

Reforming the House of Lords from the bottom up could include Citizens' Policy Forums

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6/13/2012

Titus Alexander argues that current proposals for reforming the House of Lords will not address the fundamental unrepresentativeness and lack of trust for elected officials that is driving low voter turnout and alienation from public discourse. If parliament wants to reconnect with the public, it should bring public consultation and participation into its deliberative process.



The debate about House of Lords reform addresses the wrong question. Instead of arguing about how to fill the red benches at Westminster, we should ask: *what kind of parliament do we need to improve democratic governance of the Britain?* The purpose of a new chamber must be decided before we consider its membership and method of appointment.

The coalition's proposal to replace the Lords with a largely elected upper house with the same functions and powers will not address the fundamental problems of parliament – which are that politicians are not trusted, they are unrepresentative of Britain's diversity, lack the depth of expertise needed to deal with many complex issues and, frankly, provide poor government as a result.

Trust in politicians has collapsed. Participation in party politics – the main route into Parliament – is low: less than 1 per cent of adults belong to a political party. Voter turnout in elections was below 65 per cent in all general elections this century and below 40 per cent among 18-24 year olds.

This means that national policy-making does not draw on the diversity of experience and knowledge of people, nor does it reflect their concerns. Ministers and civil servants try to bring the gap though a variety of forums and public consultations. Since June 2010, the Government and its agencies have set up at least 726 formal consultations and countless commissions, working groups or forums to draw on outside expertise. But these are usually short term and ignored if they do not support the government's political priorities.

More seriously, parliament does not have the capacity to probe the vast range of activity by government. MPs cannot exercise democratic oversight of more than 300 departments and agencies which employ some 585,000 people and spend £670bn a year.

An elected senate with large multi-member constituencies will not close the gap between the people and politicians. With a single 15 year term, senators will have no more reason to connect with constituents than hereditary or appointed peers. They can say anything to get elected, then do whatever they want and no one can stop them because they will never face the electorate again. Senators will be more remote and unknown than members of the European parliament, and have even less reason to stay in touch with voters.

If parliament wants to reconnect with the public and scrutinising government in more depth, it could bring public consultation and participation into its deliberative process, through a dozen Citizens' Policy Forums representing different interests, including users, consumers, staff, researchers, community groups and elected representatives from other tiers of government. They would cover a broad policy area, such as community safety, the economy, education, environment, families, health, global issues, rural affairs, poverty reduction, security and youth. Each forum could have 50 – 150 members elected through democratic associations of civil society and neighbourhood forums, supervised by the Electoral Commission to ensure probity. They could each have a network of local and regional meetings, together with an online forum, all open to the public.

Policy Forums could be overseen by an all-party parliamentary commission and run by a new department of the House of Commons Service rather than the Crown, with direct links through backbench MPs and/or members of the upper house, whether Lords or Senate. Each forum could be co-chaired by back bench members of parliament from different parties in either House (Commons, Lords or Senate), elected by members of the forum

and linked to parliament through the Select Committee system of either House or Joint Committees of the Commons and Lords or Senate.

By tapping into networks of civil society, parliament would do a much better job of scrutinising government. Citizen's Policy Forums would conduct investigations, lead public consultations on government proposals, undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of Bills through a public reading stage, monitor the impact of legislation through a review stage, and report directly to the House of Commons.

Over 30 per cent of people belong to voluntary organisations, about 14 million people. About a quarter volunteer formally at least once a month, a third do so informally and over 20 million people volunteer at least once a year. Over 650,000 people are trustees of voluntary organisations, 220,000 more than belong to the three main political parties. Voluntary associations involve a greater diversity of people than party politics. People from every age, community, culture and interest group take part in some aspect of civil society, often at a very local level. They work on a huge variety of issues, from allotments, childcare and neighbourhood watch to climate change and world poverty. Most involvement is very practical, doing things for each other, raising funds or advocating solutions to problems. They are what Robert Putnam calls social capital, the "dense network of reciprocal social relations" which gives civic virtue its power.

The cost of Citizens' Policy Forums is unlikely to be greater than consultation costs hidden in departmental budgets, while greater transparency and participation enables parliament to draw on a wider pool of expertise. Britain could be the first to create a new kind of parliamentary process that enables citizens to take part in politics through the internet, participatory community meetings and the democratic associations of civil society and an entirely new kind of chamber of parliament.

The House of Commons would still be the deciding chamber, voting the powers and funds for government; the upper house (preferably elected) could remain a revising chamber, scrutinising legislation, holding the government to account and conducting investigations; while Citizens' Forums would be a reviewing chamber, taking a long-term, in-depth view on issues and implementation.

Policy Forums could bridge the gulf between people and parliament through sustained dialogue between citizens and government. Regular, systematic consideration of legislation by different interests in public, rather than behind the veil of advisory bodies and task groups, will increase trust in politics. By scrutinising legislation at an early stage and evaluating its impact over time, Citizens Policy Forums could bring about profound improvements in the governance of Britain.

The political party which opens democratic participation through Citizens Policy Forums could unleash new energy and momentum for national renewal from the bottom up, and create a better upper house in the process.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

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