

Response from Mr Speaker to Speaker's Advisory Council on Public Engagement

May 2011

I welcome your thoughtful report setting out your ideas on how the House of Commons might improve public engagement. I am grateful to all members of the Advisory Council for the time and effort you have put into the report and for your commitment to supporting the House in this important area.

As we discussed when I met the Council in December, many of your ideas relate to matters that require quite wide and careful consideration within Parliament. They may also provoke debate inside and outside the House. I welcome that and, indeed, consider that wide debate on these issues is an essential part of the process of making beneficial change (and avoiding change that is not beneficial).

For these reasons my response to you sets out in many areas next steps rather than immediate actions.

Idea 1

The House should adopt a mindset of experimentation, whereby a series of time limited experiments could be run to explore the benefits and risks of making changes to the ceremony, language and modes of address in the House. These should test whether such changes would lead to better debate and a more effective House that would be better understood and appreciated by the public.

Response 1

I support the idea of experimentation. As you have recognised, the House has a good record of trying new things. I will send your report to the Procedure Committee which has been actively thinking about procedural changes that will improve the effectiveness of House business. I will also send it to the Backbench Business Committee which has already shown itself to be creative in its approach to consideration of the business for which it is responsible.

Idea 2

Experiments in greater public participation could be run, allowing direct public questions to be put to committees and providing for public recorded comment on some areas of parliamentary business as it is being developed. This approach could also be a way of making progress on the idea of electronic petitions.

Response 2

Several Select Committees have been using a variety of new methods to engage wider audiences in their work. I will send your report to the Liaison Committee given their interest in this area but I expect that others too may wish to pick up and debate further your ideas in this area.

Idea 3

A systematic review should be conducted of internal processes, behaviours and entitlements to ensure that in the mind of the public there are no areas where the jibe can be made that there is one rule for MPs and one for everyone else.

Response 3

Recent years have seen considerable scrutiny of the rules under which MPs conduct their business. I agree that it is important that there is not one rule for MPs and one for everyone else. There is currently considerable enthusiasm in many quarters for tightening the rules under which MPs do their work. At such a time it is essential that we find a way to ensure that the rewards available to today's MPs recognise the unique contribution they make to public life and are sufficient to attract candidates of high calibre to put themselves forward to be the MPs of tomorrow. I will send your report to the Leader of the House given our joint interest in these questions.

Idea 4

It should become much more common for committees to run thematic inquiries with several committees joining forces to examine an issue of public concern. Such inquiries should use creative ways to facilitate wide public participation including working away from Westminster.

Response 4

This idea links closely to Idea 2 above and is an idea where many Select Committees have very good experience on which to build.

Idea 5

National campaigns – “could you be an MP?” and “take your MP to work for a day” - could be sponsored with the aims of encouraging more people to see themselves in the role of MP and helping more people recognise what MPs do on their behalf.

Response 5

These ideas have exciting potential and chime very well with the work of the recent Speaker's Conference. In the first instance I will write to the other members of the Speaker's Conference to seek their views and it may be useful for us to have a round table discussion with them about how best to take them forward.

Idea 6

If the House is genuinely concerned to alter its image it should systematically monitor the change in public perceptions using external research to audit attitudes to political engagement on an annual basis. This research should aim to identify cause and effect, so that future work can be planned most effectively.

Response 6

Agreed. I have asked John Pullinger, Librarian and Director General, Information Services, to action this recommendation and to provide reports to you on progress.

Idea 7

The House might embrace the idea of "Creative Commons" for the creation and reuse of material in and about Parliament. An inaugural event, "Open Parliament" could involve a weekend of capturing and sharing video, still images, written observations and even art.

Response 7

I agree that openness and transparency are important to the House of Commons. In principle, therefore, I support your proposals. In practice careful thought is needed. There are real concerns about security, about intrusion on Members as they go about their daily work and need some privacy to be able to do so effectively, and about the impact on the fabric of the buildings. For these reasons I will send your report to the Administration Committee who have the task of advising on questions where there is a need to balance a variety of interests within the parliamentary environment.

Idea 8

Plans for the education centre should be fulfilled, and a venue specifically for public participation should be designed in rather than bolted on to the parliamentary estate. Changes might be targeted for delivery by 2015, the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta and the 750th anniversary of de Montfort's Parliament; perfect timing for reaffirming the "Parliament of the People".

Response 8

Your report presents some exciting possibilities. In the first instance I have asked John Pullinger to work with you to flesh out further what might be achieved.

Idea 9

Given the importance of political literacy in education we will, with the support of Parliament's education Service, explore further how best Parliament could enhance young people's experience of getting involved in representative democracy.

Response 9

Agreed. The involvement of young people in representative democracy is, in my view, a matter of the highest importance. I would like to give you every encouragement to do more

work in the area. I am sure that John Pullinger and his team will be very happy to work with you.

Conclusion

The Advisory Council has done just what I hoped it would do when it was established. You have proved to be a valuable source of advice to me. I welcome what you have achieved already and am grateful for your continuing commitment. I look forward to discussing your further ideas in due course.

The Rt Hon. John Bercow MP
Speaker of the House of Commons