

STRATEGIC REVIEW CONSULTATION

RESTORATION AND RENEWAL – HOUSE OF LORDS

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Summary

Four factors favour a bold re-think of plans to restore the House of Lords and move back to it in the 2030s. It would be wasteful to make provision for a House numbering 800+, when its ideal size is generally agreed to be between 200 and 600. Public debt is soaring. The House is widely viewed as retrograde and stuffy. Virtual working has been an outstanding success, and can only get better.

Combining those factors, the solution for the interim period is a largely virtual House, with a modestly-sized physical centre whether in London or in York. This is a golden opportunity to transform both our working methods and our public perception.

If the interim solution works well – and we already have good evidence that it will – we will not want to go back to our formidable but archaic current surroundings in the 2030s (save for the occasional ceremonial occasion), and should stay in our new home.

Alternatively, if we are to return to the Palace of Westminster sometime in the 2030s, focus-groups of peers, guided by architects and other experts, should guide us in commissioning a building that is calculated to work for us with technology as it will by then exist.

Size and function of the House of Lords

1. In an ideal world, decisions over where and how the legislature is to be housed should be taken only after a thorough review of its function and size. There seems to however already to be a broad consensus that:
 - a. There should be a second Chamber to revise legislation and hold Ministers to account.
 - b. It should number no more than 600, and perhaps as few as 200.

More keenly-disputed issues, in particular how the Chamber should be appointed or elected, and how we should style ourselves, are of much less importance to the debate on restoration and renewal.

2. It seems astonishingly wasteful that physical provision should have to be made for more than 800 of us, both on an interim and a final basis, when almost nobody thinks a House of that size is necessary or desirable.
3. We cannot of course precipitate a political decision on our future size, however desirable that might be. But the fact that we are currently more numerous than anyone wishes us to be surely places on us a strong obligation to be flexible in our future plans and, as public sector debt rises dramatically, not to undertake spending that would not be needed for a smaller House.

Virtual working

4. Fortunately, virtual working in the House of Lord has been (from my perspective at least) a huge success. I very much hope that, as a minimum:
 - a. Committees will continue to function virtually, as they have done very effectively over the past few months. As a member, my experience is that one sees the target of the questioning more clearly than in a real committee room. Teams dialogue alongside the broadcast Zoom session allows the Chair to steer things more effectively than in a non-virtual hearing. The ease with which witnesses can be heard from all parts of the UK and over the world is remarkable: not only do they not have to travel, they need find only a couple of hours in their schedule rather than a day or more.
 - b. PeerHub will continue to allow us to vote virtually from wherever we happen to be. The usual counter-argument, that voting becomes disconnected from attendance at the debate, does not bear scrutiny: conscientious members will view any debate in which they wish to vote virtually; and even in the old-style Chamber, whipped votes attract far more participants than the debates that precede them. Surely, the lobbies have had their day: there are other places in which we can rub real or virtual shoulders with our colleagues, and it would seem madness not to take advantage of the available technology.
5. Virtual debates have been highly successful, judging by those which I have attended and spoken or voted in ranging from the small and esoteric (Private International Law Bill) to the blockbuster (Fisheries Bill). The quality of interventions is of course no less, and the supposed loss of spontaneity is not really evident in my view. If peers are going to read prepared speeches they will do so whatever the format; and if they wish to react to what has gone before, that is at least as easy online as it is in the Chamber. Debating and voting online also gives us the opportunity to consult online and offline materials, without restriction, as points are made: I have often spent 15 minutes as a vote approaches checking references made in the closing

speeches (e.g. to “the way they do it in New Zealand”) to help confirm me in the decision how to vote.

6. The criticism that during the pandemic some Members have put themselves down to speak too much and on subjects on which they are not expert, if valid, is a function not of the virtual nature of proceedings but of the allowance system that unfortunately incentivised such behaviour.
7. I have heard occasional criticisms of Ministers for not “coming to the Chamber” to answer questions during the pandemic. Such criticisms seem to me quite out of place. If Ministers are prepared to answer questions conscientiously and informatively, it scarcely matters where they do it from. The converse also applies.
8. Virtual operation has the huge additional advantage of flattening the geographical imbalance with which the House of Lords has long been troubled, allowing peers to work for at least part of the week from the region in which they live and encouraging participation from peers in all corners of the country.
9. One might reflect, finally, that videoconferencing is in its infancy. Our House with its median age of (I believe) 74 has adapted strikingly well to the existing technology, which our clerks and staff have made operational with incredible speed. But by the 2030s the available tools will be very much more sophisticated, and the ability to operate them will be second nature for all but the most venerable Members.
10. It is often said that from great challenges emerge great opportunities. That is emphatically the case here. We need to make the most of them in our interim and final plans.

Plans for the interim

11. Putting our recent experience of virtual working together with the mounting public debt and uncertainty over the future size of the House of Lords, I conclude that we could and should function as a largely virtual House during the period of any R&R. A central building would still be needed, prioritising a small Chamber for those who wish to attend (booking system) with excellent video technology for those who do not; a library; small pods or meeting rooms as in the Scottish Parliament (a notable deficiency in the existing House); work stations for use by those whose parliamentary rooms are outside the building; storage lockers; and modest facilities for members to eat, drink, meet together and hold lectures and receptions.
12. That building could be the QE2 Centre or it could be in York: were we to function largely virtually, it would in one sense not matter very much, and from a personal point of view I should be happy to visit either. The reality however is that the centre of Government will continue to be in London and that those who suggest moving us

to York do not necessarily have our continued strength or influence at heart: so my inclination is to prefer the London option.

13. Not only could we function perfectly adequately in a chiefly virtual manner: we would transform our image in a wholly positive way. From being perceived in many quarters (even The Times! – see Quentin Letts' latest diatribe) as the epitome of out-of-touch stuffiness and entitlement, we would be putting ourselves in the front rank of forward-thinking legislatures globally, and defining ourselves in the public eye not by our rank and status (which is a mystery to most of the public anyway) but by the job that so many of us do so well.

Plan A for the long term

14. I find it hard to imagine that after 5-7 years operating as above, we would want to go back to our existing surroundings. They are, of course, majestic: but they are not practical in many ways. Every statue and every panel of carved oak reeks of hereditary (male) power, traditional privileges and the mid-19th century. A full restoration at public expense would be hard to justify in the coming recession. We would literally be going back in time.
15. So the interim solution should also be the long-term solution.
16. What to do with the Houses of Parliament (or our end of it) will depend on what happens to the Commons. Its earthier style of debate is better suited to a real than to a virtual Chamber (at least with current technology). Once we have moved out, could they move into our end of the building while theirs is renovated, saving the cost of converting Richmond House or equivalent into a temporary House of Commons?
17. The House of Lords might become a museum, but with the facility to use its great spaces (Royal Gallery, Chamber) for great occasions (visiting Heads of State, State Opening of Parliament). It would be good to retain an occasional ceremonial link with our history. I assume that this option would be cheaper to achieve than a fully functioning House of Lords: there would certainly be no urgency about it.

Plan B for the long term

18. If more orthodox (but expensive) counsel prevails and we resolve to go back to our current building in the 2030s, it is obvious that wholesale changes will be required. Excessive space for books (does anyone consult bound Hansards, even in 2020?), and insufficient space for meetings would be two things on my list.

19. I suspect however that few of us (and certainly not I) are experts on the future use of buildings. It would be useful to “focus-group” some of the possibilities with groups of peers, facilitated by architects or others who could help us see into the future and guide us in commissioning a building that works well with the technology that will by then be prevalent.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "BWK" followed by a stylized flourish.

1 August 2020