



The **Constitution** Unit



2 February 2010

Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP
Leader of the House of Commons
House of Commons
Westminster
London, SW1A 0AA

Dear Harriet,

The Wright Committee

We are writing to you - as Leader of the House with a record spanning two decades as a reforming and modernising MP - to urge that you do all you can within Government to ensure implementation of the Wright Committee's recommendations for reform of the House of Commons before the general election. The proposed procedural approach to implementation currently puts this at real risk.

When the Prime Minister established the Wright Committee in June 2009 he made clear his personal commitment to reform in principle and as an antidote to the problems faced by Parliament and MPs as a result of the expenses scandal. Those problems have not gone away. The reputation of MPs, of Parliament and that of the Government itself will be further eroded if, having established a clear direction for reform, a procedural roadblock is now erected as the end is in sight.

We therefore urge you and the Government to reconsider the proposed procedure for the 23rd February debate. The introduction of non-amendable resolutions can – and therefore almost certainly will – be blocked by the objection of just a single member. It is surely right in principle that MPs have the opportunity to amend and then vote on changes to the rules affecting the House. This approach has been used consistently in the recent history of Commons reform. It has proven to be the most effective way of developing consensus around a given set of proposals, whilst respecting the right of all members to set out their views.

For example, when sittings of the House (May 1999), the programming of bills (November 2000), Select Committee changes (May 2002), reform of sitting hours (January 2005) and the establishment of regional Select Committees (November 2008) were considered, members had an opportunity on each occasion to debate and amend the resolutions before them. The best way of ensuring implementation of the Wright Committee recommendations before the general election is clearly to offer MPs that same democratic opportunity to debate and amend the proposals. If this opportunity is not provided, on or soon after 23rd February, the proposals will simply die.

If the Government continues with the proposed approach on 23rd February, we therefore urge you to make clear now the date on which the House will revisit any resolutions that are objected to. You have previously indicated that time will be made available 'as soon as possible' thereafter to take any such decisions. However, without a clear commitment to a date in the parliamentary timetable the danger is that time will run out: after 23rd February, there may be no more than four parliamentary sitting weeks left before dissolution for the general election.

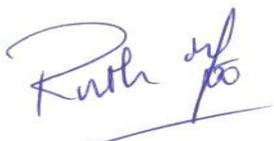
The Prime Minister, yourself and other members of the Government have previously expressed support for the principles of reform enshrined in the Wright report. Members of the Select Committee worked expeditiously over the summer to deliver the proposals in time for implementation by the general election. Every effort should now be made to facilitate time for proper consideration of the proposals and **if you do not change the procedure we therefore urge you to confirm that the House will consider any outstanding issues within a week of the 23 February debate.**

Each of our organisations has a significant interest in parliamentary and constitutional reform. We do not always see eye to eye, and have different agendas, interests and perspectives. But we are united in our belief that the Wright Committee proposals for reform of the House of Commons are essential, sensible, and practical and must be implemented before the general election. That is why we are writing to you collectively on this issue, and copying this letter to the Speaker, other ministers and opposition spokespersons, as well as members of the media.

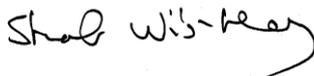
This Parliament, more than any other in recent memory, needs to reform itself. This reform could be your legacy as Leader of the House. But almost three months have now passed since the Wright Committee proposals were published – further delays preventing their implementation before the general election would be unforgivable.

We look forward to receiving your response.

Yours



Ruth Fox
Hansard Society



Stuart Wilks-Heeg
Democratic Audit

On behalf of:
Constitution Unit
Democratic Audit
Hansard Society
Power2010
Unlock Democracy
Electoral Reform Society
Better Government Initiative

cc John Bercow, Speaker of the House of Commons
Gordon Brown MP
Jack Straw MP
Sir George Young MP
David Heath MP

Please reply to:
Stuart Wilks-Heeg
Director, Democratic Audit
Eleanor Rathbone Building
Bedford Street South
Liverpool, L69 7ZA
swilks@liv.ac.uk