A FUTURE FOR POLITICS

Ways to reform our political system,
by the UK's leading think tanks

Edited by Tim Finch and Carey Oppenheim, ippr

FABIAN SOCIETY

CENTREFORUM

Progress
Labour's Progressives

Policy Exchange

REFORM

DEMOS

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CONTRIBUTING THINK TANKS

Centre Forum is an independent, liberal think tank seeking to develop evidence-based, long-term policy solutions to the problems facing Britain.
www.centreforum.org

Demos is a think tank focused on power and politics. It searches for and communicates ideas to give people more power to shape their own lives. Demos's vision is a democracy of free citizens, with an equal stake in society.
www.demos.co.uk

The Fabian Society develops political ideas and public policy on the left of centre. The society is a democratically-constituted membership organisation affiliated to the Labour Party but editorially and organisationally independent.
www.fabians.org.uk

The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank, producing cutting-edge research and innovative policy ideas for a just, democratic and sustainable world.
www.ippr.org

Policy Exchange is an independent, non-partisan educational charity. It works with academics and policymakers from across the political spectrum. It is particularly interested in free market and localist solutions to public policy questions.
www.policyexchange.org.uk

Progress is the New Labour pressure group which aims to promote a radical and progressive politics for the 21st century.
www.progressonline.org.uk

Reform is an independent, charitable, non-party think tank whose mission is to set out a better way to deliver public services and economic prosperity.
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INTRODUCTION

Tim Finch and Carey Oppenheim, ippr

It is safe to say that, whatever else divides the think tanks, we are united in believing that the practice of politics is vital for a good society in which individuals can thrive. So it is with particular dismay that ippr and the other think tanks have seen the expenses scandal unfold. In its darkest depths, as the reputation of politicians has sunk to an abysmal nadir, there has been little comfort to be drawn by anyone who cares about politics and thinks that it matters. Politics in the public's mind has become not the solution to the many issues that confront us, but the problem. Trust in the political process and in those charged with making it work collapsed and the much overused word 'crisis' did not seem hyperbolic.

And yet as the financial crisis offered up the opportunity to look afresh at how our economy is structured, so the political crisis has stimulated new discussions about changes and reforms to our political system. Once people had stopped reeling from the immediate shock of the *Daily Telegraph*'s revelations, ideas such as Proportional Representation, electing the House of Lords, giving more power to the Commons, state funding of parties, compulsory voting, open primaries to select parliamentary candidates, decentralising power to local bodies and changing our relationship with the European Union started to be debated with renewed vigour, after years in the doldrums. There was a real sense that such reforms, so often frustrated by inertia, the power of vested interests, and the argument that other issues were more pressing, could actually be implemented this time. A window for reform had been blown open. Surely the process could not stop once the expenses system had been cleaned up? Perhaps some real good could come out of the mess?

Certainly the political junkies thought so – in the early summer of 2009 the reform agenda was eagerly discussed in pamphlets and on the blogosphere, at seminars and meetings. Online petitions were set up and campaigns started. However, it was not clear whether the wider public – indignant as they were about MPs' greed – were fired up by this reforming zeal. As Progress put it in their essay, political reform has always suffered from an 'image problem'. Duck houses and porn films are one thing; Proportional Representation and the committee system quite another.

Perhaps more significantly, as other news replaced the expenses scandal in the headlines, the sense of excitement that real reform was possible was replaced by the familiar fear that the political leaders had already lost interest and turned their attention to other matters. There was a parallel with the credit crunch again: the worry was that once the immediate air of crisis had lifted there would be a depressing drift back to 'business as usual'. By the time of the party conferences, political reform seemed to be rather old news.

Of course, since then we have had the double dip in the expenses scandal, with the Sir Thomas Legg's review of expenses re-igniting a firestorm that seemed to have died down. But even so, the focus has all been on 'who claimed what for what' and 'how much they should pay back' rather than the bigger political questions. There is still a danger that wider political reform will be lost in all the furore.

It is in exactly these situations that think tanks can play an important role. We are not so driven or diverted (or at least, should not be) by the march of events or fast moving news agendas. Fascinating as all the squalid detail of expenses is, we should be able to rise above it and maintain the momentum for democratic reform.

It was in this spirit that ippr approached colleagues in other leading UK think tanks with differing perspectives to contribute their considered thoughts on the subject. The result is this short volume of essays.

It is important to mention at the outset that fixing the system is not enough in itself, as indeed a number of contributors point out in their essays. The expenses scandal was not just a consequence of inadequate political machinery; it was a symptom of a discredited political culture. Much has been written (in this volume and elsewhere) about the distance that has opened up between politicians and the people they serve – as evidenced, not least, by falling voter turn out and the collapse in party membership. To achieve real renewal in the democratic life of this country we need to reverse the dangerous disengagement between politics and public. The problem is that the most difficult time to renew your vows is when one partner in the relationship has cheated on the other.

We acknowledge that there is a deeper, wider agenda here, but do not allow ourselves to be diverted by it (or dispirited by its immensity). This is a volume more about ideas for fixing the essential plumbing of our body politic than it is about reviving its guiding philosophy. We have delimited our scope partly to make confronting it less daunting, but also to give ourselves a fighting chance of coming up with ideas that are realistic, pragmatic – doable.

In initiating the project, we wanted to look at the range of ideas that our contributors came up with, but in particular we were interested to see what sort of consensus might emerge around the most discussed areas for reform. If it is true that from the ruins of the old system we could build a new Jerusalem, which elements of its architecture could be constructed from a shared vision?

As you will see in reading the essays, we do not all agree on everything – the least surprising element of the project. To extend our metaphor: the reforms that some build up, others knock down. Any new system that we jointly constructed would not fit the perfect design of any one of us – in some cases the most treasured element would be missing altogether, in others the compromise solution would have to be cobbled together. But we are not left with a heap of rubble. Far from it. The level of consensus on many areas is impressive – and perhaps heartening. It is certainly the case, we would argue, that there is enough here to establish an agenda for reform which could be seen as a basis for a broad consensus on the way forward.

For a start, there is general agreement that the expenses scandal did represent a seminal crisis in confidence in our political system which demands more than just a clean up of the Fees Office and a clear-out of MPs. There was some concern (notably from the Fabian Society and CentreForum) that the outrage among sections of the public and press was overdone, if not downright hypocritical, and that the crisis is in danger of being manipulated by those who are fundamentally 'anti-politics'. Nonetheless, those voicing this note of caution are as eager as the

rest of the think tanks in wanting to see significant reforms across a number of areas.

There is a strong agreement, too, about the need for greater transparency. As the Fabian Society argues, it was the transparency offered by the Freedom of Information Act which exposed the expenses scandal in the first place, albeit in the teeth of parliamentary resistance; and as several contributors point out transparency in MPs' affairs, post the scandal, is now a done deal. No argument; and, to this limited extent, problem solved. The latest analyses of expenses (see Hencke 2009) suggests claims have dropped dramatically. But we generally agree too that transparency and accountability need to extend well beyond Parliament. All those paid by and spending tax payers' money should be subject to democratic scrutiny and be accountable for their actions, including senior civil servants and the quangocracy. Ideas include fixed-term appointments, subject to parliamentary hearing and approval.

Another area where the think tanks are more or less of one mind is the need to strengthen the role of Parliament in relation to the Executive. A stronger committee system is advocated by all. Ideas include giving Select Committees some role in initiating legislation, as well as in holding ministers and other senior officials to account. Standing expert committees to improve the detailed scrutiny of government legislation are also backed. There is general agreement that the MPs' role as national legislators should be re-invigorated, and some way found to allow the best politicians to build a career as a parliamentarian that commands respect and fulfils ambition.

It is fair to say, perhaps, that we would all like to see our system produce its own Teddy Kennedys – politicians of national, even international standing not because of their role in government but because of their role in the legislature. All of us would sympathise with the lament of Progress that at present the only MPs that any one takes any notice of are ministers or mavericks – and while the 'social worker' element of the constituency member should not be disparaged, it is overwhelming some MPs, dragging them down into an inappropriate level of minutiae, and diverting them away from their crucial – and primary – role of scrutinising legislation.

While we all want to see Parliament strengthened with respect to the Executive, we all also argue, albeit with different degrees of emphasis, that power needs to be distributed out of Westminster. We are all more or less localists now, it seems, though it is interesting to note that while some argue that the problem of centralism is largely structural (CentreForum) others see it as an issue of political culture (Policy Exchange). Still, giving more powers to democratically elected local authorities is generally popular – though the extent to which this devolution should include giving genuine fiscal autonomy to locally elected politicians is not as clear.

We are generally of mind, too, with perhaps one exception, in wanting to see increased citizen power, through citizens' initiatives, petitions and referendums. Demos puts the need for enhanced popular sovereignty and *ex-post* accountability of elected representatives by citizens front and centre of its contribution, drawing on classical and revolutionary concepts, such as public accusations and citizens conventions. Most of the other think tanks share some enthusiasm for greater active citizen participation – not least in drawing up the reform agenda – though CentreForum breaks ranks here

in voicing more scepticism about the efficacy of 'power to the people', arguing that it is a route to policy incoherence.

As to the sort of MPs we want, there was rather less agreement on that, though it is fair to say that we would all like to see Members of Parliament drawn from a wider circle than at present. CentreForum rides gallantly to the defence of the much maligned 'career politician', arguing that there is good reason why they often rise to the top. In essence, their argument is that good politicians make good politicians, and talent in business or another walk of life does not necessarily translate across. The Fabian Society meanwhile argues that in seizing power from the 'political class' we need to be clear who we are giving it to (and what they would do with it). There is no enthusiasm for the old days of MPs having outside jobs and keeping 'club hours' at Westminster – but there is a general sense that doing another job first, or at least entering the Commons rather later in life, would be no bad thing. That said, it is probably true to say that all the think tanks would agree with our ippr colleagues who say in their essay that the answer to our problems is certainly not a 'Parliament of Esther Rantzens'.

There is general support for the use of primaries as a way of choosing parliamentary candidates. Progress is hugely enthusiastic about primaries, and argues that issues such as the high cost can be overcome by setting spending limits. Others are more cautious – the main caveat being that there does need to be a role reserved for party members, otherwise party membership will wither still further. This in turn leads to an area, and an important one, where there are quite strong differences. Parties: good or bad, problem or solution?

Policy Exchange identifies overly strong political parties as the 'biggest part of the problem', while the Fabian Society and Reform mount equally strong defences of parties as key elements of our democratic system and for their role in aggregating the differing, and sometimes contradictory, views of the electorate into some sort of coherent policy programme. Policy Exchange would rip off the party rosettes and make parliamentary candidates campaign as individuals. In this way, they argue, we would get more independent-minded MPs who would stand up for their constituents' interests, rather than toeing the party line. CentreForum suggests that voting reform (more of which later) would produce greater independence among MPs without the need for 'independents' as such.

Despite these differences there is common ground that MPs should have more control over the parliamentary timetable and be stronger in holding the Government to account. There is broad consensus too that reducing the size of the 'payroll vote' by cutting the number of MPs who can be ministers would be a useful step in restoring a better balance of power between Executive and legislature. But then the consensus breaks down again over how much control party leaderships should exert over their MPs. Policy Exchange says they have a 'stranglehold'; the Fabians quote Phillip Cowley who has described this as 'cobblers', showing that MPs in recent years have become not more supine, but more rebellious.

Now we are getting to the areas where there is no agreement. Compulsory voting? Not an issue for most, although ippr comes out strongly in favour (with support from

Progress) as a way of addressing the very low turnout among poor and young people, and Policy Exchange strongly against. An elected House of Lords – well, there is some agreement that more reform is needed, but exactly what reform?

All of us seem to have different ideas and different degrees of enthusiasm. CentreForum backs full election as the 'least bad way forward', but wants all peers to be independent of party; the Fabian Society wants a fully elected house via a PR system; and for Progress anything less than a fully elected second chamber would be 'chickening out'. Reform would leave the future composition of the Lords to a referendum, while Policy Exchange says election – at least on the same basis as the Commons – would lead to 'disastrous gridlock' – though they are prepared to accept an elected element. On this issue, the think tanks' differences begin to show through more clearly – even more so when it comes to state funding of parties. CentreForum believes a low cap on donations is key with a case for tax relief on a portion of those donations. Policy Exchange and Reform are dead against. After all, they argue, it was state funding (in the form of allowances) that got us into this mess.

Interestingly, the issue of Europe is not much discussed at all (most of the essays were written before the Irish Referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, it should be said), and where it is, the dividing lines are perhaps more nuanced than we might have expected. There are some areas of consensus, notably the need for much better scrutiny of European legislation in Westminster. Most of us seem to think a referendum on the UK's relationship with Europe would be a good idea – the only problem is we are not arguing for the same referendum.

And finally there is Proportional Representation. Here the fault lines are predictable and probably more or less unbridgeable. The single most important change for some is a sideshow or step in the wrong direction for others. Reform argues forcefully that through first-past-the-post Britain gets the government it wants; just as forcefully CentreForum argues that the current system is 'grotesquely unfair'. CentreForum, Demos, the Fabian Society, ippr and Progress all come out for PR. Policy Exchange is firmly opposed.

About the best we can come up with in the way of a joint position on electoral reform – and even this may be stretching things – is to suggest that we might just agree that the option of PR be put to the people through a referendum. We would certainly be campaigning on different sides, however. And we would probably disagree on timing as well.

A powerful call for reform

Where, in the end, does this leave us? It is our belief that the collected views of these seven, diverse think tanks amount to a powerful call for real reform. We must, of course, acknowledge that a bunch of think tanks, however diverse, are going to come at this issue from a particular perspective. We are quintessential insiders, members of the 'political class' which, as some of the essay authors point out, is almost as distrusted and disliked as the MPs who have taken the brunt of the public's righteous fury.

We cannot deny who we are – all we can say is that even we, with our umbilical link to Westminster, were shocked by the extent of the expenses scandal – so if nothing else, this stands as our contribution to sorting out the mess.

It is true that we cannot claim to speak for a particularly wide constituency – we speak only for ourselves. But of course we do not form our views or expound our solutions in a vacuum. We believe that what is being espoused in this volume represents a pretty good synthesis of the views of those people who are politically interested and engaged in our society, if no one else. As such, we would hope that those in a position to make the political reform happen – MPs, peers and the political leaders in particular – will be galvanised by this publication to keep on with reform. If the think tanks can agree on what amounts to a solid agenda for change, there is no reason why the political parties cannot do so. The next step would be to move from general areas of agreement to a specific timetable for action. Again, this should be possible – indeed we would argue it would be a grave betrayal of the electorate if it did not happen.

The think tanks are generally united that although the expenses scandal has done severe damage to our political system and to the public's respect for politicians and politics more generally, the worst reaction we could have in the face of this crisis is to despair and to do nothing. And those who brought us to this pass still have a chance to start the process of reform.

These pages are not given over to scathing attacks and withering scorn directed at our politicians. Indeed, there is considerable support and understanding shown for a group of people who we generally regard as hard working and hard pressed, even if they have messed up big time over allowances. In this spirit, the politicians – particularly those at the top of their parties – can take our ideas as the advice of 'critical friends' – people interested in seeing them succeed, not eager to see them fail. But this volume also represents a challenge – a challenge to seize this opportunity for reform, not to duck it or to funk it.

If this Parliament adds a failure to take steps towards serious reform to its record of abusing the allowances and expenses system (and scandalously trying to cover it up) then it will surely go down as one of the most reviled in history. If, however, it uses the next few months to work together to bring in real reforms, its reputation could be redeemed considerably. Politicians have a lot on their plates in the next few months – rebuilding the economy, tackling the public debt, making progress on climate change to name but a few – but all the think tanks in this volume would concur in saying that advances on these issues and others will not be delayed or set back – indeed it will be expedited – if time is found to discuss and agree the programme of democratic reform that is so long overdue.

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The self-employed, and those working in low-paid jobs with no expense accounts, will have looked on with incredulity as they learnt of the lengths to which MPs went to 'pad' their expenses. But most people working in a big organisation, be it public, private or voluntary, will know of colleagues who are no less profligate in their approach to expenses. Like MPs, many of these white collar professionals have come to view these claims as an integral part of their remuneration package – a view that stems from exactly the same sense of entitlement that took root in Parliament. It was probably this group – flying business class and dining on the corporate account – that Stephen Fry had in mind when he told the BBC's *Newsnight* programme in May: 'I've fiddled my expenses. We all have. You have. It just isn't that important.'

How, then, should we feel about MPs that milked the system? The appropriate response probably lies somewhere between Fry's casual indifference and the self-righteous indignation of the *Daily Telegraph*'s leader writers. Certainly there were some MPs who were guilty of straightforward corruption – lying about the designation of their primary residences or claiming for non-existent mortgage payments. Such people should not be in politics and come the next general election, most no longer will be. But it is important to remember that the majority of the MPs embroiled in the expenses scandal did not actually break the rules. Their biggest crime was colluding in the operation of a system so lax and so opaque that, more often than not, the rules did not need to be broken.

If we want our politics to be about public service rather than personal enrichment, we would do better to focus on changing the system than the people working within it. But we should not kid ourselves that reform of the expenses system alone will suffice. If we want real guarantees for the future, we will have to tackle the underlying cause of the expenses scandal: the lack of democratic accountability that allowed a culture of arrogance and impunity to take root in the first place. In short, we need to ensure that MPs are truly answerable to those they are there to serve.

Representative democracy still works

Received wisdom has it that the politician who promises to give more political 'power to the people' is on to a sure-fire winner. But it is far from self-evident that such promises are, in fact, sensible or desirable. Representative democracy requires politicians to represent the views and interests of their constituents as best they can while recognising that those views and interests can conflict, not only with each other, but also with an MP's personal beliefs and/or the views and interests of the rest of society. Some of the ideas that politicians have promoted in recent months and years – giving citizens the power to initiate legislation, impose or reject policy through the greater use of petitions and plebiscites, or even to 'sack' an MP if 5 per cent of voters in a given constituency demand a by-election – pose a direct challenge to the principles of representative democracy and risk, giving undue weight to well organised or well funded pressure groups.

If politicians are to take the difficult and painful decisions that will be needed if we are to meet the big, long-term public policy challenges facing the country (think climate

change or energy security), it is surely better that they are given the freedom to pursue a policy that may be vigorously opposed by an active minority or even, on occasion, a majority. The death of the Manchester road-pricing scheme in a referendum in December 2008 provides a good example of just how difficult it is to make real policy progress on the basis of plebiscite. By giving local people a veto over the Government's transport policy, short-term considerations and parochial concerns were allowed to trump the significant long-term societal benefits that would have accrued from the extension of pay-as-you-drive schemes across the country.

None of this is to say that politicians know best, of course. Simply that they should be given the chance to implement their policy agenda and, four or five years later, to stand for re-election on their record. The alternative approach, in which voters regularly receive issue-specific ballot papers through the letterbox, usually leads to democratic dysfunction, as the people of near-bankrupt California have discovered to their cost. The lesson, according to *Financial Times* columnist John Kay, is clear: 'If you ask people simple questions that can be answered yes or no, you'll get honest answers. But there is not the slightest reason why these answers should add up to a coherent policy programme' (Kay 2009).

In defence of the political class

Some argue that politicians should have experience of the 'real world' and should therefore feel free to pursue a range of outside commercial interests. And it is certainly true that if Parliament contained more former doctors, teachers, soldiers, farmers, business leaders or bankers, many of the implementation problems that arise when legislation is drawn up by people with little or no frontline experience might be avoided.

But this is an argument for people entering politics later, not for MPs maintaining an extensive list of outside commercial interests once elected. We know from experience that a system in which politicians do half a day's work outside Parliament before scurrying over to the Commons for a 2:30pm start, leads to a number of serious problems.

First, there are constant questions about potential conflicts of interest. Second, it takes politicians away from their primary duty to their constituents. And third, it results in a legislature that convenes at times that most mothers (and fathers who wish to see their children occasionally) would find unacceptable, and that people with no outside interests or independent wealth find unaffordable.

What is more, the assumption that people whose previous experience is political have little to offer should not go unchallenged. It is no coincidence that the Milibands on the Government side, or Cameron and Osborne on the Conservative side, have all reached senior political positions, while many of their colleagues with more 'real world' experience, have not. No doubt Archie Norman thought politics would be a 'doddle' after running a giant retailer like Asda. But he, like a good many others before and after him, found that reaching high office in politics required an entirely different skill set from that which works in business. Politics is about influencing, persuading and communicating. Business is about command and control.

Practical measures to strengthen Parliament

The romantic myth of the independent-minded politician bravely holding government to account while shaping key legislation should not be overstated. Members of the House of Commons have always represented a wide range of interests – and talent – while the Executive has long found myriad ways to assert its authority. But there is little doubt that in recent decades the average backbench MP has seen his or her status eroded in comparison with the Executive. The demands of modern politics, with its emphasis on unity and rapid reaction to a rolling media agenda, has further marginalised the role of backbench MPs.

Yet a vibrant and effective House of Commons remains central to the health of our democracy. In the short term, MPs could introduce a series of practical reforms that would help redress at least partially the imbalance between government and Parliament.

First, the independence of Select Committees should be enhanced by making the selection of chairs subject to secret ballot rather than controlled by the whips as is currently the case. The Commons as a whole should set its own timetable, as the House of Lords already does, while ensuring the Government is given sufficient time to carry through its legislative programme. The parties should also permit more free votes.

Second, it is vital to reduce the size of the Government. There are now around 140 paid and unpaid government positions, including 26 whips, ensuring that the Government wields far too much patronage power over MPs.

In the longer run, there is a need to conduct a vigorous debate about whether the separation between the Executive and legislature should become more formalised. British politics is increasingly quasi-presidential in scope but does not possess the checks and balances that are integral to most presidential systems. One such check could be created by allowing the Commons to scrutinise and potentially block ministerial appointments.

Electing the House of Lords

At a time when governments are under increasing pressure to rush through important legislation, it is vital that the House of Lords continues to fulfil its scrutiny role in an atmosphere less partisan than the Commons. To do this, it will need to draw on a wide range of expertise and possess some independence from the party system.

However, there is little agreement on how to achieve this goal. At present, the power of appointment resides with the Government: a clear conflict of interest which too often has led to the ennobling of political mediocrity for reasons of expediency. Some have argued that this task could be farmed out to an independent authority. But this would invariably raise questions about the prejudices of the 'great and the good' on the new body. There would also be something deeply unpalatable about an unelected quango appointing people to play such an important role in the democratic process.

The election of Lords is therefore the 'least bad' way forward. The objections that are normally raised to a democratic choice of peers are hardly insurmountable. The Lords' secondary status to the Commons can be clarified in law. It would be straightforward to

establish campaigning rules which forbid running on a party ticket. Shorn of party labels and the constituency link of MPs, there is little reason to believe that the Lords would become heavily politicised or a threat to the Commons.

The independence of the new Lords could be protected by fixing longer-term limits than the Commons – perhaps 12 years. The relative stability of the body could also be ensured by electing a third of the Lords every four years, ideally on general election day at the end of each fixed-term Parliament. There is also no good reason why we need the 700-plus Peers we have at present. A chamber with 360 members – elected in groups of 120 – would suffice. The elections could be phased in over the first 12 years of operation, giving the existing Lords the choice of running or a period of grace in which to stand down.

Increasing accountability

Localism that works

The experience of Scotland and Wales exposes the myth of the UK's uniquely 'centralised political culture'. Experience shows that once powers have been handed over to a sub-state authority – explicitly, as a result of an agreed constitutional reform, people quickly adjust to the new reality, understand where power and responsibility now lie and behave accordingly. Different tiers of government may try to blame each other when things go wrong, but voters, journalists and civil society groups tend to know where the 'buck stops'. Our centralised political culture is a product of our centralised political system, not the other way around.

So the real question is not whether localism is possible – it is – but whether it is desirable. Ultimately, this comes down to what sort of country we want to live in. Despite paying lip-service to the localism agenda, successive Conservative and Labour administrations have tended to hoard power in Whitehall, creating a political system that, in revenue-raising terms, is now the second most centralised in the European Union after Malta. In the Conservatives' case, this centralising instinct stems from a profound distrust of local government; in Labour's case, from a strong belief in the ability of the central government bureaucracy to deliver social progress while ironing out geographic (and other) inequalities.

The liberal approach is different. It rests on the pluralist principle that power should be widely dispersed and exercised as close to the people as possible. This means, for example, allowing the people of Scotland to create for themselves a different social compact from that which exists in England. If the Scots want enhanced services in return for higher taxes, that is their prerogative. And the same should go for the localities.

The process of 'localising' our politics is not one that controlling ministers in Westminster will find comfortable: giving people freedom inevitably means giving them the freedom to make mistakes. But over time, the benefits of 'competitive localism' – so familiar to policymakers in federal countries like the United States – would make themselves apparent as the different communities, towns, cities, regions and countries of the United Kingdom watched and learned from each other's policy innovations and experiments, and strove to outperform their neighbours. Such a model should, if given time to develop, lead to a general ratcheting up of standards.

We should be under no illusions of the difficulties involved in achieving such a change. Allowing local communities to fashion their own local policy responses to local circumstances may sound like common sense, but for a political community obsessed with eliminating 'post-code lotteries' it will require a big shift in outlook.

Renewing the relationship with Europe

The problems that beset the British political system are mirrored in Europe. There are many reforms at EU level – not least a more direct link between the European Parliament elections and the election of the President of the European Commission – that would be desirable in the longer term. But given the lack of appetite among governments – and even more so, voters – for a further bout of treaty reform, the EU is better off focusing on working within its existing treaty framework and improving its record on delivery at this juncture.

However, the UK can take two concrete steps to better hold the EU to account and resolve the question of its relationship with Europe. First, Parliament needs to improve its scrutiny record of European legislation. The Select Committees should have an opportunity to comment on draft legislation before the Government reaches a decision in the EU's Council of Ministers. MPs should also be prepared to make use of the provisions in the Lisbon Treaty (and employ these in kind even if that treaty is not ratified) to force the European Commission to reconsider legislation that strays beyond its remit or is not justified.

Second, Britain's relationship with the EU has become so dysfunctional that only a referendum on membership can provide clarity of direction. The reluctance of governments over the last two decades to clearly explain or engage positively with Europe has damaged Britain's position within the EU and undermined the confidence of the British public in the benefits of Europe.

A referendum on the Lisbon Treaty would only further cloud rather than clarify this relationship, leading to an ambiguous answer on a complex set of questions. A referendum on membership would give both sides the opportunity to air their arguments and answer more fundamental questions about Britain's future role in Europe.

Reforming the way political parties operate

State funding

British political parties have become too reliant on the moneymen. This has led to the widespread perception that a small number of individuals hold unfair sway over party policies, or are seeking special favour from the Government. But a further increase in direct state funding would do little to force parties to re-engage the public. This would be better achieved by capping donations.

A cap on donations at, say, £10,000 would not only limit the potentially malign influence of a few very wealth individuals on the body politic. It would mean parties seeking money from the many rather than the few, something that would force them to look beyond their own memberships. To help, there is a case to be made for a tax relief on donations, say up to half the level of the overall cap, treating political donations more like donations to charities and other campaigning groups.

A cap on constituency spending across a parliament, combined with a cap on national party spending, should encourage parties to engage more widely than they do at present. With both donations and spending capped, politics might just become a battle of ideas once again.

Primaries – a partial solution

Primaries could prove a useful tool to open up the candidate selection process in some constituencies. Parties should be encouraged to experiment further. But it remains to be seen just how many voters would participate once the novelty had worn off – the danger is that in many places participation would be reduced to a small cabal of already engaged participants. Primaries are also expensive and unless candidates are given some form of equal monetary support, they risk diminishing rather than broadening representation. A system of recall could also play a role in ensuring that sitting MPs are more accountable for their actions, although the terms would need to be carefully defined to prevent abuse and protect MPs from the efforts of well organised minorities determined to destabilise them.

Ultimately, however, the only real way to loosen the grip of the party machinery is to reform the voting system. Voting reform would allow the electorate to distinguish between candidates from the same as well as different parties. It would also give smaller parties a far better chance of upsetting the status quo, extending real choice and diversity. In addition, it would drastically reduce the number of safe seats, increasing the accountability of MPs to their constituents.

Proportional Representation – the central reform

In our opinion, voting reform should be top of the agenda.

First, the minor issues. There is a case for lowering the voting age to 16, though it is highly unlikely to lead a great rise in participation rates. Moving polling day to the weekend and experimenting with e-voting and other polling innovations might also make some difference at the margins. There is little good cause, however, to introduce compulsory voting as it tends to mask, rather than address, the underlying problem of voter apathy. People should have the freedom not to exercise their vote and politicians should heed the message of those who choose not to go to the polls.

To tackle disengagement with the political system, we need a broader set of reforms that oblige the parties to re-engage with all parts of the electorate. And the key to this change is Proportional Representation.

That the current system of election to the House of Commons is grotesquely unfair is unarguable. While every post-war general election has thrown up its own distortions and injustices, some have illustrated the point more starkly than others. In 1983, for example, the SDP/Liberal Alliance received 3 per cent of the seats in return for 26 per cent of the vote, while the Labour party, which gained fractionally more votes (27 per cent), received nine times as many seats (209, or 32 per cent). It took 32,776 votes to elect each Conservative MP, 40,463 votes to elect a Labour MP and an astonishing 338,302 votes to elect a Liberal/SDP MP. Things may have improved a bit in recent elections, but in 2005 it still took nearly twice as many votes to elect a Conservative

MP as it did a Labour MP, and nearly four times as many votes to send a Liberal Democrat to Westminster.

What is more, the current first-past-the-post system has the effect of creating large numbers of 'safe' seats. In the least eventful election of recent years (in 2001) only 27 seats changed hands out of 659, though the average in recent decades has been closer to 50. But that still leaves 600 seats where no change takes place, in some cases for decades.

Supporters of the challengers in these seats are statistically more likely to be run over and killed on the way to the polling station than they are to see their preferred politician get elected. Little surprise, then, that millions of voters are turning away from politics, with voter turnout falling from 84 per cent in 1950 to 61 per cent in 2005. Little surprise, also, that the parties are increasingly turning away from voters, targeting their resources and their policies to the half million or so swing voters lucky enough to live in a swing seat.

Some argue that none of this really matters – unless you are a Liberal Democrat, that is. Or rather they used to until some recent research came out showing that MPs with safe seats abused the expenses system far more than MPs in marginal seats. This should not surprise us either: if you are certain to hold your seat, you are unlikely to spend much time worrying what your constituents think about you. Which proves the point that politicians are constantly telling everyone else in the public sector: accountability is key. Want a politics that makes every politician accountable? Create an electoral system that makes every vote count.

As to which proportional voting systems would represent an improvement on the current one, the answer is simple: all of them. But the single transferable vote (STV) or Jenkins' AV [Alternative Vote]-plus would get our (first preference) vote.

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Daniel Leighton, Demos

The French Revolutionary Mirabeau observed that elected representatives have a tendency to transform themselves into 'a kind of de facto aristocracy' which claims autonomy for itself. His contemporary Madame Roland underlined the point when she declared 'representative government soon becomes the most corrupt of all if the people cease to scrutinise its representatives' (Rosanvallon 2008). And the nineteenth century MP Robert Wallace observed of the British political system in his era that it was composed of 'two traditional oligarchies … managing the members of its parliamentary following through a dexterous blending of menace, cajolery or reward' (cited in Sutherland 2007).

All three would surely have felt vindicated if they had been around to observe the current MPs' expenses scandal. The obvious riposte, of course, is that the people have the vote as the ultimate sanction to rid themselves of wayward representatives. Yet there are strong grounds for arguing that electoral mechanisms are necessary but woefully insufficient.

The most pertinent question to ask in the wake of the expenses scandal is not 'how can we restore trust in Parliament and our representatives?' but 'how can we give citizens more control and oversight over Parliament and their representatives?' This opens up a neglected terrain, often missed in calls to reform the electoral system, as to how we decentralise power or increase participation in decision-making, so that citizens can hold their representatives to account for decisions that they have already made, rather than those they promise to undertake – so called, *ex-post* accountability (Blaug 2008).

The rush by all party leaders to introduce some system of recall for miscreant MPs indicates an inchoate sense that greater *ex-post* accountability is needed. Our preference would be for a system that draws on classical models of public accusation, enables citizens to publicly sanction parliamentarians or ministers between elections but that, unlike recall, would not need to be initiated at constituency level. This republican perspective, grounded as it is in the notion of popular rather than parliamentary sovereignty, provides a different take on the question of restoring trust in Parliament. It suggests that as important as proposals to strengthen the power of the Parliament over the Executive may be, these are second-order issues compared with the need to put Parliament in its place in relation to citizens.

The question of the ultimate source of authority in the British Constitution is famously obscured by the decaying, but still central, doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty. We need to clarify and restore the primacy of citizens over the institutions to which they delegate power. Citizens rather than their representatives should be the primary decision-makers when it comes to reforms of the democratic process. What emerges from this republican-inflected perspective is that citizens need to go from being the occasional authorisers of political power to the owners and custodians of it.

Accountability and the overburdened vote

Accountability involves the *ex-post* judgement of the past performance of public officials or politicians. It involves both scrutiny and sanction. Scrutiny entails

examination and evaluation, whereas sanction entails empowered action on the basis of such evaluation. The key mechanism for the public to sanction MPs in modern representative democracies is the vote. Yet in between elections, scrutiny and sanction, theoretically at least, are exercised by a range of other agents – by Parliament over government, judges over Parliament, by senior managers over subordinates, and in a more diffuse way by the media over the state in general.

It is worth exploring the nature of the electoral mechanism in more detail to clarify the sort of accountability it affords citizens. In elections, the citizenry acts as a Principal that theoretically both scrutinises and sanctions elected officials as their Agents. Yet, in the words of Blaug, 'this is quite a particular kind of Principal/Agent relation as it involves the authorisation *ex-ante* [i.e. before the event] of an empowered and autonomous agent that can rule over people' (2008: 105). Elections thus combine *ex-ante* and *ex-post* accountability in one move: citizens both authorise new leaders to govern and express a judgement on incumbent performance.

However, when, as was the case with the expenses scandal, a divide opens up between citizens and the political class, the vote is a fairly blunt instrument. This is especially the case in the UK where power is fused between the Executive and the legislature, making a mockery of the notion of a separation of powers, and where the electoral system creates the huge distortions between votes cast and seats gained by the majority party.

How are we to interpret the fact that the Labour government's share of the vote dropped in both the 2001 and 2005 general elections, but in the first it won a 'landslide' and the second it had a more than workable majority? Was the electorate sanctioning it for its performance in office or authorising it to continue as before – or both at once? The truth is that unless there is a hung parliament the sanction of dwindling support has no impact on the authorisation of power for another four years.

While elections provide authorisation *ex-ante*, it is less clear they can provide effective *ex-post* accountability. The vote is therefore overburdened with a dual function that it cannot effectively perform, which in turn creates a political culture and policy environment that infantilise the electorate. Years of frustration, resentment and despair need to be built up before a party is removed from government by an apparently manic swing in the mood of the electorate. One set of elites is exchanged for another, but the conduct of the elites once in office rarely changes.

Can PR rescue the political class from itself?

Could a change of voting system bear the dual burden of accountability more effectively? There are a number of positive effects that might come with a move to Proportional Representation but they are unlikely to deal effectively with problems of ex-post accountability. Even a partial form of PR such as the Jenkins AV [Alternative Vote]-plus could change the unwarranted winner-takes-all effect of first-past-the-post elections. This could have a number of indirect benefits, notably if coalition government forced a more consensual and consistent style of policymaking. If one party cannot guarantee the passage of its preferred legislation it will be forced to bargain with coalition partners or support parties in order to legislate. By dispersing

power among more veto holders, PR might provide a functional equivalent to the separation of powers that is lacking in the current fusion of executive and legislature. In turn PR might open up the political process beyond the two great political oligarchies that have occupied Parliament for the last century.

However, those calling for PR as a direct response to the expenses crisis miss the fundamental problem it brought to light. Whereas previous scandals have primarily affected the governing party, the expenses scandal affected the political class as a whole. It reflected a worrying tendency: 'that the real divide in British public life is no longer between the main parties, but between the political class and the rest' (Oborne 2008: xvi). MPs from different parties have more in common with each other than they have with voters and like any special interest group the political class fights hard to maintain control over its own regulations, pay rates, pensions and means by which it is held to account.

The expenses scandal powerfully revealed this sense of separation between political class and the public. It also revealed a profound sense of powerlessness: the vote can sanction one faction of the political class, but it can never serve to sanction it as a whole and by the time an election comes around it may be too late to do anything about specific acts of malfeasance. In all representative systems, once elected a politician's primary loyalty and accountability are to his or her party; between elections all the incentives and sanctions on conduct are possessed by the party leaderships. In this sense politicians are no different to anyone else – they respond rationally to the incentives and sanctions they experience within their environment. The problem is not with parties per se but with their monopoly over the rules of the game. The most sensible response is not to try to turn human beings into angels but to remove them from obvious conflicts of interest.

While Oborne's acerbic account of the political class is convincing, it overplays the novelty of the phenomenon: it misses how it is a consequence of the democratisation of the gentlemanly eighteenth century political arrangements he pines for. Despite aims to create a more equal and less corrupt system the political class has become a self-perpetuating oligarchy that jealously guards its privileges. It is possible that primaries could enhance popular control of politicians by giving them stronger incentives to be loyal to the constituency that selected them. Yet the expenses scandal arguably reveals the need for citizens to find a space and role within the political process that is not designed or premised on the logic of the party system.

Democratic dualism: authorisation and oversight

There has been a persistent concern since the birth of modern democracy to compensate for the dysfunctions of electoral representation and the 'arrhythmia' of the ballot box. Perhaps the most well known intuitional manifestation of such democratic distrust is the Recall and Initiative procedures, some combination of which is used in 27 states.

Throughout the modern era reformers have called for supplementary processes to the vote, through which citizens could control office holders in mass democracies. This was less about mass participation in decision-making and more about ensuring a role for

citizens in overseeing representatives after they had gained the legitimacy of the ballot box. These mechanisms sought to enlist the capacity of the citizens in a judicial rather than a legislative capacity. As Rosanvallon puts it, the concern was: 'To institutionalize social vigilance and to understand sovereignty in terms of a dynamic and potentially conflictual relationship between a representative power and a power of oversight, both emanating from the people' (2008: 92).

The role of the public accusation[1] in the democratic imagination

While the need for limitations on government power has been a constant of modern democracies, such structural checks and balances have been liberal rather than democratic in inspiration. This is to say they have sought not to enhance the sovereignty of citizens over representatives but prevent an all-powerful government encroaching on individual liberties. This has meant that liberal distrust has been more successfully institutionalised and that the expression of democratic distrust has mutated and evolved outside formal institutions (Rosanvallon 2008).

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reformers consistently drew inspiration from the accountability mechanisms exercised in the Athenian People's Court and the 'tribunes of the plebs' in the Roman republic. Both institutions empowered citizens to launch public denunciations against officials, which would then be put to a jury of citizens to decide. The denunciation enabled any citizens to initiate an accusation of malfeasance against office holders, including military leaders. Sanctions could involve anything from commendation to ostracism and execution (Blaug 2008). And during the fledgling years of the American and French Republics reformers sought to graft ancient accountability mechanisms on to the vote to control the emerging class of professional politicians (see Rosanvallon 2008).

The expenses scandal is an example of how the expression of popular distrust is channelled and often distorted by a scandal-hungry media which cannot be held to account for its own conduct. To use Machiavelli's terminology, it is hard to distinguish between genuine denunciations and 'calumnies' that unjustly ruin reputations and careers. The *Telegraph*'s campaign of terror over the political classes was so effective because the political class colluded in covering up their expenses. Yet beyond the general election there is no institutional route by which citizens can express dissatisfaction or sanctions on their own terms. By going the standard route of appointing a civil servant to report on a new expenses system, the Government has failed to give the populace an 'opportunity to vent their animus' against the political class. MPs' combative response to the Legg review suggests that a solution on repaying expenses will be yet another closed compromise within the political class.

The ghost of popular sovereignty in the UK

All constitutions premised on the consent of the people are beset by paradoxes of authority and ownership. Laughlin and Walker describe this paradox as ultimately being generated by the 'tension linking – and also the question of the priority between – a constituent power (the 'people') and constitutional form, politics and law' (2007: 1). Yet such questions are particularly difficult to pose, let alone answer, in the UK. Although the modern concept of constituent power was first articulated by the

1. In republican Rome those bringing false accusation or 'calumnies' warranted being put on trial. Machiavelli argued that calumnies were 'as injurious to liberty as accusations are beneficial'.

Levellers in the midst of the English Civil War, it failed to gain any recognition in the 1688 Settlement. The latter has been described by Laughlin as resting on a deliberate obfuscation by governing elites: 'the invocation of popular sovereignty but located only in a parliamentary form and the characterization of this revolutionary change as being designed to restore the ancient constitution' (2006: 42). The question of constituent power has become so deeply buried that MPs literally do not think it exists. The expenses scandal is only the most banal consequence of a constitution that is parastic upon the notion of popular sovereignty while refusing to formally aknowledge it.

Over time, vesting sovereignty in the 'Crown in Parliament' has rested on a further obsfuscation, wherein the power of the crown has passed to the hands of the Prime Minister and government within Parliament. The doctrine of 'parliamentary sovereignty' has been democratically dented with the advent of universal suffrage and hedged from above by the European Union. Yet recognition of the right of the people to elect their representatives says nothing about their role in modifying or radically altering the democratic and constitutional rules of the game in which representatives operate. Precisely because parliamentary sovereignty occludes the people as constituent power, it provides no means of articulating clear and consistent procedures whereby citizens could or should be party to fundamental changes to democratic rights and processes. Yet this is precisely what is called for today.

An immodest proposal: citizens as owners and custodians of the political system

The expenses scandal and MPs' bemused reaction to the public anger it generated is indicative of basic confusion over the role and status of citizens in the political order. This crisis of political ownership, while amplified in a society of more individualised and demanding citizens, has been centuries rather than decades in the making. Gordon Brown's attempt to address citizen disengagement and distrust – from the *Governance of Britain* paper (HM Government 2007) to the current constitutional reform bill – singly fails to confront this confusion. The process of 'taming the prerogative powers' is long overdue and to be welcomed but the relationship between citizen and Parliament is sidestepped again and again.

The first step to preventing representatives from become de-facto aristocracies is to recognise citizens as the formal owners of their constitution. To do this we need to reclaim the republican distinction between *constituent power* of the people and the institutions created to represent and act on behalf of this power. Following the radical reformers of the eighteenth century a new constitutional settlement should recognise the power of representation and oversight, with both stemming from the people. This calls for direct and public forms of accountability that enable the people to rehearse and display their sovereignty over representatives. While the vote authorises the representatives to act on the people's interests, the power of oversight and sanction needs to remain distinct, visible and *threatening* after the fact of authorisation to ensure that they do.

To the extent that a British Bill of Rights could be about building on rather than undermining the Human Rights Act, the process of writing one should not simply

catalogue existing rights and obligations. Rather, it should be seized on to specify new rights and obligation of political ownership and oversight. Having made the people the owners of the constitution, innovative new mechanisms by which to make them the custodians need to be experimented with.

What might such mechanisms and processes look like and what should they focus on? I suggest two distinct categories: new mechanisms to initiate public accusations and new procedures for citizen control over democratic rule-making. In both instances citizens would be empowered in their capacity to make binding judgements in the pubic interest rather than directly participating in everyday legislation. This is distinct from the notion of citizen juries as consultative bodies on issues of public policy. While such processes can have a functional utility in improving policymaking they do little to empower the citizen as an overseer of their representatives.

Public accusations

A new accusation system could replace, parallel or become part of the formal inquiries and commissions that are currently launched by politicians into their own conduct, often in response to media pressure. At present these often exacerbate rather then diffuse distrust. Take the example of the multiple inquiries that have been held to date on the Iraq War. Regardless of the validity of the judgments, the fact that the Prime Minister sets the terms of references and appoints the Inquiry members gives the perception that they were rigged from the outset. Infusing these processes with randomly selected citizens would enable the creation of an independent judgment that would create an alternative focus for public debate.

Citizens could initiate public accusations through a petition: if a reasonably high threshold of public votes were reached, a jury of randomly selected citizens and a judge would be independently appointed. Public sanctions could range from highly symbolic black marks on the reputation of those deemed guilty to a modern equivalent of political ostracism, wherein politicians could be banned from taking any form of public office in the future.

As was the case in the Athenian and Roman republics, a public accusation system should incorporate 'two step accountability devices' which 'hold to account those officials who hold officials to account for no good reason' (Elster 1999: 274). The issue of false or frivolous charges presented a serious challenge to the legitimacy of the accusation process in both Athens and Rome. Both polities experimented with a number of ways to limit false charges, principally by imposing costs on the citizen bringing the accusation. These included fines and future bans on making accusation.

Democratic rule-making

The immediate response from party leaders to the expenses crisis was to shower the electorate with democratic gifts from above – from recall and initiatives on tax to electoral reform. Yet the question of how citizens should vote for or remunerate their representatives or the capacities they should have to affect the political process are questions elected politicians are not in a good position to answer. They have an inherent conflict of interest between preserving their own status and their party's prospect of retaking or regaining power and decisions that might enhance the

democratic process over the long term. The choice between party and country is not always a zero-sum game. Yet the pressure to opt for short-term gain is intense within the party systems prevalent in modern political systems. Indeed, the reform proposals offered by both the Tories and Labour are shot through with partisan logic: the Tories say 'yes' to initiatives on taxation, 'no' to a referendum on PR, whereas Labour is promising a referendum on PR but one restricted to a choice over the single transferable vote (STV).

Rather than having to justify the inclusion of citizens in making decisions about the democratic process, the burden of proof should be on those who would seek to exclude them. Certain categories of decision relating to the democratic process should automatically bypass representatives and go to a specially convened assembly of 'citizen representatives'. Citizen representative bodies have been defined as those in which 'members are selected or self selected, or authorized through initial election alone – rather than functioning as professional representatives' (Warren 2007: 50).

The exemplar model of a democratically legitimate citizen representative body is the British Columbia Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform. The Citizens Assembly, initiated in 2004 following an election promise, consisted of 160 randomly selected citizens empowered to set the terms of reference on referendum on whether the province's Single Member Plurality (SMP) electoral system should be changed. The new electoral system proposed by the Assembly, a form of STV, was narrowly defeated in a referendum in 2005. The outcome in this instance is less important than the process. The key lessons concern the way professional politicians were screened out of the selection process for Assembly members, the direct empowerment of a citizen body to set the agenda and the passing of the final decision to the citizenry at large.

Where the responsibility for administering such processes should sit is an open and contentious question. One potential location could be the new Supreme Court. Alternatively, a new arms-length 'Office of Citizens Control' could be created as part of new constitutional settlement. In the first instance there should be a series of discrete citizen assemblies empowered to set the agenda on a range of democratic process issues: whether to change the electoral system, and whether to institute recall and on both funding of parties and the remuneration of MPs. Demos held a 60-strong convention on MPs' expenses in June 2009 and participants from a range of backgrounds not only came up with eminently sensible proposals for reform, they also appeared to immensely enjoy taking part.

It is important to note that neither accusations nor citizens' conventions are likely to take place on a regular basis. Just as most people are only likely to serve on a criminal jury once, it is unlikely that citizens would be asked to serve in a citizens assembly or political jury more than once in their lifetime. As with criminal juries, their effectiveness is less about the number of people taking part so much as the type of people taking part. Randomly selecting citizen representatives to oversee such processes would symbolically and practically prise the hands of the political class away from the democratic process itself.

Conclusion

While the idea that sovereignty resides in the people is new territory for Britain's representative institutions, it draws on the long and rich tradition of democratic republicanism in Britain – a tradition that should provide the animating logic of a new constitutional settlement. What would emerge is a new role for citizens in overseeing political power that could enhance trust in the political system, not least by reducing that populist media backlash that occurs when MPs make decisions in which they have a clear conflict of interest.

This call for more direct citizen oversight is not intended as a panacea to the multiple pathologies of power that beset the creaking Westminster model of democracy. Power is and has been for decades both massively over-centralised and over-concentrated in the Executive. Addressing the lack of constitutional standing for local government must be part of a constitutional reform package. Enshrining and observing the Council of Europe's Charter on Local Self Government would provide one means of enacting this change. The enhanced role of local government would potentially free up MPs from becoming constituency social workers. Yet the extent to which they could become respected and trusted representatives of the nation requires a confrontation with the fetishisation of power in the figure of the 'crown in Parliament'. This not only occludes the fact that all power has passed into the hands of the leader of the majority party but also conflates the power of representatives with those of the people. Focusing on the problem of citizen oversight reminds us that Parliament and the political class need saving from themselves – and that ordinary citizens can and should play a key role in this task.

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Sunder Katwala, Fabian Society

As a crisis of politicians and an indictment of a 'political class', the expenses scandal has been widely welcomed, often exuberantly celebrated. As a crisis of boring old politics, we seem to have barely tried to get to grips with it at all.

There has been legitimate anger at the erosion of public service, intertwined with synthetic indignation from those delighted to see politicians live up to the worst caricatures of their trade. The prurient opportunity to pick over the taste in furniture and supermarket habits of the political classes was legitimised by the fact that we were paying for it all. The exposé was a journalistic triumph, proved again by the inept parliamentary attempts to redact what was already public, which helped the media to rediscover its own monastic commitment to expenses probity, and belief in transparency in all things, save, of course, the workings of a fearless free press. Politicians have been eager to ensure that justice is seen to be done, though perhaps less committed to principles of due process or equity of treatment should they prove politically inconvenient.

There are concrete beneficial effects in cleaning out corrupt practices, changing indefensible rules and challenging a sense of entitlement which saw former Shadow Leader of the House Alan Duncan refer to his Parliamentary salary as 'rations'. What broader or systemic change will come from calls for a 'new politics' is less clear.

Gordon Brown has no doubt been reminded that a 'new constitutional settlement' was going to be his big idea to restore trust in politics on coming to office. However, the spirit of democratic renewal has been somewhat doused by what has turned into a Whitehall tidying-up exercise, with little to excite the most engaged reform anorak, still less to send great swathes of the disengaged rushing back to a ballot box near you.

David Cameron took up a double-page spread in *The Guardian* to pledge 'the most sweeping transfer of power' in living memory, which turned out to mean ruling out electoral reform and (maybe) considering fixed election dates (Cameron 2009). Sweeping rhetoric on localism is combined with Tory frontbenchers campaigning against 'postcode lotteries'. The opposition gives no hint of proposing anything of the scale of any single post-1997 reform, such as devolution or freedom of information, nor indeed the incremental reforms of previous Tory governments, such as Macmillan's introduction of life peers, the introduction of Select Committees after 1979 or even John Major's somewhat unfairly maligned Citizen's Charter.

Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg may feel somewhat aggrieved. Denied even the chance to compete to be toughest with expenses miscreants by the minor scale of most Lib Dem misdemeanors, his good populist argument for a recess lock-in until MPs had sorted out reform was ignored. The third party can claim long-standing coherence on political reform, though the greater political challenge may be that establishing a new politics of pluralism requires imperfect compromises and cross-party cooperation to happen.

There is broad support for the idea that this crisis creates a 'once in a generation' opportunity for significant political reform but little agreement on what this means or confidence that it will be taken. Many will argue that this simply shows that the

political class still don't 'get it'. The rhetoric of sweeping reform may be combined with efforts to work out what minimal reforms will suffice. Yet this is also too simple an indictment. The responsibility for reform does not lie with the politicians and the political institutions alone. Have the rest of us in civic society articulated a coherent argument as to precisely what it is that the political institutions are supposed to 'get'?

Naturally, a crisis of political legitimacy has often been used to reinvigorate a wide variety of pre-existing agendas for political reform. We will all think that some of the proposals mooted are important, necessary and increasingly urgent – and that others would be a distracting step in the wrong direction. All that we disagree about is which reforms belong in each category.

Disagreements about what should change should be no surprise. It is in the nature of politics. But how seldom that is acknowledged, not least because it might complicate the lambasting of 'the politicians' for their stubborn and selfish refusal to do what 'we, the people' want.

The triumph of anti-politics?

The central question for reformers then becomes how to seize politics back from the political class on behalf of citizens. Paul Judge, founder of the Jury Team, puts his faith in what he calls 'independent people': 'We think independent people can make good decisions. We use that model for juries. If you put a group of sensible people together and show them the facts, they'll make good decisions' (Judge 2009). From the right, supporters of the minimal state argue that the Conservatives should learn from the Republicans in the US: 'A series of "anti-politics" policies, ranging from term limits for legislators to limitations on budgets, helped to establish in the public mind that at least some Republicans were with "us" against "them" – with, that is, the country against its apparat. This, above all, is what the British Conservatives need to do' (Carswell *et al* 2005).

The Power Inquiry makes the case for liberal reform, arguing that the current voting system is regarded by millions of citizens as a waste of time: 'Many citizens find parties and elections unappealing because they require individuals to commit to a very broad range of policies with which they might not entirely agree … it is vital that clear processes exist for citizens to influence and challenge the specific areas of government and policy that concern them' (The Power Inquiry 2006).

These are different reform agendas, with different political motivations. The Jury Team explicitly eschews ideology. If the problem with politics is the politicians, the answer is to replace them with non-politicians of honesty and integrity – Mr Smith goes to Washington remade as Esther Rantzen goes to Luton South.

The proposition is that all voters of goodwill want are candidates of goodwill. If only they can be freed from the constraints of party, the tyranny of the whips, any shared or collective body of beliefs or a manifesto of specific commitments to voters across the range of policy, they will be able to arrive unhindered in Parliament to rise 'above politics' and govern sensibly in the common interests of 'the people'.

Yet, for an emerging generation of Conservative Parliamentarians, similar anti-political grievances can be put to more focused ideological purpose. For Douglas Carswell and Daniel Hannan, the anti-politics argument is not simply an anti-incumbency tactic, but is explicitly advocated as a way for the Conservative right to take 'our stand on the defence of the individual against the state', undermining collective provision and promoting the idea of shrinking the state so that 'the citizen should be as free as possible from state coercion' (Carswell *et al* 2005). Yet an uncannily similar 'them and us' argument is voiced in support of a broadly opposite motivation by the Power Inquiry.

It has become fashionable to assert that a better informed electorate is much more aware of the weaknesses of politicians and the political system. As a result they are withdrawing from formal participation in politics and instead channelling their energies into community activism and campaigning groups. Yet the old politicians maintain their hold on the system, thereby stopping a new era of democracy.

As my colleague at the Fabian Society, Tim Horton, has written: 'If this is the problem, the solution is obvious: change the institutions, change the parties, get the politicians in their place and put "the people" in charge without having to work through the formal political structures … et voila! We will all come rushing back to engage in a new golden age of citizen democracy. If only it were that simple' (Horton *et al* 2007).

That the argument is so popular on left, right and among those who reject those categories as part of the problem suggests a tide of opinion running heavily in its favour. In that case, this crisis of legitimacy of our political institutions is also highlighting a deeper, foundational weakness in our understanding of what politics is.

A false history

How did we get here? Everybody knows it is about the corruption of all that was noble in Parliament and politics. Daniel Hannan MEP recently lamented in the *Daily Telegraph* that MPs now 'contract out their opinions to the whips' and thus 'cease to represent their constituents'; this, he suggested, was contrary to traditions of Parliament through most of its history (Hannan 2009).

The Power Inquiry similarly asserts that 'the whips have enforced party discipline more fully and forcefully than in the past'. This is the Jury Team's central complaint, too. You might hear this lament in any pub in the land, and from almost every newspaper columnist.

Phillip Cowley, however, says that this is 'cobblers from start to finish'. He goes on: 'This idea that there has been a decline in backbench independence is not just wrong, it is the opposite of the truth' (British Academy 2007). There was almost no backbench dissent at all in the 1950s. The Conservative governments after 1951 lost one Commons division in thirteen years, compared with six government defeats during this Parliament, while only one division in every fifty during the 1950s saw any backbencher vote against his party; by the 1970s one in every five divisions did so. The Major, Blair and Brown eras have seen ever increasing levels of backbench independence and New Labour's supposedly 'supine' backbenches turn out to be the most rebellious in post-war Parliamentary history[1].

1. A full list of Commons government defeats can be found at www.election.demon.co.uk/defeats.html

This mythical history is unlikely to make for a successful foundation stone for calls for a stronger Parliament.

Misunderstanding politics – and forgetting that not everybody agrees with me

The populist case for reform is equally weak in its contemporary understanding of what politics is about.

What, for example, are we to make of the Power Inquiry argument that, 'For millions of citizens it seems, voting is simply regarded as a waste of time because the candidate or party you favour is either not standing or has no chance of victory while the candidate or party that does stand a chance of winning is positively disliked'? There are certainly legitimate criticisms to be made of an electoral system which gives too little voice to smaller parties, or gives disproportionate power to the largest parties when they have a plurality of the vote. But this complaint goes much deeper than that. A candidate I positively dislike can only have more chance of winning an election than my own favourite if they have more support *from other people*. No electoral or political system can address the grievance, however irritating, that other people don't always agree with me.

The failure to understand politics as not only about 'having my say' but also aggregating preferences and negotiating disagreement drives much of the frustration with 'formal politics'. The Power Inquiry finds that the political parties are often unattractive because of their 'broad-brush' approach while campaign groups are 'much more focused and require only that an individual supports change in one area'. True – so who will then aggregate and trade-off these noisy, clashing demands?

The case for politics restated

In his seminal work of 1962 *In Defence of Politics*, Bernard Crick argued that only politics can find out what the public wants and reconcile these different, and sometimes contradictory, demands. But it will always do so imperfectly, and this, as Andrew Gamble has pointed out, leads to disappointment or even cynicism:

> *Democratic politics will often be scorned by many on left, right and centre because it is so messy, unprincipled, approximate and because politicians so often appear devious, evasive and untrustworthy. They never measure up to expectations. Crick's hard point is that they never will, and in expecting them to do so, we find ourselves perpetually disillusioned, which is why so many people disengage from politics altogether, seeking comfort elsewhere.* (Gamble 2004)

This argument has been developed in recent separate contributions from Gerry Stoker (2006) and Meg Russell (2005), who each consciously develop Crick's arguments, particularly to examine how a consumerist society seems to find it increasingly difficult to understand the collective nature of political decision-making. Negotiation and compromise can be time-consuming and boring. That is why many people leave politics to the experts – until a particular issue bothers us. Then the test is the consumerist one: did I get what I wanted once I bothered to turn up? If not, 'the system' has failed; 'politics is broken'. Yet, as Russell argues, the central point is that 'politics does not allow everyone to get what they want'.

The current debate about the political crisis may be ratifying a triumph of anti-politics over politics, as a strongly mediated public discourse increasingly struggles to tell the difference between the two. This may now be a central barrier to serious engagement in a project of political reform – and especially to the chances of reforms successfully increasing engagement and reversing alienation in an enduring way.

This is not to argue that reform is not necessary. It is. Nor that the current political response is adequate. It has not been. The dilemma is that no reform agenda could satisfy those discontents which are voiced against a current crop of politicians and the formal political institutions as currently constituted, if they often turn out to be essentially protests at the inherent limitations of politics itself. The risk is of a sterile stand-off and dialogue of the deaf. The political class will be satirised as wishing to dissolve the people and elect another, as a cycle of crisis, reform, disappointment and crisis deepens political disenchantment.

Indeed, reform helped to get us here. The principle of transparency has been extended: for the first time, we know who gives money to parties and what MPs spend on expenses. But greater transparency will not increase public trust in the political process if what is revealed lacks public legitimacy. The transparency genie is well and truly out of the bottle – and could hardly be reversed.

The Labour government has often been caught in the consequences of its own half measures. On MPs' expenses there is little excuse: sunlight has acted as a disinfectant and the principles of a more legitimate system are not difficult to define or implement. But, elsewhere, no alternative to a discredited status quo may command sufficient public consensus to endure: there is, for example, no public confidence in political competition being largely funded by rich individuals, corporate donations and trade unions yet neither is there support for any alternative system, particularly one that makes any greater demands on the public purse.

Reform to strengthen political engagement

The answer to the political legitimacy crisis is *politics*. There can be no magic bullet solution to what is primarily a question of political culture and political education. But the overriding priority should be to pursue political reform in a way that is engaging and educative of the nature of politics itself and that brings about practical results.

This strengthens the case for a constitution-making moment in British politics – and for doing so through some form of citizens' convention.

This may not work. The ill-fated European Constitutional Treaty arose from similar motivations, back in 2001, though the lack of a European *demos* presented an additional layer of difficulty. But it must be worth trying. Perhaps such a body could be partially indirectly elected from democratic institutions, partly elected and partly selected by lottery. The precise form that this takes matters less than its ethos, breadth of engagement as a focal point for public debate. Ultimately, the central test of political engagement can only be the extent to which those whose views do not prevail on any particular issue do believe that their views were fairly taken into account in drawing up the new rules of the game.

Challenge critics to engage with strengthening Parliament

Perhaps more immediately, there is a significant opportunity to strengthen Parliament's powers of scrutiny over the Executive: the election of a new Speaker and the appointment of Tony Wright MP – a committed reformer, effective Select Committee chair and strong public advocate for Parliament – to chair an inquiry to make recommendations on Commons reform is a positive sign.

A parliamentary reform agenda could include putting Executive powers exercised under Royal Prerogative on a statutory basis so ensuring the full range of Executive actions are open to parliamentary scrutiny; making Select Committee style pre-legislative scrutiny the norm; giving greater powers to initiate debates to backbenchers and Select Committees, including a focus on ensuring topical issues are regularly aired in the House; strengthening the powers of Select Committees by removing the whips' control over their membership and routinely debating their outputs more fully in the full Chamber; and more effective scrutiny and debate of European legislation through a collaborative process involving both Westminster chambers and British MEPs. Several other areas for reform have been mooted, including during the recent election for Speaker.

However, changes of this nature are surely not – by definition – likely to satisfy the many highly vocal champions of a stronger Parliament who appear to be entirely oblivious to the workings of Parliament and to a recent Parliamentary history entirely at odds with their heartfelt narrative of a lost golden age.

Still, such a reform agenda should be pursued on its merits. The more substantive it is, the more it might do something to challenge the prevailing myth of an ever weaker Parliament, though even an accurate account 'from within' is likely to be dismissed as special pleading. Again, the best approach would go beyond the new Speaker's role in improved public communication by seeking to maximise external engagement with the Parliamentary reform process, for example through public hearings that seek to engage external experts and reformers in the challenges of bringing about reform.

Experiment with direct democracy, but connect it to representative institutions

Calls for more 'direct democracy' should not be dismissed. Taken to extremes, these can offer an incoherent Ross Perot-style fantasy of a push-button democracy. But these too could, despite anti-political motivations for their advocacy, also have a positive pro-politics educative effect.

More effort should be made to integrate direct and representative democratic institutions. The weakness of the Downing Street petition mechanism is that a large number of signatures simply generates an official defence of existing policy. A better approach could be developed from the Petitions Committees in Scotland and Wales: a certain number of signatures would generate Committee consideration, or a full Commons debate.

In any event, our political system increasingly incorporates some elements of direct democracy. Although the 1975 referendum on the European Economic Community was

largely an exercise in political management, the devolution referendums in Scotland, Wales, London (carried) and the North East (defeated) have established something of a threshold for significant systemic reforms to be approved by public vote. It would be possible to legislate for clearer criteria, or introduce a right of citizens' initiative. With a threshold of perhaps 10 per cent of a constituency electorate to trigger a recall ballot on a sitting MP, or of a council or national electorate to put a citizens' initiative, there would be a political challenge for those railing against the status quo: can they generate sufficient support to bring about change and then win a public argument for it?

Electoral reform is important, but no panacea

There is a good case for regarding electoral reform as the single political change that might have the most long-term impact on the political culture, but any argument that it would somehow remove the frustrations of democratic politics is another route to disappointment.

The 'vote for a change' campaign[2], (which I support) seeking a referendum at the next general election, has sought to tap into the zeitgeist mood by running an 'outsider' campaign for change for what is, at heart, a pro-politics argument. That may make tactical sense but there is a tension too.

Electoral reform would lead to a less narrowly focused politics, in which more minority views would be represented. This would also entail a political culture in which governing power would depend more on the political arts of negotiation and compromise, and the major parties would still need to construct broad electoral coalitions. Britain under Proportional Representation might have five or six party politics, and might become somewhat closer to the type of politics and party system in Germany. There is good comparative evidence that more pluralist systems deliver better social outcomes; perhaps less that they do so by enormously increasing a sense of politics as a site of competing ideologies. The nature of our politics today reflects the type of society we are, and not just the nature of our political institutions.

Still, there are many faults in our current system, not least that shifting political geography makes its chances of picking the right 'first-past-the-post' winner increasingly a matter of Russian roulette should there be a close election, a fairly fundamental flaw disguised by the one-sided elections of the last thirty years. There is no perfect alternative when it comes to balancing and trading-off the objectives of choosing a government, a national Parliament and local representatives, but the case for the status quo is extremely weak.

Most importantly, the argument for such a change needs to be won. This, too, is a matter of politics. Too often, reformers engage in theological debates about the perfect electoral system, rather than the strategic challenge of building a sufficient coalition to bring about change. Support for electoral reform is broad, but it could also be shallow in a short, myth-laden referendum campaign. (Again, the citizens' convention route to reform may have stronger prospects.)

The idea of politics as negotiating and sharing power has never been a strong one in the British political culture. That is part of the reason why engagement in the European

2. www.votefora change.co.uk

Union is so difficult: leaders feel they must declare game, set and match to Britain rather than explaining why the give-and-take of a political deal can serve mutual and shared interests. It is also why the Jenkins' Commission proposed a hybrid reform that could combine more pluralism and greater proportionality with a tendency to majority governments – somewhat more constrained.

PR is not the only possible constraint on governing power: the electoral reform debate has remained surprisingly isolated from the broader checks and balances which have, albeit in a piecemeal way, begun to challenge the 'elective dictatorship' of the super-centralised British polity which Charter 88 first made a mainstream issue two decades ago.

The first preference of many reformers is 'PR or bust'. That is a legitimate argument, but there is also a decent case that a constrained majoritarianism involving the Alternative Vote, a PR-elected second chamber alongside PR in local government and entrenched rights would evolve a major pluralist advance.

Open up party politics to greater participation

'Politics and parliament in this country are about party. Without party neither responsible government nor responsible democracy is possible. … For parliamentary government, as for every other good thing, there is a price to be paid: and that price is party' (Powell 1974 quoted in Heffer 1999). The case for party was put most powerfully by an unlikely advocate: Enoch Powell was perhaps the frontbench politician of the twentieth century who did most to chafe against the constraints of party loyalty. He made the speech at an unusual moment – in Birmingham in February 1974 when explaining why he was resisting calls to stand as an independent, so advising his supporters to vote Labour. Powell was wrong in his prophecy of existential national suicide, and on the losing side in the subsequent EEC referendum too, but this argument about party being the essential link between the public and politics in a representative democracy endures.

Changing the voting system can change the balance of political power and the political culture, but cannot in itself do a great deal to transform opportunities for participation. Experiments in direct democracy can offer opportunities, perhaps especially for a popular 'veto' politics; they can less easily promote constructive reform. But greater political participation may centrally depend on the unfashionable cause of reviving party politics.

The parties are said to be in terminal decline. Can they be revived as political communities, and therefore as vehicles of participation and engagement? The argument has become confused by so much focus being on the use of primaries: some believe these could kill parties and others that they could revive them. Certainly, statutory compulsion on all parties to hold open primaries, in which anybody could stand or vote, would dissolve party as a political community.

But the argument for parties choosing to open up participation to their own supporters is a powerful one. It is not fanciful to believe that parties could involve several million people again, if they were able to develop less hierarchical and more open cultures and structures. Polling for the Fabians' *Facing Out* project revealed 2.5 million Labour

identifiers, active in non-party civic engagement who were 'never members', a majority of whom were keen to participate in a range of ways beyond the party card model. David Miliband cites the Greek Socialist party PASOK's involvement of 900,000 people in a Greek population of 11 million, which proportionally would equate to four or five million Britons (Miliband 2009). The central question is whether current members and activists see the opportunity to find new allies for their causes, rather than a threat to jealously guarded rights. There is a legitimate fear that the promise of openness will be trumped by the 'top down' instincts of leadership control in both parties; but in that case the opportunity to widen participation will also fail.

If the parties cannot be revived as political communities, we have little to replace them with. The end of party politics is unlikely to herald the new dawn of citizen engagement that some imagine. After party politics, populist anti-politics might truly have the field to itself.

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In his final words to the House of Commons as Prime Minister Tony Blair remarked that, 'Some may belittle politics but we who are engaged in it know that it is where people stand tall…. If it is, on occasions, the place of low skulduggery, it is more often the place for the pursuit of noble causes.' Blair was of course speaking before the parliamentary expenses crisis, which has made 'politics' and 'low skulduggery' virtually synonymous in the minds of the public.

None of this is new: politics has always possessed a janus face, being an arena for the pursuit of both personal power and the wider public interest. The British public have never trusted their politicians. Nevertheless, following the expenses crisis politics has fallen to a new low in the hierarchy of public esteem: the number of people who say they trust politicians fell from 23 per cent in 2008 to just 13 per cent in 2009 (Campbell 2009).

This matters because politics is a good thing. As Bernard Crick argued almost fifty years ago in his *In Defence of Politics*, politics is the way in which human beings, living in large and complex societies, divided by conflicting views and interests, are able to peaceably resolve their differences. For all its faults the alternatives to politics are almost always much worse. We only have to consider the ugly extremism of the British National Party to remind ourselves of that.

So, if politics matters, can it be reclaimed and refashioned so that it is less corrosive of public trust? It is our contention that it can, but that political reform will only be successful if it directly addresses the causes of public disengagement and focuses as much on questions of political culture as on the traditional mechanics of constitutional reform.

The immediate trigger for the current wave of public hostility to the political system was of course the abuses of MPs' expenses. In itself this is actually a rather simple problem to resolve: greater transparency will wipe out the most offensive practices simply because future claims will be made in full view of an unforgiving public. But the sheer level of public anger over the issue has exposed a wider feeling of public disenchantment with the political class. The expenses scandal was the trigger, but the cause of the crisis lies much deeper in the workings of the political system.

This has led politicians from all parts of the political spectrum to argue for a wider set of constitutional reforms. Everything from fixed-term parliaments to proportional representation has been put forward as a solution to the current crisis. Many of these reforms are long overdue. But we will not restore trust simply by returning to the constitutional agenda of Charter 88, whatever the individual merits of particular reforms. To those who think more of the same will do the trick, it is worth recalling that a decade and more of radical constitutional change has coincided with a *rise* in political disaffection, and not the fall that many predicted. The political class may be talking about electoral reform and an elected House of Lords – both of which we favour – but the public as a whole are not.

So, what lies behind the widening chasm between the public and politics – and what might we do to bridge it? In his 2009 *Political Quarterly* lecture, the Chairman of the

Public Administration Select Committee, Tony Wright MP, argued: 'There is always a tendency to think that a problem can be solved by a new piece of machinery. That is why I have wanted to talk about cultures as well as structures, and why I have come to think that the former is often more decisive than the latter in terms of how organisations actually work' (Wright 2009).

We share this view: our troubles stem as much from a dysfunctional political culture as from the inadequacies of our institutional arrangements, although there is a complex interplay between the two. Much of what the public finds so distasteful in our politics is about the way politicians and the media behave. Of course, some of that behaviour is determined by the incentives built into our constitutional architecture, but some of it is not. In what follows we examine the institutional and cultural causes of the current crisis and highlight what we believe to be the most propitious avenues for reform.

There are generally two camps in the debate about what has gone wrong: some blame the politicians and the political system, while others argue that our political crisis is a result of a set of wider social changes affecting not just this country but most other Western democracies too. Below we identify what we believe to be the most significant political and social factors behind the current crisis. These are: the role of the politician, the nature of the political class, the way politicians behave, the quality of our wider civic culture and the worrying rise in political inequality.

What our politicians do

It is clear that there are a number of aspects of the role of the politician that undermine public sympathy with politics. These activities include, for example, MPs appearing to slavishly follow the party line and engage in petty party political tribalism. Polls show that the public want their MPs to have independent minds and take decisions on their merits, within the obvious limits of a functioning parliamentary system.

This means that the role of the MP as the independent scrutiniser of legislation should be enhanced. This requires a shift in the balance of power between the Executive and the legislature so that MPs have much more influence over the policy process, thus providing them with a distinct and alternative career path to that offered by a ministerial or shadow ministerial role. Such a shift should also help produce a less tribal political culture.

There are a number of ways this might be achieved. MPs should have greater control over their own timetable and agenda. A period of time should be set aside each week to allow MPs to debate and vote on matters of their choosing.

Select Committees should be strengthened. Chairs and members should be chosen by a free and secret vote of the whole House and committees should receive more resources and staffing to enhance their ability to scrutinise and hold ministers to account. Select Committees should be given confirmation powers over senior appointments made to the major public bodies that they oversee. In extreme cases they might also be given the power to remove senior public servants by issuing a declaration of no confidence.

Less discussed, but equally important, is the need to overhaul the public bill committees which remain hopelessly inadequate. Specialist and permanent legislative

committees should be introduced to replace the non-expert bill committees which would provide for more effective scrutiny of legislation and enable MPs to develop expertise in specific areas.

The Conservatives propose having fewer MPs but that would make it even more difficult to hold the Executive to account. If the objective is to strengthen Parliament and save money it would be far better to reduce the number of ministers and impose a cap of just one Parliamentary Private Secretary per department. Strengthening Parliament has to involve shrinking the size of the payroll vote. Having fewer ministers is also an important prerequisite for greater localism. The more ministers there are, the more things they constantly try to do to justify their salaries. Britain needs a smaller core Executive with greater devolution down to local authorities.

Since public disenchantment with politics stems partly from the public's frustration over their insufficient ability to hold those who exercise power to account, it is crucial that Parliament is empowered to do so on their behalf. It needs strong powers in relation to the ballooning number of unelected and largely unaccountable bodies that have come to exercise so much influence within Britain. There should be confirmation hearings for heads of quangos and regulators; the rules and conventions protecting civil servants and special advisers from full parliamentary scrutiny should be scrapped; ministers in the Lords should have to answer in the Commons; and there should be regular question time sessions with the UK's permanent representative in Brussels.

Who our politicians are

In addition to changing what our politicians do, we also need a debate about the sort of politicians we want. Underlying public disillusion with formal politics is disquiet with the 'professionalisation' of politics. We have seen the emergence of a political class, perceived to be somehow distinct and separate from the rest of society, and made up of individuals who increasingly look and sound very similar to one another. This has reinforced the public's scepticism about politics: it looks increasingly like a parlour game for those bent on a political career, rather than being about making decisions in the interest of the country. Professionalisation has reinforced the view that politics is something that *they* do, rather than something in which we all have a stake.

Of course, politics has always been dominated by certain social classes: those with Oxbridge degrees and private school educations. There have always been life-long politicos, going back to William Pitt and Benjamin Disraeli. Indeed, they have often proved the most capable political leaders. And clearly we will always need full-time politicians. The task today is to diversify the range of people getting into politics. This means both broadening the range of routes into politics, and expanding the plurality of spaces for political decision-making.

This, crucially, involves reform to political parties. The parties are the main transmitter belts between the public and the political system: they recruit members and activists and they select the candidates who end up running the state machine. While political parties continue to dominate our political institutions the public's interest and engagement with them is at an all-time low. Whereas in the 1950s the Labour and Conservative parties could genuinely claim to be mass movements, with millions of

members and real links to civic groups such as trades unions, veteran associations and women's institutes, these parties are now hollow shells of their former selves.

The solution is not to get rid of political parties and replace them with a parliament of Esther Rantzens. No democracy in the world functions without political parties and for two very good reasons. Effective democratic government requires the aggregation of the public's disparate preferences into coherent programmes of government that can command wide support. Governability requires coherence. And accountability requires that we know how our representatives have behaved since we last voted for them – something that is made much easier if they are attached to a party that we can recognise quickly in the polling booth. Without parties it becomes more difficult to assign blame and 'kick the rascals out'.

So parties are necessary but they need opening up if they are to reconnect with the wider public. One of the most important roles of the political party is to select candidates for public office – and nothing illustrates the parlous state of our politics more than the fact that in very many safe seats Members of Parliament are effectively chosen by a small group of party activists. Recent research has found that on average just 40 Labour party members participate in the selection of prospective parliamentary candidates (Straw and Ajumogobia 2009). One much-discussed way of prising open this crucial route into politics would be for parties to allow a wider pool of their supporters to vote in parliamentary selections, through the adoption of more or less open primaries.

In Totnes, Devon, this year the Conservatives used an open primary to select their candidate to replace the expenses outcast, Sir Anthony Steen, which saw over 20,000 voters turn out to participate in the selection process. No doubt such high numbers were achieved because of the public's anger over Steen's behaviour but international evidence, especially from the United States, suggests that primaries can interject a dynamism and unpredictability into politics that our own political system palpably lacks. The epic battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton for the Democrat nomination is an obvious and inspiring example.

If primaries would help give ordinary citizens a greater say in who represents them, a recall power would give them much greater scope to hold their representatives to account outside of election times. The expenses crisis unveiled the public's deep frustration with a system that gives them so little control over their MPs. All powers to determine the fate of badly behaving MPs rest with the parties and not the voters.

To give an example, Hazel Blears was reselected on the back of just 31 votes to fight her seat, which comprises 40,000 people. We therefore believe that there is a case for a recall mechanism but that the right to trigger one should be narrowly defined around ethical and not policy issues. The threshold for triggering a recall should be set high – around 25 per cent of the local electorate – and there should be tight regulation of the funding of any recall campaigns.

The narrow range of routes into British politics is also a consequence of Britain's excessive political centralism. Decisions over everything from police force numbers to hospital waiting times are made in Westminster, to a degree that would be unthinkable

in most other democracies. And with this the only important site for political contestation is the House of Commons. Giving a wider range of people the opportunity to access the political arena means opening up new spaces of political decision-making that are closer to them.

This requires more autonomous local government. It also requires fashioning local political institutions that are not simply captured by the traditional party machines. The creation of directly-elected mayors everywhere from London to Hartlepool has allowed figures from outside the traditional political networks to successfully run for office. The adoption of elected mayors in more towns and cities could open up local politics to new kinds of political leadership.

How our politicians behave

In addition to changing what our politicians do and who our politicians are, we also need to change how our politicians, and other actors in the political arena, behave. As Dr Meg Russell has argued, some of the most off-putting features of our politics are essentially cultural. One example is the party tribalism that so dominates political debate, but which the public finds so off-putting. At a time when most British people decreasingly identify with either of the two 'big tribes' (the 'other parties' received over 40 per cent of the vote in the 2009 European elections), the political class seems trapped in a time warp in which every initiative from the Government is opposed by the opposition and vice versa. Even as the ideological differences between the parties have decreased, the intensity of the partisan rivalry appears to have intensified – and in a way that totally fails to engage with a less partisan public.

Another off-putting feature is the way politicians are forced to speak in the media. The public say they want politicians to 'be honest', which sounds reasonable enough. But it is actually very difficult for politicians to say what they really think when any sign of political disagreement or any word out of tune with the party line is represented in the media as a 'split', or any change of heart a 'U-turn'. Partly because of our very competitive and rather sensationalist media culture, politicians are forced to speak wearing straight jackets and journalists readily enjoy poking them into ever more absurd contortions, as they struggle to stick to the party line. The public simply stops listening.

But how can we change cultures like these? Some of the transformation can be driven by changing the incentives that reward behaviour of different kinds. Measures that strengthen the independence of MPs and Parliament such as those set out above could help produce a less tribalistic political culture. Another method would be electoral reform that would force parties to form coalitions in order to govern.

Some of these questions are beyond the reach of constitutional engineering. How does one change a sensationalist 24-hour-a-day media culture in a way that would allow for more honest and reflective public debate, with less talk of splits and U-turns and more genuine deliberation? At some point there is a responsibility for the actors involved to change the way they act: politicians could honestly try to tell things as they see them and journalists could choose not to pounce on them for doing so.

Civic renewal

The points we have made so far concern politicians themselves – what they do, who they are and how they behave. But much of what is wrong with our politics is also reflective of the state of our wider civic culture. We have seen a decline in the membership of civic associations and in particular in those forms of civic activity most closely associated with party politics – the unions and local political clubs that used to act as the recruiting sergeants for grassroots politics.

It is true that in their place we have seen the rise of a multitude of single issue movements – but while these demonstrate that we are far from the apathetic people we are sometimes portrayed as, these groups are generally unconnected with formal political participation. Moreover, as Meg Russell points out, the political culture they generate is one that rather replicates the consumerist culture of household consumption, where people issue (legitimate) demands, but also expect to get what they ask for. The trouble is that in politics, unlike shopping, not everyone can plausibly get what they want (Russell 2005).

Very few citizens are engaged in the process of making the difficult decisions about who gets what, when and how. Instead it is left to the politicians, who are typically condemned for failing to deliver. This corrosive dynamic is fed by the media, which is quick to take up a passing anti-politics crusade and condemn the rascals for letting 'the people' down.

The only way through this is to work from the bottom up, by fostering new spaces in the local civic realm where citizens are able to join in the task of directly deliberating over the questions that affect their communities. There are some promising signs of innovation here: in the way New Deal for Communities initiatives engaged residents in decisions about regeneration funds, in the growth of Tenant Management Organisations in the social housing sector and in the use of participatory budgeting in many of our towns and cities. It may even be that a Citizens Convention of the kind that ippr and others has proposed to discuss reform to our political system could play such a role at the national level.

Of course, we need to be realistic. We are a more individualistic society than we used to be, people are less rooted in their local communities, and many people lead busy lives, travel long distances to work and lack the time to attend local civic meetings. But even taking these social changes into account, it remains essential that we create genuine spaces for political participation near to where people live in order to renew our political culture.

Political inequality

The dog that has yet to bark in the commentary that has followed the fall-out from the expenses crisis concerns the fundamental issue of political equality. Robert Dahl, the doyen of political science, wrote that a central claim of every healthy democracy is 'the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals' (Dahl 1971). Yet there are good reasons for supposing that the principle of political equality is under threat and that politics is becoming the increasing preserve of the affluent and the powerful.

ippr's research has shown that political participation is increasingly skewed by social class. For instance, the turnout gap in elections between top and bottom quartile earners in the UK has doubled since the 1960s. Indeed, the Hansard Society's most recent *Audit of Political Engagement* found that, 'social class has more of an impact on political engagement that any other factor. On every single measure [of participation] … people classified as social grades AB (the most affluent) are more politically engaged than DEs (the least affluent), frequently by a margin of around 15 to 20 percentage points' (Hansard Society 2009).

Anyone interested in improving the health of British politics ought to be worried about these trends. They suggest that our democracy has not just experienced a fall in voter turnout but also a rise in turnout inequality. Political systems tend to respond to the interests of those that participate and neglect the preferences of those who do not. This in turn breeds electoral alienation, entrenching apathy on the part of those less inclined to participate. As Sarah Birch of Essex University has argued, the best, but by no means the only way, to break the cycle of disaffection is to make voting compulsory and thereby provide an incentive for political parties to address the needs of the population as a whole. She also notes that countries which have compulsory voting have lower levels of income inequality, precisely because it makes it much more likely that all voices are listened to (Birch 2009). ippr shares this view and though such a move would be unpopular with the electorate, especially in the current climate, it is clear to us that compulsory voting is the most effective way of promoting political equality – a goal that should be shared across the political spectrum.

Our current political crisis is not simply about expenses – the rot is set much deeper than that. At the same time this is not the moment to simply dust off a list of our favourite constitutional reforms from twenty years ago. We must make institutional changes but they must be addressed directly at the causes of public alienation. We have argued that changes must be directed at the role of MPs, the way parties recruit citizens into politics and wider questions of political culture that require not just constitutional reform but also behaviourial change by the actors themselves. Beyond the political system we need to work from the bottom up to renew our wider civic and political culture, and to address the widening inequalities in political participation.

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Neil O'Brien, Policy Exchange

For a lot of people the MPs' expenses scandal was the final straw, and the anger it unleashed resembled the bursting of a dam of pent-up frustration. The immediate issue will now be cleaned up. But this alone will not fix the underlying causes of disenchantment. I think the key issues to tackle are the UK's overly strong party system and the drift of power into the hands of bodies that are not accountable. So for that reason it is not so much constitutional reform that is needed as *political* reform. We need to weaken the party system and put power in the hands of those the public feel they can influence.

Reforming the party system

The political class

Voters see politicians as a relatively homogenous elite – a true political 'class', in the sense that journalist Peter Oborne has described – with its own certain set of mores, in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish one party from another. The public feel this group of people speaks its own language, does not tell the truth, does not understand their problems, looks after its own and (in recent years) has become rather too free and easy about spending the public's money. Worst of all, voters do not feel they can do much about it – the political class has all the power, but is unaccountable and remote.

The two root causes of these various complaints appear to be the strength of the party system, and the fact that power is increasingly not in the hands of local people who the public can influence, but instead vested in international bodies, the courts and remote quangos.

According to a 2005 Hansard Society polling report, politicians are seen as 'automatons' forced to follow party lines under the direction of party managers. They found that 'the public tends to reject party loyalties and political leadership as legitimate influencers on MPs' (Healey *et al* 2005: 24). Their polling found that the public think that MPs *should* vote according to what they think is right, or what they promised, or what is right for the country – whereas in practice, the public believe, MPs simply vote as they are told to by party managers.

Another Hansard society poll found that only 23 per cent of people say they are not interested in 'national issues'. But 47 per cent say they are not interested in 'politics'. In other words, it is the party politics, not the issues, that turn people off. Party politics is also perceived as driving dishonesty. 76 per cent of the public think MPs do not tell the truth. Why? MPs cannot answer a straight question because they have to spout the party line.

It is clear that the public do not want 'career politicians', but that is the way things are going. It is now very hard to reach the highest heights of politics unless you begin extremely early. Increased control over selection of MPs by the central parties might well favour a diversity of experience even as it discriminates against a diversity of political views. On the other hand, open primaries are likely to favour local people and those with some kind of interesting real world experience (which is

good). However, it might also be assumed that open primaries would lead to the selection of more centrist MPs than if members of a party decided alone – thus reducing the diversity of views. At present we do not really know whether they will be widely adopted (they are very expensive) or what their long-term effect might be.

The public should not have to pay for parties

The expenses scandal has led some to argue again for state funding of political parties. Ironically, however, state funding (in the form of expenses) is exactly what has damaged the reputation of MPs. The serious point about this is that the public do not accept that they should be forced to fund political activity through taxation.

Contrary to popular belief, there has been no 'arms race' in political spending in the UK. At the last two elections the Tories spent less in real terms than they did in 1966 and 1970. Labour's spending did increase in real terms over the same period, but only to close the gap with the Conservatives. So political parties have certainly proved capable of raising enough money to campaign effectively.

We already have quite a lot of state funding for political parties in the form of Short Money (the annual payment to opposition parties in the Commons to help them with their costs) and Cranborne Money (the equivalent in the Lords). This totalled about £4.5 million for the Conservatives last year – or about a fifth of their budget. This is the least bad form of spending, given the tie to research. Nonetheless, ultimately the money is fungible to some extent. If parties did not have it, they would have to cut back elsewhere – probably on print advertising.

State funding for political parties is philosophically difficult to justify. At the European level we already have state funding for political parties and I feel deeply uneasy that my money is being given to help extremist political parties. Members of the public do not like the MPs communications allowance being used to fund glossy propaganda.

If taken to a high level this can have disastrous practical effects, creating a self-sustaining cartel of parties, insulated from the public and dependent on the state. It discriminates against new ideas and outsiders, and reduces the incentives for politicians to stay in touch with the voters.

The new political techniques pioneered by President Obama are the polar opposite of state funding. The changing technology of communication makes it easier for outsiders to organise. It makes it possible for politicians to fund their activities from many small donations rather than a few large interests. Politicians funded this way will be more responsive than those funded by the state.

Even before the expenses scandal, the proportion of people who felt they can 'change the way things are run' by getting involved in politics was falling steadily: from 37 per cent in 2003 to 31 per cent in 2008. Centralisation is clearly part of this problem: 25 per cent think they have some influence over how things are run locally, but only 14 per cent do nationally. Localism is central to re-engaging the voters.

Reforming Parliament

Giving power back to the Commons

The main weakness of the legislature is because of the stranglehold of the Executive on Parliament. The Executive has this control because of our overly-strong party system. So there are three things we need to do to empower Parliament:

1. Take party labels off the ballot paper at election time.
Politicians should be elected because of their own personal qualities, not the colour of the rosette they are wearing. Until 1970 only the MP's name appeared on the ballot, so candidates could not rely on their party to carry them. They had to be local heroes. MPs can become more independent without increasing the number of 'Independents'. If MPs owed less to their parties, and their re-election depended more on their own personal political base they would be more likely to vote with their conscience and their perception of the evidence. The more that MPs feel they can stand up to their parties, the more 'cliffhanger' votes we will have, and the more relevant Parliament and parliamentary debates will be. Parliament can be exciting and newsworthy. But the strength of the whips and weakness of the MPs very often prevents it from being so.

2. Shrink the permitted size of the Government in Parliament – the so-called 'payroll vote'.
We could establish a rule or convention that not more than a certain percentage of MPs should be allowed to hold Government jobs. That would fit with other moves in the direction of a proper separation of powers and responsibilities.

3. Set a limit on the proportion of parliamentary time that can be taken up by Government business.
Over time the Executive has come to dominate parliamentary business more and more. It might be possible to create more parliamentary time for independent business by increasing the number of hours in the parliamentary year, but the alternative of capping Government time has the added advantage of discouraging legislative over-production by the Government.

These three reforms taken together would have a combined effect. If rebelling were less dangerous and more attractive, and rebellions had a greater chance of succeeding, and there were more chance of initiating legislation from outside the Government, then Parliament would be a much more exciting and relevant place. MPs would be rescued from their current depressing status as 'pager-slaves', jumping to vote when summoned by their party.

The loss of power from Parliament to other unaccountable bodies is also important. Far and away the most important is the European Union, because European legislation now dominates the output of legislation in Westminster.

But there are other important problems. The increase in judicial activism and human rights law, confusion over ministerial responsibility for executive decisions which are actually made by officials, and the growth of policymaking quangos have all weakened Parliament and diminished its relevance. The powers of all these groups should be curtailed. But equally importantly we need to turbo-charge the power of Parliament to scrutinise these outside bodies.

'Strengthening the committee system' sounds boring, but the work of the committees is among the most useful output of Parliament. Making their committee chairs more independent is part of the answer, and increasing the number of researchers and experts they employ is the other part. It would pay for itself many times over in reduced government waste. In some cases, they should be given new powers.

Limited reform of the Lords

At present the House of Lords does a reasonable job as a revising chamber. It has been a limited check on elective dictatorship in recent decades – and there have been few other checks. It is not the biggest problem facing our political system.

Clearly the hereditary peers will have to go. And moving from appointing to electing the Lords is very is attractive in principle. But it could be tricky in practice.

The public want a range of experiences in Parliament. As long as there is some element of appointment in the Lords, that is – or at least should be – an ideal way to bring in experts from particular fields. Directly electing some of the members certainly would not be a disaster. But above a certain threshold a part-elected Upper House would be likely to find itself in a contest of legitimacy with the Commons (and a fully elected one certainly would). So if we want to have more than a small number of elected members, and particularly if we go for full election, then we need to be clear about two things: what alternative basis of legitimacy should its members have – and what are the limits on the powers of the second chamber?

Electing a second chamber on essentially the same basis as the first and giving it real power would be pointless, and potentially a recipe for disastrous gridlock. In Germany the members of the Upper House are appointed by the states, and are there to fight centralisation. This seems to be the most reasonable alternative basis of legitimacy for a second chamber.

But even though it only has competence to deal with issues affecting the Länder, there have been a number of examples of gridlock in Germany, which is inevitable if the second chamber is to have any real power. The Bundesrat, through which the federal states participate in the legislation and administration of the Federation, works smoothly because effectively only 16 people vote, on behalf of their states, which are large and powerful. But in the UK we have 434 local governments. And because of the weakness of local government, they appear to be elected mainly as a proxy vote on the incumbent government. This in turn means the two main parties experience wild swings in their support, and both have come close to total local wipeout in 1997 and 2009. As it stands, this would not be a reasonable basis on which to build a second chamber as there would have been no check on Labour after 1997 and none on the Tories if they were elected in 2010.

We certainly want to see successful local leaders thrown up to the national level. If we were only going to elect a small proportion of the Lords it could be interesting and useful to have some members of the Lords to represent the interests of a whole area, for example the whole of a major city, or the whole of a county. I suspect that successful local council leaders would make good candidates.

Changing the voting system would make things worse

Proportional Representation would exacerbate the root problems that have caused the current crisis of political legitimacy.

Firstly, PR systems are bad for the accountability of MPs to local people. Some systems cut the tie between the Member of Parliament and the area. Others prevent the voters from punishing particular MPs who are high up their party list. For example, although almost no one in Britain knows the name of their Members of the European Parliament, if the public did want to get rid of the top-placed member of a party's list at the Euro elections, they would struggle to do so. In fact, they would have to drive that whole party's share of the vote down to a very low level. If former Conservative MP Neil Hamilton had been an MEP, he would still have his job.

Secondly, at the national level, PR would further weaken the average voter relative to the political parties. The key difference between first-past-the-post and all PR systems is the effect on the party system and the nature of coalition negotiations. Under first-past-the-post the main parties are effectively broad coalitions, with their programme predetermined and presented openly in advance of the election. In PR systems there are typically lots more small parties in Parliament, and the composition of the Government is determined by post-election negotiations between political parties, with very small parties typically punching far above their weight.

For example, in Belgium in 2007 the election resulted in small moves up and down for the ten main parties. It then took just under 200 days to form a government because of the baffling complexity of the inter-party negotiations. In such a system the outcome of the election often bears no relation to the change in the actual vote received by the parties. Who 'wins' is determined by small numbers of political leaders who compete to cobble together different complex coalitions between themselves in private. PR advocates often complain about 'wasted votes'. Arguably, in PR systems voting is more of a waste of time.

First-past-the-post offers the electorate a clear and open choice, and the outcome of the election decides which broad direction the country goes in. PR shifts the locus of power out of the open and into the private back rooms in which deals between party leaders are stitched up.

No to compulsory voting

Some politicians love compulsory voting because it covers up generalised apathy and discontent with the system; I am strongly against it. In the British system this is revealed by the number of people who do not vote. Philosophically, it is difficult to justify why people should be made to vote in a free country.

It would also be odd to extend the vote to 16-year-olds. If we do not want to let them buy cigarettes or a beer in a pub, why should they be given the vote? This suggestion is often advanced in the context of increasing turnout. But nearly four in ten voters who were entitled to vote did not at the last election. Tackling this is a more fundamental issue.

Empowering the citizen through referendums

I am a huge enthusiast for referendums, which are real citizen power, and increasingly form part of our regular political life in Britain. The current government has called several (devolution in Scotland Wales, Northern Ireland, and London) and promised more (if it decides to join the euro, or change the electoral system). Local areas have held lots more – for example on congestion charging in Manchester, the North East Assembly and elected city mayors.

We should now formalise the use of the referendum and make it a rule that one can be triggered with the support of a certain (reasonably high) proportion of the electorate.

Some people look at referendums as being a foreign import. In fact, the idea has deep roots in Britain. Both John Locke and the great constitutionalist A V Dicey were supporters. Dicey noted the advantages of asking the public specific questions, rather than requesting that they choose personalities and whole packages of policies simultaneously:

> *I value the referendum first because it is doing away with the strictly absurd system which at present exists, of acting on the presumption that electors can best answer the question raised… when it is put together with such a totally different question… and generally that it is wise to mix up systematically, questions of persons with questions of principle, and secondly, though in a certain sense mainly because the referendum is an emphatic assertion of the principle that nation stands above parties.* (1894, quoted in Qvortrup 2005: 48)

The arguments against referendums are mostly arguments against democracy itself. There is something curious about the idea that voters cannot be trusted to make the right decision about a single issue, but can be trusted to choose the 'right' representatives to decide for them.

Voters are better informed and educated than ever and better able to make decisions than politicians give them credit for. For example, in Denmark during the 1992 Maastricht Treaty referendum the political magazine *Press* asked a representative sample of voters to identify a number of salient factors about the Treaty. The magazine subsequently asked a cross-section of back-bench MPs the same questions. The result was that the voters knew as much about the issues as the MPs.

The other fear about referendums is that they will somehow make programmatic party government impossible. The only country in which direct democracy plays as big a role as indirect democracy is Switzerland, which is hardly teetering on the edge of anarchy. Used more sparingly, they are now a normal part of government in nearly all developed countries. They have been held in almost every European country. They have not made countries ungovernable.

Referendums increase public engagement and knowledge about politics. In their book *Educated by Initiative*, American political scientists Daniel A. Smith and Caroline Tolbert found evidence that provisions for referendums increase turnout (for every two propositions on the ballot, turnout goes up by 1 per cent) and that referendums increase interest in politics (for every two referendums on the ballot the number of

people discussing politics increases by 1 per cent) (Tolbert and Smith 2004). There is similar evidence from Europe.

Having accepted the principle of referendums, Britain should now formalise and widen their use. They have great potential for bringing democracy to life.

Localism over centralism

Even before the expenses scandal, the proportion of people who felt they could 'change the way things are run' by getting involved in politics was falling steadily: from 37 per cent in 2003 to 31 per cent in 2008. Centralisation is clearly part of this problem: 25 per cent think they have some influence over how things are run locally, but only 14 per cent nationally.

Again, we need political change just as much as structural or constitutional change. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the failures of centralism, our political culture is still caught up in the delusion of central omnipotence. Which national politician will admit that some burning local issue is none of their business and outside their control? Which journalist will write that a 'postcode lottery' in the performance of some service is actually a perfectly understandable variation of service, based on a diversity of preferences and continuous local experimentation? Who will take a stand on principle, and tell well-meaning national politicians and officials that they must simply keep their noses out of a local issue?

Localism can be broken down into three types:

- National services can be run in such a way as to be more responsive to local needs
- Local Government can be set free to be more responsive
- National and local government can set groups and individuals free to run things for themselves.

There are many big structural ideas for reforming the delivery of national services to make them more localist – from school choice to elected police or justice commissioners. There is still quite a lot that could be done to expand on this theme – particularly in the big areas of health and welfare.

But I think the big thing that must be done is less visible: we must abolish as many as possible of the thousands of central targets that have been imposed on public services in the misguided belief that this constitutes 'management'. As well as being set free from the whims and fads of the centre, local services should be given the freedoms to manage which they are currently denied – for example, by ending national rules on pay, conditions and staffing.

In terms of local government, the visionary goal would be to have local authorities raise much more of their own income, through a mix of property, income and business taxes. Councils currently raise just a quarter of their revenue from council tax, and get about half in the form of project-specific grants from central government. A good first step would be to compress all the small ring-fenced pots of money into a single grant, like the old 'block grant' which local councils could spend as they liked, within reason. After that the whole apparatus of central targets and requirements should be abolished.

The final stage of devolution – to individuals and groups – can be done in various ways. It could mean simply giving people their own budget, which appears to be having beneficial effects in adult social care. Or it could be done by looking at how local and central governments commission services. Many more services could be commissioned, rather than being centrally provided. And at present even where there is commissioning, private or charitable providers are often discriminated against – either because commissioners and providers are not split or because the pricing framework is distorted.

Localism of these three kinds could do a lot to revitalise our democracy – and improve our public services.

Reforming our relationship with the European Union

A referendum on the scope of our relationship with the EU is long overdue. Polls have shown that nine out of ten of the public supports a referendum on the EU Constitution/Lisbon Treaty.

According to the European Commission's regular Eurobarometer poll, back in 1992 55 per cent of people in Britain thought the EU was a 'good thing' and 15 per cent a 'bad thing', a majority of four to one in favour. That support has declined steadily so that today the proportions are equal. By two to one, the Eurobarometer poll found that people do not feel Britain benefits in economic terms from its membership.

Partly for structural reasons, and partly because of the weakness of reporting on the EU, the public have little idea how many decisions are taken at the European level. The (pro-EU) foreign policy expert Mark Leonard has written that:

> *Europe's power is easy to miss. Like an 'invisible hand', it operates through the shell of traditional political structures. The British House of Commons, British law courts, and British civil servants are still here, but they have all become agents of the European Union implementing European law.* (Leonard 2005)

The vast majority (72 per cent) of new regulations introduced in Britain over the last decade have come from the EU. Many things that people think are domestic decisions are in fact the result of European legislation, from Home Information Packs to the downsizing of staff at the nationalised banks. EU decisions powerfully shape every area of domestic policy, from environmental targets to the number of hours worked in the NHS.

The public, or at least anyone under the age of 52, have not been asked whether this is what they want. For many voters, the EU is clearly seen as the apotheosis of all they dislike about remote, unaccountable politics. Only putting the future of our relationship with 'Europe' to the public will really clear the air.

If Britain is to remain a full member state, we need to deal with the EU differently. In total the EU produces an average of four pieces of legislation a week, regardless of whether national parliaments are sitting. At present this legislation floods through the House of Commons with no real scrutiny. Westminster MPs should have the same 'mandating' powers enjoyed by MPs in Denmark and Sweden to control what the Government can and cannot sign up to in Brussels. The Government should be also

prevented from using the 'scrutiny override' to prevent the European Scrutiny Committee from debating issues (it does this on average about 70 or 80 times a year, typically on the most important matters.

There must also be more transparency about what is being decided for us in Brussels. A weekly question time for our Permanent Representative to the EU (either in the Commons chamber or in Committee) would allow Parliament to properly scrutinise what the executive is doing in Brussels.

Conclusion

The level of anti-politician sentiment is certainly high – but dangerous or extremist forces are not likely to break through, I believe, as long as we refrain from adopting PR and the fragmented politics that would come with it.

Gimmicks will not solve the public's frustration with party politics and the loss of control to unaccountable bodies.

The expenses scandal will come to be seen as a salutary experience for Britain's politicians as long as we draw the right conclusions from the crisis.

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Jessica Asato, Progress

Constitutional and political reform has always suffered from an image problem. Perceived as the domain of lawyers, academics and political anoraks, real constitutional change has mostly been driven through at the behest of enlightened, or threatened, political leaders. Citizen-led reform has been less forthcoming – when crime, employment and public services are the top of people's concerns, it is easy for politicians to dismiss arguments for change as middle-class chatter. It is telling that the one constitutional campaign that probably had the most impact was Charter 88, now Unlock Democracy, which convinced Labour in opposition to include many of its proposals as manifesto promises. Once in power, however, all governments find it harder to let go and trust the public and despite introducing a number of good reforms including devolution and the Human Rights Act, Labour's plans remained half-baked.

This is why some constitutional reformers want to use the expenses crisis to turn public anger into public pressure for a new system. It is an, albeit time-limited, opportunity to galvanise public support in favour of changing politics for good. The cosy club which so many in politics know about, but have done nothing to dismember, has been shown in its Technicolor ugliness. The expenses system with its rules designed to top up MPs' pay because they have been too scared to ask for higher remuneration over the years, is evidence of the more general problem with our political system. It is self-serving, over-centralised, unresponsive and unrepresentative. From our unfair voting system to the way candidates are selected in political parties, this is a time that demands the polity to look anew at ways of improving our democracy.

As an organisation that has consistently championed constitutional reform in the Labour movement, Progress welcomes this opportunity to engage with think tanks across the political spectrum on policy proposals to create fairer, more transparent and relevant politics. We recognise that consensus will be difficult to achieve on every issue, but where there is common ground, the responsible and public-spirited response must be to find ways of putting our ideas into practice.

Politicians

It is obvious that the standing of politicians has been seriously damaged by the expenses debacle. So few people outside Parliament had any idea how the arcane system of receipts and claims worked, or how the fees office allowed MPs to max-out their allowances. Freedom of information requests were flatly denied as MPs vigorously defended their right to keep details of their claims private. Individual politicians may have come a-cropper, but the vast majority of politicians were willing to collude in a system that protected their interests and kept the public blind.

Even as public anger started to erupt, politicians were still to be found indignantly asserting their right to privacy, claiming mob action ruled the day and that they had every right to claim the maximum they could. The fact that MPs' profligacy was so starkly contrasted against the growing recession did not help, but the response of some so-called honourable members was quite startling even for political aficionados who expected them to behave a little more contritely.

To undo the damage, it is hoped that Sir Christopher Kelly's report in late 2009 will insist on maximum transparency and efficiency in expenses. Of course it is important that MPs with constituencies outside London have financial help to allow them to fulfil their duties. It would be a retrograde step if reform prevented members from spending more time with constituents or only encouraged the independently wealthy to put themselves forward for Parliament. Restraint with expenses, however, would be a good move. If MPs wish to live the high life or spend money travelling first class, it should not be on taxpayers' money. Neither is it fair that members can use that money to make profit from property. Instead the Government should consider introducing a system of funding for homes outside of London that requires receipted payments for the average rent or hotel accommodation in the region.

But the system of allowances can no longer be allowed to be a substitute for discussing how much MPs should be paid in relation to the important role they play in our democracy. Now is probably not the time to have this deliberation as the public still simmers with fury and the recession continues to create unemployment. The issue of pay, however, needs to eventually be discussed if we want to increase the esteem of elected politics, no matter how difficult the public conversation will be. Being a politician should be a mix of a calling, public service and professional endeavour. It cannot be restricted to a wealthy or political elite, and while the days of deference are behind us, bringing respect back to the role must be part and parcel of reforms. It seems absurd that chief executives of councils and quangos are readily paid salaries with public money above £100,000, yet MPs who should be equally valued in society if not more so make do with much less. A race to the bottom of the salary scale in order to show adequate penance will not help the situation.

Similarly, it would be a shame if politicians felt that the only way to get back into the public's good books was to become what is derogatorily termed as 'glorified social workers'. There needs to be a balance between the time politicians spend with their constituents, helping to sort out casework and understanding the dynamics of their area, and the time spent in Parliament working on legislation, Select Committees and in government. Modern politics is far more demanding than fifty years ago, when politicians regularly had time to write political tomes and take long holidays. We cannot demand that politicians act less like robots and more like normal people, if we force them into working practices that do not encourage family life, leisure and time for real scrutiny of Parliament.

Parliament

One way in which a little prominence might be brought back to the role of an MP is if their time in Parliament is used more productively and powerfully. At present, there are two main ways of being noticed from the green benches – becoming a minister or becoming a maverick. Hardworking backbenchers who may perform a huge variety of roles on all-party parliamentary groups, or in charities, or in their constituencies are either perceived as lobby fodder or so un-ambitious that they aren't worth paying attention to.

Increasing the importance of Select Committees would be one way to create an alternative career route in Parliament, while at the same time strengthening the

accountability of the Executive. A good start would be to give MPs the right to vote for Select Committee chairs without whipping. This would ensure that chairs are chosen for their ability to ask difficult questions rather than whether they agree with the Government. It would also confer greater independence on the reports Select Committees produce, which are often instructive but mostly ignored. Increasing resources for staff would also help in this respect.

Other ways of beefing up Select Committees would include giving them the right to initiate bills (possibly linked to citizen-led initiatives, as proposed by the Conservatives) and the right to make major public appointments, linked to the opportunity to remove said appointments under certain circumstances. If it is difficult for the public to see parliamentarians holding the Government to account through the barracking of Prime Minister's Questions, at least by giving Select Committees more powers, they might develop a respect for those MPs who usually work hard but do so unnoticed outside of the chamber. American politicians build strong reputations because of their work on Congressional committees, and while it is unlikely the UK Parliament will adopt full separation of powers, little steps towards greater executive accountability would be welcome.

In this vein, one relatively simple way of reducing the power of the Executive would be to limit the number of MPs on the government payroll. The number of ministers has burgeoned under the Labour government, making whipping easier and therefore a positive outcome for the Government more likely. While research by Philip Cowley shows that the common conception of Labour parliamentarians being government lapdogs is not necessarily true in that there have been more rebellions in the last three parliaments than in any other period, it is true that the number of ministers on the payroll has risen from 121 in 1983 to 141 in 2008. If the whips are no longer able to rely on the threat of sacking ministers, both in government and in shadow cabinet teams, there might be a return to more verbally persuasive methods of convincing fellow parliamentarians to support or oppose legislation. Debates and force of argument might begin to take central stage instead of parties purely playing a numbers game.

The House of Lords should not escape censure either. It is extraordinary that the only elections that have taken place since 1999 are among the unelected hereditary peers when one of their number dies. It is hoped that all parties will back a fully elected House of Lords as announced by the Prime Minister. Either one believes in a principle which rules that ultimately individuals who have no democratic legitimacy should not pass laws, or one does not.

We have over-exaggerated the independent expertise of members of the House of Lords. Yes, a number of excellent members of the Upper House have made legislation immeasurably better, but the idea that the same individuals would only do so if they had the privilege of an honour does not seem particularly honourable in the first place. Either our most brilliant lawyers, scientists, artists, philanthropists, militarists and ethicists think it is an important duty to come to the aid of their parliamentarians, or they do not. Bribing them to use their knowledge in return for a peerage seems beside the point.

Public engagement

Not all reforms need to take place within Westminster, however, and if we simply leave it at that, we are unlikely to see a genuine transformation of politics. One change, which could create a seismic shift in the way that we go about our politics, would be to introduce a more proportional voting system. The arguments have been well rehearsed, but they bear repeating. At the moment, the vast majority of Westminster seats are a foregone conclusion before the election is ever held. There is no point in a Labour voter turning out to vote in Witney, or a Conservative turning out in Liverpool Riverside.

The principle of your vote counting is an important one. While most people (87 per cent according to the Hansard Society's most recent audit of public engagement with politics) think it is their duty to vote, far fewer do. But we should not be surprised about this. It is a rational response to the knowledge that mostly, their vote does not make a blind bit of difference. All of the public engagement campaigns in the world would not change that reality or the public's response to it.

Our first-past-the-post system forces political parties to concentrate on a tiny number of marginal seats and predominantly the middle classes within them. In turn this means that only 2 per cent of the electorate get the undivided attention of their politicians at election time. This skews the policies of parties as they gear their messages to voters in the South East and the M1 corridor where most marginal seats are to be found. So it is no wonder that 85 per cent of the public feel as though they have no influence over decision-making in their country (Hansard Society 2009) .

Progressive politics should not view things in black and white. Policymaking and political decision-taking is necessarily a fraught and complex process. Yet in our haste to placate the worried swing voters in marginal seats, politicians from all parties present their platform as 'EasyPolitics' – a low-cost, mix and match choice which will get voters to their destination in record time. This has led to hard choices being fudged behind closed doors on everything from constitutional reform to climate change, from Europe to energy policy. When scaring off the middle becomes the ball and chain on every politician's foot, our politics becomes neutered, devoid of real content and debate.

Changing the voting system will not necessarily increase voter turnout, nor will it fundamentally change the nature of politicians – a quick read of Cicero tells us that. But it could help to realign our politics so that politicians are forced to acknowledge that they will have to compromise, build coalitions, and admit that not everything is as easy as all that. In fact, they will have to live out their politics a little more like people live their everyday lives.

Another measure which those who believe in social justice should be considering is introducing compulsory voting. Not because political activists have lost their tether with the public, or because the Electoral Commission's advertising budget is threatened by a potential Conservative government. But because there is a real imbalance between the young and the old, the rich and the poor, and white and ethnic minority groups when it comes to voting. Although turnout has been in decline among all demographic groups since the 1970s, it has declined the most among the lowest socio-

economic groups. In the 1960s there was around a seven-point difference in turnout between the highest and lowest earners; by 2005 this figure had increased to around 13 points. For every young person who turned out to vote in 2005, more than two older people voted.

Politicians can therefore afford to ignore the poor, the young and the non-aligned, pandering instead to the middle, the old and the party supporter. Making it mandatory to turn out in elections would ensure that all voters' voices are listened to by politicians, and a fairer reflection of voters' priorities might result. More than 30 countries, including Australia, Belgium, Greece and Switzerland, do so and their turnout is 15 per cent higher on average. In the UK, such a move could shift the emphasis on canvassing and turning out those voters who have identified with one party onto the non-affiliated and disillusioned. In turn, this could lead politicians to advocate those policies that most help the poor and the young.

One final important way that would really help to shape the future of constitutional reform would be to introduce a Citizens' Convention. Since politicians have failed to come up with any satisfactory, detailed constitutional reform plan, it makes sense to convene a randomly selected convention of citizens to deliberate on everything from House of Lords reform to methods of greater devolution. By trusting the public to design significant constitutional change, the idea that the public are the arbiters of our political machinery will gain traction and help to put them back in the driving seat of radical reform.

Political parties

Primaries officially came of age in 2009. In early August the Conservative Party adopted a primary in its parliamentary selection in Totnes, Devon, following the resignation of expenses pariah, Sir Anthony Steen. Over 20,000 voters, around 23.9 per cent according to the Conservatives, turned out to select a local GP in what has been seen as the most successful use of a primary yet, albeit at a £20,000 cost to the party.

In June David Miliband, the Foreign Secretary, came out in favour of the method in a speech given to the John Smith Memorial Trust. He said, 'the traditional political structures of mainstream political parties are dying. Shrinking membership, declining affinity, fuzzy identity, lead many to proclaim that death has already happened, with few tears at the funeral.' Miliband cited the success of the Greek socialist party, PASOK, which used primaries to select party candidates for local elections, as something that should be considered in the UK. It looks like PASOK's attempt to reach out beyond its traditional party membership was one reason for its recent election success.

Tessa Jowell, Minister for the Cabinet Office, was the first senior Cabinet Minister to signal her support, in a speech in June at think tank Demos. Higher Education minister, and possible candidate for the Labour candidate for London Mayor, David Lammy also supports primaries. His regard for President Obama's ground-breaking campaign to win the presidency last year has led him to believe that Britain could develop its own brand of movement politics.

In general, however, grassroots political activists have viewed this innovation with distrust, seeing it as an attack on their autonomy and unique role as signed-up party members. Conservative members have accepted primaries more readily, though possibly because the very low turnouts in most selections do not threaten their role and perhaps because they realise that opposing the leadership's support of primaries as it heads towards government will signal disunity. In the Labour Party, the main opposition to primaries coalesces around three main concerns: how primaries will be financed and whether this will lead to a money race as happens in the US; what sort of candidate will be chosen and whether we will end up with celebrities, middle of the road 'please everybodies', or local do-gooders; and whether this sounds the death knell for organised political parties with memberships and internal policymaking.

Much of the worry about introducing primaries, however, is predicated on an assumption that they will be entirely modelled on the US versions with their glitzy campaigns and corporate backers. In the Labour Party at least, there is an alternative British-style primary system which might overcome the main objections, and which could bring a real shift in the way in which political parties involve the public in this country. The main elements of such a model would include: capping spending by primary election candidates regulated by the Electoral Commission; state funding of the election to avoid individual parties purchasing votes by spending the most money; primaries to be held on the same day with voters only receiving the ballot paper for the party they are registered with; and allowing party members to choose the shortlist.

A primary run in this way would avoid the first and the third of Labour party members' concerns – a cap on spending would ensure that we do not end up with only wealthy candidates, and allowing members to choose the initial shortlist provides a reason for joining a political party. The second concern about the type of candidate elected is less easy to deal with except for to say that if the public chooses candidates the rest of the polity don't like, well that's democracy, isn't it?

But worries about overly eccentric or celeb politicians being elected are overblown. As seasoned US campaigner, Ben Brandzel has said: 'Mass movements open to anyone … will always be pulled towards the commonsense centre. It's why Wikipedia can self-police for accuracy, why Obama's open forums never seriously embarrassed the candidate and why the London citizens' agenda called for things like ensuring the Olympic Village creates public housing – not erecting statues to Che' (Brandzel 2009). If anything, primaries could help to free candidates from old-style top-down central party or trade union patronage as those candidates who are most likely to win will have built up support among the public. Good public speaking skills, charisma and rapport with the public will help: some of the things, in fact, that the public and commentariat say is lacking in our neutered twenty-first century politics.

Part of the reason why some politicians are actively considering primaries is because of a concern that there is a real disconnection between the public and parliamentary representatives. The public often say that they do not feel as though their politicians care about their concerns and take their votes for granted. By allowing the public a greater say in who stands at an election may help to politicise a group that has been growing in apathy and also generate greater legitimacy in those who are standing. Instead of on average 200 party members choosing the

Labour party candidate in a constituency of around 70,000, we could have 20,000 voting, and more if all parties held their primaries on the same day. Apart from general elections themselves, there is no other time when we ask the public to make such a positive political act.

There are other benefits to introducing primaries. For example, it might change the way political parties campaign. If each party has a register of its supporters, it would be able to concentrate more of its doorstep activity on the votes of the unregistered rather than always relying on getting out the core vote at elections. This would have a beneficial effect because at the moment most parties ignore voters who do not vote, or who are undecided because they can rely, particularly under the first-past-the-post voting system, on their solid supporters. By having to reach out to those who are disengaged, politicians will have to work harder to build consensus among diverse communities. Primaries signal that our political elites are willing to trust in the masses and shift power down to them. At a time when a chasm is growing between the public and politicians, primaries could help to start rebuilding some trust between them.

Another innovation which the Labour and Conservative parties have taken tentative steps towards would be to allow non-members to participate in other party initiatives, for example by helping to formulate policy or running campaigns and fundraising. The launch of MyConservatives.com suggests that the Conservatives are willing to learn from Barack Obama's campaign and use the internet to open up their usually closed processes to the public at large. The Labour Party will follow suit if it has any sense.

One internal party change Labour could consider would be to insist that local parties who wish to influence party policy need to show that they have engaged with their local public to come up with the ideas presented to the National Policy Forum. This would both help to reach out to the community at a time when Labour has lost touch and also ensure that any policy made would reflect the real concerns of ordinary people. It would give policy prescriptions from the grassroots more legitimacy, meaning the leadership would find it more difficult to ignore. A policy backed by 1,000 local voters will have much more clout than one endorsed by a handful of Labour members meeting on a Friday night in a cold community hall. The average membership in a local Labour Party is 280 people, yet the electorate are 70,000-strong. Part of Labour's regeneration as a political force will be predicated on whether it can find fresh ideas and new ways of thinking about old ideas.

State funding for political education would also help in this regard. We expect the public to come to politics fully cognisant of political philosophy, social policy and how Parliament works. While citizenship education is meant to be remedying this in school, the wider public still knows very little about politics. Funding training, summer schools and seminars could help to develop political activists' capabilities and would send a signal that we care about the state of our nation's political health. Sweden and other European countries already fund this area of work in political parties without controversy, and it would represent a grown-up step if we could do the same in the UK.

Conclusion

Neither Labour nor the Conservatives have made the step-change they need to if they are to present themselves as the true heirs of Thomas Paine. Political pundits and activists alike have spent too long hand-wringing about the public's lack of engagement with politics without taking the bold steps needed to make a real difference. Political consensus both within and across parties will be hard to come by on many of these reforms, but the expenses crisis provides everyone with an opportunity to try to get it right this time. It is likely that the closer the election gets, the more risk-averse the leadership of our main parties will become. But this would be wrong-minded – what is required in the next six months is for politics to be turned on its head and for politicians to accept that only radical changes will help to restore some of the lost trust, not just from the expenses crisis, but from the last few decades.

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Nick Bosanquet, Reform

The scandal over MPs' expenses has revealed a shocking lack of transparency and accountability in our political system.

Transparency is vital for ensuring that public servants work for the public interest. As soon as the expenses story broke and people became aware of the claims being made, MPs changed their behaviour and the number of claims fell.

Now, the lessons learnt from the scandal need to be transferred across the political system, to every spending department in the state. Unelected and unaccountable officials spend more taxpayers' money in a week than backbench MPs can claim in a term. It is only when voters know how their money is being spent that officials will be incentivised to give us value for money.

In the minds of the public, MPs and government are closely conflated. They see MPs as responsible for the overall activity of government. MPs bear the brunt of public dissatisfaction with government activity because they are the most visible and accountable part. Officials work behind the scenes with immunity, while quangos operate in the 'twilight zone' of government, untouchable by electors or the market. MPs must reclaim their authority from Britain's £35 billion quangocracy, while the public sector must be reformed to make officials personally accountable.

However, MPs' expenses are just the tip of the iceberg and reform must go much further in order to ensure real democratic accountability. Reform's report *Fit for Purpose* (Haldenby *et al* 2009) lays out new ways to strengthen the democratic accountability of civil servants. Appointments for senior civil servants should be open, with full Select Committee hearings and approval. The doctrine of ministerial responsibility must also be reformed; it currently shields officials from taking responsibility for their actions, as well as drawing ministers into the process of delivery. And civil servants should be expected to be subpoenaed before parliamentary Select Committees and to have to be held accountable for their work against a clear set of objectives.

Instruction to deliver

Ministers are there to guide policy, bring forward reforming principles and engage the public in the debate over public services. Ministers must be able to manage, but they also need to be able to collaborate with civil servants, rely on them to implement delivery and make use of their technical expertise.

Making officials personally accountable for implementation and the management of Government departments would free politicians to make the vital policy decisions. This maintains a clear distinction between civil servants and politicians and makes it clear who is responsible and accountable. Ministers have a key role to play in guiding the strategic direction of policy but they cannot be expected to be technocratic experts. Both civil servants and politicians should be responsible for their separate roles in the political process.

Reforming and strengthening the role of Parliament

Falling turnout in elections, particularly among the young, is symptomatic of the public's low confidence in Parliament. International comparison highlights the extent of this decline. Recent figures gathered by polling consultancy ComRes show that only 19 per cent of people in the UK agree with the statement 'Parliament is working for me' (Kalitowski 2008). This is in stark contrast to the case of Canada, where 34.4 per cent of people said they had 'Quite a lot' of confidence in Parliament, according to the World Values Survey. Quality of life is also much higher in Canada than in the UK, ranked sixth on the United Nations' Human Development Index table, compared with the UK in eighteenth place (UNDP 2006). There is no clear causal link, but there is a strong presumption that the comparative rift in the quality of life and public confidence in Parliament between the UK and Canada is linked to the differing government structures in the two countries.

Electoral reform would be a sideshow. Successive elections have demonstrated that Britain generally gets the results it wants, while proportional representation could end the ability of the electorate to change governments. The result of PR would simply make the coalitions that already occur within political parties more explicit. Moreover, PR centralises, taking the voter further away from Parliament. With candidates chosen by party leaders, the voter loses their connection to their representative, removing them further from the democratic process.

PR would not change politics: it would merely change the party structure without bringing new voices into Parliament, doing nothing to resolve the democratic deficit which Britain faces.

Shorter Parliaments, better elections

Voters can be given more control over Parliament by introducing shorter terms of four years, requiring governments and parliamentarians to seek re-election sooner, not later. Countries with three or four year Parliaments, such as Canada, Australia and the Scandinavian nations, have higher levels of confidence and higher electoral turnouts than the UK. Shorter terms increase voter power and give MPs more contact with voters. They also focus government on achieving results within the four-year term rather than on manipulating polices around an election date.

Contact between politicians and voters will be vital to the public regaining its sense of power and responsibility within the democratic political process. Recent surveys suggest this has been heavily eroded: 75 per cent of people agree that a strong Parliament is good for democracy, yet only a third are satisfied with how the institution works at the moment (Kalitowski 2008). Reducing parliamentary terms to four years would also stop the charade of lame-duck administrations limping into a fifth year before eventually meeting oblivion.

Not a rubber stamp

MPs must realise that their fundamental role is the scrutiny of government legislation, policy and activity. In recent years, this duty has been neglected as MPs either seek ministerial careers or choose to focus on local matters that affect their constituents.

With this rift between aspiring ministers and 'social workers', the ultimate job of challenging Government legislation has been forgotten. Not enough MPs are parliamentarians dedicated to the work that goes on inside the chamber.

Parliament should be the place to test legislation, where the country judges what the Government wants to do. In recent years there has been a legislative avalanche with governments passing act after act that have not been exposed to the intricate scrutiny that is needed. A reduction in the number of bills taken through Parliament would allow for much more detailed scrutiny and more time for debate. What is needed is fewer bills and higher quality acts.

Separation of powers

Making MPs more independent from the Executive is crucial for better parliamentary scrutiny. Currently, the party whips can stifle debate too easily and protect the Government from the people's representatives. This is a consequence of Britain's dangerous amalgamation of its legislative and executive power. The incentive for any ambitious politician is to toe the party line in exchange for future career prospects, rather than scrutinise the Executive.

The separation of powers and the appointment of ministers from outside of Parliament would have the twofold effect of ensuring that parliamentarians were able to freely challenge the Government and that ministers who were appointed had greater experience derived, for instance, from managing large organisations or serving in the public sector.

Parliament should and must still have the power to question and remove these ministers, but once the ministers are no longer recruited from within their own ranks, it will be possible to hold them to account more effectively, ensuring proper scrutiny. Standards must also be set for full parliamentary scrutiny of prerogative actions, such as decisions on entering armed conflict.

Stronger committees, more research

Parliamentary committees have a vital role to play in the process of scrutinising legislation. They need more power to confront government and challenge legislation, and the resources to undertake proper research to back this up.

In the United States congressional committees are powerful bodies which can consider, amend and report bills that fall under their jurisdiction. They can impede bills from reaching the floor and hold hearings with powers of subpoena. In contrast, Select Committees in the UK have much more limited powers to review legislation, and lack the resources to act as an alternative power base to the Executive. Select Committee must have more authority, particularly the power to sign off on departmental budgets. They must also be better funded and provided with the greater research capability and expertise needed to conduct effective scrutiny of large government departments. Finally, it would be desirable for the National Audit Office to work directly for Select Committees.

At present the main focus of parliamentary activity is on debate. No one is listening and this activity is rarely reported in the press. The main work of Parliament should be

the effective development of policy contributions and to challenge government legislation though specialist committees, backed up by much more incisive research and fact finding. Reform's work is particularly concerned with the weak performance of Parliament in holding the Government to account on key areas affecting public spending and taxation.

Parliamentarians first

Politics, Parliament and government have become more complex and demanding since the nineteenth century; the age of the aristocratic amateur is over. Politics requires determination and dedication and will increasingly make greater demands on its practitioners if they are to succeed. Modern politicians need to be local activists with a national presence, visionary thinkers with an eye for detail, media-savvy operators and hardened bureaucratic managers.

No single career path can furnish politicians with all these skills. Politics is more than a full-time job and the different roles of politicians need to be clearly defined to ensure that MPs, ministers and party leaders are serving their political purpose.

Once elected as MPs, politicians should have the freedom and independence to focus on their parliamentary duty to hold the Government to account. Many MPs are ideally suited to questioning ministers and officials, scrutinising legislation and judging the policies of government. They would serve themselves and the country better by focusing on holding the Government to account rather than trying to climb the greasy pole. Politicians should not have to become ministers in order to have a 'career', just as MPs often will not make the best ministers.

Ministerial talents

By selecting ministers from outside of Parliament, we can ensure that we attract the brightest and the best and most importantly people who are ready on day one. What is expected of ministers and what their roles require has clearly been a source of confusion. After stepping down as Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith said that she had 'never run a major organisation' before. And when asked if, when appointed Home Secretary, she was worried about being up to the job she said, '…every single time that I was appointed to a ministerial job I thought that' (Dale 2009). Meanwhile, Lord Mandelson has proved more popular as a minister than he ever did as an MP. We need people with the capacity to control a department with a multi-billion budget and face down vested interests, not someone who has never strayed from the whip.

Reforming the second chamber

How the House of Lords is composed in the future should be decided by a referendum. Whether elected or selected, however, what the House of Lords needs more than anything is independence and authority.

Introducing fixed single terms for peers would also make the second chamber more effective and relevant. Expertise needs constant renewal, and the Lords must always be open to new, independent voices. A House of Lords with long, seven-year fixed terms would be more reflective of and responsive to public opinion, yet not a rival to the House of Commons. Detached from the electoral cycle and free of Government

influence, the House of Lords could build on its strengths, as an independent Upper House.

The House of Lords should be a place where experts can review and revise legislation, not a partisan battleground. Peers should be genuinely independent and should follow the example of some state legislatures in the US in which party groupings are banned. With a truly independent House of Lords we could ensure effective scrutiny of both Government and legislation.

Members of the House of Lords should be appointed for fixed terms by an independent appointments commission, removing the malign influence of party politics. What's more, once the need for ministers to be Members of the Houses of Parliament were removed, there would be no need for the Government to make ministerial appointments from the House of Lords.

Channelling citizen power

While voters are becoming distanced from Parliament, activist citizens are growing in number. Direct democracy is already happening, and people are increasingly trying to take more control over their lives and find new avenues to have their voice heard. People take the initiative every day as consumers to gain the information necessary to understand the services available to them and bring change to their daily lives. Individuals are crying out for choice in public services and rights as patients and parents: to choose their school or hospital, and get the best education or treatment available. The internet has revolutionised politics and enabled the individuals to speak out and participate in the policy debate. The formation of organisations such as London Citizens has led to the birth of 'Community Organising' within the UK.

So citizen power is here – the point is it has to be channelled into the process so that it does not become a distraction, or worse, a direct competitor to our representative system.

Democracy in the internet age

The 'e-citizen' will have a vital role in rejuvenating the democratic process. There is a strong case for more direct access to petitions or citizens' initiatives, to trigger discussion of legislation. The Hansard Society suggests that people could engage more with politics via petitions, which could be managed through a new Petitions Committee. Any petition signed by more than 10,000 people should give the petitioners the right to make a brief statement and lead to a debate (Hansard Society 2009a).

There is, however, a risk of disintermediation, with the lines of accountability and channels of representation becoming increasingly strained. Politicians should strive to ensure that these different initiatives and strands of democracy are connected, that the process remains consolidated and that they remain at the heart of the democratic process. Through technology politicians can keep their finger on the pulse of public opinion and open up a dialogue between themselves and the public. But e-democracy should inform parliamentary democracy, not supplant it.

Making localism meaningful

There has been a decline in confidence in British local government which has gone along with increasing centralisation. The case made in the mid-nineteenth century by Alexis de Tocqueville for the importance of localism is still highly relevant (in *Democracy in America*). As he said, 'without power and independence a town may contain good subjects, but it can have no active citizens'. This must inspire the much needed restructuring of government in order to restore its meaning to today's voters.

National rhetoric, local reality

In recent years the British state has become more centralised while political culture has become more fixated on the Westminster village. Yet this runs counter to the most effective form of governance. Localism, the principle whereby decision-making and authority are devolved to the lowest possible level, could redefine the relationship voters have with our political institutions and reinvigorate confidence in government. The British state should be restructured and simplified on this principle. Britain needs fewer layers of governance. Local councils should be empowered and the Regional Development Agencies should be abolished.

Greater power and responsibility at local level is needed for people to be able to become active citizens and re-engage with the political process. A Hansard Society study suggests that a 73 per cent majority of people believe they have 'not very much influence' or 'no influence at all' in decision-making in their local areas. 20 per cent of people answered that this was because 'decisions are made without talking to the people', that is to say, local government institutions do not sufficiently engage with voters (Hansard Society 2009b). A more localised form of government would see politics essentially becoming closer to people's everyday lives.

Local power bases

A key part of returning power to a local level must be creating local power bases that can be held to account by local citizens. The Greater London Authority and Mayor of London have shown that local power bases work, as London citizens are now more engaged in the life of their city and know who is responsible for what. They have also led to greater accountability among public services and quangos in the capital, as powerful elected local politicians are able to hold the unelected quangocracy to account and assert their own democratic authority.

Even London's Mayor, however, suffers from too limited powers and remains subservient to central government. In order to create genuine local power bases, every metropolis should have its own elected Mayor with extensive powers similar to those of City Mayors in the US. They should be held to account by powerful local councils, meaning that citizens could see and feel a stake in the democratic process in their local area.

The major obstacle is not lack of interest; it is structural. Reform's work on the police service concluded that local accountability would be difficult to achieve unless the territories of most police forces were reconfigured to connect with local government boundaries. Centralised funding is disconnected from local requirements, while police authorities have little capacity to raise funds locally. Furthermore, flexibility in the

actual spending of their budgets is limited by the amount of central government targets that police forces have to comply with. Local funding and local accountability need to be realigned, while local authorities need to be given autonomy and flexibility in order that particular local problems can be solved more quickly and efficiently. Already local authorities are taking the initiative by introducing spending constraints and re-examining how to gain maximum productivity from their public services. Local knowledge, local design and local initiative will be key but localism needs resources to implement local change.

Planning and housing should also be delegated to the right level to align the costs and benefits. City-region authorities or clusters of local authorities developed into collaborative networks will enable strategic interests to be effectively matched while local concerns remain engaged in the planning process.

Reforming political parties to meet new challenges

Political parties have a key role to play in British democracy. They remain the best way to undertake the goals of politics, to aggregate interests and to form a government. Parties recruit talent into the political process, generate ideas to tackle the future challenges facing the country and engage the public into parliamentary democracy. They unify different perspectives within the party more than they divide perspectives between parties. A political party is the momentum, cohesion and the activity of politics. Parties have always competed to win the votes, they will now need to innovate and adopt new methods to maintain the support they need.

Open parties

The political sphere is more open than at any time in British history. The media, internet and blogosphere have thrown open the doors to the corridors of power and political parties must now keep up with a more versatile electorate. Arguably, political parties have already started to rise to the challenge.

The Conservatives held the first open primary to select their parliamentary candidate for Totnes, Devon; while David Miliband has discussed the possibility of allowing all Labour supporters to have a vote in electing a future party leader. These initiatives could, if followed through, result in greater voter confidence and stronger affiliation between political parties and their supporters. The American state primaries generated major public interest on their side of the Atlantic. The degree of choice of representation available to the American public contrasts with Britain, where people have relatively little say over who represents them, prospective parliamentary candidates being chosen from the top down. Open primaries would encourage bottom-up political engagement.

Neither have political parties been slow to recognise the value of the internet and blogging to engage with the public. From ConservativeHome to 'WebCameron', the internet is making politics more accessible to more people. It has pulled some 18- to 25-year-olds into politics. Through the blogosphere and Twitter posts, public interest and scrutiny of politicians has never been greater. Political parties need to embrace this potential, not resist it.

'No' to state funding

The public finances are already in a perilous state, even before the Government commits to new expenditure. State funding of political parties would be very unpopular, as people already feel that democratic structures take too much of their money. It would result in politicians becoming increasingly disconnected from the electorate and their own members. The necessity to continually raise funds from the British public drives the 'permanent campaign'. Parties must constantly make their case for support and ensure that politicians will never stop working with and for the public.

We must, however, strive for fair election campaigns. State regulation of campaign spending would not damage grassroots engagement but would keep political parties on an even financial footing. Who funds each attempt by political parties to take over UK Plc is not the biggest challenge facing British democracy. We need to make parties and MPs perform with the funding they have, not give them more.

Conclusion

If the reforms and ideas discussed above are to result in real change, they must stretch beyond Parliament and Whitehall in order to deliver transparency and accountability across the board. Reform's report *A new reality: Government and the IPOD generation* indicated that the 18 to 34 age group, described as 'Insecure, Pressurised, Over-taxed and Debt-ridden', do not know what their taxes are spent on or where to look for this information. They want more reciprocal, non-hierarchical and transparent authority relationships (Reform and Ipsos-Mori 2008).

Constitutional reform needs to deliver transparency and accountability in government and public services. Too much is happening in politics that people have no say over, or worse, no knowledge of. The public's voice has been lost in the gauze of newsprint and angry pressure groups. It is time to refocus the political system on the people it is supposed to serve. Only through constitutional reform at all levels can we rejuvenate our democratic system in order for Parliament to overcome its declining popularity and restore its relationship with the voters.

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