

“A significant loss to UK democracy”: Experts respond to the abolition of the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

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By Democratic Audit UK

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The incoming majority Conservative government has opted to abolish the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, which unlike the other commons committees does not exist on a statutory basis. Democratic Audit UK asked experts and practitioners to respond to the news, who are united in considering it a foolhardy decision which will do little to improve Britain’s ailing democracy.

Louise Thompson, Lecturer in Politics, University of Surrey

Select committees have always been well regarded, but over the last Parliament they really came into their own. Former Public Accounts Committee Chair Margaret Hodge for instance said that she had [more power during her time on the select committee](#) than she did as a government minister. The decision not to re-establish the PCRC is therefore a worrying indication of the nature government’s relationship with Parliament over the next five years. To some extent this is not really an unexpected development. There were signs throughout the previous Parliament that that government were not happy with the amount of scrutiny being given by the committee. It took [over a year for them to respond](#) to (and largely ignore) the committee’s detailed work on the proposed lobbying legislation in 2012 and is yet to respond to its report on Parliament’s role in conflict decisions.



Although some select committee reports do see a tardy response from the government, the frequency with which this occurred towards the PCRC suggests that its members may have been doing too good a job at putting government plans under the microscope. With so much more constitutional reform now on the agenda, there is a considerable gap in Parliament’s scrutiny mechanisms. If it is not the PCRC holding the government to account, it will now be up to individual MPs to try to adequately scrutinise these plans. Doing so without the resources of a select committee will be very difficult indeed.

Graham Allen MP, Chair of the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 2010-2015

The need for Parliamentary accountability and public scrutiny on democratic change is more necessary after the election not less. The Union faces a crisis internally and in its relations with Europe, Devolution in England is now a pressing political issue, Parliament needs to find its role, the Human Rights Act faces abolition, disenchantment with politics and democracy and the public questioning of the legitimacy of Government is at an all-time high. Parliament needs to play its full part



in addressing these problems and not be denied effective means to do so by Government.

The Government have nothing to fear from a proper partnership with Parliament. Careful all-party pre-legislative scrutiny of its proposals will make for better law. Ramming proposals with potentially enormous Constitutional ramifications through a Parliament unequipped with a dedicated all-party Select Committee could leave large areas un-discussed and un-debated. A full five year Government has plenty of time to get its legislation through properly, and a one party Government should be especially sensitive to ensuring Parliament is consulted adequately. If Parliamentarians let this happen it may well encourage Whitehall officials to propose other curbs on the gains made by the last Parliament

Richard Berry, Research Associate, Democratic Audit UK

The abolition of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee represents a significant loss to UK democracy. In a narrow sense, the abolition can be justified by the shift in political priorities. That is, many of the changes that PCRC spent the last Parliament exploring, like votes at 16 or a written constitution, appear to be off the agenda for the time being. Some might argue that Parliament should concentrate on scrutinising what the government is doing, not what it isn't. However, that perspective overlooks the important role that Parliament has to open up public debate and raise new issues and ideas for government to consider.



When the Director of Democratic Audit UK Professor Patrick Dunleavy and I [appeared before PCRC](#) in 2014, for instance, we highlighted the poor quality of electoral information available to voters. A fantastic example of what such a committee can achieve is PCRC's work on [House of Lords reform](#) in 2013. It might not be an immediate priority any more, but when this issue comes round again – as it surely will – the fact that PCRC has laid out a blueprint for incremental reform, with cross-party consensus, will be invaluable.

Andrew Blick, Lecturer in Politics and Contemporary History, Kings College London

I was fortunate enough to work closely with the PCRC, its chair – Graham Allen MP, other committee members, and its staff, during the 2010-15 Parliament. It carried out groundbreaking investigations into previously neglected areas, including a consideration of the possibility of a code for independent local government. Its inquiry into the idea of a written constitution for the United Kingdom was the first ever to be conducted.



Were membership still left to the whips, Graham and others like him would never be allowed onto select committees in the first place. The experience of the last five years tells us why. Committees that challenge established premises, ask awkward questions, and make radical proposals, are a source of irritation and discomfort for people whose main task is keeping the troops in order. The whips have now had their belated revenge. But important changes are often driven by people who

may seem irritants to those committed to operating the system as it is, not reforming it.

Aside from the more attention-grabbing inquiries, the more regular work of PCRC will be missed, too. It was able to scrutinise the myriad constitutional bills that passed through the last Parliament. More such legislation, some exceptionally controversial, is planned, in areas including repeal or replacement of the Human Rights Act 1998, and 'English Votes for English Laws'. The PCRC will no longer be there to scrutinise it, and the load will have to be shared by those committees that remain in the Commons and the Lords, which are already hard-pressed.

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