

The Truth About Westminster

- [Acknowledgements](#)
- [Introduction](#)
- [Chapter 1: MPs Available for Hire](#)
- [Chapter 2: Buying and Selling MPs on a Large Scale](#)
- [Chapter 3: MP Fiddles and Some Reluctant Lords](#)
- [Chapter 4: The Power of Patronage](#)
- [Chapter 5: The Truth About Party Funding](#)
- [Chapter 6: Sex, Money and Power](#)
- [Chapter 7: Whipping and the Death of Conscience](#)
- [Chapter 8: Secrets of Ministers and Civil Servants](#)
- [Chapter 9: Trade Scandals and Arms Deals](#)
- [Chapter 10: The Changing Culture](#)
- [Chapter 11: Rebuilding the House](#)
- [Chapter 12: Christians in Politics](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [A Short Bibliography](#)

*This Charter for Reform of UK Parliament was originally part of **The Truth about Westminster**, a book by Patrick Dixon, published in 1995 in response to scandals at that time.□*

The Charter remains as powerful and relevant in 2009

, as many MPs of all parties are forced to resign in the wake of "unwise" expense claims.□ The whole of the book is available here in links above. Please feel free to widely reproduce in part or whole with acknowledgement.□ We need urgent reform.

'Politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.' Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970)

'We cannot legislate for integrity.' Betty Boothroyd, Speaker of the House of Commons, 1995

'I am fed up with being called a sleazebag.' Anon MP

'It is the necessary nature of a political party in this country to avoid as long as it can be avoided the consideration of any question that involves a great change.' Anthony Trollope (1815-1882)

'Where there is no vision the people perish.' Proverbs 29:18

Problems are easier to identify than solutions, but the more serious a problem becomes, the more urgent is the search for 1 way forward. In May 1995, Lord Nolan's Committee published its first report on standards in public life, with a wide range of recommendations, including a ban on payments for lobbying and new controls on quango appointments. It followed several months of written submissions, as well as oral evidence before a large committee in a televised public hearing at Westminster Central Hall. Lord Nolan is a quiet, reserved and shy man who was deferential and kind to witnesses, to the point where some who watched him in action began to worry that the Inquiry would have no 'teeth'. However, others on the Committee were less accommodating, and early leaks left no doubt that the final report would be quite radical and incisive.

Despite first indications from the Prime Minister that the report would be fully implemented, it met vigorous opposition from MPs, led by Sir Edward Heath and others who were in no mood to make major changes. Lord Nolan watched expressionless from the Gallery while section after section of his carefully reasoned proposals for major change were shredded and lampooned.

For example, many MPs were bitterly opposed to any notion of some kind of independent body to rule on any aspect of parliamentary ethics. They insisted that self regulation continued at all costs. They also attacked any suggestions that selling their services in well-established commercial arrangements was in any way unethical. The report was referred to a House of Commons Committee, which began a long watering down process, before a full debate in Parliament. The Committee rapidly split along party lines, as did the House of Commons.

However, as has been said, you cannot legislate for honour or integrity. Codes of practice or votes to ban certain behaviours may be useful in defining what is acceptable, but they have limited value. They may help resolve the war between press and politicians, by laying down clearly where the wandering line now lies between right and wrong in public life. Nevertheless, guidelines will be ignored if people think that they can get away with it, unless there is a deeper transformation of attitudes and culture.

It is hard to see how anything other than radical measures will restore public confidence. Only utter fools would dare ignore the devastating vote of no confidence in politicians revealed by opinion' polls. People still believe passionately in democracy, but not as they currently experience it, while some politicians continue to live as though the media have made up the survey results. Others take the position that politicians have always been unpopular and it hardly matters. Indeed, the future of democracy at Westminster could be threatened by failure to take action.

I am convinced that nothing less than a radical overhaul of the parliamentary system will work, and that the process may take several Parliaments, perhaps even a generation. The need is urgent and the pressures for change continue with every fresh allegation. I am convinced therefore that a political revolution of sorts is inevitable, while the timing and process may be uncertain. Such a process may require a new political movement which transcends party divides in a quest for common values.

It could be argued that the revolution has already begun. Parliamentary history was made in a watershed vote on 0 November 1995 when 587 MPs voted to ban all commercial lobbying arrangements and related consultancies, with only two MPs voting against.

This was a decisive change, a body blow to accepted culture and a sure sign that Westminster had been rattled to its very foundations. The vote was followed minutes later by another, forcing MPs to disclose details of how much they earn from outside interests. This was carried by 322 to 271 votes, a firm majority, despite disastrous last minute waverings by John Major who said he was against that particular measure. The result was therefore embarrassing to him and the whole Conservative Party, despite being technically a free vote. He was portrayed in the press as opposing anti-sleaze reforms, comments which were both unfair and unfortunate.

The significance of these votes can hardly be over emphasised, and lies in the fact that such results would have been totally unexpected just twelve months previously. All the rancour and discord, which had been aimed at the Nolan proposals when unveiled just a few weeks previously, had suddenly melted away. Many MPs no doubt had consulted with their constituency colleagues, to be told in no uncertain terms to 'clear up the stinking stables of Parliament or lose our support'. One MP summed up the feelings of many when he said: 'I am fed up with being called a sleazebag.'

But have one in three Conservative MPs been truly converted in their hearts, or only in their heads as a means of survival? It is hard to believe that all those with parliamentary consultancies have radically changed their worldview in such a short time. That is perhaps one reason why John Major was caught out, The Whips warned him just days before that Conservative MPs would not support earnings disclosure, but opposition collapsed at the last minute.

The votes were dramatic and historic, but mere votes may not be enough to change the habits of a lifetime. One MP immediately declared that he might refuse to abide by the new rules, which had no basis in law. Another made it clear that he was not too worried about new measures when it came to accepting cash for arranging a meeting with a Minister. In the future it will simply be a question of MPs making sure they are not caught, with little grounds for excuse if they are. In any set of regulations there are loopholes, and in the complex world of Westminster there are many ways to disguise activity.

I am convinced that substantial change at Westminster will require more than a vote or two. It will take a new generation of dynamic visionary leaders. The trouble is that many outstanding men and women of integrity are dismayed at what they see as wide-scale political corruption and moral decay in Westminster, and are, not yet prepared to sacrifice their lives and the future of their families for it.

As I have talked with many MPs and Peers I have been struck by their sense of paralysis: the notion that nothing can change. The traditionalists are a powerful group and may be in the majority: they worship the glorious past with a selective memory for all that was good; they live for the old atmosphere the fading memory of grand speeches; the power of Churchill and Gladstone. For them, the buildings, the archaic method of working and the elaborate

procedures are all part of the magic and the mystery; they almost worship gibe semi-sacred cathedral of power.

They are a self-selecting group of Westminster enthusiasts. which is why they are there. On the whole they are a disappointing lot, with notable exceptions, lacking weight and calibre. As we have seen, the place is also seductive and Intoxicating through the atmosphere of privilege, pressure of patronage, and through persuasion to conform by established members Radicals can quickly lose their cutting edge.

However, while bored back-benchers sleep through irrelevant debates and while Ministers hurry from the Chamber on urgent business, a second political revolution is already in progress. Step by step the traditional power of Westminster being transferred to a European Parliament and Regional Assemblies could be a reality within five to ten years.

The crisis over BSE in beef and the subsequent ban on British beef in the EC was a further example of loss of power from Westminster to the European Parliament. This relentless process is threatened by nationalism and tribalism within nations - although sub-national groups also find the EC rather attractive because it gives them a hope of direct representation in the future if a country disintegrates.

There are a few anarchists in Parliament who would happily sweep much of the system away, who despise any tradition based on a wealthy elite, and who see Westminster traditions as a means of perpetuating the worst kinds of patronage and discrimination. Yet they are widely regarded as eccentric, misguided, and disloyal members of the 'Club'. The danger is that 'Club' members are losing touch with reality; the world has moved on and left their culture behind.

My purpose now is to draw together various options which could be taken to help place Westminster on a healthy foundation for the next century, assuming of course that by then European Parliament has still left something for Westminster to do. Some of these will find wider public support, while others are more controversial. Most of them may find a hostile reception from politicians, but as a whole they could form the basis of a renewed democratic process. Some, as we have seen, are already becoming a reality.

Lord Nolan's Committee has suggested seven principles of public life which should govern every word, action and decision of those at Westminster, whether MPs or Peers. These principles express values which are important, which one might wish could be taken for granted, but which need to be spelled out in the light of the current crisis. They are the bedrock on which a healthy society is based. The wording from the Nolan Report is reproduced here in full in bold, with extensions of each; and one addition.²³⁶ Many of these basic principles are expanded later in more detailed proposals. They -should apply where appropriate to Peers as well as MPs.

Eight principles of public life

1. Selflessness

Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their families or their friends nor to gain advantage for their party. Public office should be seen as a high calling to serve the nation as a whole. Elected representatives should always bear in mind their duty to take into account the views of the whole electorate, not just those who voted for them.

2. Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties or might give the impression of influencing them or of placing them under an obligation. Neither Members of Parliament nor Peers should work for lobbying companies, nor accept consultancies or any other remunerated roles which relate to their parliamentary function. This wholesale prostitution of the parliamentary process should cease. They should however be free to pursue unrelated interests outside the House (see below). Candidates for election have a responsibility to inform their electorate what policies they will support or not support if elected, particularly where their views may not coincide with their party manifesto.

Regarding Whips and whipping, it is unethical for holders of public office to attempt to pervert the democratic process by placing undue pressure on others to support measures which they believe are wrong and have said before election that they will not support.

It should be accepted that in a healthy democracy, debate influence the views of those in public office admitting an altered perspective may be a sign of integrity rather than of weakness. The alternative is a Parliament of unreasonable people who believe that every opinion they have is so correct that it will never change. Care should be taken to represent differing policies and views of others fairly and accurately.

3. Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit, after a proper process of independent consultation not influenced by political affiliation, race, colour, creed or any other factor such as Freemasonry which might undermine public confidence. The power of patronage must not be abused.

Therefore all quango appointments should be advertised widely and subject to independent review. Publicly funded contracts should be awarded on an open basis. Civil service jobs and remuneration should be independent of any political pressures. 'Party political' honours should be greatly reduced so that the majority of politicians are nominated by an all-party group, for consideration alongside others who have provided outstanding service to the nation.

Membership of any political party, involvement in political activities and membership of the Freemasons or any other 'secret society' should be declared by candidates for public appointments. One might argue that candidates for Parliament should also declare links with secret societies.

4. Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office, remembering at all times that they are public employees whose sole task is to serve the public. They should not be accountable merely to each other. Therefore, particularly where there are public concerns, external audit should replace self-regulation, and independent inquiry should replace internal investigations. The new Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards may well be able to fill some of these roles.

5. Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands. Secrecy is so embedded in public life that this is unlikely to work without a Freedom of Information Act.

6. Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising, in a way that protects the public interest and maintains confidence in public office.

Peers as well as MPs should be required to register all interests from which remuneration or other benefit is gained directly or indirectly. The approximate value of the interest should be recorded in several categories - say £5,000 bands as well as the approximate time commitment. A proposal for or declaration of earnings related to a parliamentary role has already been implemented. (it has been said that this will 'obliterate the professional classes' from Parliament, so that the only people who remain Millionaires using Westminster as a club and those who have never earned a living outside politics. This is clearly nonsense. Many company directors have salaries that are published, so why not MPs?)

Roles or responsibilities which are unremunerated but which are likely to create a sense of obligation should also be declared, as well as possible future interests where relevant. Parliamentarians should take all possible steps to ensure that their duties are not likely to be seen to confer undue material advantages to relatives or spouses, for example through commercial arrangements. The utmost care should be taken that all statements made are accurate and not misleading about personal matters, and contain enough information to quell speculation and rumour, with due regard for privacy.

7. Civility

The seventh principle is civility (not on Lord Nolan's list). Holders of public office should make every effort to care for the reputations of others as they would like to be cared for themselves. They should endeavour to seek common ground for the good of the nation, so that policies may be built on consensus rather than confrontation. They should take care to avoid insulting or

derogatory language about people, and should avoid abusing parliamentary privilege to say things that would normally be libellous, except in very exceptional circumstances of overwhelming national interest.

8. Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example and should ensure that at all times in public or in private that they do not act in such a way that might risk bringing public office into disrepute. At present the House of Commons is ruled by patriocracy. The party is everything. However, the duty of each MP should be to uphold the honour of the House and to serve the nation. These should be a higher calling than party loyalty

Disciplinary Committee

Standards need to be maintained by a Disciplinary Committee which is independent of Whips and party executives. and which commands public confidence, as a reference point for advice and action on ethical issues. Members (whether politicians or others) could be proposed and elected on it free vote in the House of Commons. In the current climate, confidence is unlikely to be restored by continued self- regulation, through the Privileges Committee for example. However a return to self-regulation may be possible once public confidence in Parliament as a whole has been rebuilt.

The Disciplinary Committee should include outsiders, perhaps in the majority, as well as MPs, and be chaired by a judge. while remaining a manageable size to enable rapid decision-making. The new eleven-strong Select Committee on Standards and Privileges is too large. Previous investigations by similar committees have taken too long and have split down party lines.

Many politicians have protested at the suggestion that anyone other than MPs can sit in judgement on MPs, and the same with Peers, because by constitution Parliament is the highest court of all. While that is true, Parliament has the power to choose to delegate whatever powers it likes - and has already done to a European court over many issues. In any case, there is always a built-in safeguard because delegate powers can always be withdrawn if seriously abused.

On balance so long as the interval between accusation and verdict is short, it is probably better to have private hearings with full publication of oral and written evidence when the verdict is announced. The alternative is a full-scale public hearing which may not be helpful for many minor cases. If an MP is found guilty of misconduct by the Disciplinary Committee, then a range of options can be recommended by it for Parliament to act upon, of which one is an amnesty or pardon.

1. Amnesty and pardon

It is clear that there has been genuine confusion over a number of 'grey' areas relating to lobbying in particular, and also the declaring of interests. The public may be served best by

defining a range of minor breaches of behaviour committed before a certain date, for which an amnesty could be granted. This will allow MPs, who still fear that various minor undeclared interests will be discovered, to bring them all out into the open, in order to set the record straight. A pardon could also be considered for various offences in exceptional circumstances for compassionate reasons.

2. Fines

A second response could be a fine. However, the last time an MP was fined by Parliament was in 1666.²³⁷ Fines could be a very useful sanction. In 1967 the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges recommended that legislation be passed to give the Commons statutory powers to levy fines. This call was repeated in 1977 by the same committee but nothing has happened.²³⁸

My view is that such a step is long overdue and should be introduced at the earliest possible moment. A fining system would allow disciplinary action which falls short of other more drastic steps, and would enable the public to feel that justice is being done, particularly since many of the 'crimes' seem to have a root in financial greed.

3. Ministerial suspension or resignation

The Committee should have the freedom to recommend that a Minister resigns or is immediately suspended from office pending an inquiry in the case of more serious allegations under investigation. It is unwise and perhaps an unfair burden to leave such matters entirely to the discretion of a Prime Minister. In all these measures the aim is to restore the highest public confidence. In law there are some problems over a Minister handing over the Crown's mandate for his or her Department while still technically in office but 'suspended'. However, this is allowed for in the case of serious incapacity through illness, and a similar allowance needs to be recognised here.

4. Suspension or expulsion of an MP

There have been many examples in the past where MPs have been thrown out of the Debating Chamber and barred from the precincts of Westminster. In practice, the greater punishment is loss of face with other members of the Club, 191 (1 media ridicule. However, longer-term suspension deprives electors of effective representation, and the means it) (to anything about it. One alternative for serious offences could be expulsion, which forces a by-election, so that the MP's own constituents can give their own verdict. It has happened in the past that such a disgraced MP has been immediately re-elected (Bradlaugh in 1882) and returned to take his seat.²³⁹

In the past, Members of Parliament have been expelled for being in 'open rebellion'; having been guilty of forgery; of perjury; of frauds and breaches of trust; conspiracy to defraud; corruption in the administration of justice, or in public offices, or in the execution of their duties as Members of the House; of conduct unbecoming the character of an officer and a gentleman; and of contempts, libels and other offences against the House itself. MPs have also been expelled for

fleeing from justice, regardless of whether they have been convicted. 240

5. Imprisonment for most serious offences

Although the Lords have always retained the right to send people to prison, whoever they may be, the right of the House of Commons to do the same for its own Members has fallen into disuse. In 1967, it was recognised that even if a prison sentence were to be imposed, it could probably not be extended beyond the end of that parliamentary session which might vary from a few weeks to a few days. This power could be redefined and exercised, within that limited time constraint, for without a fuller range of the normal powers open to the judiciary, the only way to ensure proper punishments will be by trial in a conventional court, and this may not always be necessary or appropriate. An example of where imprisonment might be appropriate would be in the case of accepting a large bribe.

Some attention will also need to be given to a similar system of sanctions for Peers who transgress.

Proper remuneration and contracts for MPs

Then there is the question of remuneration for MPs, possible restrictions on outside earnings and proper auditing of expenses.

1. Increased pay for MPs (above June 1996 levels)

Bearing in mind job insecurity, almost complete disruption of normal family life, the difficulty many back-benchers find in returning to other employment, and the urgent need to recruit men and women of calibre who have a track record of success, MPs have not been adequately paid, until the historic July 1996 26 per cent increase, which many may agree pushed the argument the other way in favour of a pay cut.

Some people argue vigorously that the salary for MPs was already higher than the national average, and that it is vital that such important public service is carried out by people who are prepared to make a financial sacrifice. However such increases become more reasonable in return for some kind of trade-off. for a ban on consultancies and paid lobbying, and for pro-rata salary reductions for time spent on other employment (see below).

On balance I am convinced that substantial pay increases were necessary to encourage the most outstanding leaders of the nation to enter political life. It was a curious situation indeed when a Parliamentary Commissioner was recruited in November 1995 on a salary of £72,000 a year for four days a week, to supervise such things as the Register of Members' Interests, for MPs paid less than half that figure.

However, a condition of higher pay should have been some kind of scaled reductions, taking outside earnings into account. So how could this work in practice?

2. Increments for age and experience

It is absurd to have a new flat rate for MPs which takes no account of age or experience, particularly now at the high level of £43,000 a year. It would have been far better to have had a basic 'package', perhaps at June 1996 levels, for new Members, which increased with every year at Westminster, up to a maximum 'seniority rating'. Allowances for back would remain unchanged.

I hesitate to mention exact figures because to do so may invite controversy, distracting from the proposals as a whole. However, it is necessary to do so in order to illustrate how pay scales might work, and to show that the overall 'salary' bill should not have been much larger when deductions were allowed for. What changes the most is the distribution of income between MPs.

Let us take for example a yearly increment for experience of £1,000 increasing to a maximum of £20,000 for someone with more than twenty years in the House. There could also be an extra adjustment for age which allowed a new entrant - say in his or her late fifties - to have more income than a new thirty-five-year-old, bearing in mind how useful 'life experience' is to the House.

Let us suppose that a starting salary of around £35,000 is increased for MPs over the age of thirty-five, by £2,000 per five years of extra age. The maximum could be set at a certain level - say £55,000 for any MP, however old or experienced. This is better than a flat rate of £43,000.

Ministers on appointment could gain an increase on top of whatever their MP's pay would normally be. The amounts could vary from £15,000 for a junior Minister, to £40,000 for a Prime Minister. The new increase to more than £140,000 is probably too high. Ministers leaving office should have a full year before the ministerial allowance ceases, to compensate for strict controls on what jobs they may accept in the two years afterwards, unless they have been forced by the Disciplinary Committee to resign.

Examples of incremental scales:

1. 35-year-old - newly elected £35, 000
2. 55-year-old - newly elected £43, 000
3. 48-year-old - elected at 40 £45, 000
4. 68-year-old - elected at 38 £55, 000
5. 60-year-old Minister - elected at 45 £80, 000
6. 55-year-old Prime Minister - elected at 40 £92, 000

These new figures above assume continuous service in Parliament. If the total increments gave an average of

£10,000 extra per MP per year, then that figure multiplied by 651 gives a total of £6.5 million,

less savings on outside interest deductions which could come to £5.9 million (see below), giving a net cost increase of only £0.6 million or 2.7 per cent on top of the pre-July 1996 total bill of around £22 million instead of 27 per cent approved by Parliament, or £6 million addition. These figures do not include national insurance, or pension contributions or increases for Ministers.

3. Formal conditions of service

There is no written contract at present between an MP and the State, and therefore no terms and conditions of service. The reason is that an MP is elected by constituents to represent their interests, and that has been the description of the entire working relationship. In practice the MP's role has been defined by precedent, as described in Erskine May's 211 authoritative but complex guide to parliamentary practice. 241

There should be a formal statement of terms and conditions of service which every MP has to sign before receiving any remuneration. Electors can send whomsoever they like to Parliament, but if money is going to change hands, then it should be on a properly determined and legally binding basis. Such terms and conditions should state the expectations for attendance, general behaviour, ethical code, outside interests and other matters including management of staff.

Disciplinary procedures should be explained and agreed to it as part of the signed contract. For instance the contract could state that the MP agrees to accept the recommendation of the Disciplinary Committee as immediately binding. Failure to do so would lead to freezing all remuneration payments.

4. Ban on paid lobbying and parliamentary consultancies

Outside interests are important to keep Westminster healthy. It is essential that we do not encourage a Westminster ghetto - with its own culture, mannerisms, sense of humour, language and attitudes - out of touch and out of control. It is vitally important that longer-standing Members continue to have experience of the 'real world'. This is less so for those who have just entered the House after a full non-political career, yet essential for MPs who have had no experience other than working in local or national politics. Nevertheless, outside interests do need regulating.

It is quite acceptable for MPs to continue part-time interests outside the House, but not if they gain financially from employment as a direct result of being in Parliament, as is currently the case with 30 per cent of MPs.²⁴² However, there is nothing to stop them offering their time to whomever they like, as an unpaid public service, nor to stop companies employing former MPs as advisors.

5. Deduction of income for time on other jobs

Even if MPs earn from unrelated fields - say as a part-time doctor or dentist - the time spent on these activities should be declared. It is relevant to their electors because it affects their

availability. In the light of the recent huge increases in remuneration, it seems very reasonable that a proportion of their state income should be deducted, if the person is regularly unavailable for parliamentary business due to outside commitments.

Thus, taking the examples above, an experienced MP working an average of two days a week as a solicitor, with twenty-five years in the House, would receive £30,000 instead of £50,000. This is fairer on MPs and fairer on the tax-payer. Electors should also be told in campaign literature how many hours a week each candidate proposes to spend on parliamentary or constituency business. Relevant outside interests should be declared in debate, and when asking written questions, as well as listed appropriately and promptly.

Assuming an average MP has a day a week of work outside the House, and the new salary structure above, then around £9,000 would be saved per MP each year or £5.9 million. This would offset some of the cost of allowances for age and experience.

6. Restrictions on ex-ministerial appointments

There should be an agreement that Ministers do not take up jobs for up to a two-year period in which they or their employers might benefit substantially from their recent time in government. (Lord Nolan has suggested this should only apply to Cabinet members, but this is illogical. The restriction applies already to senior civil servants and should apply to junior Ministers too.) An independent vetting committee should decide when this ruling should apply. The minimum time from ministerial office to appointment in any case should be three months.

7. Standard terms and conditions for staff

There should also be standard scales of pay for MPs' staff so that their rights are protected and so that it is easier to ensure where allowances are spent. Such staff should be on a proper Westminster payroll and enjoy similar pension rights and other benefits to those of the civil service. The value of the allowances for staff should not be increased above the level of inflation.

Reform of party funding

No reforms will be complete without addressing party funding. As we have seen, the current system of fund-raising invites accusations of corruption because sources are often not revealed, and where they are made public, it is possible that undue influence is being exercised. There is also a danger that if campaign expenditure helps win elections, and if a 'party of the rich' tends to have a greater budget than a 'party of the poor', then wealth will buy votes, power and a Prime Minister.

1. Partial state funding and spending limits

A first step would be to limit national election spending. Constituency expenditure is already fixed - at £3,370 per candidate, not including candidate expenses. A further step would be to provide a state contribution towards new national limits, perhaps half, which could be topped up

by voluntary donations. The level of support could be calculated by the share of the votes at the last one or two elections. Local costs would continue to be raised locally.

Another option would be to match voluntary contributions pound for pound with state funds up to the permitted total. The budget should be set quite low. One of the reasons that such a vast amount is spent on political advertising is in order to outdo the influence of the other parties. The only ones who gain are advertising agencies and sellers of space.

In a media-dominated age there is already huge coverage of the issues at election time. A better use of resources would be to use state funds to print summaries of each manifesto and send them to every household with candidate details, all on the same document, and let people decide for themselves, rather than batter the public with emotive one-line slogans on hoardings. The candidate details should indicate the issues on the party manifesto which the prospective MP will not be supporting if elected.

2. Stricter controls on donors

Then there is the controversy over the secret source of many donations. While personal donors have a right to privacy, the public also has a right to be certain that an entire party is not being hijacked by the generosity of a few large donors, or even by a foreign government. Therefore it seems reasonable to suggest that all donations above a certain size should be publicly declared - say over £50,000 - and that the maximum donation allowed from any source should be £1 million annually. There should also be a complete ban on political funding from organisations abroad, or from individuals, unless they are entitled to vote in a British election. It is true, however, that this would be increasingly hard to police in our global village with so many transnational money flows.

The costs of state funding would be around £11 million every five years divided across the parties roughly in proportion to the share of the national vote at the last election. That sum works out at less than 4 pence per person per year hardly a massive strain on the national purse.

Reforms of the House of Commons

1 Reform of whipping

We have seen how the abuse of whipping has been another factor - bringing Parliament into disrepute. We saw in an earlier chapter that the only purpose of whipping, apart from idling MPs which way the party leadership intends to vote, is to bully MPs into voting for things they do not believe in and which they think are wrong or against the interests of their constituents or of the nation. The process of whipping needs some reform but this is unlikely without reform of patronage, which is linked with it.

In an ideal world each debate would be won or lost on the merits of its arguments, and a good speech would be expected to alter MPs' voting. At present, debates are won or lost on the party majority, and sometimes when majorities are small, on the basis of loyalty through whipping. It

is almost unknown, therefore, for a vote to be swayed by debating, and so it could be argued that the proper function of the Chamber has been largely lost. Many speeches are made for little purpose other than to impress party hacks, for the television lens, or for local supporters back home.

There should be a complete and immediate ban on so called 'death bed' votes as described in Chapter 7. Proxy voting should be allowed by the Speaker on medical grounds, allowing seriously ill or dying MPs the dignity of remaining in hospital or at home with proper care without the stress of being blamed for a major defeat in a decisive vote.

2. 'Integrity voting'

There is a radical alternative which I have called 'integrity voting', where all sides agree that their Members will be informed of a party line but that on most debates there will be a free vote. MPs will be allowed to decide each motion on the basis of the arguments. No longer will we have the absurd situation of a Bill being passed because those who hated it in the majority party voted for it, while a smaller number of those who agreed with it in the opposition voted against it.

'Integrity voting' means that candidate selection is far more important, and constituency parties would need to take greater care in finding out a whole range of opinions before agreeing to adopt a person. As I have said above, election details should indicate the main points where a candidate is expected to differ from a party line if elected. This will deal decisively with the great argument for whipping, which is that pressure is needed to make MPs vote for the policies on which they were elected.

However, many votes are taken on matters not directly referred to in a manifesto, or on issues which have emerged since the manifesto was written, or in circumstances which have changed, so there must always be room for some flexibility. It can also be argued that few voters have seen, let read, a manifesto from any party and can hardly expect their MPs to be held to all the small print. The complete Conservative manifesto for the 1992 election takes some reading: it is around a third of the length of this book.

3. Government by consensus rather than decree

Many MPs say that government like this would be impossible. It would certainly be harder work. The result would be less legislation, but more co-operation and more communication. Perhaps better legislation would be the result, with the support of the majority of all parties. The Poll Tax would have been thrown out at the first hurdle. Strong measures would be those known to command support of the majority of all parties.

'Integrity voting' would lead therefore to government by consensus rather than by decree, and there is a great deal of hidden consensus at the moment. That is why so many are finding it harder than ever to tell the difference between the policies of the major parties on many issues. Why should this be such an embarrassment to party leaders? Surely it gives us some hope for the future, for more consistent government and more considered opposition.

'Integrity voting' would encourage MPs from different parties to see each other as potential allies on a number of issues instead of adversaries on almost everything. It would encourage proper debate where speeches are made in the expectation of winning or losing votes. It would command public approval.

Opponents may argue that such a suggestion is 'hopelessly naive' and could never happen. However they have no better suggestion than continuing to whip MPs into voting for what they may believe strongly is wrong for the country. There has to be a better way.

'Integrity voting' also takes into account that in a constituency of 60,000 voters, only 25,000 may actually have voted for the successful candidate or for that party. Yet all 60,000 people are totally dependent on that MP for representation. If an MP takes his role seriously, then the first obligation will be to his or her total electorate, and that will probably mean supporting policies 'of the centre' rather than the extremes of left or right. After all, those are probably what the electors would vote for if they had been given a proper choice, other than a two-party system with 'first past the post'.

The number of MPs on the 'payroll' with no voting freedom should also be reduced. The strict payroll vote should include only those in paid positions - ie Ministers, not Parliamentary Private Secretaries.

4. National referenda on constitutional issues

One way to avoid aggressive whipping battles would be to carry out a national referendum more often than in the past, to settle an issue of national importance. For example, over further integration with Europe, or the formation of national assemblies in Scotland, Wales and England. This would also prevent elections being hijacked by single issues. Such national votes are expensive however, and not to be undertaken lightly. Perhaps in the future cable technology may allow simultaneous low-cost electronic voting by people at home on a massive scale.

5. Discipline in debate

There is widespread unhappiness not only with whipping, but also with the way business generally is conducted in the [louse of Commons, ranging from objections to 'animal noises' and 'yah-boo' politics, to gratuitous insults, blocking devices used to thwart the wishes of the majority of MPs, or hick of discipline over the use of debating time so that some debates go on into the night. The overall impression is not good.

One may argue that attempting to tackle such issues in the context of sleaze or integrity is taking things too far. However, the way Parliament works does convey an important message to the nation about values in democracy, together with how MPs are seen to behave and the way they organise their business. Unless the pattern of life changes, I those who find it unattractive, distasteful and demeaning will continue to boycott the place. Yet those are the very people the country needs to restore integrity to public life.

6. Reform of Prime Minister's Question Time

All example of this is Prime Minister's Question Time on Tuesdays and Thursdays, which is undoubtedly a major tourist attraction judging by the people in queues, but serves little useful purpose. The Prime Minister is fired a range of questions with no notice and is forced to waste considerable time each week rehearsing bland answers across a vast field of interest.

Of necessity the result is superficial point-scoring which makes good theatre but is bad for democracy. A primary aim in Question Time is to trip up the Prime Minister with some slip of the tongue or half-guarded comment. This is the politics of the classroom or playground rather than the vital business of the nation.

Parliament and the country would be far better served by a more structured time when particular questions are put down in advance, after which related points can be taken from the floor. The time for this could be extended from fifteen minutes to half an hour. Question Time could then become a show-case for concise debate on current issues.

7. Orderly conduct

We say that Britain is a country that prides itself in free speech, yet many interruptions in a crowded and excited Chamber are discourteous, offensive or obstructive, and have little place in a civilised democracy. The public rightly condemns loutish behaviour in all its forms, especially within its own Parliament, and MPs need to take note. It is feeble to argue that things were (even) worse in the past. All that tells us is the need for continued reform, and that life in Westminster years ago was beset with terrible weakness. Our past must not be allowed to distort our view of the present, nor to dominate our future.

Most people are appalled by what is happening now and want something quite different. They want to see MPs making proper points instead of political banter, and they want Members to listen to each other. The Speaker has plenty of authority to impose firm order, as outlined in Erskine May, and the power to discipline if necessary by suspension or expulsion, so the fault lies in part in a lack of application by the Speaker.

Some MPs tell me that noise is essential, for without it Speakers will be unable to tell the mood of the House. If that is the case, then they are incompetent and should be silent in the House, since they clearly lack even a basic understanding of how to communicate. I know myself from speaking to tens of thousands of people in large, medium and small groups over the years that it is relatively easy to 'read' any audience, without getting them to yell or grunt or make fatuous comments.

The only exception I would make is in a culture far removed from one's own (eg tribal rural culture in Africa), being interpreted into another language to several thousand people. In such a situation I have been profoundly grateful for local people explaining to me why, for example, they have burst out laughing at what I thought would be a serious moment.

That situation hardly applies to a small to medium size British audience of between thirty and six hundred people in an intimate venue. In such a place body language and facial expression say it all. There is no need whatever for sullen silence, but merely for greater courtesy and common

decency.

Some MPs are incapable of coherent speech in the Chamber. Others drone on, reading monotonous speeches without more than a brief glance around the Chamber. They need help but will they be willing to learn? Selection Committees should pay far more attention to oratory skills and personal character than to a track record in mere activism and door knocking.

Unfortunately the impression given by television is that the Chamber is either full of noisy male 'yobs' (the women seem relatively polite and far less boorish), or empty apart from a few who are asleep, picking their fingernails or dealing with correspondence. It is hardly any better if you stand in the strangers' gallery as I have often done.

Ministers can also be bad examples: for reasons of protocol they deliver fixed bland statements with almost zero content. You learn more from a five-minute interview on radio or television than from an hour listening to the same Minister in the Chamber. In an interview a Minister is forced to abandon fixed text and actually deal with issues. Of course many are skilled at trying to evade this method of getting at the truth.

8. Quorum for debates

One afternoon I went into both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. In the Commons I counted fewer than twenty people including the Speaker - out of 651. There was one representative of the government, who slouched back with his eyes closed as his opposition colleague addressed him. Several others were talking in pairs. Two or three were scribbling away on letters and one was reading a newspaper - both of which activities are technically in breach of the rules. One was talking to the Speaker. I counted only two people who were intently listening to the speech - which I have to say was rambling, bordering on the incoherent, without passion, purpose or conviction. The state of the Lords was similar or worse.

This is no way to supervise the executive of our country. If an MP wants to say something to a Minister, he or she should go and say it, but there is no need to abuse the Chamber in the process. If an MP wishes a statement to go 'on the record', then let a copy be sent to the relevant Department, and hand a copy to Hansard recorders. If an MP wishes to be on television, then he or she may be disappointed unless something more interesting is found to say.

This line of thought is traumatic to many back-benchers who seem to live in a world of partial denial. If they face the painful reality, then they are forced to admit to themselves that most of the time when they do actually manage to attract the eye of the Speaker to say something in debate, it is almost a complete waste of time.

One practical way to help revive the Chamber would be to insist on a quorum at all times for debates to continue, but this rule was abolished by Standing Order No 40 in 1971, presumably because MPs were abusing the rule by forcing the Speaker to count and recount the number of Members in debate.

It should be perfectly possible to make a quorum work with strong leadership from the Speaker. Simple electronic counting at the doors would help, with a number displayed on the numerous television screens both inside and outside the Chamber. A quorum would impose a discipline on the length of debates and the number of contributions, and would therefore improve the quality of debates.

When you have sat through an interminable number of dreadful contributions, you can begin to understand why MPs enjoy letting off steam in a noisy manner when they do get together. But the answer is not more animal noises, nor more time for debate, but a new debating culture altogether.

As we have seen, most debates are largely a formality with a fixed outcome. Life is far too short to spend on such nonsense. The timing of debates could be severely cut to three or four set pieces on either side, plus the same number of other contributions, unless there are a sizeable number who wish to continue. The serious work on refining the exact wording of proposed legislation can continue at committee stage or in the House of Lords.

9. More time for back-bencher motions

The time saved in this way could be given over to allow backbenchers who think they have a majority in the House to put through particular measures. This is easy to test through collecting more than a set number of signatures on early Day Motions - the parliamentary form of a petition. It is a disgraceful thing indeed when a hardy group of ten or twelve MPs 'talk out' a debate by reading long bogus speeches with the express intent of forcing the Speaker to declare that there is now no time for a vote.

This is a monstrous abuse of the democratic will, especially if there are - say - 300 who would vote in favour against 100. It is hard to imagine a worse use of parliamentary time and energy, and once again confirms an image in the public mind of injustice, abuse and moral decay. There are already sanctions which can be applied by the Speaker to prevent this but they are poorly used. For example, an MP can be stopped for repetition or irrelevance. Again, there is a 'ten-minute rule' on the length of contributions which can be applied at present under certain circumstances. Its use should be extended.

Giving a real chance to back-benchers of carrying through their own legislation would energise the majority who at present feel that their role is marginal. It would also keep government on its toes - more alert to back-bench concerns, to opposition MPs and to public opinion.

10. Reform of debating hours and archaic practices

Further reform of interminable debating hours and voting times would also make it easier for women with young children to become MPs. At present it is almost impossible for a nursing mother to survive life in Westminster. I am convinced that if half of MPs were women, then the whole culture of Parliament would change for the better. If this had been the case ten years ago then I find it hard to imagine that Westminster would be in the same mess today: fewer sex scandals, less financial impropriety and less excessive whipping for a start.

There is another factor in debates which destroys communication and makes every exchange clumsy. As we enter the third millennium it is absurd that MPs cannot talk to each other in debate, but have to address every comment via the Speaker. The result is stilted dialogue, which is unhelpful at a time when the Chamber needs a new breath of life.

Members still describe each other as 'the Honourable Member for. . .'. This archaic form of address has one advantage but many disadvantages. The advantage is that it is a constant reminder to the individual MP that his or her total identity in the House is as a representative of constituents as if that were needed. One would have thought MPs were more intelligent than that.

However, the disadvantages are not only clumsiness in debate, but also, as far as the public is concerned, a level of confusion about who is saying what. It makes for lifeless exchanges. It would be far better for MPs to say what they mean in direct language. Some MPs are so confused themselves about where MPs are from that they are unable to address them at all other than as 'the Honourable Member'.

11. Voluntary ban on 'propaganda sound-bites'

There are various stock phrases or insults which come out time and time again, which communicate nothing except the lack of creative ability and intelligence of the speaker. They should cease by mutual agreement. For example, '... when we win the next election . . .' is a very odd statement indeed, whatever the polls may say. Yet it is a stock phrase that has been repeated hundreds of times by senior MPs of both main parties over the last few years.

In no other walk of life would a professional of any standing use such proud, strange and illogical language. If they did they would be regarded quite rightly with utter contempt. They might say: 'If I get the job,' or 'If I am offered a place on the board.' This style of posturing is popular with politicians and is carried from the Chamber into many media interviews.

However such repetitive banter is tedious and irritating to listen to. Those who stoop that low come across as arrogant, foolish, deluded or just lacking in integrity.

Many such offending phrases are propaganda sound-bites, designed no doubt to appeal to a television editor who they think is looking for a twenty-five-second quote for the next news bulletin. But they have the opposite effect and insult our intelligence. The first lesson to learn when dealing with the media is the need to interest or entertain, and an over rehearsed one-line comment may do neither. The sad thing is that tens of thousands of pounds are wasted every year by the main parties on paying people to dream up these catchy but superficial phrases.

An example might be a reply in Question Time when a Conservative might say: 'Labour is the party of great promises and high taxation which always promises and can never deliver,' as a reply to a serious question on the National Health Service. The trouble is, that similar abuse has been heard a hundred times - and may not be true anyway. After all, a revolution has taken place in the Labour Party. Another Conservative jibe has been: 'Labour don't know what they stand for except Tory policies,' or 'They are the party with no policies, no ideas, and no

answers.'

This is cheap debating that is itself empty of new ideas and very unattractive. We are far more interested to know what good ideas the speaker has that will help us through situations which we all recognise are very complex. Labour is just as bad. Some praise of the other side would make a welcome change from time to time. Anything else other than broad agreement on many issues looks rather forced since we all know that consensus is alive and well in British politics - so long as you are not in the Debating Chamber or in a media interview 'on the record'.

12. New emphasis on honest consensus

There is no government in recent history that has reversed more than a very small proportion of the legislation passed by the previous administration, even though every measure may have been bitterly opposed at the time. Sometimes the reason is that undoing the damage would only create further chaos, but more usually the reason is lack of integrity in the opposition throughout, rather than sudden conversions. These are very serious issues that we see in almost every debate in Parliament day by day. One can hardly blame the public for concluding beyond all doubt that most politicians are insincere. Blair regularly

How refreshing it would be to hear Tony congratulating John Major on a major speech, or pointing out that New Labour would probably be doing largely the same thing, without being drowned out by mocking Conservative laughter. What a revolution it would be for John Major to agree that 'Labour have some excellent ideas which he has been discussing with colleagues because they find support with many in the Conservative Party.

Adversarial politics is dead. It has had its day, but the corpse still needs to be buried. It stinks of rotting political flesh. Adversarial politics is dishonest, disreputable, disagreeable and destructive. There is this deep-rooted and warped idea that the only way to get power or to keep it is to rubbish the other side. This is obviously false and morally wrong. It cannot go on. The nation has seen through the years of half-lies and distortions. We are sick and tired of it. If today's politicians do not bury this corpse, then we shall do so through the ballot box, by selecting candidates who will.

Another classic example of lack of integrity is over the abuse of statistics. When two politicians tear into each other on television, one saying that an important trend is rising and the other claiming the opposite, what are we to think? Are they both mad? Are they both liars? Is only one telling one per cent truth? Or have they both plucked out of thousands of figures those that best support their case?

We need an independent source of official statistics on the economy and other areas of national life, which is used by all parties as a common basis for discussion and manifestos whether on crime, unemployment, economic growth or health or education. Without this we will continue to have a situation where nine out of ten people disbelieve what party leaders are saying. We cannot go on like this and there is an alternative. Radical reform is not only possible but essential .

Every now and then we see a glimpse of reality: when the national interests are threatened or there is risk of war. But why does it take war to make peace in Parliament? Why does it take war to make MPs behave like mature adults instead of hot-headed hooligans? In good Churchillian fashion, compromise, solidarity, mutual respect, positive affirmation and public unity become the order of the day. We saw this in the Falklands and Gulf Wars, and more recently in Bosnia. We have also seen living, warm, powerful consensus over Northern Ireland. Of course there are dissenting voices. because there are genuine, deeply felt disagreements, but the empty rhetoric and point-scoring have largely gone.

We could see a recovery of consensus across the whole of politics almost overnight. It would only take two or three statesmen with the strength of character to do it. National leaders, men and women of calibre and character, are what we need, able to command total respect because of who they are; high achievers from all walks of life with charisma, passion, integrity and utter conviction. Looking across the entire House of Commons today it is hard to see even one person with that kind of leadership.

But where are those kind of people? Where are the nation's leaders? Do they exist or are they a romantic dream? The answer is that I stumble across them in every area of national life, but rarely in politics, although a few do land up in the Lords where they are politely listened to by all the wrong people. Lords do listen to Lords, but the weight of the Lords has something to say to the juvenile House of Commons. It is ridiculous that a Peer cannot address MPs by invitation in debate. Change the constitution, and make it serve us better.

If these leaders of industry, the professions, the church other walks of life were to enter the House of Commons in significant numbers, the result would indeed be a political revolution. How many would it take to shame the party into order? Between fifty and a hundred MP independent minded leaders would be more than enough to alter radically the whole of national political life. These are not party political issues, but issues of life and death for our democracy as a whole.

Perhaps MPs would be encouraged in a new spirit of consensus and co-operation to sit where they like, without abuse or ridicule, on one side of the House or the other. The rows of benches are an historical and unhelpful accident, maintaining a divisive, sectarian tradition where Parliament first sat in the long, narrow St Stephen's Chapel, part of the Palace of Westminster, from 1547 until the great fire in 1834. Visitors walk through the Chapel as a mere corridor today.

Open government

So much has been made by the Conservative administration about open government. Indeed, it was an important element of the 1992 manifesto. The truth is that it is now far easier than it was to obtain some kinds of information, notably about the Secret Services. However, our system of government is still built around the principles of blind deference to authority and secrecy; and it is condescending: 'Just trust because we are wise and powerful and we know best.' us Secrecy serves the status quo very well, and makes effective opposition almost impossible, whichever party is in power. Secrecy may be more tolerable in a 'high trust' environment, but where there is natural suspicion at every level, then secrecy is seen as conspiratorial. It also adds fuel to the

righteous fire of investigative journalists who feel constantly cheated of vital information.

Secrecy is clearly necessary from time to time, for example where national security is at risk, or when an interest rate is about to change. Secrecy does also have a useful role in protecting civil servants from exposure when they have done nothing wrong except produce first-class advice on how to implement a third-class ministerial idea.

Freedom of Information Act

Without any protection, civil servants will be unable to maintain so easily a tradition of strict neutrality because it could be assumed that every paper leaving a civil servant's desk contains ideas that he or she agrees with. Nevertheless, the arguments are growing rapidly for a Freedom of Information Act, which would allow every citizen to obtain a vast range of government data.

Critics of openness would say that it will simply 'lead to civil servants being unwilling to commit important ideas or comments to paper, in case their confidential advice lands up on the front page of a newspaper. I am no great enthusiast of comprehensive Freedom of Information legislation, just as in theory I prefer self-regulation to external controls, but in the current climate I think it is essential to respond with openness rather than continue as in the past. At the moment we need a transparent system, of government, as far as is humanly possible. Without it, the current malaise will only get worse. The use of technology should reduce the costs of openness. For example, the Hansard records of parliamentary debates should be published on Internet. This will strengthen democracy at a time when newspapers have all but ceased to report Parliament in any detail.

A challenge to the two-party system

We have discussed principles to guide those in public life, external regulation of MPs with sanctions, new restrictions on commercialism of Parliament in return for restructured pay. state funding for political parties and disclosure of major donors, a less tyrannical whipping system, reforms within the Debating Chamber and legislation for openness.

While all these things may help to counteract some of the concerns raised through this book, so long as we are left with a two-party system, it will be harder to establish the consensus and co-operation in which integrity is most likely to flourish in the longer term. It will also be harder to persuade the 'middle ground' leaders in the nation to enter politics, because they will be forced from the outset to polarise into one of two main political camps, or face almost certain political oblivion.

However, there are many people who cannot with integrity force themselves into either mould. One example might be someone with strong socialist compassion, but some other values that might be too 'moralistic' to fit comfortably in the Labour Party. Another might be someone who is strongly wits European, yet strongly socialist, or someone who has a very liberal view of personal morality, yet is in favour of far less state control.

Why should there only be two models of government, only two ways of seeing the whole nation, only two ways of political vision? The two-party system has provided stable government but at the cost of failing to enfranchise the moderate majority, in favour of party political hacks or extremists. Our adversarial process then magnifies the differences, while the media explode them out of all proportion, because only three things fill news items: 'hard' news events, speculation and conflict; and when the nation is not at war there is not enough of the first.

Electoral reform

One rather controversial option therefore would be to look once again at some reform of the voting system. At present most of the electorate get someone to represent them whom they did not choose, campaigning for policies that the voter may not agree with. For example, in 1974, Labour won a majority with only 39.2 per cent of the vote, and in 1983 the Conservatives won 61 per cent of the seats, a landslide victory, but with only 42 per cent of the votes. In the same election the Liberal and Social Democratic Alliance won 25 per cent of the vote's yet only 3 per cent of the seats. In 1987, Labour won 70 per cent of the Scottish seats for 42 per cent of the votes.

These are hardly pictures of democracy at its best. Out of 651 seats, only 170 have majorities of 10 per cent or less from the 1992 election. This means that in 481 seats or 74 per cent of cases, unless there is a swing of more than 10 per cent from one election to the next, there is going to be no alternative to the previous MP.

Many seats offer no choice at all because the area they cover is so heavily weighted towards one party. An example is Riverside in Liverpool, where more than 20,000 out of 27,000 votes were for Labour, or City of London and Westminster South where the Conservative vote was 21,000 out of 35,000. In most constituencies you will find large numbers of voters who would like to vote for moderation, say for the Liberal Democrats, yet know that such a vote will never have the faintest chance of winning.

Proportional representation (PR) would change all that of course, yet there is very strong opposition to it within the course of Commons, perhaps because so many MPs would have a less certain future. Support for electoral reform is also declining in the nation as a whole. We are told that it is 'not British' yet for many years PR has worked well in Northern Ireland for local government and for the European Parliament, and was used for appointment of university seats until the 1950s. In 1992 Labour adopted the Plant Committee proposals for PR by an additional member system for the proposed Scottish Parliament, but PR has always been opposed by the Conservatives.

It is said that PR means constant coalitions and weak government. People point to Italy which has become so unstable that PR has been abandoned, but West Germany has been governed very successfully with a different form of PR. They have a combined system which allows half the MPs to be elected for single-member constituencies, with a top-up additional member method to correct any imbalance in Parliament.

There is no doubt that the right form of PR could be a revolutionary change which would

encourage political, cultural and ethnic diversity, increase the number of parties with MPs and increase cross-party co-operation. It would end the sterility of the current two-party system and allow people a tot wider choice. It would encourage a new generation of men and women to enter public life, who at present feel totally disillusioned with both the main parties and who see the Liberal Democrats as a waste of time because they will never be in power under the current system.

Reforms of the Lords

While there may not be great enthusiasm for such a radical measure as PR, there is far wider agreement that the House of Lords needs an overhaul. Whatever approach is taken is likely to be complex and lengthy to implement. The Upper Chamber has an important role in improving legislation, and in maintaining the general health of Westminster. These roles should continue. There is no need to increase the powers of the Lords. However, at present the Lords is too closely associated with patronage and inherited wealth, despite the fact that many hereditary Peers live on surprisingly low incomes.

1. Abolition of voting Hereditary Peers

The simplest reform would be to abolish the voting rights of all Hereditary Peers and to remove their day subsistence allowances. This would reduce the number of Peers by 758 from 1,204 to just 443. At the same time it would be worth reviewing the status of the 'Lords Spiritual', or those twentysix members of the Anglican Church who are Lords by virtue only of their appointment as bishops or archbishops. It could be a convenient time to formally disestablish the Anglican Church.

2. Abolition of religious discrimination

The current situation in the Lords is untenable in today's multi-faith society, and is also discriminatory against the majority of Christians in other denominations. It is hard to justify special voting rights for leaders of just one branch of the Protestant faith with a mere 1.5 million members, and not for other Protestants, nor for Catholics, who between them have almost 5 million members. 244 And what about Muslims or other faith groups?

At the same time, restrictions should be abolished which prevent clergy of any denomination becoming elected Members of Parliament, or prevent them being appointed as Peers in the same way as anyone else, on the basis of merit. The 1801 Act says that no person 'ordained to the office of priest or deacon' or who is a minister of the Church of Scotland can be an MP. Roman Catholic priests are also banned by the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829.

This is illogical, sectarian, and against every tradition of Electoral freedom. People should be able to elect whomever they want, and Christian leaders motivated by faith may be of great help in the House of Commons at such a time as this, particularly if they have general experience in the workplace a., well. It is sad that religious intolerance and bigotry in Northern Ireland may have overshadowed the very real contribution that the Christian community could make to the renewal of politics in Britain today.

3. New peerage allocation methods

If the total number in the Lords was partially reduced, say, to 800, then there would be room to create 357 new Peers, some of whom might well be those who had lost their hereditary or religious seats, but whose skills and experience would be greatly missed in the House. The remainder could be selected using the usual methods, although in the light of our review of the patronage system in an earlier chapter it might be appropriate at the same time to reform the peerage allocation methods.

There is already an all-party committee to scrutinise new peerages. There should be a far greater emphasis on merit and with smaller party and Prime Ministerial lists. Cross benchers should have a key role in influencing future peerage allocation, since they are independent of party pressures.

Clearly the major political parties would be very anxious to maintain the balance of their representation, although there would seem to be many advantages in making sure that a good number (perhaps a quarter) were non-affiliated cross so benchers, since 170 of the Hereditary Peers are of this category, and have brought a breadth to debate. Labour would be an obvious gainer since at present (1994 figures) 479 Peers say they are Conservative, compared to only 114 supporting Labour. However, 332 of those Conservatives are Hereditary Peers.

4. Overhaul of Peers' allowances

The daily allowances are not large, and insufficient to support 'working Peers' spending at least half the year in the House of Lords, and they are poorly supported with administration. There may be an argument for creating a third level of Peer remuneration, between a government post and an ordinary Peer, for some asked to serve the Upper House by attending a large number of committees and such like.

5. Retirement for elderly or absent Peers

There should be a maximum age beyond which a Peer has to retire to give way to a new peerage of young people - perhaps at seventy-five. The title could continue for life, but after the retirement date, the Peer might be treated as a Hereditary Peer, losing allowances and voting rights but still able to attend and participate in debates.

Peers who do not attend Parliament for several consecutive sessions, or are present on fewer than a minimum number of days in a calendar year without special leave of absence, could be considered by their non-attendance to be retired as from the next session. In this way a more active second Chamber would be maintained.

6. Movement between both Houses

There are many people who may be unable or unwilling to become MPs for family or other reasons, yet could make a valuable contribution to the Lords, either as a cross-bencher or as a

party member. Some could be encouraged perhaps, as their situations change, to consider becoming an MP, in which case their peerage could be suspended during their time in the Commons.

Such a flow between the Chambers could help renew the vitality of both Houses, and may be increasingly necessary if the number of Life Peers increases following the abolition of 1 Hereditary voting Peers. A small risk of such traffic between the two places could be that some Lords become tamed by the lure of a seat in the other House, and end up as docile and dependent on the party line as many back-bencher MPs. However this would be a risk worth taking.

7. Recruitment, induction and training

'Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary.' Robert Louis Stevenson
(18.50- 1894)

The proposals above relate to those already shaping public life, but they beg a central question which has recurred throughout this book. What can be done to ensure that a new generation of high calibre men and women with vision and integrity are encouraged to enter politics? While it is true that the reforms as outlined above will make Westminster a far more attractive place to be, there are other steps which need to be taken.

Schools education programme: A national programme of educational visits should be targeted at sixteen- to eighteen year olds in schools. The aim should be that wherever possible each school receives a visit from their MP every two years for it talk on how Westminster works, with the chance of a conducted tour of Parliament for those interested. Many MPs already see schools visits as a priority, but these would be more focused, as part of a well-publicised national initiative to help win the interest and respect of a new generation.

Recruitment of national leaders: Modest state funding should be given to an all-party group designed to identify and befriend those with outstanding leadership gifts in all walks of life, with the aim of encouraging them to stand as MPs or to be accepted as nominations for the Upper House.

Altered selection criteria: Candidates for constituencies should be scrutinised far more closely for their leadership qualities, including their ability to communicate and motivate, their ethics and their lifestyles to help determine if they are worthy of the public trust which will be placed in them. A key test should be whether this candidate is likely to act in a way which could bring public office into disrepute. There should be less emphasis on a long track record of political activism, which by definition will exclude candidates with a fresh interest in politics as a result of recent reform - the very candidates who are needed to bring a transformation to Westminster.

Training for all candidates: There should be a standard training course for all prospective

candidates, run on an all party basis, with an emphasis on the eight foundational values listed earlier in this chapter, as well as on working together with those who belong to other parties.

Induction for new MPs and Lords: New Members of both Houses should receive an induction programme with an emphasis on expectations and codes of conduct as well as on the need to avoid acting in such a way as might be likely to damage the reputation of public office. There should also be training courses on effective public speaking which Whips might require certain members to attend.

Towards responsible reporting

So far, all the reforms discussed have been directed at the conduct of Parliament and political parties, now and in the future. However, some attention needs to be given to reforms directed at the press and other media. The number of times that individual privacy has been invaded by the press over the last few years are too numerous to mention. At present there is far too little redress for an individual with modest means who thinks that he or she has been libelled or otherwise abused.

We have seen how voluntary regulation has failed miserably to prevent the hounding of those in public life, yet the Conservative Party has had no stomach for a fight because every time there has been a whisper of press controls, another two or three of their MPs have hit the dust over allegations which the press- have said would never have been revealed were regulations in force. Hence there is a dilemma.

The need for legislation

Clearly the media have an important democratic role in widening debate and probing behind the scenes, but there must be a better-defined code with proper sanctions which have backing in law, including a French-style right of reply. There will always be a debate about what is or is not in the public interest, but as we have seen, one thing which is clearly not in the public interest is to create a situation where large numbers of excellent potential leaders of this nation are put off entering public life. It is also worrying that so much media power is now owned by a few individuals or companies and great care needs to be taken that such market domination is not encouraged any further.

It is also important to reach agreement with the media that Ministers will make 'no comment' on sensitive matters such as interest rate changes, and that such an answer should be taken at face value. The alternative is that Ministers are forced to continue to lie by denying the truth - creating a vicious circle where they are even less likely to be believed in the future.

In conclusion, then, we have seen that there are many reasons for the public revulsion against politicians and for the widely held mistrust of what they say. We have seen that while politics in Britain has always had its weak points, and while the media have tended to sensationalise, there is widespread agreement that something has gone wrong more recently.

The truth about Westminster is that the institution is in a sad state of decay. Endless

point-scoring by politicians has cheapened debate, clouded real issues, and encouraged media over-reaction. The whole system of government from Secretary of State to civil servants is rooted in secrecy and open to great abuse of power.

The truth is that there are far fewer villains than the media make out, and where there have been highly publicised 'misdemeanours', they have sometimes been relatively minor matters or have involved serious but highly complex issues. It is hard for those who have never held office to understand fully the pressures of running a government Department, and the almost inevitable pitfalls. It is probably almost impossible to be a Minister for long under the current system without in some way becoming 'tainted by office'.

However if there are few real villains, there are even fewer heroes: leaders of obvious integrity who command national respect across party divides. As a result there is a crisis of leadership in our nation, which is perhaps the most serious defect of Westminster today. A culture of consensus rather than confrontation could help create positive government, positive opposition, positive leadership, and positive reporting. The alternative is years more dominated by the politics of 'insecurity, cover-up, denial, fear of exposure, avoidance and aggressive arrogance.

We have seen the growing pressures for change, and the need for reform that goes beyond mere codes of practice, but the answer lies not in mere codes or conventions. During the next century, historians will look back at the last days of this century and no doubt place the British crisis of self confidence over Westminster in the context of more than fifty years of historical decline from the days of a world empire. They will note too a similar unease in many other developed nations following the end of the Cold War, the collapse of communism, severe economic depression, and deep-rooted problems in society such as the collapse of family life, crime and drug addiction, and the negative view of leadership.

What will they describe beyond the year 2000? Will they record that the same corrupting system grumbled on for a further fifty years until the whole concept of 'the leader worth following' had all but perished? Or will they record a political renaissance as a new generation rose up with fresh ideals and vision, rediscovering the best of our heritage, and rejecting the worst?

If there is no change, I believe Westminster will slowly die over the next fifty years, after gradual delegation to European Parliament on the one hand, to Regional Assemblies, local and privatised industries on the other, and all the while with loss of economic power to progressive globalisation. However I believe that a change in values is likely, to come to Westminster, because the country is hungry for that change and because there is a strong memory of a 'better way' held particularly in the Upper House. Rapid change in Europe demands that Westminster be in a healthy state.

Some may place their hope in elections and new governments, but changes in government will surely lead to bitter disappointment unless there is a change in heart - which is little to do with policies. Yet a change in heart will only come through a change in vision, and a change in vision will only take root as those with vision take courage to rise above the mocking and ridicule to communicate that vision.

Whether that vision is translated into action will depend on the outcome of an intense and bitter struggle between a tiny minority with power or the hope of it, and a far greater number across this whole nation who believe the nature of that power should fundamentally change.

The Truth About Westminster

- [Acknowledgements](#)
- [Introduction](#)
- [Chapter 1: MPs Available for Hire](#)
- [Chapter 2: Buying and Selling MPs on a Large Scale](#)
- [Chapter 3: MP Fiddles and Some Reluctant Lords](#)
- [Chapter 4: The Power of Patronage](#)
- [Chapter 5: The Truth About Party Funding](#)
- [Chapter 6: Sex, Money and Power](#)
- [Chapter 7: Whipping and the Death of Conscience](#)
- [Chapter 8: Secrets of Ministers and Civil Servants](#)
- [Chapter 9: Trade Scandals and Arms Deals](#)
- [Chapter 10: The Changing Culture](#)
- [Chapter 11: Rebuilding the House](#)
- [Chapter 12: Christians in Politics](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [A Short Bibliography](#)