HOUSE OF COMMONS

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

TAKEN BEFORE THE

SPEAKER'S COMMISSION ON DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

On Tuesday 17 June 2014

WITH WITNESSES: ANDREW COOPER, CLLR PETER FLEMING, LORD KIRKWOOD
and DR ANDY WILLIAMSON

Read below the full verbatim report of what was said in the meeting.

For further information and to watch the meeting: meeting webpage

Evidence heard in Public   Questions 1 - 42

Commission Members present:

John Bercow (Chair), Speaker of the House of Commons
Robert Halfon MP
Meg Hillier MP
Paul Kane
Dr Cristina Leston-Bandeira
Helen Milner
Emma Mulqueeny
Femi Onyeniran
Toni Pearce

John Pullinger, Librarian/Director General of Information Services, House of Commons, Edward Wood, Secretary to the Digital Democracy Commission (DDC), Justine McGuinness, External Communications Advisor to the Speaker, Luanne Middleton, Commission Specialist, DDC, Emma McIntosh, Commission Specialist, DDC, and Aliyah Dar, Department of Information Services also attended.

Witnesses

Witnesses: **Councillor Peter Fleming (Con),** Leader of Sevenoaks Council and Chair of LGA improvement board, **Lord Archy Kirkwood (LD)**, Peer & former Member, former Chair of the Lords Information Committee, **Andrew Cooper**, Founder, Populus market research and former 10 Downing Street adviser, and **Andy Williamson**, academic, consultant, formerly of the Hansard Society, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this fifth meeting of the Digital Democracy Commission. We are taking evidence today on the theme of representation and, by implication, how the embrace of technology might enable Parliament better to discharge its responsibility of representation. For the purposes of exploring this theme, we have a number of expert witnesses from whom we are going to hear and who have kindly agreed to be questioned following their brief presentations.

The first of our witnesses is Councillor Peter Fleming, the Conservative leader of Sevenoaks council. For those of you who do not know Peter, I am sure he is willing to identify himself in a dramatic, modestly ostentatious fashion. We thank you, Peter, for that. Peter has been a district councillor since 1999, and he has led Sevenoaks district council for the past six years. That authority has a strong reputation for providing value for money and securing good use of resources. Peter also serves on the executive of the District Councils' Network, and I am advised that following a number of years as a member he has recently been appointed chair of the Local Government Association's improvement board. He is also the Local Government Association's national lead member on welfare reform. Peter is going briefly to present to us his take on representation, obviously informed by his experience in local government, and then he is going kindly to open himself up to questioning for 10 minutes after his five-minute presentation.

Peter Fleming: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Committee for inviting us today. I thought it was slightly ironic that outside, today, we were told that we would be allowed not only to bring in our mobile phones but to use them. That is a major step forward both for this place and for the place across the road because, frankly, in local government we have been pushing the use of social media and as many different routes of connecting people with democracy as possible, and the more you can do to open up this place and the place across the road, the better.

You set a number of questions, and it is worth trying to tease out some of them. One is whether Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook, blogging and all the rest will overtake what we have got already. I don't think they will. They are an adjunct, an addition. An example I will give is of a councillor in the midlands, who unfortunately was involved in a traffic accident, which meant he was confined to his house for a number of months. Instead of forgetting about his constituents, he started to do his surgeries by Skype. It was really interesting. When he got better, he kept them going, because he found that people are more likely to come to him on a wet Wednesday in November if they can do it from the comfort of their own home, and he liked it because he did it from the comfort of his own home. That is the sort of thing we can

do to use the technology and the various channels that are out there to interact better with the people we are elected to serve and communicate with each other.

One of the questions you asked is, if MPs and councillors are big in the Twittersphere or digital media, does that mean they are less engaged at a local level? I often get involved in big debates, but when I was sat outside today I was tweeted by someone who lives in my district about a Gypsy/Traveller issue. They will then retweet it to the people who follow them to know where something is going.

There is a scale issue, and there are some MPs who clearly work on a wider scale when it comes to Twitter and some who tweet very locally, but I think a nice mixture of those two is best. Something that gives away something about the individual is also good. Politicians are seen as aloof, away and disconnected from #normalpeople, but the best people on Twitter are those who give away a little bit of themselves, and I do not think that is any bad thing. There is a limit. If you are a Colombian footballer jumping into a jacuzzi naked, then tweeting photos and wondering why it has gone global, and then complaining about it, I do not think you have much to complain about. But we are at a crossroads, Mr Speaker, and the opportunities are there for including more people in the democratic process, for widening the debate and for hearing voices that we would not normally hear.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Who wants to open up the questioning? We have a number of possible lines of questioning.

Q2 Paul Kane: If you are going to open up the whole process, how can you determine whether the person communicating with you comes from your district? You are from Sevenoaks; how do you know that it is not someone from Edinburgh or wherever—in other words, that it is a relevant member of your community?

Peter Fleming: It depends. Clearly, on Twitter you get to know the people who are local, particularly local businesses or local organisations, because they tend to have their locality in their title. But does it actually matter? If, for instance, I am talking about welfare reform or an issue to do with empty homes, yes, it has a Sevenoaks context, but should I only listen to that? When we are talking about the big issues that are facing us, if I only listen to the people who potentially are in my ward, am I hearing the whole debate or am I just hearing those people who are contacting me in that way? It is the same as anyone writing to you. The number of people writing to me are only a tiny proportion of the electorate within my ward, so as I said right at the beginning, social media will never be the only route of communication. It is just a new route of communication.

Paul Kane: An additional one.

Peter Fleming: It is an additional one.

Q3 Dr Leston-Bandeira: My question follows up on that very well. The constituency link is very well respected and well seen. Could you see a time where that idea of the constituency link just goes, disappears or changes, in terms of what the connection is? If any MP can deal with any issue, how do you see the future?

Peter Fleming: That opens up a wider debate that I am not sure anybody here particularly wants to go into. My personal view is that we still have the most centralised democracy in the western world, probably outside North Korea. We need to let more power go down to localities, and MPs and Members of the House of Lords probably need to find a new role in the political system that we have got, because if you push power down, their role will change anyway. I think the constituency link is here for a while, but we are moving to a period of time when there will be a massive shift, and with the independence debates

happening in Wales and Scotland, the demand for English independence and a more pushed-down local view of the world will become ever stronger. So MPs' roles are going to change massively, and it may be that they become less linked to a place and more in a different sphere.

Q4 Emma Mulqueeny: There is some concern about the amount of work that is going to be generated by engaging digitally with people. There are two points, really. There is the person communicating, and on the government and Parliament side, councillors and MPs, etc., receiving a lot of Tweets or things saying, "This is going on." Then there is an expectation from the person who has sent the message across social media that that is the official lodging of that request to have something done about it. First, in your experience has that had a knock-on effect on the amount of work that you have to do? Secondly, not in your experience but your opinion, if the issues people raise over social media for you to deal with are not dealt with, do you think that the damage caused is significant?

Peter Fleming: I learned something new the other day—that you can make a freedom of information request on Twitter, as long as you say that it is a freedom of information request. I had not realised that. We had one tweeted to us and we had to check the legislation, and it is true. In 140 characters someone can make a freedom of information request of the council. It is no wonder that Tony Blair says that it is the one regret he has in his time as Prime Minister. It does raise the expectations of a lot of people.

It is interesting. You are right that people's expectations are heightened about how you will respond. The same was said about e-mail. There was a time when you wrote to your MP, waited for the letter to arrive, waited for the requisite amount of time for them to write to the Minister to get the answer, and they then wrote back. Within two or three months you might get a reply. By that point you have lost the will to live and will not respond, even if it is not the answer you wanted.

There is an expectation if you receive an e-mail that you need to reply to it. People's expectations around Twitter and the like are slightly different because quite often they are not posing a direct question; they are making comment. I think there is a slight difference between expectations. Also, the great thing about Twitter is that it is 140 characters, so there is only so much of a question you can fit into that.

People's expectations generally are rising. We live in a world where immediacy and gratification are expected. Twitter is a new form of gratification. You type to someone you have never met or spoken to; you expect a response from them immediately. You have to manage that expectation. The idea that politicians in this place would be able to put a barrier around themselves and say they are not going to deal with it—frankly, that is not reality.

Q5 Robert Halfon: I am not sure what you are saying, except that politicians should respond on Twitter, which I would argue a lot are doing already. I don't think there is anything particularly revolutionary in that, because it is a medium that people can choose to respond to. Other constituents might prefer Facebook or LinkedIn or whatever. What are you doing in terms of real representative online democracy in involving your citizens in the decision making of the council, as opposed to just being good at responding on Twitter? I am not saying that is a bad thing. I am not yet clear what your unique selling point is in all this.

Peter Fleming: I will come back to the first point that I made. A very nice lady told us before we came into this room that we would be allowed to use our mobiles. The inference is that normally we would not be able to use our mobiles or to tweet. If you go to any council in the country now, the expectation, particularly from the LGA, is that you will be able to tweet

and blog live from a meeting. I was following the chief executive of FutureGov, who was at the first meeting of Hammersmith and Fulham council last night. It was brilliant, fantastic. You didn't have to be there. It was a real, open debate of what was happening in that council chamber. As to how it has changed democracy—well, it has opened it up. How many people—I am not a resident of Hammersmith and Fulham; I would not have dragged myself to Hammersmith, but I have got an idea of what was going on in that meeting last night. So I would not over-analyse it. I would not make it, "Why hasn't democracy moved on; why aren't more people voting?" But more people being involved, more people understanding the process: those are all good things.

Q6 Chair: Have you any plans to conduct an online referendum in your area?

Peter Fleming: No, but again, you start to get into that thing, which is: how many people are you excluding? If you just do something online, you are still at this point in time excluding people; so, yes, you give an online option in everything you do, but you still have to be able to go and meet people face to face, help them fill in a questionnaire—do those sorts of things as well.

Chair: We are running very short of time. I wanted to take Toni; then I would like to move on to subsequent witnesses. There is then a group session, I think I am right in saying, so I think there is a further opportunity.

Q7 Toni Pearce: It is very interesting. I have been reflecting on my experiences of my constituents, I suppose, as the President of NUS, online. The vast majority of my interactions with the 7 million people I represent are online—or any proportion of those 7 million. I think that is quite interesting. One of the important things to remember, I suppose, is that social media is not just a communication tool. It is a media tool; it is a broadcasting tool. To say that you should limit your experience of social media to a constituency level I suppose is like saying you should only read local newspapers. I guess my question is more about how do people make interventions. Where is the point of intervention for people in the political system, whether that is at a local level or a national level, and where should that be? How can technology facilitate that?

I think at the moment one of the things that young people particularly find very difficult is not knowing where they can intervene when they disagree with something or they want to have their voice heard. What is the point of intervention—other than voting, which they only get to do every few years? Where can they intervene, and what do you think technology can do to facilitate that?

Peter Fleming: Your constituency obviously—your 7 million—are mostly digital natives, and actually when you want to speak to them the chances are that you can use some of these channels and the likelihood is that they will pick up on them.

Q8 Toni Pearce: The vast majority of them are mature students, so yes and no.

Peter Fleming: But they still will tend to be; if they are in any kind of education system at the moment, the way courses are delivered tends to be around a digital way of delivering those courses. So as to how people can involve themselves in democracy, I believe that within the next 10 years we will have electronic voting and we will have an ability to do local referendums, national referendums, electronically. We would be stupid not to move down that route; but there are a number of things that will need to be moved on to get us to that point. But if somebody really wants to start a campaign, digital media—social media—is the place to do it now. That idea that you are going to meet in a church hall somewhere and get a group

of people going and get your voice heard—well, frankly, you can do that all virtually now and get your voice heard quicker than it would have been before.

Q9 Chair: Just before we move on, Peter, I wonder if I could just ask you: when you say you think that electronic voting will happen within the next decade, but in order to get to that point a number of things, as you put it, need to move on; for the avoidance of doubt and for clarification, can you tell us whether in your view the thing that needs to move on is political opinion and therefore readiness to accept change, or technology to underpin security and the integrity of the ballot?

Peter Fleming: I think both. I think people need to feel confident and actually this is one of the issues we have around data and the use of data in the public sphere anyway; because on the one hand politicians are saying, "Protect your data; you have got two weeks to save your computer"—we have all of this ramping up—and on the other hand, we are saying, "The thing that's going to save us as a country is big data—putting data all together and using it." Politicians have to decide whether data is the answer or the problem. I think data is the answer. Big data has potential and open data has massive potential to help this country, but we have to persuade people that data is not bad and that sharing aspects of their personal data and allowing the state to hold some of that, to allow an opening up of democracy into an electronic age, is a good thing.

Q10 Chair: Peter, thank you very much indeed for your presentation and for responding so enthusiastically and comprehensively to our questions. We are now going to move to our second witness, and I want very warmly to welcome Lord Kirkwood—Archy Kirkwood—from upstairs, as we in the House of Commons tend to put it.

Lord Kirkwood: The senior House.

Chair: The senior House, as you undiplomatically but candidly put it. Thank you very much indeed. For those of you who do not know him, Archy Kirkwood was the Member of Parliament for Roxburgh and Berwickshire from 1983 until 2005, and he then was made a peer in the dissolution honours. During his career, there have been highlights. He was Lib Dem Chief Whip for five years. He was shadow Cabinet member without portfolio for six. He was a member of the House of Commons Commission, which I can tell you is a thankless task—I chaired it myself—and very much a matter of service and duty rather than salivation or pleasure. He was a member of that Commission for nine years, which is a very considerable sacrifice on his part. He was Chair of the Social Security and the Work and Pensions Committee—one became the other—for two Parliaments. That was a very, very heavy Select Committee experience. He chaired the Information Committee in the House of Lords for four years. Archy has a huge vista of experience.

Lord Kirkwood: I've got form.

Chair: You have got form, but good form, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Lord Kirkwood: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am very pleased to be here, genuinely. I am personally very interested in your work and I think it is a marvellous initiative. The timing is really perfect in terms of trying to get a grasp of the kind of things that Parliament needs to do in time to unleash the recommendations in a new Parliament in 2015. It is a moment in time, as Peter said, and I think a lot of people—not just myself—both within and outside Parliament will be watching with great interest to see what recommendations you come up with.

I want to spend a moment or two, if I may, diverting you to the problems I faced up until the end of the last Session. As you rightly said, I was Chair of the Information Committee in the House of Lords and that was charged with the responsibility of trying to

educate in an ICT direction a House that has an average age of 68½ . That was a bit of a challenge, but—as you know, although other colleagues perhaps do not—there is a bicameral service across the two Houses. It is a unique service and it required legislation to do it. The House of Lords therefore is a part of the argument, although the pressures and the dimension of impact would rather obviously be different because of the absence of constituency representation and the fundamentally important role of an elected representative.

I wanted to say that, as a legislator in the House of Lords, we have not been slow—I would like to think—over the past few years in taking advantage of some of the infrastructure changes. For example, we now have wi-fi across the whole estate, which I think was a very far-sighted decision taken by the Administration. It was not cheap or easy to do in a building of this kind—again, you know more about that than anyone else in the world. We also have recently made mobile facilities available to Members. We have upgraded to Office 2013 and are going on to Office 365. By the summer, Members of the House of Lords will be able to use any device anywhere, anytime as long as they have an internet connection.

I am encouraged greatly by the extent to which some of these new facilities and services for Members are being taken up by people who you might not expect to be keen to do so. The House of Lords is part of the argument. The recommendations that you make will obviously be focused on trying to work through the problems facing elected representatives, but I hope that the other place will also be borne in mind, because it is a bicameral service and if changes were made internal to Parliament, the House of Lords would be part and parcel of that, too.

I think that we need to make sure that legislators in both Houses get proper facilities and support for everything that they do. I say that because, particularly if you are aged 68½ —I'm not quite 68½ , but I'm getting there—you get frightened by the incoming fire. The best example I can use briefly is that, as part of the Lib Dem group, we were the swing factor in the House of Lords discussions on the Health and Social Care Bill in 2012. When people realised this—lobbyists are not stupid—we were getting absolutely dive-bombed by terabytes of information. Some of my colleagues came to me, as Chairman of the Committee, as a direct result and said, "I want another e-mail address because this one's full up." You then sit them down and say, "Well, that's really not the way to go. There is no hiding place where they will not find you, one way or another."

The Information Committee in the House of Lords has been trying to encourage constructive engagement and involve bona fide organisations—I support this—such as 38 Degrees. They have been targeting people such as my colleagues in the Liberal Democrat group. What I was trying to get the Information Committee to do was to persuade the whole of the House—this would apply, perhaps, in the House of Commons as well—to get people such as me to identify, in my official internal biography, those public policy areas that I was interested in receiving information about. As you kindly said earlier, I am a social security specialist if I am anything, and I want as much as I can eat—gossip, state secrets, anything to do with social security, I am really interested in. So I would never feel oppressed because it keeps me in touch, and it is harder and harder to keep in touch these days if you are aged 68½.

If we could find some way of matching the people who have something to say to me about their pension or their universal credit—not casework, because I don't do casework, but I do welfare reform and the House of Lords did the Welfare Reform Bill of 2012. It did serious justice to that; there was a three-month Committee stage, and it was the best Committee stage in which I have ever been involved, in either House, in a career here of more than 35 years.

We need to find some way of filtering the information so that it is balanced out. If you get 3,000 messages that all say the same thing from 38 Degrees, that needs to be weighed in the balance, but what about the 12 people out there who are intelligent members of the

community in other parts of the country? We don't have the excuse of saying that we don't want to hear from anybody who is not in our constituency, because we don't have constituencies. If we could find some way of filtering the incoming fire and presenting it in the way that the Library does, so intelligently, before a debate on the Welfare Reform Bill, so that you would get the eight to 12 pages that John Pullinger's information department is excellent at producing and then there were three pages at the end that said, "The broad overview of the incoming messages to legislators is the following," that would do half the job.

The other half of the job—I don't know how you crack this, aged 68½ or not—is that we need to get a feedback mechanism to complete the loop; otherwise, citizens are spending a lot of time and effort sending you important content messages and they do not see the result.

I tried to set up a debate, with the help of BBC Parliament, which is something that we should not forget either, because with weekend terrestrial television being so appalling, I have found myself watching Mr Speaker's lectures late on a Saturday night rather than anything else—they are very good value compared with what else is on. I set up the debate, which was introduced by a Cross Bencher who shall remain nameless. The debate was on early years education because it was a nice neutral subject. We got a lot of interest. The BBC trailed and carried the debate. Between 12 and 15 Members took part, and they all forgot that it was being televised. Here was me thinking, "I will get the introducing Member to say that we have had interesting contributions from all over the country and that here are three or four. All the other people will do the same. People will watch this and there will be some sort of feedback via that route." But they all forgot. Pilots are important—Andy and I were talking about this outside—and pilots often fail, but you learn from pilots. If pilots fail, they are not necessarily a failure because you learn a lot from the experience.

I am up for all of this, and my plea is that we need to support and protect Members so that they are not frightened by what might hit them. We have to find intelligent ways of paring down the volume because of the context. Your questions include: what will democracy look like in 15 to 20 years? Well, we might have artificial intelligence that will replace Mr Pullinger and his heirs and successors in 15 to 20 years, but we definitely need ways to digest the material so that legislators can make good use of it in time. We also need to find some way of feeding back—asking, "Well, what do you think of that?" and we need to show them the result and encourage them to continue to take an interest. It is a two-way process involving the House of Lords. I think that if the House of Lords is approached properly, it can play a role in a way that people might be pleasantly surprised by.

Chair: Archy, thank you very much indeed for those opening remarks.

Q11 Meg Hillier: Thank you very much for coming along, Lord Kirkwood—Archy, if I may call you that. You have vast experience of the House. We have had an interesting presentation on how Bills are laid before the House by the Government, and you talked about a very interesting Committee stage of a Bill. Do you think there is scope for using digital means, such as social media, to get the public to have more of a say in both the Government's agenda and the issues that Back Benchers discuss and debate in this House, or do you think that is a step too far?

Lord Kirkwood: It is a brilliant question. Somebody will need to stop me; Mr Speaker has experience of this. Keeling schedules are what we need. We have the best developed paper-based system for the legislative process anywhere in the universe, and a lot of players have stakes in the process, such as Government Departments, Ministers and the draftsmen. A Keeling schedule is something that will allow all of the amendments to go on a tablet surface in gremio of the Bill that it is changing. If you have a welfare reform Bill that is reforming the 1998 Social Security Act, the Bill as it progresses would not just have a whole list of

amendments that is completely incomprehensible, even to parliamentarians with the help of the Library; it would place new sections in the 1998 Act and interleave the amendments that the new legislation is making to the parent legislation all the way through. If you are interested in section 12 of the welfare reform Bill, at the beginning of the Bill's proceedings, before it goes into its Public Bill stages in the Commons, you can invite members of the public to look at it on their Apple or other tablet device. It is not Queen's English, as you know, but it is much easier to see the context in which the proposed change is being made.

I think Keeling schedules would be possible by 2015, if we have the political will, and they are a recommendation that I would punt quite hard. Although it sounds a bit geeky and a bit internal, it makes the data mashable—it has to be open source and all of the things that Peter was talking about earlier. Nothing would demonstrate better the willingness of Parliament to say, "This is an open argument." It would improve the legislative process enormously. It would also make it cheaper and quicker, but we are not quite there yet because some of the Departments need to get all their systems lined up.

Q12 Meg Hillier: That's great. May I ask a follow-up? That is about the Bill system as it is, but what about taking it back one step further? For instance, if I was a member of the public wanting to know about dogs—dangerous dogs, dog fouling or whatever—I wouldn't even know when the legislation might come before Parliament. By the time it gets to the stage that you are talking about, the Government have pretty much decided what they want to do. They will whip Members to do certain things, and the other party will whip its Members to do either the opposite or to do likewise. As a member of the public, I would have very little chance to influence it, except perhaps by going to visit my MP. They might or might not take it up; it is quite haphazard.

Lord Kirkwood: That's another very good question. Can I have two recommendations? How many recommendations am I allowed?

Q13 Chair: An unlimited number. The more of our groundwork you want to do, the more grateful we will be.

Lord Kirkwood: I think the search engine that we have got within Parliament is not good. People are used to Google and, of course, you can't beat Google because it is quite big, but we really have got a very inadequate search engine within the parliamentary website. That would be another ask, because while I don't think that is impossible, it will involve a little bit of money.

Mr Speaker will know that we are about to appoint a digital director, and I think one of the first questions he will ask is, "Why can't I just find out anything I want by going into the search engine and typing 'the Dogs Act current update', press the button and watch it all unfold?" It is a very good question. It is deeply frustrating that when I am interrogating our own internal systems and social security statutory instruments, which is very detailed, Google is still better than our parliamentary search engine by a mile. I don't know why that is.

Q14 Chair: Well, the advantage that that person will enjoy when appointed is that she or he will have on the desk, from day one hopefully, a list of possible recommendations.
Lord Kirkwood: I hope so.

Q15 Chair: And the practicality of working them up as quickly as possible.
Lord Kirkwood: Perfect timing again.

Q16 Helen Milner: Thank you very much. That is very interesting. I think much of what you said is perfect, and we should recommend it. I was in Edinburgh yesterday meeting members of the public, and they were saying very similar things. Lots of them were actually from the technology world and actually had those solutions that we could implement here in Parliament.

I do not think our problem is necessarily a technology problem. I think it is a culture change problem. Every MP, every councillor, every Peer is an independent person, and if we were a company we could implement a wonderful technology-based system—we could have filtering, we could actually eradicate e-mail and have a much more sophisticated way for this information to come to you and to your colleagues in both Houses—but we still have MPs and Peers who do not use e-mail. Therefore, what do you recommend we do to help what appears to have to be a bottom-up process? We really need the culture change to happen if we are going to invest in fantastic tools to make this two-way interaction with the public much better, more sophisticated and more effective, but we cannot do it unless the people who are those representatives come with that change.

Lord Kirkwood: It is much easier in the House of Commons, I think, because we now have pretty serious staff resources made available to elected Members. I think that we need to be encouraging them. This may have a bit of a resource simplification, and I certainly do not want to get into rows with IPSA because there are enough people doing that already, but what about a recommendation that no self-respecting elected Member in 2015 should come to Parliament without some level of support within their own operation that is media/coms/digital savvy? It is not sensible and people should be told that by their Whips and by other people. I think that is the best way of dealing with that. I would not expect elected Members to become power users, because they do not have the time, but they could have a trusted lieutenant of some kind, who could filter out the important stuff from the non-important stuff and make sure that they are industry-standard and dealing with the level of change, which will be enormous over the next five years; it changes every nine months, as you will know better than me.

In the House of Lords, that is harder, because people are free agents, lone wolves and worse. We need to give them some serious support to get them to the levels they can aspire to for themselves. I have thought about this a lot; I think time will erode the number of people for whom non-digital processes and hard copy paper will need to continue to be rolled out. The Committee structure in the House of Lords is now nearly half and half. Half the Committees are paperless—that is a big change from a year or 18 months ago.

Q17 Paul Kane: A very quick question or comment. You touched on the amazing service, and I agree with you, that John Pullinger and his team at Information Services do, in terms of delivering briefing papers. That is a function within the House. Of course, there is the populace at large, who are very knowledgeable in various areas. Do you see an opportunity for the populace—experts in their field—to have a forum to furnish Parliament, whether it is the Commons or the Lords, with information relating to specific Bills, or even almost crowdsourcing or kick-starting a process that leads to a Bill—almost a pre-Bill drafting stage?

Lord Kirkwood: I think that crowdsourcing is very interesting, and will have a role. The uniqueness of Mr Pullinger is that people trust him. The Houses both have independent Libraries—I sometimes wonder why—and the thing that is unique to both is that people absolutely trust what they are told; there is no sense of thinking, "Am I safe to say this?" If you have got something that comes from either House Library, then it is absolutely bombproof and always has been, in my experience. That is the difference from a pressure

group—even a blue-chip, well-established pressure group that generally I would trust. I am not saying that any of them will deliberately mislead you. This would involve extra resources in the Library, but if you are telling me that there is some incoming stuff—there was plenty of it in the Welfare Reform Bill in 2012—you would look at it differently from the stuff that you were collecting from the Library. Somehow we need to find some way of branding or quality-marking, through the Library or somehow, the external stuff, because there is a lot of fantastic stuff, but you do not have the same confidence in it as in the stuff that comes from the Library.

Q18 Chair: Archy, thank you very much again, both for your wisdom and for your time, which are both much appreciated.

Colleagues, we will move on to our next witness, who is sitting to Archy's right. Andrew Cooper is the founder of Populus, the market research and polling company, which, in my recollection, he has run for years with my old friend Michael Simmonds, with whom I worked in university politics more than 25 years ago. I don't think I have known Andrew quite as long as I have known Michael, but I have known Andrew a very long time, and I have the highest regard for him. For those of you who do not know him, he graduated from the London School of Economics. He worked at the Social Market Foundation, and in 1995 he went to work for the Conservative party as head of polling and then director of strategy during William Hague's leadership. He left in 1999 to form Populus. He returned to Populus in 2013 after a two-year leave of absence, during which he served as David Cameron's director of strategy in No. 10, so he has considerable experience from more than two sides of the political equation, if I can put it that way. Andrew, we will be interested in what you have to say to us, and then we will have the opportunity to question you.

Andrew Cooper: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Next to my desk when I was working in No. 10, on the wall I had a quote from Tony Blair—perhaps not the most popular person to quote from this week. In his excellent memoirs, he said: "The single hardest thing for a practising politician to understand is that most people, most of the time, don't give politics a first thought all day long…For most normal people, politics is a distant, occasionally irritating fog." The reason he said that this matters—he said that it was a "fatal flaw" in many politicians—is that it leads them to focus on the small picture rather than the big picture.

Having spent most of the last 20 years trying to study, analyse and measure what the public think about politics and how they engage with it, I think that is a fundamental truth. On the rare occasions that I succeed in getting Members of Parliament to come along and observe focus groups with ordinary voters, the thing that invariably shocks them is the fact of how little most people have taken in, how little they have followed, how little they know and how little they care, to be honest.

That draws me to two points in respect of what we are talking about here. First, there is a huge distinction, in terms of the general public, between the engaged and the disengaged. We have done quite a lot of work modelling how one identifies the engaged and what characteristics they have. Roughly speaking, there is a pretty consistent 8% or 9% of the adult population who are very engaged. It is obviously the old adage that, if you want something done, you find a busy person. They are the kinds of people who tend to be very actively involved in life in general, and are much more active engagers with politics and the media. They are very disproportionately the people who would send Members of Parliament e-mails, turn up at public meetings and phone radio programmes, but also post online reviews of hotels, movies and so forth; they are very engaged people.

One of the issues here is: does digital democracy simply create new channels for the people who are already engaged, or does it expand access to politics, so that politicians can

hear voices that they do not normally hear from? I think the evidence at the moment is that it is predominantly the former. It is not that that is a bad thing; certainly, Lord Kirkwood was talking about great things that can be done to make Parliament itself work better and do its work more effectively through the use of digital technology. But I am sceptical. At the moment, it shows the way to engage with other people.

Twitter at the moment is basically an echo chamber of the opinionated. Many people use Facebook as a medium precisely in order to evade mainstream politics. I took a lot of time talking to Jim Messina, who was the campaign manager for President Obama, who made a huge use of social media, but the reason they did so was because they realised that voters are much more likely to receive, listen to and digest a message if it came not from a politician but from a friend. In the cynical world in which we live, the people whom most people trust are other people like them, rather than mainstream media or politicians. So in a sense, the drive to social media there is people moving away from politics, not towards it.

There is also a risk that, in the short and medium term at least, what digital democracy does is even more to amplify the voice of pressure groups. We have talked about 38 Degrees. Pressure groups have learned quickly to use social media in a way to put a lot of pressure on to legislators, but they are, as it were, Astroturf, not grass roots.

The second thing that arises from that Tony Blair observation is that, in terms of the further debate about direct democracy and whether digital democracy leads us to digital referendums and trying to involve the public more, I think, because of the truth that he spoke, there is absolutely no appetite for that. The fact is that what most voters in this country want is to get on with their lives and not to have to think about politics, and to believe that they can trust their politicians to respect, understand and act upon their interests and values and to sort out the country's problems. When you try to use polling to figure out the answer to a political problem, it always ends up in a fog, and people end up saying, "Well, that's what we have MPs for." Most people don't want to and don't feel qualified to take the kinds of decisions that they think politicians take. There is no appetite for that.

I think the fundamental questions at the end are: does digital democracy enable us to hear the voices that we don't normally hear? I am not sure that at the moment it does. Will it lead people who aren't already engaged to feel better informed? I think probably not. Will it make the majority of people who feel increasingly frustrated by their politics feel less so, and feel that politicians are doing their jobs better? I fear not.

Q19 Chair: Okay. You have either a pessimistic or, from our vantage point, a challenging perspective, Andrew, but we appreciate that. The whole purpose of this is to have people come here and say exactly what they think. That is part of the challenge to us, and that is appreciated.

I am going to hand over to Meg to take the Chair. We are going to hear from Andy Williamson later—not much later—but unfortunately I have to move on, so Meg will take over. I am sure there will be questions for you, Andrew, to which we look forward. Andy, if I can publicly thank you: I know we engaged a bit last week at, if I remember, Policy Exchange and at the dinner afterwards, and I am sorry I am not staying now, but I will get the benefit of what you have got to offer us and thank you very much indeed. Colleagues, thank you for coming.

In the absence of the Chair, Meg Hillier was called to the Chair.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Robert, will you kick off?

Q20 Robert Halfon: Is it possible to turn your argument on its head and say the reason why people are not engaged is that there is nothing to engage them with; there are no mechanisms to engage them properly? Westminster is seen, as you say, as something quite esoteric. If you moved towards a more genuinely digital democracy where people participated, although in the beginning it would be the moderately engaged already, would not it spread to the people who may think, "Actually, it might be worth getting in because I might have a chance of having an input into what is going on," whereas at the moment they know that most of the things they do does not make any difference. As Ken Livingston once said "If voting changed anything, they'd abolish it." If you turn the argument on its head, would you solve the problem you have set out?

Andrew Cooper: I don't think so. I think the problem most people see in politics is a problem of content: it is the discourse of politics and the way politics is conducted, rather than the channels through which it is communicated. There are a lot of people for whom the fundamental point is that they feel disempowered, and you would empower some of them. Perhaps you are describing something very revolutionary about the way that democracy works, but from where most people are now, most people do not want to engage as much as they would need to engage in order to be part of a digital plebiscite democracy on substantive issues. If you had a digital referendum that Parliament was going to honour—one in which, for example, everybody in the country who chose to take part would vote on the question of immigration policy with the certainty that that would be enacted—you might certainly engage people, but that seems to me to be the fundamental application of a representative democracy, whereas I think the problem is that there has been a breakdown in the dialogue. People feel their voices are not being heard and arguments are not being put to them; the whole way that politics is conducted is turning people off. My own view is that it is not a problem of channels.

Q21 Toni Pearce: I agree with a lot of what you are saying. I don't think that technology is a silver bullet, but nor do I think that means that it does not have value. One of my reflections on politics is the opacity of the system—not having any idea of how it works or why you would want to know why it works, or what goes on or even what decisions are made, where or what the LGA is or what an MP is. Do you think that there is a role for technology to play in making the system less opaque?

Andrew Cooper: I am certainly not saying it is a bad thing. I just think that the more you open it up, the more you are going to find that the problem is the problem: what turns people off about politics is that politicians never give a straight answer to a straight question. People watch Parliament and they think it looks like a pantomime. People often say in focus groups, when you play them clips of parliamentary exchanges, they think it is literally theatre, in which if the roles were reversed, the people who are currently in opposition would be saying and doing exactly the same things as the people who are now in government and vice versa. It is the magnification of small issues into big issues—a theatre in which parties pretend that relatively small differences of opinion are vast differences of principle. It is the problem that each party tries to pretend that it alone has all the answers and the other side has none—all of those things. I am sure you are right that you can make the process less opaque for people by using the democracy of digital technology, but all you are going to do is shine more light on the problem, and the problem is the problem.

Chair: We are going to try and move on because I am anxious to bring other people in and Andy as well.

Q22 Dr Leston-Bandeira: I will try to be quick. What would you do with everyone on social media trying to make a change—proposing a change in the Bill or something like that? Do you just ignore them? What do you do with that pressure from below? How do you deal with that?

Andrew Cooper: I think it's great that there is a subset of our population who are engaged and keen to be part of the process. The challenge is how to engage with the others. The fact that new channels have become available to make it easier for people to do that more actively and better is great, but what we are doing is amplifying the voice of people who already have a voice. That is a good thing, but it is not widening access to politics and enabling voices we do not normally hear to be heard. That is my only point.

I think the point Lord Kirkwood made was absolutely right: it is also about feedback That is crucial. If you invite people to contribute and they then hear nothing back, it achieves the opposite purpose because they feel even more turned away and that their voice is even more ignored.

Q23

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Thank you very much, Andrew. We come now to Dr Andy Williamson. As you will probably gather from his title, he has an academic background, but he is also an internationally renowned expert on digital democracy and social media, focusing particularly on strengthening democracy, engagement and building trust. He founded research and consultancy practice Future Digital, and some of his recent projects include social media guidelines for Parliament, which were developed for the Inter-Parliamentary Union. He was previously director of digital democracy at the Hansard Society and has advised the New Zealand Government on their digital strategy. You are pretty well qualified, Andy. If you would like to make your presentation, we will then have questions from the panel.

Andy Williamson: I want to start by going up a level and with a couple of thoughts. Our representative system of democracy as we know it at the moment exists in part because a direct and deliberative model was not available to us. We are sort of in a de facto system that we have arrived at historically, but we are now in a position where we could do things more directly and more deliberatively, so we need to question whether the representative model is in fact right and appropriate for where we want to be in five, 10, 15 years' time. We need to understand whether it might be, or partly might be, what is stopping us getting there, and how we can make it easier. There are issues of motivation and access, which are largely about the public, but we have not talked about issues of power and control which exist on the other side of the debate.

As we are quoting some great thinkers, I'm going to quote Banksy: if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes politics. That is a fairly good sentiment that the public have around politics. The public are not disengaged. They are disengaged from party politics; they are disengaged from adversarial politics; they are disengaged from wasting their time; they do not feel that they make any difference—but they are not disengaged.

This is not a case of when we change; it is a case of how we change. We are going to change. It is a case of how quickly we change. In the case of Parliament it is about the legitimacy of the institution and what role it chooses to take in determining its own future. In 15 years, will this institution have any legitimacy? It is a very challenging and hard question to ask, but it is one we have to frame this discussion in terms of.

I think we then have to frame this around digital and we must be very careful, because digital is not a panacea. I come from a digital background—my first job was programmer. I am a software developer who moved into strategy who moved into policy and who generally

thinks you can combine the two and change things for the better, but it is not about technology. Technology is really good at dissemination. It is really good at networking and maintaining the links, particularly the weak ties—we hear a lot about how issue-based groups can form, reform and come together, and that is through what, sociologically speaking, we call weak ties. Those networks are there but they are loose. Digital is really good at aggregation and it is really good at sharing stuff and listening, so it is a broadcast channel, but it is also a listening channel. It is really bad at deliberation, at big-scale deliberation. Despite the people who advocate for it, I have yet to see a really effective large-scale digital deliberation project that worked.

Why don't we just be honest about it? Why do we keep saying that we have to do it that way? Let's look at what is good with digital, and then let's do the other stuff in analogue ways. So when we talk about the future of digital democracy, we have to look at the analogue components of democracy as well, and how digital can be used to make them better. One good example of that is, if it is good at aggregation and dissemination, let's have lots of small conversations and aggregate them. It is a practical way of doing it.

We can close the gap between citizens and representatives in lots of ways. We can have better engagement and communication, but actually the first thing we have to do is have better listening. Our institutions and our elected representatives have to be better at listening. If we want our citizens to take part in a digital debate, then our citizens have to, first of all, have access. We talk proudly in this country—Helen will know the exact figure—about the percentage of people we have online, but let's not kid ourselves: if we have 85% of the population online, we do not have an 85% digitally literate population. We have 85% of the population online. That statistic means nothing else; it tells us nothing about their ability to interact online, to use the tools online, or to engage online. Also, beyond digital literacy, we do very little in this country about building information literacy. If we want a digital future for our democratic systems and we want people to engage in democracy, we have to have an information literate public, and we don't. That's a problem.

Andrew mentioned the problem with using social media: you simply get digital elites. I absolutely echo that; that is so critical. We have moved from a political elite to a digitally enabled political elite; it is a subset of a subset, with a few new players in there. It is not the solution to representative democracy.

It is not about digital. Digital is an enabler and a transformer, but it is not a solution in its own right. The problem is culture. The problem is we need culture change, and we need to look at the social adoption of technology. We need to look at the effective use of technology in our democratic systems. Trying to be technologically deterministic about it—assuming that getting this system, this tool, this app, this box will do something—will fail. You will fail every time if you ignore the social and cultural issues. Technological determinism does not work.

So what do we do? We have to reframe representative democracy. There is a huge opportunity to do this. We at the moment represent the democratic system as a hierarchy within our civic ecosystem: the representatives are at the top, the great unwashed are at the bottom, and various people live in between. A lot of people don't like that. Some people pretend they don't like it, but it kinds of suits of them, because hierarchies are about power—hierarchies are arrogant and controlling. They don't really encourage you to take part and participate in them.

We need to start thinking about society as a network and that representation occurs within a network. It is a networked ecosystem. In a networked system, we have to think about mutuality, trust and co-creation. We have to think about how we become, as representatives, intimate and co-creating, and that is immensely challenging for most people to consider. We

have to lose the idea of control, let go of the message and trust people to create the messages for themselves, and actually trust people to take responsibility for their own futures a lot more than we do. We are very patriarchal in our decision making. As much as we have talked here about how citizens don't trust government, let me tell you: government does not trust citizens, and that is actually more damaging.

We need to move to a model of deliberation and engage citizens more often. We have to overcome the negativity of the media, and we have to get rid of the lobbyists. There are some great statistics in France today that political lobbyists are even more hated than MPs. That is fantastic; they have actually got to the top of a poll. Interestingly, in France, more than half the people want an assurance that government is independent in the engagement they are doing before they will engage with it, even though 95% of people who have engaged in the process with the French Government at any level have been overwhelmingly positive about it. So they see it as a good process, but they want to know that it is independent and can be trusted, because they do not trust the people in power to run it openly. I think that says a lot.

Just picking up on your point, Meg, 80% of people in France want more pre-legislative scrutiny in terms of deliberating about the law before it is written. I have not seen an equivalent statistic for that here. I just happened to see that one yesterday in France so I do not know the details of it.

Ultimately, for me, it is about renegotiating the complex role of representative politician and legislator. MPs have a very complex role. It is not simple; it is incredibly challenging. Digital can help that, but it also blurs the role. When you are tweeting, what are you tweeting as? If you are tweeting in a Committee, are you tweeting as a legislator, as a politician, or are you just tweeting as a human being to someone you know? It is very, very complicated. We blur our identity. Mark Zuckerberg announced that we would lose our multiple identities. He was wrong, but it is a very strong point.

What makes a good digital politician? We have the answer to that already and it is a really good one. What makes a good digital politician is what makes a good politician: it is someone who is out there and engaged. My favourite example is Bertie Ahern: when he was Taoiseach, he still used to go round his constituency on Saturday mornings and knock on doors to ask people how they were. That is a good politician. You don't need Twitter to do that but, actually, you can use Twitter to do that every day. I think I will leave it at that. We have to build effective relationships and trust with the public so that we blur the boundaries between representative and citizen.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Thank you very much, Andy. If you have not yet read it, there is a book about a real-time study during the Obama election campaign of 15 different methods of engaging with constituents, and the key one that worked was direct engagement with the politician.

Andy Williamson: Funny that, isn't it?

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): If it needed proving, for those of us who do it anyway, that just underlines it. I will take questions from the panel first and then from the audience. With your permission—in fact, whether you like it or not—you will be on camera. We are trying to be open here. So just to warn you, if you need to nip out and brush your hair or something.

Q24 Paul Kane: Thank you very much. The two Andrews raise the issue of a disengaged community. We hear a lot about young people being involved in the digital world, but they seem to be disengaged from politics. In your opinion—maybe this goes to the other Andrew as well—what does Parliament need to do to change and to engage with those people who are technically literate and who feel disengaged for whatever reason?

Andy Williamson: There is an important distinction here. I think Femi and Toni would be better qualified than me to comment, given my age, but from a theoretical or experiential point of view, young people are not disengaged. Young people are disengaged from party politics and from what they see as an irrelevance. They do not see the relevance of Parliament because Parliament is just what they see on TV, but they are in no way disengaged from the issues that affect their lives.

I was in Sweden last week and we were looking at young people there. They are really engaged. They are engaged about issues. Where we need to find a way to engage them is on their terms. We need to step out of this building, get out from behind the walls of this building. I often say that the building you are in is a metaphor for the democracy you want: welcome to the Palace of Westminster. We have to get out of it, get outside and talk to people. Now, it might be that Parliament cannot do that. If we think of an onion and Parliament at the centre of it, you can only see so many rings out. We have to find people that we know one or two rings out and go to them with our message, and then say, "Now you take it forward." We have to trust those people to be our intermediaries and to translate the message so that it is meaningful for the people they know. It could be two or three steps down the line before you actually reach the people you really need to talk to and who, at the moment, are completely excluded from this process.

Q25 Emma Mulqueeny: I am not asking a particular question but just following up on this discussion with a very real example. You say young people are disengaged from politics. I know I am confusing Government and Parliament here, but Michael Gove exercises my 16-year-old and 12-year-old daughters a lot. Why? Because they found out from their teachers what he is doing and what his policies are. They have nowhere to take that back to Parliament or to engage with Michael Gove because they do not know how to, but they are very engaged because the people who are affected by this are then sharing it with their community and other people who are actually affected. This is a particularly explosive subject—it is something that is directly affecting children and people who are engaged in it now—but there is just an empty place. Where does all of the ire go except back into pupil, parent and teacher crossness about what Michael Gove is doing? That is a fact. If we look at what is happening there and then assume that that is what is going to be what is repeated, and those kids want to get into social media and engage, what should Parliament and Government do in that very real situation to engage?

Andy Williamson: That is what digital is really good at. If there are 100 or 200 or 1,000 of those conversations going on and you can aggregate them on social media, Parliament should be listening, and it should be listening to the people who are spreading those conversations. It should be listening to find out where the conversations are, then it should be finding ways to aggregate those conversations so that the people in this place are able to find out what those thoughts and comments are—what the impact of their work is—and find out what young people think. I don't think it is that hard to do. It simply takes a change in the way that things are done. The technology is there to do it—digital is a fantastic aggregator.

Q26 Helen Milner: I want to make a comment and then I will ask a question. I want to stand up for 38 Degrees, which seems to be getting quite a lot of negative feeling around the room. They did a round table and people were calling it "clicktivism" and so on, but I know people who have only ever engaged with politics through 38 Degrees. That is a very real example of where digital is engaging people who have not previously been engaged. Okay, it gives parliamentary representatives a problem because of filtering, exactly as Lord Kirkwood

said earlier, but we really should not be negative about a channel that is giving people a way of engaging. It is not perfect, but it is a way of engaging.

My question is the same one as I asked Lord Kirkwood. I totally agree with you that technology is not the solution: we need a culture change and technology is part of the carrot to help that culture change to happen. We are really keen to make recommendations for things that are going to work. I agree with what you said, but how would we do it? What are your recommendations for the "how"?

Andy Williamson: First of all, calling it "clicktivism" is the way that the political elite dismisses the masses—by referring to it in a dismissive way. 38 Degrees is absolutely fantastic. What it has done for politics in this country, for young people in particular, is transforming. Where it fails is its engagement with this place, but that is part of the maturity of the model. It has created opportunities for a lot of people and people now see there are opportunities that did not exist before.

What are the recommendations for this place? Well, digital is not optional. It should be in the job description. Oh—you don't have one. You should have one. If you can't do it digitally, you shouldn't be here. It is time to retire. There are better things for you to do. I'm sorry, but it is as blunt as that. It is a little different in the House of Lords, because there are some different challenges there, but in the House of Commons, if you cannot work digitally, you have no place here. That would be my strongest recommendation.

You need to move with the times. You are representing us, and we use these tools, so you must be able to use them too. You do not have to be a power user—as Andrew said, you don't have to be expert in it—but you need to be able to use them and understand them, and harness their power, particularly in terms of listening and communicating. I do not expect you to be a top Twitter user. Parliament is a microcosm of the world; there are good digital people and bad digital people—people who get it and people who don't—and that is always going to be the case in Parliament. But as for not using it, it is like when you start a new job: on day one in the bank, you can't turn around and say, "I don't think I'll use that e-mail, thank you." It is not your choice. As you work for us in here, we should be telling you what the job description is, and part of that job description is: you will be digital.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): There's a challenging recommendation—possibly unpopular in some quarters, although I have to reassure you, Andy, that the 2010 intake has made a dramatic shift.

Andy Williamson: I know. There are still a couple, but it is very small now.

Q27 Meg Hillier (in the Chair): The days when MPs used to have to have someone to dial their telephone, which occasionally happened even in my intake—I was 2005—are dying, I hope.

I am aware that some of you who were witnesses might want to ask questions of each other, as well as the Commissioners perhaps wanting to ask all of the witnesses a question. I am going to suggest that we take questions in threes, very quickly, starting from the end near me. I want to give people who have come along today, and have already given one and a half hours of their time, the chance to say something as well. I am going to ask them for questions. This Commission is willing and keen to have submissions, but this is not the time for submissions because we have got only half an hour overall for questions. This is your time to ask questions of the witnesses we have before us today. If you want to make a longer comment, please feed that in through whichever digital or non-digital means suits you. Robert and I will have to go to vote, but other Commissioners may be around briefly at the end. First of all, would any Commissioners or witnesses like to ask questions of witnesses?

Peter Fleming: I just wanted to say something that hasn't been said, on the way that social media is changing and the way that councils provide services, not just in this country but abroad. In California, when they want to inspect restaurants, instead of going round every four years to a restaurant they now use TripAdvisor and just log the big data. So if four people say that they have had a really bad meal and ended up ill, that is the place that they will go to.

We shouldn't play down the power that social media has to change the way that we deliver services. So this place also needs to understand that, actually, the delivery of services will radically change in time, and law needs to keep up with the different way that we are going to deliver services as well.

Q28 Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Thank you. We are aware that, facing outwards, we have to ensure that people can engage better with Parliament and that we all do things in a way that means that we engage better. Sorry, Andrew, I just got a note that says you need to leave at 5. Is that right, or can you stay?

Andrew Cooper: That's all right.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Okay, so Andrew is still here for questions. We have a roving mic here. Do any Commissioners have any questions? I think you have had a fair crack of the whip. For those of you at the table, your mics are on, so if you mutter about something we will hear it. Perhaps people could indicate if they would like to ask a question of any of the witnesses or, indeed, the Commissioners. We will take three questions at a time. Say who you are and where you are from—if you are from somewhere—and make it a brief question, please.

Q29 John Nugent: Hi, my name's John Nugent. I have been working in online business for about 20 years. I have been studying online democracy for about five years and launched a website about three years ago partially to address the problem of what is a political operating system. In effect, what we are talking about is the opportunity to turn parliamentary processes into software. That throws up all sorts of issues around: do we copy what the current system is and turn it into software—give representatives access with everyone having a computer and everything stays the same—or do we change the system to take advantage of the power of the new medium?

My question is to the panel. Do they see the system changing radically because of the internet? And whose job will it be to make the change? I do not see any reason why I need to wait for Parliament to build a bit of software that creates the next version of democracy. Anyone could do that with a bit of funding; the big challenge is the business model and who funds it. With a few hundred thousand pounds you could build a system, but part of that process is not just the technology; it is about the compulsion to use it. That system also has to have built-in compulsion. So my question is: do we think that Parliament's job is to create the next version of digital democracy, or is it open to anyone to work on that, particularly around open source issues?

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): I may direct that to some of you. If you are particularly interested in answering, let me know, because I am not sure that you all need to answer every question. Would anyone else in the audience like to ask a question?

Q30 Sharon Richardson: I am Sharon Richardson. I am an independent digital technologist. I help organisations figure out and adjust their culture and processes to take advantage of digital technology. One of the big trends we see out of social media is the speed and expectation of response times. I haven't seen that mentioned today. The lesson that

businesses that have social media command centres are learning is that unless they can speed up their decision-making processes, they actually create more frustration by responding but, effectively, not doing anything. Is that something that you will be looking at? How do you speed up the political process?

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): That challenge might be above my pay grade.

Q31 Jason Da Ponte: My name is Jason Da Ponte. I run a digital design agency based here in London and have worked in digital systems and communication for many years, including at the BBC for a long time where I have led the mobile content. Great applause to everyone here who has been talking about digital engagement, particularly through Twitter, but my question to the Commission is: why are you talking about how to use Twitter as a thing rather than talking about or questioning how Parliament could communicate and engage in the way that Twitter does—so that everyone has one equal voice and the ability to engage with each other on any level they want to?

I am not saying that Parliament has to change the way it works completely, but the way that the communications works. Why is it not intra-spaced? When you come to the site, why can you not put in the hashtag for the topic you are interested in? Why is it divided up in a way that average citizens do not engage with politics, around particular interests?

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): In fact, we have only had one person indicating so far, so I'll squeeze in a fourth in this round to see if we can get through some more people—the gentleman in the brown shirt.

Q32 Luke Flegg: My name is Luke and I am part of a project called Change The Future. I have been thinking for four years and playing with the question of what it would look like if there was a website that replaced the Government—that brought everybody together to solve their own problems. The people on the ground are closest to the problems that we need to solve and all of us are experts in the issues that affect us closest. For me, it seems a question of how good we are at drawing the wisdom and insight from these people and weaving it into a problem-solving fabric that focuses our problems and challenges into actionable ideas.

Finally I can see the light with these designs now; this is possible. My house is full of sketches; I feel like Jacque Fresco from the Venus Project. There are loads of projects doing this kind of thing and I am interested in how Parliament is willing to interface with projects like this. What kind of time, space, funding, resources or permissions is it willing to create to explore these opportunities or potential affiliations? I do not think it needs to be a scary thing like saying, "Overthrow the Government." It is going to be a long transition but the internet is allowing me to print my own furniture and write my own software. Authorship is handed over to the user now and I think that politics is heading that way.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Thanks. To recap, we have the question about who decides on the platform for engagement, interaction and representation, the question of the speed of decision making in Parliament, and the issues around parliamentary engagement via Twitter. We are looking at engagement in a separate theme, which does not mean we cannot touch on it today, but we are looking at that in more depth in the next session. We have the question of what it would look like if there was a website that replaced the Government. Luke, I would suggest that you talk to our colleague Douglas Carswell, who is working at that very model.

There are a couple of points there, particularly for the Commissioners, about parliamentary engagement via Twitter. Cristina, do you want to pick up on that? We are not touching on engagement so much but, generally, the issue on Twitter.

Q33 Dr Leston-Bandeira: Just a couple of the questions, really—starting with the first, about whose role it is to deal with the data. You have the data out there—is it up to Parliament to do everything? One thing we have been looking at—a lot of the evidence has been given to us—and something that Parliament is trying to do is to follow the assumption that it is not Parliament that has to do everything. The data might be there and there is a lot of movement trying to have more open data and that sort of thing so that other people can come, interpret and use that data. That is definitely one thing we have been looking at. Some of the evidence we have been having goes that way and there is already some work going that way.

I don't know if you followed Rapid Apps Team—I love the name—who are in Parliament. Quite recently, they have been trying to do work in that area but that is just a small example. There is much more that can be done. The French are a good example to look at. They did a lot of work with a specific organisation called Regards Citoyens and they built up a platform to look at legislation from an open-letter perspective. This is definitely something we are looking at.

I want to pick up on the Twitter idea. That is something that we have definitely looked at. We have had evidence on that. Some examples have been given to us, and other countries do other things but here the experiments were #askPickles and #askGove. There were specific areas and sessions where Secretaries of State or Ministers would come to the Committee and the public could put questions. So it is about pooling engagement through the ideas and through the issues because issues are what engage people, not necessarily the political process. It is exactly about what you are saying—not necessarily displaying information just according to the process, but displaying information according to the ideas because that is what will engage the people.

Q34 Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Thank you, Cristina. That is a good summary of some of the work we have done so far. I am now going to go to the witnesses.

Peter Fleming: I will give very quick answers to a number of questions. The first one was, "Do you wait for permission or do you just get on with it?" I think you just get on with it. I think in the world that we're in—frankly, waiting for this place to do anything, you'd be far better getting on with it and seeing where that goes.

I was a little bit worried about where Lord Kirkwood was going around the fact that Google was better than what they had got. Don't reinvent stuff that is already there; just use somebody else. If Google is the best answer to finding stuff about this place, then continue to use Google. If I was appointed in that new role I would say, "I'm not going to invent something new—there's something brilliant already out there."

On speedy response, I always remember when I was growing up watching "Watchdog" and every other week there would be some spokesperson from Currys or Dixons on about how awful their customer service was. There would be a woman talking about her awful experience of getting a new washing machine. The reality is that you don't hear anything about Dixons and Currys any more because their response is amazing. You say something bad about Currys and Dixons on Twitter and within about 30 seconds Matt or Martha is there saying, "How can I help you with your problem?" They understand that people are actually watching their interactions and how they deal with people and are making choices about who they are going to buy their next piece of electronic equipment from on the strength of how that interaction goes.

The final thing is that I would say—it is difficult to say, "Lower your aspirations"—go local before trying to go national with your idea of democracy in the way that you were talking about it. In, I think, Cornwall we are looking at a model, which was members of the public posing problems and then other members of the public coming together to try to find

solutions. The council were not moderating it, but chipping in where they could. I think the model that you were talking about will work better in a local environment than it will in a national one because some decisions that Government make are made around information that isn't public for lots of good reasons. It is also about making decisions that are not hugely popular. We have spoken about Blair today and I think history will judge those decisions as it will, but there are other decisions that Governments have made that, on the face of it, have been hugely unpopular, but history has told us that they are actually the right decisions. Sometimes, for some of those big, difficult things, the mass are not the best people to make that decision.

Q35 Meg Hillier (in the Chair): There's a politician saying something. We will replay that in Sevenoaks.

Andy Williamson: I want to say a couple of things. First, there are hundreds of democracy websites and applications out there. Most of them have about three users. Don't reinvent the wheel. Stop building silos and start sharing. That applies to the institutions as well. Everything in this institution should be open. Everything should be freely available for me, as a citizen, to use non-commercially. If I want to make money out of it, I should pay for the upkeep of it and subsidise the citizens. But if it is me as a citizen, I should have access to it. Stop reinventing the wheel. Stop building democratic castles in the air, because they don't work. All these websites have five users; one problem solved by three people and nothing happens again—they are never seen. Work together, find other people who are doing this stuff, find out what your niche is, work in your niche and let them work in theirs.

In terms of Parliament, there is an awful lot of good stuff being done around the world. I am involved with the open legislators working group in the Open Government Partnership process, the OGP, and there is some really good stuff. My recommendation is to look as hard and fast as you can at Latin America because Latin America is fantastic. The Latin Americans are so far ahead of the Europeans on opening Parliaments from a citizen perspective in terms of parliamentary monitoring organisations, open data and also campaigning and advocacy organisations. The Argentinean city of Buenos Aires, Chile, where there are a lot of NGOs, Mexico, Brazil, the Brazilian Parliament, the Chilean Chamber of Deputies and Senate, and the Uruguayan Parliament are all fantastic places.

Look at Opening Parliament—Google "Opening Parliament", look at the declaration on parliamentary openness and see the stuff that is in there. That is something I said in my submission to the Commission. I feel strongly that this Commission should endorse the declaration on parliamentary openness. I would also say that to groups that want to work with Parliament. This is not adversarial; it needs to be a partnership. The key is that we have got to work together. It is not us and them, because that doesn't work.

Lord Kirkwood: I very much agree with that last point. I like South Korea, where constituents are entitled to know where their MPs are at any given moment in time. I think that would be a wonderful thing to introduce here, as long as it doesn't apply to the House of Lords.

To be reactionary for 30 seconds, somebody has got to decide about the money. Peter made that point in a different way. If the Burkean idea is that the representative owes merely his or her judgment to the people he or she represents, that is most acute in the money. You can have the cleverest website in the world, whether it is produced by Mr Carswell or not, but somehow somebody has got to take the responsibility for making a decision, knowing the financial consequences of what that means. Somebody has got to carry that conch, as it were, and if you don't like what they are doing, somebody else gets the conch and it is their turn. So money is in the balance. I felt that with social security. You are challenged all the time by the

bedroom tax and all the rest of it about whether you go one way or the other. It is always easier to spend the money, but you don't have to fork out the money yourself. So money and resource allocation is difficult to do by automatic systems.

Secondly, on the first day I went to be a trainee solicitor, my legal pupil master said to me, "You sign nothing the same day that you draft it. You go home and sleep on it, and you find out what the weather is the next day." This comes back to the Committee stage of the Welfare Reform Bill. David Freud, who is a very intelligent Minister, was confronted all the time with new ideas and, to his credit, he took some of them away and thought about them carefully. The next week, he would come back and say, "Okay, I can see the force of that." Twitter might want a response from David Freud in real time, but it is not advisable to do that. Reflection needs to be built into policy making, and as a legislator you need to have space to do that.

Finally—I want a third recommendation, because I am chancing my arm—I think the Commission should not stop its work. Something in the recommendations should have a continuation of the process in some way, so all this work by experts such as Andy and others is continuously engaged with over the next five years to see what is out there and to see what we are missing.

Andy Williamson: I didn't say that.

Lord Kirkwood: I mean it, seriously. He's not alone, but he's at the cutting edge. It would be a shame if the Commission did not recognise that this is a process and not a one-off.

Q36 Meg Hillier (in the Chair): As the MP for Tech City, I completely get your point. First we will go to Andrew, and then I am going to bring in Robert to pick up a bit more on the point about the speed of decision making, because we do work at different speeds here, and that is worth touching on. Then we will see whether we have time for some quickfire questions.

Andrew Cooper: Listening to the discussion, one of the things we have not touched on that strikes me is the power of digital technology to help MPs get out of this place. For example, it always seems to me very odd that this is a world in which Members of Parliament are whipped to vote in a particular way. With all due respect, you are sitting here having this discussion, and you are going to go and vote on something about which you haven't heard the debate. We could use digital technology to help you spend more time in your constituencies and out in the real world away from Westminster. It would not affect your ability to vote the way you vote, because you are doing different things in this place anyway. There is a sort of conceit built into the way the House works. One of the things that a lot of people feel passionately about is that Members of Parliament spend too much time in this place talking to each other in arcane language—"the right hon. this" and "the hon. Member for that".

Lord Kirkwood: We wear pretty frocks.

Andrew Cooper: All of that makes it incredibly inaccessible. I remember David Owen saying 20 or 30 years ago that if he ever became Prime Minister—it's probably a good thing he never did—the first thing he would do would be to call in the carpenters. At the time I thought it was a very silly thing to say, but what he meant was that people look at it on television and the whole architecture and the atmospherics, and in a digital world it all looks quainter and quainter and quainter. Perhaps we need to physically change it as well.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Join my campaign to move us to east London.

Q37 Robert Halfon: Somebody mentioned speed of response. I think the council leader was saying that Dixons or Currys respond brilliantly but there is a management of

expectation. Dixons and Currys can afford to hire individuals to respond to people. Even with e-mails there is a difficulty with responding because people now expect you to respond to e-mails straight away, not realising that MPs may receive 200 or 300 e-mails in a 24-hour period. On top of that, now MPs are not just getting tweets, they are getting messages on LinkedIn or Facebook or other social media. It is becoming an infinite response.

My view is that if the constituent, as the customer, wants to use a particular form of social medium then on the whole I have to respond to that. Otherwise you can use a supermarket analogy: Tesco don't just sell Tesco ketchup; they sell the kind of ketchup that people want to buy. While the MP must be responsive, there has to be not just a management of expectation but a fairness on the part of the people who are engaging with the representatives. They have to realise that the nature of social media, the infinite amount there is and the fact that people move from platform to platform means that it is not always possible to respond in a way that necessarily a big corporate might be able to respond. MPs need time to deal with all the different mediums that people are using.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Not to mention the subject matter, which might not be familiar to us.

Robert Halfon: Not to mention the subject matter.

Peter Fleming: May I just come back on that? MPs are quite good at passing e-mails on to leaders of their respective councils to sort out the problems as well. There is quite a lot of data movement.

Robert Halfon: There is an argument—a very valid argument—that if someone is writing to an MP about the pavement, it is not the role of the MP to deal with it in the first place; the MP is here to legislate. I happen to think that it is my duty to respond to all kinds of things that people write to me about. Nevertheless, it is a council issue. It is the council that can decide on housing, pavements, roads or whatever it may be, not the MP. The MP has no power whatsoever. So there is nothing wrong with the MP getting the letter and forwarding it to the council leader or chief executive to respond to, because that organisation and you are the only people who have the ability to do something about it.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): We are touching on a whole other area about political education and who is responsible for what. Toni wants to come in and there is a gentleman in the audience. We've got a sudden flurry of hands. They will have to be quickfire. So name, rank and then a quickfire question. I will take Toni first as she is a Commissioner. Would you be quick as well, Toni, as we are running tight on time?

Toni Pearce: Two things following on from that conversation are important to say. First, there is something really clear about setting expectations. Part of that is about who are we inviting to lead our country. For me that is a very personal issue. As somebody who gets messages from people trying to hold me to account at 4 o'clock in the morning on Twitter, I think that if you respond to those immediately you are setting an expectation that the only person who can do your job has to be superhuman and cannot be disabled or have children or any other responsibilities. There is something about setting unreasonable expectations and being honest that you are people and you cannot immediately respond at all hours of the day.

I fundamentally disagree with the analogy of constituents being customers. I don't think that politics is a service provision, a business or something that is sold. There is an analogy there about somebody delivering something for you and being a public servant for you. Actually, if we want this relationship to be meaningful and we want politics to be more than just about buying one message over a different one, it should be much more about individuals relating with their elected representatives, not treating them as if they are Currys, Dixons or Tesco, because you are not buying ketchup. You are buying international, national and local

politics. I think we should be careful about what we are asking for when we say we want that speed.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): We've got only five minutes left, so I am going to take quickfire questions, so that means you have literally 30 seconds. Then I am going to ask the panel if they have a quickfire summary answer. So you can think about your 30-second summary, though you might get a bit longer if we run over by two minutes. If you have already asked a question, I'm sorry, you have lost your chance.

Q38 Keith Butcher: I'll introduce myself. My name is Keith Butcher. I work for a software company called Decoded Solutions based in Bournemouth. I found this event through Google and London Technology Week, and thought it was an interesting event to attend. I have found it very positive; it is interesting to hear views from Government. I have worked for IBM in Sydney and directly with Google in Australia. One thing I have found that works very well is: focus wins. To keep momentum up with this kind of forum it would be nice if we could share some strategy within Government with industry leaders and see how we could possibly overcome some key challenges, perhaps selecting just two or three as a starting point.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Good suggestion. We have been to Tech City and had some other engagement, but we need to do more and online. #Emilymatters—you have probably got a name as well.

Q39 Kate Willoughby: My name is not Emily; it is Kate Willoughby. I'll fess up that I am interested in finding partners to work with, as Dr Andy Williamson was talking about. I have a play, "To Freedom's Cause", which I brought to the House of Commons in February as part of an event that used social media on a shoestring. We got a huge response with the debate, people outside the room and inside the Jubilee Room, which you will know is tiny. We are working on plans for a project next year and I am looking to find digital partners. That is why I am here.

Q40 Gerald LaTouche: I am Gerald LaTouche. I'm interested in all things global governance. I am for the democratisation of the international politico-economic system. Listening to this committee, I am thinking to myself if there is a danger that this committee is admitting something. Considering the way the public has been able to use social media to bring pressure to the political process, whether it is locally, the expenses scandal in the UK, or internationally such as the Arab spring, are we admitting that the public has been more efficient in using social media to engage the political process to bring pressure than we in Parliament?

Q41 David Melville: My name is David Melville. I work for a company that delivers automated voting systems across the world. I would like to ask the gentleman from Populus, Andrew, whether it is reasonable to draw the inference that he seemed to suggest that most people do not know very much about politics and even more people care less about politics. Is that a reasonable inference to draw now, given the level of engagement, civic digital engagement, which is frankly very low? Is it reasonable to make that assumption in a truly connected environment, which we have not frankly seen yet in the UK?

Secondly, I have an observation on the legislative timetable for Lord Kirkwood. To remind the Commission, the Law Commission, in looking at the legal framework for elections in the UK, has specifically removed from its remit anything to do with e-voting. Its report

speaks to 2020, the second of the next five-year terms. We are actually talking about 2025 at the earliest before we can introduce anything to do with the legal framework that requires e-voting.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): I am going to ask Andrew, Peter, Andy and then Archy to come back quickly on those points. I think Archy should get a little bit longer as the question was quite detailed.

Andrew Cooper: I think it is just a fact. Everybody in this room is profoundly atypical. The vast majority of people are not engaged and do not follow politics. They get on with their lives. The proliferation of channels is not something that they are taking up. That is just a fact.

Peter Fleming: I think Andrew is deeply cynical. The reality is that we can talk about that from the comfort of this country, but mention was made of the Arab spring and what is happening with digital democracy around the world and I think there is a big argument to say that if there was a real need for people at the gates, pulling them down, then digital democracy would have a massive part to play in this country, as has been shown in other parts of the world.

Andrew Cooper: But that is not using digital media to inform representative democracy as we know it. That is the transformation and creation of a different system.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): We are going to have a big debate, but we are not going to start one at 5.31 pm. We can do that afterwards.

Andy Williamson: I think that the way we frame disengagement is the way that political élites maintain power. They tell us that the public do not know what they are talking about and are not interested, so they just get on with it. It is like appointing yourself as being more important than everybody else.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): There is tension across the desk.

Andy Williamson: Andrew is right. If you ask them about political engagement, that is what they will tell you, but you are asking the wrong question. Are they interested in health, education or in their kids? Yes. Are they interested in jobs? Yes. We just do not give them the vehicle, so we have to change the system. It comes back to my earlier point, which is that we have to see democracy as a network and not a hierarchy.

Finally, I want to say that I am a citizen and not a customer. Democracy makes that difference. It is not white goods. It is not a piece of salami. It is about my life. That makes me a citizen, not a customer. Do not frame me as a customer in the process.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): I do not know whether Robert wants to come back on that. I agree with you, but as an MP I have a responsibility to respond within a certain time frame, for example, and to set it out clearly.

Andy Williamson: I think that is different. I think that having a customer response strategy—but to treat a citizen as a customer in a democratic system is fundamentally wrong.

Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Point taken.

Lord Kirkwood: I just want to say that I am aware of the Law Commission's work, which is very important, but I do not share the view that it will take until 2025. I think there is a good chance of getting some of the legislation through in the next Parliament, but not before.

Q42 Meg Hillier (in the Chair): Thank you very much for coming along. May I remind you that the Digital Democracy Commission, as I think I mentioned earlier, will take evidence and ideas via any medium? You can write them down or send them in via Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn. You can also post things on the Parliament website and we answer e-mails and read letters. We have a way of ensuring that we are all connected digitally as a

Commission, so we have digital presence with each other even when we are not physically in the same room.

Keep an eye on the website, as it will tell you about other sessions coming up. We are also doing road shows around the country, so if you have any thoughts about where we ought to go or who we ought to meet, please feed that in as well. We would really welcome your thoughts. To pick up on Andy's point, we are all in a network, so go out and network and tell other people in your network about us, too.

I have been reminded to tell you that our hashtag is #DDCVisits for the visits and that our Twitter handle is @digidemocracyuk, so please tweet out and remind other people.

Open data was also mentioned, so whether it is open data or how you think that MPs should engage or how you as a citizens should engage with Parliament—remember that we are talking about Parliament, not Government, which is important. We are a Commission looking at how Parliament works. We cannot control the Government. In fact, it is more about the House of Commons than the House of Lords, but that synergy will hopefully happen anyway. Please do feed in your views. Without your views, we will be working in a vacuum, which is not our intention.

Thank you again for coming along and for feeding in your thoughts.