

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

MR SPEAKER'S SPEECH TO THE HANSARD SOCIETY, NOVEMBER 27 2013

TOWARDS A 21ST CENTURY PARLIAMENT

Thank you very much indeed for that introduction. It has been the better part of three years since I last had the privilege and pleasure of addressing a Hansard Society audience. That is a passage of time which has left me wondering what exactly it was that I said or did last time to cause such offence.

With my record, some would say, the possibilities are endless. It is, nonetheless, very kind of you to offer me this platform tonight and it is one that I was enthusiastic to secure because much of what I want to say today relates to an area of public life and policy where the Hansard Society can rightly claim to be pioneers, even Founding Fathers and Mission Mothers, namely e-democracy.

This Society first started to investigate this subject way back in 1997 when the internet age was in its comparative infancy and almost a decade before the arrival of smartphones and iPads, let alone Facebook and Twitter. You have continued to be at the forefront of innovation here through your intense involvement in Wegov, where e-government meets the eSociety, also now in Sense4us, another bold project and through publications, notably the recent epic *Futurenews: The Communication of Parliamentary Democracy in a Digital World*. Much of what I am about to announce this evening shamelessly intends build upon the research which you have done, which I believe has more than made the case for being developed further and embraced by the House of Commons. Thank you in advance and I am sorry that I will not be paying royalties!

Before I do that, however, I think it is particularly appropriate to take the chance to set out the progress that has been made, and I do think it is considerable, in restoring the public standing and the political strength of the House of Commons as an institution. The first time that I addressed

the Hansard Society as Speaker was in late 2009 not long after my election to that position. This was but a few months after the expenses scandal had rocked Parliament to its very foundations, forcing new arrangements to be devised for such future payments at something close to warp speed with all the subsequent difficulties in terms of the practicalities of implementation that so often occur when legislation is drafted and enacted in haste in an atmosphere of crisis. The notion then that I would be able to return to the Attlee Suite four years later with any positive achievements to point to would have seemed an extremely optimistic notion. Yet I am convinced that I can do this.

The blunt truth is that the expenses debacle was a particularly embarrassing layer of icing on an especially unappetising cake. The reality in 2009 is that the House of Commons as a meaningful political institution, an effective legislature, had been in decline for some decades and was close to reaching the point where it had become, to distort Walter Bagehot slightly, a dignified part of our constitution without much actual dignity. The House appeared to be little more than a cross between a rubber stamp and a talking shop which had taken to collective activity such as the imaginative interpretation of what might be a legitimate expense claim as much as an odd form of displacement activity as out of any shared sense of malice or corruption.

Those of you kind enough to be and to remain members of the Hansard Society then were, and I mean this in the nicest possible manner, thoroughly unrepresentative of the great British public as a whole, most of whom had decided that while they quite liked the architecture of the Palace of Westminster they could not see much virtue in what they observed to be happening inside it. Parliament appeared to have been reduced to the status of a small green room in which men, overwhelmingly men, shouted at each other for relatively short periods of the working week and then disappeared from sight thereafter to do Lord Knows What. Certainly, it was not to strike terror in to the hearts of Ministers or offer considered criticism and surgical scrutiny either of proposed legislation in the chamber or via the Select Committee system of the implementation of executive policy. The expenses disaster was, or could have been, the final humiliation by which the so-called

Mother of Parliaments became permanently divorced from the electorate which with evident reluctance, was called upon to create it every so often.

A great deal has changed since then, although I would not dream of suggesting anything other than that there is much more still to do. Yet it is manifestly the case that the House of Commons has proved a much more interesting institutional creature in this Parliament than has been true for some time and most learned commentators on these matters, and even the lobby, have noticed this. Far from being in the final twitches of our mortal life, the virtual corpse has staged an unexpected recovery. It turns out that in the spirit of *Dr Who* the parliament elected in 2010 has not been about death but about regeneration. The House of Commons is not only capable of making the news but of influencing the political weather. It is no longer pining for the fjords but has taken flight and does indeed have a beautiful plumage. Our challenge now is to ensure that this welcome revival cannot be reversed.

I will come to the reasons behind this Westminster Spring in just a moment. However, as I am with this audience which is as indefatigable as it is cerebral, I must cheer you for keeping the faith during the very dark days that we experienced as a legislature very recently. To have remained an active member and supporter of The Hansard Society in 2009 must have made involvement in The Flat Earth society seem a rational deployment of human time by comparison. Parliament has recovered in part because people like you cared about it, wanted it to recover and almost fired up the House of Commons to take restorative action. For that, we MPs are truly in your debt.

It strikes me that three factors best explain the resuscitation of the House of Commons over these past three years. They are: procedural change; fresh blood; and the novelty of coalition government.

The first of these is probably, on balance, the most important. The current House is enjoying the fruits of the votes taken on the Wright Committee recommendations in March 2010. Julian

Critchley once described Margaret Thatcher's victory over Edward Heath in the 1975 Conservative Party leadership contest as the "Peasant's Revolt" and the same was true on that day eight weeks before the May 2010 general election. The House embraced the election of the Deputy Speakers, the whole House election of Select Committee Chairs, the whole party caucus election of Select Committee members and the creation of a House Backbench Business Committee.

Few on either frontbench, if we are candid, expected such a radical set of proposals to be embraced as were to be adopted. One of the most reliable maxims in politics is that if you change the rules, you change the game and that has proved correct on this occasion. The Select Committees have acquired a huge boost in their legitimacy through their new democratic mandate. They have not needed a formal extension of their powers to exercise new authority and become much more prominent actors whether it be the Treasury Select Committee, the Public Accounts Committee or the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport.

As General de Gaulle once said when he was asked why he wanted to make the presidency of France an office to be filled by the voters and not the complex set of elite politicians who had controlled the post previously: "one does not elect a man to open flower shows". No one on a Select Committee today feels that his or her proper role in life is akin to opening a flower show.

On top of these procedural innovations, I, as Speaker, have added one of my own, namely the rescue of the Urgent Question as a parliamentary instrument of inquisition. The Urgent Question or UQ is a device which allows any Member of Parliament on any sitting day to petition me to demand that a department supplies a Minister to answer some issue or matter that has arisen very suddenly. In the twelve months before I became Speaker, precisely two Urgent Questions had been awarded which suggests either that very little of any urgency occurred in the years 2008-2009, apart of course from the largest financial collapse in the developed world since the 1930s, or that the UQ, like so many weapons which the House theoretically had at its command to train on the executive, had become so rusty that it was no longer credible to seek to pull the trigger. Since I have had the

honour to sit in the Speaker's Chair I have granted 154 Urgent Questions. Moreover, I do not think it is an idle boast to contend that they have now become an established element in the parliamentary timetable, that they have forced the House of Commons back on to the news pages and to the airwaves and that they have prompted Ministers to volunteer statements to the House with which they would not have bothered in the last few Parliaments because they know that if they do not the chance of a UQ is now high. I am sure that my successors will do many things very differently to me and rightly so but I would be amazed if they put the Urgent Question back into parliamentary cold storage.

All of this has been assisted by the two other developments which I mentioned earlier, fresh blood and the novelty of coalition. The 2010 election was unusual both in the very large number of new MPs which it produced, 227 of them, since topped up again by some by-election outcomes, but also by the fact that both the Conservative and Labour parties saw large numbers of new members arrive. That was not true in 1997 when I entered the House as one of a relatively small group of fresher Tory MPs while the Labour Party had truckloads of first-time Members of Parliament.

To make matters more intriguing still, both of the main parties had intakes which were more diverse by gender, ethnicity and race, sexuality and career background than had been true previously. A little belatedly, admittedly, the House of Commons actually looked and sounded like the Britain that had cast ballot papers in 2010 to choose its elected representatives. This has been deeply refreshing. It is my very strong sense, sitting institutionally where I do, that the class of 2010 did not arrive here minded to serve its time, do what it was told, and keep itself quietly occupied. It has instead been a force for further change. It has fused that culture with the revolution in the rulebook of March 2010.

That this has been the first Parliament of any length in which there has not been a single majority party or a single minority party in government has perhaps added to the cocktail of change as well. There has been no real equivalent at Westminster – although this is not the case for

Edinburgh, Cardiff or Belfast – of the formal coalition understanding which we have seen since May 2010. To an extent, Whitehall and Westminster have had to make up new norms as we have gone along. The uncertainty as to what exactly is the correct way to proceed has offered the breathing space for backbench creativity and parliamentary originality which the House Backbench Business Committee chaired by the redoubtable Natascha Engel MP has eagerly exploited. It has also, I conclude, further convinced Select Committees that a more forensic approach to scrutiny is not an act of rebellion or disloyalty to their own political party but a civic obligation. My instinct is that this shift in attitude and approach is one that will survive irrespective of the party composition of the next Parliament.

More broadly, we have witnessed a benign cultural revolution to accompany the rulebook revolution. This can be seen in so many different ways whether it be the new hours which the House keeps which I know are not popular with everyone but which are bedding in, a new approach to access to the House so that more members of the public can visit and tour what is after all their Palace of Westminster, the arrival of a nursery to assist those with small children who work here and so on.

The overhaul is not complete.

The House Business Committee has yet to arrive despite its place in the coalition agreement of May 2010 and the Procedure Committee has recently highlighted deficiencies in the means by which Private Members' Bills become law (or, more accurately, do not) which is plainly an area where the House is entitled to a discussion, a debate and a decision, whatever it ultimately determines to do. Questions to the Prime Minister remains, in the view of many people, something closer to a blood sport than to the type of serious inquiry that they would favour. But, overall, I think that when looking at our rulebook and our culture we can say that we have made significant strides towards becoming a truly 21st century Parliament and three cheers for that.

We are obviously in a better place than four years ago.

Despite this, there is an enormous challenge out there not only for the House of Commons and Parliament as a whole but for all legislatures in the 21st century. That challenge is how we reconcile traditional concepts and institutions of representative democracy with the technological revolution which we have witnessed over the past decade or two which has created both a demand for and an opportunity to establish a digital democracy. Quietly, over past decades, a radically different world has emerged which in time will make the industrial revolution seem minor.

There has been much research conducted in to this at the academic level and in individual initiatives and publications, not least those with which the Hansard Society has had the wisdom to become involved. But it is hard to see exactly where we are and hard to understand the notion of 'trust' in this brave new world, uncertain as it is. Indeed, there has not been one single overarching strategy for how we might move from where we are now to what a parliament in a digital democracy may look like, nor is there one role model from whom we can all take inspiration. That said, Estonia, where a quarter of the votes cast at its last national election in 2011 and perhaps half of those which will be recorded at its 2015 elections, were delivered online is something of a market leader in this regard and well worth investigation.

I am convinced that we need an innovation of our own to create such a map and a compass and to invite outside expertise in to assist us in this endeavour.

That is why I am announcing today the creation of a Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, the core membership of which will be assembled in the next few weeks, supplemented by a circle of around 30 expert Commissioners and reinforced I hope by up to 60 million members of the public. This exercise will start in early 2014 and report in early 2015, a special year for Parliament as it will be the 750th anniversary of the de Montfort Parliament along with the 800th

anniversary of the Magna Carta, the document that set the scene for the 1265 Parliament to come later.

Digital democracy will have some universal features but others which vary nation by nation. It is yet another change which pushes against formality and for flexibility. Its elements might include online voting, e-dialogue between representatives and those represented, increased interconnectedness between the functions of representation, scrutiny and legislation, multiple concepts of what is a constituency, flexibility about what is debated when and how, and a much more intense pace for invention and adaptation. What we are talking about here is nothing less than a Parliament version 2.0.

Digital democracy should thus be seen as the complementary counterpart of the outreach efforts which I have spent much of my four years as Speaker seeking to promote. It is a form of in-reach, encouraging and enabling the public to become more involved in the work of Parliament and Parliament responding as a result. Historically, in-reach has largely consisted of voting once every four or five years. For representative democracy to thrive it has to evolve and there has to be a step change improvement in its responsiveness to the electorate and the country at large. We know this can work in a party political context. Look at the extraordinary success of Conservative Home initially under the leadership of Tim Montgomerie, in establishing itself on the right of the spectrum. There are many individual parliamentarians who are brilliant bloggers, operators on Facebook or stars in the spectrum that is Twitter (although I myself am not one of them, I should confess now before a newspaper diary column outs me on this, to being something of a self-appointed non-playing captain of the team when it comes to technology and politics). We should want our Parliament to be ahead of the curve in this territory and we should aspire that our 750th birthday party in 2015 is not an occasion for slapping our own back about the past but pointing ourselves firmly toward the future.

A Speaker's Commission would consider, report and make recommendations on how parliamentary democracy in the United Kingdom can embrace the opportunities afforded by the digital world to become more effective in representing the people, making laws and scrutinising the work and the performance of government. It should also consider how Parliament can become more relevant to the increasingly diverse population it seeks to serve. We also need to ask searching questions about the digital divide, the haves and have-nots of the internet and the smartphone, not least because of the accumulating evidence that the Berlin Wall which undoubtedly exists in this terrain is no longer about age but relates to affluence or the lack of it. A digital democracy should not reinvent the divide in franchise of the 19th century in a new high technology form. It has to be universally inclusive and not simply a narrow Geeks nirvana.

If we get this right, then the Speaker's Commission would provide a blueprint for action covering, among other topics, ways to bring to the heart of our democracy the things that really matter to our citizens – how to put right grievances, how to turn law-making into something that really involves the people who will be affected – and not just a conversation between interest groups and political parties – and much more that we have yet to discover.

I should also be clear for the political and procedural purists in the room (otherwise known as Mr Mark D'arcy of the BBC) what such a Commission is and is not.

The Commission is a completely new idea.

It is not a Speaker's Conference initiated by the government, a noble device but one which is rather hierarchical, rigid and can take years to complete. It is not a Select Committee. It is not bound by parliamentary rules or protected by privilege. It will draw upon existing parliamentary resources, including my own time as Speaker. The inner core will contain parliamentarians but they should not be a majority of the members. The information and ideas upon which it will feed will be provided freely (in both senses of that term) by anyone who wishes to participate. Any additional

costs for research and other expenditures will be met within existing budgets. It will be open. It will involve public hearings and the mass solicitation of evidence. It will be seen outside of Zone One of the London Underground network. It will crave for international examples such as Estonia which I mentioned. It will involve asking the likes of Google, Facebook, Apple, Twitter and Microsoft to let us in to their thinking about how technology might develop over the coming years. It will call upon the brilliant entrepreneurs in Tech City in east London and a host of fantastic Tech clusters throughout Britain and ask them to apply their disruptive minds to how technology can enhance democracy. Like the digital world itself it will be unpredictable, potentially anarchic. It should even be quite fun.

I have chosen this structure because it duplicates the spirit of the digital world. What we want to be is fast, flexible and fluid and I believe that a Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, rather than a Speaker's Conference or Speaker's Committee is the best means to advance to our desired ends.

It is also, I concede, ambitious. The structure is one which is unfamiliar to the House of Commons, the agenda is potentially vast and the timetable for publication is tight. Universities and even our schools, because this should not be an area deemed exclusive to so-called adults, might not necessarily respond to the call to e-arms, although I suspect that they will not need to be conscripted. The recommendations might not make the impact that they should arriving as they will but a few months before a general election, although I believe that when the new Parliament assembles it will be truly interested in what it means to become a new Parliament more broadly. And technology might turn up in 2020 or 2030 that renders all that we thought before redundant.

None of which should be an alibi for inaction. When I was elected Speaker I made it clear that while I would be a non-partisan figure *within* our democracy, I would not be neutral *about* our democracy. Representative democracy is a wonderful principle but what it is to be representative has to be re-examined constantly. It is a process, not an event. I am a passionate advocate of

democracy. I do not feel that it is stretching the nature of the office in which I serve to champion that democracy. I am by choice politically celibate but I am not a political eunuch. The fantastic people who work in and for the House of Commons are not party political figures and should not be either but from the top downwards they share my desire to see Parliament and the people connected as closely as humanly possible and we recognise that technology can be our best friend and ally in this regard. All those who care about Parliament, and I appreciate that with this audience I am preaching to the long-time converted, should want to embrace this cause and deliver us their thoughts on the development of digital democracy. I am convinced that we can really make a difference.

It has been very decent of the Hansard Society to allow me this stage to offer my thoughts on this subject. I would again like to stress my admiration for this society and to salute Ruth Fox and her team for all that they have done, are doing and will be doing to support our democracy. You have been pioneers in this regard and I hope that you do not mind others joining you at the frontier.

The 2015 anniversary will be an occasion for celebration and challenge. We can celebrate the remarkable survival of our political institutions and traditions in this country. Yet we must recognise that the world is radically changing. Recognise that the demands on and of parliamentary democracy will be different in the future than the past. Recognise too that while it is impossible to anticipate every single technological development our challenge is to devise some new structures and methods of doing our business in a fashion that will allow us to respond to the communications revolution the world is experiencing. One aspect of life that digital democracy will not abolish, however, is the enthusiasm that politicians exhibit for the sound of their own voices. This is my cue to tell you that I have spoken for long enough. I look forward to your questions now, from those here and from those people on-line, and to your participation in the work of the Digital Democracy Commission. Thank you very much indeed.

(4, 114 words)