

Trust the people on Commons reform

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Few members of the British political commenterati think the House of Commons works well. The specific complaints, familiar to any keen observer of the House, are manifold. The government has too much control over the parliamentary timetable and, with more than 140 MPs also serving as members of the executive, it dominates the Commons through its own 'pay roll' vote.



The whips deploy any means necessary to ensure that backbench MPs follow the party line. Over time, most backbench MPs retreat into the task of securing 'small victories', and re-election, by taking up casework from their constituents — a role sometimes caricatured as being akin to a glorified Citizens Advice volunteer.

The concern that parliament has become increasingly subservient to the executive is not new. When Norman St John Stevas introduced a motion to establish Departmental Select Committees in 1979, he indicated that 'the proposals that the government are placing before the House are intended to redress the balance to enable the House of Commons to do more effectively the job it has been elected to do'. Yet, while the Select Committee system is widely praised, it is also generally recognised that it has not been enough to redress the growth of executive dominance. The prime minister himself recognises this tendency. As he told us in his 'Towards a New Politics' speech on 2 February: 'I believe that the proper role of parliament (...) is to scrutinise the executive and it should be given all the necessary tools to do so'.

Fine words. Similar ones were used when the prime minister announced the establishment of a Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons in June 2009, to be chaired by Dr Tony Wright MP. The establishment of the Wright Committee, with its remit to look at ways of strengthening the role of backbench MPs, was welcomed by journalists, academics and other commentators as a means of re-balancing power between the legislature and the executive. Following its publication, the report's recommendations were widely endorsed as pragmatic, short-term measures which would make a genuine difference. Campaign groups and research organisations with an interest in parliamentary affairs were united in their support. Tony Wright was duly named 'Backbencher of the Year' by the Political Studies Association.

It was perhaps naive to assume that widespread praise for proposed reforms put forward at the invitation of a supportive prime minister would mean that they would be quickly adopted. Less than two weeks after the publication of the report, government indifference to its recommendations was apparent. Since then, the procedural twists and turns, and the passions which they have provoked, can only be fully grasped by parliamentary anoraks. Reformers suspect, not without reason, that the government and the whips are using every procedural trick in the book to prevent the reforms being passed. The move which has really irked members of the Wright committee is the government's intention to put the reforms to the House as non-amendable motions on Monday 22 February. This means that any, perhaps even all, of the 21 reform measures will fall if a single MP shouts 'object'.

As carefully-framed reform proposals descend into parliamentary in-fighting, one notable factor remains absent from the entire discussion — public opinion. Given that the impetus for the Wright Committee came from the very clear need to respond to public anger over expenses, might we not want to ask that the public make of it?

Admittedly, this might sound like an absurd proposition. After all, at least 99 per cent of the population will be blissfully unaware of the Wright report or the shenanigans surrounding the government's handling of it. Besides, almost every opinion poll about parliament tends to reveal little more than widespread public ignorance about its functions. For instance, in 2006, the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement found that 61 per cent of people said they knew little or nothing about the role of MPs; 56 per cent could not even correctly name their own representative.

Unsurprisingly, comparing opinion polls on parliament also highlight results which appear deeply contradictory. The Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement (APE) found that in 2007, prior to the details of MP's expenses being published, three-quarters of people agreed with the statement that 'MPs spend too much on expenses'. Yet, as anger about MPs' expenses reached its peak, the 2009 APE reported that two-thirds of people agreed that MPs needed sufficient resources to 'properly represent and inform' their constituents.

The problem with opinion polls, of course, is that they are non-deliberative. Members of the public are asked pre-defined questions, and usually presented with a choice of set answers. They are not challenged on their views, or permitted to refine or reconsider them after having considered relevant evidence or counter-opinions. It is therefore not surprising that, at times, opinion polls seem to capture ignorance and prejudice rather than informed public judgement.

One way of dealing with the shortcomings of conventional opinion polls is to introduce a deliberative element to them. In a deliberative poll, participants are first asked for their views on a series of matters, before being introduced to a range of balanced written information, invited to debate the issues with others and put questions to expert witnesses. Each participant then repeats the original questionnaire, allowing the overall change in attitudes to be measured. The methodology has been pioneered and developed by Professor James Fishkin of Stanford University, and used successfully in a wide variety of contexts.

The deliberative approach is inevitably more costly than a conventional opinion poll, and generally eschewed as a result. But it was used at an event which took place over the weekend of 9-10 January 2010, organised by the Power2010 campaign to help produce a short-list of key constitutional reforms to be put to the public vote in the run-up to the general election.

The event brought together a group of 130 people from across the UK, constituting a sample which was broadly representative cross-section of the British population. Many had surely been motivated to attend because of their anger over the MPs' expenses scandal. Their scepticism about democracy and government in Britain was certainly evident. On arrival at the event, only a third said they thought our democracy works at least fairly well, while only 27 per cent expressed any degree of trust that the government would generally do what is right. Yet, having been given the chance to deliberate on a range of options for reforming the UK's political system put forward by other members of the public, one of the key conclusions reached by the participants was that more power needed to be given to MPs.

A key shift which took place over the weekend was that the great majority of the reform proposals put to the participants declined in popularity once the deliberations had taken place. The average fall in support for the 69 measures about which they were asked was 6 percentage points, although in some cases the drop was far more dramatic, including ideas such as making manifesto commitments legally binding (-41) and allowing voting by Internet or text message (-23). Other 'magic bullet' solutions tended to go the same way.

Meanwhile, among the twenty or so proposals for which support increased were 'strengthening select committees' and 'giving MPs more control over the parliamentary timetable', both of which rose in popularity by an average of 4 percentage points. By the end of the weekend, the proposal to strengthen select committees was seen as desirable by 89 per cent of participants, and ranked joint first alongside 'establishing a duty of public consultation on controversial matters through a deliberative process'. In effect, the participants had voted for the Wright committee report.

With conventional opinion polls suggesting that less than 20 per cent of people think parliament is working well, this outcome may appear deeply paradoxical. Yet, the outcome would surely make any sense to anyone who attended the entire two day of deliberation, as I did. Much of what the participants came to learn about parliament and MPs was a revelation to them, and it radically changed their interpretation of the problems of UK democracy. You could almost sense the penny drop as they realised that representative democracy is deeply flawed if the vast bulk of parliamentary time is dominated by getting government business through, and their elected national representatives spend more of their time (and, necessarily, their allowances) on dealing with casework from local constituents than on holding the government to account.

The Power2010 deliberative event was a powerful reminder that reform of the House of Commons is not just a matter for the government, and not just a matter for parliament. It is also a matter for the people. Infusing the House with fresh blood at the next election and removing some of those most tainted by the expenses scandal will not be enough to restore faith in our democracy. More than ever, we need to have a clearer idea of what voters expect of MPs, and we need to ensure that members of the next parliament have the opportunity to serve in that capacity. Seemingly, Gordon Brown understands this too. Before he became prime minister, he declared: 'one of my first acts as prime minister would be to restore power to parliament in order to build the trust of the British people in our democracy'. That promise is long overdue, but it is still not too late — even if it should actually prove to be one of his last acts as prime minister.

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