

# Comment – Time to move on from the Westminster museum

When I'm traipsing through the lobbies of Westminster I often think how much the mother of all parliaments could learn from its reconvened and revamped cousin up the road in Edinburgh. Not just the dangerously radical idea of electronic voting – although that'd be a good start. How much is wasted from the public purse for 650 MPs to plod back and forth for hours having their heads counted when it could be sorted in a matter of minutes at Holyrood?



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There's also the drastically modern notion that all members should be elected by the general public. At the heart of our UK democracy is an unelected chamber rivalled in size only by China's People's Congress. This bloated gathering of

more than 800 peers is crammed with party hacks, cronies, bishops from the establishment's favoured church (those particular seats available only for men) and has-been MPs who were rejected by the electorate, all turning up to collect £300 per day in expenses and have a jolly lunch by the Thames. Ironical they had more of a say than Scotland's elected MPs on the EU

Withdrawal Bill's reshaping of our democracy.

At every level in this place the archaic procedures seem designed to do nothing but frustrate. There's the regular 'talking out' of Private Members' Bills, with blustering opponents rambling on to kill all available time and stop a vote taking place on something that could improve people's lives. This unedifying spectacle leaves anyone who witnesses it feeling utterly demoralised and disenchanted with politics. Simple limits on speaking time would put an end to all that puffed-up baloney.

Even getting a Private Members' Bill to the stage where it can be talked out needs a bit of luck and a lot of work. You have to win a ballot, with the deputy speaker pulling numbered balls out of a jar, for the privilege of having a go at making laws. Only then do those chosen MPs have to come up with an idea for legislation, rather than developing a good idea first then putting proposals forward for equal consideration with others. That would be the sensible way to go about things, that's the way they do it in Holyrood, but you don't get much which makes sense down here.

Only last week we saw the absurd situation where a bill to criminalise upskirting in England & Wales was derailed by a solitary Tory MP. The rules meant that after 2.30 on a Friday only a single objection is enough to stop a bill progressing. Up pops Tory Chris Chope to do his civic duty (?) and bring to a grinding halt all the effort to make this perverse practice the crime it deserves to be.

It may be back to the drawing board at Westminster but thankfully we've got a Scottish Parliament that gets things done and upskirting is already a specific criminal offence here

The architecture of Westminster doesn't exactly help make the place dynamic, in fact it may well be part of the problem. It's crammed with nooks and crannies, hard to negotiate, dark and imposing and secretive. It's as if it were deliberately designed to intimidate any young whippersnappers who dare to come in with fresh ideas and energy.

By contrast Holyrood's plethora of glass and light is a breath of fresh air, the building blending with the landscape outside rather than an impenetrable fortress. There are still lots of bad habits to be ironed out from the politicians but by and large it helps create a more open, accessible and transparent culture.

The Houses of Parliament is a fascinating museum, but it no longer works. When the MPs vacate this dilapidated palace for repairs, expected around 2025, they should move on to a modern purpose-built place leaving behind the peers and pomp and the ridiculous procedures. I hope the Scottish MPs will have vacated long before then, we already have the parliament we need, but it would be good to see all parts of the UK better served by their democratic institutions. It would also be far cheaper than paying a ridiculous repair bill which already has wildly fluctuating estimates from 3.5 to 7 billion pounds.

Time to move on and leave Westminster for the tourists, the history buffs and the lovers of peculiar oddities to enjoy.