

MR SPEAKER'S SPEECH TO THE HANSARD SOCIETY, THE ATTLEE SUITE, JUNE 9, 2010.

## REFORM IN A NEW PARLIAMENT – REVIVING THE CHAMBER

Peter. Thank you for those kind words of introduction. There is much about the political circumstances in which we find ourselves that has changed but, perhaps mercifully, there is also some continuity. Peter, you continue to be the both the Chairman of the Hansard Society and among the most outstanding analysts of Whitehall and Westminster, while the Hansard Society continues to have the kindness, some might argue the sheer masochism, to host my speeches. It was a pleasure and privilege to offer two setpiece lectures to this distinguished forum last year and it is an honour to have the chance to set out further thoughts today.

This is, manifestly, a very new political era, one which has witnessed far more radical change than I suspect any of us thought would take place when the old Parliament was dissolved on April 12<sup>th</sup>, a date that now seems almost a lifetime ago. The most dramatic example of this novelty is, of course, the creation of the first peacetime coalition since the 1930s with all the innovations which this requires in the way that both the executive and the legislature work. But that should not overshadow the considerable change which has occurred in the composition of the House of Commons itself. We have some 227 new MPs and 5 members who have re-entered the House. This is a slightly smaller intake than that of 1997 but still more than a third of the whole House, a figure which represents a massive turnover. We have 143 female MPs, the highest such total ever. While many women would still contend that this remains an underrepresentation of 52% of the population – and my wife would be foremost among them – the total does represent a quantum leap from the mere 19 female Members thirty years ago. Furthermore, some 31% of new MPs are female and drawn quite evenly between what we used to describe automatically as the two major political parties.

The class of 2010 also includes more members from an ethnic minority background, with 16 new MPs here, again drawn evenly from the Conservative and Labour Party ranks. We now have the first female Muslim MPs, three of them, the first black female Conservative MP, the first Asian-British female Conservative MP and the first African-British female MP. Again, there is a case to be made that this is only the first step towards a Parliament that more accurately reflects the Britain of today, but let me remind you that in 1980 there were no MPs from an ethnic minority background whatsoever. This is real change and I cannot but believe, Peter, that if a member of the esteemed Parliamentary Lobby to which you belong had fallen into a coma in 1980 and awoken only this week (and there are one or two of them who sometimes offer that impression) they would be absolutely staggered by the change which they would encounter on the green benches were they to look into the chamber. Add to that the arrival of several openly gay MPs from across the spectrum plus representatives from the Green Party and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland for the first time and what you have is little less than a quiet revolution in who now sits in the House of Commons as a Member of Parliament.

It is only appropriate, indeed entirely logical, therefore that Westminster as an institution is undertaking a quiet revolution in its own proceedings as well. It would be somewhat strange if this extraordinary transformation as to who is an MP did not, eventually, have some transmission effect as to how the House of Commons conducted itself. This has, after all, been the long-established pattern of the past where over the centuries the emergence of new sorts of MPs has, after a period of time, had a wider impact on the institution itself.

The present process of reform to which I refer is based, of course, on the Wright Committee and its recommendations. In March the House voted with unexpected force, in what might be termed as a Peasants Revolt by backbenchers, for a radical package of reforms which we are all now in the early days of implementing. A House which has long been monopolised by what are known as "the usual channels" now has some unusual channels as well, namely a virtual orgy of internal elections. Lindsay Hoyle, Nigel Evans and Dawn Primarolo were elected as Deputy Speakers yesterday and they started their work in the chamber today. Elections for chairs of the departmental Select Committees and of the Procedure Committee

took place today and the results will be announced tomorrow morning. For what it is worth I see the Procedure Committee serving as an engine of change throughout this Parliament. A House Backbench Business Committee and, later, a House Business Committee are to be created. Reform is to be a process not an event. For all that there are heavy pressures on Members, this is a truly wonderful time to be in Parliament and, I must admit a little selfishly, to be the Speaker of the House of Commons. Much of what has happened and is happening was endorsed in my manifesto for the Speakership but if you ask me whether I thought 12 months ago that we would be anywhere close to where we actually are today, the only truthful answer would be a regret-tinged "no". Yet here we are.

There is so much happening in and around the House that if I were to cover all the material which I could discuss I might beat Senator Strom Thurmond's notorious speech in Congress in 1957 which lasted for 24 hours and 18 minutes. You will be relieved to discover that even I would consider that an excessively extended oration, although an inviting target for another occasion I must say, and I will subject you a far far shorter and more focused argument this evening. For what I want to concentrate my remarks on is the crucible of the House of Commons – the Chamber itself – and what might be done to revive its standing.

There never was a golden age of Parliament and there never was a golden age of the Chamber. The great Parliamentary occasions chronicled by historians and depicted by artists have over the centuries been complemented by absenteeism, unruly behavior and, of course, countless thousands of dreadfully dull speeches. There are even records in the Journals of the House in the 17<sup>th</sup> century of "A Great Silence" when no-one could think of anything worthwhile to say about anything.

However, in our times there is too much evidence to ignore that the Chamber as a forum has been in decline. Ministers do not spend anything like the amount of time in the chamber now that they did in the 1960s and 1970s. There are times when we hold debates on subjects of real national and international significance but where the numbers in the Chamber are plain embarrassing. The public has noticed. In a cruel coincidence, the age of the televising of the House began just as a sharp decline in the attendance in the Chamber occurred. This has led

to a national notion about MPs, which took root even before the expenses earthquake took place, that (1) the only time that they all seem to turn up is for the zoo noises of Prime Minister's Questions when they behave appallingly towards each other and (2) the rest of the time there is almost no one there. A point of special – and wholly justified – criticism is that when we are legislating on matters of real importance to every one of our citizens, only a dozen of us appear to think that it is worth turning up.

This is in some ways a harsh caricature but we would be profoundly unwise to ignore it. As far as most normal citizens are concerned, the Chamber is Parliament at work and if there are not very many people there then Parliament cannot be working that hard. This is, as I will come on to, a simplistic critique but it certainly is not a stupid one. The primary function of the House of Commons is to hold the executive to account and the principal theatre for political scrutiny has to be the Chamber, not the atrium of Portcullis House, the tea room or on College Green in the company, charming though it is, of a Nick Robinson or an Adam Boulton. The public are right to regard the Chamber as a barometer of our performance.

Why has the present unsatisfactory system come to be? It is certainly not because of an outbreak of collective lethargy amongst Members of Parliament, quite the opposite. One of the sad ironies of the expenses explosion and its aftermath is, as I have noted a number of times, at a moment when the typical MP has never worked harder, his or her stock has rarely been lower. The truth is that MPs are incredibly cross-pressured individuals and for many of them time spent in the Chamber is not a terribly productive use of what is very precious time.

Modern MPs face what I described earlier this year as the five Cs as they look at their schedules. There is the Chamber, certainly, then there is work in Committee within the House, there are Constituency engagements aplenty (indeed many a voter would like to see their Member on television in the Chamber and patrolling the High Street simultaneously), there is Casework on behalf of constituents (which is hugely more pressing in 2010 than it was in 1980, never mind the alleged Golden Age of 1880) and there is Campaigning on various issues and causes some of which is conducted from and through the parliamentary estate but much of which is not. Those five Cs and the hours available in a week are not

easily reconciled. The Chamber has to prove its worth if it we are to revitalise it.

We have to be ruthlessly realistic. The other four Cs are not about to be abolished or to disappear of their own accord. Nor should they. Committee activity, constituency engagements, casework and campaigning are all vital functions of a modern legislature and an industrious representative and legislator. A successful set of changes would more efficiently link the Chamber to the other four Cs so that the Chamber becomes the place where committee reports are more prominently highlighted, affording them extra profile and value, where the concerns of constituents and constituencies can be more forcefully aired and where campaigns can be launched and sustained. The links between the Chamber and all the other Cs have been largely broken. We have to seek the means to restore those links.

And at the same time, perhaps, we can think about the other things that have contributed to the decline of the Chamber and the prospects of curing those. I will return to this before I end my remarks.

It is here that I would like to set out my own thinking and encourage a wider discussion. What do we need to offer MPs from the chamber so that it will be worth the investment of their time? How can we do this relatively swiftly, so that this vast new cohort of MPs choose to become citizens of the Chamber, an outcome which would radically change the culture of the House of Commons? How do we then convince the media to take notice of this shift so the public becomes aware that something different and worthwhile here is happening? Who will be prepared to take some personal and political risks if the chamber is to be revived?

It seems to me that there are three essential themes that should shape our approach.

The first is that there should be more opportunities for all MPs, but especially backbenchers, to ask questions of ministers. I have tried to play my part in this regard by making every effort to make rapid progress down the order paper so that as many as possible of those in the House who want to pose an inquiry to a minister have that opportunity. I have also deliberately rescued the Urgent Question, a device which compels a minister to come to the

House to face a question on a matter which has suddenly arisen, from its march towards parliamentary obsolescence. There were more than 20 UQs awarded in the period between my becoming Speaker last June and the dissolution compared with two in the 12 months previously. I will be no less sympathetic towards the Urgent Question as a means of scrutiny in the Parliament ahead.

It is worth asking, though, whether we would benefit from building more space for questions into the parliamentary timetable. At the moment, a month or slightly longer can pass between, for example, a session of Treasury or Foreign Affairs questions being held and while really momentous events can be covered through a ministerial statement or Urgent Question, some less spectacular but very important developments can be missed or become rather stale by the time that the Chancellor or Foreign Secretary appears at the despatch box again. If we were to extend the time available for questions each day to 80 or 90 minutes that would enable questions to two major departments to be heard, rather than to merely one Department as at present. Moreover it would allow for scrutiny to be more regular, more intensive, more inclusive of Members and more of an inducement for MPs to see the chamber as a worthwhile vehicle for their political endeavours.

The one valid objection that I can envisage to such a process is that it would cut into that scarce resource which is parliamentary time and so would come at the expense of other crucial activities, notably legislative scrutiny. I am not convinced that this has to be a zero-sum game. We certainly do not want to return to the insane business hours of the past with the House discussing legislation in the small hours of the morning. There are other ways to create time if we are imaginative. I have no personal objection to an earlier starting time on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. A few more Friday sitting days would not be a great burden. And, above all else, by aligning the schedule of the House of Commons more closely with that of the school holidays, pressing on until very nearly the end of July or later and returning for September sittings, we can put serious amounts of new time aside for considering legislation. When I made this assertion at a Hansard Society lecture last September I was considered something of a maverick, worst still an idealist and perhaps even an eccentric by a number of Westminster insiders. I am pleased to see that there now seems

to be a consensus that more sitting weeks would not only please the public but be a well-regarded Parliamentary resource.

My second theme is that the Chamber would become more relevant by being more topical. As Speaker of the House I would not want to imply that any aspect of House business is anything less than pulsating. I want to assure this audience that Hollywood has made no movie which could remotely compete with the average Tuesday night Adjournment Debate. But even allowing for this, it should be conceded that our current structure and system for general debates is perhaps not the most riveting aspect of life within the chamber. Put squarely, we have too many general debates which are indeed extremely general and rather lengthy but not much of a debate and too few short, sharp and snappy exchanges on subjects which are immediately relevant, in the minds of MPs as concerned citizens as well as parliamentarians and of interest to the electorate at large.

In my view, we would be better off with a larger number of short and highly topical debates and not a smaller number of lengthy debates on matters that are not always pressing. Sir George Young, when Shadow Leader of the House, favoured such a change and my instinct is that there should now be sufficient cross-party agreement to bring about that change. I am convinced that a more flexible system of debates would bring Members into the Chamber not only because they are really interested in the subject concerned. The media would have little option but to report such exchanges and the public would become engaged too. Another possibility would be to provide regular space in our timetable for a debate to occur on a subject selected from a short-list determined by public petitions. There are, I freely admit, some dangers in this idea but once again why be allergic to experimentation?

The final theme I want to promote is the resurrection of the Private Member's Bill as part of the parliamentary process. The opportunities for the individual backbench MP to act as a legislator in his or her own right are too limited. The time available for this has diminished to the point where the sensible course for a Member who finds him or herself a lucky winner in the ballot is to see if a department has some "hand-out" legislation which it would not mind seeing enacted by this route. There is nothing wrong with this but it is sad that the Private

Member's Bill is no longer seen, as it was very prominently in the 1960s, as the chance for a crusading backbencher to promote a really big cause and eventually pilot it onto the statute book. I would like to see more time offered for Private Member's Bills. I am certainly open to asking whether Friday is the only or the right day for them, and want to see more resources provided to those who want to champion that legislation. It seems to me that this is an admirable goal in itself but it would also, once again, demonstrate the worth of the Chamber.

Up to now I have been talking about how we get different types of activity into the Chamber. Let me take a moment to say why we should do so – in other words, in praise of the Chamber itself.

The Chamber of the House of Commons is laid out like the former St Stephen's Chapel no more than a few yards away. The monastic stalls facing each other are fancifully thought to have engendered a two-party system. I am not sure whether the proponents of that view have considered its application to coalitions.

But the key thing about the Chamber is that it is small. A comparable area would be a tennis court with sidelines and run-outs, not the same shape but the same area. It is often said that we have seats for only 427 Members, but this must be a very approximate calculation. If you visualize me in my former party life sitting next to my magnificent colleague Mr Nicholas Soames you will understand that the figure must be an estimate. The important aspect to this is that we need only a hundred or so Members in that small Chamber to change its atmosphere entirely – to get the electricity of question and debate to spark and crackle. That is very different from a huge hemicycle in which even half the membership present is outfaced by the rows of empty seats.

And allied with the size of the Chamber is the way that we use it. In the debate on the rebuilding of the Chamber after its destruction in 1941, Nicholas Soames's grandfather, Winston Churchill, spoke of the "conversational" style of debate and the best debates are like that today. They exhibit immediacy, directness, passion and emotion. We do not want queues of MPs reading scripts into the record.



In this respect, the class of 2010 has made an outstanding start. I have been surprised and delighted at how many new Members are making their maiden speeches – nervous as they must feel – without a note. Not only does that bode well for the directness and intimacy that I mentioned just now, it also augurs well for an especially home-spun tradition, that of “giving way” in debate, often to people who you know will not agree with you and whose comments you might feel better without. Colleagues who speak extempore can usually cope readily with interventions. With a script, it can be more difficult. Perhaps we need to be selective about some of the traditions of the House of Commons but, whatever the technique Members choose for making speeches, “giving way” to interventions in the course of them is surely one of the best.

I have suggested just a few ways to revive the Chamber. I am sure there are other options. Yet what matters, and what is so encouraging, is that we now have a climate in which the merits of various ideas can be deliberated with enthusiasm and the plausible prospect of an actual outcome. Moreover, the words “parliamentary reform” are no longer received with yawns or treated as if a contradiction in terms. There is a hunger for change, an appetite for innovation and a conviction on all sides that we need – and are ready - to think anew.

This is exceptionally exciting for me as Speaker in what will be a historic and fascinating Parliament but it should also be a thrill for the likes of the Hansard Society. People involved with you have been banging on about the need for urgent parliamentary reform for decades. For much of that time it must have seemed as if most of Westminster was wearing earmuffs. Yet the Hansard Society has always believed that the House of Commons matters and that Parliament must entertain change if it is to matter as much as it could to as many as it should. Peter, your example over the years, if I may say so, has been particularly impressive. I became involved as a council member because I shared those values. It is so rewarding to see issues such as the revival of the chamber being addressed with such vigour today.

I have mentioned the class of 2010 and I will conclude by making an appeal to them through this platform. The House of Commons can be a confusing and complicated place and its

proceedings are often complex, although often for sound current, not arcane historical, reasons. Despite this, there are, in fact, all the means at your disposal to be a really effective parliamentarian and life at Westminster does not have to be a short or long wait for a ministerial red box. I want to help you become a parliamentarian who matters for yourself, your constituents and the causes you care about. Those who work for and help run the House of Commons share my aim as well. I fully understand the multiple pressures which new MPs will be under and the almost compulsive nature of the “permanent campaign” mentality which we appear to have imported from America. Scrutiny is, however, the absolute core of what the House of Commons is about and the Chamber is the place where scrutiny is and, crucially, is seen to be exercised. This will be a highly original, intriguing, Parliament in many respects. Let it also be the one in which the Chamber comes to life again.