



The Speaker of the House of Commons Speech to the Parliamentary Studies Association & Hansard Society annual Lecture – November 30 2009

It is a very great pleasure to be delivering this annual Hansard Society and Political Studies Association lecture and it is kind of you, Professor Randal, to introduce me. It is particularly decent of the Hansard Society to issue this invitation as this fine body hosted a speech of mine a mere two months ago. On that occasion, the esteemed Peter Riddell sat in the chair and concluded events by remarking that he had never known a Speaker of the House of Commons be so candid. At the time, I took this as a warm compliment but on reflection I fear that he may have meant it in the spirit of Sir Humphrey informing Jim Hacker in Yes Minister that his preferred policy proposal was "very courageous". Despite this, I intend to be no less frank with you tonight.

I want to make five core arguments this evening. The first is to acknowledge that the cause of parliamentary outreach has been severely impaired by the expenses scandal and that we have no chance of reconnecting with the public until wholesale reform on a scale that will rightly satisfy the electorate is embraced and enacted. The second is to set out the reasons why in the age in which we are living the outreach challenge will still be a considerable one even if closure on the expenses matter can be achieved. The third is to sketch out the strategic imperatives that must be met if the standing of Parliament in public life is to become what we want it to be. The fourth is to outline what the House of Commons is already doing and has already sanctioned to advance with regard to outreach activity. Finally, I would like to set out an innovation which I hope and believe would assist this process further in the future.

So let me start with the impact of the expenses debacle. It is a cruel paradox that at a time when MPs have never worked harder, their standing has rarely been lower. Let me be brutally honest about the scale of what has occurred. I cannot think of a single year in the recent history of Parliament when more damage has been done to it than this year, with the possible exception of when Nazi bombs fell on the chamber in 1941. The difference is that the physical wreckage then was done by dictators whereas responsibility for the reputational carnage inflicted this year lies with the House. I have consistently sought since becoming Speaker to apologise to the public for this dire saga, as have all the main party leaders, and more apologies yet will be required.

As I am in a room where a number present work for the parliamentary media and outreach teams in their various forms, and there are other staff members also with us, I should like to focus some remarks on you. To all of those involved in attempting to promote Parliament to the public, let me acknowledge that we MPs have made your lives much harder, at times akin to being asked to swim against the stream at Niagara Falls, and you are entitled to an apology. I also want to extend this mea culpa to the permanent staff more broadly and at every level. There must have been times in the past few months when it was a severe embarrassment for you to have to admit to friends and, even more, to

strangers that you are employed at the Palace of Westminster. Derision and abuse will have followed. I am deeply sorry about this too.

It is because of this that I have asserted the absolute necessity of seeing through the recommendations of Sir Thomas Legg, Sir Christopher Kelly and the creation of IPSA. We have to make it crystal clear that we will dynamite the past arrangements, practices and, crucially, cultures that allowed the expenses disaster to take place and will do so with as much vigour as Guy Fawkes intended to apply here in 1605. Nothing else will allow us back in to the national conversation. It is time, to put it differently, to stop implying to the public that they do not really understand Parliament properly and to admit that Parliament has not really understood the public properly. I will endorse four of the wisest words in politics, "concede and move on".

To move on, there were reasons why the outreach challenge was exacting before the expenses affair ever surfaced. These relate to profound social changes of which those who want to reconnect Parliament to the public need to be aware. There are three developments, in particular, on which I want to place the spotlight.

The first is the decline of deference towards all institutions but, most notably, to constitutional bodies. In many ways the decline of deference in society is a healthy change. Parliament should not be venerated simply because it is old and historic or because the actual building itself is an astonishing tribute to Victorian architecture. Parliament should have to justify itself to a perhaps sceptical population. There is an important difference, however, between scepticism and cynicism and we would be mistaken not to recognise how much cynicism there is out there. So the outreach challenge is not about one big push at a certain time and place but rather a continuous system of engagement which needs to be constantly refreshed and renewed. Much of the coverage of politics has become 24/7 in character, so the exercise in explaining why Parliament matters has to be similarly ceaseless as well.

Second, we need to appreciate that the nature of the audience whom we are aspiring to address has altered and that many members of it are very distant from us and the political process writ large. I will not stray into the lively argument as to whether Britain is "broken" or "fractured", not least because there is a party political element to that discussion which renders it terrain on which the Speaker of the House of Commons should not tread. I do not believe it is controversial, however, to observe that, over time and for whatever reasons, our society does seem to have become more fragmented. There are a lot of marginalised people among us, whether that marginalisation is due to apathy and atrophy, as some would assert, or to outright alienation as others might insist. An outreach strategy which does not succeed in reaching those people – the marginalised – would be a pretty modest enterprise. We also need to appreciate that marginalisation is not exclusively a matter of minority status on the basis of gender, ethnicity and race or sexuality but that it also involves social class, geographical location and family status as well. We have to frame an outreach approach that incorporates all of these factors.

Third, we have to be aware of a fundamental inequality of information which exists in Britain today. When I was a child, the vast majority of families had a national newspaper in the home and watched the news on one or other of the main terrestrial television stations. That is no longer valid. There are, indeed, some people who do follow that formula but a

further two categories of citizen have emerged. One is what might be identified as the "super-informed", those whose access to multiple news channels on television and mastery of the Internet means that they are capable of acquainting themselves with more information about politics than any humans in history. The BBC's brilliant new Democracy Live website will add more value here.

There is also, I fear, a rather larger minority, the "under-informed", for whom the arrival of more television options and the availability of celebrity magazines to rival national newspapers mean that it is perfectly possible to avoid political news, or all "hard news" come to think of it, almost entirely. We have to construct an approach which makes contact with these people as well. It is not good enough merely to make the super-informed, as wonderful a set of souls as they are, yet more super-informed.

All of this might lead one to the conclusion that we live in an irrevocably anti-politics age and hence that the quest to make Parliament more relevant to the public is doomed. I do not believe that to be the case despite the series of observations about how society has developed that I have just offered. This is because I think the phrase "anti-politics age" is not quite accurate. I am sure that we live in an "anti-politician age" (not that there was any period of time that could be described as a "pro-politician age") and there is a lot of evidence to which I will refer which hints that we live in an "anti-party politics age" but to suggest that society is tuned out of all politics altogether is too crude and dangerously misplaced.

There is hard data to support this. The polling organisation MORI, now Ipsos MORI, has over the years asked the admittedly rather general question "How interested are you in politics?". In June 1973 some 60% of those surveyed declared that they were very interested or fairly interested, with the remaining 40% responding that they were not particularly interested or not at all interested in politics. The question was posed again, among other times, in March 1991, April 1997, May 2001, April 2005 and December 2008. On no occasion did the numbers alter by more than one percentage point over those three decades. If there is an unstoppable "anti-politics" movement, it does not reveal itself in these numbers.

And that makes sense. Look at the political activism which was seen around the vexed issue of fox hunting and whether to ban it, the Iraq War and whether to back it or increasingly around climate change and what to do about it. Look at some of the dedicated activism which takes place around local controversies on a daily basis. Look at the fact that the numbers of emails and letters which MPs receive from their constituents have risen consistently during this decade. If this is "anti-politics", it is a strange means by which to manifest itself. It smells like pure politics to me.

What is really happening, therefore, is something much more subtle. Within the realm of politics there has been a huge movement away from party politics towards political activism of other forms. The pack of old has been replaced by the lone wolf. That is because traditional tribalism is hard to maintain in a more complex and fragmented citizenry. This has meant that despite the general interest in politics remaining the same and all sorts of alternative political activism mushrooming, the collective membership of the main political parties has been in something close to meltdown. As I am convinced that the public sees Parliament as principally a theatre for party politics, it is no real

surprise whatsoever that the decline in interest in Parliament identified over the past few decades has tracked the decline in overall political party membership.

Much of the country may remain capable of intense interest in issues which are undoubtedly political in their nature, but, to name a few examples, people do not see animal welfare, global warming or international poverty as fitting neatly into party politics. Voters do not view these concerns as central to what the House of Commons is about either. Such people are willing to demonstrate outside of Parliament and chant their concerns at its walls. They do not believe that it would be especially profitable for them to engage with Parliament any more than they seem to think that the best way of advancing their ideals on animal welfare, global warming or international poverty would be to become a member of a political party as well as or instead of becoming part of a pressure group pitched to their precise concerns.

This leads me to the third argument that I want to offer to you this evening. It is that any strategy for the successful reconnection of Parliament and public has to be aware of two very strong perceptions about the House of Commons which I am sure are in the national ether today. The first is that we have a politicians' Parliament and not a peoples' Parliament. The second is that we have a political party Parliament and not a public policy Parliament. Neither of these observations is actually true but unless both of them are challenged, all the fabulous efforts of those involved in the many outreach efforts will traverse only so far. We have to invite more people into Parliament in person and to participate through the website. We also have to prove that much of what takes place in Parliament is not what might be thought and that it focuses squarely on issues. If we can do that, more of the public will see the relevance of the House of Commons and, in time, the media will follow where the public has led.

So, fourthly, what are we doing today and what is in the pipeline? It should be observed that the role of individual Members in connecting with their constituents is changing beyond all recognition and will continue to change. These individual, local relationships are at the heart of a well-functioning representative democracy and their purpose is widely understood. What I want to concentrate on this evening, is the role of Parliament as an institution making a connection with the public in ways that complement, reinforce and reach beyond the work of individual Members.

It is a little appreciated fact that the House of Commons, largely due to the vision of key members of its staff and the enthusiastic backing of certain MPs, realised early in this Parliament that it needed a more ambitious outreach programme. Prodigious work has been done, despite all the distractions, and I would like to salute a few people now. John Pullinger, Director-General of Information Services, Rob Clements, his deputy, Aileen Walker, Director of Public Information, Liz Parratt, Head of Media, Clare Cowan, Head of Outreach, Tom O'Leary, Head of Education, Tracy Green, Head of Online Services and Victor Launert, Head of Visitor Services, and their teams have done superb work and they deserve congratulations from all who care about the standing of Parliament in the life of the nation. The House has sought to achieve its objectives here by a number of means, invariably working in close partnership with colleagues in the House of Lords.

The first has been to encourage more people to come into the House of Commons. The House has technically been open for tours for years but in truth the numbers were limited

and what could be seen was not as expansive as it could have been. Visits from schoolchildren were accepted but not prioritised as they might have been. The days of the week when the House could be inspected were not what they should have been. There was room to do more to lay out a welcome mat.

I think it is uncontentious to suggest that there has been and will be a quiet revolution in site access. More tour parties have been accommodated and those who come now see a lot more of the parliamentary estate. There has been, entirely correctly, a fresh significance accorded to school tours and visits. A partial subsidy for schools which have to travel substantial distances to reach Westminster has been a striking success. In sum, the parliamentary estate today receives a staggering one million visits, some 225,000 people go on official tours and around 150,000 people sit in the galleries.

The top priority, already planned for and budgeted for, is a new education centre which should be open by 2013 and which will transform the experience of those who visit Westminster and allow 100,000 such individuals each year the opportunity to experience Parliament first hand. Other schemes which are the subject of active preparation include opening up the House of Commons at weekends (which is often when it is most convenient for the visitor) and creating a wider range of tours to suit different specialist interests. Parliament is now beckoning people in. The most dramatic illustration of this was the recent Youth Parliament held in the chamber of the House of Commons which I had the honour and privilege of chairing. There were those in this place who thought the only legacy of this idea and my willingness to open up the chamber would be a vast amount of chewing gum left stuck on the green benches. Indeed, it was at best sad and at worst shocking that anyone should have stereotyped this event beforehand and I trust that the critics will now give the Youth Parliament a break. I hope it is now a matter of consensus that the endeavour was a triumph, not least thanks to the enthusiasm shown by a team of staff from all the House Departments led by Geoffrey Farrar.

In my view, it is also vital that the House of Commons makes itself available to be the venue for special meetings of those involved with worthwhile causes and not only the best known or the most fashionable of them. Thanks to the efforts of Clare Cowan, I had the enormous joy earlier this month of attending an event celebrating a new initiative by the charity Rethink which will aspire to ease the plight of those enduring severe mental health problems by introducing them to the world of art. The House of Commons should be the natural centre for precisely this form of outreach.

This range of activism is being supported by the promotion of Parliament outside of London. For some time, the House has sought to be a catalyst for the creation of school councils as miniature versions of itself in the educational realm. I have told those involved in this initiative that they have my unambiguous backing and that they can envisage a bigger and better blueprint. I want all schoolchildren to experience the essence of representative democracy for themselves as this will provide the basis for an understanding of Parliament and the importance of democratic engagement. This drive is being reinforced by our efforts with headteachers and teacher training in general. The Teachers Institute programme that we have run in recent years could be taken further with teachers brought in to our outreach efforts throughout the country. We are also blessed with a small but hyperactive team of House staff who are based in the

regions and who strive tirelessly to spread our message about the value of Parliament and the relevance of our democracy on a week-in week-out basis.

In a similar spirit I am pleased to see how closely we are engaging with universities. Understandably, the emphasis here tends to be on those studying Government or Politics. In the United States, it would be close to unimaginable for a student to complete a degree course in politics without a detailed appreciation of the functions of Congress and an understanding of how a bill becomes a law. This is often not the case for students of politics in Britain. Lest these words are twisted to be an attack on contemporary academics, which they are most certainly not intended to be, the decline of interest in British parliamentary politics is a logical consequence of the trends that I identified earlier. That does not mean that it is impossible to reverse. The revival of parliamentary studies would be very welcome. This is not, however, solely a matter of the politics curriculum. We have an embryonic programme, steered by Lord Philip Norton - Parliament as a teaching resource - designed to advertise to lecturers that Parliament can assist in the teaching of law, history, geography, and much more.

Finally, in this section, I come to the website. It is simply fantastic and could equally be known as 'aladdinscave.com'. It is a resource which should be the envy of legislatures around the world and a tribute to those involved with it. There is no constraint as to how inventive we can be and every incentive to remain in the fastest of fast lanes of this technology. We must ensure that procedural content can even more easily be found, used and reused. There must be no limit to our vision.

I have sought in my own way since becoming Speaker slightly more than five months ago to be a cheerleader for all this and to act consistently with it. I have visited all the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies with the express purpose of learning from them. I have made it clear that welcoming school and student parties in here and my leaving the parliament estate to engage with those audiences is immensely important to me. I have spoken directly to more than a dozen school groups and several sets of university students and I want to build upon that record rapidly. I am throwing open the doors of Speaker's House to a multitude of organisations in an unprecedented fashion and will continue to do so. I have taken to the airwaves to defend parliamentary democracy but also to let parliamentarians know what the public expects of them.

Today, as an illustration, I visited Cheshunt School in Hertfordshire in the morning and spoke to 2,500 A level students in the Westminster area this afternoon. After the reception following this lecture, I will travel over to Battersea Park to present a prize at the Royal Association for Disability Rights Awards. As of now I have been involved in approximately fifty events which could be defined as "outreach" since my election and I see that as a modest downpayment on my intentions. I will excuse myself from the interesting dispute as to whether I am the shortest Speaker in the history of the House of Commons. Whatever the conclusion of such a discussion, nevertheless, at least no one involved in the outreach campaign can accuse me of being invisible.

All of the above has sought to counter the concept that we have a parliament for politicians and not one for the public. To remind you, the second element of the strategy that I identified, to remind you, involved illustrating that parliament is not merely about party politics but the policy preferences of citizens as well. This is a tougher nut to crack

because, to be honest, the chamber of the House of Commons is not about to assume the atmosphere of the library or the seminar. There is, though, another means of engagement which we should be concentrating – namely, the vehicle of the departmental select committees and the exceptional output which is associated with them.

Select committees have the capacity to draw the sceptical but activist voter back into the Palace of Westminster. They have their own style, they are infinitely easier for individuals and organisation to submit their views to, and they instinctively look at issues which matter enormously but do not organise themselves in party political packages. It is possible for the public to participate by presenting evidence to these committees directly, which is obviously impossible to do in the chamber itself. Those who appear in front of select committees do so in lively and unpredictable exchanges and are not always the “usual suspects”, or in the “usual places”.

One memorable instance of this was the extremely fruitful co-operation between MoneySavingExpert.com and the Treasury Select Committee during the inquiry into credit rating checks. The webforum held by the Business and Enterprise Committee on the future of post offices was highly influential on the final report. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee has shown an admirable willingness to take to the road, collecting evidence in Gloucester, Lincoln and Hawes, Yorkshire for three different inquiries. We should be advertising the capacity of the public to connect with departmental select committees with maximum vigour. If the coverage they secure could be enhanced by a superior media feed system then that would be worth doing. The Select Committee on the reform of the House of Commons chaired by Dr Tony Wright last week published its report. I earnestly hope that the powers that be will spell out very soon their assessment of each of the recommendations and that in short order the House will have the chance to debate and decide the way forward. I would be amazed if the wider question of the role of select committees was not revisited again in the next Parliament. Moreover, irrespective of what decisions are reached when, anyone with the best interests of the House at heart should want select committees to be placed more squarely in the shop window.

This is, I hope you would agree, a substantial agenda of activity. It has been starkly overshadowed by the expenses scandal as I have conceded but this does not mean that it cannot emerge again into the sunlight if we have the resolve to deal with allowances in a manner that condemns their abuse to one of the more regrettable dustbins of history. Yet despite all that I have asserted, it would be a mistake not to realise that the House of Commons will need outside assistance as it aspires to restore a reputation which it has managed to Ratner and to reconnect itself to the people it serves. Many inspiring ideas have emerged from within the parliamentary estate, but we have no monopoly on wisdom. The process of outreach requires that we reach out to outsiders as well.

Which is why, fifthly and finally, I want to set out an innovation this evening. It is a testament to those who work here that the concept came first from John Pullinger, the Director-General of Information Services for the House of Commons and I have shamelessly seized upon it. I truly believe it can be a major reform for us.

It is, therefore, my intention to establish the first Speaker’s Advisory Council on Public Engagement. It will consist of external figures with stellar careers consisting of anticipating

or responding to the needs of the public as citizens, consumers and customers, kindly offering their time without payment. It will provide an invaluable sounding board for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff, encouraging them in their endeavours and making constructive suggestions as to how the outreach challenge can be met. It will be informal and independent but informed and inclusive, looking ahead over the next decade. It will start by examining our current outreach activities, but move on to a much wider remit of providing blunt advice about how the House of Commons is seen now and what should be done to restore the trust required between Parliament and the public. I welcome the approach it will take. I hope to be able to announce the name of its Chairman shortly and to settle on the composition of the rest of the Council soon afterwards.

In conclusion, I have sought to be completely candid about the effect of the expenses explosion, have acknowledged the scale of the challenge we would have faced in terms of outreach regardless of it, have indicated a specific strategy, have outlined what is being done and what we already have pledged to do and have announced a new instrument for even better thinking. Not all of this will be universally applauded. It will doubtless be denounced in some quarters as public relations and not what it really is, public engagement. I expect such criticism and am not troubled by it. As Robert Kennedy once said sagely, "one in five people are against everything all the time." It is the other 80 per cent of the United Kingdom's populace that concern me.

I believe with all my soul in the power, the passion and the poetry of parliamentary politics. The outreach agenda is at the core of my notion of a modern Speakership. It, along with the restoration of the backbench MP as a political actor, is the yardstick against which I want to be measured. I know that the task of convincing the public that the House of Commons is about more than an enormous set of dubious expense claims will be a hard one. Nevertheless, I am certain that there could be few more noble causes. I am utterly determined, with the support of colleagues, parliamentary staff and civic society, successfully to do so. Thank you very much indeed.