

Pruning the Politicians

**The case for a smaller
House of Commons**

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CONSERVATIVE
Mainstream

Winning from the Centre

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About Conservative Mainstream

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Mainstream believes that the Conservative Party is at its best and most successful when it addresses the practical problems the British people face in their daily lives, and extends opportunity throughout society. Its publications and meetings are designed to help the formation of thoughtful and attractive Conservative policies.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

West Sussex, among many other counties, has just been through the Boundary Commission Review mill. After the next election, my Chichester constituency will lose Petworth, one of the four main towns integral to it, largely as the inadvertent consequence of the creation of multi-member wards at District Council level.

This decision seemed an absurdity: Petworth has deep ties with Chichester. It led me to try to understand the Boundary Commission's rules. For this task I enlisted the help of Lewis Baston who alerted me to more serious deficiencies of the rules under which the Commission is obliged to operate. I would particularly like to thank him for his help with this paper. Oliver Heald MP, Archie Norman MP, a number of necessarily nameless Commons' Clerks and staff of the House of Commons library made a number of helpful suggestions. I would also like to thank Liz Bates, Ann Marsh and Tom Wortley for their help.

As the system became clearer to me, I have come to the conclusion that, if we are to have disruptive boundary changes, we should at least move towards the benefits of a smaller, more efficient House and fairer representation. This paper sets out the arguments for such reform.

The ground is well worn. The case for smaller parliaments is fashionable and I have been persuaded of it despite the fact that a thousand voices say so. Inaction by successive governments has two main causes. It is partly a consequence of technical obstacles to change, often Boundary Commission rules, and partly the result of the understandable self-interest of political parties and MPs. The paper tries to suggest means of dealing with both.

The views in this paper are my responsibility and do not necessarily reflect those of the Conservative Party.

FOREWORD

The recent substantial vote against setting up an elected Regional Assembly in the North East of England had a number of clear messages for politicians who are prepared to listen. One of the clearest is that the people do not want more elected politicians. Whatever the nature of the “democratic deficit” which currently afflicts a number of institutions, the solution does not lie in more elected representatives.

In this paper Andrew Tyrie takes this argument further and argues that we already have too many politicians. Specifically, he thinks the House of Commons is too big. With characteristic intellectual rigour, he produces facts and figures to support his proposals for a smaller and better House, concentrating on what it should be doing.

With respect for democracy at such a low ebb, it is vital that practising politicians put forward well-informed and well-argued contributions to the debate about how to restore people’s faith in elective politics. Mainstream is delighted to publish Andrew Tyrie’s ideas on one key area of this debate.

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INTRODUCTION

Cutting Parliament down to size

Britain has too many politicians. The number of Westminster constituencies should be reduced by about 20 per cent, in two tranches about a decade apart. At the same time, the remaining constituencies should be made of more equal size.

By slimming down parliament, and making sure that a vote is worth roughly the same throughout the United Kingdom, a modest contribution can be made towards restoring respect for politics and politicians. In the process, the cost of politics to the British taxpayer can be reduced by several tens of millions of pounds, stemming the sharp rise in the cost of elected politics since 1997.

Accomplishing this is not so difficult. It requires a specific reform and just a little boldness. First, the four Boundary Commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should be replaced by a single Commission for the United Kingdom as a whole, charged with the twin tasks of reducing the number of constituencies by 20 per cent, and with creating constituencies of equal size. The existing rules, which create an ever upward drift in the size of parliament, should be amended, or scrapped where appropriate, to accommodate these twin tasks.

Secondly, reform must be accompanied by political imagination. MPs will not queue up for extinction. A 20 per cent reduction means that over 120 MPs will see their seats disappear. On top of that, the accompanying boundary changes could mean mass re-selections and many losers, even before taking account of the reduced number of chairs to dance around. So MPs need some encouragement. The answer lies in more flexibility by political parties in the application of the re-selection rules, where boundaries are redrawn, a re-examination of retirement provisions and (in the absence of democratic reform of the Lords) life peerages for those affected who have given good Commons service.

The Electoral Commission will shortly assume responsibility for the Boundary Commissions.¹ The Commission will be able to issue guidance on the interpretation of the redistribution rules and to make recommendations for legislative change. This is an opportunity they must be given every encouragement to grasp.

¹ This takes place under provisions of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, after the completion of the current review of parliamentary constituencies. The Commission has already assumed responsibility for the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

CHAPTER 1

Two problems: too many MPs and unequal representation

Too many MPs: (1) How many does parliament need?

A contemporary parliament should:²

- 1 form and provide legitimacy for government;
- 2 legislate;
- 3 legitimise taxation and spending;
- 4 require the government to explain its actions by exercising powers of scrutiny;
- 5 perform a representative link between individual constituents and the executive.

The first of these is the most important. The best parliaments are those which contribute most to securing consent for government. In mature democracies they tend to owe more to political evolution than the reasoning and constructs of political scientists. Evolution and history has bequeathed us a House of 659.³

Nonetheless, it is difficult to argue that 659 people are required to form and legitimise a British government. In principle, any number that the electorate considers reasonable would, by definition, be

² For an excellent examination of this see *Parliament under Pressure*, Peter Riddell, Orion 1997. See also the author's *Mr Blair's Poodle: an agenda for reviving the House of Commons*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2000.

³ A House of Commons of 600-700 members has been with us for a very long time. Since the Great Reform Act of 1832 it has varied between 625 and 670 members, with the one exception of the 1918-45 parliament, which was first large (707 MPs), and then small (615) because of Irish independence. While the number of seats has changed only a little, there have been vast changes in the nature of society, the franchise, communications and the work done by parliament. There has never been a fundamental reassessment of how many legislators the country needs. Perhaps in a parliamentary democracy with as much continuity as Britain it can safely be avoided. If so, responding to the views of the electorate should be at a premium.

enough to secure consent. The evidence is that the electorate would welcome a reduction in the number of Westminster politicians.⁴

It needs to be considered whether, by reducing the available pool of MPs from which Ministers can be drawn, the quality of the ministerial team might be reduced. I doubt it but it is a moot point.

A related issue is the size of ministerial teams. There is a good case for reducing the number of Ministers, in parallel with a reduction in the Commons. Are 115 required to sustain an effective government? The case for such a large number has not been made. Indeed, the main case for it lies with party management, not efficient government, as a source of patronage for the leadership, not a source of better decisions or better explanation of them. The size of ministerial teams should reflect the tasks people expect of central government. In my view, the country would benefit from smaller government and much more devolution of power to local institutions, particularly individual schools and hospitals. A broadly *pro rata* reduction in the size of the payroll vote is therefore consistent with the logic of a reduced role for central government.

Everyone is agreed that the legislative process in parliament is substandard. Almost everyone is also agreed that this has nothing to do with the number of MPs who perform it. Reducing the number of MPs by 100 is unlikely to make any difference to scrutiny of legislation on the floor of the House. The lion's share of second reading debates takes place in a virtually empty chamber, anyway.

The future of effective scrutiny of the executive should lie increasingly with Committees and less on the floor of the House. Committees could be affected by a smaller House, at least in theory. The two main types are Standing and Select Committees.

Outwardly, Standing Committees may appear active because they are comparatively better attended. But this is usually because government whips need to sustain attendance in case the opposition call an unexpected division. Even this is of diminishing concern now that much Standing

⁴ For example, in October 2004, Yougov carried out an opinion poll for the Mail on Sunday, which asked people if they supported cutting the number of MPs by around 100 to 550: 58 per cent supported the change, 23 per cent opposed and 19 per cent didn't know. Similar, sometimes more emphatic, responses have been obtained on this question over many years. (http://www.yougov.com/yougov_website/asp_besPollArchives/pdf/DBD040101010_2.pdf).

Committee work is programmed, as is business on the floor of the House. MPs who think that Standing Committees make a valuable contribution to the quality of legislation – there is always the odd exceptional Bill – are thin on the ground. Many MPs would argue that reducing the size of Standing Committees by 25 per cent does not go remotely far enough. Several academics and commentators have even suggested that Standing Committees are a scandal and could safely be scrapped.

It is on the Select Committee corridor that effective scrutiny of the executive by parliament will increasingly depend. Select Committees need not suffer from a smaller House. The current size of committees could probably be maintained with a smaller parliament, particularly if opposition parties gave higher priority to their work. A small reduction in the size of committees could also be considered. The *pro rata* reduction in the size of government and opposition front benches suggested above should also release more MPs for Select Committee work. Even a 20 per cent reduction in MPs' numbers should therefore not have much effect, although those with sub-committees, such as Treasury, might find themselves occasionally short-handed. The effectiveness of Select Committees depends far more on targeting their enquiries effectively than on the availability of a particular number of MPs.

Parliament makes a slightly better job of legitimising taxation, not so much *ex ante*, in its examination of the Budget and the Finance Bill, but *ex post*. The work of the Public Accounts Committee, and its use and supervision of scrutiny by the National Audit Office, is one of the most important, and more competently executed, functions of parliamentarians today. Reducing the size of the House by 20 per cent should not make any difference to the quality of the Committee's performance.

Overall, scrutiny of the executive would be unlikely to decline if performed by a smaller House. The quality of current scrutiny activity is limited not by the number of MPs performing it, but by the determination of the executive to prevent them. Anecdotal evidence about MPs' work at Westminster is relevant here. It is understood that Labour MPs are encouraged by their Whips to stay away from Westminster and to take "constituency days" rather than participate in the House's activity. By implication there is simply not enough for them to do, or not enough that the Whips would wish them to do, at Westminster. Executive obstruction also explains why Select Committee

reports so frequently are ignored and why written parliamentary questions so often fail to produce an informative answer.⁵

So far, the reader might conclude that MPs are sitting around doing nothing. Quite the opposite. Over the past 30 years MPs have found themselves in a new constitutional role – that of local Ombudsmen. MPs spend far more time on their constituency work than ever before, writing letters⁶ and engaging in a good deal of work formerly the preserve of local councillors. Half a century ago quarterly visits to the constituency could be considered diligent. These days the majority of MPs work hard in their constituencies every weekend.

Could this new job be performed by fewer MPs? The short answer is that the correspondence, and other Ombudsman-style demands, are unlikely to diminish. Nor is it necessarily a good thing that they should. Indeed, the best case for retention of the current number of MPs can be made by reference to the growth of the MP's new job.

The increased contact between MPs and their constituents can play a valuable constitutional role in a democracy. It belies so much talk about the rise of apathy, cynicism and disengagement by the electorate towards politicians. It is a reflection of the contrast between the low esteem in which politicians as a class are held and the rather higher esteem in which constituents often appear to hold their particular MP. The recent decline in voter turnout is not necessarily inconsistent with this, a product of the electorate's belief in 2001 that the result was a foregone conclusion. In 1992 it was not. The Parties were also offering radically different agendas. The electorate sensed that there was a clear choice to be made: turnout was one of the highest in British electoral history.

Is it the direct personal contact with MPs which the electorate demand or is it a service which an efficient MP, supported by his

⁵ In any case, the Written Answer system is no longer necessarily the most effective means of obtaining information. Writing a letter often elicits more and leaves the MP free of the curious, perhaps otiose, Tabling rules. The Freedom of Information Act will erode the privileged access of MPs to information.

⁶ In the 1950s, MPs were still receiving only 10 to 15 letters a week. In the 1960s, this had risen to between 25 and 74 letters a week. According to Parliament's postmaster there was a four-fold increase in mail between 1964 and 1997, implying incoming correspondence for some MPs of as much as 300 letters per week. Derived from *Representing the People? MPs and constituency work*, Greg Power, Fabian Society, October 1998. I receive an average of nearly 300 a week: it is on a rising trend.

office, can provide? If the former, a reduction in MP numbers might be imprudent. Indeed, it would imply the need for an increase, at least in line with the growth in the electoral population.⁷ If the latter, a reduction should be acceptable.

The evidence is that the electorate are not asking to meet their MPs – the demand for face to face meetings in surgeries is, if anything, in decline. However, they are demanding the services of MPs in helping them deal with public bodies – councils, the CSA, benefit offices, the police – where decisions appear arbitrary or mistaken. Furthermore, the refrain, particularly from some senior MPs, that much of this work should be left with local councillors, is only partly true. Many of the decisions of local and regional institutions have been forced on them by central government. Constituents are therefore correct to alert MPs to the consequences.

Arguably, MPs should be able to cope with the increase in the caseload which would accompany a reduction in their number. But, if fewer MPs are to do the same amount of work, they may need larger staffs. This is the route that all other major parliaments have taken. US Congressmen have roughly seven times the staff of MPs – they represent roughly seven times as many people.⁸ If the number of MPs is to be reduced by, say, 20 per cent the secretarial allowances of the MPs that remain may need to be increased commensurately.⁹ At the same time, firm rules will need to be kept in place to ensure that allowances do not merely bolster incumbency by funding re-election campaigns. The current rules, in my view, are already stretched to acceptable limits, perhaps beyond.

The main case for a smaller House has already been simply stated: the electorate does not see the need for so many MPs, and they are probably right. Other arguments are often heard for a smaller House.

First, there is the cost of parliament. This is a good argument. Estimates of cost savings are set out on page 28. These take account of the need for the remaining MPs to be provided with extra support staff.

⁷ The UK electorate for the 1955 General Election was 34,852,000; by the 2001 General Election it had increased to 44,403,000.

⁸ Members of the House of Representatives represent districts with an average population of 647,000 employing an average 17 members of staff. MPs represent constituencies with an average population of 89,200, an average 2½ full time staff, or equivalent.

⁹ Even in the absence of any other reform, secretarial allowances could reasonably be aligned more directly with the number of constituents each MP represents.

The electorate are right to be concerned by the burgeoning cost of electoral and democratic politics. The cost of the Commons has risen from £182 million to £280.1 million since 1997. It has to be recognised that the £25 million or so saved by a 20 per cent reduction in the number of MPs makes only a small contribution to arresting this trend. Nonetheless, it would send a clear signal. The Commons can and should act as a beacon for other parts of the democratic process.

Opportunities for savings may also come with a reduction in the number of Ministers discussed above. District and County Councils could probably also manage with fewer elected members. Proposals for an additional tier of regional government should be scrapped. This was the clear message of the North East's referendum, one of the most startling democratic results in British politics for many years.

The full cost of democratic and electoral politics – the cost of running the Commons, Britain's share of the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and local government – has risen sharply in recent years. A preliminary estimate, set out in the Appendix, suggests that the cost of democratic politics in Britain has risen from about £720 million in 1997 to £1.3 billion in 2004 – excluding the capital start up costs of the new assemblies. This huge rise is not easy to justify.

Part of the reason that trust in politicians has been eroded is the growing cost of electoral and democratic politics. Ironically, some of this extra cost has been generated by initiatives intended to restore trust, such as the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the creation of the Electoral Commission. Yet reforms that probably would restore trust – for example, removing the link between political parties and business and the unions, and reducing the number of politicians – have not.¹⁰

A second argument for a small House has come with the creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. It carries a clear implication of the need for fewer MPs, since most large federal countries have small federal legislatures. Some international comparisons are examined on page 13.

¹⁰ I argued for a ban on large donations to political parties, whether by individuals, companies or trade unions in 'Our politics is healthy. Our party finances stink' in *Strong Parties Clean Politics*, New Politics Network discussion paper, March 2003.

Thirdly, there are some lesser, practical points in favour of a reduction. A smaller House might also bring the Commons chamber nearer the point where it could seat everyone simultaneously. Such a House would also probably be more collegial. The floor of the current House is designed to seat only 350.¹¹ Most other parliaments around the world have taken the step of providing an allocated chair for each MP, and often a desk or table on which to write. No doubt replacing the current chapel design (itself three times re-constructed, by Wren, by Pugin after the fire in 1834 and under Churchill's scrutiny after serious war damage in 1941¹²) would be several bridges too far for many of my colleagues, and I would want to mull it over myself. If a redesign discouraged the shouting matches and other behaviour which the electorate finds so unappealing, it would have something to commend it. On the other hand, continuity and familiarity in a democracy should not lightly be set aside.

All the arguments – cost, devolution, more collegiality and efficiency, amongst others – count for something but ultimately they are secondary. Only one argument really matters. Parliament needs to respond to the electorate. Of course, the electorate want to have their cake and eat it. They are increasingly critical of the way that parliament works, often rightly. They think that there are too many politicians. Cutting the size of parliament could form a small but important part of the reforms needed to demonstrate responsiveness to their criticisms. Yet the electorate also make increasing demands on their constituency MPs. These views cannot be fully reconciled but some reduction should be possible without imperilling the remaining MPs' ability to respond to the growing demands of the electorate at local level. The time has come to do it.

¹¹ According to Erskine May, 23rd edition, p205.

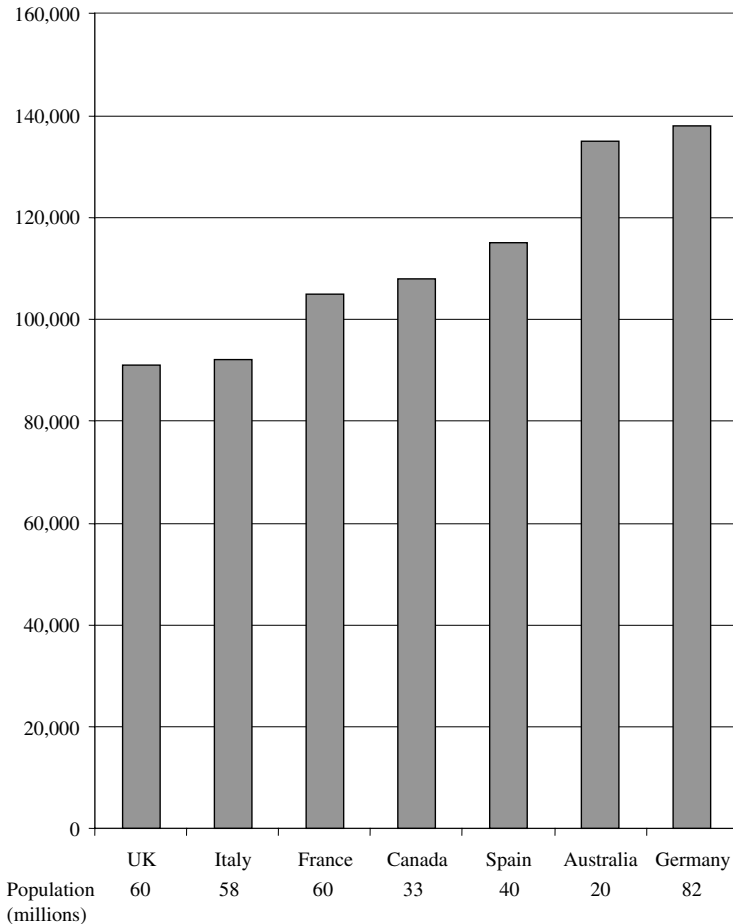
¹² Churchill told the House, "if the House is big enough to contain all its Members, nine-tenths of the debates will be conducted in the depressing atmosphere of an almost empty or half-empty chamber... We wish to see our Parliament as a strong, easy, flexible instrument of free debate. For this purpose a small chamber and a sense of intimacy are indispensable... We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." *How Parliament Works*, Fifth Edition, Rogers R and Walters R, Pearson Longman, 2004.

The contrary view also has powerful adherents: "Why are we squeezed into so small a space that it is absolutely impossible that there should be calm and regular discussion, even from that circumstance alone? Why do we live in this hubbub? Why are we exposed to all these inconveniences? Why are 658 of us crammed into a space that allows to each of us no more than a foot and a half square . . . ?" William Cobbett, quoted in *The Great Palace; the story of Parliament*, Christopher Jones, BBC 1983.

Too many MPs: (2) International comparisons

Other parliaments do not necessarily do things better, but continental and international comparisons may have something to offer. It is relevant that, among advanced democracies of a roughly similar size, Britain has the most legislators per head of population. Even a 10 per cent cut in the size of the House of Commons (taking the number of MPs down to a little below 600) would leave Britain relatively overstocked with MPs, with about 100,000 people per legislator.

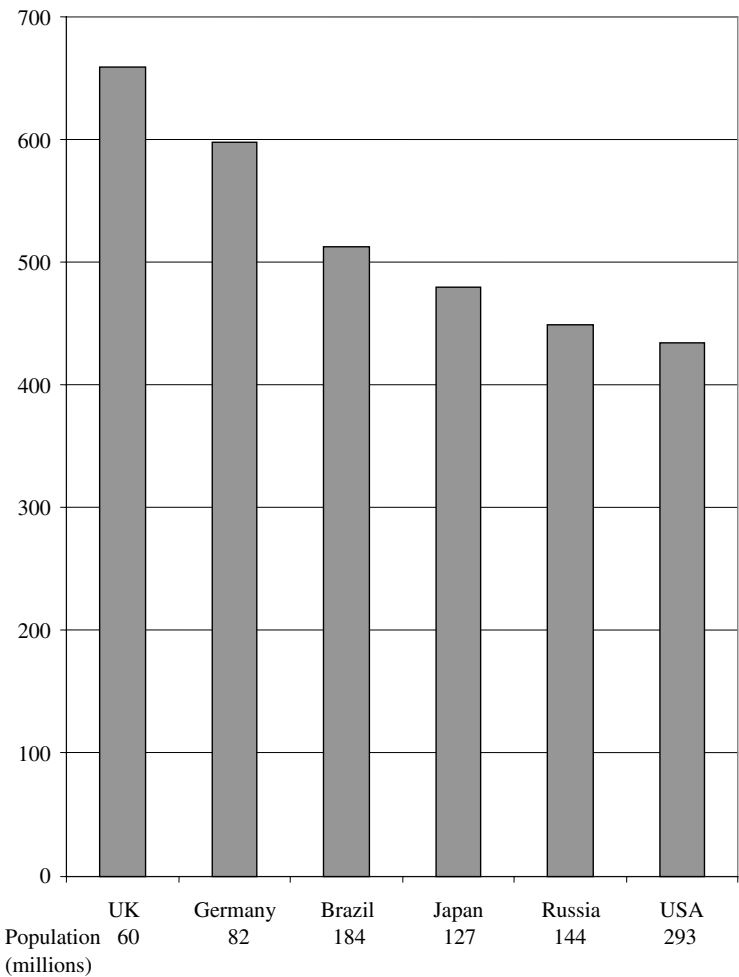
Population per legislator



Source of population figures: Central Intelligence Agency website.

The UK House of Commons, with 659 members, is also among the world's largest legislative bodies in absolute terms. Countries with much larger populations get by with fewer members of their principal legislative chambers. Of course, no comparisons are entirely fair – several of these countries are federal, with large state legislatures, and the role and composition of upper houses varies hugely.

Number of legislators in Lower House



Source of population numbers: Central Intelligence Agency website.

Unequal representation

If the case, in principle, for a smaller House is accepted then we must also accept the disruption that would come with implementing it. And if we are to have the disruption that would come with the boundary changes we should take the opportunity to ensure more equal representation. For the main argument against requiring more equal representation has always been the disruption it would cause.

There is a good deal of inequality to address. Votes in different parts of the UK have widely different values. While constituencies are supposed to be more or less the same size, in practice they are not. It is surprising that such unfairness has been tolerated for so long. Although reforms in Scotland will remove some of the worst anomalies, many others will remain. The average size of an English constituency in 2001 was 69,928 electors, and in Northern Ireland 66,167¹³ electors, while the average size of a Welsh constituency was 55,904. If Wales were put on a par with England, it would have 32 seats, a drop of 8 from current levels and 3 below its current legal minimum of 35 seats.

Even within England, there are big variations. The current Commission's review proposes, and therefore accepts, constituencies of widely different sizes, from Hackney South and Shoreditch (57,204) to Banbury (78,817) and the Isle of Wight (103,480). Some of the variations are caused by the decision not to allow parliamentary seats to cross county boundaries. If more equally sized constituencies are to be created, in a small number of cases this rule will have to be relaxed.

Worse still, the electoral map is out of date, usually by about a decade, before it is ever used. In England, the use of obsolete electoral data is responsible for the most egregious anomalies. The current constituencies are based on the electorate figures from 1991, and the next review – based on electorate figures from 2000 – will probably not come into force until 2009. The current Banbury seat, for instance, was very close to the desired size, based on 1991 figures, but at its first electoral outing in 1997 was nearly 8,000 voters too large, over 10 per cent off target. By 2001, it

¹³ Northern Ireland's representation increased from 12 to 17 seats in 1982 (18 seats in 1995) to compensate for the abolition of Stormont. If devolution is entrenched many will call for a reversion to 12 seats. The pre-1980s under-representation originated, in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, as a rough *quid pro quo* for the creation of Stormont.

had added another 7,000 to produce a seat of 84,371 voters, 20 per cent off target. In 2003, it had grown to 86,510. By contrast, Sheffield Brightside began again not too far off the right size in 1991 at 64,000, but by 1997 its electorate was just under 59,000 and in 2003 it was the smallest in England, scraping in at just over 51,000.

Inequality of representation is unfair to electors. It is also unfair between parties. Labour benefits from the over-representation of Wales (and, until the next election, Scotland) and from urban areas of declining population. The 2003 electorate of the seats Labour won in 2001 averaged 64,936, while for Conservative seats it was 72,814. Even restricting the analysis to England, Labour seats had 67,991 electors on average, while Conservative seats had 72,939 electors.

CHAPTER 2

The Rules in detail – and what’s wrong with them

The Rules

Sorting all this out requires a close look at the rules. The current rules are set out in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, to which they were appended as Schedule 2. These are:

- Rule 1. (1) The number of constituencies in Great Britain shall not be substantially greater or less than 613.
 - (2) The number of constituencies in Scotland shall not be less than 71. (Repealed - by the Scotland Act 1998.)
 - (3) The number of constituencies in Wales shall not be less than 35
 - (4) The number of constituencies in Northern Ireland shall not be greater than 18 or less than 16, and shall be 17 unless it appears to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland that Northern Ireland should for the time being be divided into 16 or (as the case may be) into 18 constituencies.
- Rule 2. Every constituency shall return a single member.
- Rule 3. There shall continue to be a constituency which shall include the whole of the City of London and the name of which shall refer to the City of London.
 - 3A. A constituency which includes the Orkney Islands or the Shetland Islands shall not include the whole or part of a local government area other than the Orkney Islands or the Shetland Islands.
- Rule 4. (1) So far as is practicable having regard to rules 1 to 3 -
 - (a) in England and Wales, -
 - (i) no county or any part of a county shall be included in a constituency which includes the whole or part of any other county or the whole or part of a London borough,
 - (ii) no London borough or any part of a London borough shall be included in a constituency which includes the whole or part of any other London borough,
 - (b) in Scotland, regard shall be had to the boundaries of local authority areas,
 - (c) in Northern Ireland, no ward shall be included partly in one constituency and partly in another.
- (1A) In sub-paragraph (1)(a) above “county” means, in relation to Wales, a preserved county as defined by Section 64 of the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994.
- (2) In sub-paragraph (1)(b) above “area” and “local authority” have the same meanings as in the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.
- Rule 5. The electorate of any constituency shall be as near the electoral quota as is practicable having regard to rules 1 to 4; and a Boundary Commission may depart from the strict application of rule 4 if it appears to them that a departure is desirable to avoid an excessive

disparity between the electorate of any constituency and the electoral quota, or between the electorate of any constituency and that of neighbouring constituencies in the part of the United Kingdom with which they are concerned.

Rule 6. A Boundary Commission may depart from the strict application of rules 4 and 5 if special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency, appear to them to render a departure desirable.

Rule 7. It shall not be the duty of a Boundary Commission to aim at giving full effect in all circumstances to the above rules, but they shall take account so far as they reasonably can -

- (a) of the inconveniences attendant on alterations of constituencies other than alterations made for the purposes of rule 4, and
- (b) of any local ties which would be broken by such alterations.

What's wrong with the rules?

The rules may look reasonable enough. In practice, they are bad news. Taken together, they create an upward drift in the number of constituencies at each review, and they force the Boundary Commissions more or less to ignore Rule I, which is supposed to cap the size of the Commons.

The ratchet

Several of the rules interact to produce the 'ratchet effect'. Since the current system of boundary determination came into force, there has been a steady upward trend.

1950-55	625	Major redistribution by Act of Parliament in 1948
1955-74	630	First Boundary Commission review (1952-54). After this the rules were rewritten to reduce the frequency of reviews.
1974-83	635	Second Boundary Commission review (1965-69) report published in 1969 but implementation delayed until after 1970 election.
1983-92	650	Third Boundary Commission review (1976-82)
1992-97	651	Interim review of Milton Keynes (1990)
1997-2005/6	659	Fourth Boundary Commission review (1991-95)
2005/6-2010/11	646	Reduction of Scottish representation
2010/11	c.651	Fifth Boundary Commission review (2000-06)

The main cause of the ratchet is the *quota* (the ideal average size for a constituency), established at the outset of a boundary review. This figure is all-important in determining how the review operates. At present separate quotas are determined for each of the four nations of the UK. The quota is derived by dividing the total electorate at the start of the review by the existing number of constituencies. In the current review this produced a quota of 69,934 in England.

The quota is used to determine the ‘theoretical entitlement’ of a county or other area to seats. For instance, the electorate in Hertfordshire was 773,593, which gives an entitlement of 11.06 seats, which rounds down neatly to 11. However, using the quota as a basis for the number of seats does not mean that the outcome of the new review will necessarily result in keeping that same number of seats. This is for three reasons.

First, Rule 6 allows extra seats because of ‘special geographical considerations’, creating seats smaller than the strict arithmetic would allow in some areas. These are built in to the divisor of the quota, making the quota smaller than it would otherwise be.

Secondly, Rule 5 prescribes that seats should be as close as practicable to the quota. This means that something called the ‘harmonic mean’ must be used, rather than the arithmetic mean. If, for instance, an area is entitled to 2.41 seats, should it get 2 or 3, with rounding? The answer is 3. If the area has an entitlement of 2.40, one can create 2 seats of 1.20, or three seats of 0.80, which as far as the rules are concerned are just as good as each other. Above 2.40, Rule 5 clearly states that 3 is better than 2. Rounding up more often than rounding down increases the overall number of seats.¹⁴

Thirdly, Rule 7 creates a presumption against change and ‘disruption’. This makes it more likely that areas whose entitlement has fallen slightly below their current representation can resist change.

¹⁴ When I discovered this my first thought was to use the arithmetic rather than harmonic mean, i.e. round 2.49 down to 2, and round 2.50 up to 3. In practice, the Commission have done this in several cases including (in this review) Oxfordshire. However, the arithmetic mean produces more anomalies and inequalities than the harmonic mean and can result in constituencies being much too large. If a place with an entitlement to 2.49 is rounded down, the deviation from the correct size is 24.5 per cent; rounded up, the deviation is 17 per cent.

In all this, Rule 1, which appears to fix the size of the House, is in practice interpreted out of existence. What does ‘substantially’ mean, if 641 is not ‘substantially’ more than 613? The excess is 4.6 per cent. As it happens, in the last couple of reviews the Commission has plucked a figure from the air and established its own definition of what is substantially more: a deviation of 31, or 5 per cent.¹⁵

Worse still, the reduction of numbers in Scotland now allows the creation of more seats in England, without offending against the ‘substantially more than 613’ reference in Rule 1. Therefore, the 5 per cent ‘constraint’ might be no constraint at all. Wales has its own unique problems – see page 24.

Of course, a certain amount of mathematical and statistical complexity is inherent in drawing up boundaries, but the current rules are not good enough. They are difficult even for those with a direct stake in the matter to understand. Rules 5, 6 and 7 create upward pressure on numbers, which subverts the intention of Rule 1. Rule 4, strictly applied, would make observing Rule 5 impossible. More or less anything can be smuggled in under the heading of Rule 7, as ‘inconvenience’ and ‘local ties’ are vague concepts.

The confusion inherent in the rules also adds to the scope for the parties each to dress up schemes that give them an advantage, claiming that they reflect local ties. It is inevitable that parties should seek advantage in their submissions to inquiries – they would be perverse if they did not. But the scope for discretion provided is too large.

In the fog of the qualifications aimed at respecting local ties, geography, special circumstances and the like, the main purpose of the Boundary Commissions is being lost: creating seats of equal size and keeping the numbers from rising. It is time to sort this out, reduce the size of the Commons and make seat sizes more equal. Chapters 3 and 4 suggest how this can be accomplished.

¹⁵ See the Fourth review of the Boundary Commission.

CHAPTER 3

Too many MPs: the solution

The Boundary Commission should be set the task of reducing the number of MPs. At each of the next two reviews it should be required to reduce the number of constituencies by, say, 10 per cent, bringing the total number of MPs down to around 600 at the first review and below 550 at the next. These reviews should take place at 10-year intervals. After the second reduction the question should be re-examined and the case for further reductions considered.

If the problem is not to re-emerge the ratchet also has to go. This can be accomplished in several ways. One would be to introduce a fixed divisor, that is, a fixed number of seats for parliament which the Commission could not alter in the light of special circumstances. Another would be to create ‘a reverse escalator’, of which more below. Both mean a change in the calculation of the electoral quota. There are, no doubt, other methods.

These are technical issues. The one certainty is that it is possible to solve them. Those who are confident of this can safely turn to Chapter 4.

A fixed divisor?

The House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee recommended in 1987¹⁶ that the present system of determining the electoral quota should be replaced by a fixed divisor. They proposed that this should be 515 for England, 36 for Wales, 66 for Scotland and 17 for Northern Ireland.

The Boundary Commission would have no administrative problems with operating a fixed divisor for the whole of the UK. The Home Office produced an unconvincing argument against fixed divisors in response to the Select Committee, arguing correctly¹⁷ that it would not always

¹⁶ House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee (1986-7) *Redistribution of Seats*.

¹⁷ Small variations would continue to be caused by the operation of rounding and the harmonic mean, and any get-outs for geographical reasons, but the scale would be inconsequential compared to the current situation. The government response was published as *Redistribution of Seats – Government Response* (1988), Cmnd. 308.

produce the same number of seats, but incorrectly that slight fluctuations around a fixed point were somehow worse than a gradual increase.

Once one has decided that a certain number of MPs is desirable for the House of Commons, there seem to be no good arguments against a fixed UK divisor. The current Rule 1 seems to create an implicit target of 630. The only rational reason not to have a fixed divisor would be a preference for gradualism, that it would be better to produce change over a period longer than a single review. Downward escalators could do that job.

An escalator clause?

Another possibility would be to insert a downward escalator clause into the calculation of the quota. Instead of the existing allocation, the divisor could be based on the allocation *less* a certain number. This could only be practicable with a single UK quota. To reduce the Commons gently to 600 MPs would require a couple of rounds with a 35-40 reducing factor, or one more drastic change of 65-70. The escalator clause could be left to achieve a long-term gradual reduction even below 550. It could also be calibrated so as more or less to cancel out the upward creep of the ratchet. Its advantage in relation to the fixed divisor is that it can produce a gradual, automatic fall rather than a single painful adjustment.

CHAPTER 4

Unequal representation: the solutions

Two steps can ensure equality of representation: first, the creation of a single Parliamentary Boundary Commission for the UK as a whole; secondly the removal of most of the discretion which means that the Boundary Commissions fail to create equal sized constituencies. A third improvement – speeding up the whole boundary review process and using better population data – would also help.

1. A United Kingdom Parliamentary Boundary Commission

The 1998 Jenkins report on the electoral system recommended (para 164):

that any changes to the Boundary Commissions' criteria have regard to the need to correct sources of bias, for example, by moving to the use of a single electoral quota for the United Kingdom as a whole.

Lord Jenkins was right. Furthermore, unless the Commissions are unified, the Scottish overrepresentation is likely to re-emerge. This is because in 1998 the government did not adopt either of the permanent solutions to capping the rise in the number of constituencies suggested in Chapter 3. They created neither a fixed divisor, nor a downward escalator. They simply took the English quota at the time (69,934), and applied it to Scotland.

Over time, the Scots will again be overrepresented. The discretion in the existing rules is very likely to give the Scots more seats than England. Even before the creation of the Scottish Parliament this would have been unacceptable. Given the current unfairnesses of the West Lothian question, and much higher government spending on public services in Scotland than in England, it would now be outrageous. So something must be done.

The most straightforward solution must be to abolish the four existing Boundary Commissions for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and replace them with one Boundary Commission, operating

according to a single set of rules and interpreting them uniformly.¹⁸ And the most important rule should be one requiring constituencies with an equal number of voters.

2. Instructing the Commission to create equal sized constituencies

The main task of any Boundary Commission should be to maintain seats at roughly equal size. Those of the UK seem to have lost their way a little. The four UK Boundary Commissions tolerate deviations of 20 per cent either side of the quota, compared to 10 per cent in Australia, 5 per cent in New Zealand and less than 1 per cent in the US.

20 per cent is too large. The Commission should be set a firm rule, from which there should be no discretion or exceptions, that no constituency is permitted to deviate from the national quota by more than 5 per cent. This would create constituencies varying in size between about 66,000 to 73,000 electors, prior to a 20 per cent reduction in the House, or about 79,000 to about 88,000 after it.

It is argued that wider variations are necessary to preserve communities, but in practice large deviations from quota do not usually serve this purpose. They are mostly the products of arbitrary arithmetic. Rule 4 is the culprit. This restricts the Commission to looking at constituencies county by county. Only serious anomalies (small unitaries and some London boroughs which have the same status as counties) can be considered for exceptional treatment. In cities the policy of not crossing ward boundaries also creates very unequal seats.

The position in Wales is particularly nonsensical. The Boundary Commission for Wales states that ‘the review areas to be used during the fifth general review are the preserved counties as amended by the Preserved Counties (Amendments to Boundaries) (Wales) Order 2003.’ The ‘preserved counties’ existed before local government reforms in 1995, and bear little relation to local identities or any

¹⁸ The current arrangements do not have deep constitutional roots. Four separate permanent Commissions were established as a result of a political compromise in 1944. Prior to that, they were set up *ad hoc*, when parliament decided redistribution was necessary. In 1866/7 and 1918 there were three Commissions (England & Wales, Scotland, Ireland).

current local government structure. These phantom entities are even, as the 2003 order states, subject to their own strange reviews of the boundaries between them.

What are the answers?

First, Rule 6 - 'special geographical considerations' - should be abolished. It can reasonably be taken to apply to very few constituencies, although many attempt to argue that it should be given wider application. The constituency of Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, comprises 2.3 million square kilometres, about the size of Western Europe, from mining towns to remote forests and plains separated by 2,000 miles of desert. It is represented by a single MP and has a standard number of electors. If Kalgoorlie can manage, so can western Cumbria. The principle of equal representation is too important to be compromised by get-outs such as Rule 6.

Secondly, the new UK Commission should explicitly be allowed to take a more flexible approach to borough, unitary and county boundaries in order to produce constituencies that are much closer to the size specified by the quota. This discretion should be applied most readily to boroughs and, as a last resort, to counties. It could follow the 'pairing' system used in the London Boroughs in the last two reviews, which departed from the strict application of Rule 4. As in London, pairing would not take place routinely, but only in cases where it was essential to achieve acceptable equality of representation. The current discretion is fettered by the need to follow local government boundaries 'so far as is practicable.' An alternative is provided by the Boundary Commission for Scotland which is obliged only 'to have regard to' local authority boundaries, unlike England, where the presumption is much stronger. The Scottish rule could simply be applied in England and Wales. There remains a strong case, if the rules on drawing cross-county constituencies are relaxed to some degree, for specifying that the Scottish and Welsh national borders, and English regional boundaries, should not be crossed.

Thirdly, it is necessary to re-examine the building blocks that make up constituencies – local authority wards. Wards vary greatly in size, between different authorities, and even within the same authority. The largest ward

in the country (Birmingham, South Yardley) has an electorate of 19,567 while five of Rutland's sixteen wards have fewer than 1,000 electors. Using wards as large as those in Birmingham, and many other cities, creates unequally sized constituencies. It can also result in unpopular decisions.

The move to multi-member wards in rural districts has introduced this problem to new areas, including mine. The tail is wagging the dog. Wards are designed for the convenience of local authorities, not parliamentary constituencies. The inadvertent consequence is that ward boundary reviews are forcing the redesign of parliamentary seats. This is absurd.

There are at least two possible ways forward. The Parliamentary Boundary Commission could be allowed to draw lines where it wishes in the interests of equality. If a divided ward is perceived as bad, the local government ward boundaries should be redrawn to fit the parliamentary template, not vice versa. If allowing the Commission discretion to cross ward boundaries were considered too shocking, it would be possible to designate ward subdivisions for these purposes. Large wards usually have fairly clear internal dividing lines. In most rural areas this should be relatively straightforward. A template for subdivisions often exists with parish boundaries and, in any case, the multi-member wards which have exacerbated the Boundary Commission's difficulties – leading to absurd decisions – are a novelty in many areas. In urban areas, the use of ward subdivisions is arguably more problematic. Nonetheless, this nettle will need to be grasped if council ward boundaries are not to get in the way of the bigger prize of national electoral equality.

3. Up-to-date electorate figures and a faster timetable

As things stand, the boundaries are often four or five years out of date before they even become provisional recommendations, and up to a decade out of date when first used. This is because the Commission is obliged to work from a single 'enumeration date'¹⁹. Therefore, when the Commission produces new provisional recommendations, the calculations are based on the distribution of population as it stood in 2000. Only at the margins, when choosing between one scheme or

¹⁹ The basis of the entire review is the state of affairs on the date on which the review is announced in the official *London Gazette*.

another that is permissible under the Rules, can it consider any growth of the electorate that may have taken place during the review period.

The Rules need to be changed. The Boundary Commission should be given the statutory power to take account of projections of population changes. Population projections can never be wholly reliable, and they should not be used as reasons to make radical departures from the data. But discretion to take them into account, when deciding on a county's allocation where it is near the cut-off point, or in assessing permissible departures from the quota, would be sensible. In any case, population projections up to five years in the future are already permitted in ward boundary reviews, but not in parliamentary reviews. It should be possible to use an estimate of electorates two or more years from the start of the review as the basis for allocation.

Another source of delay is procedural. The Deputy Chairmen of the Boundary Commissions are High Court Judges. They are not always available when needed, slowing the whole process. The Lord Chief Justice needs to be encouraged to show more flexibility in releasing judges for this work.

A faster timetable for the whole exercise would reduce the scale of these anomalies. The gaps between the enumeration date, conclusion of the boundary review and the first use (let alone last use) of the new boundaries have always been long. The table illustrates this:

Time between Boundary Reviews and their use since 1953

	Enumeration date	Review concluded	First use	Last use
First review	1953	1954	1955	1970
Second review	1965	1969	1974	1979
Third review	1976	1982	1983	1992
Fourth review	1991	1995	1997	2005/6
Fifth review	2000	2005/6	2009/10/11	

Source: Compiled from the Boundary Commission General Notes.

The cost savings

A reasonable estimate of the savings to the taxpayer of a 20 per cent reduction in the House of Commons is at least £25 million. This is made up of about £15 million in savings to MPs' pay (and some allowances, see below) and about £10 million saved from a reduction in the administration costs of running the House of Commons.

The total bill for Members' pay and allowances (in 2002-03) was £131 million, implying a saving of £26 million, but not all of this could be saved, as the remaining MPs would still need to do the departing MPs' case-work. On the assumption that the remaining MPs needed the staff currently employed by the departing 20 per cent in order to do their case-work²⁰, the saving would still be at least £15 million.

A reduction in the number of MPs would also generate savings in House of Commons administration, on which nearly £140 million per annum is spent at the moment. Many of these costs are fixed: buildings maintenance, security etc. Others clearly vary with the number of MPs: catering, travel etc. Capital costs would also be lower. Even if it were assumed that only a third of the saving implied by a *pro rata* reduction in the administration budget was captured, a 20 per cent reduction in the size of the House should yield nearly £10 million.

²⁰ This might not be necessary. Some MPs already have seats of the size that would become the norm if the number of MPs were reduced by 20 per cent, and they do not benefit from higher allowances than their colleagues with smaller constituencies.

CHAPTER 5

Mustering parliamentary support

Reducing the size of the Commons will be popular. It will be logical. It will save money. But any such proposal will meet the obstacle of party and personal interest. No rational party rushes to weaken its electoral position nor do MPs rush to bring their careers to a premature end.

Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that a reduction in the House will affect far more than just the 50 or 60 MPs whose seats will disappear in each of the two 10 per cent reductions suggested in this paper. Many others would also be displaced by re-selections triggered by boundary changes. Re-selection is always something of a lottery, even for experienced politicians. Nor is there any reasonable way for parties to match displaced MPs with retirement vacancies. Many high quality MPs would inevitably be casualties.

Three proposals would assuage these problems.

First, the major political parties should be encouraged to change their own internal rules to reduce the number of re-selections as a consequence of boundary changes, at least for the two Boundary Reviews in which the major reductions take place. At the moment, Conservative Central Office advises Associations that an open selection process should be held where boundary changes affect more than 20 per cent of the constituency electorate. This could reasonably be raised to at least 30 per cent. It could go even higher, particularly if there are no adjacent seats with fellow incumbents similarly affected.

The Labour Party's rules are apparently already more flexible. In the last major boundary changes (1992-1997) Labour MPs were given first choice of where to stand in the new constituencies. The relevant NEC rule states that, where "a significant proportion" of a seat is affected, a re-selection takes place, with the sitting MP automatically placed on the short list. However, if a majority of the affected branches and affiliated trades unions have no objection (a decision taken by majority) no re-selection is triggered. Despite these flexible rules there were a few cases of dispute, occurring mainly where MPs

for a marginal seat lost a small but highly supportive area to a neighbouring seat, and picked up some ‘bad’ areas in exchange.

More flexibility to enable MPs to retain seats heavily affected by boundary reviews would probably be a prerequisite for the garnering of the necessary support. Flexibility would also reduce the turnover in the Commons, worth something as a counterweight to the discontinuity which would accompany the proposed 20 per cent reduction.

Secondly, those who lose their seats and who have given service to the House, or to the Executive, could be considered for life peerages. Among other categories this might include former Ministers, Select Committee Chairmen and Privy Councillors. Despite many claims to the contrary, the power of Prime Ministerial patronage with respect to peerages is unaltered and, in the absence of comprehensive democratic reform of the Lords, there would be no bar to a couple of bumper Lords appointments.

The life peerage proposal involves some extra cost in the short run. But this would be dwarfed by the savings generated from a smaller Commons over the longer term. Any increase in the size of the Lords would be temporary, but the reduction in the size of the Commons would be permanent.

Opponents might quibble that two such bumper crops could diminish or demean the Lords. In the light of the Prime Minister’s unprecedented packing of the Lords²¹, and his creation of committees of a handful of existing peers empowered to grant peerages to fellow hereditaries, this would be a tall order²². Better to have MPs in the Lords who have at least once had an acquaintance with the electorate than some people whose main contribution appears to have been to write cheques in the hope of the ermine. Were a more democratic second chamber to be created – the policy of the Conservative and Liberal parties and one which the author strongly supports – appointment to the Lords of the displaced MPs might have to be re-examined. The size of both chambers would need to be considered –

²¹ 53 per cent of the current life peerage has been appointed by Tony Blair (310 out of 581), an unprecedentedly fast rate of appointment. Mr Blair was also responsible for ensuring the retention of 92 hereditary peers with the so-called Blair - Cranborne deal.

²² I set out the case for a small and mainly elected second chamber in *Reforming the Lords: a Conservative approach*, Conservative Policy Forum, 1998.

there is a strong case for at least halving the size of the second chamber from its current figure of 710.

Thirdly, cross-party cooperation should be sought. The equalising of the size of constituencies would remove an unfair advantage currently enjoyed by Labour. Their cooperation in restoring fairness would be highly desirable. Likewise, cross-party cooperation would also be valuable in the drawing up of any list of Lords appointments.

The public do not want to pay more for politics. They do not want more politicians and would prefer to see a reduction in their number. This has been the message of opinion surveys over many years, dramatically reinforced by the result of the referendum for an assembly in the North East.²³ Politicians should now respond by finding ways to arrest the growth in the cost of democratic politics. The best place to start – and the best signal for politicians to send – would be for the Commons to prune itself.

²³ On November 4th, 78 per cent voted against the creation of an assembly, with 22 per cent in favour, on a turnout of 48 per cent. The cost of the assembly and arguments about the need for more professional politicians were central issues in the campaign.

APPENDIX

The public cost of democratic politics

Two questions are addressed. First, what is the total public sector cost of democratic politics in Britain? Secondly, by how much has this cost risen since the constitutional and other costs introduced after 1997?

Two clear conclusions emerge. First, the full public sector cost of democratic politics, at around £1.3 billion a year, is high, and far higher than most people suppose.

Secondly, the cost of democratic politics has risen very sharply since 1997, with an increase of 80 per cent, representing extra annual expenditure of over £575 million.

Although the electorate is unaware of the detailed numbers, their sense that a great deal more is being spent, perhaps sometimes wasted, by and for politicians, is undoubtedly contributing to the erosion of confidence in politics. The proposal made in this paper for a reduction in the cost of running the House of Commons, by reducing the number of MPs, is only a pinprick on these burgeoning costs, but it is a start. Much more needs to be done to arrest the rise in the cost of democratic politics in Britain or, if such rises are necessary, much more needs to be done to justify them.

The cost of institutions created since 1997

Since 1997, as part of its programme of constitutional reform, the Government has set up a number of new institutions. These have added to the cost of democratic politics both through initial set-up costs, which have totalled £561.5 million, and through annual running costs, of £188.5 million. However, in the estimates of the total cost of democratic politics, set out below, the set-up costs (new buildings and the cost of referendums) have been excluded. Only the annual running costs have been included. Nor, of course, do the figures include projections of the cost of other government proposals. For example, plans for regional assemblies (which have already incurred a £0.5 million information campaign¹, would mean set-up costs of £30 million

per assembly² and running costs of £25 million each³) are ignored. The cost of establishing and running these institutions is widely held to have been instrumental in bringing about the decisive rejection of proposals for an assembly in the North East in a referendum on November 4th.

The cost of institutions created since 1997 – set-up costs

Institution	Set-up cost heading	Set-up cost (£ millions)
Electoral Commission	Set up costs ⁴	0.6
Scottish Parliament	Referendum ⁵	4.4
	Building	431.0
Welsh Assembly	Referendum ⁶	2.3
	Building	55.0
Northern Ireland Assembly	Referendum ⁷	1.7
Greater London Authority and Mayor	Referendum ⁸	1.5
	Building ⁹	65.0
Total		561.5

The cost of institutions created since 1997 – running costs

Institution	Running cost heading	Set-up cost (£ millions)
Electoral Commission	Operating ¹⁰	14.0
Scottish Parliament	Election ¹¹	3.5
	Operating ¹²	58.7
Welsh Assembly	Election ¹³	1.5
	Operating ¹⁴	45.0
Northern Ireland Assembly	Election ¹⁵	0.5
	Operating ¹⁶	35.9
Greater London Authority and Mayor	Election ¹⁷	3.8
	Operating ¹⁸	22.6
Total		185.5

The annual cost of democratic politics

Partly as a result of the increase in spending on the new institutions, the overall cost of democratic politics is now around £1.3 billion a year.

Heading		Cost	Total (£ millions)
Elections	General elections ¹⁹	11.1	
	European Parliament elections ²⁰	14.7	
	Local authority elections ²¹	28.2	
	Scottish Parliament elections ²²	3.5	
	Welsh Assembly elections ²³	1.5	
	Northern Ireland Assembly elections ²⁴	0.5	
	Greater London Authority elections ²⁵	3.8	63.3
Operating Costs	MP salaries, staff and allowances ²⁶	139.5	
	House of Commons facilities & administration ²⁷	140.6	
	European Parliament share of operating costs ²⁸	105.0	
	LA Democratic Rep. & Management costs ²⁹	600.0	
	Scottish Parliament operating costs ³⁰	58.7	
	Welsh Assembly operating costs ³¹	45.0	
	Northern Ireland Assembly operating costs ³²	35.9	
	Greater London Authority operating costs ³³	22.6	1,147.3
Other	Electoral registration ³⁴	52.0	
	Electoral Commission operating costs ³⁵	25.7	
	Boundary Commissions operating costs ³⁶	3.1	80.8
Total			1,291.4

The rising cost of democratic politics

The £1.3 billion annual cost of democratic politics represents a sharp increase since 1997, of £573 million or nearly 80 per cent.

Heading	Specific area of expenditure ³⁷	1997 Cost ³⁸	2004 Cost ³⁹ (£Millions)
Elections	General elections	11.6	15.8
	European Parliament elections ⁴⁰	10.1	14.7
	Local authority elections ⁴¹	23.7	28.2
	Scottish Parliament elections	-	3.5
	Welsh Assembly elections	-	1.5
	Northern Ireland Assembly elections	-	0.5
	Greater London Authority elections	-	3.8
Operating Costs	MP salaries, staff and allowances	81.8	139.5
	House of Commons facilities & administration ⁴²	100.2	140.6
	European Parliament share of operating costs ⁴³	88.3	105.0
	LA Democratic Rep. & Management costs ⁴⁴	350.0	600.0
	Scottish Parliament operating costs	-	58.7
	Welsh Assembly operating costs	-	45.0
	Northern Ireland Assembly operating costs	-	35.9
	Greater London Authority operating costs	-	22.6
Other	Electoral registration ⁴⁵	43.7	52.0
	Electoral Commission operating costs (Home Office and English Local Government Commission costs in 1997)	11.1	25.7
	Boundary Commissions operating costs ⁴⁶	2.6	3.1
Total		723.1	1,296.1

A cautionary note

Estimating the total cost to the public purse of democratic politics in Britain is a major undertaking and, as far as I am aware, it has not been attempted before. There are problems of definition (eg where does the cost of democracy end and the cost of government begin?) as well as the more conventional accounting difficulties of separating out capital and current spending (capital projects, such as the Scottish Parliament building and Portcullis House have been excluded) and difficulties created by the introduction of resource accounting. Some readers may feel that items have been erroneously excluded (for example, there is nothing in these tables for the cost of policing elections); others that a number of items should not have been included. The cost of the House of Lords, £76.7 million (up from £38.5 million in 1997), has been excluded, since it is not a democratic institution. The costs of special advisers, at £5.8 million⁴⁷ (up from £1.8 million⁴⁸ in 1996-7) are excluded since, more controversially, they could be considered an administrative cost of the executive. The notes provide more information on the methodology and assumptions.

Notes and references

- 1 House of Commons Hansard, Col 150W, 5th January 2004.
- 2 Projections, House of Commons Hansard, Col 636W, 27th February 2004.
- 3 Projections, House of Commons Hansard, Col 636W, 27th February 2004.
- 4 House of Commons Hansard, Col 392W, 9th November 2000.
- 5 House of Commons Hansard, Col 384W, 12th May 2004.
- 6 House of Commons Hansard, Col 384W, 12th May 2004.
- 7 House of Commons Hansard, Col 297W 11 Feb 1999. Costs of referendum and first election amounted to £4.7m; deducting £3m on the assumption that the 1998 and 2003 elections cost the same gives £1.7m.
- 8 House of Commons Hansard, Col 384W, 12th May 2004.
- 9 Greater London Assembly website, City Hall - how the building was chosen, http://www.london.gov.uk/gla/city_hall/city_hall_howchosen.jsp.
- 10 The Electoral Commission's Net Resource Requirement for 2003/04 is £25.7 million (The Speaker's Committee, First Report, 2003). Before the

Electoral Commission was created, some of its functions were performed by the Home Office. The Home Office Annual Report for 1998 did not separately identify spending solely on electoral-related services, but gross expenditure on running/administration of elections in 1997/98 was £8.7 million and is likely to include some (though not all) functions now assumed by the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission has also assumed responsibility for the Local Government Commission for England, with a running cost of £2.9million. £14 million is therefore a reasonable estimate of the net additional cost of the Electoral Commission.

- 11 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2003 elections is £13.9 million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £3.5 million.
- 12 The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Annual Accounts 2002-2003, operating cost, <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/corporate/anrep-accts/accounts/accounts-03/schedule-2.pdf>.
- 13 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2003 elections is £6 million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £1.5 million.
- 14 National Assembly for Wales Resource Accounts, 2001-02, <http://www.wales.gov.uk/subieconomics/content/accounts/2001-2002-e.pdf> – payroll cost of members is £3.5 million, other related costs are £15.2 million and attributing one third of the £81.3 million budget for Assembly officials to the elective side gives a total of £45 million.
- 15 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2003 elections is £2 million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £0.5 million.
- 16 Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, Annual Report, 2002/03.
- 17 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2004 elections is £15 million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £3.8 million.
- 18 Mayor of London's Annual Report 2004; total expenditure in 2003/04 is £55.9 million, but this includes some executive rather than elected functions: the total cost of the key elected bodies is £22.6 million, consisting of the Mayor's office costs, £6.8m, City Hall, £9.7m and the Assembly and Secretariat, £5.8m.
- 19 House of Commons Hansard, Col 1081W, 23rd July 2002: central government expenditure on the 2001 General Election was £44.3

million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £11.1 million.

- 20 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2004 elections is £73.4 million; annualising cost over five-year cycle gives £14.7 million.
- 21 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projected costs in 2002-2005 are £14.3, £26.9, £12.6 and £59 million; averaged over four years gives £28.2 million.
- 22 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2003 elections is £13.9 million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £3.5 million.
- 23 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2003 elections is £6 million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £1.5 million.
- 24 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2003 elections is £2 million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £0.5 million.
- 25 Electoral Commission, *Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002*; projection for cost of 2004 elections is £15 million; annualising cost over four-year cycle gives £3.8 million.
- 26 House of Commons Commission Annual Report and House of Commons Resource Accounts: Members, Administration HC 67, HC 68 of 2003-4.
- 27 House of Commons Commission Annual Report and House of Commons Resource Accounts: Members, Administration HC 67, HC 68 of 2003-4.
- 28 Derived from estimate provided by European Parliament website (www.europarl.eu.int/presentation/default_en.htm). The EP costs EUR 2.50 per person per year, which converted into sterling and attributed per head to the UK gives around £105m. The cost may be higher; payments to the EU are not based on population.
- 29 Derived from Corporate and Democratic Core expenditure in Local Government Finance Statistics at www.local.odpm.gov.uk/finance/stats/natstats.htm; Local Government Democratic Representation and Management (DRM) expenditure is not centrally compiled. Corporate and Democratic Core (CDC) expenditure, which combines DRM and corporate management in 2003-04, was £1,431 million. The findings of a

sample of eight local authorities suggested that DRM expenditure accounts for at least 40 per cent of CDC expenditure. 42 per cent of £1,431million gives £600 million.

- 30 The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Annual Accounts 2002-2003, operating cost, <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/corporate/anrep-acts/accounts/accounts-03/schedule-2.pdf>.
- 31 National Assembly for Wales Resource Accounts, 2001-02, <http://www.wales.gov.uk/subieconomics/content/accounts/2001-2002-e.pdf>.
- 32 Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, 2001/2, Annual Report 2002/3.
- 33 Mayor of London's Annual Report 2004.
- 34 Electoral Commission, Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002.
- 35 The Electoral Commission's Net Resource Requirement for 2003/04, The Speaker's Committee First Report 2003. See also footnote 10.
- 36 Boundary Commission for England Annual Report 2003/4 (£1.8m) (Local Government Commission for England merged with Electoral Commission in 2002), Boundary Commission for Wales Annual Report 2003/4 (£0.4 million), Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales, National Assembly for Wales, £0.3 million, Boundary Commission for Scotland, Central Government Supply Estimates 2002/3 (£0.3 million), Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland, Scottish Executive Annual Expenditure Report, 2002/3 (£0.3). Costs for Northern Ireland unknown.
- 37 For sources, see also annual cost of democratic politics table.
- 38 Or as near as possible to 1997.
- 39 Or as near as possible to 2004, eg General Election cost is projected cost of a General Election in 2005 (Electoral Commission, Funding democracy, Providing cost-effective electoral services, 2002).
- 40 1997 cost calculated by deflating 2004 cost assuming 2.5% annual inflation (the 2004 figure for the European Parliament elections includes an annualised cost of £13.2 million to pilot all postal-ballots (see DCA website, <http://www.dca.gov.uk/elections/euro/faq2004.pdf>) – the 1997 figure has been calculated by deflating the 2004 figure, minus the cost of the postal-ballots).
- 41 1997 cost calculated by deflating 2004 cost assuming 2.5% annual inflation.

- ⁴² A change in accounting procedures means that the stated costs for 2001 onwards are slightly (around 1.5%) lower than they would have been under the previous accounting system.
- ⁴³ 1997 cost calculated by deflating 2004 cost assuming 2.5% annual inflation.
- ⁴⁴ Derived from net current expenditure on services (NCE) in Local Government Finance Statistics at www.local.odpm.gov.uk/finance/stats/natstats.htm; CDC expenditure makes up somewhat less than half of NCE and DRM makes up 40-45 per cent of CDC (see footnote 29). So the estimated share of DRM expenditure in 1996/7 would be under a quarter of NCE. NCE rose from £1.6bn in 1996/7 to £2.8bn in 2002/3. If DRM has remained a consistent proportion of central services expenditure, it has risen from £350-£400 million in 1996/7 to £600-£700 million in 2002/03.
- ⁴⁵ 1997 cost calculated by deflating 2004 cost assuming 2.5% annual inflation. Includes deflated operating cost of the Local Government Commission for England (Local Government Commission Annual Report 2001-2).
- ⁴⁶ 1997 cost calculated by deflating 2004 cost assuming 2.5% annual inflation.
- ⁴⁷ Cost of salaries, severance pay and pensions, House of Lords Hansard, Col WS43, 22nd July 2004.
- ⁴⁸ House of Lords Hansard, Col 807, 22nd October 2001.

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Pruning the Politicians

The case for a smaller
House of Commons

“Andrew Tyrie has performed a valuable service . . . the first serious attempt to aggregate the cost of elections and the operating costs of the bodies for which elections are held . . .”

The Times, 10th November 2004.

It is increasingly clear that the public do not want more politicians, nor the extra cost that comes with them. In “Pruning the Politicians” Andrew Tyrie argues that politicians should respond. They need to arrest the rise in the number of professional politicians and the soaring cost of democracy. He believes that the House of Commons should give a lead, by putting its own house in order. The most straightforward way to do that is to reduce the number of MPs.

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