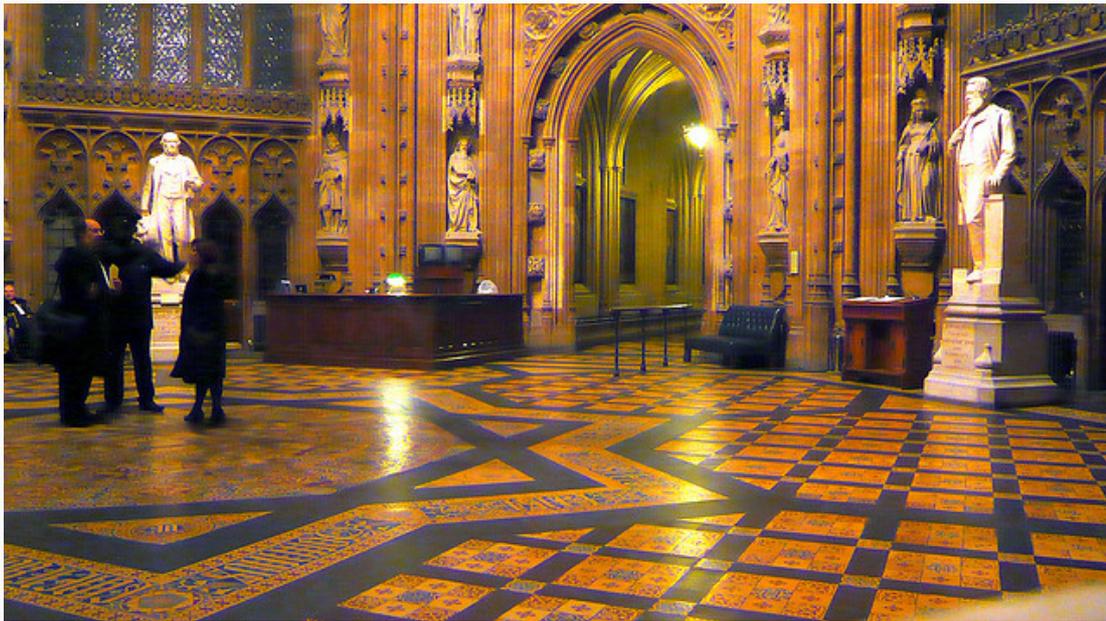


The abolition of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee is a loss to Parliament and British democracy

By Democratic Audit UK

*The incoming majority Conservative Government have made one of their first decisions the abolition of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, currently Chaired by the Labour MP Graham Allen. **Andrew Blick**, who worked closely with the committee argues that the decision is a poor one, and that its work – both high profile and more mundane – will be greatly missed.*



Credit: Herry Lawford, CC BY 2.0

The abolition of the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (PCRC) reminds us of an important fact. In 2010 the whips – responsible for party discipline within Parliament – lost their role in determining chairs and members of Commons select committees. Now these bodies are elected by MPs. But the whips continue to play an important part in determining how the executive is scrutinised, and in particular how the select committee system operates, by simply deciding that a particular committee should no longer exist. This conflict of interest would not be accepted in any other field, so why is it allowed in the most important area of all – ensuring that government is democratically accountable to the public?

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.

To get an idea of what we will be missing, here is the work programme that Graham has told me he would have liked to have pursued, had the whips not abolished PCRC, and had he been elected by the whole House as its Chair;

1. *Parliamentary Boundaries.*
2. *English votes for English laws.*
3. *The democratic implications of Devolution in England.*
4. *The Human Rights Act.*
5. *Review of 2015 General Election with respect to Voter Engagement and Registration.*
6. *Constitutional Implications of Scottish legislation emerging from the Smith Commission.*
7. *A Constitutional Convention for the UK.*
8. *800th anniversary of Magna Carta and the future of a Written/Unwritten Constitution.*

We should all regret this loss to Parliament and to democracy.

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Note: This piece represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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