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The Reform of Parliament and the Crisis of Political Participation Transcript

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MODERNISING PARLIAMENT: REFORM OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Professor Vernon Bogdanor

Vernon Bogdanor (VB)

Well, ladies and gentlemen, those of you who have been coming very assiduously to hear me give lectures on the past few occasions will I'm sure be very pleased to hear that I'm not giving a lecture today, and I'm sure you'll be even more pleased to hear that I've managed to persuade the Leader of the House of Commons, the Rt. Hon. Geoff Hoon, to take part in a question and answer session with me on the topic of the reform of Parliament, in particular the reform of the House of Commons. We also hope to get into the area of the crisis of political participation and the case for compulsory voting, on which Geoff Hoon has recently made some very interesting speeches.

As those who have come to these lectures before know, we have talked a good bit about the crisis of political participation, so I think that fits in very well with what we're saying. Geoff Hoon has recently come back from Australia, where voting is compulsory, and it would be fascinating to hear his thoughts on how that has worked. We are very grateful to him for giving up his time. Perhaps I should also say this is the first time I've ever had the opportunity of imitating John Humphreys or Jeremy Paxman, and that I hope you'll bear with me!

Geoff Hoon (GH)

I may leave now!

VB

Perhaps before getting into the substance of House of Commons reform, can I ask you something about yourself? You began I believe as a university lecturer, a bit like me, and also a barrister, and then into politics. I'm not sure whether that makes you a poacher turned gamekeeper or the other way round, but what made you give up a secure academic career and a lucrative career as a barrister for the uncertainties and poor pay of a political career?

GH

Before I answer the question directly, it reminds me of a story told by a parent of one of my close friends who had a younger brother. He'd heard that I'd been an academic and a barrister, and I'd just at that stage been selected to fight a seat for the European Parliament. I think he was eight at the time, and he turned to his mother and he said, "When is Geoff going to get a proper job?"! I have to say, I've avoided it ever since. I actually regard politics in one sense as something that, if you'd have gone back to when I was say 16 or 17, first becoming fascinated by politics, I don't think I ever thought that I would be a politician, never mind a member of the Cabinet. I think probably at that stage I wanted to be a footballer and I felt that I was a rather better footballer than I was ever likely to be a politician, and some, I have to say, might still agree with that! So I think like all people, I have a sense of duty, a sense of obligation, also a sense that I literally do want to change things. It is important that people who have some abilities are prepared to make those available to the society that encourages and supports them. My wife is a teacher, and I wonder sometimes whether every day she doesn't do more good than I do every day, but it really is a question of getting up in the morning and trying to work out what contribution I can make to the society that has given me a great deal of opportunity, and I do think, very strongly and rather old fashionedly, that I have a duty to try and put something back.

VB

You took a rather unusual route into politics because you became a Member of the European Parliament before becoming an MP in the House of Commons. What made you decide to take that route?

GH

Partly because I have always been an internationalist. I, as an academic, went to visit the European Parliament, and frankly in 1982, I knew very little about it, though I suspect neither did most members of the population of this country. I was a lawyer and I went to visit the European Court of Justice in Luxemburg, and I found this to be something quite exciting, different, challenging, probably before most people really became interested in it. Therefore when the Labour Party in the area that I come from, Derbyshire, was looking for a candidate, bear in mind that the Labour Party at that stage were still profoundly anti-European and I was not. There was not too much enthusiasm, given that we had lost the 1983 General Election. The competition wasn't that great, shall we say, Vernon, and I just edged out the three men and the dog that were proverbially trying to get selected as well. So I think actually chance, and I have to say that my wife has still not forgiven me for it. She thought she was marrying an extremely successful barrister who was going to earn a large amount of money. She's never quite recovered from the fact that she has married a pretty impecunious politician!

VB

Did exposure to the European Parliament give you a different perspective when you eventually came to the House of Commons? You must be one of the few MPs who have been an MEP first. Does that alter your view of the Commons?

GH

I think it was enormously valuable to me, not only in terms of my view of the Commons, but in terms of my view of the world, because one of the great things about the European Parliament, often I think under-appreciated and certainly under-publicised, is the fact that, like any Parliament, you enter the building and you meet people from a range of different backgrounds, in this case a range of different countries. One of the things that I still find when I visit there, and I still try and go from time to time, is that I can see people who can give me a snapshot of what's going on in their country, a sense of what is happening politically, economically, and that exchange of views is enormously important. My Dad volunteered to fight in the Second World War and served in the RAF, and he came to visit Strasbourg when I'd first been elected, and he said it was rather better doing what I was doing than what he had had to do in the Second World War. We don't always give, in this country, the European institutions the credit for that. We argue about straight bananas or budgetary rebates or common agricultural policy, but actually, it has stopped my generation from having to do what my father's generation did and fight a European war. That I think is enormously important and not properly appreciated.

VB

Well, that's part of the general case for Europe, but the European Parliament is a very different sort of animal, isn't it, to what we see in the House of Commons? How precisely, in your view, does it differ from our own Parliament, and are these differences for the good or for the bad?

GH

Well, of course the key difference is that the European Parliament does not have an Executive, a government, as part of its membership. That has helped as I've been looking at some of the modernisation issues. I'm going to be very careful trading with a very knowledgeable academic about structures of constitutions and parliaments, but the real difference is, and our

Parliament is rather peculiar if you compare it to most others around the world, in that I as a government minister sit in Parliament as a Member of Parliament. In most other places that is not allowed. Most ministers, once they are appointed ministers, would either have to give up entirely their parliamentary seat and, in some countries, they are allowed to park their parliamentary seat for the period in which they are ministers, but it's a much clearer separation of powers than there is in our system. Therefore the European Parliament, being a Continental Parliament, very much modelled on the revolutionary assembly in France, essentially sits in what they call a hemi-cycle, in English, a semi-circle, preceding from the far left around to the far right, where they inevitably sometimes you might feel politically meet up. So Communists on the far side, then they have the sort of reconstructed Communists, the Euro-Communists, there's a Socialist group, Christian Democrats, who are sort of Conservative in Continental terms but they are far to the left of anything that would be described as Conservative in the United Kingdom, because they actually believe in Europe for example, which is quite a difference. Liberals again, on the Continent, very often quite dry economically, so they are quite Conservative economically. Our Conservatives sit as far to the right as we'll let them, and then just slightly to the right of them are the Nationalist parties like the French National Front or its equivalent. So they do sit in exactly the way from left to right that the revolutionary assembly sat after the French Revolution, and as a result of there not being a government, it is genuinely a debating chamber. The European Commission will come and make statements. The presidency of the European Union, which changes every six months, currently the United Kingdom, will also make statements. The Prime Minister is going there tomorrow to speak. So it's much more of a debating chamber, but it is very different from the House of Commons. It has a very Continental feel and tradition, so that the amount of time that speakers are allowed to speak for is very clearly rationed, and the longest speech – you may think this is a very good thing – the longest speech often is about six minutes, and quite often speakers will be given a minute to say whatever it is that they think is important to say. Of course the great advantage to the equivalent of the Speaker, the president of the Parliament, is that since everything has to be interpreted, then no one can go over their minute because the microphone is simply switched off and the interpretation goes! So you can carry on if you like, but nobody can understand you! So it is very much a Continental institution compared to the tradition of the House of Commons.

VB

Now that's the floor, the chamber of the European Parliament, compared with the chamber of the Commons, but the committee structure I gather is extremely different from our own as well. Before asking about that, I can imagine a number of people in the audience yawning when I mention committee structure. Is it only political nerds and anoraks like, I suppose, us who should be interested in committee structures, or should the average voter be interested in how the House of Commons works, the committee structure of the Commons, the committee structure of the European Parliament? Is this a subject for nerds or anoraks or should everyone join in?

GH

A bit of both! I think you need a fairly detailed understanding of how parliaments work to get really interested in a committee structure, but on the other hand, it is in the committees, by and large, in most parliaments in my experience, that the real work and scrutiny is done, the detailed, line by line consideration of proposals for legislation, and the real difference between the House of Commons and most other European parliaments, certainly the European Parliament, is that, and this is where we do get slightly nerdish, in the House of Commons, our so-called Standing Committees are temporary committees, just to confuse you. The Standing Committees are appointed to deal with particular proposals for legislation. So each time a Bill comes before the House, a Standing Committee to deal with that particular Bill is appointed. Vernon probably knows why it's called a Standing Committee, but it isn't a Standing Committee. We also have Select Committees, which are permanent committees, but they don't deal, generally speaking, with the legislation. They write reports on interesting and important things that they are fascinated about. In contrast, the European Parliament has genuine Standing Committees, not appointed to deal with legislation, permanent committees, and each Member of the European Parliament is appointed to one of those committees and serves on that committee. Those committees deal with the full range. So I was a member, predictably, of the Legal Affairs Committee, being a lawyer, and the Legal Affairs Committee dealt with a lot of the legislation on creating a single market, for example. So not only does the Standing Committee, that is the permanent committee, deal with proposals for legislation, every time there was a proposal on creating the single market, that would come to the Legal Committee. They would consider it, write a report suggesting amendments, all of the things that you would expect a committee to do, but on top of that, they might also, for example, write a general report about, say, competition policy, for which we were responsible. Now, that wouldn't be based

on a proposal for new legislation, it would simply perhaps be an annual review by the Commission that we would then have a look at. Equally, we could invite witnesses along to give evidence. The Commission would come along from time to time, or indeed anyone else that we thought might have something interesting to say about the subjects that we were considering. So in a sense, and this is true I think of most Continental Parliaments, the permanent Standing Committees, the fixed committees, deal with the full range that in the House of Commons is dealt with separately by Standing Committees and Select Committees, and so in a sense, they're brought together, and certainly there is a debate to be had in the future about whether that's not a more appropriate model for considering legislation.

VB

As you say, Standing Committees is one of those peculiar phrases. They're really ad hoc committees. I always think the nearest analogy is a public school, which is really a private school, and I don't know why either of them get that name. Standing Committees are simply not standing, as you say. I think the Scottish Parliament's adopted the model of the European Parliament. If it's a good model, and you seem to be implying it is, why don't we have that model at Westminster?

GH

Well, it's certainly something that I am more than open minded about, but obviously the House of Commons is rather like that large proverbial oil tanker. Despite my enthusiasm for modernising its procedures, there are many reasons steeped in our history as to why we have developed our committee structure in this particular way. Select Committees, for example, were only developed after 1979 and are a relatively recent innovation therefore as far as Parliament is concerned. But there is an increasing debate about how we ensure effective scrutiny. One of the advantages of Standing Committees is that they do focus specifically on that particular Bill. The Members of Parliament are appointed solely to deal with that question, and on the more technical matters for which we have legislation, that's probably quite a sensible thing. Where I think perhaps there is room for improvement is where we have a series of Bills dealing with similar or related subjects, and then it does seem to me perhaps sensible to have someone who has served on a number of these committees carrying through that expertise and knowledge into the next piece of legislation. So the problem the Government would have in making such a dramatic change, or advocating such a dramatic change, is of course that we would have to reconcile as well the interests of the Select Committees, who jealously guard, rightly, their independence and might find it difficult to see them integrated in the way that in effect you are, if not advocating them, by implication suggesting.

VB

Would it also follow – and this is a very large question I know – that the more effective the scrutiny of the House of Commons, the more difficulties there are for Government and therefore there may be, understandably, voices in the Government who may be saying, well is it really in our interests to make the House of Commons a more effective body?

GH

I think that the Government Whips would have a view of such a change certainly. There is no doubt that – I didn't say what their view was! – that the Government would have to look carefully at any such suggestion, but I don't entirely accept the premise of your question. I'm not entirely sure that it would be fair to say that scrutiny is necessarily improved by a change in these arrangements. Scrutiny, in my experience, tends to be in the eye of the beholder. The Opposition, rightly, and I spent five years in Opposition, would say they don't have enough time for this or that, but the truth is that the only weapon available to the Opposition in our Parliament, if the majority is clear, is time, and what tends to happen is that the Opposition in a committee, or indeed on the floor, will spend all of their time on the first two clauses of the Bill, and then when we say, "Well hang on a second, there are, as there is going to be on the Companies Bill, there are 842 clauses on this bill, wouldn't you like to spend a little bit of time on the other 840?" they'll say, "Well, we need more time for that." The truth is that we have to try and find a reasonable compromise between proper scrutiny, which means having some time to devote to the generality of the Bill and to

the detail across. I promise you do not all 842 clauses, they are generally rather more modest than that – but at the same time, allowing sufficient scrutiny on all parts of the Bill, but not simply allowing the Opposition to talk and talk and talk, because you may have noticed that politicians do occasionally talk more than should.

VB

We can come back to scrutiny in a moment, but let's now move – we started this line of questioning in relation to Europe, let's move back to Britain. After the last Election, you were appointed Leader of the House. That is a ministerial position, it's in the Cabinet, but also presumably, as well as having responsibility to the Government of which you are a member, you have responsibility to the House of Commons as well. Is that right, that you have responsibility to the Commons as well as the Cabinet, and do these responsibilities ever conflict?

GH

It is one of the peculiarities of our constitutional arrangements that someone in my position can be both a member of the Executive, and if I could make clear, I'm also a member of the Legislature by reason of the good sense of the good people of Ashfield, who I hope continue to elect me, but also, as you say, I have a kind of general responsibility to ensure, if you like, fair play in the House of Commons. It's a rather peculiar position in that sense, but I am around and available. Part of the job is to be not too far away from the Chamber, so that if Opposition Members wish to raise issues about the organisation of business or particular complaints that they might have, I am there and I would seek to respond to their views. So whilst I am a party politician and a member of the Government, at the same time, and I suspect it would probably only work in our system, I also have responsibilities to try and ensure that there is fair play, and of course I do that.

VB

Do you rely in a sense on the agreement of the Opposition to get fair play, to get fair procedures for both sides, so that both the Government and the Opposition have a fair crack of the whip? There's a phrase I think often used called the usual channels – is that right?

GH

The usual channels normally describe some communications between the two Whips' offices, and there is no doubt that the House of Commons, and probably Parliament generally – I don't claim to be an expert on the House of Lords, but certainly the House of Commons could not function without a degree of understanding between the two sides, and if that understanding was withdrawn, our procedures would ultimately break down because you can't have the kind of debating chamber that we have, the kind of arrangements that we have, without some acceptance of the rules, and those rules do have to be even-handed. Obviously ultimately the Speaker is there to guarantee fairness in the Chamber in the course of debates, and he does that rigorously, but in the preparation of debate and the decisions as to how the legislation is to be taken forward, how much time needs to be allocated to the Opposition and so on, then there is a lot of negotiation and discussion that goes on. I'm not saying this is always done without differences of opinion. Of course the Opposition's job is to maximise their ability to dominate proceedings on the floor, and our job is to give them as little opportunity as we can.

VB

I think if most people were asked to name the most prominent Leader of the House in recent years, many people would say the late Robin Cook made a particular impact. Is that right? Did he leave a particular legacy which you feel, as it were, inclined to follow?

GH

Well certainly, and rightly, he was recognised for his determined efforts to modernise the procedures of the House of Commons. We've had a Modernisation Committee in place for a number of years to try and, I would sometimes say, attempted to bring the House of Commons into the 20th Century, but my ambition is to bring it into the 21st Century. Robin certainly did a great deal to streamline some of the rather more antiquated arrangements, but to be fair, quite a number of previous Leaders of the House have contributed as well, so I think Robin is probably best known not least because of the fact he was obviously beforehand Foreign Secretary and a very prominent politician.

VB

One of Robin Cook's slogans was modernising the Commons, the modernisation programme, and you used that phrase yourself. What precisely does that entail? What needs modernisation in the Commons?

GH

I think certainly after 1997, particularly because there were a lot of new and, frankly, rather younger Members elected in 1997, some I suspect rather unexpectedly, not only to them. They perhaps felt that some of the traditions should be changed - and this is one of the difficult balances that has to be struck. It used to be necessary, for example, to wear an opera hat when calling for a Point of Order in the course of Divisions, which is a slightly strange and bizarre thing to have to do. So in a sense, there were some traditions that really needed doing away with, and ensuring that the arrangements came into the, as I say, not just the 21st Century, but at that stage, probably we were struggling with the 20th Century. There have been great debates in the House about the hours of work, and that probably encapsulated Robin's particular contribution. It is one of the reasons, rightly, he's remembered, because certainly when I was first elected in 1992, it was still relatively common for the House of Commons to work through the night. I certainly have seen dawn rise on the other side of the Thames rather more often than I care to remember, and frankly, I do not think that made sense. I don't think anybody felt that sitting through the night and trying to take decisions in the small hours of the morning on an important piece of legislation was in anyone's interest at all. Certainly, by about 1997, we had developed a practice of finishing towards 10 o'clock. It was, if you'll forgive me for being party political for a second, relatively easy between '92 and '97 because the then-Government didn't have a lot of legislation that it wanted to bring forward, so finishing at 10 o'clock was quite convenient for everyone. This is where the issue becomes a little more difficult, because my family home is about 120 miles away from here, and my constituency is a little further, and I can't go home each evening in any event, so a 10 o'clock finish quite suits me, because I can, if I'm a minister, do my box, if I'm not, I perhaps watch Newsnight, and then go to bed. Now, for someone, on the other hand, whose family is in London or somewhere within commuting distance of London, there is then a debate about whether we shouldn't finish, say, at 7 o'clock, and allow people a rather more normal existence of going home after work and seeing their children and seeing their family and then, as I say, being rather more normal in their family life than it is possible for me. That really has been the debate since 1997, and we've had various arrangements, sometimes finishing at seven, sometimes finishing at ten, to try and accommodate that, but unfortunately, the debate has often been a geographical one. It hasn't necessarily divided the parties politically, because I'm not sure people vote. I'm perfectly content with a 10 o'clock finish because I can't go home. I can perfectly well understand why someone living in London with their family wants to go home. So trying to reconcile those two is impossible, and currently we have a compromise that says that we work until 10 o'clock on a Monday and Tuesday, finish at seven on a Wednesday, and finish at six on a Thursday. Six is important on a Thursday to allow particularly Members of Parliament to get to Scotland. For those who want to stay on until Friday to do Private Members' Bills, they obviously can do that, but it is a compromise, and one of the things that I'm determined to do is to give this compromise some time to see how it works. It's not - it probably, as in the nature of all compromises, doesn't satisfy everybody at all because those who want 7 o'clock still want 7 o'clock, and those who want 10 o'clock still want 10 o'clock.

VB

Can we now get into the substance of what Parliament does? I suppose the main popular criticism of MPs is that they don't think for themselves, they vote along party lines, whatever those party lines are, and it seems to me in the very simple form in which I've just outlined that criticism, it won't really hold because the revolts we saw in the last Parliament on such matters as the Iraq War or foundation hospitals or top-up fees in universities, and the number of MPs involved in that, in proportion rather, I think was the greatest we've had since the 19th Century, vast revolts, but they didn't have much effect because the Government then had such a large majority. Some people would say a swollen majority because the Government was elected on about 42% of the vote, and you had the same phenomenon the other way round with Margaret Thatcher's Governments in 1983 and 1987, when you had huge revolts on subjects like the Poll Tax, but they didn't have much effect because the majority was so large. Does the country benefit from these large majorities?

GH

There are a number of aspects of your preliminary observations that I might just want to take some small issue with. I don't think it's possible to start off by saying that there is a feeling that MPs simply do what their whips say without actually asking how it is that MPs are elected. I recognise there are probably some people in Ashfield now, I hope, who might see my name and vote for me personally, but the truth is, and I recognise this, that they vote for me because underneath it says "The Labour Party Candidate", and they are voting for a political party, and by and large, that is how our system has worked for quite a long time. In those circumstances, therefore, it is not unreasonable when a Member of Parliament comes to Parliament, having been elected with a political party's name underneath his or her name, that he or she should accept the discipline of the whip, and the whip is simply saying that you should vote in a particular way in accordance with the manifesto upon which you were elected.

I accept there are issues of conscience. There are certainly issues that are regularly not subject to the whip. Most of the great moral issues of our time are not subject to a party whip. But, generally speaking, I think it is not unreasonable to expect that when my constituents vote for a Labour Party candidate, that I should broadly follow the Labour Party's view, and the same obviously is true of the other political parties represented in the House. Now, an academic very recently, from Nottingham University, has produced a book demonstrating what Vernon was saying, that the last Parliament was probably one of the most rebellious in modern history. That at least does demonstrate, whether or not it's because there is a large majority, it does demonstrate that they are capable of free thinking and independent judgement and are prepared to defy the whips. Whether that is because they do so in the security of knowing that there is a comfortable majority is perhaps a matter of further debate.

Harold Wilson once famously said that the size of the rebellion is always equivalent to the Government's majority minus one! What he was implying of course, as was Vernon, that that nobody is really going to rebel if they think that the Government risks losing. That was not my experience in the last Parliament. I think there were issues where, frankly, even up to the point at which the votes were counted, our whips weren't entirely confident that we would win some of those votes. We've mentioned one or two of them this evening. So I think these are rather more difficult issues than simply saying should Members of Parliament always exercise their own independent judgement. I think it is important that we elect people who are capable of exercising independent judgement. I see no evidence amongst my colleagues in any part of the House that they do not do that. Equally, I think it is important that they are consistent with the people who elected them and the reasons for their being elected.

VB

The academic from Nottingham you mentioned is Philip Cowley. I can't remember the title of his book, but I'll try and bring it along next time. But there's a further point, isn't there, about large majorities, because someone might say that if you had a proportional representation electoral system, you wouldn't have these large majorities, and therefore the House of Commons could assert itself, and if people don't like foundation hospitals now, or if in the 'eighties they didn't like the Poll Tax, it might be the House of Commons' view that prevails. Is there anything to this argument, do you think?

GH

I spent some time, when we were in Opposition, on a committee looking at the different electoral systems. There are probably some members of the audience already struggling to stay awake, and I could really cause you great problems by taking you

through all of the various different kinds of electoral systems! It can get very tedious. I came to the conclusion, having studied them carefully, that what we should do is look at the institution that we were electing to, and then make a judgement as to what was the best way of electing people to that particular institution. I still am slightly unpersuaded by the argument for proportional representation in the House of Commons, for two reasons. Firstly, I believe that people very strongly value the link between the elected Member and the constituency. Now, certainly there are systems - they have one for Scotland, and they have it in the Bundstag in Germany - that do allow that link to exist, although it's not perfect in that you have two sorts of Members of Parliament. You have those elected in constituencies, and those added in to try and ensure that the institution is proportional. So that's one criterion which I think is extremely important. Another is that I think the British people at election time want certainty. I think they want a result. Now, Vernon's answer to that may well be to say they would be happy with a coalition result, but I doubt, for example, looking at the situation in Germany in recent weeks, British people would have been entirely comfortable with having this tremendous uncertainty as to who had won. It's still not absolutely clear that Chancellor Schroeder is happily vacating his position. The result was a draw, and no one is really able to form a clear left or right majority. They now have what they call a grand coalition. I'm not wholly persuaded that people in the United Kingdom would be ready for that, or indeed would want that. I think when people vote at election time, they want to see, frankly, a winner and a loser, and first past the post, our present system, does achieve that. But as I say, I link it to the fact that most people value the link between a Member of Parliament and a constituency, and that's something which, if you look at opinion polls, is very highly rated by the public.

VB

As you say, many people's eyes glaze over at the mention of proportional representation, but not I think this audience, because the last lecture was on that subject!

GH

Oh, they're experts!

VB

I said it was in September, and I said the fact that a large number of people had come to hear me talk about different electoral systems was a clear sign that summer is over.

GH

Was it raining?!

VB

No, the weather was quite good... But as you say, you're absolutely right, that any form of proportional representation would lead to coalition or minority government, that's obviously clear, but this relates to another point you made in your broader critique, of participation. You said that the crisis of participation is strongest amongst those living in deprived areas, amongst the underprivileged, who vote, people from the classes D and E, you suggested, I think it was 54% voted, whereas people from the managerial class A and B are a much higher proportion vote. Now, is it fair to say that many of the people living in deprived areas live in seats which are fairly safe for one party, usually the Labour Party frankly. Therefore there is much less incentive for the Government to win over their votes than there is of people living in the marginal seats, which tend to be in the suburban areas or the better off areas, surrounding London, Birmingham and so on. Might someone who was in favour of proportional representation say that people in deprived areas ought to have much more leverage with proportional representation because then you wouldn't have the safe seat? I mean, if you're talking about the centre of Liverpool, say, which is fairly deprived, that's safe; you could put a donkey up for the Labour Party, and it would win. It's like, the other way, in Bournemouth, you could put a donkey -

GH

I'm sure my colleague Jane Kennedy would take exception to that....!

VB

...for the Conservatives. So it's not a party point! How would deal with this, because you have made a lot, and I think rightly so, of the fact that there is a crisis of participation amongst, in a sense, those who need the vote the most?

GH

I accept the argument. The argument, if I can put it in a simpler way, is that by having proportional representation, every vote across the country counts, so it doesn't matter whether you're in a deprived area. I think the same argument, if you'll forgive me for saying so, Vernon, arises in the leafy, rural areas of the country, where, generally speaking, I won't say which animal that they use, but anyway, the animal will be elected if it wears a blue rosette. Now, in those circumstances, I accept the argument that people put forward on behalf of proportional representation is that every single vote across the country would count in making an assessment of the final result. The problem with that argument, Vernon, is it doesn't seem to be borne out in reality. The turnout in the most recent elections to the Scottish Parliament was very low, even though they use a form of proportional representation, and there doesn't seem to be particular evidence on the Continent that the turnout has much to do with whether there is a PR system or not. The French have changed their electoral system on a number of occasions, usually when Francois Mitterrand was President and depending on what advantage he thought he could get from having a different system. It didn't seem to particularly affect the turnout one way or the other, so I'm not wholly persuaded by that. On the other hand, I do think there's a real issue, a more substantive point, not just about turnout in deprived areas. I think there is a bigger effect as well, caused by generations. My mother and father have never missed an opportunity of voting - my Dad's 82. I worry that that generation as they, frankly, die off, are being replaced by generations who might or might not vote; indeed, as people are coming through the electorate, they are ever-more less likely to vote. That combined with, you're absolutely right, the point about those more deprived areas where people are less likely to vote, is generating an increasing number of non-voters. When I first started in politics, it tended to be people in their 20s who said they wouldn't vote. Now I find that there are people in their 30s and 40s. They're the same people I met 20 years ago, they're just a bit older, and they still have not got the habit, or the duty, because I think my parents' generation regarded voting as a duty, and they don't have that. Therefore there is a growing problem for us, because my sense is that of the total electorate, fewer and fewer people, election on election, really regard voting as an important thing to do. I think that's the challenge for us in a democracy to try and examine ways in which we can change that and turn that around. I've suggested one way. I would prefer there to be others. We hope, for example, that making postal voting a great deal easier would have an impact, and it had some impact. The turnout between 2001 and 2005 went up slightly, but only very slightly, to 61.5%, which I think is poor for a modern democracy.

VB

On the first point you made, it's absolutely right, there is no correlation between the electoral system and turnout. I think we came to that conclusion last time, those who were here, and for advocates of proportional representation, it's a case of what someone said was a tragedy, a beautiful theory destroyed by an inconvenient fact! But going on to the other point, the main point you make in a way, let's talk about that. It is very important, as you say, the low rate of turnout, particularly amongst young people. In the 2001 election, the average percentage of 18-24 year olds who voted was 39%. Bob Worcester always says that politicians spend a lot of time courting the young, but they'd do better to court those over 65 because there are twice as many of them and they are twice as likely to vote. I have an anecdote to contribute myself here, because the percentage of young girls, the so-called high heeled vote, from 18 to 24, was 33% in 2001, and I was rung up shortly before the last election by a magazine that I haven't previously had much to do with called *Cosmopolitan*, and I thought they might have wanted my photograph, but actually they didn't....! What they wanted was some suggestions of how we could help increase the turnout rate amongst young women, who are obviously as much affected by politics, if not a lot more so, than anyone else. I suggested

that they held interviews with the three party leaders on issues of interest to young women, and they in fact did that. I don't think it did very much to increase the turnout, but can we think why has this happened? Why is it that young people do not turn out to vote as much as older people, who may find it physically more difficult to get to the polls, and older people don't need postal voting or electronic, but they'll go to the polls in bad weather, even if they're not physically fit - why is this?

GH

Frankly, I do not know!

VB

Nor do I!

GH

I think if I did, then I probably would be appointed immediately as the Labour Party supremo in charge of elections.

VB

Or the Editor of *Cosmopolitan*!

GH

Or the Editor of *Cosmopolitan*! Actually, I'd probably be better off being the Editor of *Cosmopolitan*, but there you go! I think there are a number of factors. I'll have a go at them. I think one of the reasons why older people tend to vote is that they can remember being told, almost certainly by their mothers, maybe by their fathers, that they had not had the right to vote, and I think that makes a big difference. If you look at the turnout in the first elections in Central and Eastern Europe, the turnout in Afghanistan or Iraq, where people had not had the vote - South Africa is another illustration - they will queue for hours in order to vote. People travelled huge distances in Afghanistan to vote. Sadly, what appears to be happening in Central and Eastern Europe is that after that initial rush of enthusiasm, then turnouts again are starting to dip, which is unfortunate, but it does demonstrate that that, if you like, collective memory in the older generation is there and is powerful. That doesn't explain though why that hasn't necessarily been transmitted down to the 18-24s. I think that the gap is bigger. I think it's a rather larger age group that I worry about. It leads me on to a second problem that I think we need to address, and it is a gap between the understanding of the electorate and the institution, whether it is Westminster passing legislation, or frankly whether it is Brussels passing legislation, people don't learn, they don't understand, they don't appreciate what it is that parliaments and governments do. What I increasingly find interesting amongst young people, and I'll explain the reason why in a moment, is that I can say to them on the doorstep, as I did in May, "Look, we've made a big difference to your school, to your hospital," and they say, "Yes, that's true," but they had no idea why. They didn't appreciate that decisions taken in London had an impact on what happened in their local school. They knew their local school had improved, and very often people who weren't going to vote would say, "It's fantastic what a difference has been made," but it was almost as if the extra funding had somehow come from the sky, it had arrived by magic. They thought it was great, but they had no sense that it was the result of a decision taken in Whitehall or in Parliament. Similarly, let us take one issue that young people are very energised about, protecting the environment. People will join pressure groups, they'll join campaigns, they'll go on marches, they'll write letters, they will engage in all sorts of things which we would regard as being political and part of the political process, but on the other hand, if you said to them that real decisions affecting environmental protection are taken in the European Parliament, they would glaze over and not believe you.

What is happening is that we've got, in a sense, crisis is perhaps too dramatic a word, but we've got a problem both with the institutions that take the decisions, and also a problem for political parties, because the political parties ought to be the engine, the focus, for that kind of activity. It's there. It will be amongst your students. It's certainly amongst the students I used to teach, and it's amongst the students that I still talk to when I can. They want to get engaged, they believe in things, they want to make changes, in exactly the way that I did when I first went in to politics, but they do not see political parties or necessarily political

institutions as the vehicles for making those changes. That's something that we've got to address, either civics in schools, or whatever it's called these days, citizenship classes, or it's trying to find some way in which we explain the basic functions and structures of our democracy. I'm more worried about that in a sense than the turnout, because I think one leads to the other. A lot of people will say, "I don't vote because I don't really understand," "I don't vote because it doesn't make any difference," "I don't vote because you're not going to do anything for me." So I think it's all part of that perception about our democracy and how it works that we need to address.

VB

Do you think the media have a role in helping to improve participation, and are they fulfilling that role? Again, I have another anecdote here from my own recent experience that one of my former students is David Cameron, who's been a bit in the news recently.

GH

I saw him today, when I was hanging around the House of Commons!

VB

Well, I've been rung up endlessly by the media, not about his views on proportional representation, but about whether he may or may not have taken drugs 20 years ago, which I neither know nor care about, but have the media a role here and are they fulfilling that role?

GH

I think the media could do far more to explain some of those connections I described, to try and explain how it might make a difference. You shouldn't encourage me to talk about the media too much because it does occasionally get me into trouble, but I do think that we have a media in this country that is much more focused on short term events than a longer term explanation as to what is going on in our country or our society, and it means that everything's a crisis, everything's a failure, everything's going wrong, even though the next day actually the particular story in question will not any longer be found to be particularly true. I think the role there is perhaps to give people a sense there we're confronting some quite difficult issues in Government.

I'd make this point, you wouldn't need Government ministers if all the issues were straightforward. You have to exercise judgement, you have to take decisions, and necessarily, they are difficult decisions, and they must be difficult decisions, about the future direction of the country in a number of particular areas. In those circumstances, to have a media that really is only living from day to day, I'm not sure is necessarily particularly helpful, and we have a much more competitive media than in most other countries. It means we have half a dozen newspapers all competing for sales, and the way they do that is by having dramatic headlines – shock, crash. Look at the headlines in tomorrow's papers, and just see what I'm saying, and then compare the headline with the story, and it's sometimes quite interesting to see that the story doesn't really bear out the headline.

VB

I think someone once said that no one ever lost money by underestimating the taste of the public.

GH

Mark Twain.

VB

One of your remedies for this crisis in political participation is compulsory voting, or rather I suppose, better put, compulsory attendance at the polling booth, because you could destroy your ballot paper if you wanted to. This operates in Australia and one or two other countries. In Australia, one of the objections to it is that elections can be decided by what they call in Australia the donkey vote, and that is that it's decided by people who are not really very interested. There's some evidence in Australia that if your surname begins with a letter near the beginning of the alphabet, you're more likely to get elected, because people will rush in and just tick the first name they see! I remember once hearing the Australian Electoral Commissioner give a talk, and he said that he'd fined a man for voting twice. He said, "Now, why did you do that?" The chap replied, "Well, you fined me last time for not voting at all, so this time I wanted to make sure!" Are we in danger under compulsory voting of having elections decided by people who really aren't interested and don't care and have just gone along and ticked the first name that's there and run off to avoid the fine?

GH

This was one of the things that we did find when we looked at proportional representation. In those systems where they use multi-member constituencies, so they elect more than one member, therefore people are required to vote a number of times, then certainly - and this was the case amongst my colleagues in the European Parliament from Ireland - they all tended to be called Andrews and Bernotti and Aardvark, so that certainly did have an effect.

Going back to what I was describing about the reaction of many people who I spoke to in the run-up to the last General Election - "I don't understand it", "I don't know that it's going to make a difference", "You're all as bad as each other." I found when I went to Australia and asked people about voting, you're right, compulsory attendance at the polling station means that there are some people who just put 123. (What people have to do is turn up and get their name ticked off, and they are then given a ballot paper and it's up to them as to whether they fill it in or not - providing they've shown that they've attended, that's all that is required.) The other thing in Australia of course is they also have to indicate their preference. So it's not a simple first past the post election. They have to rank the candidates in order, 123. The impression I got is that it forces a lot of people who might otherwise simply stay at home to think about things. Now, I accept there will be some people who don't go through that process, who just turn up and put down 123 against the first three candidates, but I think the difference is that every so often, in Australia every three years, people actually do have to think about these important issues. I say that's quite important because I do believe that many of those people who don't vote in British elections don't vote, if I can put it this way, for proper reasons. They don't vote because they don't feel they understand what the issues are. I found this particularly being a candidate in the European Parliament elections. A lot of people would say, "Well, I would vote, I normally vote, but I don't understand what it's about. What does it mean to me? What does the European Parliament do?" Now, some of those might have been giving me an excuse, but on the other hand, I think some of it is genuine. It's the point I was making earlier about this connection between what happens when you vote and the results that flow from all those votes being cast in an election. I think making people vote, at least making people attend, does force some people to say, "What does this mean and what are the results of what I am doing?" and I think that's a wholly good thing.

VB

Can you achieve the same end by extending the principles of direct democracy, like referendums and so on? This Government has had referendums, ballots, on grammar schools and whether people want to keep their grammar schools or not, referendums on whether you want a directly elected mayor or not. These are referendums at local level. Can they help to engage people in a way that voting in a General Election doesn't, and should we extend that sort of principle so that perhaps people can vote on the size of the local authority budget, or perhaps even matters connected with their health service and so on? Is this something that should be extended?

GH

Someone once famously said that all politics are local, and there is little doubt that, dealing with people in my constituency, there is no doubt that they are interested in politics, they are interested in decisions that affect their lives. If there is a planning issue that affects a large number of people, the local hall will be full, and I suspect full of people who probably may not have voted at the previous election, because when things affect people, quite rightly, they get angry and concerned and want their voice to be heard. I think perversely, inconsistently almost, with what I was saying earlier about turnout and participation in elections, in a way, because of the mass media and because of the variety of different ways now people can communicate, in a sense, the individual's voice is stronger than it ever has been in terms of campaigns, particularly at the local level, where people want to be heard.

There's less deference in society. People are much more likely to challenge authority, and all those are healthy things in a democracy. Where I think the problem arises is trying to find the right level in which those decisions are taken. It's a classic problem that the European Union has, if I can start at that end, trying to work out what is the appropriate level for decisions to be taken. I think that is the real challenge for anyone interested in democracy or constitutions. Should a local planning decision be taken by the people affected? Arguably it should, but you know as well as I do, if it's an unpopular proposal, it will be rejected. I have a classic example, local planning decisions are broadly taken by county councils in the East Midlands. There is a proposal for a waste tip in my constituency. The local county councils will vote against it. Every other county councillor not in my constituency will vote for it, because it means it's not in their patch and it's not in their back yard! Now, is that the best way of doing it? Who would you consult if you had the referendum on that issue? Would you consult the whole of Nottinghamshire? It's clear that all the people who didn't live in the immediate area would vote for it, and all the others would vote against it. Is that the right way of resolving these issues? Schools are easier because there's a relatively predictable catchment area for the particular school, but even then, there have been some difficulties in boundary drawing. Do you allow people who are not in the catchment area to vote because they have a chance of sending their child to that particular school? I think similar issues arise at a national level. Essentially, we have used referenda for what we have described as major constitutional change, and that has been reasonably consistent since, whenever it was, 1969 when we passed the Government of Ireland Act, which provided for a referendum in relation to the future status of Northern Ireland, and obviously we had a referendum in 1975 over continued membership of the European Union. So these are difficult issues. I don't entirely believe that local referenda are a solution to every issue, but I can certainly see that getting people involved - if people were involved...the theory I have, Vernon, is that we'd set up a referendum and 10% would bother to vote, and then we'd actually spend a lot of time proving that people weren't really very bothered.

VB

Can we conclude by just going back to the question of modernisation of the House of Commons and scrutiny of legislation? If you were able as a dictator to put forward, shall we say, three reforms of the scrutiny process, what would they be?

GH

Well, I'm never going to be a dictator, so I'll avoid that particular observation, but I certainly believe that we should be looking at ways in which we can have a more consistent approach to a series of Acts of Parliament in the same sort of area. I think that does mean tapping into existing expertise. I think some sort of more permanent arrangement for standing committees is probably the way forward, although I think there are a lot of decisions that still have to be taken before that.

I think there is an important issue about the relationship between the second chamber and the first chamber. It's a complicated question. I certainly can see the role of a second chamber, but peculiarly in our system, because we have no written constitution, the House of Lords, subject to the Parliament Act's procedure, has pretty much the same powers as the House of Commons, and that is a problem, because they have not been elected, and the history of democracy is to give primacy to the elected chamber. One of the things I would like us to be able to do, and we're looking hard at this, is to sort out that relationship. When I was studying constitutional law, the conventions of the constitution in relation to the two chambers was set to be very clear. Professor Smith who lectured me set it out very, very specifically, and I think he would have been rather surprised to discover that Liberal Democrats announced that they were no longer going to be bound by, at least the Salisbury Convention, which is rather important. So, you know, that's a change over, what, 30 years, which I think, as I say, Professor Smith would have found pretty remarkable. So I think that's an important area as well.

The third thing is rather more mundane. It is trying to find a way in which we can turn Parliament outwards. I think sometimes Parliament is a rather inward-looking institution. Many of the reforms that Robin was responsible for were trying to bring us into the 21st Century, as I described earlier, but I think what we then have to do is to get people to appreciate that the decisions, the debates, the discussions that take place in the Chamber are absolutely relevant to what happens on their street, in their community, in their town or in their city. That means finding a way of getting people more engaged, more involved, and appreciating what is happening. So that actually I think is the fundamental challenge, because otherwise there's a risk that as that number in the electorate who are not turning out to vote increases, and as society changes, as perhaps people become involved in single issues, they won't necessarily appreciate that in Parliament we do have the ultimate vehicle for changing our society, and unless we get people engaged in that and voting for it, whichever way they happen to vote, then I think our democracy will be poorer.

VB

Your comments about the House of Lords provide a very good trailer for the next session at the end of next month, which is in fact about the House of Lords. I'm afraid we've run over time, but that is I think a sign of the stimulus of the discussion, of the things you've said. I don't know how well I've fulfilled my Jeremy Paxman role, but you have shown the audience, whatever their political views, that you are an extremely effective Leader of the House who is committed to the rejuvenation of our democracy, and as you say, these problems aren't just problems of institutions and machinery, they are about improving our democratic system, and it's obvious that that's one of your central concerns. I hope we can show our gratitude to one of the busiest ministers in the Government in the usual way - thank you very much.