

# The Palace of Westminster has the look and atmosphere of a private members' club – so let's start afresh

By Democratic Audit UK

*Westminster sits in the centre of the country's major city, physically accessible from great portions of the country by both rail and car, with citizens in theory able to meet their representatives should they wish to do so. So why does the Palace of Westminster feel so remote? **Ben West** argues that Westminster has all of the trappings and atmosphere of a private members' club, and that has to change.*



Old fashioned? (Credit: [Leonard Bentley, CC BY 2.0](#))

You leave behind the light and airy open-plan atrium of Portcullis House, the business-like background noise of people at work: interns and researchers scoffing down a sandwiches on the way back to their desks. MPs meeting constituents and groups of schoolchildren, people carrying trays of coffees in paper cups, politicians and journos scurrying about. It is, in short, a workplace canteen not unlike those in the offices of large organisations across the country. A place of work, of business. It's in sterile office buildings like this across Whitehall where the dull job of running the country actually happens.

Ahead of you lies the Palace of Westminster itself; a network of narrow corridors and low ceilings; ornate pub carpets and carved woodwork, a maze so complex that only those on the inside can possibly navigate it. It is known by more than one MP as 'Hogwarts'.

If you want to know why our democracy is in crisis, why the majority of the public believe MPs live on a different planet, why young, dynamic, hardworking, indebted and renting Britain is in the chokehold of an atrophying out-of-touch elite – then Hogwarts can tell you a lot.

As a white middle class Oxbridge guy, on the occasions once or twice a month when I go there, I've got to be honest. I enjoy it. Striding through Westminster Hall up to the lobby feels powerful. The place stinks of grandeur and history. Over there is where Charles I was put on trial, where Churchill lay in state. Obama gave an address a couple of years ago from over there. Oh look, there goes a guy off the telly. Looking down from above are timbers over 1000 years old. As architecture, as history, as a place to stand and stare it's thrilling – and that's ok.

But as a house of democracy, it's terrible. This is a Palace of the Commons that 97% of the population will never

step foot in. Far too many of that remaining 3% look like me and feel too comfortable there. The clue is in the signs everywhere that say 'members only' or 'give members priority' and the 2 or 3 lines of questioning that you need just to get into the 'public' areas. Recite your business and destination clearly – the stern person asking you has a gun.

It's easy to forget that every single one of the people working in that building are paid for by us, and are meant to be working on our behalf. Why then, as a visitor (particularly one without a pass) do you feel like an interloper who better be on your best behaviour and play by their rules?

Airport security will always be an unpleasant, but necessary pain. But the sense of discomfort is also historical and intentional, built into the fabric of the building itself. I've been the occasional guest of friends who are members of private members clubs in London. With majestic colonnades, sweeping stairways, dress codes, dining rooms with menus full of unpronounceable items and strict rules about where members and non-members (and often, incredibly, men and women) can and can't go, they feel like a slice of Westminster.

Our democracy is both metaphorically and physically modelled on a private members club.

A private members club. That's how abuses have happened. Mind your own business, look away, watch out for your friends, and whatever you do, don't rock the boat, or you'll land us all in it. The overwhelming number of people going into Westminster are immensely hard-working and honest, and most somehow manage stay that way. Given the atmosphere of the place though, it's a wonder that more don't go feral.

A lot of the blame, it seems lies with the Parliamentary authorities, who seem insistent on keeping the place sealed in aspic and run along similar lines to a National Trust property. If you contact your MP to arrange a tour of Parliament (which anyone is entitled to do), you'll be treated to an hour-long art and history lesson – details and dates of paintings, a blow-by-blow account of Her Majesty getting robed up for the State Opening, amusing and arcane anecdotes about statues and toes rubbed. The gift shop at the end is similarly baffling. Is there any other democratic legislature in the World that is known for its specially-labelled whisky?

It's fascinating way to spend an afternoon – but don't be fooled into thinking you'll come out of the place with any better an idea of how things actually work. Heaven forbid a troupe of schoolchildren or foreign tourists leave with an understanding of how MPs are elected or how a law is passed.

You'll have no more luck if you try to circumvent the absurdity by holding an event of your own within its four walls. The organisation I work for recently tried to hold a meeting of some of our members in one of the grand old committee rooms, giving them the chance to discuss policy, brainstorm ideas and feed back to one another. But modern democratic participation isn't just discouraged by the atmosphere of the place, it's often physically impossible.

In advance of the meeting, I foolishly asked whether it would be possible to live stream the meeting over the web, giving members from outside the country the opportunity to input. We were curtly told by the parliamentary authorities that even if it were technically doable (it was, just about), doing so was banned in case it gave the impression of being 'official business'. If British citizens meeting to discuss the issues of the time in the mother of all parliaments isn't official business, I'm not sure what is. Certainly more official than the goings-on in many of the tea rooms and bars below.

The point is, none of this is accidental. The practices and attitudes of 19th century democracy are hard-wired into the fabric of the building itself. Half the committee rooms are divided into narrow pews, making working in small groups and collaboration impossible. Hierarchies are rigidly enforced, with a high table at the front. The layout of the rooms makes it clear: we as citizens are meant to follow and listen respectfully to the panel and chair, perhaps asking the odd respectful question – not to share ideas amongst ourselves, brainstorm or collaborate. In the 'public' corridors, we're meant to quietly tiptoe through, giving way to and toffing our caps to our elected betters.

They built it that way. The late Victorians (because in reality, the majority of the place is no older than a typical terrace house), sought to create a space that physically embodied and reinforced the values of Imperial Britain. As at Oxbridge and the public schools, language and whimsical traditions were invented which, intentionally or not,

divided those who were in from those who were not.

Those outside of that enfranchised elite, and those from the dominions and colonies across the Empire, were, then as now, meant to be observers. Their role was to gaze in awe and wonder at the grandeur of the Mother of Parliaments – not to challenge the people working in it.

The sinister, exclusive absurdity of all this becomes clear when you visit Berlin, or, for that matter, the new Parliaments in Cardiff or Edinburgh. The German Reichstag had the good fortune of being gutted by the Second World War before spending 40 years in decay. Within that historic shell, over the past 20 years they've created buildings and institutions fit for a 21st Century Western democracy.

There's still security, but visitors – including foreign tourists- are actively encouraged to visit free of charge, and given a tour that explains (sometimes in too much detail) how the German parliament works. Technologies such as electronic voting have been embraced, ensuring that voting happens with minimal fuss. The front of the building carries the words "To the German People", and for the most part, the Bundestag delivers.

Given that there's a £1.6bn bill to refurbish the Palace of Westminster in its current state, now's the time to think whether Britain can afford to run itself out of a living history museum. Our democracy isn't working. More people go dogging each weekend than are members of political parties. Turnout is plummeting. Politicians are one rung up from paedophiles in the popular imagination.

Enough of the mock humility, the hand-wringing, the gestures, the scapegoats, and the spectacle of one grandee passing mild judgement over another in costly enquiries. We need a fundamental break with the past – a shift not just in rules, but in culture, ways of working and atmosphere. The private members club must be abolished – physically demolished if needs be.

One option is for the interior of the Palace to be demolished, German style, and rebuilt as a modern place of work, better able to meet the demands of a modern accountable, participative democracy. Sweeping away the cobwebs, both metaphorical and physical.

The other is to build a new place for parliament to meet from scratch – somewhere with direct transport links to Brussels and the North such as Stratford or the upcoming development at Old Oak Common would be ideal. The new building could be designed with all of the features and amenities necessary to run a modern, accountable democracy. Childcare, proper visitor facilities, video-conferencing, electronic voting and media studios. Perhaps even an affordable cafe.

For me, though, there's also an argument for preserving what we've got. If you want to understand the psyche of Victorian Britain, with all its awe-inspiring successes and jaw-dropping injustices, and the journey that we as a people have travelled since then, there can be no better place than the Palace of Westminster.

In contrast to the Smithsonian Museum of American History or the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, we lack a museum of our own telling the British story, of our empire and our struggle for democracy. It's a story worth telling our children. Now's the time to start engaging with and understanding that history – not living in it.

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***[This post originally appeared on Ben's personal blog and can be found here](#)***

*Note: this post 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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