



OVERTURNING PARLIAMENT

by Rachel Burgon



Overturning Parliament

It's summer 2030, and extremists have been relegated to the margins of UK politics. Britain is now considered the world's truest democracy, and pragmatic, forward-thinking government looks set to stay.

Yet only a decade ago the country was teetering on the brink of civil war. Our parliamentary system, which had appeared to serve us well for centuries, was broken beyond repair. Having been gridlocked for close to two years, Parliament was battling attempts to bring it down. Public faith in democracy was dead, and violent anger had begun to spill out onto the streets.

Upside-down Parliament

It may have been Brexit that had brought the crisis to a head. But it had been brewing for many years. It's now widely accepted that traditional parliamentary democracy in the UK was doomed to fail since its inception – because the entire structure upon which it was built was upside down!

On the face of it, the two parliamentary chambers had appeared to balance democratic accountability (via the Commons or Lower House) with expert scrutiny and long-term interest (via the Lords – the Upper House). There were merits to both houses, but each also exhibited fundamental flaws – flaws compounded by the 'upside-down' nature of the parliament.

The population had its say through general elections, determining the political hue of the Lower House. But democracy became increasingly diluted as policies and legislation moved up the parliamentary ladder, through the unelected Upper House, before ultimately being signed off by the Monarch.



The Problem with the House of Commons

Elections to the Lower House were democratic, with party-political considerations playing a key role. But party politics, combined with general elections at least twice every decade, meant that policies were driven by ideology, political ambition and the need to ensure re-election.

Elected governments regularly used previous incumbents as scapegoats when things went wrong, and sometimes when they didn't. Ministers relished every opportunity to reverse perfectly adequate policies introduced by previous governments simply to make their political mark. And, when it came to the opposition's scrutiny of government policy, it was less a case of dispassionate analysis and more blame-mongering with a view to snatching power at the next election.

All in all, parliamentary democracy was a costly, ineffective and antagonistic model of governance, slowly fanning the flames of animosity for several decades before Brexit poured on the oil and exposed its failings for all to see.



The Problem with the House of Lords

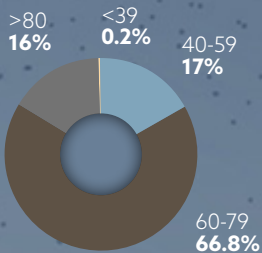
Hereditary Peers

Attended State School **2%**



Attended Private School **98%**

Age of Members of House of Lords



The Upper House was by no means devoid of political rivalries and inflated egos. But, freed from electoral imperatives, it represented stability – enabling it to take a much more considered approach. Members of the Upper House spent much of their time considering draft laws emanating from the Lower House, scrutinising each draft law line by line. And, although the House had lost its judicial role back in 2009, its voting membership included many individuals with top legal or judicial backgrounds. This meant the House was well placed to understand the implications of new legislation, and was often able to persuade the government to make policy changes on a wide range of issues, such as a delay on cuts to tax credits until protections for low paid workers were put in place.

One of the problems with the Lords, however, was that because it generally considered draft laws that had already passed through the democratically elected Lower House, any legislative delays, amendments or rejections could be construed as anti-democratic. This, coupled with the highly visible fact that the Upper House did not reflect the demographic makeup of the UK, meant it seemed aloof and out-of-touch with everyday people. It lacked diversity in terms of ethnicity, age, gender and religion, appearing to be a relic of a bygone era. Its members were regularly portrayed in the press as “sleeping on the job”, “squandering tax-payers’ money” and “deliberately frustrating the will of the people to serve their own self-interest”.



Hidden Cracks in the System Start to Show

Despite the flaws in both parliamentary houses, the system had been relatively stable and appeared largely democratic since the end of the First World War. Elections had been dominated by two main parties, Labour and the Conservatives, each benefiting from a defined voter base to which it was able clearly to articulate its values. Highly-unionised blue collar workers and academics tended to vote Labour, whilst wealthy land-owners, entrepreneurs and industrialists generally voted Conservative.

The result was a century of functioning representative democracy within the Lower House; within this stable two-party system, the fact that an unrepresentative group of septuagenarians held the power to curb the electoral will of the Lower House appeared purely academic. In effect, the two-party system served to paper over the cracks of the fundamentally flawed system.

But societal shifts in post-industrial Britain meant the voter base became fragmented. People no longer cast their votes along clearly defined party lines and, as a result, the Labour Party and the Conservatives became pressured to adopt increasingly incoherent and populist policies in a desperate attempt to gain votes.

As politics became more polarised and extreme, the majority of the electorate felt there was no party that spoke directly to them: voters, more often than not, resorted to placing their cross in the box for the party they felt represented the 'lesser of two evils'. So whilst some people got what they *voted* for, almost nobody got what they actually wanted. Parliamentary democracy had failed.



New Democracy

By 2020, with the Brexit Bill failing to pass successfully through both houses of parliament, attitudes to the Establishment had turned from disillusionment to downright hostility. Whilst anger had spilled onto the streets, in many cases setting neighbour against neighbour, the brunt of it, from all shades of the political spectrum, was directed at the established political system, which lay impotent in the face of a national uprising.

The spring 'Million Man March on Parliament' had ended with the occupation of parliament buildings by the people, and in the absence of any credible political authority, the monarchy took charge. The Army was commanded to ensure peace on the streets whilst the Queen established a temporary government of national unity, and a Royal Commission was rapidly established to devise a new model of parliamentary democracy to truly act in the interests of the country and be enshrined in law under a new national constitution.

The resulting parliamentary model sees democracy become strengthened, not diluted, as it passes through the Parliamentary process. The Lower House is now made up of expert 'peers' who propose sensible, well considered policies and legislation and we, the public, have the final say on these proposals through the Upper House.

Members of the Lower House are selected on merit to represent key sectors or interest groups: scientists, engineers, farmers, doctors, head teachers, senior police officers, youth workers, small business representatives, economists and heads of industry. Social, cultural and religious groups are also represented in this Lower House. Membership is supplemented by representatives from the general public, randomly selected from a group who have opted in to contribute significant amounts of their time. While Members serve for a period of 3-5 years, the focus is on maintaining sustainable health, wealth and happiness for the nation and all its people.

Membership of the Lower House is supplemented by seasoned legal experts, such as judges and QCs, many drawn from the disbanded Upper House. These legal experts provide guidance on the implications of new legislation, and undertake other necessary due diligence before draft laws are passed to the people to take the ultimate decision.

The Upper House is now where we, the people, get our democratic voice. In many instances this still takes the form of representative democracy, whereby people elect a local representative to approve policies and legislation on their behalf. The Upper House performs a role similar to that of a company board, responsible for approving the final composition of the Lower House.

The development of new policies and legislation is generally initiated when members of the Lower House identify a particular need or potential benefit – drawing widely on input from civil society and the various sectors they represent. But technology is increasingly being harnessed to allow the population as a whole to suggest, discuss and ultimately determine which draft policies and laws should be approved.

Ordinary members of the public can also petition for new policy and legislation to be considered. Members of the Lower House then work together to shape proposals and identify any unintended consequences or indirect implications on other interest groups. Proposals are either agreed by consensus in the Lower House and put to the Upper House for approval by the people or, if there is more than one option, put to the Upper House for final decision. Each decision is supplemented by online and offline engagement with the public, producing considered reflections of public opinion to factor into the legislative process.

This has led to a truly representative and efficient democracy. Advancements in cyber security and biometric technology mean secure input can be gathered from individuals on a mass scale, and time sensitive laws and legislation can be approved or pushed back to the Lower House in a time efficient manner. As technology advances, the need for members of the public to be represented in the Lower House is expected to diminish.

Under our new system, draft policies and legislation are driven by long-term, strategic vision rather than short-term populism. But where proposals are widely unpopular with the voting public, they can be voted down in the Upper House.

The system is vastly more cost-effective, policy direction remains steady, and investment in public services is planned and committed over decades rather than years. To an extent, fiscal responsibility is shared by both houses – core budget priorities are proposed by the Lower House and approved by the Upper House. But in the same way the Bank of England took charge of setting interest rates in the 1990s to depoliticise monetary policy, an independent body has been established to oversee fiscal accountability and determine whether there is a need to increase taxation or borrowing to meet additional spending pressures.

The Lower House enforces a code of conduct for its members; the increased engagement of individuals in policy development through technology creates an additional element of accountability. And an Independent Scrutiny Committee and transparent process for any complaints or investigations helps to safeguard against corruption and bad government.

It is often said no system is perfect, and it remains to be seen how our new democratic system will be viewed through the lens of history. However, under the new system, the Brexit stalemate was brought to a satisfactory and democratic end in little over six months. Where the previous system had failed so spectacularly, our newly born democracy has proven itself capable of delivering sensible, workable solutions, and re-united our polarised nation.

Perhaps ironically, the monarchy played the pivotal role in averting civil unrest and in the development of the new constitution. At the opening of the new parliament, King Charles III declared the successful establishment of new and true democracy in the United Kingdom to be Queen Elizabeth II's legacy after seventy years on the throne.





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Upper Chamber

Role

Considers and amends draft legislation. Scrutinises the work of the government.

Problem

- Not representative of the demographic make up of the UK
- Has the power to delay, amend and at times reject legislation introduced by the democratically-voted Commons. As this upper chamber is unelected, it can be seen as an anti-democratic institution with the power to frustrate democracy
- A number of Members are hereditary peers rather than appointed on merit
- Appointments are often party political and therefore partisan
- Members are generally appointed at the end of their careers and are perceived as out of touch.



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Lower Chamber

Role

Government (made up of MPs from the party with most votes) sets priorities, decides how to spend public money and deliver public services, develops draft legislation. MPs from other parties hold the government to account by 'challenging it'.

Problem

- The need to get re-elected promotes vote-winning initiatives over long-term strategic vision
- Party politics leads to a culture of blame, with MPs refusing to work together cross-party
- Short-term nature of government means investments and delivery models are overturned by future governments and are therefore costly to the public purse.



1

Universal suffrage

Free vote for all adult citizens, regardless of wealth, race or ethnicity*. People vote for MP to be their local representative. Most MPs are part of a political party.

*Very minor exceptions apply e. g. the Queen, Members of the Lords, and long-term ex-pats.



2 Upper Chamber

Make-up

- Representatives elected by the voting public or direct democracy. Representatives are elected on a geographic but not party-political basis.

Role

To have the final say, deciding on and approving or rejecting draft policy and legislation proposed by the lower chamber.



1 Lower Chamber

Make-up

- Made up of experts representing sectors and interest groups - selected on merit/proposed by sector bodies.

Role

Engage with stakeholders to identify areas which need, or would benefit from, new or reformed policy or legislation. Work together to develop and draft policy and legislation. Work together to develop and draft policy and legislation and assess the potential implications across all sectors.





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