

House of Lords Debate on Parliament and Public Engagement

*House of Lords Hansard
9 February 2005*

Lord Norton of Louth rose to call attention to the case for increasing public engagement with Parliament; and to move for Papers.

The noble Lord said: My Lords, this is not the first time I have raised the issue of increasing public engagement with Parliament and I make no apology for returning to it. For too long, the relationship between the public and Parliament has been neglected in favour of highlighting the relationship of Parliament to the executive. It has been a skewed focus. Parliament's role, crucially, is as the link between the people and the executive. Government is chosen through elections to Parliament and, as Enoch Powell once observed, it is through Parliament that people speak to government and government speak to the people. Parliament thus occupies a pivotal position. It alone has the legitimacy to do so.

Is there evidence that the public wishes to engage more with Parliament? We often assume that people are losing interest in politics. There is certainly evidence that people are losing interest in political parties and partisan debate and that they distrust politicians. However, survey data show that people, not least young people, are interested in political issues and that there are more people now than there were 20 years ago who are willing to take action in the event of Parliament considering an unjust or harmful law.

We know that people, individually as constituents and drawn together in interest groups, do make contact with Members of both Houses. Constituents are more likely to write to their MPs than was previously the case. Interest groups now lobby Members of both Houses on an unprecedented scale. A survey of interest groups carried out in the 1980s found that three-quarters had regular or frequent contact with one or more MPs. A consequence is the sheer volume of mail arriving in the Palace of Westminster. In 2003, that amounted to no less than 12.5 million items: 80 per cent went to MPs, the remainder to Members of this House. The figure excludes the ever-growing number of e-mails sent to the Members of both Houses.

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I welcome the fact that within Parliament there is an awareness of the need to engage more effectively with the public. Facilities and material for those visiting the Palace of Westminster have been significantly expanded. Proceedings are broadcast on the Parliament Channel. Despite a marked decline in parliamentary reporting by the national press, more people are now

able to see Parliament in action than was ever the case before the 1980s. The Parliament website hosts 9,000 pages and more than a quarter of a million people access the site every month. Committee proceedings are webcast. Both Houses now have dedicated information officers. Your Lordships' House has an excellent Information Office under Mary Morgan, disseminating material on the work and proceedings of this House. There is a group on information for the public, a Commons' body that includes Mary Morgan, to help co-ordination across Parliament.

Changes in structures and procedures have also facilitated engagement. The greater use of evidence-taking Select Committees in both Houses has provided an important and structured means for interested bodies to submit evidence. The use of committees for pre-legislative scrutiny has enhanced considerably engagement with those outside Parliament. Some committees have utilised online consultations, in some cases attracting submissions from people who would not otherwise have participated in the parliamentary process.

The result is greater contact between Parliament and the public than ever before and I think it is important to make that point. Is that then not sufficient? It certainly is not. We have failed to keep pace with popular demands and expectations. We have not yet got the fit right between people's interest in particular issues and the means we employ to engage with them.

In the time available I wish to focus on what needs to be done. This can be considered under two headings: first, process; and, secondly, awareness. If we are to achieve greater engagement with citizens, then the way in which we deal with legislation, and consider issues of public policy, has to be fit for purpose. The way we organise the process remains far from adequate. There is no structured means by which citizens can have an input when Bills—or, rather, most Bills—are being considered by Parliament. Only a minority of Bills are considered by evidence-taking committees. Standing Committees in another place are not empowered to take evidence. The use of Special Standing Committees in another place which can take evidence is extraordinarily rare. Only a minority of Bills are subject to pre-legislative scrutiny by Select Committees. For an individual or group with a particular interest in a Bill, the only recourse is to write to one or more Members. They need to have a good knowledge of MPs and Peers, as well as the parliamentary process, in order to know who to contact and when to contact them.

If members of the public are especially concerned about an issue of public policy, and if they think that something should be done, they may decide to petition Parliament. Signing a petition is the most popular form of collective political activity. The MORI poll for the Hansard Society and Electoral Commission

Audit of Political Engagement published last year, found that 39 per cent of those questioned had signed a petition. That is three times as many as had

presented their views to a local councillor or MP. Many people may devote a lot of time to organising a petition and thousands may sign it.

What happens when it comes to Parliament. As the Modernisation Committee of another place laconically noted last year in its report *Connecting Parliament with the Public*:

"Very little is currently done with petitions to the House of Commons".

For all intents and purposes, they enter a parliamentary black hole. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is now a tendency for people to petition Downing Street rather than Parliament.

Parliament needs therefore to reform its structures so that people outside can more directly engage with both Houses. However, changing the way we operate is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Having appropriate structures in place is no use if people are unaware of them and what their purpose is. We need to enhance popular awareness of what we do and the means available for people to have an input into our deliberations.

The most extensive means of educating people about Parliament is through the provision of citizenship in the national curriculum. This is a welcome development, but it has not yet met the expectations of those responsible for it. This is, in part, because of the way the provision of citizenship education is structured—a point taken up by the Modernisation Committee—and in part because of inadequate resources to deliver the curriculum. The noble Lord, Lord Phillips of Sudbury, who is president of the Citizenship Foundation, is unable to participate in the debate because he is in Grand Committee. He wished to stress that too little resource was put behind the introduction of citizenship education in schools. Those schools that have made a go of it have been reaping a rich harvest, especially in terms of engaging those who are usually difficult to motivate, but regrettably, they represent only about one in three of secondary schools.

Limited resources also constrain the Information Offices of both Houses from reaching a much wider audience. The Scottish Parliament has four or five times the number of staff that we have in this House in order to disseminate information. The Information Office in this House publishes an excellent booklet entitled *The Work of the House of Lords*. The print run is 40,000. Put that figure alongside that of the 430,000 people who visit the palace each year. The booklet would be an excellent resource for anyone teaching citizenship, but there are not the resources to mail copies to schools.

When Barry Winetrobe of Glasgow University and a former member of the House of Commons' Library gave evidence to the Constitution Committee last year, he drew attention to,

"the more integrated and comprehensive experience of the Scottish Parliament, where notions of public engagement are embodied in all its operations".

Emulating the Scottish Parliament, he noted, would entail a twin-track strategy of informing the public about the legislative process and engaging the public in the legislative process. As I hope will have been apparent from what I have said, that is precisely what I envisage.

How can this twin-track strategy be achieved? Let me deal, first, with process. The Constitution Committee, which I had the privilege to chair, published its report on *Parliament and the Legislative Process* in October. It recommended that pre-legislative scrutiny should be the norm, rather than the exception, and that every Bill should be considered at some stage during its passage by an evidence-taking committee. It also encouraged committees, wherever possible, to take evidence outside Westminster and to consider the greater use of e-consultation and the commissioning of opinion polls. These are significant proposals and it will help if the Minister can tell us when the Government will be replying to that report.

The report also drew attention to the use of petitions committees in other parliaments, including the Scottish Parliament. The Modernisation Committee in the other place recommended that consideration be given to petitions automatically standing referred to the appropriate Select Committee. There is a case for a dedicated petitions committee, able to act as a channel of onward transmission, but also with a capacity to chase up departments to ensure that each petition receives a considered response from government.

In terms of enhancing awareness, the website—as the Modernisation Committee recognised—needs to be far more user-friendly. The committee advocated a radical upgrading. I favour a complete redesign with far more emphasis on issues, rather than on structures and processes. As the Modernisation Committee noted, a major upgrade entails a significant investment in systems and staff.

That is also the case with expanding the information disseminated by both Houses. Parliament needs to invest significantly in dissemination. We need to harness our resources to providing visitors to the Palace with material about Parliament as a working institution, not simply as a historic building. We need to publish material—clear, accessible material—for schools and colleges throughout the country. Why not ensure that every student has a copy of the pamphlet, *Your Parliament?* We need to support citizenship education on a properly resourced basis. The failure to resource properly the provision of information to the public is a false economy.

My list is illustrative rather than exhaustive, but it is sufficient to identify what we should be doing. The relationship of Parliament to the public is fundamental to the health of our political system. Citizens know how to contact their local MP. They have less awareness of the institution of Parliament and of how it goes about its business. We know that, when they come into contact with the institution, their reaction is a positive one. We need to ensure that they have greater engagement. We benefit from their input: the political

system is the better for it. We certainly cannot afford to be insular. We need to act, and the sooner the better. I beg to move for Papers.

Lord Harrison: My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Norton of Louth, for opening the debate and for his many fine suggestions. I shall devote my seven slender minutes to how we physically receive the visiting public into the Lords, how accurately your Lordships' House is reported and how we might improve both.

When noble Lords walked into the House today, they will have noticed that nothing outside indicates the House of Lords, let alone welcomes the visitor. The only signs, apart from "In", "Out" and "No Entry", are one to Black Rod's Garden entrance—an Eden that I believe no longer exists—and a reference to the Sovereign's Entrance—a whole sign for a visitor who comes but once a year. However, we have a Peers' Entrance. It is through that unsigned portal that the visiting public is invited to come into their own Parliament but, other than the excellent welcome afforded by our door staff, there is no visible sign of welcome, and no orientation manifests itself. It gets worse.

Skip the next few steps and fast forward to our putative Peregrine Pickle, availing himself of the opportunity to observe one of your Lordships' excellent Select Committees at work. We have all sat on such committees and have stirred when some timid stranger from the real world outside steps hesitatingly into, say, Committee Room 4, which unhelpfully tells Peregrine Pickle that Sub-Committee G—no description—is sitting there. Once inside, no information is provided about the remit of the committee, its current subject of inquiry, its personnel or the names and status of the witnesses. A few minutes later, your Lordships hear the scrape of a chair and a shuffle as our visitor rises to leave, an older but no wiser man, with regard to your Lordships' House and how it works. He will return to the real world outside, disabused of only one of the myths that grip our television nation: namely, the myth that your Lordships habitually sport ermine at work as their regular home kit.

Noble Lords will get the picture. In the Lords, we assert and assume. We seldom welcome or explain. That is despite some notable developments in recent years. Our Select Committee reports are now more attractive and readable. They are no longer redolent of post-war paper austerity matched with printed type suitable for a pre-Chaucerian palimpsest.

In our daily work, we suffer from the incubus of this fine but faulty building, which was designed for another age. Secondly, we suffer from a lack of funds and resources to do and explain our work, as was pointed out by the noble Lord, Lord Norton of Louth. Indeed, in our annual report, we vaingloriously boast that the British public get us on the cheap. In contrast, the European Parliament has a wonderful, dedicated visitors' centre and staff who do an unparalleled job in explaining their parliament to our people.

We should leave this Palace of Westminster to the Commons and to the Law Lords, for whom we are regularly and confusingly mistaken. We should build a

new parliament building as successful architecturally as the Scottish Parliament, which receives coachloads of visitors. We need a parliament building that opens its doors and welcomes the public, who may then see us for themselves. We need a modern, vibrant second Chamber, confident in its job of legislative scrutiny, informed debate and government oversight.

I now turn to how we are reported. Unfortunately, we often collude with the strange and quirky image that the public have of us. That is reflected in "Today in Parliament" on Radio 4 where, as often as not, one of the odder—and usually trivial—exchanges in this House provides the light dessert to the meatier menu of the Commons. Who can blame the public for thinking that the Lords remains the comic creation detailed a century ago by Gilbert and Sullivan?

This is all the more regrettable given the experience, expertise and knowledge found in the Lords on important issues, such as the European Union. However, in large part we fail to activate that pool of expertise to the benefit of the country and the public. What better time is there than now, in advance of the proposed referendum on the European Union and its constitution, to mobilise the living library of considered thought contained in our countless EU reports and give it a public face and voice? Why not copy the public information service of the Folketing, the Danish Parliament, which provides documentation and informed information on our European Union affairs to its own citizens. That service has a dedicated staff and an up-to-date website. Against the tide of Euro-myth and misinformation, we have common cause in shedding light on issues that really touch the lives of Mr and Mrs Peregrine Pickle as they perambulate outside their own Parliament.

Finally, I draw the attention of my noble friend the Minister to the European Union Select Committee's meeting in Brussels with the Commissioner responsible for parliamentary liaison, Margot Wallström, who is the public face of Europe. Not only did she expatiate to us on the Commission's own new "call direct phone line", which is styled to rebut the more absurd examples of myth- and mischief-making currently engulfing the public image of the European Union, but, prompted by my question on Carl Bildt's suggestion of townhouse meetings for the public, she also promised that, if invited by the incoming British presidency, the 25-strong European Commission would fan out throughout the United Kingdom to hold "meet the public" meetings at the time of their forthcoming presidency briefing here in London. Will my noble friend explore that exciting possibility? Who knows, perhaps we too should join in that exercise in meeting the public whom we strive to serve beyond the M25?

Lord Holme of Cheltenham: My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Norton, for making this debate possible and for his challenging opening speech. I declare an interest as chairman of the Hansard Society, whose purpose is better to connect Parliament and people. I shall be referring to some work the society does in a moment.

Before I do, there is a problem—and there is no point trying to skate over this—which, if not of disconnection, is at least of a faulty connection between Parliament and people. There is considerable evidence of misunderstanding both who we are and what we do. For instance, in the qualitative phase of the audit of political engagement to which the noble Lord, Lord Norton, referred—which was commissioned by the Hansard Society and the Electoral Commission—the pollsters asked participants, as they do nowadays, to compare Parliament with an animal. Which creatures did they choose: the noble lion, or the wise owl? No: they chose snakes, weasels, foxes, wolves and vultures. Yet in the same audit, over two thirds of those responding wanted a say in how the country is run—although, interestingly, only one-third of them thought they had that.

So, before talking about some of the excellent work that is being done, by the staff of both Houses and by such bodies as the Hansard Society and the Citizenship Foundation, to which Lord Norton referred, it might be worth while exploring some causes of this apparent alienation. First, we must accept that in our times the age of deference has gone for ever. We live in a "show me" world, not a "tell me" world. There is no longer any magic cloak of mystery available in which parliamentarians can wrap themselves. Like the once-mighty Wizard of Oz, we are now exposed to full view. Or are we? For most people see us through the media, and it is conspicuous how relatively empty the press benches are during this debate.

When we think about the media, another insight from attitude research may be relevant. On the whole, people have a pretty good opinion of their Member of Parliament. They rate their local MP well. Yet, at the same time they mistrust politicians and Parliament *en masse*. We can see the same effect in other spheres of public life. People whose personal and family experience of healthcare has been good, for instance, nevertheless feel that the NHS is on its last legs. It is as if the public space is so full of cynicism that people hardly trust their own experience in making judgments about what is happening in public affairs.

In the case of Parliament I would hazard a guess, if I dare do so in a pre-election period, that an excess of adversarial partisanship has something to do with this cynicism. People see very little, for instance, of our careful, consensual, cross-party work in committees, but they see a lot of synthetic outrage and ritualistic sparring. Even more problematically—as I think the noble Lord, Lord Norton, implied—they see Parliament as part of an often unpopular government, rather than as a healthy and corrective counter-balance to Executive power. So what of the media? Is it a true mirror, where any parliamentary rage that exists is simply that of Caliban seeing himself in the glass? Or is it a distorting prism?

It is precisely to explore these issues of the symbiotic relationship between Parliament and the media that the Hansard Society last year established a high-level commission on Parliament in the Public Eye, ably chaired by the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam. I certainly look forward to his commission's insights and recommendations when it publishes—which will, I think, be soon after the

election—and to hearing from the noble Lord later in the debate. I know his commission has already identified one bridge to better understanding, and here again I follow the noble Lord, Lord Norton. That is to make a better connection between issues in which people are intensely interested—whether it be pensions, poverty, the environment or the Iraq war—and our parliamentary process and programme. To the layman, those too often seem impenetrable and technical, illuminated only by the occasional pyrotechnics of a debating ding-dong.

That is one reason I particularly welcome the emphasis put on pre-legislative scrutiny in *Parliament and the Legislative Process*—the last report, published in October 2004, by the Constitution Committee under the chairmanship of the noble Lord, Lord Norton. I understand that the Government have undertaken to respond within six months—and those six months run out on 25 April, when the Government may be otherwise occupied. Can we please see an early response to that very important report? When the Minister responds, it would be helpful to know when that might be.

Pre-legislative scrutiny is a wonderful opportunity to follow EM Forster's maxim: "only connect". The Hansard Society tries to help in this through its website tellparliament.net, which creates facilitated forums for committees and for all-party groups to consult the public. Currently, for instance, 330 people are engaged in a diabetes dialogue. Interestingly, 78 per cent of them have never been in contact with a Member of Parliament before—yet they are now actively involved in consulting, both as lay and expert members of the public on that issue.

So we are making some progress. Thankfully, there has been widespread recognition in Parliament that we have much still to do. I, too, pay tribute to the work of the Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee, and to the House authorities here, including Mary Morgan, who do a great deal with limited resources. The House authorities made a bold decision last summer in allowing the Hansard Society to hold our "House to Home" exhibition, which some of your Lordships came to, in Westminster Hall. It was a great success: we had over 60,000 people attending the exhibition. The great majority of them became involved in dialogue and constructive feedback. Bodies such as ours are also working in schools, trying to bridge the gap I have spoken about.

If there is one theme which links all these activities—whether by the House or by civic, public interest bodies—and which I believe should affect our deliberations today, it is that if this Parliament is to avoid becoming a heritage backwater, we must demonstrate first that we are not an appendage of the Government, but a living legislature. Secondly, we must demonstrate that our doors are open—literally, figuratively and electronically—to our fellow citizens. If we can do that, then the mother of Parliaments will be able to enjoy a respected and useful third age.

Baroness Greenfield: My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Norton, for introducing this timely debate. We live in an era when public engagement is critical for the big, often unprecedented issues that face us as a fast-moving,

21st-century society. Never before has engagement been so needed on the new types of problems and opportunities—many of them influenced by science and technology—that face us today. Indeed, it is a search for the best strategy for public empowerment in a rapidly changing society in which scientists also need to engage.

It seems to me, as a scientist, that there are some clear analogies between the problems faced by scientists for public engagement and those faced by Parliament. In both cases, Parliament and science affect our daily life. Yet, there is still a groundswell of apathy, in both cases, that the affairs discussed—either among scientists or, indeed, in Parliament—are beyond the expertise and knowledge of many and, indeed, the daily cares of most. How convenient, then, just to leave it to others—the professionals, the experts—while one gets on with one's daily life.

Surely, such an attitude is not just one of benign negligence but has far more negative overtones. Scientists and parliamentarians are distrusted. In both cases they could be perceived—and, in a manner fuelled avidly by a sensationalist press—as self-serving. To that end, they might well be perceived in both cases as manipulating information or being economical with the truth, in accordance with their own agenda. A scientist, as a parliamentarian, could be perceived by the general public as, at best, impacting only very indirectly on their daily life.

In a recent survey, two thirds of those polled apparently thought that scientists wanted to make life better for the average person, but a similar proportion also thought that a scientist should listen more to what people thought. It is at fora such as those at the Royal Institution and, commendably, other science centres throughout the country, where we try to address that problem.

When it comes to public engagement with Parliament, I gather that there are some excellent strategies afoot to help remedy a comparable situation. Apparently, citizenship classes are being instigated in schools, websites for parliamentarians are increasingly interactive, and mock elections are being held with young people to give them a feel for democracy and what it can achieve. However, parliamentarians and scientists are surely in need of a more general culture change. That phrase is widely used yet rarely defined, because it amounts to nothing less than the collective mindset of our whole society: the amalgam of our ideas, thoughts, hopes, beliefs and, as such, it is hard to change. After all, a belief is often immutable in the face of logic or evidence to the contrary.

A belief, therefore, that science and Parliament are boring, that scientists and politicians are devious and dysfunctionally remote from everyday life, is clearly not so easy to undermine simply by telling people the contrary. We need to show the alternatives and stimulate, so that certain beliefs are replaced by others. Beliefs and ideas are hardly ever changed by merely increasing laws, by further regulations or audits. In fact, such simple manoeuvres would attempt to control through change and would surely bring about the opposite of the desired effect. Laws and audits may well deter a public, especially

those employed in public sector careers such as school and university teaching, where they are already plagued by a demoralising over-regulation. I suggest that culture change is most effected by people caring about what is happening; by emphasising content rather than process; by convincing people that what happens in both institutions, be it science or Parliament, is relevant to their daily life; and, above all, that they are empowered when they take an active interest.

Again, a good comparison between science and Parliament is that interest often mounts when people disagree. There is a perception, perhaps, for both science and Parliament, that we are often homogenous in the way in which we go about our business. None the less, Parliament, more so than science, is of course in the business of celebrating the diversity of ideologies. Some might argue that a clash of ideologies is less marked in Parliament than it used to be. Perhaps Parliament could be seen as going the way of science, perceived as a grey area of dogma, where the only diversity eventually lies not in polarisation but in personality—in image rather than idea. As such, the public, through the media, often play the man rather than the ball, placing emphasis on the personalities and caprices of individuals rather than the range of concepts that they represent.

It is hard to legislate an involvement and an interest in an institution without first catering for a nascent interest in the subject matter itself. It is exactly the same problem with science: one cannot ask the general public to be involved with science as a generic and empty concept, as a process, as a word. Instead, one has to show, through examples, how relevant it is. Indeed, the affairs discussed in Parliament will increasingly have a strong scientific or technological flavour. There is a further merit in drawing comparisons between the two, to show how a culture change in both cases could be brought about. Debates in Parliament, rather as scientific experiments, are hard to change in their methodology. Rather, the way in which they are presented and what is expressed should be where we focus and, in particular, on how we work with the media.

Perhaps one advantage of science over Parliament is that we are able to use visual images, which apparently increase the impact of a presentation by 400 per cent. On the other hand, the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate, increasingly available as it is on different types of screen, as opposed to the pages of highly technical peer-review journals, must surely redress that balance.

I spent a substantial part of last year in Australia, reporting as a "thinker in residence" to the Premier of South Australia. One of the central issues on which we were working was how science and, indeed, scholarship in general, could be mainstreamed with the activities *inter alia* of politicians. One project that I encountered in Australia and which I commend to your Lordships, was a "Science in Parliament" initiative promoted by the state of Queensland. Scientists and politicians met together in large numbers, and that, of course, had traction in the press. Similar models, where science as well as other sectors could be seen to be engaging with parliamentarians, discussing ideas

that were relevant to the public, and ways whereby the public could appreciate a diversity of view, would make for good and improved media copy, and hence encourage more public engagement.

Culture change is not easy, nor can it be the responsibility of one sector or profession. It is both an effect and a cause of other transformations occurring in our society, but it is something to which we need to be sensitive. I suggest that it is only by working closely with the media and concentrating on the issues that concern people that we will help them avoid sleepwalking into a fast-paced technological change. Instead, parliamentarians and scientists alike should aim to empower a greater intimacy with a system that should increasingly, in turn, be preoccupied with the implications of that technological change.

Baroness Royall of Blaisdon: My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Norton of Louth, on inspiring this important debate, and I welcome many of his suggestions about process. This debate is of the utmost importance because it is inextricably linked to the need to nurture our democracy. I am a passionate democrat, and I deeply regret the current lack of interest and engagement in the governance of our country.

Too many of us have become passive democrats. Too many people cannot be bothered to go out and vote in elections. It is not that they do not like voting. When it comes to "Big Brother" and the plethora of other programmes that require people to vote participants in or out, millions of fingers press the red buttons. But people do not think that voting in elections really matters and they do not understand how relevant it is to their daily lives. This is a persistent source of frustration for me, and it turns into something much deeper when I read reports of the elections in Iraq, where people voted in polling stations that had been bombed earlier in the day, and where a woman of 60 is reported as saying, "Today is the first time that I feel like a complete human being". These people are thirsting for democracy, to engage in their new system of governance and to help shape their future.

Perhaps those of us who have not had to struggle for our democratic rights take them too easily for granted. Perhaps the struggle also provides a form of education so that people know why they need to engage and understand that democracy is a means of empowerment and an important aspect of social and political emancipation.

The tendency towards single-issue campaigns that other noble Lords have mentioned rather than engagement in the democratic process is, of course, not confined to the UK. It is the same in France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the USA and many other countries. For me, the attractions of compulsory voting are great. Does it matter if people do not engage in the political process and do not bother to vote? Yes, it does. I understand that many young people have been turned off traditional politics and prefer to engage in campaigns that are of specific concern to them. I celebrate their commitment, but I regret that too often they are unwilling to use our system of governance to best effect. They might lobby us, but they do not vote. A healthy democracy needs

the oxygen of participation. Once the participation falls below a certain level, its legitimacy is called into question and then we enter very dangerous and uncharted waters.

In my view, people have a democratic duty to vote and to engage, but they can exercise that responsibility only if they understand the system in which we live. Therein lies one of the problems. Many people have only a limited knowledge of what Parliament is and does and therefore do not engage with Parliament. Perhaps, more importantly, Parliament does not adequately engage with them. We do not reach out to people as we should. Too often we forget that Parliament belongs to the people. There are many ways of dealing with the challenge of providing better information and access for the public. The noble Lord, Lord Norton of Louth, mentioned many ways in which the House of Commons and House of Lords are making significant changes. But there is much more to be done. Perhaps some of us should consider blogging.

We have to establish a better dialogue between Parliament and the citizens of this country. Education is, in my view, the key. If we can instil into children and young people the importance of democracy and understanding of local councils, Parliament, government and the European Parliament, they will be empowered to use the systems and structures to their advantage and the advantage of the society in which they live. I warmly welcome the Government's initiative to introduce citizenship into the national curriculum. I know that there has been some criticism about the teaching of citizenship; clearly, poor-quality teaching must be improved. However, this should not detract from the importance of the subject and the need for adequate resources.

Those of us who have the privilege to be parliamentarians have a special responsibility to engage with schools, from primary level upwards, to explain what we do and why. Interacting with children and young people is a pleasure and a great way to break down barriers. With respect to colleagues who are older, wiser and much wealthier than I am, some children I have met simply cannot believe that a middle-aged woman wearing jeans who lives down the road can be a member of your Lordships' House.

The provision of information about what we do, the laws that we pass and the committees on which we sit is for me an integral part of a transparent democracy. It is an expensive part of democracy and we are too reluctant to invest properly in the dissemination of information and the setting up of interactive dialogue.

The media also have to take some responsibility for nurturing democracy and increasing public engagement with Parliament. Freedom of the press is possible only in a democracy. The 24-hour media in constant search for breaking news stories no longer take enough interest in the deliberations of Parliament. Yes, Parliament junkies like me can obtain our daily fix with "Today in Parliament", but most news programmes and newspapers do not have adequate parliamentary coverage. The huge fall in the number of Lobby correspondents is a clear testament to that.

The daily grilling of politicians does not fill the gap. Indeed, too often the cynicism of interviewers and their clear disregard for the integrity of politicians reinforces the public's jaundiced view of politicians. Greatest responsibility must lie with politicians themselves. It is up to us to restore confidence in politics and in our democratic system. One of the ways to do that is by ensuring that we and our Parliament engage with the public. We have a duty to inform and explain, to interact and to listen. Politicians must not raise unrealistic expectations that we cannot deliver. We must not lose touch and become disconnected. We must make an effort to keep plugged into reality and to engage.

As we near a general election, political parties have a responsibility not to tarnish further the political system. Engaging in negative politics, cultivating cynicism and fostering apathy demeans us all. The public's reaction is, "A plague on everyone's houses," and we all lose out.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is a plea to government, Parliament and all colleagues on these Benches that we should increase our engagement with the public in the interests of transparency and as a means of reinvigorating our democratic system. The challenge is great and costly, but it is one that we must meet. To use a phrase borrowed from one of my heroes, Willy Brandt, let us "dare more democracy" and dare more engagement between Parliament and the public.

Lord Dean of Harptree: My Lords, I add my thanks to my noble friend Lord Norton of Louth for introducing this important debate. How refreshing it is so far to have a broad measure of agreement from all parts of your Lordships' House. There is nothing more important for all of us as parliamentarians than the relationship between Parliament and people.

Our forefathers fought for over a century in Parliament and outside to obtain the universal franchise. Why is it then that we have poor turnouts at elections; that people turn away from the polls; and that they seem to feel that Parliament does not effectively represent their interests? What can we in Parliament do about it?

I go back to Burke's classic definition in the 18th century; namely, it is the job of Parliament—I think that this applies to both Houses—to represent the interests of the nation. Representation does not necessarily mean election. I had the privilege to be elected to another place in 1964. In those days, there were MPs in all parts of the House who had knowledge and experience of the world and work outside politics. Unfortunately, in all parts of the House, most of those have disappeared.

We now have an increasing number of professional politicians. I am not decrying professional politicians, but we do not want too many if we are to have balanced and effective representation in Parliament. That is one of the reasons why people feel that the representation of their interests in Parliament is not as great as it used to be.

I suggest that your Lordships' House is today more representative of the British public than another place. We have a wealth of experience and knowledge. There are Peers with knowledge and experience of virtually every subject under the sun. Why are your Lordships' mailbags growing all the time? Because people feel that their problems are understood and will be effectively expressed in your Lordships' House. Why is it that governments accept amendments put forward in your Lordships' House? Surely it is because they recognise on occasions that the wisdom and experience in your Lordships' House is superior to the wisdom coming out of Whitehall. That is one of the reasons why this House is respected outside; long may that continue.

Reform has been in the air off and on since 1911. I am fairly suspicious of most of the proposals put forward for reform of your Lordships' House. I know that noble Lords, particularly those opposite, will say, "There is a crusty old Tory reactionary" and all that.

A noble Lord: Hear, hear!

Lord Dean of Harptree: I say that because under most of the proposals for reform the House would be less representative of the people of this country and diversity would be reduced. I am particularly against an elected element in your Lordships' House. My noble friend on the Front Bench is probably looking disapprovingly at me, but in my view the elected element would make the House less representative of the interests of this country and too much like a pale shadow of another place, particularly if nomination for candidates was dominated by the party machine, which would almost certainly be the case.

I can think of only one reform that might meet with consensus in your Lordships' House: to offer life peerages to our present colleagues who are here on a hereditary basis. The Government can then say that they have got rid of the hereditary Peers, which is one of their pledges; the rest of us can say that we preserve continuity and a House that works well.

As has been said from all parts of the House already, Parliament is at its strongest and best when people feel that their interests are understood and expressed and that Parliament enters into their hopes and fears and does something about them. Parliament will then have more authority and be an effective watchdog on government and will prevent further encroachment on the powers of Parliament by the government of the day.

Lord Parekh: My Lords, I begin by thanking the noble Lord, Lord Norton, for introducing this debate, with his usual erudition and wisdom. We need to be clear why it is important that we should increase public engagement with Parliament. It is not a question of political cosmetics, nor is it a question of how best we can sell ourselves to the people, but it goes to the very heart of the kind of political system that we have.

Britain has always prided itself in being unique in having a parliamentary form of government and a parliamentary democracy. It is a form of government in

which the sovereignty is supposed to lie with the people, but it is exercised not by them directly but indirectly through Parliament. Therefore, it is a complex form of government, and we must constantly remember that it must strike the right kind of balance between Parliament on the one hand and democracy or the public on the other. If Parliament were to become remote or overbearing, the democratic element would suffer and people would feel alienated from it. On the other hand, if the Parliament became populist and tended to conform much too easily to popular demands, there is a danger that people would lose respect for the institution and the parliamentary aspect would suffer. I say that to set the scene for a couple of important points that I want to make.

Parliamentary democracy depends for its success on the constant flow of ideas and influences between Parliament on the one hand and the public on the other. I have a feeling that perhaps, in earlier debates, there has been a concentration on how we can reach out to the people and make ourselves better known and recognised. We also need to look at the other side of the equation; namely, how people can reach out to us and influence the quality and content of debate in this House. It is in that context that I want to raise four or five important issues.

First, it is absolutely vital that the public should be able to make an input into the parliamentary proceedings. As the noble Lord, Lord Norton, rightly said, public petitions on which hundreds of people expend a lot of effort should be taken far more seriously than we seem to. One way in which to do that would be to refer them automatically to the relevant Select Committees, which would decide whether to conduct an inquiry into the issues that the public petitions have raised or take them into account in the context of some other ongoing inquiry.

In that context, I am reminded of a very important debate that took place in this country in the early decades of the 20th century, when the great Liberals and members of the Independent Labour Party, as it was in those days, asked themselves how people could be directly involved in the conduct of parliamentary debate. There was a fascinating suggestion, which might be worth revisiting, that 5 per cent or 10 per cent of the legislation in any given year could be set aside for public input. In other words, people who know where the shoe pinches and have daily experience of how the political system works have some fascinating ideas about what laws and policy they would like to see adopted. Why not think in terms of asking people to make suggestions as to what kind of laws and policy they would like to see? The whole nation might be engaged in a very important debate about what Parliament might eventually do with those ideas.

The second point that I want to raise has to do with the fact that some of our laws and policies can benefit greatly from wider citizen input. We do that to some extent, but we could do it far more by institutionalising and widening popular consultation. Select Committees or Joint Committees considering draft legislation could take evidence outside Westminster, or we might organise well publicised citizens' forums where public debate could take place

and the public could make an input into the system. We might commission public opinion polls or invite extensive online consultation.

Thirdly, your Lordships' House is rightly well known, not only in this country but throughout the world, for the quality of its debates. These debates, whether on euthanasia, humanitarian intervention, university funding or the war on Iraq, have been absolutely first rate and deserve to be better known. They could be published in attractive covers by Her Majesty's Stationary Office and sold at a subsidised rate or given away free to schools and university. They could then form the basis of debates in schools in the same way as Supreme Court decisions form the basis of debates in schools in the United States. They would educate public opinion and raise public awareness as to what your Lordships' House actually does. There is no reason why one could not go a step further and have a parliamentary education unit to summarise debates and issues in short two or three-page summaries for the benefit of the media.

Fourthly, in this country, compared to some other countries, there is no regular contact between academics and parliamentarians. There is a lot of expertise in our universities which could be profitably utilised for the benefit of our debates and legislation. It would therefore be greatly beneficial if academics and other experts who are not institutionally tied could be involved in organising seminars and discussions for the benefit of MPs and Peers. I know, for example, that the University of Westminster, with which I am associated, is planning a Westminster forum on politics and international relations, precisely with that sort of thing in mind. I very much hope that our parliamentary education unit might be able to co-operate with it.

Finally, in much of the discussion, our ethnic minorities tend to get ignored. I was a little disappointed that there was no reference to how they might make an input into our debate. They are particularly handicapped because they have few regular columnists who express their views on important issues. They are grossly underrepresented in the other place, though happily well represented in this one. We need to find some imaginative ways in which to take Parliament to them as well as bringing them to the Parliament. They have a vital input to make, not just in race-related issues but on lots of other issues, such as the war on Iraq and university funding, on all of which they have important sensibilities to communicate. At present the CRE is more or less their only spokesman, and that has its obvious limitations.

I would suggest that there might be two ways in which to engage those people, although there are countless others which your Lordships may think of. One would be to have a Select Committee on Race, for a short period at least. Secondly, we might have a clearly targeted consultative mechanism directed at ethnic minorities. Those two ideas may be worth considering, and I am sure that there are many other such ideas.

Lord Lucas: My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lord Norton for starting the debate. I agreed with everything he said, I believe, including the suggestion that there must be a public stage of every Bill. As was set out by the Labour

Party Back-Bench committee on the procedures of this House and echoed by the noble Lord, Lord Parekh, we are looking for dialogue, a genuine opportunity for people outside to influence what is said and what goes on in the House. We are looking for mechanisms that would make that possible.

The speeches given by my forebear, the first Lord Lucas to sit in this House, a hundred years ago, were reported at length in newspapers—and incredibly boring stuff it is too. In those days, we could hand our views down as Moses handed down his tablets and have them paid attention to. That is absolutely not the case now, and I cannot see that it ever will be the case. The best that we could hope for in existing circumstances is to have the media as interlocutors for us. I do not share the despair of the noble Lord, Lord Holme of Cheltenham, at the fact that there are only a couple of people in the press box. That is good. There have been many debates when there has been nobody, nor any mention in the press afterwards to indicate that someone was watching on the telly. It is delightful that we have someone here.

Members of the press have their own agenda and interests, and we cannot expect them to toady to us. It is no good us coming to them as supplicants, either; if we do that, they will merely shape what we say to suit their own needs and report that. That is what we get in so many of even the BBC's political programmes, which I enjoy listening to. The agenda is chosen by journalists; they choose who they want on the programmes, and a lot of the time they are not politicians at all but people talking about what politicians are saying. So we get the whole debate third-hand. That is how the media play it, because people enjoy listening to it. That is how we should expect the media to be. If we want to talk to the public, we have to find our own ways of doing it.

My noble friend Lord Norton was absolutely right: an obvious way in which to talk to the public is to create a website that is usable by members of the public who want to know something about what we think and do on a particular subject. However, my noble friend should not underestimate the amount of work and structural change necessary to do that. We really need to get professional in information management. The tools and systems are there to do it, but we must bring ourselves up to date. We have to face up to the fact that we are living in a world where technology makes possible things that were not possible before. As Peers, we ought to have personal websites, or even weblogs to make ourselves accessible to people outside. I note that Politico's offers free websites to Members of the other place, but not to Peers. That is something that we should put right.

If dialogue is to work, it will be crucially dependent on our ability to respond. The noble Lord, Lord Harrison, said that we should get out of this place and free ourselves; we should have a new building. This Chamber is all we need by way of a building; the rest can be provided by technology. What I lack is not space, but research facilities. If I had someone who could find things out for me, organise, carry out research, structure amendments and so on, or handle an interface with the public, it would make an enormous difference to my ability to do my job in this place. That is not on offer at the moment. It is pathetic how we hobble ourselves and allow ourselves to be limited and

ineffective in our job by not having facilities that are there in abundance 100 yards to the north and in even greater abundance in Europe. Why do we limit ourselves in that way? It is not a reasonable thing to do.

We do not need to think of buildings. It does not matter where researchers are located. They can be scattered all over the country or in a building somewhere in outer London. It does not matter because, given decent technological arrangements, we can communicate with them, and they can do their work wherever they may be. The business that I run, *The Good Schools Guide*, no longer has an office. Everything is distributed. There is no paper, no office. We do not need it.

I know that many of my noble friends may not be as comfortable with the Internet as I am, but come on, jump in, welcome to the world. If we had the facilities that the Scots have provided for themselves in the Scottish Parliament, we might be able to make a good start. I do not think that it would cost much—£10 million or £20 million might be the end of it. We would be doing it in a way that was cost-effective and free of architects.

We have to change, if we want what we do and say in the House to be respected. If we want to be part of the political process in this country, we must open ourselves to the public. We have to find ways of communicating with them effectively. It is in our hands. We are a House of Parliament, and we have the ability to do those things for ourselves. All that is required is the will and a certain amount of pressure on the usual channels.

Lord Puttnam: My Lords, I, too, thank the noble Lord, Lord Norton, for initiating the debate and for the very full and wise way in which he set out the topic. I identify myself with every word.

I should be more than a little surprised if anyone this afternoon argued against the noble Lord's core proposition, although in a meeting last week, a very senior parliamentarian made the point that, should the public become that much more familiar with the workings of Parliament, they could only recoil in horror at many of its processes and procedures. That is an extreme view, but not wholly without foundation.

For the past eight months, as the noble Lord, Lord Holme, mentioned, I have had the pleasure of chairing a Hansard Commission, Parliament in the Public Eye. The work has been extremely interesting, if something of an eye-opener. I have been very fortunate in that the commission's members are a pretty distinguished group from politics, journalism and the academic world.

We have now taken a great deal of evidence from a wide range of interests, both from within and from outside Parliament, and it has recently become increasingly clear what the outcome is likely to be when we publish our report a few months from now and—just as important—what has driven our conclusions.

As your Lordships have heard already, there is a great deal of confusion as to what is Parliament and what is government, but there is no evidence of a lack of interest. It is just that people—particularly the young—no longer believe that Parliament, let alone the executive, really shares or understands their concerns. More precisely, they feel themselves marginalised and excluded from issues—climate change is a good example—on which they would like to focus and, if possible through debate, become that much more knowledgeable.

Your Lordships will not be surprised to know that they want to be part of the debate, not merely passive observers to whom bits and pieces of probably sanitised information are thrown whenever the government of the day decide to part with it.

Parliament is viewed from the outside as a small, exclusive but not especially attractive club with its own language and practices, most of which seem designed to exclude rather than include the average or even the interested citizen. Parliament, the public and the press are felt to share what would objectively be considered an essentially immature relationship. A number of parliamentary practices are seen as being manipulative, as indeed, on closer examination, a few prove to be.

In a nutshell, the public are increasingly critical of the way in which the country is run. After eight months of looking at the problem, I believe that in many respects they have every right to feel somewhat disenchanted. It is certain that anyone who believes that the next generation is likely to be satisfied with being asked, once every four years or so, how they feel things are going is in for a very big shock.

Three issues have emerged from our inquiry that seem to be of overwhelming importance if Parliament is to find ways of reconnecting with the legitimate expectations of the people. I say "people" rather than "electorate" because the young are such an important part of what I see very much as an opportunity.

Our commission seems to have arrived at a consensus that whatever the qualities of this or that aspect of parliamentary life—and there are many—Parliament fails to present itself as the sum of its parts. As a result, much of what is best gets submerged in broad-brush criticism of the areas in which it palpably fails to meet the expectations of the world outside these walls. That almost certainly will call for significant levels of organisational change, including a management and communication structure that conforms to the pace and nature of the challenges facing all other aspects of public life.

That leads naturally to the second consensus. Irrespective of the incremental improvements being made in almost all aspects of Parliament's work, the pace and, in some cases, the nature of change are failing to match that which is taking place in society at large. The result is that Parliament is not only failing to stay abreast of developments and opportunities but is, if anything, year on year, falling behind. One has only to look at the growth over the past 20 years in the cost and sophistication of the communication budget of any

significant corporation, or even the government, to realise the urgency and significance of this afternoon's debate.

Our third consensus is the area in which society as a whole has to step up to the plate. The level of informed, transparent and engaged democracy that any citizen of the 21st century has every right to expect will necessarily be comparatively expensive. I do not think that a cut-price democracy represents that much of a bargain. The British people have a right to be offered a vision of what is possible and what that is likely to cost. Their parliamentary representatives must then unblinkingly argue the case and stop apologising for seeking the resources they need to do the best job possible. Those who support a cut-price version should stand up and say so, but they must also be absolutely clear about the cost to open and engaged democracy that their version will achieve. There will always be more than one notion of what represents value for money, but in this area of civil society for me and, I suspect, for the noble Lord, Lord Norton, only the very best will do.

Philip Stephens, in the *Financial Times* a couple of weeks back, finished his column by expressing the view that,

"the future has been handled over to events".

He was not speaking of Parliament at the time, but I had been reading an excellent book by Edward Pearce on the Reform Act 1832, entitled *Reform*, and what I got from the book was that reform came about only in the very nick of time.

Why is it that so much that is important in our public life is addressed too little, too late and too cheaply? As has been said by more than one noble Lord, our forefathers fought for the rights that we have. They fought for Parliament and democracy, and they fought for the right to have free and fair elections. Yet we seem extraordinarily careless about protecting the information flow and the engagement that make that entire process worth while.

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws: My Lords, I, too, pay tribute to the noble Lord, Lord Norton, for providing the opportunity to debate this subject. The noble Lord, Lord Norton, is a constitutional lawyer of high repute and he has often raised important issues about our political processes, sometimes raising a warning flag when active steps have to be taken to maintain an effective political system. We owe him a debt of gratitude for doing that. As the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, has just said, sometimes we have to get there in the nick of time. In raising this debate we are perhaps just at that margin.

Last year I became the chair of yet another independent commission looking into the state of political participation in Britain. Called the Power Inquiry it was established by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. That commission comprises Ferdinand Mount, who will be known to Members of this House as a former political adviser to the Conservative government, the president of the Women's Institute, the deputy General-Secretary of the TUC and representatives of sections of the

community. The commission is composed not just of the great and the grand but also of people from community organisations, political activists and young members of the public. The noble Lord, Lord Parekh, will be happy to hear that members of the ethnic minorities are well represented.

We have been considering and taking evidence for three months and already it is clear to us that there is a deep well of frustration and disenchantment with traditional politics, which has been referred to by a number of previous speakers. Whereas in the past the public may have been divided around the principles and policies of Left and Right, people are now abandoning their tribal moorings. A sense of distrust of politicians and of the system in general seems to be shared by many. A very saddening result of our inquiry so far is the discovery of the feeling that involvement in politics is a waste of time. That sentiment is expressed by young people but also by people from ethnic minorities and generally by sections of the public who traditionally were actively engaged in politics.

We should never underestimate the strength or depth of this disconnection between governor and governed. General election turnout may have dropped only recently but party membership has been in severe decline for 50 years. Local election turnouts have been low for decades and surveys have consistently found strong distrust of politicians since as early as the beginning of the 1980s. The decrease in membership of political parties should concern us because, of course, it is from the political parties that our politicians are drawn. Therefore, the pool is becoming increasingly smaller.

The partisan arguments, which claim that this is the result of sleaze—that is the allegation made against Conservative governments—or spin—that is the allegation made against the Labour Government—are often wide of the mark. The overriding cause is the widespread sense that the average citizen has no real influence over the key political decisions that affect their lives. That is repeated over and over again. Endless consultations carried out by public bodies seem to have no clear impact. The recurring theme is that they are often seen by the public as a fig leaf rather than real account being taken of their views.

There is also a sense that MPs are far more bound to the wishes of their party leaderships than to the views of their constituents. It is claimed that the one real formal power the citizen has—the vote—has been rendered meaningless by one party dominance and the similarity of the main parties' policies. Even if that is perception only, there certainly is a feeling among the general public that there is little to choose between them.

The political parties are going through their own convulsions of having to reconfigure their identities in a very new context in which class is no longer such a powerful determinant of people's position in the world, and certainly not a determinant of voting patterns. Political parties have been poaching in each others voting pools for some decades now, and that is not confined to one political party. Members of the public say that there is uncertainty regarding what the parties stand for.

Disenchantment with political processes is just the contemporary outcome of a much older historical trend. Our system of democracy, formed as it was in the 19th century, never took serious account of the fact that citizens at some later time might want more influence than a vote every few years. In those days and for much of the 20th century British citizens were expected to delegate decision-making to their political representatives on the grounds of their superior intellect or by virtue of the fact that they shared a common ideology, and therefore you could be sure that your political representative would reflect the things you believed in. However, that may no longer be so. In an era when citizens are ever more confident of their own ability to make informed decisions, and when the old ideologies no longer resonate, that traditional rationale cannot work. The 21st century citizen does not see why he or she should defer to the politicians they no longer regard as their betters, or to parties with which they no longer identify. We have to recognise that those underlying problems exist, and they are problems with which political parties will have to engage.

Apart from anything else this analysis of the ways in which political parties are having to reinvent themselves applies in other mature democracies too. It explains why similar problems are occurring across nearly all of the older established democracies. The old way of explaining this by saying that we are all comfortable and therefore people do not vote because they do not feel the need to—the Galbraith notion that we are living perfectly well and therefore do not have the impulse to vote—is not the answer.

The notion that such a deep-seated problem can be addressed by policies such as all-postal voting or electronic voting from your armchair are inadequate. Citizenship education is one of the things with which we must engage. However, only a determined strategy to address the citizen's sense of powerlessness will really resolve the disenchantment. Ironically we talk a great deal about public trust in politicians but there has to be mutuality in processes of trust. What is needed is a programme designed to show that politicians actually have enough trust in their citizens as well as the other way round. We should be involved in greater engagement with them.

The good news is that such a strategy need not be conjured up anew. The Power Inquiry is exploring dozens of innovations and experiments across the world which are precisely designed to re-engage citizens with politics. They range from participatory budgeting in Brazil to youth councils in Finland to citizens' assemblies in Canada. I am hoping that we may be able to see in those better and more exciting ways of engaging the electorate.

I was in the Computer Office the other day when someone said that they wanted a website but that they really would prefer eyesight. While I have sympathy with Members of our House who feel that way, I agree with others that we have to modernise our own processes for them to work better.

As others have said, our democracy is vital but we have to revitalise it on a regular basis. I hope that the Power Inquiry will help our political masters to see that mastering is no longer the name of the game.

Lord Pearson of Rannoch: My Lords, I too thank my noble friend Lord Norton for raising this subject so vital to our democracy and also for his penetrating introduction, particularly for drawing the distinction between party politicians and Parliament.

When one asks people of all classes around the country why they think politicians are now held in such low esteem, one usually gets the answer that they are in it for themselves and tell lies to get what they want. If we have the courage to reflect on this accusation, we see that it is pretty near the mark, and increasingly so as time goes on. I suggest, as my noble friend Lord Dean mentioned, that part of the problem here is the rise of the professional politician, particularly in the House of Commons. They bear much of the responsibility for the perception that the truth no longer takes precedence over expediency.

Indeed, if one watches a modern politician being asked a question it is fairly easy to read the thought process going on in his mind. It is not, "What is my best shot at a truthful answer to this question?", but rather, "How will the answer I give advance my career?", or perhaps, "What answer will damage my career least?" Perhaps it was ever thus. Indeed, to some extent I am sure it was but the growing absence from the other place of people who do not depend on their parliamentary or ministerial salary for their way of life must surely have exacerbated the problem until it has now become almost universal. There are, of course, many honourable exceptions.

I know that this analysis oversimplifies this aspect of the problem, so may I go a little deeper and look at another unsatisfactory aspect of modern political life? Modern party politicians, particularly in the other place, seem to have one overriding ambition in their lives; that is, to acquire power. In order to acquire power—power, that is, to boss the rest of us around—they resort to a growing use of focus groups and opinion polls to ask the people what the people think they want. Our politicians then translate those wants into policies and offer them to the people in the hope that the people will vote for them and give them power. Missing from this modern routine are vision, leadership, courage, duty and service. I think that the people have seen through this system, even if they do not analyse it consciously, and they do not like it.

In this regard, I had what was for me a memorable conversation the other day with my noble friend Lady Thatcher. She said, "I may have made a few mistakes when I was Prime Minister"—at which, of course, I demurred as I am sure most other noble Lords would have done. She went on, "but at least everyone knew where they were jolly well going!" Most people in the world today agree, whether or not they liked her policies, that my noble friend Lady Thatcher was our last great leader. You may not have shared her vision but you have to admit that she possessed it. I submit that you cannot really have leadership unless you first have vision; and then you need the courage, the energy, the duty and the service to see it through. When there is no vision the people perish.

I do not offer a solution. I merely comment on one aspect of our present predicament. I would, however, suggest that vision comes from above; it does not come from focus groups.

There are, of course, many honourable exceptions to what I have said but I fear that most of those exceptions are to be found here in your Lordships' House, which most of your Lordships attend out of a sense of duty and to give service.

I fear it is inevitable that I must also point out that one of the main causes of public disengagement and disenchantment with Parliament is our relationship with the European Union. There are, I submit, two fundamental principles in the relationship between the public and Parliament, two pillars upon which our democracy rests. The first is the hard-won right of the British people to elect and dismiss those who make their laws. The second is that the British people have given Parliament the power to make all their laws for them, but they have not given Parliament permission to give that power away.

I fear that both those principles, for which over the centuries millions have willingly given up their lives, already stand betrayed by our membership of the European Union. Already huge areas of our national life which used to be controlled by this Parliament are controlled by the qualified majority vote in the Council of Ministers. For the record, those areas are all of our commerce and industry and environment, thanks to the Single European Act 1986, our social and labour policy, thanks to the social chapter, and our agriculture, fish and foreign aid. It appears that our immigration and asylum and direct taxation may have also been potentially ceded to the decision making system in Brussels.

If our Government or the Executive agree or are outvoted on a new law in those areas, then this Parliament must put it into British law, on pain of unlimited fines in the Luxembourg Court. The United Kingdom has only 9 per cent of the votes in the Council and you need about 30 per cent to block a new law.

In addition, laws affecting our justice and home affairs and our foreign and security policy must also be rubber stamped by the House of Commons and your Lordships' House if they have been agreed by our Executive and the executives of all the other member states in Brussels. In other words, we still have a veto in those areas but if the Government do not use it Parliament has to acquiesce.

It simply does not wash to say that our democracy is maintained because decisions are taken in the Council by Ministers who were elected as Members of Parliament. The point is that the House of Commons itself, whose members the people elect and dismiss, is excluded from the process except as a rubber stamp, and so is your Lordships' House.

It is essential to remember that the people's pact is with Parliament: it is not with the executive or government of the day. The people elect or dismiss

Members of Parliament once every four or five years and the Government are formed out of a majority of elected MPs. Only 60 per cent of the electorate now bother to vote in general elections and modern governments are supported by only some 40 per cent of those who do vote, or 24 per cent of the electorate. I submit that these temporary governments, always empowered by a minority of the people, do not have the right to break the great pacts upon which our sovereignty rests. Yet that is just what our membership of the European Union has done for the past 33 years.

The Government now admit that over half of our major laws, and 80 per cent of all laws, originate in Brussels. No law passed in Brussels has ever been successfully overturned by Parliament. No wonder the people are disengaging from the process. Indeed, a recent opinion poll found that no less than 68 per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds, and 65 per cent overall, would support our relationship with the EU being reduced to one of free trade—which means, in effect, leaving the EU. That is a quite remarkable result given that all our leading political parties and media have been telling the public for 33 years that membership of the European Union is vital to the national interest.

In conclusion, noble Lords will have noticed, perhaps with relief, that I have not mentioned the proposed new constitution for the European Union. I have merely set out some of the bones of our present relationship with Brussels. There will, of course, be opportunities to debate the constitution. Suffice to say now that if it is enacted it will make the present situation very much worse and the public even more disenchanted with the way they are governed. I think that they have got this point too, which is why I trust that they will vote against it if they get the chance.

Lord Desai: My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Norton of Louth, for introducing the debate. Perhaps I may say to my noble friend Lord Parekh that there are five academics out of 13 speakers and, therefore, the special meeting of academics and parliamentarians here and nowhere else. However, I found him much too satisfied with the relationship between the public and Parliament. I recall what I thought a rather splendid event, although everyone was shocked, when the fox hunters invaded the House of Commons. I remembered 1968 and student sit-ins, and so on. I know that I could penetrate the House of Commons with no problem. It is an archaic building which no one can guard. The sheer antediluvian arrangements of Parliament were exposed for everyone to see, with elderly men, encumbered by swords and unsuitable dress, trying to chase flexible, agile and athletic young people.

However, the important point is that those people were there because they cared about what they wanted. People find frequently that Parliament is not a good vehicle for conveying the intensity of their beliefs in a cause. Political parties hold a portfolio of views on practically everything under the sun. If I care intensely for one specific issue, I cannot convey my intensity. I have only one vote. For example, I cannot convey the intensity of my belief when voting to keep or remove fox hunting.

This parliamentary system of great and ancient lineage is proving inadequate because people want to be noticed with regard to specific issues rather than generalities. Broadly based political parties are dysfunctional. They are dinosaurs. We really want about 35 parties, and each party should be born and die quickly. They should be single-cause parties and disband themselves and move on. We have not realised that the way that we think of democracy and how voters feed in to Parliament is now totally inadequate. When their demands were broad—better housing, more employment or better health—they represented the whole of the community. Now, people have more particular demands and we have no way of reflecting that.

Reflecting on the fine speech of my noble friend Lord Harrison, we do not make people feel welcome at all. You have only to see people queuing outside St Stephen's entrance to see how uncomfortable entry to Parliament is. As with Oxford and Cambridge colleges, it is never indicated where you are, because if you have to be told, you should not be there in the first place. Those of us on the inside know where we are; who are you to come in here? That kind of aristocratic, élitist facade continues centuries after our forefathers and, if one may put in a word for them, our foremothers, fought for those rights. We still treat the people with contempt.

For example, why is the State Opening of Parliament not much more open? Why do ambassadors and such people come to sit around here? Why do not ordinary people come to sit around here? Why do we not hold it in a place where people can see what is going on—in Wembley Stadium, or something? I would prefer Westminster Hall as a nearer solution, but it is their Parliament, for heaven's sake, and they should be able to see what we are doing. It is not actually their Parliament; we do things in their name but do not want them around.

As my noble friend described, the ordinary person walking around the Committee Corridor is made to feel extremely unwelcome. Government is our business, not theirs: "You just vote and go away". People are not going to do that. That is why people do not get legislative change by petitions; they get it by riots. Riot in Trafalgar Square, and the community charge comes down. That is how it came down; no amount of parliamentary activity brought down the community charge.

Lastly, our procedures are time-wasting. The assumption is made both in the other place and here that once you have come here, your time is of absolutely no value. You stay here as long as the Whips want you to; the fact that you have nothing to do if you are not sitting in the Chamber does not matter. We do not have to provide you with anything to do: you are here; where else have you got to go? You cannot have anything better to do, you should feel honoured that you are here.

For example, why do we have First Reading, Second Reading, Committee, Report and Third Reading? Has anyone really found out what purpose that serves? Those of us who have been in enough of them know what a complete waste of time all committee meetings are. Why cannot we streamline? Why do

both Chambers have to have the same procedure? As I have said before, why cannot we become a Committee of another place? They should have a Second Reading; we do the Committee and report back to them so that we do not have to do everything twice.

Why cannot we learn to be more efficient? Why cannot we learn to be where the rest of the world is? Just because we are the oldest democracy in the world does not mean that we have to be the most inefficient.

Lord Sewel: My Lords, it is always a mistake to follow my noble friend Lord Desai, but I shall give it a try. First, I join other noble Lords in congratulating the noble Lord, Lord Norton of Louth, on securing this debate on an important subject.

The debate is very much couched in terms of the idea of the active citizen, the person engaged at all levels in the public life of his or her country. That does not mean that the individual citizen should be engaged all the time in the public life of his or her country; the whole system could not stand that. Understandably, people come in and out of political engagement at different times. For long periods of life, people have other and, dare I say it, better things to do than become involved in politics or engage with Parliament. That is right and good.

Where the difficulty and danger lies is if there grows up a generalised sense of disillusion and cynicism, a sense that engagement is pointless because there is so much of a gap between those who make decisions and those who are subject to them. That is the theme of this debate and of a wider debate in our politics.

Most noble Lords know that I am not uncritical of everything that happens in the Scottish Parliament. I would not follow my noble friend and suggest that we build a new building; I do not think that the Exchequer could take the strain. However, following what the noble Lord, Lord Norton of Louth, said, it is worth seeing whether we can learn some lessons not only from how the Scottish Parliament committee structure works but how it was initially put in place. There are lessons there.

The decision was taken even before the Parliament came into existence that it would be good to have a strong committee system built around subject committees. That makes it much easier to deal with issues. Several noble Lords have emphasised the importance of issues rather than party. That is absolutely right. If you have subject committees dealing with legislation and broader policy issues on the basis of an interaction between informing and engaging, that allows you to get depth of interest and focus. It enables the voices of the entrenched interest groups to be challenged. That is an important factor to take into account.

That structure did not emerge overnight; it did not emerge by magic. It evolved over a fairly lengthy period through discussion with various representatives of areas of civil society in Scotland at the time. So there was a degree of

agreement across the public life of Scotland, if you like, about how the Parliament should operate once it came into existence. My point is that you cannot get models of public engagement by adopting a top-down approach to how those models should be put in place.

It is also possible to learn from our own experience. In 1996, there were two Scottish Bills, one dealing, if my memory serves me correctly, with crofting and the other with nursery vouchers. At the time, many of us thought that that was a pale imitation of devolution on offer. There were shortcomings, but a special committee was established. It went to Scotland and took evidence. It discussed the Bill with people in Scotland who were likely to be affected by it. It was not a perfect mechanism, but it was a start. It is a pity that we have lost that example and model; it could do with being reconsidered and perhaps further developed—not necessarily going to Scotland but to other far away places such as Birmingham or Manchester.

In closing, I emphasise that it is too easy to say, "We realise that there is a problem with public engagement in Parliament; engagement is a good thing; we want you to engage and this is how you should engage". We need to do a bit of prior work and discuss with a wide range of people and interests what they think are the appropriate models of engagement.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire: My Lords, it is a particular pleasure to speak, for the first time, immediately after the noble Lord, Lord Sewel. He and I were introduced on the same day, now slightly over 10 years ago I regret to say, when we were both young.

I apologise on behalf of my group that we are rather thinner on the ground than I had hoped. My noble friends Lord Phillips of Sudbury and Lord Shutt of Greetland, who are actively engaged in this area, both had to be involved with the Charities Bill this afternoon. My noble friend Lord Shutt is engaged in the inquiry that the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy, is chairing on behalf of the Rowntree Trust. My noble friend Lord Holme has spoken a little of the Hansard Society inquiry, which the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, is chairing. A number of us are therefore engaged with the question.

I suggest that after the next election, when we are all recovering from a fall to perhaps 50 per cent in turnout, possibly even lower, we shall all have to engage much more sharply with how we bring government back towards our citizens. One of the first things that it may be useful to do is to abandon the word "customer", when talking about government relations with citizens, and bring back the word "citizen".

There is a broad issue behind this and also a much narrower and more practical set of issues. A number of noble Lords have spoken about the general decline in participation in western Europe and in North America, which has gone with the decline of mass society, mass organisations, church attendance, trades unions, Women's Institute membership et cetera over the past 20 or 30 years. It is not simply a British problem. Turnout in the deeply

divided American presidential election was not that much higher than we expect the turnout in our election to be.

When I hear people talk about the encouraging growth of non-governmental organisation involvement in Parliament, I worry that we are now approaching a divide between a minority of activists, mostly drawn from the professional service classes who are engaged in such activities, and the majority of disengaged or excluded, among whom one sees what one has to call the council estate population—the whites who are non-employed or only partially employed. While canvassing a rather smart estate in west Yorkshire last weekend, I was struck by the fact that those who were self-employed, some of whom appeared to be doing well, felt themselves to be cut off from politics. That is bad news for the Conservatives for the coming election. The majority of self-employed people to whom I spoke, in an estate that had two-garage houses throughout, thought that politics had nothing to offer them and said that they did not intend to vote.

With regard to ethnic minorities, I have to say to the noble Lord, Lord Parekh, that my happiest experience in the past year has been to speak to meetings of 300, 400, 500 people, but they have been British Kashmiris, British Gujaratis, British Punjabis, well organised in their communities. We understand that the British Caribbean population is not so effective in politics because it does not have the community links.

The decline of deference is something that we all have to come to terms with. I have a wonderful memory, as a young candidate in Huddersfield in the late 1960s, of just catching the end of the age of deference—when I was introduced at my first meeting with the words "Dr William Wallace MA PhD. We're honoured to have him with us". You would not get that nowadays. The noble Baroness, Lady Royall of Blaisdon, thinks that people are a little confused about what they see a Lord as being. A while back, I went to give the prizes at the school at which a friend of mine is the headmaster. The car he had promised me at the station was not there, and so I approached a taxi. The woman driver said, "They've asked me to pick up a Lord but, since he hasn't come, I suppose I could take you". I should have grown mutton-chops in time.

We have to change and adapt to a world in which people think about celebrities and no longer respect a political establishment. We all have to adapt, therefore, and not just decry the drift of public interest away from us and the media cynicism.

I was brought up in the middle of the Church of England. I love the traditional Church of England service and the music that goes with it, which I sang as a boy; but I recognise that that does not attract the younger generation to churches. They need a different service, and the full churches are those that have adapted radically. Parliament has to follow the same sort of approach. That means talking about the image of Parliament and the ritual of Prime Minister's Questions, which for many people encapsulates what they see Parliament as being about and is also what they dislike about politics.

I am struck by how deep the tradition of two-party adversarial politics is. My party has been running at 20 per cent in the polls over the past three years, but the newspapers still read as if there were only two parties in British politics. There are five parties from Great Britain alone—leave aside Northern Ireland—sitting in the House of Commons today.

I agree strongly with the noble Lord, Lord Desai, that that is actually more representative. We need more parties in Parliament of the right, the centre and the left, in order that more people can feel represented.

We have a mass of legislation: far too much, far too ill considered. On occasions, I have spent a lot of time over the past three years talking to deeply sceptical teachers about the weight of new instructions that they receive each school year from the Department for Education and Skills and how unnecessary they feel much of it is. There is a new Minister and he or she has a lot of new ideas; there is a new Education Bill, and so the stuff comes in.

There is executive domination, with ministerial outrage when Bills are challenged or changed. Part of the aggression that the current Government clearly feel towards this House arises because we dare to change ministerial proposals. That, however, is the job of any decent Parliament.

We therefore need to change the style of Parliament in terms of representation and better considered legislation. Here we come to pre-legislative scrutiny, which is a radical proposal because it reduces the power of Ministers. It means that Ministers cannot take initiatives and announce them on the "Today" programme. I am strongly for it, but let us look it straight in the face and realise just how much it would change the relationship between government and Parliament.

It would be better if we had fewer Ministers, more co-operation among parties and an end to one-party dominance based on a minority of the electorate. As I said recently to the noble Baroness, Lady Farrington, people who come from local government to this House often have a much healthier attitude to politics because they have had to co-operate in local government.

There are a number of smaller, more practical steps that we could take. Reference has been made to the Parliamentary Channel. I am amazed at how many people watch it. Someone passed me in the street in Saltaire the other week and said, "I know who you are. You may think I'm a nerd, but I watch the Parliamentary Channel". I wanted to say, "Yes, you probably are".

We should perhaps think about holding some committee meetings ourselves outside Parliament, as part of an outreach to demonstrate that we are not a metropolitan elite. One of the reasons for considering moving our three legislative days from Monday to Thursday to Monday to Wednesday is that more of us would then spend more time outside London, which would be a healthy thing.

We have a tremendous tension in Westminster between security considerations and the need to become more open. I strongly agree with all of those who say that our signage, our style and our welcome to visitors need to be reconsidered. I strongly agree also that we should open Parliament in Westminster Hall, with the Commons and the Lords sitting alongside each other and, preferably, with the Lords not sitting in rather outdated robes with bits of rabbit, or whatever it is, on them.

Education is also an important issue: education for citizenship and education about British history and Britishness—an issue that is coming up in all the parties, I note. There was an excellent speech by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the British Council some months ago. Tim Collins raised it, I thought rather unhelpfully but at least he raised it, from the Conservative point of view. The Keynes Forum, a Liberal Democrat-associated body with which I am connected, is having a one-day seminar just after the election on what we mean by being British these days. It is an area in which we all need to engage. We therefore have a large post-election agenda.

We should not be content with being a heritage backwater. I disagree strongly with the noble Lord, Lord Dean of Harptree: we must change our practices. I hope that we will also change our method of selection to one that is at least partly by election. We need to learn from the experience of other countries, such as the Nordic countries, which are much more active in teaching citizenship. We need to rebuild democratic participation from the bottom up, which means that we have to look at local government very sharply. We recognise that we have to go out and explain ourselves to the unengaged public and do all we can to involve them in what we do here at Westminster.

Lord Howell of Guildford: My Lords, everyone is very pleased with my noble friend Lord Norton of Louth, and rightly so, because not merely has he introduced this excellent debate but he shows exemplary concern about the great and central issues of our institutions, our constitution and the role of Parliament, which we would all do well to follow.

In the light of the Motion, the key issues that we must clarify are: what do we mean by the public and public opinion, and what do we think are the nature and role of this Parliament with which we want to see the public properly engaged? I have very little doubt that, with the onset of the information revolution, the role of Parliament—I refer to Parliaments everywhere but especially this one—and particularly that of the second Chamber, the Upper House, is changing significantly, as my noble friend Lord Lucas indicated. I shall come to that in a moment. Big changes are afoot.

First, I pose an even deeper question; it is not too philosophical, I hope. In thinking about public engagement, do we have faith in the public's understanding and judgment, and believe that if facts are honestly expressed and put before the public, they will steer political reality? Alternatively, do we believe, like many very distinguished people in the previous century, including Walter Lippmann among others, that the public are incapable of mastering the facts and therefore are always susceptible to distortion and media

manipulation, whether by politicians, media campaigns, lobbies or PR experts? I stand in the former camp, but I can see that it is plainly a minority position. Nowadays people in government, the press and PR clearly believe that the public can always be manipulated and sold this line or that, and that therefore facts and opinion can be elided and accuracy in reporting facts can take a second place to promoting a cause or line.

As that has taken place there have been predictable results. Going back well into the previous century, rather than in recent years, people have come increasingly to distrust politicians and to view their dissembling, self-contradiction and statements with enormous scepticism. So the gap has been filled over the past 50 years by the advent and rise of media politics. Today a large part of the political process takes place not in the Palace of Westminster but in the media forum and on the media stage, where careers are made and broken and opinions formed. That was the case long before the information revolution really took hold in the last decade of the previous century, but that has vastly accelerated the trend.

The American academic Philip Bobbitt, in his profound book *The Shield of Achilles*, makes the point well that previously the political Left always did the job of being the constant critic of the government and the establishment, whether Left, Right or centre. But with the discrediting of the old Left in this market-dominated age, and with Left parties moving quickly to the new centre, which when I first entered politics was called the Right—it is now called the centre or even the centre-Left—the competitive critical function has been taken over by the media.

As Bobbitt says, the problem is that the media are untrained in the task, either ethically or politically, of performing this critical role in a balanced way. They have no incentive to offer different or alternative and improving amendments, programmes, strategies or ideas. The media tend to ignore as boring or dismiss anything constructive or striking out on a new line. That simply is not their role. The trouble is that they do not carry out that role, which they have taken over from us, very well at all. They are particularly incapable of challenging the current political consensus and prevailing views. As a result we have reached the fascinating point where people have come to view the media with the same degree of scepticism, distrust and disappointment with which they previously viewed politicians and Parliament.

That brings us to today. This is the opportunity for our political institutions to win back lost ground and show that honest and accurate presentation of the facts, only then followed afterwards, and clearly distinguished from, opinions about merits, and always combined with weighing up reasonably the advantages and disadvantages of courses chosen, is the new currency that people can trust.

We should aim for that. But, to go along that path, Parliament, and certainly this House, must have a clear view of what we can offer—the product for sale, so to speak. I do not argue that it is all about marketing, let alone advertising. As recent blunders by, dare I say it, the governing party confirm, admen do

not always understand the politics of public affairs and their ideas should always be carefully filtered. There may be exceptions but it seems the general situation.

I add as gratuitous advice to the Government from this Dispatch Box that any talk of "selling" or pushing for sale something to the public is always off-putting and counterproductive. That is why it is highly unwise of the Government to go on about "selling" to the public the European constitution, which my noble friend Lord Pearson of Rannoch mentioned. If it needs all that hype and sales push, a wise public—in a democracy, one must trust the public wisdom—will simply ask, "What is wrong with this product that it needs pushing so hard?"

With what are we in this House asking the public to engage? It is obvious that the House of Commons is the democratic cockpit, which makes good copy. It is upstaged nowadays by the political battle in the media and on television, but it continues to be a healthy part of the noisy democratic process and ongoing debate.

Your Lordships' House is different; we are supposed to be the calming, moderating influence, performing the same role as the cooling chamber on a Watts steam engine or the governor on a motor: essential, not very glamorous, but nevertheless central. Possibly we can do that a little better, as we do not have the disadvantage, to which my noble friend Lord Pearson referred, of having careers agitatedly to advance. Most of us have not much career left to advance, so that should give us a better position from which to argue.

That is why bringing the poison of extreme partisanship—not all partisanship—into the House of Lords is so damaging to the public's respect for our peculiar role. I am thinking of the kind of point-scoring practised recently by some Ministers, I am afraid, at the Dispatch Box in this House. Frankly, it sounds absolutely pathetic. I strongly advise those who practise it to desist.

We are supposed to be a cooling not an agitating Chamber, lowering the temperature not raising it. We do that by amendments in the legislative process, which is sometimes very tiresome and boring, but necessary; by analysis and debate; and by excellent committee work, through scrutinising and reporting. We are, and are capable of presenting ourselves as, a large and relatively independent think tank—if not totally independent then at least giving a platform for all sorts of different viewpoints, including some that are mould-breaking and not just conforming to current conventional wisdom.

Certainly, we do not want to sound too efficient. For once, I disagree with the noble Lord, Lord Desai. I know that the word "efficiency", when it comes from the Government Benches, means "ram the legislation through". We do not want to be efficient in that sort of way.

I fully understand the difficulties in which those persons charged with promoting and publicising the House of Lords are placed. If they sing the

praises of this place too much, then, like my noble friend Lord Dean of Harptree, I would be quite happy to defend the status quo. But I realise that that is a controversial position and that a lot of people do not want to defend the status quo. So it is difficult to go down that line. Of course, if they tangle with issues and policies, they are in danger of falling into partisan matters.

Nevertheless, a number of things can be done. The House of Lords could be repositioned in the new context that the informational age creates, which, as I say, applies not just to this Parliament but to Parliaments everywhere. More could be done to talk up forthcoming debates and explain why the issues are so crucial—for instance, constitutional matters, energy issues, overseas development or any of the great global issues. More could be done to make media access much easier in the Palace of Westminster, including access for foreign media personnel. Washington, for example, is as security conscious as we are, but it is much more open to allowing foreign correspondents to get a pass.

More could be done to explain to the public, via schools and information networks of every kind, the crucial dual—or even triple—roles of the second Chamber in the bicameral system. Above all, politicians and government officials should give up manipulation and relearn the fine art of persuasion, which I have described. There should be far more candour and humility from the top about what national governments can and cannot achieve and there should be far more reticence in making extravagant commitments about goals that any informed person knows full well are out of reach. Finally, there should be far more effort to escape the prison of jargon and to find new, more intelligible and useful ways of explaining how the world really works.

Then we might see a somewhat disillusioned public—now vastly more informed, as the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, rightly indicated—turn back from the inevitable short-termism and often amazingly uniformed media to the more thoughtful and longer-term perspectives that this House in particular can offer, and to the institutions that down the ages have protected their liberties.

Lord Davies of Oldham: My Lords, this has been a most stimulating and interesting debate, which has covered a very wide range of issues. I share the anxiety mentioned by my noble friend Lord Harrison, who had a wistful look at the Press Gallery but did not notice how many representatives of the press were there to hear our debate today. My noble friend indicated that we might be wasting our sweetness on the desert air, although I think that he thought that we were the dessert course when it came to BBC reporting of Parliament.

We recognise that there is an issue about how we communicate with the wider public, which we share with the other place. It is acutely aware of the statistics reflected in today's debate on the declining participation in elections. However, noble Lords were wise to indicate that there are more ways of participating in the political process than the act of voting. As my noble friend Lady Royall indicated, the act of voting has been so significant for those countries which have recently enjoyed that right. We all applaud when people fulfil that democratic duty in the context of real danger.

Perhaps our secure and mature democracy engenders a degree of complacency with regard to the act of voting, but our citizens are active in many other ways. As noble Lords have indicated, single-issue politics are with us in terms of representation. Every Member of Parliament will tell how he gets deluges of correspondence on particular issues. That is why I warmed to the proposal that we might, at times, with regard to our Select Committees, recognise the value of specific issues and greater publicity.

I do not underestimate the difficulties. We all owe a great debt of gratitude to the noble Lord, Lord Norton of Louth, not just for this debate, which he introduced so ably, covering all the major issues, which were followed up by other speakers, but also for his chairmanship of the Constitution Committee over a number of years. We appreciate the work that he has done.

The noble Lord asked me, as did the noble Lord, Lord Holme, when the Government will produce their response to the committee's report. We expect to reply within the six-month deadline. Some of the issues that have been raised today will inform the Government's response to the report. We will certainly consider the various recommendations which, in some cases, have profound resource implications.

Some of the issues are directed at government and what they can do directly with their resources. I hope that I will give a satisfactory answer to some of those points. Other issues relate to House authorities and how we and the other place can successfully organise our business and communications. I am greatly impressed with the degree of insight into those issues that has been demonstrated. Several noble Lords followed the noble Lord, Lord Norton, in indicating that some of our committees need to get outside the Palace of Westminster and the advantages to be derived from taking specific issues to the people.

The noble Baroness, Lady Greenfield, mentioned science. She drew a very nice parallel between the importance of science issues being communicated effectively to the lay public and the difficulties that scientists also face in their discrete area, which parliamentarians are also addressing. I have every sympathy with the noble Baroness.

I once went to a conference in the United States, which was attended by very distinguished scientists and parliamentarians. I am not a scientist, nor a distinguished parliamentarian, but I was delighted to be at that conference, save for one thing. The gap between the representatives of politics and the scientific community in the United States was quite terrifying. The agenda was a green issue.

When we talk about communicating across generations and more effectively to young people, we should recognise how much concern about the planet and green issues figure in their debates. At the conference, it was clear that the German and British politicians and scientific communities could sing largely from the same hymn sheet. But it was a hymn sheet that was utterly and totally denied by every American politician who was present. Even when

top-level scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology emphasised the issues with regard to global warning, there was a straight denial. That was a clear case of the gap that can open up between science and the public, and how important it is to bridge that gap.

I note the reservations that were expressed about Parliament and its current work, but in such areas we have been part of the general debate. I do not think that there is a Member of Parliament who does not think that science and scientific issues are a very important part of the political agenda.

I also want to emphasise the part for which the Government are directly responsible. Several noble Lords referred to the citizenship agenda in schools. Of course, a citizenship agenda is about political process. If one is to translate aspiration into, ultimately, effective action, it has to be. But it is also important that we start from the young person's understanding of issues. That is why the citizenship agenda has to be a series of building blocks.

The Government deserve some credit from this House for having launched citizenship in schools. We need additional resources. I shall not make a political point at this stage because I admired a great amount of what the noble Lord, Lord Howell, said about petty point scoring from the Dispatch Box. However, he will recognise that we are getting into the three or four most tempestuous months of this Parliament. I respect what he says, but I think he recognises that we take pride in the extent to which we have introduced citizenship education in schools. A lot remains to be done and additional resources are needed. Indeed, the plea for those resources has been made on all sides of the House.

The reports referred to by my noble friend Lady Kennedy of The Shaws and the Hansard Society inquiry being chaired by my noble friend Lord Puttnam are important in this area. We need to make sure that the education system as a whole recognises that the issues we are confronting are not confined to Britain. While it is easy to berate ourselves as failing the nation by our inability to communicate successfully, it is the case that all mature democracies face real problems with participation, an issue reflected in the turnout to vote. Although the Americans are congratulating themselves on the increased participation in the recent elections, voter turnout in the US was still a long way below British participation at its worst.

However, it must also be recognised that if people lose faith in parliamentary institutions, democracy is under threat. I want to balance that by emphasising that we can achieve a great deal with citizenship education in schools and to point out that we are making progress in this House. The noble Lord, Lord Norton, mentioned the work of the Information Unit and the excellent work done to produce high quality documents under the guidance of Mary Morgan. The noble Lord mentioned the fairly limited print runs, and we recognise the problems in communicating effectively with all the millions for whom we are responsible. Nevertheless, a person making a visit to this House should understand fully the workings of the House. We are improving our performance in this respect.

I accept entirely a point made by my noble friend Lord Harrison, along with other noble Lords, on the question of access. We are stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea here. I came to the other place at a time when there were no security guards at all. People could just wander in through St Stephen's Entrance. However, to do so was still pretty daunting. The notion that people would flock in with glee, knowing that they had come to their own Parliament and around which they could wander freely was somewhat belied by the fact that the odd police officer was stationed to caution people about where they could go. Moreover, the building itself is full of 19th century Gothic Revival grandeur and therefore puts people at some disadvantage.

We all have to recognise the new dimension that has developed over recent years with regard to security. There can be no doubt that every security defence we organise produces in turn a barrier in terms of political participation. I heard reference made to "better days" by the noble Lord, Lord Dean, when people could move around easily and feel more at home. I am not sure whether that was altogether true, but that situation was bound to change once the public galleries became the source of potentially serious assaults on our leaders. We are bound to have anxieties on that score and we have to strike a balance.

However, I agree entirely that there can be no excuse for not producing adequate information, in particular with regard to committees. The procedures and work of our committees are absolutely bewildering if one visits them without adequate information. We have made progress on this front. Our Select Committees provide information about the subject they are considering and details on membership, although we could do a great deal more on the provision of information, and probably need to do so. But the political process is difficult given that the major burden of our work is legislation, which presents its own problems if one only drops in on the process. If one is fortunate enough to hear the Second Reading of a Bill, one can enjoy hugely the debate on principle, while coming in during the Committee or Report stages means witnessing arguments that have been narrowed down to specific points. That is much more difficult in terms of communication.

That is also why Prime Minister's Questions are so hugely popular. We can all relate to that. However, the noble Lord, Lord Wallace, suggested that the constant conflict of adversarial politics might not be to everyone's taste. It is not an instance of the cool, reasoned politics for which the Liberal Party has always been known, even when in government. Lloyd George always presented his views in the most measured and conciliatory way to the nation, particularly when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. I hear what the noble Lord says about adversarial politics, but there are times when political parties clash over real issues and those storms need to be heard by the nation. They reflect the authenticity of the necessity of choice—and choice is what democracy and the vote ultimately are all about, although I agree that choice needs to be well informed.

Several noble Lords asked whether Parliament is sufficiently modern in the processes it uses for communication. I have some good news on that point.

Although the noble Lord, Lord Lucas, challenged me on this issue, we do produce an enormous amount of material on the parliamentary website, much of it produced for free. I cite for example *Hansard*, committee reports, forthcoming business, copies of Bills and the amendments tabled to them. I can assure the noble Lord that officials are constantly looking at new ways of improving accessibility on the website, but I take on board the points he made in his contribution to the debate.

Noble Lords will be pleased to learn that, from the early summer, the BBC Parliament website expects to broadcast the House of Lords live over broadband with captions so that viewers will know who is speaking and what they are speaking about—by which I mean that they will know which subject is being addressed. Whether viewers understand the full and subtle detail of the points being made will depend very much on the level of performance to which we should all adhere.

I want to emphasise that we are not standing still on these issues at Westminster. It is always a question of reaching agreement on where improvements can be made, but real resources are available. These developments must be properly addressed to the House authorities, which I appreciate sounds like a form of escape clause for a Minister at the Dispatch Box. However, I do not seek to thrust responsibility on others, but merely to point out that we have the usual channels where agreement is reached. It is true that the Government have an interest in the usual channels, a point that would have been brought to my immediate attention by the noble Lord, Lord Norton, had I not confessed it first. Noble Lords will recognise that I am referring to parliamentary resources which are put to use for the good of the wider community. Debates of this kind help to advance that cause and I hope that we will make considerable progress on these issues.

However, I have to say that certain parts of the debate have jarred a little. I cannot conceive of the glorified amateur being the better politician than the so-called committed professional. The glorified amateur tended overwhelmingly to be represented in the Conservative Party while the Labour Party was never anything other than professional. Well, if right has always been on the Conservative side, I can say only that the last century that those Members lived in was different from the one I lived in, so we reach different judgments about it. Further, I do not see in the other place today a great deal of difference in the composition of the two main parties. In so far as there is a difference, I find that issues of principle, commitment, rectitude and political judgment are as much to the fore among professional politicians as they ever were among glorified amateurs. And if it is argued that glorified amateurs do not have vested interests, the vested interest of the professional politician is to get elected. While that can take crude forms at certain times, so can the prejudices of the amateur.

Looking at the nature of our debates, and I reflect on the fact that none of us is paid to be here, one cannot pretend that there is an automatic and easy balance between interests in this House. Let me take the most obvious example. How many times are issues of wealth and the concerns of the poor

addressed in this House through Questions in comparison with, let us say, agriculture and fishing? By any calculation, the answer is clear. So we should recognise that glorified amateurs are not always over-representative of some sections of our community.

The noble Lord, Lord Wallace, raised the question of the representation of ethnic minorities and referred particularly to the Caribbean community. We take pride and delight in the fact that the Caribbean community is represented in this House, and increasingly so in the other place, but it is still greatly under-represented. This is not a question of whether there is sufficient political interest; it is a reflection of whether we can succeed in producing representation and engagement for such communities. We are making progress but we need to do more. All ethnic minorities are under-represented in British politics in every respect and we have a great deal of work to do in those terms.

I am coming to the end of my response to the debate against a background where I know that I have been remiss and not mentioned every contribution. However, noble Lords will recognise that they have covered a wide range of issues and that they have been part and parcel of a debate on a subject about which we all care greatly.

I omitted to mention the noble Lord, Lord Pearson of Rannoch, seeking to be conciliatory rather than adversarial at this stage. I recognise that he made a slight polemical remark about the greatest politician of recent years, the noble Baroness, Lady Thatcher. She is also the person, of course, who signed the Single European Act. The noble Lord asserted that we are losing power to Europe, and so there is a slight contradiction there. But I shall not be controversial today. I am merely reflecting the challenge in the noble Lord's speech.

In many ways this has been a challenging and heart-warming debate which has seen the House at its best. We are committed to advancing the cause of effectiveness in our work and our obligations to people outside. We are not directly elected but we subsist to a great extent on public money and we have obligations to do our job as well as possible. The quality of the debate today indicates that we intend to do so.

Lord Norton of Louth: My Lords, several contributors have stressed that politicians are not trusted. In recent surveys, hardly anyone has been found to trust politicians to tell the truth. The same surveys show that about 80 per cent of those questioned trust professors to tell the truth, so I should stress that today I am speaking in my role as a professor.

I am extremely grateful to all noble Lords who have spoken. The number of speakers and the positions they hold attests to the importance of the debate. As the noble Lord, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, said, a number of other noble Lords who are in Grand Committee or other meetings had planned to speak. My noble friend Lord Elton, who had hoped to be present, has stressed the need for Ministers to make policy statements in Parliament and not outside.

It is clear from what has been said that much more needs to be done to increase public engagement with Parliament. That is not simply a generalised or pious hope; concrete steps can be taken to increase such engagement. I very much welcome, therefore, many of the suggestions made by noble Lords today.

There is clearly a broad measure of agreement encompassing all parts of the House. I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Desai, that we need people to feel that, if they want to express their particular views, if they wish to protest, the place to head is Parliament. It is when protestors are not heading for Westminster that we need to worry. It is vital that this place remains the focus of attention.

I thank the noble Lord, Lord Davies, the Minister, for his response and not least for his comments on the need for additional support for citizenship education. Clearly, government support is important but, ultimately, as my noble friend Lord Lucas said and as the Minister reiterated, responsibility for change is a matter for Parliament. Crucially, as the noble Baroness, Lady Royall, indicated, there has to be the political will to achieve the changes that need to be made.

I hope that today's debate, at the very least, shows that there is a growing awareness of the need to act and—I echo the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam—that time is of the essence. I beg leave to withdraw the Motion for Papers.