

# Time to tackle the growth of the ‘payroll vote’

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By democraticaudit

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*The number of Members of Parliament who take the ‘Government whip’ has continued to grow. This trend is exacerbated by a larger number of members of the House of Lords who have become Ministers, who escape the kind of scrutiny which we associate with the House of Commons. **Stewart Wilks-Heeg** argues that is time to do something about it.*

In our latest full Audit of democracy in the UK, we highlighted our concern about the long-term growth of the government ‘payroll vote’ and its role in diminishing the independence of parliament from the executive.

Essentially, the payroll vote comprises MPs who are part of the government and are bound by convention to vote with it in divisions, or resign. In its broadest definition, the payroll vote includes government ministers and whips, as well as all MPs who are engaged as unpaid Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPSs) to ministers. It is also important to note that some ministerial roles are unpaid.



*Government Chief Whip, Sir George Young (Credit: Astral Media, CC by 2.0)*

We regard the size of the payroll vote as a problem for two main reasons.

- A substantial payroll vote restricts the capacity of MPs to hold the government to account, which is one of the most important roles of the Commons.
- A very large payroll vote makes it very difficult for the Commons to amend proposed government legislation, even though growing numbers of backbench government MPs are prepared to defy the Whips.

Additional concerns raised by the trends highlighted above are that:

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Additional concerns raised by the growth in the number of government roles are that:

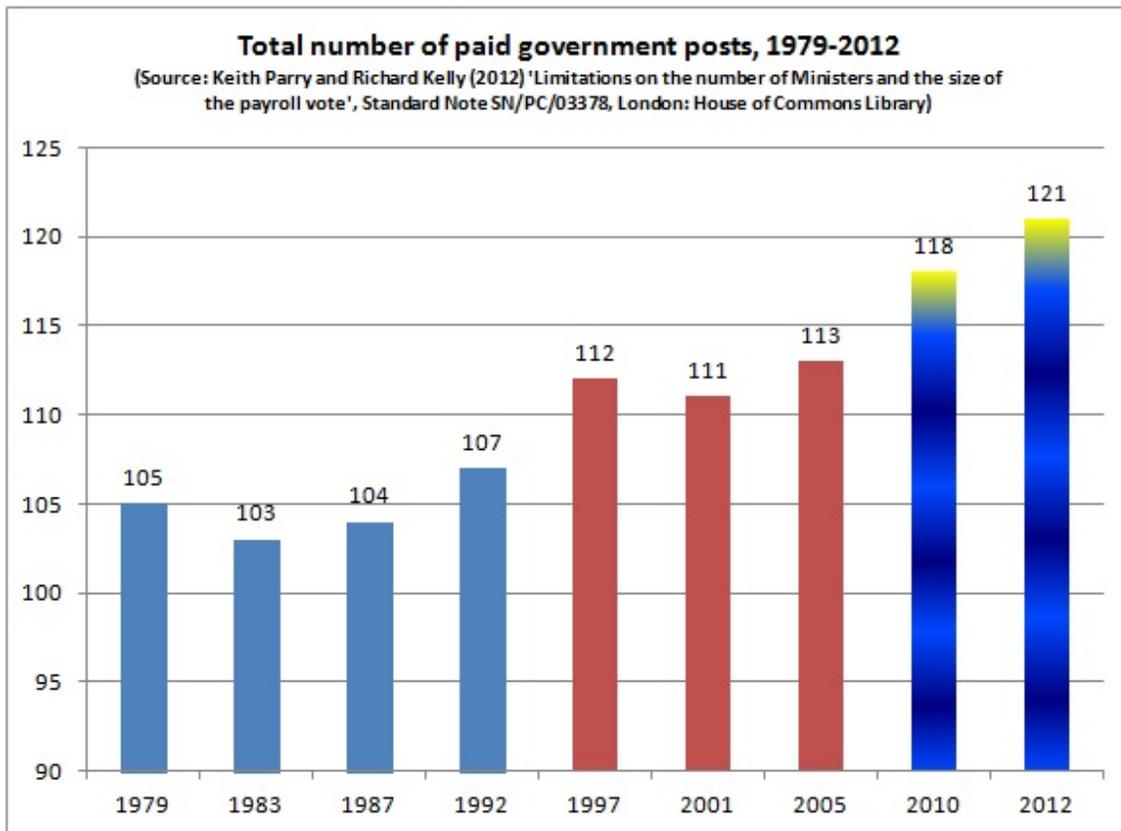
With a rising number of Ministerial posts taken by Peers, there are serious questions about how such Ministers can be held to account by elected MPs. It is difficult to see why the number of government posts continues to grow, particularly given devolution and the stated desire of successive UK administrations to move to 'smaller government'.

Concerns about the growth in the number of MPs making up the payroll vote are not new. Limits on the size of the payroll vote in the Commons were introduced in 1975, including specific limits on the numbers in each category (Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State, Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State, Whips). There is also legislation restricting the total number of Ministers and Whips in the Commons to 95.

However, gradual expansion in the payroll vote since the mid-1970s has been made possible by:

- Appointing a greater proportion of the maximum permitted among MPs (which has now been reached);
- Appointing more ministers from the Lords (now 26, up from 20 on 1979),
- Appointing additional unpaid Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPSs), for which there are no formal limits.

The graph below shows how the total number of government posts has increased since 1970. In this instance, the total is made up of Cabinet Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State, Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State, and government Whips. A small minority of these posts will be unpaid, but unpaid PPSs have been excluded. It is therefore a narrower definition of the payroll vote than the definition outlined above.



*Note: A small minority of the government posts recorded in the graph will be unpaid, due to the statutory limits on the number of paid positions. However, reliable figures for the number of unpaid appointees do not currently exist. The figures above do not include unpaid PPSs.*

As the chart shows, there has been a very clear tendency for the total number of such roles to grow over time, particularly under the Labour governments of 1997-2010 and, even more clearly, since the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010. The period since 1979 has also seen an overall increase in the number of unpaid PPSs, from 37 to 43, although the peak in the number of PPSs was 58 in 2001.

Inquiry after inquiry has criticised the growth of the payroll vote and recommended that steps be taken to reverse it. These include The Norton Commission (2000), The Newton Commission (2001), and The Public Administration Committee (2010) and (2011)

However, there are no signs that any government is willing to take the steps needed to reverse the trends highlighted above, such as placing a limit on the number of Peers who can serve as Ministers and also restricting the number of unpaid governmental roles. Instead, the problems highlighted above will become worse if the government does go ahead with plans to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600, as contained in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2010.

*For further discussion and analysis of the payroll vote, see this recent [news story](#) in The Guardian and the figures published on The Guardian [datablog](#).*

**Stuart Wilks-Heeg was the Executive Director of the Democratic Audit until 2013**