

Speech in Debate on the Impact of Covid-19 on both Houses of Parliament. May 20th 2021 *(Not delivered for technical reasons only).*

Lord Howell of Guildford.

ML. Before getting on to mainstream matters I have one less happy observation to make.

I refer to an item in The Week magazine headed ‘Why the Lords has made a fool of itself’.

This was about the decision to investigate our colleagues Baroness Boothroyd and Lord Heseltine for failing to attend the ‘Valuing Everyone’ course.

I know they have now been excused but this never never should have arisen.

Having attended the course myself I can confirm that it has some admirable messages to convey, about good manners and how to treat those working with you respectfully.

Frankly these are things with which members of this House should be fully cognisant anyway and one really does wonder whether it was worth a reported £746k to have them repeated by consultants who seemed to know less about how Parliament operated than the peers they were lecturing.

I now turn to more serious matters.

ML, with the Covid experience we have been through a revolution, and it is one which continues. The Emergency has unfolded in a more radically changed atmosphere of public debate and perception about Parliament and Governance than anything that has ever gone before in our history, thanks to the miracles of the digital age.

Vivid examples are:

- A huge increase in Public awareness of Governance and its institutions, Parliament very much included:
- Local identity and empowerment (in the devolved admins and cities:
- Media exaggeration: Ultra-fast dissemination of rumours and half-truths:
- Use of technology to contact officially millions via NHS and other agencies:
- Bombardment of mobiles and Ipads with confusion of guidance, advice, laws (as set out so well in Constitution's Committee's report 'Covid-19 and Parliament – produced under the excellent chairship of the Noble Lady, Bns Taylor of Bolton):
- And much more.

ML, Behaviour has changed, social habits have changed, attitudes to central government have changed and politics have changed, as Labour, the metropolitan media and especially the BBC, are all slowly finding out.

Thanks to the communications revolution and unparalleled degrees of access and transparency the public has been enabled to see the two Houses of Parliament going about their work of holding the Executive to account more closely than ever and I do not think they are over-impressed.

There is no question that parliamentary officials have done brilliantly. But debate-less Chambers, plus brusque Ministerial turn-offs, do not impress the public, any more than the rough and tumble of Chamber exchanges did in the past. Especially when the Executive was becoming bigger and more intrusive than ever before.

This was not just caused by Covid. Permanent shifts have gone on in the last decade. The pith and nature of popular demand when it turns to

Parliament are towards practicality and away from ideology and old slogans on either side.

BY contrast the Committees of Parliament flourished during Covid. Frankly they are infinitely more telegenic, not just in investigations and scrutiny but in connecting with the public about what is going on.

When Departmental Select Committees were set up in 1979 (which were followed by an expansion of broader focussed Lords Committees), we hoped they would both be good investigators of complex government, and attract media interest and be generally serious and reassuring viewing for a public, increasingly hungry for information and increasingly sceptical about the effectiveness of 'bear-garden' main Chamber cut-and-thrust in truly holding Government to account.

As Woodrow Wilson once observed 'The Parliamentary main Chamber is Parliament on show: the Committees are Parliament at work'.

ML, The show must go on of course, but the lessons are obvious. If both Houses of Committees want to regain trust and respect, which they should have in a healthy democracy, then the Committee system should be greatly and swiftly strengthened.

As members in the Other Place have observed, after the Common Procedure Committee has done some in-depth reports, 'It is an Open Secret in Parliament that Cttee powers have no teeth'.

That is not quite true, because the media have lent them some teeth. There our 1979 hopes have worked out undoubtedly.

And it does *not* apply to all Lords Committees which have made a real impact, in some instances, on policy direction, especially foreign policy and strategy.

But powers could be extended not only to summoning witnesses, but also to an overview of departmental and cross-department budgets and,

yes, to a say in legislative procedures and time-tabling. Staff, already quite excellent in my experience, will also need further reinforcements.

When one considers the vast staffs and back-up teams associated with Committees of the US Congress, or even the Bundestag, it is a miracle as to what our hard-working clerks, assistants and advisors achieve.

ML, We are almost the only parliament in the genuine democracies where the legislative process is almost entirely under control of the Executive.

The renewed Union Parliament, which we are going to have to devise and construct to keep the Union together, is anyway going to require substantial reform of parliament in almost all aspects.

Let's move on from brusque and often totally uninformative Ministerial answers at the Despatch Box to penetrating and powerful investigative questions in the Committees, and let's start now.

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