

Parliamentary committees could hold the answer to Britain's democratic decline

By Democratic Audit

*British democracy is stuck in a deflated, short-term trap thanks to a number of slow burning structural changes such as the rise of the 24 hour media. Here, **Professor Ian Marsh**, the author of 'Democratic Decline and Democratic Renewal: Political Change in Britain, Australia and New Zealand' argues that newly empowered Parliamentary committees hold the answer and can ground Parliament in longer-term thinking and offer a check on the ministerial dominance of Parliament.*

In a [recent post](#) for the LSE's [British](#)



A Parliamentary Committee Room (Credit: Parliament.uk)

[Politics and Policy blog](#), I argued that the origins of democratic decline lie in three slow-burning structural changes: hollowed out parties, convergence in major party agendas and the post 60s pluralisation of citizen identities. As a consequence, the political conversation is now largely trapped in a short term cage.

But these same structural changes also make it highly unlikely that the major parties could ever recover their former agenda setting and mobilisation roles. So if the parties are unlikely to renew these capabilities, how, in a Westminster-style parliamentary system, might agenda setting and interest aggregation be renewed and links between citizens and the formal system deepened?

This requires an analogue of the older party conferences and other party agenda setting processes, but now constructed around single issues. Any new political and policy making architecture would need to demonstrate a capacity to intervene influentially at the strategic or agenda entry end of the public conversation. It would need to influence (reciprocally) the attitudes and orientations of interest groups, social movements and other protagonists. It would need to engage the media at an earlier point in the policy cycle. By these and other means it would also need to facilitate social learning. These are demanding requirements. How might they be met?

In the earlier post, I argued only one institution – parliamentary committees – could meet these requirements. But they could only do this if reinforced by procedural and other changes that assigns them a new and influential role in the formal policy making process. These changes would need to be political, cultural and institutional.

At a political level, a weakening of party discipline is essential. Voting reform and multi-party politics may be preconditions for such a development. Meantime, a more democratic upper house could create an alternative (or supplementary) site for committee infrastructure. At a cultural level, the notion that major emerging issues should first be exposed in a transparent setting and before decisions are taken by the executive would confound many present assumptions and conventions. At an institutional level, the allowances of chairs, committee work as a career track, committee standing, procedures surrounding the debate of reports and the resources available to committees would all need to be reworked. These are demanding requirements and of course the many obstacles cannot be understated.

But what is the alternative? A rampant populism abetted by focus group politics, the marketing model and a 24-hour media cycle is surely profoundly corrupting – and its presence can only be curtailed if an equally potent countervailing infrastructure – one that can facilitate social learning – is appropriately embedded in the formal structure of power.

Parliamentary committees could offer new essentially political capacities to recreate the outcomes that were formerly located in the mass party organisations. In this role, they would complement other instruments of enquiry and assessment. Indeed, they may induce the creation of additional infrastructure (e.g. an analogue of the Congressional Budget Office attached to the legislature; or deliberative forums – like Citizens Juries, deliberative assemblies, blue-ribbon panels – of various kinds). Committees would add essential political depth and reach to such ancillary mechanisms. They have the capacity to do this around single issues. Their findings might then inform subsequent debate between the rival political elites.

A preliminary case for nominating parliamentary committees (and the overall committee system) as critical potential agents of democratic renewal might involve grounds such as the following. First, they can constitute a point of access for interest groups and social movements. Such organisations are now ubiquitous. They are key representatives of and advocates for a more differentiated citizenry. They are at least as democratically grounded as any of the major parties. Hence, their engagement is essential to broaden representation.

Second, committees should have access to the voting power of the legislature. Drawing on this access, committees can constitute a medium for improving the alignment between parliamentary rituals and policy making realities. Access to the voting power of parliament places committees on an equivalent formal footing to that of ministers. If committee members feel sufficiently strongly about an issue, and if they are able to persuade a sufficient number of their colleagues to support them, they can gain attention for their views on the floor of the House. They can if necessary challenge the executive, a course of action which the incentive structure of a multi-party environment and/or weakened party discipline is likely to encourage. Parliament offers a transparent setting for such activity. These processes create the scenes, acts and cameo dramas of parliamentary life. The possibility of such action would likely stimulate media interest in committee deliberations and hence extend their reach into public opinion more broadly.

Recasting the parliamentary theatre in such terms might have a third benefit. In offering a new focus for media attention and new content for media reports, a better alignment between policy making processes and the development of interest group and public opinion might be established. The dynamics of social learning determine this outcome. In appearing before enquiries, gathering evidence from their members, reporting the results of their participation, engaging with the views of other protagonists (including departments), and forming more encompassing advocacy coalitions, processes of social learning can be stimulated. Parliamentary deliberations that are more closely aligned to the substance of issues might reinforce this outcome. By such means, parliamentary rituals and debates might be more congruent with policy choices. This is essential to develop social learning.

Fourth, parliamentary committees can open up access at the right moments in the policy cycle – at the agenda entry end when issues are still being defined and their significance evaluated. These matters are now largely the prerogative of the executive. Ministers or mostly control formal agenda entry. Parliamentary committees offer the only extra-party infrastructure capable of qualifying executive power.

Parliament is a kind of theatre. Its successive acts and scenes and cameo dramas create a mise en scene that, in adversarial settings, simulates the real struggle for power of an election campaign. The question is: in a more pluralised society, can this drama be recast to impact constructively on public opinion? Would a committee and parliamentary conversation that focuses on strategic issues, partially independent of the struggle for office between government and opposition, achieve this outcome? In effect, this would involve the creation of a contemplative phase in the policy process, one that would precede but inform final choices, which would remain the prerogative of the executive. Because of its influence on policy, the deliberations that occur in this new phase could be expected to attract much more intense media interest.

These are the general arguments in favour of a substantial development of committee roles. They move well beyond present arrangements. Enthusiasm must be qualified by a clear-eyed assessment of present committee experience, hobbled as it is by the Whips and by parliamentary procedures that are oriented to the executive. Perhaps most of all enthusiasm must be qualified by recognition of the hold of established political habits and expectations. These are embedded in all parties and are often grounded in deep scepticism about enhanced transparency and participation. They also reflect defence of immediately perceived major party interests. No doubt change, if it is to occur, must await a virtually irresistible accumulation of pressures and perhaps the leadership of a twenty-first century Disraeli or Gladstone.

But democratic renewal is in the first instance a challenge to political imagination. Is there an architecture that can enrich and deepen the public political conversation – one that can enhance the social learning of all participants and protagonists? In the architecture envisaged here, this conversation would commence at the level of a policy community, continue through parliamentary committee enquiries, and gather further momentum through the drama of floor debates and their associated routines and procedures. Many elements of this conversation occur now, but mostly in a disconnected form. They are to be found in the various nooks and crannies of the public sphere and the formal policy system. Bureaucracies dissect issues and sometimes publish background papers. Think tanks cogitate. Interest groups and social movements agitate. When an event of sufficient moment arises – or is stage managed – the media reports. But these currents and eddies are now relatively separated. They are not integrated or fused into a common stream. Parliament is the only authoritative setting where this could occur. Parliamentary committees are the tried and tested vehicle for this task.

Note: This post represents the views of the author and not of Democratic Audit, or the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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