

## 2010 – a new type of politics

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2009 was not a good year for British democracy. The daily revelations over the summer that some MPs had abused the generous expenses and allowances system reduced (even further) the public's confidence in Parliament itself. Many MPs have declared that they will not seek re-election and there is in 2010 the prospect of a fresh new intake of MPs, indeed one of the largest in recent history. However, Parliament itself has been sick for some time and we must address more fundamental issues than those exposed by the expenses saga.

The arrest of Conservative MP Damian Green for exposing Home Office failings in November 2008 highlighted what most already knew or suspected – that the power of the Executive branch of Government has grown enormously at the expense of the legislature. Parliament has been the junior partner in the tripartite relationship of Legislature, Executive and Judiciary for some time but the search of an MP's Parliamentary office and of his home by nine counter-terrorist police demonstrated this acutely. The then Home Secretary stood proudly before the House of Commons and declared that she simply had not known or been informed of the planned arrest. The police had felt it necessary to inform the Speaker of the House of Commons and Boris Johnson but not the Home Secretary. Something was very wrong here in Brown's Britain.

The large majorities granted to Tony Blair in 1997, 2001 and (although reduced) in 2005 meant that really he did not need to worry about Parliament. Rebellions against Government policy occasionally took place – such as over top up fees, extraordinary rendition and internment, foundation hospitals and schools – but in nearly all cases the Labour whips cajoled their members into line.

Parliament should be the body politic of the nation. The place where Government proposals are debated, draft legislation scrutinised (amended if necessary or desirable) and Ministers held to account. Instead, far reaching pieces of legislation such as the Proceeds of Crime Act, Companies Act and Terrorism Act have passed through the House of Commons with very little time for proper scrutiny.

This light-touch scrutiny has a direct relationship with the steady erosion of British freedoms and liberties over the past 12 years. Extraordinary rendition, identity cards and the ability of the state to hold a person for now 42 days without the citizen even knowing the charges against them are very worrying developments. Every Government has a duty to protect its citizens and the balance between protecting the citizens and safeguarding hard fought for liberties is always a difficult one to strike but a good Home Secretary must be able to say 'no' when the cost of granting such powers is simply too high and it is here that successive Labour Home Secretaries have failed. As Benjamin Franklin put it so well *"They who would give up an essential liberty for temporary security, deserve neither liberty or security"*

We need urgently to look at our sickly Parliament and re-balance the relationship between the Executive and the Legislature. In 2007 David Cameron launched the Democracy Taskforce to formulate policy proposals for the next Conservative manifesto. This taskforce was led by the former Chancellor and now Shadow Business Secretary Rt Hon Ken Clarke QC MP. Its conclusions are well

worth reading. Essentially it has become apparent that a future Conservative Government must stop and actually reverse the ever increasing power of the Executive. It must transfer power from the centre, from Whitehall to the people – to the Town Councils, to the regions, to Parliament.

The Parliamentary Select Committees which were set up by the Thatcher Government were an important development in holding the Executive to account. Robin Cook's decision to form the Liaison Committee (composed of senior MPs of all parties) to hold the Prime Minister to account was inspiring. But we need to take this further. The power of the whips to appoint Chairs of Select Committees must go. Instead Parliament itself should choose which of its number should Chair the key Select Committees. These individuals should be paid the equivalent of Cabinet Ministers and have a proper staff. They should become household names. The Foreign Affairs Select Committee should have similar powers to the US Foreign Relations Committee. We must empower these committees to call for people, papers and records and ensure that its reports receive proper publicity.

In essence we must restore accountability to our system of Government again. Parliament's tradition of breaking for the long summer recess must be reduced. It is important that MPs have time to re-connect with their constituencies and speak to local people about issues of concern but it cannot be right that during the months of July, August and September one part of the British constitution simply does not function.

Just as we need power to be returned to the legislature, so we must look again at the relationship between the centre and the localities. The former Deputy Prime Minister Lord Heseltine led a special taskforce looking at our cities. Lord Heseltine's conclusions are available to read at <http://www.conservatives.com/pdf/CityLeadership.pdf> For our great cities – Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Newcastle – to name a few, to go on to become great world cities we must change the way in which democracy functions. We must find a way of inspiring and involving people in local democracy and that is not happening at the moment. Very few people can name their local Councillors and the truth is that few know the purposes of their District Council as opposed to their County Council or Parish Council.

The introduction of the Greater London Assembly and elected Mayor of London is a shining success however. The Mayor is a well known public person. The position is seen as prestigious and has attracted high calibre candidates (Ken Livingstone, Boris Johnson and Steve Norris are obvious examples). The turnout in the London Mayoral election in 2008 was 45%. Not high but when you think that the average turnout at local elections in 2007 was 35%, it was an achievement. There can be few in the country who do not know that Boris Johnson is Mayor of London. The position is important nationally and internationally. The first Executive Mayor of Birmingham (which would need to be a greater Birmingham rather than simply the City itself) will be similarly important. We need to attract a new type of people to local politics – we need entrepreneurs, as well as teachers, doctors, lawyers, accountants etc. To do this we must show that local democracy matters, that our Mayors have real decision making powers. Our democracy needs more than simply Mayors of our key cities, but this will be a good start in re-connecting people in the democratic process.

I have always believed that people will vote and engage when they believe that it matters. The turnout at the 1997 general election was 71.4%, by 2005 it was only 61.4%. We must show people that elections matter by transferring powers back from the Executive to City Mayors, to Select

Committees, to the people. It is the Conservative Party which has the radical thinking on constitutional affairs to make this happen.

*Tim Crockford is the National Chairman of the Tory Reform Group ("TRG"). The TRG is one of the oldest and largest groups within the Conservative Party and is composed of MPs, Peers, Conservative members and voters from the across the country. It is the home of progressive One Nation Conservatism.*