

Democracy must evolve with the times if it is to retain the trust of the UK public

By Democratic Audit UK

*The Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy recently produced a report which advocated a number of reforms to the democratic process, including the introduction of online voting. One of the commission's members, **Robert Halfon MP**, argues that the report is an important milestone in our democracy, and argues for the introduction of the policies the commission recommended.*



Credit: [digital democracy](#), CC BY NC SA 2.0

The Digital Democracy Commission, of which I am a member, is a revolutionary initiative to widen interest in our political democracy. It has been a massive pleasure to serve alongside the other commissioners.

I believe that our democracy will never be complete unless it makes an effort to reach out to those who do not participate in it, and in considering access to it, we cannot overlook the impact of the digital world. The workings of Parliament are analogous to the workings of the code cracked by Bletchley Park expert Alan Turing. Parliament is an incredibly well engineered machine, but it can be deciphered only by a genius who has the experience and knowledge required to navigate its many enigmas.

While we are still using the Enigma computer of Parliament, the public have moved on to getting information via smartphones and open source computers. Another way of looking at that is to consider Parliament as an old IBM mainframe system in an age where system diversity is the rule, not the exception. Parliament is restricting itself, and we need to ensure that it uses all the available options.

The purpose of the report is simple: encourage the public to engage more with Parliament and ensure that Parliament engages more with the people it represents. I believe that three steps are needed to ensure that that happens. First, we need to make sure that there is a free market of information from Parliament. Not only must that be accessible and understandable, but it must provide a forum for exchange and ideas. Therefore, the first step must be, as the report stresses, to overcome barriers through the simplification and digitisation of parliamentary data so that they genuinely become open. Secondly, the creation of a cyber Chamber will enable all to participate in the daily life of the Chamber. Finally, online voting would ensure that the most important part of the

interaction between Parliament and citizens was accessible.

We do not need to build everything from scratch. The digital age has seen a lot of companies—Amazon, eBay and many others—developing ways to engage with customers, and we can use existing expertise to develop parliamentary engagement. If representation is to mean anything, rather than simply implementing a new, fancy web design, we should ask people what they want and directly engage with their opinions. The report has started the crowdsourcing of democracy to make it truly inclusive. In an era that is dominated by the digital sphere, it seems almost absurd to have such limited means of accessing House of Commons literature in a digital format and in language that is accessible to everyone.

The barrier to people educating themselves about Parliament and its features is dual: on the one hand, information is hardly accessible in the format used by the new generations; on the other, the language used in parliamentary proceedings is so obscure that, just like the Bletchley Park codes, it takes an accustomed genius to understand it. That is why the first step towards democratising access to parliamentary literature must be a simplification of the language to make it more accessible, which means clarifying the jargon, but also developing tools, accessible digitally, to demystify all the processes so that everyone feels they can get genuinely involved in the parliamentary system.

That participation cannot constrain itself to the traditional roles allocated to citizens. The policy that I find most important, and which is outlined in our report, is the creation of a 'cyber Chamber' that would allow the general public to weigh in on debates that concern them. Throughout this debate, we have discussed ways to increase participation in parliamentary affairs. We can do that only by allowing those for whom the laws are made to intervene in debates, in an informative style, to ensure that every voice is heard.

Our surveys show that people feel disconnected from political parties, but not from the issues that we discuss. People are very interested in what goes on in the world and at home, but not in Westminster politics, which means that we have to focus our efforts on the substance of Parliament, the debates and the laws it creates to allow citizens to feel that they are an integral part of British democracy in action. That should include not only the 'cyber Chamber', but a new way of directly questioning the Prime Minister and MPs. The focus on direct representation must extend to ways of holding those who lead our country to account, and the report therefore outlines a need for an additional structure for Prime Minister's questions that would directly involve the public.

If we are to crowdsource our democracy, we must make certain that the public feel they have real involvement in the way Parliament works. The report suggests the creation of a cyber Chamber, or "Open House", which would be "regular digital public discussion forums to inform debates held in Westminster Hall."

That is the right direction of travel, but I am a revolutionary in that matter—we need to go further.

In the long term, we need a separate Chamber of the public where individuals are able to vote on key issues of the day that are being debated, which would give a voice to public opinion. Although the House of Commons would always have the ultimate say, each citizen would be given a personal identification number and could vote online on major debates. The result would be an advisory opinion as to what the public feel about key issues as they happen. The third, virtual Chamber would always be advisory, but it would be a great way to ensure that MPs were made aware of their constituents' concerns before we walked into a debate. That would be a real way to re-engage the public in our democracy.

The third essential part of the triangle is online voting. When considering the digitalisation of the political system, we must always bear in mind the ever-diversifying ways to use the internet. One of those is the ability to accomplish high-security tasks without having to move. Banks have set up transfer systems that require nothing but a click, so why would it not be possible for constituents to vote online if they wanted to do so?

The voting system is incredibly romantic. We have the old-fashioned pencil and the beautiful, black, dented, old-fashioned ballot box. We mark a cross on a piece of paper and stick it in the ballot box, which is anachronistic and stuck in the previous century. The public have moved on from such behaviour, which is why we have seen such a drop in voter participation and a huge increase in people who want to vote by post. Our surveys show that the majority of people would support an online voting platform, and 15.3% of the electorate chose to vote by post at the

last general election, in 2010.

People want new options, and it is up to us to provide them with some. We must not fool ourselves: the decline in voter participation is strongly linked to the fact that new generations interact in different ways and therefore require different ways of appealing to them.

The digital divide is a fading reality, with more and more people being included in the digital age, and we cannot afford to keep Parliament out of it. We have heard the real concerns linked to such a policy, and the entirely valid fear of security breaches is probably the most important threat to the system we have imagined. I was amazed, after the first public meeting of the Digital Democracy Commission, to receive abusive e-mails from people saying that I was completely ignorant and out of touch with the security of online voting, but that is a farcical argument.

There are a huge number of abuses in the current system, but no one says, “Why don’t we look at the flaws in the system?” There are still many small “c” conservative advocates of that system, even though it has enormous problems. When we go to a polling station, we do not even have to show our identification, yet if any suggestion of online voting is made—we have security for online banking and shopping—everyone starts worrying about security.

As highlighted in the report, Estonia shows that online voting does not differ from the security requirements of other online proceedings. The system obviously needs to be protected, but we will not be able to proceed with digital democracy if we retain an attitude of stunned inaction towards progress. By looking away from online voting, Parliament would exclude itself from participative democracy and let the rest of the world move far ahead digitally and democratically. We have to engage the public in the way that they want to vote, and we have to move towards some system of online voting. I hope we can have some pilot schemes so that, by the 2020 election, we may see how online voting can work in certain parts of the country.

This year, we celebrate 800 years of Magna Carta, which is perhaps one of the most important documents in modern history—it might be rivalled only by the ten commandments. For the first time ever, a major country said that the king was not above the rule of law and did not have divine right. It took hundreds of years for the system to evolve into what we know as parliamentary democracy, but in that same way we need to mark this anniversary and to make digital democracy the new internet Bill of Rights between the people and Parliament. The report is a step in that direction.

Democracy does nothing if it does not evolve with the times. Freedom survives only when it is a living organism, not when it is stuck like a pickle in a jar in a laboratory. We must strive to enliven our democracy through the digital world. We would do well to remember that the Bletchley Park code breakers who saved our country did so thanks to IBM. Democracy is nothing if it does not recognise others.

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Note: this post is an edited speech made by Robert Halfon MP in [Westminster Hall on Tuesday 10th March](#). It represents the views of the contributor and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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Robert Halfon has been the Conservative Member of Parliament for Harlow since 2010.

