

It's time for a new politics

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he state of Britain's politics should be a source of concern for all parties. Public faith in politicians and our political institutions is draining away. According to MORI, the proportion of people trusting politicians to put the needs of the country before the needs of their party halved between 1974 and 1999. Trust in Parliament fell from 54 per cent in 1983 to 14 per cent in 2000. The current malaise is not a fashion or a temporary aberration. In many ways, our political system is broken.

The consequences of this estrangement are grim. When people lose faith in politics, they see society differently. They feel powerless to influence the world around them. Civic engagement is affected. Cynicism about politics corrodes public discourse and discourages those who want to make a difference. It undermines effective government and encourages damaging short-termism.

The Conservative Party's ambition is to restore engagement and promote accountability so that we can build trust in the political system. The changes required cannot be effected by political gimmicks or constitutional tinkering. We need to understand the depth of erosion in trust and the sea-change required to rebuild it. Old politics cannot be repaired. A new politics is needed.

New politics requires action on three key fronts: devolving power to the people, strengthening our democratic institutions and changing the behaviour of politicians. We will restore engagement by returning power to people and communities, involving members of the public in decision-making and the delivery of public services to an unprecedented degree. We will apply the principles of responsiveness, accountability and engagement to the

big constitutional questions facing the country – reforming our political culture, strengthening Parliament and restoring integrity in the electoral process. And we will do so because we realise that harnessing the power of individuals and communities is the only way to deliver real progress.

If some of our prescriptions are different in important respects, our overall goals are remarkably similar to those of Unlock Democracy. We agree that ‘radical change is needed to connect people and politics’. And we want to show that a modern Conservative government will have the radicalism and ambition to drive reform.

Putting our house in order

To mend our broken politics, it is necessary to understand the causes of political breakdown. First, the perception of a Westminster elite looking after itself has caused immense damage, not just to the reputation of MPs, but to politics generally. Greater media scrutiny is a fact of modern life and cannot be blamed for the situation. We must put our house in order. Changes such as MPs no longer voting on their own pay, transparency in allowances and closing the final-salary scheme for MPs’ pensions are all essential steps.

Second, money in politics remains a concern. We have proposed a universal cap on donations, to apply to individuals, companies and unions, a step which regrettably the Labour Party does not accept. We should aim to reduce the cost of politics – and we should be deeply suspicious of any attempt under the guise of reform to make the taxpayer pay more, which would only add to disillusionment.

Third, the behaviour of government matters – and no administration has done more to corrode trust than New Labour’s. Promises have been broken with a breathtaking lack of shame – not least the manifesto pledge of a referendum on the European Union constitution. Spin has debased proper debate. Repeated reannouncements have attempted to create the illusion of action. Statistics have been manipulated. These are not just

partisan criticisms of another party. By common consent, New Labour's style of government has poisoned the political well.

The next government must behave differently. All organisations naturally seek to present matters to their best advantage, but there is an important difference between the legitimate desire to communicate effectively and the manipulation of facts by the government machine for partisan ends. We will put in place mechanisms to prevent government spin, for example statistical independence, new fiscal rules and a statutory limit on the number of special advisers.

The government's constitutional agenda

When Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, his first speech to Parliament was on constitutional reform. Yet the 'work of change' was driven mostly by a desire to distance the new administration from Tony Blair's. It is deeply ironic that the talk about 'trust' and 'renewal' was only a cynical act of political positioning.

Brown's constitutional agenda was notably different in character to the rather more ambitious reforms, such as devolution and Lords reform, begun by his predecessor. Major constitutional issues such as the West Lothian question, the promised referendum on the EU constitution and any real progress on Lords reform were all ducked. Instead, the changes were more modest and largely uncontroversial: topical questions and debate in the House of Commons; increased parliamentary scrutiny of public appointments; and removal of the ability of the Prime Minister to intervene in judicial and ecclesiastical appointments.

Such reforms, though worthy, are inadequate. Lord Norton of Louth described the government's new legislation as a 'Constitutional (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill'. Lord Falconer of Thoroton went further, describing it as 'constitutional retreat'. Insignificant measures will not begin to address the reasons for public dissatisfaction with the political system. They will not remedy the lack of trust that the public has in politics; nor will they satisfy people's demands for a greater say over their own lives and their own communities. Broken politics will not be fixed by citizens' juries or a statement of values.

Indeed, far too many of the proposals border on gimmickry – a new bank holiday to celebrate Britishness; a national motto; citizens’ juries – which the government now admits will not be real deliberative decision-making bodies but glorified focus groups. Shallow public relations devices merely discredit constitutional reform and erode trust still further.

Power to the people

In place of gimmickry we need genuinely radical changes to restore public trust in politics, increase public engagement in decisions and ensure better public scrutiny of decision makers. We should begin by recognising that society has changed. We are in the ‘post-bureaucratic age’. In a single decade, the internet has revolutionised the way in which people access and share information. People have unprecedented control over their own lives. They demand similar control over the way the state interacts with them. As Jeremy Hunt, the shadow culture secretary, has said, the ‘wise state’ is being replaced by ‘wise citizens’ who demand to participate actively and equally in the decisions that affect their lives.

With a natural scepticism about big government and a belief in empowering the individual, Conservatives are not just comfortable in this new world: we relish the potential it brings. So we have promised radical reform in public services, opening up public sector monopolies, enabling companies and third-sector organisations to deliver services, and giving the consumer a real choice over publicly funded services.

But many decisions have to be made collectively. Parents can choose a school for a child, but they can’t choose their police force; they can’t choose how much to pay in council tax, or whether their country goes to war. The principle for these issues must be that decisions should be taken as closely as possible to the people affected, and that the people who take those decisions should be accountable for them. This means a real transfer of power from central government to communities. And it means trusting communities to take those decisions – even if as a government you don’t like the consequences.

We believe that greater use of direct democracy will help make politics more responsive. So a Conservative government will introduce Citizens' Initiatives, forcing politicians to respond to the public. One way of doing this would be to say that if a petition were submitted to Parliament signed by a set number of voters, for example 100,000, there would be a formal debate on the topic. Likewise, local authorities and some organisations are already able to submit Bills to Parliament. We propose that the public, if backed by a petition of one million electors, should also be able to table a Bill for Parliament to vote for, to vote against or to amend.

We have already announced plans to allow residents to veto excessive council tax rises – replacing the bureaucratic instrument of capping with democratic accountability. We also want to see more local referenda. We propose that local people should also be able to call a referendum. For instance, it would improve local democracy enormously if people could initiate the process by submitting a petition signed by 10 per cent of the local electorate. On policing, we have promised radical reforms that would introduce elected police commissioners, accountable to the people they serve, to replace distant and invisible police authorities. And where the public wants it, there is a strong case for elected mayors in our cities and towns, strengthening local accountability and the link between the governors and the governed.

But for empowerment to be meaningful we also need to maximise the amount of reliable, unbiased information on which the people can base their decisions. In the United States they talk about being able to 'google your tax dollars'. So we propose that the UK government should provide detail on every item of spending over £25,000. Parents have become used to using league tables to inform their decisions on where to send their children to school. Home buyers expect to be able to check best-buy tables for mortgage rates. People have a right to similar information on the quality of public service provision. That is why we want to see local councils provide information in formats that allow it not just to be accessed by anyone with internet access, but to be harvested, processed and interpreted in creative and innovative ways by newspapers, think tanks, researchers, pressure groups and interested citizens.

Similarly, we want to see crime mapping at street or ward level so communities can understand local crime patterns and trends and use that information to challenge poor performance and hold senior officials to account. In the age of accountability and the instant exchange of information, the government and the public sector must be equipped to inform and deliver.

Those who believe that constitutional reform is only about great institutions and grand issues, such as the House of Lords or the electoral system, may not see the force of these proposals. In fact, empowering people and communities to take decisions will deliver change on a scale to match any conventional constitutional reform, and it will have enormous consequences on how people judge the political system. People feel locked out of decision-making, and we have to let them back in. Returning power to the people is as much a way to change politics as it is to change public services and deliver a better quality of life to citizens. Reform has a fundamental role to play in giving people a stake and a say, re-engaging them, drawing politics out of Westminster and so rebuilding democracy.

A modern constitution

But we do not intend to ignore the big constitutional questions, not least because we need to repair the damage done by Labour's constitutional vandalism. For instance, Labour have persistently refused to address the consequences of devolution. By treating Scotland and Wales as Labour fiefdoms, and by ignoring this unfairness, they have unleashed the forces of nationalism in Scotland, England and Wales.

By contrast, although we opposed devolution in 1998, we fully accept the settlement and, unlike Labour, we are able to critically assess what needs to be done, free of the baggage and self-interest that has held Labour back. Annabel Goldie, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, has ensured that they will play a full part in the Calman commission, which will examine the future of the Scottish Parliament for the majority who want to see Scotland remain an equal member of the United Kingdom. In Wales, Lord

Roberts of Conwy is considering the referendum issues raised by the latest Government of Wales Act and Cheryl Gillan, the shadow Welsh secretary, has negotiated protected time in Parliament for discussion of Welsh provisions in general legislation. And in England, Ken Clarke has brought forward persuasive proposals to address the unfairness of the West Lothian question. The common thread running through our approach is that we want to preserve and strengthen the union, improve accountability and ensure fairness. That doesn't mean treating all the UK's constituent parts the same – it means ensuring that we have arrangements which address the different needs of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

On electoral reform, we remain suspicious of any reforms which would destroy the link between a single MP and their constituency and move the vital decision of who governs from the electorate to murky negotiations between parties. We reject electoral experiments, such as weekend voting or electronic ballots, which either are a diversion or undermine secure elections. Our priority must be to restore the integrity of the ballot. We would introduce individual voter registration, as recommended by the Electoral Commission, and address the gross disparities between constituency populations that still persist. And we have continued to seek cross-party consensus for a substantially elected House of Lords.

Strengthening Parliament

But at least as important as restructuring democratic institutions is ensuring that they operate effectively. It is no coincidence that the decline of trust in politics has been matched by an increase in power accruing to the executive and an inability of the legislature to hold the government to account. The trend is not new, but Labour's contempt for parliamentary and Cabinet government has set a new low.

Programme motions in the Commons, intended to ensure that issues receive adequate scrutiny, have been used in such a way that entire sections of important legislation, such as the Criminal Justice

and Immigration Act 2008, have received no debate or scrutiny at all. As Tony Wright, chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee, has put it, they are a 'guillotine by another name'. Far from strengthening Parliament, the brutal programming of Bills has served to sideline the House of Commons. The absolute key to restoring power in Parliament is to give the House of Commons the right to determine its own timetable.

Parliament must exercise greater scrutiny of legislation, not least of EU laws. Theresa May, the shadow leader of the Commons, has brought forward proposals to improve scrutiny of European legislation, including strengthening the European Scrutiny Committee by giving it the power to force a debate and a vote on the government's motions, and putting on a statutory basis the convention that UK ministers must gain parliamentary approval before agreeing a decision made in the EU's Council of Ministers.

But Parliament must go further and reclaim its proper role as the place where decisions are announced, discussed and dissected, and ensure that its debates are as topical as the immediacy of the modern media demands. Above all, it should never allow the executive to take the most important decisions without proper debate and approval.

There is now consensus between the parties that in future, decisions over when to go to war must, where time permits, be taken in Parliament. But we have to remember that the decision to go to war in Iraq was the subject of prolonged parliamentary debate and approved by a resolution in Parliament. The EU constitution was in fact the subject of a vote in Parliament. Giving Parliament more votes isn't the issue: the government must respect Parliament. There is a strong case for more free votes and for allowing backbench MPs, not the whips, to choose the members of select committees – through secret ballot if necessary.

As Parliament has failed to hold the government to account, the courts have increasingly been invited to review administrative action, repair defective legislation and even overturn parliamentary decisions. The introduction of the Human Rights Act and the creation of a new Supreme Court dislocated from Parliament increasingly threaten to draw the judiciary into decisions which are in essence political, and so undermine its

independence. Strengthening Parliament will be essential to ensure equilibrium between, and separation of, the three powers – the executive, legislature and judiciary. And the Human Rights Act should be replaced with a British Bill of Rights to ensure a proper balance between rights and responsibilities.

Harnessing social responsibility

One of the things that has most damaged trust over the past decade has been the tendency of ministers to make promises that they cannot deliver, and having done so, to demand total control because their reputation depends on it. This problem will not be addressed by structural reform alone. It requires those of us who aspire to govern to behave responsibly.

Politicians should not overclaim about what they can achieve. Conservatives believe in the latent capacity of Britain itself – the talent and energy and compassion of individuals, businesses and communities. Politicians need to stop pretending that they alone can drive change. On the contrary, what we should be doing as politicians is, wherever possible, creating the right structures and environment for individuals and communities to help themselves. The job of government is to get behind people, not to get in their way. That is why we have laid out radical reforms on welfare, schools and prisons, which have in common the principle of creating incentives and drawing in the expertise and experience of charities, community organisations and the private sector.

Our proposals for constitutional reform are not distinct from our policies for public services such as health and education. They reflect our underlying principles of reform: strong communities, localism and accountability to the people.

Of course, there will be those who say that transferring power away from the centre is the sort of promise that is made by oppositions and broken by governments. It is entirely understandable that people will be suspicious. After all, Labour has consistently broken its promises on constitutional matters. They created the Scottish Parliament, but since losing power in Scotland have treated the Scottish government with barely

disguised contempt. They pledged democratic reform of the House of Lords, but only removed the hereditary peers. They beguiled the Liberal Democrats with a manifesto commitment to a referendum on electoral reform, only to break it once in office. They promised the public a referendum on the EU constitution, only to break it as soon as they had got the immediate concern of a general election out of the way.

But if the public is understandably sceptical, and wonders if politicians are serious about giving up some of the power they are seeking, we can remind them that it was a new Conservative government which, back in 1979, introduced select committees – hardly to the narrow advantage of the new administration. And returning power to people and communities will in fact be hugely in the interests of governing effectively at the national level.

We can also point to a clear direction of travel in the modern Conservative Party. Our innovative use of open primaries, in which all registered voters in a constituency, regardless of their political affiliation, may vote in the selection of the Conservative parliamentary candidate, has given us a more diverse and representative range of candidates than ever before. We have taken a lead in requiring our MPs to give details of how they use their expenses and in pressing for meaningful reform of party funding. We have shown that we accept the logic of devolution, and have allowed our parties in Edinburgh and Cardiff to develop their own distinctive policies on devolved issues to reflect the needs of Scotland and Wales.

The constitution belongs to no one political party, and reform should never be driven for narrow party ends. To its great discredit, New Labour's constitutional changes have frequently been partisan, if not in aim – where the need for change was sometimes real – then in practice. Too often ministers pulled blindly at the wires of Britain's delicate constitutional settlement, careless of what they might disconnect.

Constitutional reform should have a higher purpose, and today there can be no greater imperative than to repair our broken politics. The original Charter 88 declared that the freedoms which belong to citizens had been 'rationed' by 'our rulers'. Two decades on, central government has never had so much power.

Britain is rightly proud of the democratic system and values of liberty which it exported worldwide. Today it would be a fine thing if we could show that, in the age of public disaffection and voter disengagement, cynicism about an old and increasingly discredited system can be replaced with the hope of a new politics, where government is more accountable and citizens are truly empowered.