

Power 2010: we need to reclaim power from the executive and reward scrutiny and bravery

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I've written a fair bit in these virtual pages about the **pressing need for constitutional reform**. One idea Progress pushed for much of last year was that of a **Citizens' Convention**. It seemed to me that the expenses scandal threatened to cover our democratic institutions and the notion of elected representation with such a deep layer of crap, that only an assembly of randomly selected citizens from across the country could decide what needed reforming and how.



Well, that didn't go anywhere, sadly, but last weekend, Power 2010 - a follow-on from the Power Inquiry – staged a unique deliberative event. Working with YouGov, it brought together 200 citizens, scientifically chosen, to whittle down 58 ideas from over 4,000 submissions to reform our democracy. It was pretty much a citizens' convention, just without state backing.

You can find out more about the process by visiting **Power 2010's website**, but it was an exciting experiment and, depending on how many citizens get involved in the final round of voting, could help transform the nature of debate about constitutional issues in this country.

I proposed reform of select committees as one of the ideas to go forward to the assembly. Sure, it's not as sexy as, say, setting MPs pay, or recall, but I firmly believe that we need to enable Parliament to exert greater power over the executive in order to shift the culture in Parliament. Recall and pay levels are important, but won't do much to change the day-to-day practice of politics. As I said in my initial submission:

"There is really only one career path in Parliament, and that's through ministerial office. This route rewards politicians who are loyal, can keep their mouth shut and who eschew risk-taking. This leads to a dull safety-first politics, aided and abetted by a 24/7 media which leaps on the first scent of dissent and brands it a split or a u-turn.

What we need is an alternative career path for politicians which rewards scrutiny, diligence and bravery in defending the public interest."

By allowing MPs a free vote to elect select committee chairs, for example, we would remove the ability of the Government to determine patronage and turn it into a contest between peers as to who can prove their independent credentials. Similarly, by giving select committees powers to introduce Bills, the stature of committee chair would be raised and political success won't simply be defined by ministerial office, but by also how well you've performed in Committee. Moreover, if select committees had the power to make major public appointments, it would introduce a greater sense of transparency and accountability into unelected public office. There would be less opportunity for quango chiefs to pass the blame for failure of Government, and vice-versa.

I was pretty surprised, to be honest, that Power 2010's forum chose the reform of select committees as their top idea to go forward to a national poll which launched today. But when people who are unconnected with politics are given full possession of the facts they don't necessarily choose the easy options. Lots of other good ideas, such as changing the electoral system, fixed term parliaments and a fully elected House of Lords were also nominated last weekend by the selected citizenry. I was particularly impressed that they suggested compulsory politics lessons in schools. That's like a politician's wet dream.

Anyway, the whole point of what Power 2010 is doing is to get loads of people to vote for five ideas to lobby our politicians to introduce if they get elected this year. There are 29 to select from and I hope you might consider voting for **strengthening select committees** as one of your five!

People + the internet = Power 2010.