

PREFACE BY THE BISHOP OF SOUTHWARK

In its last report the Business Committee indicated that it was minded to provide opportunities for debates on a number of constitutional issues at successive Groups of Sessions. The difficulty has been to find an appropriate focus. Discussion of one element (such as reform of the House of Lords or devolution of power to the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly) needs to be related to others - such as regionalisation in England or developments within the European Union. It has also been difficult to decide on the most appropriate timing for a debate on any particular issue. For example, despite the welcome given to the General Synod debate in July 2001 on the Reform of the House of Lords, there was a feeling in some quarters that it suffered from the fact that it was unable to address the prior question of the purpose and function of an Upper Chamber within a reformed parliamentary system.

Following the debate on Regionalisation at the last Group of Sessions the Business Committee has now asked the staff of the Board for Social Responsibility to prepare material for a debate on the question of the effectiveness of Parliament. In view of the pressure on the Board's resources I agreed with the staff that we should accept the generous offer from the Hansard Society to make one of its reports available to General Synod members and that it should be accompanied by a short paper prepared by the Board Secretary. It will be clear that there is no suggestion that this material represents 'policy' or a Church of England 'position'. Its purpose is simply to provide background material which will, I hope, help us all to reflect on the important questions facing our democracy at the start of the twenty-first century and, as members of the General Synod, to debate them intelligently and prayerfully.

I am sure that members of General Synod will join me in expressing gratitude to the Hansard Society for its willingness to help us.

+THOMAS SOUTHWARK

Chair

Church of England Board for Social Responsibility

13 September 2002

INTRODUCTION

1. It is twenty-one years since my predecessor, Giles Ecclestone, published *The Church of England and Politics*, which he described as a survey of one aspect of the Christian mission: the task of the Church in regard to politics. Re-reading his six case studies now we may be struck by a paradox: in some respects our Church and our society have changed greatly, in other ways the continuities are remarkable. I suspect that the importance of the six issues he examined is greater than ever (although the form they take has changed in important respects) but the Church's ability to address them has been greatly reduced. His list was as follows:
 - ◆ Race and community relations
 - ◆ Men, women and sex
 - ◆ Health and sickness
 - ◆ Violence, peace and war (including Northern Ireland)
 - ◆ Work, industry and prosperity
 - ◆ The political process

2. As the Board for Social Responsibility comes to an end and, with it, the post which Giles Ecclestone and John Gladwin held before me, it seems to me that the task of the Board - and I hope of its successor - of helping the Church to engage with such complex issues remains formidable. All of them are important but it is the last one, the political process, which will engage the General Synod at the November Group of Sessions. Members will have their views on such matters as the significance of the size of electoral turnout in the European Parliament elections in 1999 or the General Election in 2001, or the success of the BNP in winning three seats in the May 2002 local elections, or the relevance of M. Le Pen. Before

turning to such things it may be worth recalling what Giles Ecclestone had to say in his section on the political process:

I believe it should be a matter of serious concern when the political structures and conventions by which our society implements its will are neglected. Politics may be regarded as merely a matter of 'who's in, who's out', and of who wields power; a more adequate view, and certainly one that has shaped our institutions at creative periods, has seen politics as concerned with the achievement of relative justice, in a setting where both order and freedom are valued. The case for democratic institutions does not ultimately rest on the untenable belief that decisions which emerge in democracies are invariably, or even generally, better than those arrived at in societies where power is less dispersed; it is based on the moral conviction (ultimately religiously based) that human beings ought to have charge of the conditions of their lives, as an aspect of the costly freedom for which they are made. But considerations of effectiveness in government are not wholly irrelevant to the moral case for representative institutions. Political institutions which presuppose a degree of openness and responsiveness between government and the people are likely to prove more sensitive to the needs of the situation, and secure more willing assent, even in difficult circumstances, than those which stress simply the power over people concentrated in the hands of government.

It is clear however that at present British political institutions, whether of central or local government, are not felt to be characterised by responsiveness to the full range of attitudes and interests in the country. There is a widespread feeling that the democratic and representative parts of the political process are either operating inadequately or are manipulated by Government in order to deliver the support for government

policies which the political structure formally requires. There is anxiety, particularly in the nations and regions most remote from London but also in distinctive groupings within the population e.g. the black community, that their needs are not being met or even taken account of. Overall there is a pervasive dis-ease about inadequately controlled 'big' Government (The Church of England and Politics, 1981, p.40)

3. If it is clear from this that concern about the state of parliamentary democracy is not new, it should be equally clear that no simple or single response to that concern can be offered. The value of Lord Newton's Report, *The Challenge for Parliament*, which is summarised below, is that it recognises this complexity but offers some suggestions as to how we might seek to address the problem. The Hansard Society, which commissioned the report, is committed to encouraging discussion of ways in which parliamentary democracy might be strengthened and will therefore welcome the General Synod's contribution to the debate.

4. It would be surprising if all members took the same view of such complex matters. Some - like their predecessors in 1976 - may support the extension of proportional representation to all public elections, others may want to emphasise the need for 'citizenship education' as envisaged by the Crick Report. Some will think that too rapid a move to 'answers' leaves inadequately addressed the necessary prior analysis as to the precise nature of the problem. Hence there may be disagreements, too, about the context and scope of the discussion. Some people argue that in the world described in last year's BSR report *Development matters: Christian perspectives on globalisation* the power of individual governments to influence events (whether

Dyson's investment decisions or what is shown on television) is severely constrained. Others believe this view to be commonly exaggerated and point to the scope for action, particularly if time is taken to build effective coalitions and alliances. The Convention on the Future of Europe currently being chaired by former French President, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, is of relevance here. Can the European Union - perhaps expanded to the East and South with ten more members - develop so that it competes effectively in world markets and yet remains close enough to be 'owned' by citizens who have been taught to judge its value only in materialistic terms? (Details of the Convention and the role of the Churches in it can be found on the website of the Conference of European Churches www.cec-kek.org).

5. If it is neither possible nor desirable for a single 'Christian view' to emerge from a debate on the future of parliamentary democracy, what might be the contribution to it of the Church of England in general and the General Synod in particular? The following points might be considered
 - ◆ All human constructs, including political and economic arrangements, are imperfect and stand, under the judgement of God, in continuing need of reform
 - ◆ Politics is a vocation. Those who seek to serve the common good through public service should be supported through prayer and sympathetic understanding of the difficult judgements they have to make
 - ◆ Neither the 'individual' nor 'society' exist as abstract entities - healthy political life depends on the willingness of able individuals to enter public service

and the ability of citizens to believe that their legitimate concerns will be addressed

- ◆ Political culture and the standards which are judged to be acceptable in public life are inevitably relative (to time and place) but the maintenance of higher standards will depend on many factors - including the adequacy of systems of scrutiny and accountability, the integrity of politicians and journalists, and the support of the general public as concerned citizens
- ◆ The Church does not inhabit a realm untouched by the corruption and sinfulness of the world, but has to serve God in and through the world as it is

6. That final point may prompt some reflection on the fact that the General Synod, like the Parliament from which it derives its power, has also faced questions of governance and change in recent years. An earlier stage of questioning in relation to effectiveness and coherence - particularly in bringing together questions of policy and resources - led to the appointment of the Turnbull Commission in 1994 and the establishment of the Archbishops' Council in 2000. It would be unhelpful to push the comparison too far, but it is perhaps worth asking whether any of the principles set out in the report of the Hansard Society have any relevance to the governance of the Church. The relationship of effectiveness and accountability, the role of financial scrutiny, and the need for effective communication are just some of the areas in which the Church may have things to learn - as well as to teach - in relation to the wider society of which it is a part.
7. Lord Newton's Commission on Parliamentary Scrutiny has helpfully set out its proposals for enhancing the effectiveness of Parliament. The Commission will have

failed in its purpose if it is seen as having offered these ideas on a 'take it or leave it' basis. On the contrary, the hope is that they will provoke widespread debate - which must involve agreement as well as disagreement. The Church's contribution to that debate has so far been very modest although in other parts of civil society there are encouraging signs of a new determination to promote necessary change in this vital area. (Some indication of the range of material available can be gleaned from such websites as www.hansardsociety.org.uk or www.charter88.org.uk then click on 'Issues' or 'Links', or www.parliament./uk but there are many others.)

8. The Hansard Lecture by the Leader of the House of Commons, which is reproduced as Annex 1, sets out some of the key issues - not least the role of the media in influencing public perceptions of public life - and he reminds us of the steps already taken to address some of the concerns of parliamentary reformers. He admits that much remains to be done if confidence in Parliament is to be increased.
9. This paper has been deliberately kept brief. The importance of enhancing the effectiveness of parliamentary democracy in our country is not in doubt, but the value of the General Synod debate will not lie in the length of its reports but rather in the quality of the contributions made in the debate and the extent to which they are seen - both within the Church and beyond - to resonate with the experience and aspirations of our fellow citizens.

David Skidmore

Secretary Church of England Board for Social Responsibility

7 October 2002

HANSARD SOCIETY

THE CHALLENGE FOR PARLIAMENT - MAKING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE

Executive Summary

1. Parliament has been left behind by far-reaching changes to the constitution, Government and society in the past two decades. Despite recent innovations, particularly in the handling of legislation, the central question of Westminster's scrutiny of the executive has not been addressed. Yet Parliament performs a unique role in any representative democracy. It is the principal means for holding Government to account between general elections on behalf of the public. Parliament should provide a permanent monitor of the work of Government, regularly call ministers to explain their actions and, where necessary, seek remedial action.
2. The Commission examined the strengths and weaknesses of the various ways in which the Commons and Lords pursue accountability - through debates, ministerial statements, questions, select committee inquiries and the work of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (the Ombudsman) and the National Audit Office. The Commission also examined the many non-parliamentary ways by which Government is scrutinised - through the courts, judicial inquiries, regulators and inspectors.

3. Serious gaps and weaknesses in the working of accountability were found. Scrutiny of Government by MPs and peers is neither systematic nor rigorous. The quality of information provided to Parliament is variable. Parliamentary inquiries have a poor record in locating responsibility for failures by the executive, ensuring that the Government acts upon them and following up recommendations for improvement. A survey of MPs views carried out especially for the Commission showed that Members themselves are sceptical about Parliament's ability to hold Government to account.
4. *The Challenge for Parliament* sets out a vision of how a reformed Parliament might work. Its central theme is that Parliament should be at the apex of a system of accountability – drawing more effectively on the investigations of outside regulators and commissions, enhancing the status of select committees and clarifying the role of Parliament and its politicians. The various activities of MPs and peers in the committees and chambers of both Houses should be better co-ordinated so that they complement each other in the pursuit of accountability. But, crucially, Parliament must reflect and articulate issues of public concern. Making Government accountable is a task undertaken by Parliament on behalf of the electorate with the aim of improving the quality of government. Parliament must respond to, and highlight, the most pressing political issues in a manner that the public understands.

The Commission's seven principles for reform

5. Our report sets out seven principles designed to achieve these objectives, which are supplemented by a series of

detailed recommendations. The recommendations appear at the end of each chapter. The entire list of recommendations is included at the end of the report. The Commission's seven central principles for improving scrutiny are:

◆ **Parliament at the apex**

Parliament alone cannot guarantee accountability. Politicians do not have the time, resources or expertise to keep a close watch on anything as large, fragmented or complicated as modern government. However an array of independent regulators, commissions and inspectors responsible for monitoring the delivery of government services now exists outside Parliament. Parliament should be the apex of this system of scrutiny. It should provide a framework for their activity and use their investigations as the basis on which to hold ministers to account. This is the central theme of the report, outlined in chapter one and more fully developed in the report's final chapter. Our recommendations aim to create a more formal and organised relationship between those outside bodies and Parliament, to promote more systematic scrutiny by both the Commons and the Lords.

◆ **Parliament must develop a culture of scrutiny**

The Commission believes that MPs are unclear about their duties and, in particular, about how they can and should hold the executive to account. Vigorous scrutiny depends on politicians using the tools already available more fully. That requires them to understand the unique role and potential of Parliament. As such, The Challenge for Parliament is based on the belief that changes in the attitudes and behaviour of politicians themselves are as important as changes in the working

of Parliament. Parliament lacks a corporate ethos which promotes collective functions such as accountability. Members of the Commons have to balance a number of competing roles of varying significance - representing the interests of their political party and constituency as well as performing their parliamentary duties. Parliaments should provide the means and opportunity for MPs to reconcile these diverse and conflicting roles. Party loyalties and demands need to be balanced with scrutinising the executive and holding government to account. Scrutiny should be an integral part of the work of every MP.

◆ **Committees should play a more influential role within Parliament**

The Commission regards the system of select committees as the principal vehicle for promoting this culture of scrutiny and improving parliamentary effectiveness. The introduction of the departmental select committees in 1979 enhanced the ability of Parliament to scrutinise and hold ministers to account. The committees provide a means for monitoring and keeping a permanent eye on the work of government departments and agencies. Select committees can filter, and highlight, the work of other, external scrutiny bodies. The system should now be extended and developed so that they make a more significant contribution to parliamentary business and to the work of every MP. The role of the committees needs to be more closely defined, so that each has a set of core responsibilities and a set of certain pre-agreed and public goals. Their reach should be extended to provide regular scrutiny of regulators, executive agencies, quangos and the like. Committee structure should adapt

to new methods of work through sub-committees and perhaps the use of rapporteurs. In return, committee service should provide rewards for MPs pursuing accountability - chairing a select committee needs to be recognised as a political position comparable to being a minister, and be paid accordingly. In addition, the committees should be given the staffing and resources needed to oversee the areas for which they are responsible.

◆ **The chamber should remain central to accountability**

The chamber should remain the forum where ministers are held to account for the most important and pressing issues of the day. The chamber is the public face of the House of the Commons and therefore the main means of informing and persuading the wider electorate. The structure and content of business in the chamber should reflect this important role. Reforms should aim to improve public interest, attendance and the influence of the floor of the Commons. The Commission believes that the scrutiny value of many lengthy debates is questionable. There should be more short debates and more opportunities for questions in the chamber. MPs should have the opportunity to question ministers on recent select committee reports. The Opposition and backbench MPs should have more opportunities to call ministers to account through ministerial statements or Private Notice Questions. There should be an opportunity for short cross-party ‘public interest debates’. In short, the chamber should be more responsive to issues of public concern.

◆ **Financial scrutiny should be central to accountability**

The Commons has a unique legal role in the authorisation of tax and spending proposals and therefore a special responsibility to scrutinise them. MPs have a responsibility to the public to ensure that the Government provides value for money in what it spends and that the money is spent wisely. At present, the Commons fails to perform this role in either a systematic or an effective manner. Financial scrutiny should be central to the work of the Commons since it underpins all other forms of accountability. The procedures of the Commons need to be adapted to ensure that all committees, and hence all MPs, have the scope and resources to ensure proper financial accountability.

◆ **The House of Lords should complement the Commons**

For the most part The Challenge for Parliament concentrates on improving the efficacy of the House of Commons. At the time of writing, the future composition and role of the Lords is still uncertain and future changes to its structure and composition will inevitably affect what the House does. But whatever happens to the Lords, the Commission believes that it has an important role to play in holding the Government to account. The primary focus, particularly on financial matters, should still be the Commons. But the Lords plays a valuable role in complementing the scrutiny work of the Commons. All the political parties are committed to a second chamber where no single party has an overall majority. Because of this, the second chamber provides a different perspective on

accountability. It is likely to have a less adversarial approach and take a longer view of policy and administration. The Commission also believes that the Lords has a significant role to play in the scrutiny of issues which cross departmental boundaries. Where the Commons committees are tied to departments ministries the Lords has proved itself effective in examining broader issues, for example, Europe or science and technology. It should have specific responsibility for ethical, constitutional and social issues for which the Commons has insufficient time. This though will require closer co-operation and co-ordination between the two Houses.

◆ **Parliament must communicate more effectively with the public**

Parliament is at its strongest when it articulates and mobilises public opinion - both Houses need to improve their communication with, and responsiveness to, the public. Whereas Government, the political parties and individual MPs are attuned to media requirements, Parliament is not. Reforms are required at a number of levels. Parliament needs to adapt its procedures and hours to improve media coverage and make parliamentary business more comprehensible to voters. A designated press office should maintain media interest and co-ordinate select committee publicity. Committees themselves could improve their public profile and the range of their consultations by making greater use of the internet. The re-introduction of a Petitions Committee would provide another channel for communication and might alert MPs earlier to issues of public concern. Overall, Parliament must improve its ability to respond.

6. The report is designed as a challenge to MPs and peers at the start of a new Parliament, at a stage when they are looking ahead and starting afresh on the work of scrutiny. The Commission recognises what the Select Committees – and, in particular, the Liaison Committee – have already done in this area. The report seeks to take forward some of the new ideas for change. But the Commission can only make suggestions. It is up to MPs and peers to give Parliament a more central role.

**HANSARD SOCIETY SPEECH, BY ROBIN COOK
WEDNESDAY 22 MAY 2002**

Tonight I want to talk about the health of our democracy. As Leader of the House, you would expect me to begin such a subject with a medical bulletin on the health of Parliament. But I want to go wider in looking at the changing pressures on our democracy and the changing character of political debate. You find me in an optimistic mood about the regeneration of Parliament. The past month has seen a series of decisions that together reinforce the status of Parliament.

The largest of these was the announcement last week that the Government will put Parliament in the driving seat on the road to reform of the House of Lords, through a free vote in both Houses. I was encouraged that Charter 88 welcomed the announcement as "a victory for those campaigning for a democratic UK". It is indeed possible that it will result in a more democratic second chamber, as the Public Administration Select Committee identified a "mainly elected" second chamber as the preference with the largest support among MPs.

It is right that the starting point of this parliamentary process should be a Joint Committee of backbenchers from both Houses. It will not be easy to build a consensus, but we are more likely to establish where the centre of gravity for reform lies among a committee representative of Parliament than through a decision imposed by Government. The first phase of the Committee's work will be to define the range of options on composition, which will be put to both free votes. After both free votes, the Joint Committee must return to consideration of the detailed implementation of reform. This need not take a long time - it is not a new or untrodden path they are being asked to explore.

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As far back as 1911, Lloyd George brought in the Parliament Act to curb powers for the House of Lords. Its preamble asserted:

"It is intended to substitute for the House of Lords as presently constituted, a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of a hereditary basis, but such a substitution cannot immediately be brought into operation"

Lloyd George was most certainly proved right in the last assertion. Ninety years and twenty General Elections later we have still not achieved it. But at least we have rehearsed all the arguments for reform. Although we all try very hard to come up with it, the truth is there is nothing new to be said on Lords reform. But, with good will and sober application, I see no reason why the work of the Joint Committee should not be concluded by the end of this year.

The second step that strengthens the status of Parliament is the decision by Tony Blair to give evidence twice a year to the Liaison Committee, which brings together the chairs of all Select Committees. This is an historic increase in accountability to Parliament. No Prime Minister has ever before agreed to be questioned by Parliament's committees of scrutiny.

I am warned that it is not strictly accurate to say that no Prime Minister has ever appeared before a Select Committee. I am advised that, in the era of Ramsay Macdonald, Prime Ministers doubled-up as Leaders of the House and, as such, would appear before the Procedure Committee. However, that does not remove the central point that no previous Prime Minister has ever volunteered to answer questions from any of our investigative Select Committees.

This step by the Prime Minister neatly complements the third major move forward - the reforms that we have made to the system of departmental select committees. The changes that were agreed last week provide the Select Committees with specialist staff, administrative help, and the lead role in scrutinising draft legislation in advance of it being laid before the Commons. This package of measures will significantly strengthen their ability to hold ministers to account and adds up to the most important set of changes to the Select Committee system since departmental committees were introduced twenty years ago.

The fourth item of evidence, which I produce of progress in the health of Parliament, is the recent announcement to make the Parliamentary Lobby more transparent and open not only to journalists with membership of the exclusive club. It's a bold task to take on the parliamentary Lobby. But I found the following reaction of one of the doyens of the Lobby rather extravagant, when he wrote last Friday:

"The Lobby is doomed. Alistair has sentenced us to a slow death by openness and transparency."

As openness and transparency is what the media are forever urging on everyone else, especially on Government, I am perplexed that members of the Lobby should feel so threatened when this is demanded of themselves. It must be right in a modern democracy for the public to be able to see on the record the morning briefing by the Government and not have it mediated through a small privileged group who have the select credentials. It cannot be right that specialist journalists who are experts in the story of the day are prevented from attending or putting their questions.

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Fifthly, and lastly, I can confirm that we are making good progress in the Modernisation Committee on the agenda for modernisation which I published in December and which set out my programme for reform. I would like, if I may, to dwell on my ambitions for that. I want to see more Government Bills published first in draft. The truth is that by the time both parties have wheeled their heavy artillery up to the despatch box for the set piece exchanges at Second Reading, the battle lines have been drawn too firmly to allow much rethinking. If we want Parliament really to shape the character of legislation, it must get in on the act much earlier at the time of a draft Bill.

I want a mechanism to permit the carry-over of a Bill from one parliamentary year to the next, to allow a longer time for Parliament to carry out scrutiny. The present situation prescribes that every Bill must finish in November or perish with the winter frost. Leaders of the House will always be forced to rush legislation through Parliament. If we want longer to consider legislation, we have to allow Parliament to carry Bills from one session to the next.

I want an earlier start to the Parliamentary day, so that we rescue the key events in Parliament, such as ministerial statements or opening speeches in the main debate, from their relative obscurity in the late afternoon slot, and rescue the key votes in Parliament from the late evening, when it is too late for even the last bulletins.

I want more flexible procedures so that exchanges in the Chamber can be more topical. If we had wanted to prevent the Commons from being topical, we could not have come up with a more clever barrier than requiring a fortnight's notice of any oral Question. For instance, during the recent fighting in Jenin it was not in order for MPs to raise that crisis at Foreign Office

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Questions, because the Israeli incursion had taken place after the close of tabling of oral Questions two weeks before. And I want to see a Parliament also that is more accessible to the public and more welcoming to the British visitor or, as we call them rather quaintly "strangers". At last we are making some progress. A feasibility study has been commissioned into an interpretative Visitor Centre. We have just agreed on professional training for House of Commons guides with a view to ensuring that the visitor does not just get an appreciation of the history and architecture of Westminster, but gets also some sense of Parliament as a working institution at the heart of our democracy. I would tribute to the Hansard Society, in particular yourself Richard (Holme), for their persistent badgering to get Parliament to take full advantage of the immense asset that our building represents and the great opportunity that a visit to it provides for education in citizenship.

Of course, change is not always easy; change will always have its opponents. Any campaign of advance must expect the occasional rearguard action. And we encountered one last week when the House resolved not to put nominations to the Select Committees on a basis more independent of party control. I am encouraged that there was a majority for the reform among the Labour MPs who voted. The status quo was protected by a large majority of Conservative MPs.

A number of commentators have since expressed themselves baffled that when offered the chance to vote for greater parliamentary independence, the Commons voted against. There has been particular perplexity that Conservative MPs voted en masse to preserve the power of the Government Whips.

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The explanation of that phenomenon lies in the duality of the MP's role. We are all parliamentarians, but we are also all party politicians. We are deeply ambivalent as to whether we want Parliament reaching independent decisions, or whether we want our Party securing its own agenda.

I will be perfectly frank; I am as deeply torn by this duality as the next man is. As an Opposition spokesman I took no prisoners. I have been a loyal member of my Party since I was a teenager and I will go to my grave clutching my Party membership card as previous generations went to their grave clutching their sword as their most precious possession. So, I fully understand the pull of tribal instincts because I also am a member of the tribe.

However, as Leader of the House, I have come to recognise that the tribal character of party politics may now be a trap for Parliament. The world outside Parliament has changed. When I first canvassed for the Party at 19, when you discovered a Labour voter, you knew the probability was that everyone in the household was Labour. Even more comfortingly, when you went back 4 years later on, you knew they would all still be Labour.

Today you never know how they will be voting at the next General Election. Moreover, many of those who commit themselves to one or other major party are not necessarily buying in to all the Party's portmanteau of policies.

This is entirely healthy. It is good for democracy that electors reserve the right to change their minds from one election to the next, and reserve the right to think for themselves, whatever their party is telling them.

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The challenge to the Commons is whether we can adjust to the less tribal society, which we are supposed to represent. And it is a real challenge. We may know that the public outside want to see a Commons that is more concerned with the public interest than with scoring party political advantage. But we also know that what we will get reported in the media is not the serious, and mildly boring, business of scrutinising social policy. What we will get reported in the media is a good bout of party political mud wrestling. We are stuck with the conundrum that we cannot restore respect for Parliament without airtime, but we cannot get the airtime without displays of the partisan aggression that in the long-term lowers respect for the Parliament.

When I first came to Parliament in 1974 there was only one BBC microphone within half a mile of the Chamber. It was literally in a garden shed attached to Abbey Gardens. The place is now awash with microphones and cameras. There are now thirty accredited BBC journalists. I am sure they all work jolly hard and many of them are extremely likeable people. Nevertheless, Parliament was more often in the bulletins thirty years ago, when we had one BBC microphone, than it is today when we have thirty BBC reporters.

I don't wish to single out the BBC for the present ambiguous relationship between Parliament and the media. The print media must also accept their responsibility, especially the allegedly serious print media. Every nation has its version of the tabloid press. What makes Britain unique is that our broadsheet press now faithfully tracks the agenda of the tabloid press. Politics is reported as a soap opera of personality conflict, which puts the spotlight on the process of decision-making by these personalities rather than the outcome of

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policies for the nation. This makes it difficult for the press to cover serious social issues.

There have been major breakthroughs in the past five years on matters that worry real people. For instance, the virtual abolition of long-term youth unemployment is one of the largest dividing lines between the history of the eighties and the record of this Government. It is also the largest single explanation of the 20 per cent reduction in overall crime. Yet, it has gone virtually unremarked in the media. Both press and Parliament now are handicapped by a culture of political reporting that is too introverted and too little about what is going on in the lives of readers and electors.

One of new Labour's great achievements is that it has put the patient and the pupil first and freed public services from capture by producer interests. But this lesson has yet to be learnt at Westminster, where reporting is still dominated by producer capture.

Political reporting reinforces the public impression of a self-preoccupied "Westminster village". It is dominated by the issues about which Lobby journalists and MPs like to gossip to the exclusion of the issues, which are pressing upon the lives of the public beyond Parliament Square. Jonathan Freedland pointed out recently that, if newspapers were edited by plumbers, they would give prominence to disasters about blocked drains and street floods. As they are edited by journalists, they give prominence to stories about spin-doctors and press officers.

That is why the media lovingly detailed every twist, every email, and every phone call about which day and at what hour Martin Sixsmith resigned. It is strange that a media, which

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keeps offering itself as an example of a highly competitive industry, is so blind to the real interests of the market. On the night in February when the media was preoccupied with Stephen Byers' statement on Martin Sixsmith's resignation, BBC bulletins beyond London and the South East had their lowest ratings for a year. The viewers are literally switching off media stories of the Westminster village. The risk is that the public then also start to switch off from democracy.

Philip Gould observed last week that the ratio of negative to positive media stories has increased from 3:1 in 1974 to 18:1 in 2001. Is it any wonder that we have difficulty in restoring faith in democracy as a successful process, if the outcome of the process is only reported in terms of failure?

But the need to repair popular faith in democracy is underlined by the gathering strength on the continent of Far Right extremist parties, which are intolerant, authoritarian and fundamentally anti-democratic. Let's keep the problem in proportion. Everywhere they remain a minority of less than one-fifth of the total vote. It is not a common European movement; it is different in every nation. But the emergence of the Far Right from the further lunatic extremes poses sharp questions to democratic politicians everywhere and challenges our conventional way of doing politics.

For example, our concept of political dynamics is rooted in a century of struggle between Left and Right, and that concept remains a valid short hand for the choice between the major parties in most European countries. But increasingly the choice, which the electorate is making, is between establishment and populism. Parties of the far Right are currently thriving by picking up the growing "none of the above" vote. The challenge for responsible democratic

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government is to be in power, but not to become trapped in the establishment.

Since Maynard Keynes convinced the opinion formers of his time that government was responsible for the state of the economy, political parties have put economic management at the top of their sales pitch. Only a decade ago Clinton built its entire campaign on the maxim "it's the economy, stupid". Yet the challenge we have seen recently from the Far Right is not based on discontent with the economy. A government of the Centre Left in the Netherlands has just been put out of office by a dramatic rise in the vote for the Far Right, despite a prosperous economy, in which GDP has grown by 25 per cent within a decade. Mainstream politicians need to find progressive and inclusive solutions to the new politics of which the Far Right feed - the politics of insecurity and belonging which authoritarian parties now exploit as fear of crime and hostility to different people.

There is another lesson to be absorbed and reflected upon. In the past generation we have become accustomed to the electoral battleground being waged for the centre, where live Mondeo Man, Worcester Woman, and all the rest of the pebbledash People. This fixation has been particularly acute in Britain because our idiosyncratic electoral system ensures that these crucial swing electors are the only ones whose votes really count. Yet the message from the Continent is that the struggle for the centre voter is no longer the only contest in town. Continental parties of the left have seen their core voters go straight to the Far Right without stopping off in the centre. We need to adjust to a different electoral environment, possibly more healthy electoral environment, in which those competitions are for the vote of every community not just the centrist voters.

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We also need to recognise the impact on domestic politics of globalised economics. Globalisation has been great for those with internationally marketable skills. They have seen the price of their labour bid up in the much wider market place. It has not been so great for unskilled workers who have found themselves in direct competition with cheaper labour anywhere on the face of the globe.

Perhaps one of the reasons why we have been more successful in Britain in keeping the Far Right in check, has been the vigorous programme we have pursued to widen access to education and skills and to promote social justice. Despite these pressures of globalisation, we have ensured over the past five years that the bottom decile of income earners has received the same percentage increase as the top decile, contrasting vividly with the outcome of the Thatcher years when they got a beggarly one-thirtieth of the top decile.

The most profound challenge of all is how do we bridge the gap between politicians and people, and build a shared reality understood by both. The most brilliant and at the same time the most depressing political tract which I have read in the past year is the monograph by Colin Crouch on *Coping with Post Democracy*. His central thesis is that mass democracy reached its zenith in the mid-twentieth century, and has been on a descending parabola ever since. Politics is now seen to be the property of a political class. It is not seen as the product of a mass movement or under ownership of the people.

The bigger the gulf between electors and elected, the greater my problem - everybody else's problem - in maintaining consensus around Parliamentary democracy as the remedy. The problem is particularly acute among younger voters. Although

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they are better educated, better informed, and on the whole have a better financial stake in society than previous generations, younger voters had an even worse turnout at the General Election than the rest of the population. The recent BBC research into public disillusionment came to the depressing conclusion that there was a collective sense of pride among the third of the population that did not vote. We are in danger of it being seen as not cool to vote in parliamentary elections.

Those of you who will recall that I began by saying that I am in an optimistic mood must now be asking how then do we get back to the optimism with which I started?

We can begin to recover that optimism by recognising that democratic ballots are still enthusiastically embraced when people believe that their opinions make a difference on issues, which directly affect them. There have now been a string of ballots with a high turnout as a result of our initiatives on New Deal Communities. From Sheffield to Bristol, the turnout has exceeded 50 per cent, and the turnout in Sheffield was exactly double the previous local government turnout. These are turnouts in ballots in deprived communities, which normally have the worst turnouts.

Over the past year there have been 26 ballots on the transfer of municipal housing. The average turnout is a staggering 69 per cent, which would be a highly respectable figure for any General Election. Both in Birmingham and Glasgow there was a 65 per cent turnout. This contrasts with a lower turnout in those cities for General Elections, local elections and, in the case of Glasgow, for the first election to the Scottish Parliament.

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There is hope here. People will vote if they believe that the ballot is part of an empowering process. There is no single, simple stroke by which Parliament can make elections to it appear equally relevant. But there are three steps, which I want to leave with you, which must be part of anyone's package.

Firstly, MPs must be given space to respond to events as human beings rather than as programmed politicians. We need to try to be less tribal and more individualist in our approach to political debate. Pager politics belongs to the era of collectivism and the command economy of half a century ago. In the consumerist and lifestyle age, in which younger voters inhabit respect goes to personalised responses, rather than to party mantras.

Secondly, if we are to do that, the media need to resist pouncing on the least spark of originality from an MP as a gaffe, or running off to find another MP of the same party to denounce it. No MP will show a spark of originality if we are left living in terror that it will be turned into a conflagration of headlines on party splits. Mature and honest debate requires a media that is equally mature and balanced.

Thirdly, the Commons, if it wants to be seen as relevant, must be seen to belong to the modern age. It has been unkindly described by one commentator as "Hogwarts-on-Thames". I could not possibly comment. But I do know that our language often appears jargon and our customs Victorian. We need a bonfire of those little pink ribbons, which each of us are given on election, and on which to hang our swords, and a determined attempt to look and sound as if we belong to the same century as our electors.