INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much indeed for allowing me to address you this evening. I want to start by assuring those assembled that it is not my intention to use this occasion for a detailed analysis of Mr Michael Cockerell’s *Inside the Commons*, asking the sort of questions which I suspect that you all want asked such as “why did we have to wait until the last episode for a decent showing of the Speaker?” These matters do not bother me in the slightest. I am, for example, entirely relaxed about the fact that other Members of Parliament such as Robert Halfon, Sarah Champion and Jenny Willott have been deservedly receiving fan mail by the sack-load in recent weeks. Nor do rumours that the Principal Doorkeeper is about to launch his own One Man Show at the Edinburgh Fringe this summer distress me remotely. In a similar spirit, stories that our Sergeant-at-Arms has been offered substantial amounts of money to appear suggestively in magazines of various forms leave me without envy. Although, as he is both a colleague and a friend, my advice to the Sergeant would be not to pose dressed
in a bed-sheet, and to leave the Mace out of it. I am more than happy not just to share but to concede the limelight.

I would, nonetheless, like to make a few comments about *Inside the Commons* but only because they are relevant to my wider remarks this evening. The first comment is to note that as Michael Cockerell himself has stated, he waited 6 years to acquire permission to film in the fashion which he did. Indeed, I am informed that similar requests from broadcasters stretch back all the way to the aftermath of the successful documentary *The Royal Family* in 1969. Yet it was in this Parliament under, I note, this Speaker and this House of Commons Commission that he was invited in with unprecedented access. This was not an uncontentious decision. There were those who feared that at best we were in real danger of letting light in on magic and at worst might turn ourselves into a squalid Reality TV event. The safe choice would have been to find an alibi to defer the BBC once more. We did not do so.

Secondly, I think that what Michael and his team have done is to illuminate to the country at large not merely the importance and idiosyncrasies of this establishment but the enormity of the challenge which it faces. The administration of the House has both to serve the chamber and the committees of the House of Commons and to grapple with the management of the parliamentary estate in the modern era. To do the
latter successfully itself requires major reform. Finally, my sense is that *Inside the Commons* has been for the most part sympathetically received by those who have viewed it and the understanding of Parliament much enhanced by it.

All of this I consider to be progress. This is especially true when placed in the right context. The first time that I had the honour of speaking to the Hansard Society as Speaker was in September 2009, 3 months after my own election. The atmosphere around the House then was not happy. Westminster was still shaking, almost literally shaking, from the aftershocks of the expenses scandal. I insisted then that this vast self-inflicted wound had wrought more damage on the House of Commons than even Nazi bombers had done then 68 years previously. And I meant it. As I speak tonight it is not to claim that all the wrongs of the past have been corrected and that the House of Commons is now in the finest condition imaginable. That would be hyperbole even for this place. This House is in the process of being rebuilt - it is not the finished article. Indeed, realistically, we will never achieve the finished article and it would probably be a fatal conceit to imagine that we could do so. It is in the nature of a human institution to be imperfect and improvement will always be a work in progress. It has, however, at least become possible to discuss the reconstruction of the standing and the reputation of the House without triggering hollow laughter from the vast majority of the population. It is also possible to see what a more advanced project
might look like and the next steps which we need to take to get there. This will be the essence of my argument this evening. It has also been my personal mission as Speaker.

**WHAT SHOULD WE WANT FROM THE HOUSE OF COMMONS IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY?**

Before we embark on the voyage which I have indicated, we, and especially the Hansard Society, a collection of some of the finest minds in the country, of course, should start by asking the basic question “What should we want from the House of Commons in the early 21st century?” This is not as straightforward an inquiry as it might sound. It is my view that our times demand 3 attributes.

First, we should want to be as effective a political actor, to be more precise a legislature, as possible. This means being a meaningful collective legislator and not a mere arena or just a rubber stamp. It involves scrutiny of executive performance at the highest level. It requires, equally, scrutiny of the quality of policy both as an ideal and in terms of practical implementation. It involves the best representation of individuals, constituencies and communities of interest as we can manage. It also demands that we are a true forum for national debate, leading as well as following the dialogue in the wider United Kingdom, and not just substituting for the media between
The Today Programme and Newsnight. In business terms, I think it is possible to identify metrics for success or failure here.

Second, we should want to be a body which is closely connected to the public that it serves. The days of automatic deference to institutions, no matter how lengthy or glorious their past, are gone for good and I for one will shed few tears for their passing. The notion that the electorate is or should be content with a role as distant spectator of parliamentary activity, consulted on a 1 person, 1 vote, once every 5 years basis is again, as I see it, nonsense. In all of this we should be at the cutting edge of exploring the technological means of ensuring that we are open to our customers. Once again, to borrow from business, I think there are key performance indicators to apply to us.

Finally, it is my own conviction that we must aspire to be a model organisation in how we treat those who work here. We may be a Victorian building but surely do not want to be thought of as a Victorian employer. It was often suggested in the past (on many occasions falsely but sometimes accurately) that the House of Commons was rather fond of excluding itself, as a Royal Palace, from the terms and conditions that it imposed on others in how they should deal with those who worked in their surroundings. This does not strike me as an ideal state of affairs. To be candid, it has
the stench of hypocrisy to it. We should instead have the ambition of demonstrating real leadership within the public sector and beyond that to British society more broadly. Once again, I do not consider this to be an impossible dream, although the nature of the estate makes aspects of this more difficult than for most, and again I am sure that there are credible means by which we can determine progress.

This then will be my tripod in looking both at the changes of the recent past and setting out where, in my own opinion, we should be aiming in the next Parliament. We should seek to accomplish our revival as a political institution, a reconnection with the public and the realisation of model status as an organisation.

THE REVIVAL OF PARLIAMENT AS A POLITICAL INSTITUTION

I think few fair minded individuals would dispute the notion that the House of Commons has been a more consequential political institution in the past 5 years than has been the case for decades. To a degree it should be admitted that factors other than pure political will have been at work here. The novelty of a coalition administration in Whitehall has undoubtedly altered the dynamics. The arrival of 227 new MPs and, very unusually, the fact that both major parties acquired an injection of fresh blood at the same time has also been an important element. Furthermore, the
arrival of a series of issues at home and abroad that cut across traditional party lines has also made life more interesting.

However, there have also been a number of important internal changes which I will briefly outline in no particular order of importance. The first, and my own modest contribution to matters, has been the resurrection of the Urgent Question as an instrument of parliamentary inquiry. There were just 2 UQs awarded by the Speaker between June 2008 and June 2009. Since then, I have allowed one to be put to a minister on 211 occasions. I believe that they have brought a sense of immediacy and topicality to proceedings in the chamber. I am sure that my successors will do many things quite differently to me but I doubt that they will put the UQ back in to cold storage. Second, perhaps as a result of the restoration of the UQ to the parliamentary arsenal, ministers have become much more willing to volunteer statements to the House than had become the habit for many years previously.

Then there are the fruits of the Wright Committee recommendations enacted by the House 5 years ago this Wednesday. They have led to the election of the Chairs of Select Committees by the whole House and the choice of committee members by the party caucus concerned. This has had a transformational impact on the authority and from there the ambitions of select committees. Their independence has been
entrenched and their horizons broadened. To appear before one now is far from a mundane experience which no one else is likely to notice. They are pivotal players in politics. So much outstanding work have they done in scrutinising across the field of public policy that I am spoilt for choice in citing examples of it. Andrew Tyrie’s Treasury Select Committee has advanced the cause of banking reform. Keith Vaz’s Home Affairs Select Committee made recommendations on tackling female genital mutilation which were all accepted by Government. John Whittingdale’s Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee undertook the most penetrating of enquiries into phone hacking. Their conclusions reverberate, and the perennial debate about media power and responsibility persist, 4 years later. The Public Accounts Committee, by common consent chaired formidably by Margaret Hodge, has shone a light on the myriad tax avoidance devices of large corporations.

Added to this has been the creation of the Backbench Business Committee which has seized its share of the parliamentary timetable with enthusiasm and discernment alike. It has staged over 300 debates on issues germane to hundreds of thousands, and often millions, of our fellow citizens. Invariably they have at least raised the profile of the subject concerned. On occasion, they have been the catalyst for changes in policy. The debate introduced by Geoffrey Robinson on contaminated blood triggered a Government review which spawned an additional £100-£130 million support for
victims. The debate on the Hillsborough disaster, led by Steve Rotheram, successfully demanded the release of documents, allowing a reconsideration of the tragedy that shook the country a quarter of a century ago. The revolt by 81 Conservative MPs on David Nuttall’s EU referendum motion arguably shifted his party’s policy on an issue that continues to divide the nation. Finally, in this context, John Baron’s motion that no lethal support should be provided to rebel forces in Syria without the explicit prior consent of Parliament foreshadowed the debate when the House was recalled in August 2013, closing the door on the possibility of military action. So the significance of all this is that just as the UQ is not destined for a return to the deep freeze, I would wager a healthy sum that the new culture of select committees and the ethos of the Backbench Business Committee are here to stay.

Added to this, the current Parliament has adopted quite a radical change in sitting hours. This was not universally applauded, I admit, but I also think the shift has been better than critics feared. While part of the drive for change was undoubtedly the desire among many MPs for more family-friendly hours, it was also supported by many others whose experience of past Parliaments led them to be sceptical that scrutiny was most properly to be secured in the small hours of the morning. It has brought the Palace of Westminster in to line with the practices of the modern world.
It would be extremely crude to suggest that one proxy for the effectiveness of the legislature in how many hours members of the executive have to spend upon their feet in the chamber or seated in a select committee chair accounting for their actions. However, crude in this instance does not mean inaccurate. The House has become the centre of national political life once again and that should be applauded.

RECONNECTING PARLIAMENT AND THE PUBLIC

There would not be much point in the revival of Parliament if nobody other than Hansard Society members and other atypically well informed individuals were to notice. Democracy needs not only to be done but to be seen to be done to enjoy the weight that it deserves. Reconnecting Parliament and the public is thus not some sort of public relations exercise but absolutely central to its status. The willingness to allow the television cameras in on almost unconditional terms is part of that.

A lot more has happened besides if not with the same amount of exposure. We have thrown open the doors of the estate to more visitors than ever and with a variety of tours including those that are conducted at weekends. I have sought to make Speaker’s House itself an asset for Parliament as a whole and hosted over 750 events, mostly of a charitable or campaigning kind, in the State rooms there. We have started the construction of a new Education Centre which will revolutionise the experience of
schoolchildren when they come to see the Palace of Westminster. I had the privilege of placing a time capsule under the soil there only last week which as I observed then is a rare example of a politician burying something in the sincere hope that it will be uncovered later. I can think of no better birthday present for Parliament to allow itself to celebrate its 750th birthday, as we do in 2015, than to start work on a project which will showcase Parliament to pupils as never witnessed before. I have also sought to assist in my own way by a very active speaking programme across the country. In this I have reinforced the fantastic outreach team now firmly entrenched in the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

There are many other examples of enhanced inclusion that I could mention in depth but will record briefly. These include the Speaker’s Lecture Series which many of you will have seen, sometimes at distinctly anti-social hours of the day, courtesy of the Parliament Channel. I have done all that I can to support the BBC’s wonderful Democracy Live initiative. We have developed new computer games for children to bring to life what it is that MPs and Parliament do. I have sought much closer links with academics interested in the House of Commons and championed the return of Parliamentary Studies to Politics courses. 20 universities are embracing the study of Parliament as a module and they are assisted in teaching it by some of our excellent senior Clerks. The Youth Parliament is no longer at the fringe but, instead, now at the
heart of what we do. Indeed it was an early priority for me to ensure that this became so. I opted to chair the first debates of the UK Youth Parliament on a non-sitting Friday in the chamber in 2009 and I have chaired each and every annual session since. In addition, I accepted an invitation to address the annual conference of the Parliament in 2009 in Canterbury and I have been pleased to do so each and every year since. My rationale is simple. If we in the House of Commons want to be respected by young people, we must show respect for young people. Respect is not our automatic right, but an earned entitlement. Put another way, respect is a two-way street.

We have also attempted to be more imaginative with Westminster Hall as a venue for everything from Presidents, Popes and Nobel Prize Winners such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, to concerts. This is the People’s Parliament. It should be a public auditorium and not the preserve of a private society.

With that principle in mind I would like to salute the efforts of the Digital Democracy Commission. I brought this to life some 15 months ago because although the House had taken very serious strides towards embracing new technology and employing that technology to draw the public right in to our proceedings, I thought that we had more to learn from the devolved Parliament and assemblies in the rest of the United Kingdom and from international thought leaders in countries as far flung and diverse
as Chile, Estonia and South Korea. The Commission has offered us a host of targets and a comprehensive series of recommendations. Its report has been widely acclaimed and rightly so. I am utterly convinced that we can deepen the connection between Parliament and public by this agenda.

PARLIAMENT AS A MODEL ORGANISATION

We also should want to connect better within the parliamentary estate as well as to the wider world. We should want to be, in the very best sense of the term, an example to others. We should never be the unfortunate exception to rules that we have imposed on others. We should strive to be leaders.

With that ideal we have made a number of reforms in the course of this Parliament, some of which I freely admit have not been uncontentious. We have introduced a nursery not only for the young children of MPs but for those of employees across the spectrum. This triggered a bruising battle to begin with but I cannot see it being abolished. We have not reached the progressive heights of the Scottish Parliament which offers not only a nursery for its own staff but a crèche for the children of visitors but by the standards of where we were this is a positive development. More radical in impact in the sense that it has had an impact on more people, we have abolished the vast majority of Zero Hours contracts and we are now a fully accredited
London Living Wage employer. We have also taken a hard look at the profile of our employees and asked whether we have done enough to ensure really meaningful equality of opportunity. One aspect of this has been the instigation of the Speaker’s Parliamentary Placement Scheme which allows a relatively small number of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to have the chance to experience working at the Palace of Westminster. That initiative has been a triumph and I would like publicly to salute Hazel Blears MP who came up with the idea and whose energy and enterprise made it happen. I hope and believe that those who work here, and those involved in the cleaning, cooking and security that are essential to the operation of the House, feel more appreciated.

All of this has required some very intense micro-management and I would like to thank all of those in the House leadership structure who have made it happen. It has also highlighted the need to update our internal organisation. I do not intend to speak at length about the saga surrounding the selection of the Clerk of the House. We are now in Phase Two of the selection process so an element of Purdah at my end remains appropriate. Yet to say that I am an enthusiast for the recommendations of the Straw Committee on these matters would be an understatement of the highest order. On taking extensive evidence, they could see that the management of the House was simply not fit for purpose and they set out constructive proposals to equip us for the
modern world. I am absolutely ecstatic that they reached the conclusions that they did, that they managed to obtain unanimity for their recommendations and that their findings were then accepted by colleagues without dissent in the debate in December and the legislation that came before the House last week.

My one regret about all this is that it was not possible to find the consensus required to commission the Straw Committee a year earlier because if we had it would have saved us the utter agony of a doomed first attempt. Finding a human being who was a parliamentary expert of the highest repute and a chief executive of stellar managerial form proved predictably impossible. Now that the role has rightly been separated – I argued all along that the Clerk should not also be the Chief Executive and this has now been agreed by the House - I am confident that we will be able to find a Clerk of the House whose constitutional qualifications would make Erskine May proud and a Director General who can take on, full-time, the management of the Commons.

WHAT IS THERE LEFT TO DO IN THE NEXT PARLIAMENT?
I have set out in detail what is in essence an End of Term Report for the House of Commons in this Parliament. I think that the summary “much improvement but still the potential to develop further” would be a fair assessment of the situation. This is, however, as the late Philip Gould put it in a quite different political context, still an
Unfinished Revolution. What more should we be addressing? I will highlight 2 matters in the first category of which I have spoken this evening and 1 in each of the others.

In terms of the revival of the House of Commons, there remains one major incomplete element of the Wright Committee conclusions, adopted as I observed earlier by a vote of the House at least 5 years ago, that has not yet materialised. This absence is despite it being explicitly endorsed as an objective in the coalition agreement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in May 2010. I refer to the creation of a House Business Committee which would take the organisation of official or Government activity out of the hands of “the usual channels” and put them on a formal basis with parties and interests other than the two principal sets of Whips represented. At a minimum, I think it would only be right for the whole House to be consulted on whether it was content for the formula which it embraced in March 2010 to be postponed seemingly indefinitely or if it wanted to proceed with it. Better still would be to summon up the spirit of consensus needed to bring the House Business Committee to life. It is the last stage left in asserting the rights of the legislature over the executive.
In addition, my views on the currently embarrassing character of PMQs are well known. Yet ultimately it is not my views, the views of colleagues or the views of the press gallery that should be uppermost in our minds. Surely the views of the public should be paramount. PMQs are what the public see and hear of Parliament more than anything else. My submission, supported anecdotally wherever I go around the country and by some polling evidence, is that the public disapprove of the decibel level and orchestrated barracking. Put simply, if the party leaders want conduct on a Wednesday lunch time to improve, it will. Post-election there will be an opportunity to achieve change that the public would welcome.

On public engagement, the critical challenge is that set out by the Digital Democracy Commission. Once the Education Centre is fully functioning, we will have done close to all that we can do in terms of improving physical access to the estate. It is virtual access that demands our close attention. I will again commend the conclusions of the Commission and urge those who have not yet familiarised themselves with them to do so, whether in print or online. It is almost invidious to choose between their conclusions but I must confess that I am particularly intrigued by the suggestion that we could experiment with inviting in the public to the debate functions of the House by holding e-discussions shortly before the debates held in Westminster Hall, the parallel chamber to the Commons. Dialogue in that forum is somewhat less partisan
in tone to the floor of the House and much more inquisitorial in nature so this does seem to me to be the right place to engage in such an innovation.

Finally, I return to Parliament as a model organisation. The primary mission here is to translate the recommendations of the Straw Committee into reality. This is not merely making the appropriate changes on an organisational chart and identifying the optimal candidates for Clerk of the House and Director General of the House, but in embracing the whole cultural change which is explicit and implicit in the conclusions of Jack Straw and his colleagues. This is a fabulous institution located in awesome surroundings. It must not have the ethos of a museum. It will require bold and imaginative managerial leadership to ensure that we are a Parliament fit for purpose and that this Victorian legacy can be rendered practical for contemporary representation. It would be a huge pity if we decided that by the time we had reached the 200th anniversary of the vast fire which consumed the old Parliament and brought this one in to being we had to abandon this site and look elsewhere in order to serve the public interest properly. Yet I will tell you in all candour that unless management of the very highest quality and a not inconsequential sum of public money are deployed on this estate over the next ten years that will be the outcome.

CONCLUSION
Thank you very much indeed to the Hansard Society for hosting me and to you for being kind enough to listen. This organisation consists of Parliament’s strongest supporters and precisely because of this at times amongst its most incisive of critics.

When as I mentioned I first spoke to you as Speaker it was at a moment when the terms “House of Commons” and “duck house” had become synonymous. There were those who wondered whether the reputation of the House had sunk so low that it would be impossible to stage any kind of recovery. We have not found nirvana but we have left that nadir.

When I spoke in September 2009 I set out some ambitious aspirations. Not all of them have been realised but others which had not even crossed my mind then have been adopted as time went on. I also said then that I had sought election as a different kind of Speaker, and not different just because of my comparative youth, or compact height for that matter. I referred to my determination to “test the elasticity of the office” which I do not think even my worst enemy would deny that I have done. That I have been a controversial character at times, I freely concede. Yet if controversy is the price of being the agent of change frankly I consider that to be a bargain worth striking. We have achieved much. There is plenty more to do in the Parliament ahead. I look forward to your questions and, meanwhile, thank you very much indeed.