There are five main classes of Parliamentary Papers: House of Commons Bills (see Factsheets L1 and L2), House of Commons Papers (see Factsheet P12), House of Lords Papers, House of Lords Bills and Command Papers. This Factsheet attempts to explain something of the history of this last class, Command Papers, and the present scope and content of the series.

This Factsheet and links to further sources mentioned are available on the internet at: http://www.parliament.uk/factsheets
Command Papers

History

The term *command* arose from the formula that was carried on the Papers, "Presented to Parliament ... by command of Her (or His) Majesty". The origin of this formula lies in the fact that these are Government Papers - that is, they have their authority from Ministers of the Crown (constitutionally, the Sovereign) and are laid before Parliament as conveying information or decisions which the Government think should be drawn to the attention of one or both Houses of Parliament. Today, the formula is usually, "Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for ... by Command of Her Majesty".

In the eighteenth century, these papers were usually printed as appendices to the *House of Commons Journal*, but this method became inconvenient as the years passed and the papers increased in number. In the eighteenth century, command papers were normally presented by Privy Counsellors, and at the beginning of that century they were few in number. At the time it was generally accepted that the Crown did not freely volunteer information; but presented papers merely when it was expedient or necessary to obtain expenditure, for the disposal of Crown property, or by a change in the law. Information could be sought by Parliament, by way of an address to the Crown, but the return to such an address would not be a command paper.

Various political considerations led to this principle being abandoned. As time went by, Governments found it more and more convenient to present papers of their own volition to Parliament when issues arose: it was perhaps felt useful to have the paper "on the record" and in black and white before the House.

Command Papers ceased to be appended to the Journal in 1833, when a numbered series began. This first series, unprefixed, ran to No 4222 of 1868-69. Other series followed this, each with a different prefix, as follows:

- C 1 to C 9550 – 1870-1899
- Cd 1 to Cd 9239 – 1900-1918
- Cmd 1 to Cmd 9889 – 1919-1956
- Cmnd 1 to Cmnd 9927 – 1956 to November 1986
- Cm 1 onwards – November 1986 to date

It is therefore important, when citing Command Papers, to use the correct prefix.

To some extent, the duration of these series illustrates the degree to which at various times the Command format has been used by governments. In particular the using up of the "Cd" series in nineteen years is good indication of the varied and miscellaneous scope of the set at that time. In the 1907 session, for instance, a page taken at random, detailing 17 of the 443 papers that session, included the report of a Departmental Committee on Bobbinite, the 9th Annual Report of the Congested Districts (Scotland) Board, a statement relating to the expulsion of aliens, and an appendix to the Report of the Arterial Drainage (Ireland) Commission. The assumption that information was not freely volunteered to Parliament had therefore by this time undergone a complete reversal.

The ‘Geddes axe’

It was not so much a regard for constitutional niceties as a government economy drive which saw a reduction in the number of papers issued as Command. The Geddes axe, in the post-
World War I period, led to the issue of a Treasury circular in 1921. Among other things this instructed:

"The presentation of papers by Command should be discontinued except in the cases of documents relating to matters likely to be the subject of early legislation, or which may be regarded as otherwise essential to Members of Parliament as a whole to enable them to discharge their responsibilities. Other documents hitherto issued as SOPs (ie items published by HMSO but not Parliamentary Papers), or whenever possible, be discontinued. In the case of documents at present presented pursuant to statute My Lords understand that the Act of Presentation can be met by the presentation of a document either in manuscript or after being printed as a Stationery Office Publication."

Another Treasury Circular in the early 1920s prescribed an octavo size for Command Papers instead of the former foolscap size. Some material (e.g. many statistical documents) became non-parliamentary for this reason alone. The reduction was such that in 1922, for instance, only 229 such Papers were presented compared with the 718 in 1908.

**Categories of Paper**
There has been little change in the content of the series since the 'twenties. The main types of Paper included in it are as follows:-

- State papers (including communiqués, treaties, etc). Treaties may be reprinted with a different Cm number when they are ratified.
- White Papers (i.e. Government proposals for legislation), and related policy statements, and some annual reviews
- Government replies to select committee reports (see below)
- Reports of Royal Commissions, but not normally the evidence of the Commission.
- Reports of some major Committees of Inquiry, and other Commissions and non-Parliamentary bodies
- Annual Reports, Statistics, etc. of certain bodies
- Some, but nowadays only a small minority, of Consultative Documents (sometimes called Green Papers).

In recent years relatively fewer annual and periodical Reports have come out in the command paper series. In part this was due to bodies having preferred to bring out their reports in a larger format than the royal octavo size, which was standard (and obligatory in all but exceptional cases) for the Command series from 1921 to the 1980s, and in part, that departments began to exercise different judgements as to what might be thought of as proper for the series.

**Government replies to select committee reports**
Some replies to select committee reports are issued as special reports of the committee concerned. In this case they are printed as House of Commons papers. Otherwise, they come out as command papers, and are often referred to as "White Papers", though this is perhaps something of a misnomer. The Government can also reply to a select committee report during a debate, and it has even been known for such a "reply" to emerge as the answer to a written parliamentary question or as a departmental publication.
Royal Commissions
Reports of Royal Commissions are virtually always command papers. These may include "one off" reports when a Royal Commission has been appointed to investigate a particular subject or the periodical reports of Commissions like that on ancient monuments. Decisions on whether to print reports of major committees of inquiry as command or non-parliamentary papers appear to be somewhat arbitrary. For instance, the report of the Megaw Committee on civil service pay was a command paper, but that of the Serpell Committee on railway finances was not.

Annual reports
Apart from those for government departments and agencies, the annual reports and statistics now appearing as command papers are relatively few. They include judicial statistics, prison statistics, immigration statistics and reports from the Foreign Compensation Commission and Customs and Excise.

Northern Ireland Command Papers
There was a separate series of Command Papers for Northern Ireland, prefixed Cmd, and numbered in one undivided sequence 1 to 588, between 1921 and 1975. The indexes mentioned below do not include these documents.

Unprinted Commands
A few Papers each year are presented by Command but not printed in the Command Paper series, and they are not usually available from The Stationery Office (TSO). These command papers, are termed Unprinted Command Papers by the House of Commons Library (see Factsheet P15), and include such items as the BBC and Sports Council Annual Reports. Estimates are issued "by Command" but printed in the HC Papers series.

Presentation
Normally, Command Papers are presented to both Houses, but it is not unknown for the presentation to be made only to one: C 328 of 1871, a return of military attaches in the Diplomatic Service, being a rare example of a paper presented to the Lords only.

Numbering and indexing
The numbers are allocated to Command Papers by HMSO and the timing of their release is within the control of the department concerned. After the privatisation of the trading business of HMSO, which now operates as The Stationery Office Ltd, the office of the Controller of HMSO was retained within Government to discharge certain statutory functions. One of these functions is the coordination of the publication and numbering of Command Papers and other House of Commons numbered series.

Subject Indexes to Command Papers exist only as part of the indexing of parliamentary papers generally. There is a special index to Papers of the eighteenth century: thereafter, various cumulations exist, three indexes covering 1801 to 1850, and semi-centennial indexes for 1852-1899 and 1900-1949. There are decennial indexes for the sessions between 1950-59, 1960-69 and 1970-79.

Sessional Indexes (published as an HC Paper) are also prepared. The TSO daily lists and annual catalogues are useful finding tools, and all parliamentary papers are indexed in POLIS, the House of Commons Library computer indexing system, which the House of Commons Information Office can access for an enquirer. The POLIS database is available to the general public at www.polis.parliament.uk.
Binding arrangements
Papers between 1801 and 1969 were bound up in sessions, firstly by type, in four divisions - Bills, Reports of (Select) Committees, Reports of Commissioners (ie of non-Parliamentary Committees and bodies) and Accounts and papers (the rest). Bills were arranged alphabetically, but the other sections followed a subject arrangement. For sessions between 1969 and 1979 there were two divisions, Bills (plus minutes of proceedings thereon) and the rest, arranged by subject.

This format was abandoned in 1979. From the 1979-80 Session Papers have been bound only in numerical order. Sessional indexes have been prepared on new subject headings derived from the House of Commons Library computer indexing system, POLIS. It is hoped decennial indexes will be prepared similarly.

Format
In 1983, the House of Commons Services Committee recommended a change from royal octavo to A4 paper size. This was accepted by the House on 2 May 1984, and took effect from 12 November 1986, but unfortunately some papers started appearing in the larger format from 1983 onwards, thus breaking up the standardised format of the sessional sets.

Various sets of Papers with a classified, rather than a form arrangement, covering a number of sessions, exist in the House of Commons Library, those from the nineteenth century being largely now only of historical interest. A set of Papers from 1950 to date has also been compiled to draw together serial or periodical reports each in a single sequence, which are, or were once, in the HC or Command Series. (So that, for example, all Reports of the Doctors and Dentists Pay/Remuneration Review Body from 1963 to date are in one sequence, despite their having appeared in both Command and HC series and other formats). This set, which has its own special classification, is kept in the House of Commons Library for Members, but all other users are faced with extracting serial reports from various prints in the numerical sequence if a "run" is required.

Availability
All current Command Papers may be bought from TSO bookshops, and from TSO agents abroad, from the Parliamentary Bookshop, or ordered through booksellers. Some are also available on the TSO website at the following address: http://www.official-documents.co.uk. Out of print papers can be consulted at the British Library Official Publications Library, at most university libraries, and at many public libraries (the House of Commons Information Office can advise which libraries hold them).
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Factsheet P13
Command Papers

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For your purposes, did you find this Factsheet

1. Very useful ☐ Fairly useful ☐ Not much use ☐
2. Too long ☐ The right length ☐ Too short ☐
3. Clear ☐ Not always clear ☐ Rather unclear ☐

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