

# If Parliament wants to be trusted, it must trust the people

 democraticaudit.com /2013/11/29/constitutional-and-institutional-reform-is-critical-but-it-cant-fix-parliament-on-its-own/

By Democratic Audit UK

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*Parliamentary and constitutional reform remains the main focus of most efforts to improve government and make our democracy fit for the 21st Century. But while these efforts are important and have made a positive difference in the past, they are not on their own sufficient. To become a truly representative and relevant institution, Parliament must engage directly with citizens more, and think seriously about a genuine devolution of power says **Simon Bural**.*



I recently took part [in an event](#) which explored how to turn the House of Commons into an institution fit for the 21st Century. This was good timing, given the well-publicised appearance of Russell Brand on Newsnight ([his thoughts written up just after in the Guardian](#)), and [Paxman's subsequent admission that he doesn't vote either](#).

However, I was asked to talk before all this happened, so here's the thrust of what I said. It can be summarised very easily though; genuine reform of our democracy will happen only when the government and our elected representatives start to genuinely trust that citizens have something important to bring to the decision-making process.

The topic of the evening's debate was how to make the House of Commons a truly 'open house', one that learns from organisations working in properly innovative ways for the social good. Personally I think that reforming the House of Commons, and the wider parliamentary system, while important, won't solve a thing. There are at least three other huge reforms that need to be carried out as well for it to have an impact.

Don't get me wrong; constitutional and institutional reform is absolutely critical. For example, we need a system of

voting that means that every vote counts, and we can't properly call ourselves a democracy until we've got a democratically elected upper chamber and have a written constitution. All this is the foundation of all the other reform that is required (and is so important it's why I chair [Democratic Audit](#)). But all this reform, difficult as it will be, isn't enough; it's playing with the form and theatre of parliament only. It will change some of the actors and spruce up some of the stage scenery, but for a variety of reasons it won't significantly affect the relationship between electors and elected.

### **Why won't reform of Parliament give real power to citizens?**

The first reason it won't change the relationship fundamentally is because Parliament isn't the only centre of power. There are a number of significant decisions – on trade, the economy, energy infrastructure and environment, for example – that can only be taken at either EU or international level. No amount of changing the way that the House of Commons works will affect this, it just cannot take decisions unilaterally. While heroic reforms at levels of governance higher than the UK are vitally important, they are outside the scope of what I spoke about.

However, there are a couple of things that the House of Commons demand that the government does.

Get real about devolving power locally. The current referendum debate in Scotland is only a symptom of the wider issue that power is too centralised in the UK. The Government and House of Commons must be prepared to give up some power to allow real decision-making at the local level.

The next thing is much smaller, but it is important. MPs and the Government must stop obscuring who is taking decisions at the international level and about how much power Parliament and the Government has in such forums. It just isn't good enough to come back from an international negotiation either claiming all the credit for a momentous deal or blaming all the other countries for failure. Hiding from the public what decisions are taken where, and just how much power the UK has in those forums, feeds into the wider levels of distrust that citizens have about Parliament.

Parliament only sets the rules and oversees what government is doing. The majority of citizens never interact directly with Parliament at all. All they experience is the local hospital, school or other public service. This is the second reason that reform of the House of Commons isn't enough; wider government is still too opaque and closed to citizens.

The current release of large numbers of data by the Coalition is a good step forwards, but is nowhere near enough. Government data tells us nothing about how decisions are actually taken and who was involved, and it doesn't expose wrongdoing. We need much stronger Freedom of Information Laws based on the principle of publication of all but the most sensitive documents, we need lobbying laws that stop the richest and most powerful having privileged access behind the scenes, and we need whistleblowing laws that protect, support and celebrate those individuals who put their own careers at risk for the public good.

Finally, the third reason that reform of the House of Commons isn't enough is that elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition for real democratic engagement. For example, we elect our MPs on the basis of manifestos that most people can only support in a general sense, are largely irrelevant as the five year Parliamentary term progresses. They all too often don't deal with some of the biggest issues that MPs find themselves debating in the chamber. The democratic mandate that we assign to the House of Commons is nowhere near as strong as some like to claim.

The change that is required to make a difference is not an institutional one; it's largely a cultural one. The change that is required will require government's default position being to involve citizens in key decisions well in advance and in ways that they can make a material impact on the decisions being taken.

Here the House of Commons could have an impact. It could bring citizen voice and debate directly into parliamentary debates and select committee inquiries, demonstrating that citizen voice is important at the highest

levels of decision-making. Some select committees are testing different ways of doing this, but I think more could be done more quickly.

In the end if the government and Parliament wants citizens to start trusting them more, then it has to start trusting them by engaging them seriously in the decisions that affect their lives.

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*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. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/1iflfJC>*

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