

Toeing the line in the House of Commons



The chamber of the House of Commons, where the MPs propose and debate legislation, is an impressive sight and the proceedings there are governed by tradition.

The origins of the House of Commons date from the second half of the thirteenth century. In the time of Henry VIII, the House of Commons met in his private chapel - St Stephen's Chapel - and this still influences the seating arrangements in the House of Commons today. The Speaker, whose job it is to keep order in the House, had a special chair and this was placed on the altar steps. Today, MPs bow to the Speaker when they enter the chamber, as they would formerly have bowed to the altar when they entered the chapel. And the reason that MPs sit facing each other is that they used to sit in the choir stalls on each side of the chapel.

There are 427 seats in the present House of Commons - and 646 MPs! After the House of Commons had been destroyed by bombs during the Second World, suggestions were made to change the design and increase the number of seats. But Winston Churchill spoke passionately against the idea: ... A chamber formed on the lines of the House of Commons should not be big enough to contain all its members at once without overcrowding ... there should be on great occasions a sense of crowd and urgency

So the House of Commons was rebuilt in 1950 to its original design - even down to the two red lines on the carpet - one in front of the Government benches on the Speaker's right, and one in front of the Opposition's benches on the Speaker's left. These lines are 2 1/2 sword-lengths apart - so that, if tempers became heated, the opposing MPs couldn't take out their swords and fight with each other! If MPs threatened to cross the chamber, the Speaker would tell them to stand behind their party line ... **to toe the line.**

If you want to find out about the **derivation of more everyday phrases**, click on:

<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/p.html>

Of course, you don't have to go to London and sit in the spectators' gallery to see and hear the MPs at work. There have been radio broadcasts from the House since the 1960s, and BBC TV has televised debates since 1989. If you want to hear what's been going on in Parliament today, you can **listen to Today in Parliament on BBC radio**, simply click on:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/tip/>

And if you want to **see more of the parliamentary buildings** and find out what goes on there, click on:

<http://www.parliament.uk/visiting/online-tours/>