

My hopes for Parliamentary Reform

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These last few weeks have been a terrible time not only for politicians and their parties but for our political system itself. But the crisis may also present the best opportunity we will have to strengthen and improve our democracy.

All the elements of MPs' pay, expenses and other costs must now be re-designed from scratch, totally independently from the MPs themselves – from the 'communications allowance' to the pension scheme. And transparency of those costs must be here to stay. Parliament must never again bring shame upon itself trying to hide from its own electors.

But while media coverage and comment has – rightly – focused on the misuse of the expenses system which has been endemic in all parties, we should also now start to take a broader view of the value we get, or don't get, from politics. Value is about both what it costs, but also what we get for that cost.

We should be able to expect from Parliament that it will hold the government to account, ensure good legislation, and reflect the will of the people. In all three areas, it has become institutionally lacking.

Parliament should hold the government to account, but ambitious MPs need to keep in with party bosses if they want to be promoted. Members of the legislature need to be able to take an independent line more often, with more free votes. Commons select committees could be strengthened by taking membership out of the party whips' hands and made subject to election instead.

Parliament should ensure good legislation, but its ability to do this has been eroded over time, and even more so since 1997. Sloppy drafting, changes in Commons hours, government control of the timetable and use of the 'guillotine' have meant more bad legislation. The Commons itself needs to be given back control over timetabling. To ensure adequate time for scrutiny, parliamentary sittings could be made longer and recesses shorter.

Parliament is there to reflect the will of the people, but finds its hands tied. Time and again you hear that whereas we might like to do this or that, unfortunately we can't, because that subject is the preserve of EU legislation, or that authority has been farmed out to a QUANGO. In a democracy, this simply isn't good enough. We need not just to stem the flow of powers away from Parliament to unelected bureaucracies, but to turn the tide. (The return of powers from bureaucracies to our *local* elected representatives is an even greater need – but that is a subject for another day).

The overall cost of politics has been growing, without any noticeable increase in what we get for our money, and despite devolution. We could get by, I am sure, with fewer MPs – the US for example survives with fewer legislators, despite a much bigger population.

The current debate may yet stimulate even wider change. The House of Lords could and should be made more democratic, while retaining its best attributes. Personally I am not convinced of the merits of PR as a voting system, but there is a debate to be had. And I do hope we will see greater selection of candidates by open primary, or other ways that involve the wider community.

The national media have a key role to play in reform too. They should start by returning to reporting what Parliament actually does, rather than just the twice-weekly *It's A Knockout* of PM's Questions. They could also take a more grown up attitude to the obvious point that ministers and MPs, even within one party, will have different views, and this doesn't always warrant a headline about "splits".

The new Speaker will have to be an activist, a champion of reform, not a party place-man. He or she can play a key role in starting to restore the position of Parliament. But that task will take time, and will require the commitment of everyone in politics.

In the meantime, I hope Gordon Brown will heed calls to have the general election sooner rather than later. To say we can't have an election while people's anger over MPs' expenses is still raw is to insult people's intelligence – Britons are perfectly capable of considering multiple issues at once. To suggest, as Mr Brown did, that an election would "cause chaos" in the current economic crisis is crazy: America managed it in November, and this month the world's most complex democracy, India, managed it too. People want a fresh start, and in our democracy a general election is still the ultimate in fresh starts.

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