

## Volume 35, issue 1, September 2025

### UK politics

# Private Members' Bills and the Assisted Dying Bill

This case study should be read alongside 'Focus on... Private Members' Bills' (p. 34).

For most MPs, the work of Parliament involves voting along party lines on legislation that has been drafted by the government and carefully steered through the legislative process by government whips. Backbench MPs on the government side (MPs who do not have a ministerial 'frontbench' role) are often referred to as 'lobby fodder' whose role is to defeat attempts by the opposition to scupper government legislation.

Backbenchers may get the opportunity to shape government bills during the committee stage, but votes on amendments made in committee are heavily whipped so most successful amendments come from the government itself, usually later, in the House of Lords. MPs rarely get the chance to table their own legislation, as the government controls parliamentary time, as laid out in Standing Order 14 of the rules of the House. Between the 2015 and 2024 general elections, 357 bills became Acts of Parliament. Of these, 255 of them (71.4%) were government bills.

## Giving backbenchers a voice

However, there is one meaningful, if rare, method through which backbench MPs compete for the opportunity to introduce their own piece of legislation. This opportunity is the Private Members' Bill (PMB) ballot, which takes place shortly after the state opening of Parliament at the start of each new parliamentary session. Any backbench MP can enter their name into the ballot, and 20 names are drawn at random. The chance of a backbencher getting an opportunity to introduce legislation is very slim, as there are currently over 400 backbenchers.

The first 7–10 MPs chosen in the ballot get a realistic chance of debating their proposed bill, while the others are likely to be 'talked out'. This tactic is deployed by MPs who oppose the bill, giving extended speeches during the second reading debate and aiming to waste the bills' allotted parliamentary time, to prevent the bill from reaching a vote. PMBs are debated on thirteen sitting Fridays, and if time runs out the bill does not go forward, unless the House agrees a 'cloture motion', which requires 100 MPs to extend a bills' time. This is rare, as many MPs spend Thursdays and Fridays in their constituency, following prime minister's questions on Wednesdays. In the 2023–24 parliamentary session, there was only one motion to extend time for debating PMBs, and 14 PMBs failed due to being talked out of time. Interestingly, the 2023–24 session saw 24 PMBs receive Royal Assent, which is notably higher than in previous sessions: only 13 passed in the 2021–22 parliamentary session.

Despite these challenges, PMBs have led to landmark changes. The legalisation of abortion in 1967 was introduced as a PMB and passed due to Harold Wilson's government allowing a free vote on the issue, meaning MPs were allowed to vote with their conscience. This was also the case with the legalisation of homosexuality in the same year.

## The Assisted Dying Bill

Labour MP Kim Leadbeater came first in the 2024–25 PMB ballot, securing the best timeslot and guaranteeing at least a debate on her bill. MPs who win the ballot are inundated with emails from think-tanks, lobbyists and pressure groups highlighting their specific issue. Leadbeater was won over by the efforts of several groups, including Dignity in Dying, a pressure group advocating for terminally ill people's right to end their lives legally in a medical setting. Leadbeater's Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill (more commonly known as the Assisted Dying Bill) offered terminally ill adults who have 6 months or less to live the right to end their lives.

### The passage of the bill

The last time this issue was debated in the Commons was in 2015, when a backbench Labour MP introduced a similar bill to Leadbeater's. It was heavily defeated at second reading, with a majority of 212 voting against. Despite being a free vote, Conservative MPs – who have historically been more opposed to assisted dying – held a majority. This points towards a key issue for backbenchers looking to get their bills passed: they must gain the support of a majority of MPs, which usually means gaining the support of the governing party. The bills most likely to do this are often 'worthy but extremely boring', in the words of Andrew George MP, whose own PMB was defeated in 2014. Controversial bills have no chance unless they have government support.

Leadbeater's bill was introduced at first reading in October 2024, and then received a second reading debate in November, where it passed with majority of 55, after Starmer's government granted a free vote. After the bill passed the second reading, a Public Bill Committee (PBC) of 23 MPs went through the bill line by line, closely scrutinising each clause and suggesting amendments. The Health Secretary and Justice Secretary were also involved, as their ministerial portfolios would be impacted. Unusually for a PBC, MPs gave the committee the authority to take oral and written evidence before it began its line-by-line scrutiny. Over 3 days of evidence sessions, over 50 expert witnesses from medical organisations and charities gave testimony and the committee received over 400 written submissions. Most PMBs are only granted time for 1 day in committee, but this bill went through nearly 90 hours of scrutiny over 29 sessions. Over 170 amendments were made to the bill.

Many PMBs fail because governments refuse to introduce a 'money resolution', which must pass if a bill proposes spending public money on something that has not already been authorised by Parliament. However, the government introduced one and the Commons passed this for Leadbeater's bill in January 2025.

In a landmark parliamentary moment in June 2025, the Commons held a third reading debate and voted on the bill. It passed narrowly with a slimmed-down majority of just 23, perhaps reflecting the finality of this vote and the thorough deliberation of all MPs.

### What's next

The next stage of the bill is to go to the House of Lords on 12 September, where historically assisted dying has been debated as a moral issue. The Lords possesses members uniquely qualified to deal with ethical conundrums, as it includes the 26 bishops of the Church of England as well as leaders of other faith communities. Although the bill has gone through rigorous scrutiny in the Commons, it will be examined much more closely in the Lords. There are also many more subject-specific experts in the Lords, including former medical professionals, professors of science and advocates for disability groups. Due to constitutional constraints, such as the Parliament Act of 1949, the Lords cannot block legislation, but it may heavily amend it, leading to a process known as 'parliamentary ping-pong', in

which the Commons may accept or reject amendments, which bounce back and forth between the two houses.

Ultimately, the Assisted Dying Bill is an important example of the power of backbenchers to change the law, even when the government has a strong majority. However, these opportunities are few and far between, and even if a timeslot is gained, the job of convincing a majority of MPs is a tough one.

***Ed Sylvester is head of politics at Francis Holland School.***

This resource is part of POLITICS REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: [www.hachettelearning.com/politicsreview](http://www.hachettelearning.com/politicsreview)