

Parliamentary reform: the Coalition Government's agenda after Wright:

Speech by Sir George Young Bt MP, Leader of the House of Commons to the Hansard Society, London, June 16

Introduction

Thank you, Peter, for that introduction, and thank you to the Hansard Society for inviting me to speak to you this evening.

This is my first keynote speech since becoming Leader of the House (and indeed Lord Privy Seal – although I hope you'll forgive me if I move rather swiftly over that part of the job, which no one has quite explained to me yet); and it gives me an opportunity to offer some reflections on this remarkable new world which was created by the electorate on May 6 – and also to lay the ground for what I hope will be a productive and even unprecedented period of parliamentary reform.

In that vein, I'm with the Speaker when he said to you here last week that this is a "truly wonderful time to be in Parliament". He and I are both reformers at heart – and we've only ever had one minor disagreement a year ago about which of us should be Speaker, when I came second. But on parliamentary reform, we come from a very similar place – and, judging from his speech last week, it is a pleasure to be heading alongside him in a very similar direction.

Coalition Politics

Before I address the process of change in Parliament, I thought I would share with you a few personal observations about how the new Government is operating; comparing my fourteen years as a Minister under Margaret Thatcher then John Major in a single party administration with just over fourteen days under David Cameron and Nick Clegg in a coalition.

Any Europeans in the audience will be more familiar with the life cycle of coalition government than we are here in Britain; although there should be no excuses, given the comprehensive paper entitled "Who Governs" that the Hansard Society published in conjunction with the Study of Parliament Group a few months before polling day.

In some respects, the coalition between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats shouldn't come as a big shock. Although we are two separate parties, there are many areas of policy where there is agreement between us; and of course we have also worked together in local government for many years.

The challenge now facing the Coalition is to convert a political agreement between two rival parties into an effective programme for Government. That was the rationale behind the Queen's Speech, which set out the key principles that currently bind the Conservatives and the Lib Dems – freedom, fairness and responsibility – and set out some of the Government's legislative commitments for the next 18 months. It is an ambitious programme with an emphasis on reducing the deficit; reforming our public services, particularly health and education; and a broad slate of political reforms, which will now be led by the office of the Deputy Prime Minister. This last fact, in particular, will help to ingrain reform in the centre of government by placing it right at the heart of how this country is run.

One of the most important factors in the success of this coalition will be the strength of the relationships between the key players – and what had struck me about the relations between the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister is the strength of the axis between the two. Even though these are leaders of two different parties, it is a much stronger axis, dare I say it, than the Blair/Brown axis on which the previous Government had been constructed. Whereas Blair and Brown had different philosophies but joined the same party, Cameron and Clegg have the same philosophy but ended up joining different parties.

The challenge to the rest of us in the team is to replicate that strong relationship right down the administration, and to embed in it a new and keen appetite for collaboration.

This may not be as difficult as it sounds. Relationships between us and the Liberal Democrats have been built up over 13 years, when we have both been in opposition to the previous Government. That has required, on many occasions both inside and outside Parliament, a unity of purpose to be effective. We know each other, have sat on the same benches and have worked together individually and collectively.

This has created understandings not just right at the top of the parties but further down. David Cameron and Nick Clegg forged a successful partnership to protect the rights of Ghurkhas. The Defence Secretary Liam Fox and his deputy Nick Harvey were both effective shadows to the Ministry of Defence. And my deputy David Heath and I were both advocates of faster Parliamentary reform when we both shadowed Harriet Harman in the Commons. We are now constructing working relationships in government based on common platforms that we stood on in opposition.

If you listened in to some discussions in Government, you wouldn't be able to guess which party the speaker came from.

But physics is just as important as chemistry. The coalition has been carefully constructed around the need for institutional equilibrium, mindful of the need to create a strong architecture that will minimise Ministerial divisions and internal instability.

As a result, the normal hierarchy of ministerial positions in departments – from Secretary of State to Minister of State to Parliamentary Under Secretary – doesn't operate on the same terms, particularly with Lib Dems in each department. That is a significant difference with the coalition experience in other countries, which has tended to continue operating – often with inevitable consequences – on narrow tribal grounds.

The presence of two parties in government also adds a new dimension to decision-making within Whitehall. A major policy decision requires greater inclusiveness and checks with coalition colleagues – and as a result, it may be all the more durable because of its broader political base of support. At a time when some heroic decisions need to be taken, for example, on public spending, this has an added significance.

Of course in any government there will be tensions. In a majority government, these can be resolved by a majority vote or, in extreme circumstances, a resignation. This will have to be dealt with differently in a coalition. Instead, the conventional Whitehall machinery of Cabinet and Cabinet subcommittee needs some parallel structures to iron out political differences.

That's why we have seen the creation of a new Cabinet subcommittee, called the Coalition Committee, jointly chaired by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister and sat on by equal numbers of Lib Dem and Conservative Ministers. This aims to resolve disputes within government – rather than allowing policy disagreements to spill over into counterproductive public rows.

That may be less fun for Peter's colleagues in the Lobby, but it will also lead to a better type of government.

Cultural changes in politics

Changing the structures within Government has been the most obvious demonstration of what this coalition is all about: it really is a new politics. It is a response to the challenge laid down by voters during the election to politicians of all parties. When David Cameron came out and made a "big, bold and comprehensive offer" to the Liberal Democrats on May 7, it wasn't just the whistle blow marking the start of horse-trading; it was an instinctive recognition of the need for a fundamentally different approach to the conduct of public life.

In a recent speech "A Defence of Politics" – a title which has a famous lineage, leading back from Peter through Tony Wright and originating, of course, with Bernard Crick – the Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield, Matthew Flinders, said that, "the public hankers after a more optimistic, balanced and informed account of politics".

I agree – and I think that is exactly what the Coalition Government has so far tried to deliver. People have seen over the last month politicians putting aside partisan interests, and significant differences over policy, in order to work together on the major economic and political reforms that this country needs. This mature approach has on the whole generated a sense of respect – which has been reflected in all the recent polls that show a large amount of public support, across the political divide, for the coalition.

Reform in Parliament: Backbench Business

This grown-up approach to politics is also central to how we want to conduct relations with Parliament. We want to see a real cultural change in the House – from conflict to collaboration.

For years, the real scandal in British politics has been the impotence of the House of Commons. The terms of the trade between Government and Parliament have shifted too far in the executive's favour. Over recent decades, it has simply become too easy for the Government to sideline Parliament; to push Bills through without adequate scrutiny; and to see the House more as a rubber-stamp than a proper check on executive authority.

I have made that argument in Opposition; and I say it again now in Government; not because our pledge to strengthen Parliament will make life easier for me or my colleagues (because it won't); but because this Government believes, from the Prime Minister down, that, to paraphrase Robin Cook, a strong Parliament leads to a better Government. If both raise their game, then the citizen is the winner.

That is why we have made swift progress on implementing the proposals from the Wright Committee that the previous Government didn't find time for.

And already, this Parliament feels and looks different. Last Wednesday, Select Committee chairs were elected by their peers in a secret ballot of the whole House. This week, the three main parties will be electing their party's allocation of select committee members. Yesterday, the House endorsed the Wright Committee's proposals to establish a Backbench Business Committee, which represents a moment of liberation for backbenchers, giving them the power and the time to schedule debates on the issues that matter to them and to their constituents. As the Wright Report said, this new Committee "will create new opportunities for all Members, giving them a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for what goes on in their own House".

The tone of yesterday's debate was markedly different from the same debate in March. For the moment at least, we all seem to be on the same side, instead of dragging a recalcitrant government forward. Perhaps we're just seeing the result of a new Parliament with many new Members – but it does seem noticeably calmer and more courteous. Long may that last.

We now need to see this Backbench Committee using its new powers intelligently. This is the other side of the bargain. The Government is committed to handing over more power to Parliament; Parliament should respond positively and responsibly. The success of the Backbench Committee will be a key issue to reflect on when it comes to setting up the more ambitious House Business Committee – which will oversee Government, as well as backbench, time – by the third year of this Parliament.

In that spirit, we expect members of the Committee to consult widely on the topics for debate with other backbenchers and – perhaps the biggest test of all – to drive up attendance at these debates. It would be a sad conclusion to the vision of the Wright Committee if those who criticise the Government for wasting time in thinly-attended topical debates did not do better.

As Tony Wright said during one of the debates on his report: “In a way it is easy when we can blame the Government for everything, but from now on we shall have to attend to ourselves and take responsibility for ourselves. If we do not do that, this is not going to work; it will be sunk”.¹

Their first task will be to revisit the 15 annual set-piece debates, on issues such as defence, Welsh affairs, or International Women’s Day and consider whether to continue following the rather rigid formula they have followed for decades; or whether something could be developed in their place that would set the pulse racing a little faster.

Defining the role of MPs

The Wright reforms should help to make an immediate impact on the way the House operates, and help make it less of a poodle and more of a bulldog. But I want to make it clear this evening that it is by no means the last word – but rather the opening of a new chapter for Parliament.

The expenses scandal illustrated how disconnected the House of Commons had become from the public. Even if their own MP was “a good man or woman”, they thought Parliament as a whole was full of crooks and liars. One of the elements that intensified this anger was that over the years MPs had failed to communicate to people what it was they actually did. Instead of elected representatives working hard on their behalf, people saw a political elite that feathered their nests on the taxpayers’ expense; took 82-day summer holidays; enjoyed fine dining in the House at subsidised prices; and made little positive impact on the country.

It is true that Westminster has allowed some bad practices to develop – and it is particularly important at a time when politicians are asking for big sacrifices from the country that Parliament is not seen to be insulated from the pain. We have cut Ministers’ pay. We have reduced the long period of recess over the summer so that the Government is more accountable to the House. And in

¹ *Hansard*, 4 March 2010, col. 1082

line with the Government's commitment to reduce costs across Whitehall, I have asked the House of Commons Commission to press ahead with making efficiencies in Parliament this year, in line with what we have asked other departments.

But while cutting the costs of politics will help to restore trust in Westminster, the best way to restore the public's faith in Parliament as an institution is by showing the public that their MP is doing the job he or she is meant to be doing: fighting for their interests; holding the Government to account; and debating the issues that really concern them.

MPs are sent to Parliament to represent their constituents and scrutinise executive decisions and legislation. So representation and scrutiny must become the benchmarks of how this place operates. Our mission is to help Parliament engage the public's imagination in debate; and create effective mechanisms for MPs to hold ministers to account, without obstructing the ability of the Government to implement the manifesto it has been elected on.

Reforms after Wright

In my speech to the Hansard Society in March, I outlined a few of our suggestions for how to do this – and I wanted to give you a brief update on the progress we have made so far.

Our first step has been to return to the House ownership of its own reform agenda, by scrapping the Modernisation Select Committee. Putting the Cabinet Minister in charge of the government's legislative programme in the chair of the committee that decides how the House can best scrutinise that programme risked short-circuiting the democratic process – and did so on some occasions.

Secondly, we have also disposed off the pointless Regional Select Committees, which were imposed on the House by first by a casting vote from the Leader of the House in the Modernisation Committee, and then by a slim Government majority.

Third, we are making good our commitment to provide adequate time for scrutiny of legislation – which the Wright report identified as the source of some of the greatest dissatisfaction with the House.

We have not aggressively programmed the first bill introduced into the Commons – the Identity Documents Bill – but have instead merely agreed with the Opposition a date by which the bill should have completed its committee stage. We will also want to ensure that there is adequate scrutiny at Report stage and we will look seriously at giving the Chair the discretion to set time limits on speeches, so that more MPs can contribute.

Having laid the foundations, we now want to build on them. By ensuring these committees are elected, we've given them a soapbox; so now it's time to give

them a loudhailer. We want to give them much greater access to Parliament's agenda, by allowing the chairmen to launch their most important reports on the floor of the House. Why should Government Ministers have a monopoly on the privilege of making statements in the House? And reports shouldn't just be debated in the Commons – where appropriate, they should also be voted on. The Government shouldn't just listen; it should act as well.

We also want to make progress on making the heart of the Chamber beat a little faster – and more in time to public concerns. I will be taking forward the idea, referred to by the Speaker last week, of allowing the Opposition to trade some of the time they are allotted for their Opposition Day Debates for statements on topical subjects. All too often MPs themselves do not see the point of making the Chamber the primary focus on their activities. Our proposals will seek to transform this by replacing long, thinly-attended and turgid debates with short and punchy statements that will get far greater air time. More box office; less am-dram.

While we need to refresh the way in which backbenchers can contribute in the Chamber, we also want to make it easier for people to access the proceedings of the House directly.

At the moment, petitions are read out in the Chamber before disappearing into a sack at the back of the Speaker's Chair. It's no wonder that the public doesn't think we're engaging with them. We will take forward a new system of public petitions, so that those that get the most signatures will be eligible for an actual debate in Parliament.

We will also take forward our proposals on seeking better engagement with the public during the legislative process. Labour initiated a 'draft legislative programme', published in the spring before the Queen's Speech so that the public could be consulted on the Government's legislative proposals. This was not a roaring success. This exercise was more about giving Labour ministers regional campaign tours over the summer recess than allowing the public to have an impact on legislation.

The truth is that people who want to engage with legislation have an interest or an expertise in a certain area. They can bring value to individual bills rather than to the overall direction of Government policy; which they are able to vote on every five years. There are already some good opportunities that have been devised by the House for sourcing opinion and practical knowledge – for instance, during the evidence sessions that have been tacked on to Public Bill Committees.

We will build on these existing structures to introduce a new 'public reading stage' for bills to give the public an opportunity to comment on proposed legislation online, and a dedicated 'public reading day' within a bill's committee stage where those comments will be debated by the committee scrutinising the bill. I will be setting out our plans on this in greater detail before the summer recess.

Capacity for reform in the House

My focus during this speech has been on the areas in which the Government will initiate reform; but in reality, the real responsibility and impetus for reform should come from the House itself. The Government will set the tone and establish the right conditions – by getting off the House’s back and empowering it to use its own resources. Now the House should step up to the challenge.

There are two committees who are in prime positions to do so. The first is the Procedure Committee, chaired by Greg Knight. The second is the Liaison Committee, comprised of a board of newly elected Select Committee chairs.

The Liaison Committee has not capitalised on its unique status – and I speak as a former member. In 2000, it produced a landmark report, “Shifting the Balance”. Since then, the balance has indeed shifted; but thanks to other players such as the Public Administration Select Committee, the Wright Committee and indeed my own party’s Democracy Task Force, which produced radical but workable ideas for reform. In contrast, there has been no such output from the Liaison Committee.

With a new Parliament, and with its members now elected by secret ballot, the Committee has the chance to become a ‘council of the wise’ – driving forward the priorities of the House over the next five years. It should have an intense focus on how to strengthen the Commons and ensure there is better scrutiny of the executive.

The Liaison Committee also has a major role to play in holding the Prime Minister to account. Weekly bear-baiting at PMQs has not proved to be a particularly successful way of cross-examining the PM; and although some enjoy the parliamentary theatre, much of the public finds the spectacle distasteful. The Prime Minister’s appearances before the Liaison Committee provide a high profile platform for scrutinising the head of government which has real potential to seize the public’s imagination.

But these sessions have so far failed to spark – and, as a former member, I plead guilty by association. 150 minutes with the PM, cross-questioned by Parliament’s most effective examiners, ought to be one of the most important events in the political calendar. It hasn’t been. We never laid a glove on Tony Blair – and Gordon Brown’s appearances were heavy weather. On one occasion, we received next to no coverage at all in the newspapers, with only a brief mention on the BBC’s Yesterday in Parliament.

Already over the last ten years, there have been significant changes to the format of these sessions – with them becoming less rigid and formal and allowing for more free-flowing questions and answer. But it is worth revisiting the formula. Instead of a series of rehearsed answers which create constant interruptions, we should look for more dialogue and debate. There is capacity

for a more mature conversation – and it is in the hands of the Select Committee chairs as much as it is to the Prime Minister to ensure that there is less party political point-scoring.

Select Committee chairmen have never been patsies, but rather than being selected by the Whips through the 'usual channels', they are now democratically elected by the House. This could create a new, more determined atmosphere. The Chairman – who I would like to see appointed by the Liaison Committee itself, rather than brought in from outside – will have a key role not just as a referee (as in the past) but as a player. These sessions can become win-wins: the Liaison Committee can ask the right questions and be seen effectively to scrutinise the PM; while Number 10 can use it as a forum for giving the public a better insight into the PM's goals and what drives him.

The key partner to the Liaison will be the Procedure Committee, the direct successor of Modernisation. It will have responsibility for a wider remit than it has had over the last 13 years and it might consider changing its name to reflect that. It has already said it will revisit the procedure for Private Members' Bills.

Sitting Hours/ Calendar

Another issue that the Procedure Committee might wish to revisit in the longer term is the Parliamentary calendar and the sitting hours of the House of Commons.

Yesterday, the House agreed to sit this year for two weeks in September – but a number of sensible voices in the debate expressed a feeling that we do not organise our time here in Parliament in the most productive way. There is conflict with the public – who do not understand why we take 82-day summer holidays; there is conflict with our constituents – who rightly demand that we remain visible in our local areas; and there is conflict in Parliament – as MPs juggle the competing interests of their duties on Committees and in the Chamber.

Equally on sitting hours, we have a large number of new MPs and a new regime introduced by IPSA which we have to operate within.

It may be that the House feels that the time has come to look at the whole issue of how MPs manage their time. As a start, it might be sensible to look at moving party conferences so that we can sit for longer than just two weeks in September.

I am conscious that the last time the House considered MPs' sitting hours, a lively debate ensued for about three years. This is something that we should take on carefully and cautiously - but with the ultimate aim of ensuring that the public gets the best value out of their elected representatives.

Conclusion

This is the tenth Parliament that I have sat in – and it already has the potential to be the most exciting. We have a new House of Commons, bristling with new talent, over a third of who are first-timers. We have a newly elected Speaker, with a fresh mandate for change. And we have a new Coalition Government, elected on a dual purpose: to undertake radical reform of the economy while at the same time overseeing fundamental reform of the way we do politics.

The stage is set for an extraordinary five years in Parliament.