



John Bercow risks car crash and Commons reform could be casualty

The Speaker seems sincere but he would be wise to pick his language more carefully

In the Commons yesterday, Harriet Harman got her ears boxed by reform-minded MPs for dragging her heels on proposals to increase the power of backbenchers and reduce that of the executive, the government.

Uncoincidentally, Pam Giddy, of the Power2010 campaign, wrote a letter to the Guardian, also published yesterday. Even the impartial Speaker, John Bercow, joined in to berate tardy ministers.

No surprise there, then – apart from the Speaker's outspokenness at a parliamentary press gallery lunch I attended. I'll come back to that, though here's a flavour from the Times sketchwriter Ann Treneman, who was also present. Bercow seems to enjoy living dangerously.

As Patrick Wintour reports in today's Guardian, reform is a hydra-headed issue. Government whips are stalling efforts to implement the Wright report – a select committee blueprint chaired by Labour's Tony Wright – to strengthen the power of backbenchers and thereby weaken their own.

As it happens, Power2010's deliberative debate, staged last weekend under the chairmanship of the American expert James Fishkin, found that voters want Wright's modest priorities enacted more than they do dramatic changes such as electoral reform.

I doubt if it's the result Power2010 wanted, but it sounds level-headed to me.

However, Gordon Brown, who went into No 10 promising sweeping constitutional reforms, including more power to MPs, is also under conflicting pressure over Labour's evolving shift towards backing a form of PR voting – the alternative vote (AV) system.

It requires citizens to list candidates 1-2-3 etc and eliminates lower-ranked candidates until someone has 50% of the local vote. PR purists loathe it as not real PR that sometimes produces even more "distorted" results than first past the post (FPTP).

They suspect Ed Balls of blocking them (even though he, too, supports AV) because he is currying favour with anti-reform MPs in the north. He says it's a distraction at this stage. Tricky, isn't it?

The pro-AV trio think it might help Labour's chances and cosy them up to the Lib Dems in the event of a hung parliament. Me, I think such talk is fantasy: if Labour loses its majority, David Cameron will be PM whichever way you slice it.

Brown's ex-spinner Damian McBride is under attack in some newspapers today for taking part in a BBC seminar in which he reportedly said a hung parliament would be the result if the election were held now, but that Brown could "do a Harry Truman" – who snatched victory from behind in 1948.

How dare the BBC ask his opinion, shout the humbug merchants, some of whom were more than happy to trade smear stories with McBride before he was found out.

It happens that Mr Speaker dipped a toe into this murky water during his press gallery speech, one in which he defended the media from three stock criticisms by MPs, namely:

- That the media, led by the Telegraph, are to blame for the "sharp decline" in parliament's reputation by exposing an expenses scandal that (says Bercow) MPs should have sorted out long ago.
- That the media no longer covers parliamentary debate (true) when even old MPs admit the Commons chamber has long been in decline.
- Finally, that the media is "a rival to parliament and thus an implacable opponent of it" – not true either, he insisted.

I'm not sure he got all that quite right. But he went on to argue that expenses reforms must be wholehearted and (when prompted by a question) agreed that private deals now being concocted to pay back some money by some MPs should all be made public.

His second goal is to make the Commons more relevant by making it more topical. That means more up-to-date statements and urgent questions – what used to be called emergency statements under standing order nine – on Haiti or the blizzards; MPs debating "what the rest of the country is taking about", too.

Woe betide ministers who duck and weave to avoid it, he said. Bercow has already granted 16 urgent question statements sought by the opposition since his election six months ago, compared with four or five a year under Michael Martin.

"My aim, frankly, is to create a House of Commons which the media must monitor," he told us.

For sake of completeness, I should add that he's also very keen on what he calls "outreach", which is engagement with the public.

But his plea to the media for proper coverage identified his immediate audience – political reporters – as "Jedi knights" in search of truth (pause for laughter).

What he worries about is what he called the evil empire known as the newsdesks for whom reporters work ("a dark side of the force, an invisible army of less rounded souls than yourselves"). If he delivers a reformed Commons worth reporting, will they want to report it, he asks?

I think we know the answer to that, which is somewhere between "not likely, matey" and "when you're worth reporting".

The Victorian debating chamber has, as MPs admit, long been in decline, but sparks real public interest and passion over big issues such as Iraq or abortion.

Blair and Brown have both persistently ducked big debates, as Major and Thatcher did not. When did you last hear a PM in full dispatch box debate? During the big vote before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, I am sorry to have to say.

This can easily be fixed if MPs – and the Speaker – so wish it. But some Tory MPs can't wait for a new parliament in which they can vote Bercow out. What did he think of that, I asked when my question arose yesterday.

"There will always be people who mutter and chunter and twitter and witter and blog and gossip. They are entitled to their views," he replied.

They are "downmarket people" who do not lose him a wink of sleep. He plans to defeat them by doing his job properly and being judged accordingly.

My lunch guest, a Labour MP, thinks he is doing very well. But I doubt if Speaker Bercow will be judged on his merits alone.

His high-profile, Labour MP-aspirant wife, Sally, was present at the event – "She's not my chattel," he said at one point – and, I sense, could give him more grief than her candid confessions of youthful excesses.

In 2000, Sir Nicholas Winterton had got 116 votes to become Speaker. Had he won, would MPs have complained about bias because his wife Ann is also an MP? Bercow asked.

No, and if his own wife had been an aspiring *Tory* MP, rightwing commentators would have left him alone. "It's old-fashioned, downmarket and cowardly and it does not impress me one jot," he said.

My hunch is that Bercow will probably survive a Tory majority on election day, and that he is sincere in trying to get the show back on the road in good order. But I also think he'd be wise to pick his language more carefully now and again.

Otherwise there will be a car crash, and reform will be among the casualties.