'. However, never address another Member as 'You'.

### Addressing another Member:

When referring to another Member of the House of Commons, you should refer to them as 'the honourable member', 'the honourable member from [constituency]', or 'the honourable member from [your side of the house/the opposite side of the house]'. When referring to a member of the Privy Council, (i.e. the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers, etc.) refer to them as 'right honourable'. It is proper conduct to alert a particular Member if you intend to mention them in a public speech.

### Showing Agreement or Disagreement:

Clapping is strictly prohibited in the House chamber, but you are allowed to rattle your papers in agreement. More importantly, you are allowed to yell in agreement or disagreement after a Member or the Chair has spoken. If you agree with a statement, yell 'Here!' or 'Here here!'. If you disagree, yell 'Ahh'. Finally, if you are surprised by a statement, you may shout a short 'Oh!'. While you may use these practices, the Chair has the right to call the House to order if the Members have lost decorum.

### Negative Comments and Inappropriate Language:

Any personally negative comment directed towards a Member is strictly forbidden inside or outside the House chamber. The Chair holds the right to penalise or eject any Member who engages in such behaviour. Additionally, the Chair may penalise or eject any Member who uses bullying, discriminatory, harassing, politically incorrect, or vulgar language.

### Question Time (Prime Minister's Questions)

Once a week, traditionally at Wednesday noon, the British House of Commons enters into Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) (or—informally—Question Time), in which the leaders of the main opposition parties and the House Members are allowed to question the Prime Minister or their Ministers, on the government's business. The PMQs are usually the most public part of the Parliament's proceedings and allow for MPs and party leaders to not only question the government but to also create a public image for themselves.

Our BHOC Committee will enter into a similar procedure to answer questions on proposed legislation. Unlike most Parliamentary measures, Question Time requires a  $\frac{2}{3}$  placard vote to begin. Once the House has voted to enter into Question Time, two sponsors from each proposed piece of legislation stand and answer questions from different Members.

The Chair retains the right to choose who will be able to ask a question to the sponsors.

Important note: When asking or answering a question, never directly address a specific member, sponsor, or group. Always begin your question or answer with 'Mister (or Madam) Speaker', to prevent potential hostility.

# *BACKGROUND GUIDE*

## British House of Commons (BHOC)

### **Formation of the British House of Commons**

The British House of Commons is one of the bodies of the present-day British Parliament—the other being the House of Lords—that serve as law-making bodies and enforcement agencies throughout the country. The Commons began as a way to check the monarchy over the governance of the country. At the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, the first English Parliament was convened and established that 'knights of the shire' and local representatives (burgesses) make up the members of the commons. Under King Henry VI, the Commons' power expanded to include the 'redress of grievances', which allowed English citizens to petition the body to address complaints in their local towns. Later, Henry V was the first representative to acknowledge that the Parliament was to be consulted on all new laws. The 1689 Bill of Rights solidified the basic rules on the power of the monarchy, electoral process, taxation, inheritance rights, and the powers of the British Parliament that are still used as the basis for British law today. When Scotland became part of the United Kingdom through the 1707 Acts of Union, Scottish citizens received representation in the House of Commons. Ireland followed suit on 1 January 1801. Throughout the next two centuries, the British Parliament would expand voting and civil rights on a national scale. Such as in 1911 when the House of Lords were mostly removed from the legislative process through the Parliament Act, and in 1918, when lawmakers awarded women and non-landowners suffrage rights and to run for public office. As of 2020, the House of Commons has 650 elected members.

## **Structure and Powers of the Parliament**

The most important thing to know when discussing the British Parliament and government is that it has no codified constitution. Unlike countries like the United States and France, there is no 'supreme document' that determines how the Parliament should govern or that provides strict or executive and legislative powers. This system gives the legislation the Parliament implements particular weight, as no court or executive has the authority to strike any measures down. In 1956, the 'Supreme Court', as we now think of it, had not been established and the lower courts and solicitors who sat in the House of Lords had even less legal authority. The British legal and governmental system is based mostly on legislation, precedents, and norms.

The Parliament of the United Kingdom is divided into two houses. The upper house, the House of Lords, and the lower house, the House of Commons. The House of Commons is the elected legislature and holds most of the United Kingdom's governing and legislative power. With 650 total seats in the House of Commons, each Member of Parliament (MP) represents a constituency of around 40,000 to 50,000 people. The House of Commons has the authority to implement and change laws, check the government's influence, and establish the government budget. While the House of Lords can delay the passage of legislation, provide notes on proposed bills, and, in rare cases, temporarily block a bill's passage, it serves mostly in an advisory role and holds little political or legislative influence. Before being enacted, legislation must also receive 'royal assent'. However, this stage is also mostly ceremonial, and traditionally the Sovereign heeds the advice of the Parliament and the Privy Council.

The House of Commons is chaired by the Speaker, who is an MP elected by the House members. Once selected, the Speaker traditionally leaves their previous party and becomes a politically impartial figure. The Speaker presides over the House of Commons by referring to *Standing Orders*, a series of historical precedents that outline House procedures and powers. One of the most famous standing orders is the rarely used Standing Order 43, which gives the Speaker the authority to eject a Member for a day's proceedings for failing to adhere to the Speaker's orders. The Speaker is the highest authority within the House of Commons.

The Prime Minister is the leader of the government and leads on behalf of the Sovereign by styling it as Her (or His) Majesty's Government. Traditionally, the Prime Minister is also the leader of the governing party, or the leader of the largest party within a coalition government (a government that requires more than one party in order to form a majority). The Prime Minister is required to answer to Parliament; however, they have the authority to dismiss or appoint other Cabinet ministers, coordinate government policy, organise military operations (although the Sovereign is the Commander-in-Chief), regulate government departments, and set the direction of the civil service. The Prime Minister also leads the Cabinet and the Privy Council, the body that advises the Sovereign on government policy.

The leader of the second-largest party is called the Leader of Her (or His) Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition. While the Opposition Leader has little executive power, he or she does serve as the most prominent check on the Prime Minister's power. The Opposition Leader also forms the 'Shadow Cabinet', which mimics the government's cabinet and sets much of the opposition's policies.

The House of Commons also contains a number of Committees, which serve to set and scrutinise policy and legislation in areas such as Finance, Defence, Foreign Affairs, Health & Social Care, and Justice. These Committees have influence over legislation that concerns their areas when it comes to overseeing areas like spending and government policy. The House of Commons also has legislative committees, which have a more direct role in drafting legislation and advising the government on policy and the voting schedules for individual bills.

## **Political Parties**

As a result of the UK's first-past-the-post method of Parliamentary elections, there are two major political parties in the UK: the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Alongside these two political parties, the UK has several smaller political parties, including the Liberal Party and Sinn Féin.

### *Conservatives*

The Conservative Party's origins can be traced back to the Whig Party in the Eighteenth Century, former British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel founded the modern Conservative Party in 1834. Originally called the Tories, the name was changed to Conservative to appease a wider audience, but 'Tories' remains the informal title for the party and its members. The Conservatives won with a majority of 345 seats in the 1955 elections, giving them a stable majority in the House of Commons.

### *Labour*

The Labour Party was founded as a distinctly left-wing party in 1900, having grown out of the larger British labour union movement. The party slowly grew in influence, until Ramsay MacDonald was elected as the first Labour Prime Minister in 1924. Following its defeat in the 1951 elections, the Labour Party saw an ideological split between its left-wing, moderate, and right-wing members, which stunted the party's growth seen under former leader Clement Atlee. In the 1955 elections, Labour's number of seats dropped 277, leading to Atlee's resignation.

### *Liberal*

The Liberals are the major third party in UK politics. The party generally supports engagement with the European Community, open immigration policies, civil liberties, proportional representation, and environmentalism. They occupy a vague centrist-libertarian position within the UK's political spectrum, sometimes seeking to emphasise issues of democracy and civil liberties over the other two parties. In 1956, the Liberals had a total of six seats in the House of Commons, making it the third-largest party.



## Positions

1. S.O. Davies(Labour)- Merthyr Tydfil
2. Cledwyn Hughes (Labour)- Anglesey
3. David Gibson-Watt (Conservative)- Hereford
4. James Griffiths (Labour)- Llanelli
5. Harold Finch(Labour)- Bedwellty
6. Emlyn Hooson(Liberal)- Montgomery
7. Sir Anthony Berry (Conservative)- Southgate
8. Arthur Pearson(Labour)- Pontypridd
9. Arthur Probert(Labour)- Aberdare
10. David Kerr(Labour)- Wandsworth Central
11. Sir Elwyn Jones(Labour)- West Ham South
12. Sir J. Hobson(Conservative)- Warwick and Leamington
13. Alexander W. Lyon (Labour)- York
14. Charles Pannell(Labour)- Leeds West
15. Sir Knox Cunningham(Ulster Unionist)- Antrim South
16. Gordon Walker(Labour)- Leyton
17. Spencer Summers(Conservative)- Aylesbury
18. Honourable George Younger(Conservative)- Ayr
19. Norman Haseldine (Labour Co-operative)- Bradford West
20. John Eden (Conservative)- Bournemouth West
21. Walter Elliot(Conservative)- Carshalton
22. Sir John Smith(Conservative)- Cities of London and Westminster
23. Lionel Heald(Conservative)- Chertsey
24. Mark Woodnutt(Conservative)- Isle of Wight
25. Sir Cyril Osborne(Conservative)- Louth
26. Frank Taylor (Conservative)- Manchester Moss Side
27. William Elliott (Conservative)- Newcastle upon Tyne North
28. Michael Shaw (Conservative)- Scarborough and Whitby

## **Historical Background**

Wales is a country with a rich history, culture, and distinct language. The land of Wales has been inhabited since 250,000 BC, composed of loosely-associated kingdoms until it was annexed to the crown of England in 1284 under the Statute of Wales. In 1536 Henry VIII formally enacted incorporating Wales into the United Kingdom under the Act of Union. With this, Welshmen could enjoy the same political status as Englishmen under the common law of England and receive adequate representation in Parliament. The Welsh descended from Celtic tribes and the original Britons who developed the unique Welsh language.

World War I exposed a division between Wales and England due to the undermining of political Welsh beliefs during the war. As men from the UK wanted to help the war effort, they flooded into Wales to work in coal and steel mines, resulting in the Welsh language and culture being threatened by this massive flow of immigration. This influx of immigration coincides with the political unrest in these industrial areas. The effects of both world wars led to an economic depression that led to massive unemployment, in which close to half a million Welsh people fled to other countries in search of work. As the industry tried to recover post-war, efforts were made to modernize these industries, however, production persistently fell.

### **Current situation**

Aberfan is a village located in Southeastern Wales, in the Taff valley next to a coal mine. After weeks of heavy rainfall, on October 21st, a notable portion of debris loosened by rain broke away from tip 7 and hurled downhill towards the village. School was just starting at Pantglas Junior School, when the debris struck the school, in which the classrooms and students were buried in debris, thick mud, sludge, and rubble. 109 children and 5 teachers perished in the disaster. The neighboring secondary school was also affected, 18 houses in the surrounding area were also destroyed and other nearby houses were flooded by water from the debris. After the rubble had settled, it re-solidified and blocked off a huge area of the village. Now parliament must tread carefully when dealing with this multifaceted disaster.

## Bibliography

- <https://www.britannica.com/place/Wales/The-20th-century>
- <https://www.britannica.com/place/Wales/Wales-from-the-16th-to-the-21st-century#ref44629>
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/culture/sites/aboutwales/pages/history.shtml>
- <https://archives.lse.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=LIBERAL+PARTY&pos=1>
- <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/a-brief-history-of-labour-party-leadership-2089978.html>
- [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/vote\\_2005/basics/4393287.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/vote_2005/basics/4393287.stm)
- <https://guidetoprocedure.parliament.uk/collections/luhXGjBq/powers-of-select-committees>
- <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/opposition-the/>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/ministers/prime-minister>
- <https://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/the-role-of-the-speaker/role-of-the-speaker/>
- <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/05/30/britains-constitutional-time-bomb>
- <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-29252332>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-s-questions>
- <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/media/Rules-of-behaviour-and-courtesies-in-the-House-of-Commons-November-2018.pdf>