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NEW BROOMS

**IDEAS FOR REFORMING
WESTMINSTER FROM
LABOUR'S 2017 INTAKE**

Edited by James Frith MP

Fabian Ideas 647

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New brooms

Ideas for reforming Westminster from Labour's 2017 intake

Edited by James Frith MP

Project partners



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Valerie Vaz MP

Each new intake to the House of Commons looks afresh at how parliament works and in this report 11 Labour colleagues from the ‘surprise’ 2017 general election reflect on the experience of their first year as MPs.

The result is this collection of proposals for parliamentary reform, edited by James Frith MP. He became a new dad to Bobby in the days after he was elected, an experience which no doubt helped to sharpen his perspective. In essays brimming with creativity my colleagues tackle issues from the accountability of ministers, to parliamentary behaviours and culture, and improving public access; and from legislation and debates to making parliament a modern workplace.

The point of these ideas is to ensure we can deal with the needs of our constituents. As MPs we need to have time to step out of our cloistered workplace, both physically and intellectually. This helps us do our job and will also add to the understanding of the work of parliamentarians in the 21st century.

We are at the confluence of tradition and modernisation and it is right that each new parliament should reflect on its practices and how they can strengthen our democracy. Since I was elected in 2010, for example, the extensive use of the urgent question, initiated by Speaker Bercow, has meant that parliament is able to react to national and international

events immediately, with a government minister required to come to the House of Commons to respond the same day.

As we prepare to celebrate the centenary of the first woman elected to the House of Commons, we know that we remain far from gender parity in our parliament. Modernisation and further democratisation will advance the journey to a balanced parliament and must be a priority in the crowded political discourse.

The authors should be congratulated for distilling their ideas, and the Fabian Society and Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for disseminating these proposals. Not everyone will agree with all the suggested measures but I welcome discussions with colleagues from across the House on the future of our parliament and this pamphlet is a significant starting point.

These authors have taken the initiative with thoughtful and often daring proposals which deserve a wide audience and serious discussion by anyone wishing for a modern parliament that is relevant both to those elected and to the people who elect us.

James Frith MP

I am delighted to present this collection of proposals for parliamentary reform from Labour's 2017 intake of new MPs. Collectively, they argue how we might strengthen our democracy; make parliament more effective for those we are sent here to represent; and ensure our place of work resembles a modern workplace that our voters would recognise.

In recent months, there have been renewed calls to modernise parliament by introducing proxy voting for parents with newborn babies. So this publication comes at an important moment when we need to distil the strongest ideas and arguments for reform.

After an open invitation to all, nearly a third of Labour's new intake from 2017 have written frankly about how they want parliament to change after our first full year here. Their ideas include immediate and longer term reforms but all can, we hope, form the basis of the debate and decisions to come.

I am proud to bring these wide ranging and dynamic voices together and delighted that the Fabian Society, in association with the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, have agreed to publish our little book. It was born of a collective view that we should offer a constructive voice on ways to reform our parliament and whilst this contribution comes from the left, our ideas are not party political and will require support from across the house if they are to achieve success.

New brooms

Let me put on record my thanks to all who have helped with this project and contributed to it to ensure it is a success.

Summary of proposals

The recommendations from our 11 authors amounts to a significant agenda for parliamentary reform. This 'manifesto' is drawn from each MPs' individual proposals but does not represent their collective views.

Accountability of the prime minister and ministers

- Introduce new select committee style hearings for ordinary backbenchers to question the prime minister by rotation
- Shorten the existing PMQs format to mainly consist of questions from party leaders
- Enable backbench MPs to submit urgent questions in advance of PMQs to raise a topical issue that needs swift attention
- Increase the duration or frequency of departmental questions
- Make more motions passed by either house binding – or create a process where the government is forced to explain itself with a strict time limit

Voting

- Introduce proxy voting in extraordinary circumstances such as childbirth or ill health
- Enable simultaneous voting to improve efficiency with a reduction of multiple 15-minute divisions
- Replace aye and no lobbies with government and opposition lobbies to make voting simpler and faster

- Allow voting pads to vote from within the chamber for those wishing to

Legislation

- Create more avenues for non-government legislation, by reforming private members' bills and re-allocating government time where it is under-used
- Hold post-legislative scrutiny with a mandatory debate on an act of parliament one year after it receives royal assent
- Introduce a public evidence stage into the passage of most bills as a formal part of their passage through the House of Commons – and a similar procedure for bills starting in the Lords
- Extend the use of draft bills to give experts and the public the opportunity to shape legislation
- End or limit filibustering where MPs can stop a bill proceeding by speaking for all the allotted time

Debates

- Increase the role of Westminster Hall sittings, to include debating 10-minute rule bills, hearing petitions and receiving non-urgent statements
- Introduce an electronic system to register requests to speak in the chamber
- Use debating time fairly and efficiently by placing time limits on backbench speakers throughout a debate so that the length of everyone's speech is set to reflect the number who have registered to speak

New brooms

Hours of business

- Make greater use of Fridays or Monday mornings for parliamentary business with the consideration of rotating the parliamentary week during the year
- Re-schedule the parliamentary week to reduce three-line whip business during evening sittings. Important legislation should not be considered when the Commons has a late sitting (ie Mondays) especially in the case of debates with 'protected time'

Parliamentary behaviours and culture to improve public access

- Consider alternatives to exclusively Anglican prayers at the start of the parliamentary day – for example a reflection led by different MPs in turn
- Introduce an MP's job description to improve engagement and help constituents hold members to account
- Reform archaic procedures and language that have no clear purpose and are off-putting to the public
- Write draft laws in a way that is more understandable and navigable
- Update the dress code for MPs to reflect modern business standards and end the routine use of historic ceremonial dress for office holders
- Use Westminster Hall as the place where the public petitions parliament and the government and MPs are called to respond
- Consider allowing private citizens to propose legislation, co-sponsored by an MP or group of MPs

A modern workplace

- Ensure that disabled MPs and staff receive the support they need without fail
- Introduce an independent induction process for new MPs, including a formal mentoring scheme
- Greatly reduce the amount of printed paper and digitise parliamentary documentation whenever feasible
- Reduce MP-only spaces to end the exclusive 'them and us' culture
- During the refurbishment of parliament, take debates out of Westminster and around the country to engage with local government and the public
- During the refurbishment, create a new chamber that retains parliament's heritage but also reflects a new culture in style and design and is fully accessible for disabled people and digitally enabled

IN WITH THE NEW: MODERN TECHNOLOGY AND MODERN PRACTICES

James Frith MP

Parliament is still an old-fashioned workplace. New ways of voting could help MPs better juggle working for their constituencies with supporting their families. And a less deferential atmosphere could ensure they have more of a say too.

“**L**ast time I expected you to win and you lost. This time, I expected you to lose and you won. Congratulations. Now get to work for us!” This is one of my favourite comments among those that were sent to me shortly after my election to parliament at the snap general election in June 2017. For this voter, it wasn’t about the human or personal toil of the democratic process for the individual seeking election – and nor should it have been. Instead they impressed on me their expectation; that I should get to work on their behalf straight away. So I did. And I am.

With that in mind, I want to reflect on the practical efficacy of our democratic system and some of the ways it can work better.

Shortly after my election, I became a dad again and less than 36 hours after the arrival of my son, I had to be in parliament to speak and vote on a Brexit issue. This is a stretch for a new dad and would be near impossible for a new mum. Parliament hasn’t caught up with the rest of the country on

baby leave, or much else that resembles a modern workplace that puts both efficiency and good outcomes at its heart. There is too much process and not enough product.

My wife and I had been on the delivery ward facing an early induction with a high-risk pregnancy. Knowing that this state could last for days and that it would quite possibly clash with my job to vote brought an edge to the room that was frankly unhealthy. For this dilemma to reach the delivery suite demonstrates well, I hope, how inflexible some of the parliamentary process is. That is why the way we vote must be changed to take account of exceptional circumstances. In my example, the situation pitted my fundamental role as an MP serving my constituency against my fundamental role as a man, dad and husband in support of my wife who was doing all the work at the time. Parliament is steeped in tradition and feels impossible to move at times but we might all agree it is easier for us to change parliament than to hold back the existential force of the arrival of life. I don't expect our voters to accept my not voting just because of untimely moments in my own life. Instead the system should change for the better.

Parliament needs to allow for proxy or remote voting in a certain number of cases, including key life moments. This should be determined by the government chief whip, possibly in conjunction with all chief whips, and agreed with the Speaker within a suitable timescale. The voting could be proxy registered before a nominated proxy moves through the lobby or alternatively, we could move to a digitally secure voting system for remote access, time limited votes. At the moment, MPs queue round the block for the 'ayes and nos' voting lobbies. This process can take as long as 25 minutes to conclude. With multiple votes, this might mean it takes a couple of hours to cast your votes in full. We give our vote to a clerk

who registers it on an iPad. Essentially we queue physically to vote digitally. Who amongst us would travel the distance between you and the person you wish to call on the phone before making the call with them stood next to you?

I don't want to scrap the act of voting in the lobbies entirely though. For this new MP – and indeed for all of us – the lobbies provide an excellent space to meet fellow MPs, develop relationships or strike up new connections, offer support to friends or seek advice. This is all part of the democratic piece and the lobbies must remain part of it.

Returning to that guiding thought from one of my voters – now get to work for us – I would add: 'and now work more effectively'. A vote cast from the delivery suite of a maternity ward or any such instance is as valid as that which is made in the democratic jostling through either voting lobby.

Parliament's ability to perform need not be tempered or hindered by the life moments of its MPs. In fact, parliament will perform better if all aspects of real life are reflected in its practices. Parliament led the way on workplace reform, equality legislation and parental leave but is yet to practise what is preached.

There are many changes we can make to our parliament to improve further our ability to work for others. The time we spend working for those we represent is important and any time wasted diminishes the time we can spend representing the people who elected us.

Ahead of any vote is a debate which has allocated or protected time. How these debates take place needs looking at. All MPs have to be in the chamber at the start of the debate they wish to speak in – and that is fair enough. They need to listen to the frontbench speeches setting the scene for the discussion which follows. New MPs though will likely be in the chamber until towards the end of debate before making their case and in many cases we run out of time to

fit everyone in. Many outside of parliament would find it extraordinary that all of those who wish to speak on a topic are not heard.

And with better time-managed speeches from the beginning of debates – when the time allocated to a debate is known and the number of speakers wishing to speak is registered – more voices will be heard and less time will be wasted. In addition, the Speaker or chair could invite newer and younger voices – in parliamentary years at least – to contribute to the debate. The deferential attitude of ‘most senior first’ has some value, as in life, but it needs to be limited. That limit is reached all too often in debates when the niceties become repetitive and take up time, leaving more junior voices unheard or cut short. Often, by the time some of the new intake of MPs are heard, the minister’s place will have been taken by a junior frontbencher and the more established and influential backbenchers whose support you might have liked to get, could well have taken leave of the chamber.

Total deference changes very little. Greater parliamentary agility is what we need. Not change for change’s sake but improvements to how our parliament works, how MPs record their vote, the time we spend here, the environment in which we operate and the tweaks that can ensure our parliament evolves and modernises and works even better for the people who send us here – our boss, the country.

AN APPROACHABLE PARLIAMENT: ACCESSIBILITY FOR VOTERS AND NEW MPS

Preet Kaur Gill MP

Reform is needed to de-mystify parliament for both voters and newly-elected members. MPs need job descriptions and new MPs need much more support to help them communicate with and serve their constituents.

To most people, parliament is an iconic, yet impenetrable institution. An institution that feels far removed from their everyday lives. Its archaic conventions, complex processes and use of jargon-laden language does little to bring the public on board.

It's easy to see why anyone watching parliament on TV would be turned off by the joking and jeering coming from their political representatives. It's no wonder then that much of the public feel alienated from parliament and its processes. By reforming parliamentary systems and opening them up to make them more accessible, we can transform this way of thinking and in the process, bring more people into politics. The challenge is clear – and democracy depends on public participation.

Like many others, my constituency of Edgbaston is diverse. It includes affluent parts as well as pockets of deprivation. From the student saddled with debt, to the single parent struggling to make ends meet, it is impera-

tive that there is a greater awareness of how parliament can work for everyone.

When I was out campaigning in the run-up to the 2017 general election, I was amazed at the wealth of experience on offer from people within the constituency. I came away wondering how we could harness their collective knowledge, and make use of the wide-ranging expertise housed within the constituency. On the doorstep, I was not only met by doctors and teachers, but also those with invaluable first-hand experience of local issues, who were unaware of how they could be a part of the solution.

Core Labour values seek to build a democratic society through cooperation and collective decision making. This should be our guiding principle in everything we do. It's only through community consultation that we can truly know the full impact a decision will have. To be truly inclusive we must also make a concerted effort to reach out to those who are, for whatever reason, less engaged in the political process. We know that the more disengaged and disillusioned an individual is, the less likely they are to get involved.

'Meet your MP' coffee mornings, constituency-wide newsletters and roving surgeries are just a handful of ways an MP can interact with those who typically slip through the net of standard communications. Increasing political literacy at an early age would also go a long way to remedy the low levels of interest, which sadly often endure a lifetime. To address the woefully inadequate levels of political education in schools, especially for pupils at state schools and in schools from disadvantaged areas, work needs to be done to educate and enlighten young people about the political process.

School visits by MPs are an opportunity to inspire, empower, and increase awareness amongst a generation of future voters. Leading on school visits to parliament is a great way of piquing the curiosity of children, and this

will invariably do more to inspire them than a classroom lesson ever could.

Meanwhile digital technologies present us with a powerful way to connect with citizens, old and young. Parliament needs to catch up and take essential steps to digitise democracy. These technologies can play a positive role in demystifying parliament in clear, concise language, as well as providing transparency, and another way to connect constituents with their MPs.

It is also vital that parliament becomes more family friendly. I know there are discussions currently ongoing about the use of proxy voters when female MPs have just given birth, and I fully support this idea. We cannot allow women to be put off going into politics because they feel they may have to choose between representing their constituents and having a family.

I believe we are right to honour and respect the traditions of parliament, but that this should not constrain us from improving the experience of those who work here. In the Commons, Speaker Bercow has been a champion of modernisation, much to the disdain of some. Simple measures he has introduced, such as no longer requiring the clerks to wear wigs, have improved their working environment, allowing them to do their vital work with increased comfort.

I also believe that the advisory committee on business appointments (Acoba) needs to have its powers enhanced. Acoba is the body set up to prevent the so-called 'revolving door' between government and business, where former ministers leave parliament and walk straight into a high-paid position in one of the firms within the sector they used to oversee. The potential for corruption, whether actual or perceived, is obvious. Currently, the rules are largely procedural and have no sanctions for non-compliance, and as the chair of the public administration and constitutional affairs committee, Bernard

Jenkin MP, recently commented: “The government must take steps to ensure that the Acoba system is improved swiftly. In the long term, failure to do so will lead to an even greater decline in public trust in our democracy and our government.”

A key part of making parliament accessible is to clearly convey to the public what it is an MP does. An MP's job is complex. One way to help to clarify an MP's role and responsibilities for the electorate, would be to provide a job description – giving them a clear indication of what is expected of MPs, enabling constituents to hold us to account.

Given the nature of the job, it is unsurprising that a formal handover between MPs rarely takes place. However, it should be incumbent on parliament to provide a starter pack containing key constituency and parliamentary information, and a guide on how to set-up and run both your constituency and parliamentary offices, saving precious time and reducing the duplication of work. Preparing for any new job can be a daunting prospect, but given just six weeks to prepare and execute my election campaign gave me very little time to ready myself for parliament. Ask any new MP and they'll say the same thing; the first few months leave you feeling around in the dark, waiting for the day where everything becomes clearer.

The importance of finding someone who can impart their Westminster wisdom, or even just lend a sympathetic ear, cannot be understated. Mentors are so important, and this is a cause I have championed throughout my time in parliament. A shadowing scheme within the first few months in the job, would be immeasurably beneficial in helping new MPs to find their feet. It is clear that support for new MPs is found wanting. Though the shape this support should take is up for debate, an informal induction is the very least parliament can offer. After all, an efficient and informed MP will be better equipped to act in the interests of their electorate – and that's good for democracy.

PUNCH AND JUDY POLITICS: THE FUTURE OF PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

Darren Jones MP

Some people like the weekly showdown of 'PMQs'. But others – MPs and members of the public alike – find the showboating, shouting and non-answers a turn-off. There must be a better way of holding the prime minister to account.

I don't often go to prime minister's questions. Not unless there's an important issue, or I'm supporting another Labour MP with a question. And so far, I haven't won the weekly raffle of getting to ask one myself. The reality is that PMQs is probably broken, and needs fixing.

During my first few weeks as a new member of parliament, I used to check my tie and get a seat in good time. It's usually the main political event of the week, in terms of the teatime news, so you want to get a good seat. But the reality is that you can't really hear what's going on, and the questions never get a proper answer anyway.

Maybe if I were shorter it would all be better. The speakers designed to look like circular portcullises in the green benches amplify the sound. But being six-foot plus means I'd need to lean on the shoulder of my neighbouring MP to get the benefit. It would likely be awkward.

I keep working in my office and watch it on the TV instead. With BBC Parliament having access to the micro-

phones, viewers can actually hear the non-answers from the prime minister.

I have two main issues with the weekly Punch and Judy show that is PMQs: the House often gets far too excited like some Roman gladiatorial audience, and it's usually a 45-minute period of non-answers and planted questions.

There are two benefits to this set-piece, however. First, it serves as a weekly barometer on the strength or weakness of the government of the day. And because of that, it captures the public imagination and the headline news. Second, backbench MPs can often raise important constituency issues directly with the prime minister and get the promise of a meeting or a follow up.

So how do we improve the show? Given the benefits which I have set out above, I would recommend two reforms.

First, keep PMQs but restrict it to just the leaders of the political parties plus a few topical questions for those MPs who wish to use the platform to suggest they ought to be the leader instead. How that is decided will need to be left to the dark arts of the Speaker of the House.

Second, set up a new select committee style hearing – much like the liaison committee where select committee chairs get to question the prime minister – and let back benchers question the prime minister there. This would be useful for two reasons. First, MPs can ask the prime minister questions in a more productive environment. Second, MPs could then be allowed to have a few follow-up questions – much like we currently do during select committee hearings.

The problem with PMQs of course, is that the questioner only gets one go – and one answer at the prime minister's discretion. A select committee-type structure would require the prime minister to give a better answer. And if the

MP takes issue with the answer they get, it gives them the opportunity to further make their point.

Further, MPs should be selected each week by both raffle and application. Currently, MPs fill out a form in the voting lobby, usually via the whips. Each week, MPs are selected and get notified if they've made the shortlist to ask a question. This is fine, but it doesn't allow for any discretion around urgent questions. One could lobby the Speaker and bob during PMQs to try and catch their eye, but this is never an easy task. A better way would be to allow MPs to apply for an urgent PMQ as a backbencher, much like applications for urgent questions, when MPs have to write to the Speaker setting out their case for time on the floor of the House.

Because one of the ironies of PMQs is that, on the week that you might have an important question of national or international significance, your name might not come up in the raffle. And on the weeks that you don't have a crucial question to ask, you might get lucky and have to think of something to ask to fill your slot. That doesn't seem to be a sensible way of organising things.

So let the Punch and Judy show have its place – some people seem to like it. But keep it short and let it serve its real purpose. And then create a PMQs committee where MPs can raise serious and important questions directly with the prime minister in the hope that the answer is detailed, helpful and open to supplementary questioning when required.

My sense is that my constituents would value the opportunity of me raising their issues in that way, over the clambering, excitable and ultimately useless current format of PMQs.

PRODUCTIVITY BOOST: MAKING PARLIAMENT WORK HARDER

Sarah Jones MP

Despite the national challenges we face, parliament is the least productive it has been for years. That poses dangers for our democracy. Practical steps to open up our law-making could breathe life into this zombie parliament.

“**T**here’s never been a parliament like it.” That was the conclusion of a veteran MP chatting to me recently about parliament’s lack of legislative action this session. Where does the problem lie and what can be done about it?

We are early in a five-year parliamentary term and the enormous legislative challenge of Brexit looms. Anyone would imagine a government facing this test would be using every second it had to bring forward and pass new laws.

The reality couldn’t be more different. Of course the lack of a majority is a huge headache for Theresa May, and many manifesto promises have been kicked into the long grass. But she and her party appear to have a complete disregard for parliamentary process – and they are stifling democracy in the mother of all parliaments as a result.

New brooms

Less productive

Parliament has become steadily less productive. The number of bills passed per sitting day is now around half the average between 1997 and 2017. Parliamentary sessions vary of course – some are longer and some shorter, while all governments tend to rush through lots of legislation at the end of a session. But compared to the most productive year under Labour (2009–10), when a bill was passed on average every two sitting days, we’re going five times slower under May, with a bill every 10 days.

Under the Conservatives since 2010, we’ve seen the number of government bills introduced to parliament drop by 25 per cent compared to Labour governments between 1997 and 2010. Bills passed into law are down by the same amount.

Ministers can still try and get some things done. But they will increasingly have to do so through arcane procedures and secondary legislation which is much harder to scrutinise or amend. And rushing bills through at the end of a parliamentary session is clearly not a sustainable way to make policy.

The 2017 snap election meant bills were forced through in a rush with little to no scrutiny. But now, more than ever, we need proper scrutiny of the laws being passed. The Brexit legislation alone will set the tone for this country for a generation – and could backfire massively if we get it wrong. The customs bill is a perfect example of this. The government is so afraid of dissent on its backbenches that it continually refused to bring the bill back in front of the house. And all the while Brexit draws closer.

Less democratic

It’s perhaps not surprising we have stagnation in parliament, given Theresa May lost her majority at last year’s election,

leads a divided party on Brexit, and relies on the DUP who like to spend most of their time in Northern Ireland. Even her own backbencher Andrew Mitchell called her government 'dead in the water'.

But this government has gone further down a path of complete disregard for democracy than any other before it. It's not just an inability to pass legislation that is casting a shadow over this parliament. It's the way the governing party is conducting itself. In 2009, MPs accepted there needed to be reform to loosen the stranglehold which the government held on parliamentary business. The 'Wright reforms' gave us the backbench business committee and emboldened select committees.

The way the Conservatives have acted since the 2017 election undoes much of that progress. We have had a series of secretaries of state misleading select committees, most notably David Davies' imaginary Brexit sector analyses and Amber Rudd's fatal mistake on deportation targets.

Opposition day debates are another part of parliamentary time which this government is turning into farce. From 1978 until 2009, no government lost an opposition day vote. When it finally did happen, on 29 April 2009 in a vote on settlement rights for Gurkha veterans, it was a big deal. The government immediately acted to bring forward new proposals before that year's summer recess.

Since last year's election, Theresa May's government has decided to not even bother voting on opposition day motions. The SNP's Pete Wishart has accused the government of degrading this important part of parliamentary time "to little more than adjournment debates".

The effect of this on those who value parliamentary democracy and accountability is clear. The Speaker, who has been visibly angry at the government's disengagement with the House, has granted more than 80 urgent questions in the

current parliament. That compares to 50 urgent questions in 2015–16 and just 27 in the two-year session which he oversaw between 2010 and 12.

Of course, a bit of friction between the executive and the legislature is natural. But if the current direction of travel continues, we risk parliament becoming a lame duck.

Breathing life into parliament

We can't change what we can't control – the government directs much of what happens in parliament and until we have a change of government we can't force Theresa May to behave differently. But there are still some things MPs can do:

- First, we must increase the productivity of parliament. We can use our spaces and our time more effectively. An obvious move would be to maximise the working day, and consider greater use of Fridays or Monday mornings for parliamentary business. And turning over Westminster Hall to more meaningful uses, like passing legislation – even if that means members will need to make the short walk over to the voting lobbies
- Second, we need legislation from more sources, not just from government with the odd private members' bill thrown in. In the United States, Congress and Senate, members have much more freedom to introduce legislation, regardless of whether their party has a majority. We ought to do the same, reforming private members' bills and offering more avenues for non-government legislation. If the government won't use its time properly and tries to table general debates, that time should be offered to backbenchers or the opposition for their own legislation. A further, more radical, step would be to allow

private citizens to propose legislation, co-sponsored by an MP or group of MPs

- Third, continuing with the idea of bringing parliament to the people, what about making use of Westminster Hall, one of the most important buildings in the country, which sits empty for most of the time? The Speaker is keen on digital democracy. We now have e-petitions. But there should be a chance for MPs to show that citizens' concerns can penetrate Westminster through 'people's debates'. Westminster Hall could become the place where the public petitions parliament, and we and government are called to respond. On the same theme, we could take debates out of Westminster and engage with local government as well. The upcoming renovation work of parliament gives us an opportunity to think more creatively about where we 'do' politics. Rather than complaining about public disengagement, this could be a chance to do something about it, and to pop the Westminster bubble
- Fourth, motions passed by either House should surely be binding. Even if they come from the opposition or backbenches. Labour has recently resorted to using an ancient parliamentary tool called a 'humble address' to force the government to act. But this only covers the publication of documents. Any motions that pass should be binding and effective – or the government should be forced into a process of explanation, given a strict time limit to prove it is delivering. And if they don't (much like if they mislead parliament), ministers should be sacked
- Finally, pre-legislative scrutiny plays an important role in improving law-making. But we should also be more open to scrutinising our laws after they've passed. A mandatory debate on an act of parliament one year after it received royal assent would allow us to discuss whether a law is working in the way it was intended

New brooms

Those of us who won election to parliament last year shouldn't rest on our laurels and accept the status quo. Theresa May's premiership might not last but it gives us the opportunity to think creatively about what could change. Like the building we sit in, parliament's processes could do with a serious makeover.

OPEN AND EFFICIENT: LEARNING FROM OTHER LEGISLATURES

Anna McMorrin MP

Compared to other legislatures in the United Kingdom, Westminster feels old-fashioned and like an exclusive club. Technology, simplified procedures and far fewer 'member-only' spaces will make the Commons more open and efficient.

To look at Westminster from a distance it appears to be an anachronism in today's modern world. An island set apart from the country it seeks to govern. A place with rules and a culture of its own and more in common with a boy's public school or gentleman's club than what it should be – an open and outward facing seat of democracy that represents all of us. For most people the only glimpse into the House of Commons is prime minister's questions. A brawling, braying mass of privilege and elitism broadcast to the world. Noisy and often childlike, it does little to present any sort of dignified picture of parliament as both sides swap insults.

Sitting from within, the place seems no more welcoming. My first PMQs last summer was quite an eye opener. Seated a couple of rows back on the opposition benches, I was unprepared for the volume of noise and intensity of anger as each side tested their jousting skills in an effort to win that particular soundbite war. To me it seemed as if I had landed

in an alternate universe where normal rules did not apply. It felt the epitome of arrogance and entitlement – an establishment content with looking inward, playing its own game by its own rules. Certainly a weekly test for our political leaders, but as a window to the world it lets us down.

Parliament is a place of great historical significance, but it is a place for those who ‘have’ rather than those who ‘have not’. It starts with the rules. As an MP I can go anywhere, sit anywhere and dine anywhere. I have my own staircase, my own tearoom, my own cloakroom, green benches both inside and outside the chamber and I even have doorkeepers to look after me. But if someone else tries to walk up that staircase, dares to sit on a green bench or enters the cloakroom they are swiftly asked to leave and promptly escorted out. A modern-day democracy should not be a place that fosters this type of privilege, instead it should actively seek to break down those barriers and become the type of welcoming, open and inclusive environment that we need.

And what of the actual business of parliament? As a new MP learning to contribute to debates, scrutinise and ask questions and make interventions was like learning a whole new language, shrouded in prohibitions and process. To rebel means not getting your voice heard. It’s either work with it or not at all.

It’s time this changed. One of my first interventions in the chamber went horribly wrong when I mistakenly referred to a previous speaker’s point and spoke longer than I should have done. The Deputy Speaker pulled me up on it and I sat down a little red faced. We all learn and as new MPs we’ve all had our moments, but the archaic systems imposed do little to encourage the wide debate and scrutiny that we need to see to get the best out of our government and our democracy.

This is also so in our laws. Increasingly legislation is being searched for, read and used by a wider range of people. It

is no longer confined to professional libraries and lawyers. Technology has made it accessible to everyone, opening up a world of possibilities. But once found, legislation can be intricate and intimidating.

The volume of legislation, its piecemeal structure, level of detail and frequent amendments mean that even professional users find it hard to understand and navigate. We should instead be seeking to simplify our language, reduce its excessive complexity and allow those we represent a chance to get involved.

Having worked for many years in the Welsh Government and National Assembly of Wales, a relatively young democracy, it's sometimes difficult to understand the restrictions and old fashioned ways of Westminster. The daily printing of many hundreds of pages of Hansard, for instance and the many hours waiting to pass through the voting lobbies, with each vote taking at least 15 minutes, seem symptomatic of a place unwilling to be pulled out of the 19th century. Technology means that these things should not need to happen. And a system of electronic voting would simplify this and introduce efficiency to the system.

But it is more than just old fashioned and inefficient. The us and them approach, between members and 'strangers', perpetuates privilege at the expense of equality. Why else have sittings until 11 and 12 o'clock at night? Sittings that prevent me and many others from getting home to our children, making it impossible for members, like me, who live outside London to live a life with responsibilities.

In our new intake I'm pleased to see a consensus that we are there to shake things up. We're not there to simply learn the old ways of doing things. With more women elected than ever before and from all different backgrounds, if we achieve anything it must be to make parliament a better place – more accountable and closer to the people we seek to represent.

New brooms

Shrugging off some of the rules, breaking down that sense of privilege, and dragging it – kicking and screaming – into the modern world would be a start.

A QUESTION OF STYLE: MAKING PARLIAMENT LOOK AND SOUND LIKE VOTERS

Alex Norris MP

The customs and traditions of parliament may seem charming, but they serve to alienate many of those whom MPs aim to represent. Updating some of the practices of the place would bring the institution into the 21st century and better reflect the communities it serves.

Speaking in parliament is like nothing else. It generates a type of nervousness matched only by the way you feel just before you speak in parliament. The audience is a terrifying triumvirate of your peers, an opposition there to unsettle and undermine, and heaven knows how many people watching on television or online. While it is exhilarating, it's also the stuff that fever dreams are made of, and even the steadiest of hands could be forgiven a little wobble under these circumstances.

There are, of course, steps that can be taken by both novice and expert alike to make the experience simpler. Prepare properly, know your subject (or at least appear as if you do), take advantage of the superb research support available, and get to the chamber in plenty of time to avoid the 'dash from the office sweats' – every little trick helps.

The best laid plans can still go awry. And parliament can be like an irascible uncle from childhood – charming and funny, but with an odd sense of humour that can challenge

and throw you off beam. Parliament makes you speak in a slightly different language from how you, your friends or anyone else in the world does. It's English – only it isn't. In the House of Commons, people no longer have names, but are named after places, with a title that changes depending on military service, legal training or any other number of quirks. Meanwhile, the House of Lords must not be referred to as the House of Lords under any circumstances. Despite being the House of Lords.

The member speaking must express their views clearly and with force, but with a forced and formal tone that sounds jarring to anyone watching. To the outside observer the result can look unrecognisable to the world they live in. And that is never a good thing.

For parliament and parliamentarians to connect with people, we need people to see themselves in their democracy – because we want them to feel part of it and believe that it works for them. We also want people from all walks of life to feel empowered to stand for parliament, otherwise it is as obsolete as the elite members' clubs of yesteryear.

The irony behind this theatre is that daily people fumble and stumble over the correct form of address, only for Hansard – the official report – to tidy all this up like it never happened. Overnight you become much more articulate than you were the day before, pithiness is bestowed on all and sundry and erudition exists where none did previously. Would it not simply be easier for people in the chamber to speak normally to begin with, and save the parliamentary elves from correcting mistakes that need never be made in the first place?

How people sound is one aspect of the challenge parliamentary reformers face; what the place looks like is another. Until 1998, a member wishing to make a point of order had to wear a top hat, while it was only last year that male

members were permitted to speak in the chamber without wearing a tie. Parliament is a place of work, the House of Commons an exceptionally serious one. There ought to be standards of dress but these should reflect the 21st century. Similarly, the Speaker, Blackrod and the Gatekeepers wear the types of formal attire that are utterly alien to virtually every workplace in the country. These are the quiet visual cues, amplified by the spoken word, that send a message that perhaps parliament is not for everyone. And while the history of the place is a wonderful thing in many ways, it is for far too many people an extremely ornate 'no entry' sign.

Of course, there are a great many customs and practices that significantly enhance parliamentary business. People in the chamber are very forgiving of missteps, and the current Speaker is a dab hand at supporting struggling members and avoiding embarrassment. At a time when much of our political discourse happens in the social media bear pit, there are several conventions that keeps Commons activity from following suit. These include prohibition of the word 'lie' or its variations, or the general presumption of courtesy.

Each day's proceedings begin with prayers, a not uncontroversial custom. Before the Speaker enters the chamber for the day, half or so of those MPs taking part in oral questions will be the chamber already with another half outside. The half inside observe an Anglican prayer, with the others choosing not to, only entering following its conclusion. While we can acknowledge that Anglicans remain the single biggest faith group in the country, it is entirely reasonable to question whether the day's proceedings should always start with the same prayer from the same faith.

If we agree that starting the day with some reflection is a good thing – and I for one do – we should seek a way to help this reflect modern Britain. A rotation of reflection across a variety of faiths could work, maintaining a pres-

ence for faith while also encouraging the listener to reflect on values of leadership and the ideals of good governance. The Strangers' bar offers members the chance to bring down a guest beer from their constituency for a week, perhaps we could offer each member the chance to offer a favourite reflection? Like Thought for the Day, but without the baffled introduction from John Humphrys.

These changes may seem relatively minor, but would help make our parliament better reflect the community we serve. For right now, the pace of change in parliament is glacial. Recently we discussed the repair and renewal of the palace of Westminster. Below ground the building is in bad shape, and needs significant and expensive repair. Modernisers finally won a vote choosing the quickest and cheapest way to do this – by leaving the building. The refurbishment will last an estimated six years though it is not expected to commence until 2025.

Currently, in what must be described as the most absurdly British act in history, the plan is to recreate our old, small, creaky chamber next door in Richmond House – complete with the lack of space and accessibility that blights the real thing. This is the wrong approach. The period of absence from the Palace of Westminster gives us a blank canvass to try new ideas. Stylistic ones like the ones above, and more ambitious ones, too, such as a horseshoe chamber that feels more like a place to debate than the away end at the City Ground. Some might even prefer moving away from London for a fresh start elsewhere. Somewhere with good transport links, a thriving cultural scene, a sense of history and with the ability to support such a major institution. Somewhere very much like Nottingham.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE: REAL DEMOCRACY INSIDE AND OUTSIDE PARLIAMENT

Laura Pidcock MP

Simplifying processes and stripping away some of the pomp and ceremony could make a big difference to the way parliamentary business is done. But it is even more important to focus on the systemic change – both inside and outside parliament – which could transform our democracy, and citizens' lives, for the better.

It has been just over a year since the general election. It's been a rollercoaster year, but I still feel immense pride that thousands of people leaving their homes on election day (and many posting off their ballot paper) allowed me to represent my wonderful area of North West Durham. I'm still awed by that straightforward, but profound, act of placing a cross next to a political party – an act which is so simple, but which has so much power.

Being an elected representative, if you are doing it right, is a commitment to the people you serve. I think it is important to remember what Tony Benn used to say: "You are employed by the people who vote for you. In my constituency, everyone I met was my employer." You are there, in parliament, for them: you will shout for them, to amplify their voices and concerns; elevate their experiences to the national level; you will constantly push for change and very practically, when in your community you are, amongst

other things, a bridge between your constituent and services, making sure that they are receiving what they deserve, something increasingly hard to ensure in an era of cuts.

If you are a socialist you are also there for your class. You are in parliament, not just to take up a seat, but to challenge powerful people, to attempt to shift their perception of reality from their position of comfort and – far too often – arrogance. The way I see it, you are there to disrupt their narrative that, were they in a position of poverty and struggle, they would do better.

More than that, though, I believe that as a socialist, you must work for systemic change, knowing full well that the help offered to constituents is just a sticking plaster over the deep-seated inequalities which scar our society. Counter to the way many MPs have operated over centuries, it is our life's work to redistribute power away from Westminster, the political establishment and the financial interests of the City and into the hands of people in communities. This is not easy, when the mechanisms of change have been concentrated on parliament and that centralised seat of power for so long.

Before I set foot in the House of Commons, my perception was that it was designed to stifle progress – or at least any radical progress which would shift, irreversibly, power and wealth in society. Like many political activists, I saw that it hindered rather than advanced democracy – a small but concrete example of this is the voter ID pilots. Part of that perception was about how it locks people out with its alienating processes. How can parliament give a platform to the experiences of most people's lives, when it bends so much towards a hierarchical past? After a year of witnessing it at close quarters, and seeing its inner workings, I very much still believe this to be true.

I often ask myself, when sitting in a parliamentary debate, when listening to ministerial questions or prime minis-

ter's questions, what is the point of this place? How do people view this from outside of the chamber? What is the effect of all this energy, in terms of achievement for the people who are my employers – the people in North West Durham? What, beyond that, is the cumulative impact for working-class people, and those shut out of the system? Usually, and depressingly, the answer to that question is nothing.

And because the House seems to be sleeping its way through this parliamentary term, that feeling of impotence is especially strong. From opposition, you can make the resounding and, in my mind, unequivocal case that universal credit is not working; that the relentless cuts to services and social security are harming communities; that, for instance, a sixth form in your community is closing and needs help; that selling arms to nations which could be using them to repress their own citizens is not only being complicit in barbarity but illegal; you can expose and shame all sorts of wrongs and propose a multitude of alternatives, but fundamentally change is not made this way, at least very rarely. The only time I have seen real change is when it is forced from outside of parliament, when people see an injustice, organise against it and use politicians as their mouthpiece, their funnel to directly represent them.

All of the pomp and ceremony of parliament is designed to make politicians look and feel important, to set us apart from the people we serve. So quite literally doors are opened for you, you are called an honourable member and 'ma'am', there are private spaces for elected representatives where members of the public are not allowed. The way legislation is written is stuffy and difficult and often indecipherable were it not for the clerks. The rules around the questions you are allowed to ask ministers, and how you can ask those questions are carefully governed, of course, ostensibly because of

tradition, but the effect is to limit what can be uttered by the people's representatives.

The antiquated rituals of 'bobbing' – of standing up and sitting down to show you want to speak – the walking through a corridor, sometimes for a couple of hours at a time, to register your vote, the way you must address other members in the chamber are all part, in my mind, of a process of setting us apart, to alienate working-class representatives and to firmly establish that we are part of a deferential and hierarchical system, and it is our role not to question it, but to prop it up. Put it this way, if workers were to construct a democratic system for themselves, to run their own society, it would not look anything like the House of Commons.

In fact, the most energised I feel in the House of Commons is when people, activist groups – with real struggles, and a drive to change their situation – come to protest outside of it. The most relaxed, comfortable and effective I feel in my role is when I am in my community. Of course, it is crucial that they are there, in that seat of power, to challenge the system and it is right that we should fight for reform of its archaic rules. But as socialists, we should never paper over the cracks of, and feel comfortable with, this creaking, half-functioning version of democracy.

How hard would it be to change our system so you press a button and a light comes on if you want to speak? In council chambers all over the UK, and in parliaments all over the world, they've discovered this innovation. How simple it would be to give each MP a voting pad to register their vote? What harm would there be in removing the costumes, the pomp, the alienating language? Even if some of the language was brought into the modern world, it would be an advance. "If you agree with what is written on the paper say yes", instead of "as many as are of that opinion say

aye", would be much easier for people follow. Legislative language could certainly be simplified and still be as robust.

All of these things could be done within the blink of an eye but change is resisted, because lots of the people who are elected there, especially on the government side, like the special, privileged feelings associated with its traditions rather than what it can achieve as an institution. So the problem is much bigger than parliamentary rules. The question for our generation is not only how we inject democracy and common sense into the House of Commons, but how do we shift our focus to democratising the rest of society.

Democracy, should, after all, not be a once-every-five-years exercise. It should be the lifeblood of any country, it should be woven into our practice, whether in society or at work. How do we ensure workers have more control in their workplaces? How do we ensure our schools are democratically run, alongside their communities? How do we ensure that people have an actual say in their hospitals and their fire service, rather than these important decisions being made remotely, far from their interests? Politics for socialists should not be about deference, gold chains, hierarchy and fancy language, but a concerted effort to ensure that wealth, power and control is for everyone.

SWEATING THE ASSETS: A NEW HOME WITH A NEW ETHOS

Luke Pollard MP

Parliament needs to function like any other workplace in Britain. Its move to a new home offers a chance for a new culture and new more efficient working practices.

If a week is a long time in politics, then a year is an age. The first year as an MP has shown me some great examples of parliamentary debate, scrutiny and passion but also some of the most disappointing scenes I have ever witnessed in a workplace.

For my first experience of prime minister's questions, I stood at the main door to the Commons chamber looking down towards the Speaker. Far from the Speaker's ear and microphones I witnessed Conservative MPs – Tory men – barrack, jeer and insult opposition MPs. What I've realised since then is that the abuse and snipes are most acutely targeted at women and it disgusts me.

Prior to being elected I spent my entire career in the private sector, in professional working environments that were fast-paced, creative and output-driven, whether they were companies of 400 employees or, as in my last job, a start-up of a dozen dedicated people. Coming from that background, the Commons is a culture shock and not a good one. Everyone enjoys a bit of pomp and ceremony, but all too

often the pageantry and tradition seems to persist to embed power, orthodoxy and privilege. It needs to change.

I haven't got everything right since being elected, but one thing I've learnt most is that the poisonous environment in parliament needs to be overhauled. Fortuitously, so does the crumbling building MPs and peers currently work in. MPs will move to renovated offices and a new chamber, just a short walk up Whitehall, but not until well after the next general election. MPs and the political classes that regard Westminster as home need to reflect on how we can change the culture of our politics with this move. The new building must be the rationale and catalyst for change in the way our politics is exercised and delivered.

Efficiency and delivery were two hallmarks of every company I worked for. Baked into the culture and mission of each organisation, it meant the whole team focussed on outputs and results. These two concepts seem alien in Westminster. Processes are laboured and change is slow. I should stress there are many hardworking House staff desperately trying to drag parliament into the 20th century, let alone the 21st, but they need MPs to be allies and not obstructors in this endeavour.

That is why I want to see changes in the way Westminster works. Parliament's lower house has two debating chambers currently: the green-benched House of Commons and the less iconic but useful Westminster Hall, a chamber for topical debates that is well regarded by backbenchers. Westminster Hall is where I have participated in and heard the most illuminating and persuasive debates since I was elected. Neither chamber is run at capacity.

Reform of the Commons often rightly focuses on the bizarre and self-defeating sitting hours and their impacts on anyone with family or caring obligations. But let's also look at the efficiency of the chambers. Don't just

work longer, work smarter. I want to run both chambers hot. Let's not just address the Commons' unreasonable sitting hours that reinforce the separation from reality of the 'Westminster bubble' but let's also look at how we can get more value out of our chambers. The government objects to greater opportunity for scrutiny – but it would make for a more purposeful parliament and better governance.

With each government department only questioned every six weeks or so due to lack of space in the Commons diary and then only for half an hour or an hour at best, scrutiny is limited. So, let's run question times longer and move petitions, ten-minute rule bills and non-urgent statements out of the Commons and into the second chamber. Traditionalists will spit out their Earl Grey tea at such suggestions, but Westminster Hall is a poorly used asset. With my business hat on I'd say it has high embedded costs but poor productivity and utilisation, so let's up its usage by increasing its operating hours. That would free up more time for longer question times in the main chamber and more time for debates and scrutiny. Electronic voting is covered elsewhere in this collection so I won't repeat the case for efficiency in voting here but it's a complementary argument.

The new building will have a new Commons Chamber and a new Westminster Hall. They will need to deliver better value, but they should also introduce and embed a better culture in Westminster. The new chambers should end the culture of name-calling and derision so often associated with the green benches. I've been on the receiving end of abuse from elected folk who should know better. There's no place for abuse, name-calling or slurs in politics, so let's draw a line under it in the new chamber. No more groans or blokeish jeers when opponents dare to disagree, but instead a new culture of respect for those with opposing viewpoints or political perspectives. We can all fall

foul of these best intentions on occasions but currently we are at such a low base any improvements would be positive.

Updating practices needs not just new handbooks and lines of accountability, it also needs visual signs of change. I think in pictures, so forgive me for advocating change you can see as much as change you feel in process, procedure and action.

Deep in the shell of Richmond House, the 1980s monolith that used to be the department of health, are workers preparing to build a replica House of Commons which MPs will decant to in the early 2020s. It will cost millions. If the taxpayer is to get value for money – quite a nebulous concept in politics – then it must not simply be a clone of the large room in the palace MPs currently debate in.

The new chamber should embody a new spirit of the Commons: courteous, spirited and determined. As it will be a secondary chamber that will be retained after the Palace of Westminster is refitted let's make it purposely different and better. For a start, let's have it fully accessible to address the woeful provisions for those with disabilities. Let's make it digital-friendly and let's take a long hard look at the procedures and traditions to make this a truly 21st century parliament.

I don't want to see replica green benches. Let's distinguish this chamber from the House of Lords' red benches and Commons' green benches by making this a chamber of blue benches. A new colour for a new era of politics. By all means let's retain the Pugin-esque design flourishes and overall layout but let's change the colour of the benches to show things have changed. It will be a visual reminder of the better politics the public rightly demand from their elected representatives. If we simply carbon copy the culture of the current Commons to a copycat chamber we miss an opportunity to reform and renew.

Being an MP is a genuine privilege but this odd environment I now work in needs to function like any other work-

place in Britain: efficiently and professionally. It does neither at the moment and that needs to change. That means addressing sexual abuse and opaque accountancy practices. So, with a new building let's also create and instil a new culture. Blue benches, not green. Efficient and productive, sweating the new assets for every ounce of value for the electorate. We don't need to wait for the blue benches to be opened for this change, but let's resolve that a new home won't just copy over the bad habits of the current Commons. Britain deserves better than that.

TIME MANAGEMENT: FITTING IN WITH MODERN FAMILIES

Ellie Reeves MP

Although there has been some progress, most parents would still not consider parliament to be a family-friendly workplace. And that matters, because unless we make it a modern and progressive institution, we will struggle to engage people in its work and persuade them to become a part of it.

It is remarkable to think that it is over a year since my election to parliament. Like many others the announcement of a snap general election caught me off guard and in the days after Theresa May's speech, I took time to think and reflect on whether I wanted to stand to be a member of parliament. Twelve months on I can unequivocally say I'm glad I did. As I outlined in my maiden speech back in July 2017, it is an honour and a privilege to be elected to represent Lewisham West and Penge; the area that I grew up in and am proud to call home.

One hundred years on from the Representation of the People Act and the initial extension of voting rights to women, I, like many of my colleagues, am immensely honoured to have been given the opportunity to work in a place like the Palace of Westminster. I often find myself walking through Westminster Hall and the central lobby in awe of the remarkable historical moments that have taken

place here, and the people that have gone before me to further the causes that were dear to them.

But as much as the Houses of Parliament will always symbolise our shared culture and history, it remains a place of work and one which has at times struggled to keep pace with modernity and societal change. Some significant progress has been made, particularly in the last 20 years, with parliament transforming itself from an institution stuck in days of old, to one that mirrors most contemporary workplaces. But parliament cannot afford to be complacent and must always look to evolve and adapt to changing times. After all, the more we are able to modernise parliament, the more we can increase democratic engagement, build a more vibrant political discourse and have better representation by increasing the appeal of standing for office.

I propose a series of changes which could help further the modernisation of our parliamentary democracy, making it more family-friendly and compatible with the demands of raising a family. As a mother of a young son, I know first-hand the combined stresses of trying to mitigate the competing demands of being a member of parliament and raising a family. This is complicated further by having a husband who is also a sitting MP.

In November and December 2017, as the EU withdrawal bill was navigating its way through the Commons committee stage, I was concerned by the amount of time needed to vote on various amendments as the day's debate came to a close. Whilst it was only right and proper that legislation of such significance was given protected time in the chamber, on more than one occasion we were voting on potential changes to the bill for hours at a time. The archaic nature of divisions in the Commons are well known to many, but the combination of urgent questions and statements followed by eight hours of protected time at committee stage meant that we

are often here until way beyond the normal times parliament sits. Protected time is not particularly commonplace on the majority of bills but it has been used on multiple occasions since my election and does not include time for votes at the end of the cut-off. With divisions taking on average around 15 minutes each, successive divisions can mean we can vote for hours. If a time protected day were to fall on a Monday, this can see us sitting until past midnight as we did on Monday 4th December where voting went on until 1am. On the day when my amendment to the EU withdrawal bill was debated, we had five successive votes totalling nearly an hour and a half of parliamentary time devoted to divisions.

One and a half hours of walking through the division lobbies voting is not an efficient use of 650 MP's time.

Moreover, it is not just MPs that have to stay late on occasions such as these. Clerks, security guards and staff that run catering and refreshment facilities, amongst many others, are also usually required to continue working as long as the House is sitting. These members of the Westminster community will also have demands on their time due to family commitments and we should factor in their hard work when discussing parliamentary reform too.

It is time for us to rethink and reform how we vote in such scenarios. Whilst I am fully in favour of the physical act of attending the voting lobby – and therefore against the implementation of remote electronic voting – I believe we must look at reducing the amount of time spent on voting at the end of long days of debate; particularly when a bill has been in committee of the whole House and there are multiple amendments to decide on.

In recent years, clerks who run the divisions have switched from a paper-based form to an iPad style of vote counting. We should utilise this technological improvement and move to a system where multiple votes can be registered at the

same time – such as is the case after long days of a committee of the whole House. Of course, this would not be possible if votes were contingent on one another but I believe it could save time overall.

Moreover, the government could use the voting lobby behind their benches and the opposition likewise thus saving additional time by not needing to switch division lobbies to register both aye and no votes. Multiple vote scenarios would be reduced into something determined in a matter of say half an hour, rather than protracted events lasting over 100 minutes.

Mondays are the most difficult days when timetabled with protected time debates. On Mondays, the House does not sit until 2.30pm, meaning that after an hour of question time, ignoring any potential urgent questions or statements, an eight-hour debate would see the House sit until at least 11.30pm – an hour later than is normal for a Monday. Whilst events like these are rare, the effect it has upon members with children is noticeable. The logistics that may need to be arranged are difficult and often expensive. We must do all we can to make parliament easier for mothers and fathers of young children because, at present, I am not confident that Monday sittings would be considered family-friendly by the standards of most parents.

We should perhaps consider a switch of the parliamentary calendar for these times. Thursdays are normally used for backbench business and general debates and are usually categorised by party whips as a 'one liner'. Current business arrangements on Thursdays provide a fantastic platform for having discussions in the chamber that might not otherwise be given time on the floor of the House, but given the earlier start and thus an earlier finish compared with other sitting days, I feel they are often underutilised as a day for debating legislation. At times when we will be debating key pieces of legislation, I believe we should be considering a switch

of timetabling so that backbench business can be debated on a Monday and scrutiny of bills can move to Thursdays.

As Thursdays usually commence at 9.30am, starting with question time and then the business statement, we could move on to the main business no later than noon. A normal sitting day would see us discuss legislation until 5pm and if it were a time protected debate, as was the case with the EU withdrawal bill, we could be drawing the day's business to a close at a similar time to a Tuesday or Wednesday sitting at around 7pm.

I recognise that some of my colleagues who represent areas outside of London often try to travel back to their constituencies on a Thursday, but if main proceedings were to conclude by 5pm, as is the norm for Thursday sittings, I am confident that they would still be able to travel afterwards. This would help maintain the balance between our commitments at Westminster and in our constituencies. Any reform to parliament must be careful not to add any more to the idea of a 'Westminster bubble'.

Since my election, a number of my colleagues and I have used our respective platforms to suggest ways we can improve parliament so that it is a sustainable workplace fit for the future. I have already written to the Speaker with the intention of creating a dialogue on further ways we can improve accessibility for those who have children with them whilst on the estate. I suggested that the car park should be provided with parent and child parking bays to facilitate speedier exits after long days at work. I'm pleased to say that my suggestion was well received and I am hopeful that ideas such as this can be easily enacted in the near future.

Our parliament, both as a building and as a democratic institution, symbolises so much. Its history is rich and varied. As a building, it has burnt down, been rebuilt, been bombed and been rebuilt. As an institution, it has struggled to adapt

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to the modern world but I am confident that it has already come this far and has the distinct ability to lead the way and rise above other parliaments around the world to become a truly modern, progressive and inviting workplace for all.

SUPPORT FROM PARLIAMENT: HELPING MPS DO THEIR JOB WELL

Danielle Rowley

To have an engaging and accessible political system, we must support and empower MPs to carry out their jobs fully, modernise procedure and behaviours and ensure we are reaching out to all corners of society.

It is hard to imagine what working in parliament and being an MP was like one hundred years ago. Even fifty years ago; without modern technology and constant information at your fingertips. Work, life and society in the UK have evolved massively in recent years, but has parliament kept up? I am just over a year into the job, and left feeling that there is a huge task to be undertaken to modernise not only parliament, but also through this, British politics itself.

We seriously need to look at how we engage with the public, and how we can increase voter turnout. Yes, we should be looking to increase general turnout, but we also need to go much further and properly address why certain demographics are less likely to vote. Having an increase in voting from social minorities and different age groups could have a huge effect on how British politics is shaped, and I strongly believe that voters do influence the actions of politicians – rather than it being top-down.

There are many great initiatives that look to increase public engagement and voter registration, yet we still have a large section of the public who do not feel engaged and included in our democracy, and in turn don't vote.

By having more diverse members in the Labour party, thus better reflecting society, we have a better chance of people sitting at home feeling like parliament looks like a world they recognise. However, having diverse members is only a small step on the way to making people feel that parliament is relevant to them.

Coming into parliament as an outsider last year, I was very surprised at a lot of the traditions, and have found many processes quite difficult and off-putting. I am all for a good process if it has a purpose, but many of our parliamentary ways seem to be based on tradition and the whims of prime ministers and monarchs from times long gone by.

I have often expressed disappointment at the shouting and jeering in the chamber during questions and speeches on important issues. This is raised with me on the doorstep and during surgeries, and certainly seems like a key reason behind the public having a low opinion of politicians. If we don't appear to show respect for each other in the Commons, how can we expect people to have respect for us?

Regardless of how alien an environment the debating chamber can feel, there's no doubt that I still have a lot to learn about the ins and outs of every process and every bit of legislation and all the various rules of parliament.

Sometimes I feel embarrassed to say I don't understand, but I am always reassured by colleagues that the feeling is very normal. But if we want our parliament to be accessible and we want the public to engage in politics, then we must make it easier to understand. If we fail to do so, we will not only put off voters, but will discourage people from standing for parliament, for fear that they will not be able to keep up.

Part of this is about making the processes less arcane, but on a simple level it's about making time to debate the hot topics of our age and to scrutinise complex legislation. Is it really acceptable in a modern parliamentary democracy that MPs can still wield the weapon of the filibuster? There was a grim irony about the fact that a debate the other week about lowering the voting age to 16 as a way of engaging younger voters was talked out of time by members who were opposed to it. They may have won that battle, but in demonstrating how detached they are from modern voters, they will surely lose the war.

I believe that working environments have a substantial impact on how workers perform, and this is no different in parliament. I have watched front benches half way through a five-hour debate looking like each member is about to keel over, I have been in the lobbies at midnight with colleagues and their young children, and I have heard 'I haven't even had breakfast yet!' well into dinner time on an almost daily basis. This simply cannot be conducive to a productive workplace.

Coming from the third sector, working in parliament has been quite a culture shock. Yes, of course we expect to work long hours and deal with a considerable amount of stress, and yes, that is our choice having stood for elected office. But this working environment leads to a lot of collateral damage. It is not compatible with normal family life – certainly not for those commuting from outside London – and it means MPs have to lean on our staff who go above and beyond the call of duty every day. But again, it comes back to many highly capable people not considering becoming an MP as a viable career option. And if we are to be a truly representative parliament, then we must have members from all walks of life in the chamber.

A recent tweet of mine about the state of parliament got a fair amount of engagement. People often ask how I managed

to get an office in the Palace – only a three-minute run to the chamber. The truth is, it may be closer for votes, but what you gain in convenience you pay for in the environment. In the tweet I pictured a part of ceiling tile that had fallen and crumbled – not a rare occurrence. My office smells of mould, there are the stains of centuries on the carpet, and trying to get a fast internet connection or get my emails to load has been an ongoing struggle. These may seem like small problems, and I don't want to come across as ungrateful or to undermine the great work that many do to support our work as MPs – I am very aware of how privileged I am to work in this phenomenal place. But if we are to be supported to be the best possible representatives for our constituents, and get the best out of us, then we must have good digital services and environments to help achieve this.

As well as the environment being a stumbling block for some MPs, I have experienced a very difficult process trying to get any support for my learning difficulties. I am almost a year in and have yet to have the initial assessment needed to then inform parliament about what extra support I may require. I am keen to ensure parliament is a safe and supportive workplace for all members and staff with any extra support or access needs.

To ensure we have a strong, engaging and accessible political system, we must support and empower our members of parliament to carry out their jobs fully, bring Parliamentary procedure and behaviours in line with the twenty-first century and the electorate, and ensure we are reaching out to all corners of society and championing our democracy.

It often feels like so much change is needed in parliament, in our whole system, that one doesn't know where to start. Well, we have some fantastic fresh MPs calling for a shake up, and we will work together to campaign for big

changes. But in the meantime, I will continue to make my own difference by being a young outspoken woman from a council estate who is also an MP. I hope that encourages young women across the country to aspire to sit on these green benches one day too.

UNDER SCRUTINY: MAKING BETTER LAWS

Alex Sobel MP

Bad laws undermine faith in our politics. A new approach to scrutiny, with a chance for the public to contribute to law-making and more opportunity to work through legislation before it makes it onto the statute book, could revitalise the democratic process.

Westminster's public image problem is nothing new. Public engagement with politics is low and many voters feel shut out of politics and policy-making. The current system, with badly drafted bills rushed through the Commons before being passed to the unelected Lords does not help matters, and many people feel disillusioned by the whole political process. Reviving ideas for better scrutiny arrangements – proposed at different times by both Labour and Conservatives – could mean better legislation and so inspire fresh faith in our politics.

Under Ed Miliband, Labour proposed changes to the legislative process to better integrate members of the public into law-making. The changes would have included the introduction of a public evidence stage, as part of a whole house scrutiny process to take place after the second reading. At present, scrutiny is provided by public bill committees, made up of MPs from the different parties within parliament. The role of these committees is to scrutinise and

vote on a bill, line by line. A public evidence stage would allow the public a voice in this process, one that could have a significant impact on how a bill looks when it is made law.

The Conservatives too have considered the idea. In 2010 they put a similar 'public reading stage' into their manifesto. This resulted in a trial by the coalition government over three bills: the protection of freedoms bill (2010–12), the small charitable donations bill (2012–13) and the children and families bill (2012–13). In January 2013, the leader of the House issued a written statement, in which he outlined public engagement with the government-administered pilots. He stated that "the government remain committed to promoting public engagement in parliament and specifically in the legislative process. The pilot results indicate that approaches to consultation should be carefully tailored to the bill."

The public reading stage is yet to resurface, with the general consensus being that although take-up was significant, the process did not have enough of an impact on the final bills and did not do well enough at integrating the view of the public into law. When we look in detail at one of the bills – the children and families bill in 2013 – we can see why it was not a success. The process took the form of an online consultation followed by a 'public reading day' during which parliament was given the chance to listen to and discuss contributions. Many MPs were unaware of the public reading stage and no reference was made to the comments made during the process during the bill committee's oral evidence sessions.

Reading through the brief published by the government for this trial, its key failure becomes apparent. "The public reading will close on the 26th February to allow time for comments to be collated and made available to MPs on the bill committee as it begins its work," the brief shows. This sentence infers a lack of deference to the findings of the public reading stage, instead electing to preserve them

as one piece of evidence to be 'made available' to MPs scrutinising the bill at the existing public bill committee.

Improving our law-making could also involve reviving the use of 'draft bills' to refine legislation before it makes it onto the statute books. Under the 1997–2010, Labour government, such draft bills were used to encourage pre-legislative scrutiny. Their use has dwindled in recent years with just four in the current parliament. Most draft bills are examined either by select committees in the House of Commons or in the House of Lords, or by a joint committee of both Houses of Parliament.

I believe that there is a strong case both for looking again at introducing some form of public scrutiny into our legislative process and a wider use of draft bills. The arguments in favour are strong: adding real-life perspective into the more technical and detailed stages of a bill could lead to better legislation, reflective of the experience of individuals affected. Changes made as a result of this process would be more likely to reflect public opinion and foster a more consensual approach to law-making. But the success or failure of public scrutiny will always come down to implementation and to how firmly it is embedded into the overall process.

To make the public scrutiny process work, the process of consultation should not be simply squeezed into the existing framework. Instead it should be made a formal part of the process so that we can see tangible and demonstrable evidence of its impact on legislation. Labour's plans for a separate and distinct public evidence stage would have made this happen, and this is something I think should be considered by the Labour party today.

That said, we must also be clear that a process of public consultation is not always appropriate or desirable for every bill. We must not be afraid to depart from a 'one size fits all' approach to law-making. Indeed, there are small departures from the public bill committee stage at present, with consti-

tutional matters often scrutinised by the whole house acting as a bill committee for instance. We should take into account that some bills are more likely to garner public interest than others. It is our job as public representatives to legislate on behalf of our constituents. Sometimes that will involve deep public discussion and at other times we should be trusted with the responsibility of representing.

We must also look closely at how we introduce such a stage to bills that start in the House of Lords. There is currently no evidence stage at all for bills starting in the upper house. With public concern as to the seemingly undemocratic nature of the Lords as a body, public scrutiny of their bills could serve to change that narrative. Failure to include the House of Lords into a reform of scrutiny would be an opportunity missed.

It is clear that we would benefit from more input both from experts and from the public into the legislative process. Badly drafted laws create poor and sometimes perverse consequences for society. The use of both draft bills and a public evidence stage would give us further safeguards against creating laws which don't work as they were intended.



New brooms

Ideas for reforming Westminster from Labour's 2017 intake

How to use this discussion guide

The guide can be used in various ways by Fabian local societies, local political party meetings and trade union branches, student societies, NGOs and other groups.

- You might hold a discussion among local members or invite a guest speaker – for example, an MP, academic or local practitioner to lead a group discussion.
- Some different key themes are suggested. You might choose to spend 15–20 minutes on each area, or decide to focus the whole discussion on one of the issues for a more detailed discussion.

A discussion could address some or all of the following questions:

1. When talking about modernising parliament, what do you think should be the priority?
2. What would you include in an MPs job description?
3. Does the culture of parliament reflect the people who choose to go there or does the culture shape behaviour?
4. How would more planning and less spontaneity (for example, pre-registering to speak in a debate, ending filibustering) affect parliament for the better, or for the worse?

Please let us know what you think

Whatever view you take of the issues, we would very much like to hear about your discussion. Please send us a summary of your debate (perhaps 300 words) to info@fabians.org.uk

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Parliament can be baffling to those looking on at its practices. To many, they seem simply arcane – otherworldly and off-putting. So, what must it be like to go and work there as a first-time MP?

In this collection, a group of 2017 intake Labour MPs look afresh at parliament, its processes and practices. They bring fresh thinking to how every aspect of the parliamentary process could be streamlined to work better for legislators and the general public. As Brexit looms, parliament will be under scrutiny as never before. As we change so much about our constitution and practices on leaving the EU, now is the perfect time to look again at how the UK governs itself.

This is a timely collection, by those who can bring both the knowledge of insiders without the weariness or cynicism of old hands. These 'new brooms' bring fresh eyes to the thorny problem of reforming how our democracy works.

Edited by James Frith MP, with a foreword by Valerie Vaz MP and contributions from Preet Kaur Gill MP, Darren Jones MP, Sarah Jones MP, Anna McMorrin MP, Alex Norris MP, Laura Pidcock MP, Luke Pollard MP, Ellie Reeves MP, Danielle Rowley MP and Alex Sobel MP.

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