

# From Polarisation to Collaboration: Rethinking Political Culture

St George's House Consultation Thursday 14th to Friday 15th  
December 2023

## Overview and aims of the consultation

As we look forward to welcoming you to St George's House next month, this short paper outlines areas we hope to cover when thinking about improving British politics.

*From Polarisation to Collaboration: Rethinking Political Culture* will explore issues surrounding electoral reform, civic engagement, parliamentary procedures, and the role of the media in forming the British political narrative.

Together, we will explore questions such as: how do we generate a political culture that puts nation before party? How do we energise the electorate to seriously consider their civic responsibility as voters? Why don't our politicians operate as collaborative problem-solvers or prioritise Britain's long-term needs over what will win the popular vote at the next election? Do these issues stem from having the wrong politicians or a dysfunctional parliamentary system? In addressing these questions, we hope to bring together your knowledge, expertise, and experience to clearly articulate a better model for British politics.

Decidedly non-partisan, this consultation aims to generate fresh thinking and actionable insights that will foster an informed and engaged civil society and start to rebuild trust in our politicians and political institutions. The consultation has been timed so that it can contribute to thinking at senior level across the political spectrum as we approach a general election.

## Main themes

Current political culture is marked by a deep sense of mistrust and apathy from those on the outside (with only 9% of UK voters in 2019 stating that politicians were trustworthy<sup>1</sup>) and by a strong sense of partisanship by those on the inside<sup>2</sup>.

Our research revealed three principal themes that we will consider at the consultation: firstly, the electoral system; secondly, the function of government and parliament; and finally, media and engagement. Our time together will be largely organised around small working group sessions on these themes and facilitated in such a way that everyone will be able to contribute to all topics.

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Bryne, *Trust me, I'm not a Politician* (Short Books, 2019), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Rory Stewart, *Politics on the Edge* (Jonathan Cape, 2023), 52-53.

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Gary McKeone, Programme Director

Caroline Biggin, Consultation Coordinator, Tel 01753 848851

Catherine Morgan, House Manager



This paper is not intended to be definitive. Rather it provides a starting point for our discussion and other themes may well emerge when we meet.

## The electoral system

One of the most common issues identified in the associated literature is Britain's first past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system and its second order impact on how parties think and act. Ian Dunt gives this issue particular consideration in, *How Westminster Works...* and concluded that,

*"First past-the-post has four main consequences – it reduces scrutiny, increases political tribalism, corrupts the policy making process and allows the two main parties to amass complete executive power on the basis of a minority of the popular vote."*<sup>3</sup>

FPTP arguably delivers a strong government, but it does so at the cost of accountability and democratic representation. By this we mean that that the Executive (PM and Cabinet) can push through their legislative agenda without compromise. This is due to their disproportionately high representation in Parliament when compared to their overall share of the vote. Thus, it can be argued that FPTP does not truly reflect the voice and will of the people.

In the 2019 General Election, the current Conservative government won an overwhelming majority of seats which they have used to deliver massive constitutional change – they did this with 43.6% of the popular vote. Furthermore, the SNP secured 7.4% of seats in the commons with 3.9% of the UK's votes whilst the Liberal Democrats took only 1.7% of seats after winning 11.5% of the vote. Thus, despite their vote share rising by 4.2% since 2017, the Liberal Democrats saw a net loss of parliamentary seats<sup>4</sup>.

Far more important to our discussion is the second order impact that FPTP has on political culture. Because FPTP delivers a strong government that can act without compromise, it creates a system whereby most policy and legislation can be formed and delivered without any collaboration between the parties. This generates a culture where a strong sense of partisanship is the norm, collaboration is seen as weakness and, "much of the time [parliament's] behaviours are ritualistic, point-scoring and unproductive in terms of achieving policy improvements"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Dunt, *How Westminster Works ... and Why It Doesn't* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2023), 55.

<sup>4</sup> "The 2019 General Election: Voters Left Voiceless," 2020, <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/the-2019-general-election-voters-left-voiceless/#sub-section-2>.

<sup>5</sup> "How effective is Parliament in controlling UK government and representing citizens?," British Politics and Policy at LSE, March 25,

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Catherine Morgan, House Manager



This does not mean that the cabinet is always immune from what power the Commons has, and Hannah White notes several examples in recent history where prime ministerial policy has been vetoed by the Commons<sup>6</sup>. However, it does often result in poorly considered but politically expedient laws being passed. These often operate in the immediate interest of the ruling party but are not necessarily in the best long-term interests of the nation. This tendency to "place narrow political priorities over the long-term needs ... to avoid short-term difficulties"<sup>7</sup> has been the foundation for some of the most divisive policies of recent years. It was the trigger for the Brexit referendum in 2016<sup>8</sup> and is a root cause of the current backtracking on climate goals<sup>9</sup>.

In summary, the UK's central government electoral and political systems lead to polarisation in our political discourse and a partisanship within our legislature that prizes politically expedient policy over the needs of the nation. This in-turn sets the conditions for a model of governance that perpetuates the problem.

This being the case, what could our political parties do to resolve these issues? Should, for instance, full-scale reform be a priority? Even without electoral reform, what can parties do to develop a culture and model that focuses on the long-term health of the nation even at the expense of short-term party gain?

### **The function of government and parliament**

Our political system has several unique features. The systems, processes, and structures of our central government can reinforce polarisation. This is particularly evident in the relationships and balance of power between the executive and legislature.

As discussed above, the UK has an unusually strong executive branch in due to our FPTP electoral system which means that consensus-building is not required to achieve their policy aims. However, we must remember that it is not the cabinet that is elected by the people, it is the Commons. As, the Supreme Court stated when ruling on the Prime Minister Johnson's decision to prorogue parliament in 2019,

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2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/how-effective-is-parliament-in-controlling-uk-government-and-representing-citizens/>.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah White, *Held in Contempt: What's Wrong with the House of Commons?*, (Manchester University Press, 2022), 29-32.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Partington, "UK's Political Short-Termism Is Killing Hopes of Business Investment," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/sep/24/uk-political-short-termism-killing-hopes-business-investment>.

<sup>8</sup> The Economist, "They Haven't Gone Away," *The Economist*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2015/03/26/they-havent-gone-away>.

<sup>9</sup> The Economist, "Rishi Sunak's Anti-Green Turn on Britain's Climate Targets," *The Economist*, September 25, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/09/20/rishi-sunaks-anti-green-turn-on-britains-climate-targets>.

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Gary McKeone, Programme Director

Caroline Biggin, Consultation Coordinator, Tel 01753 848851

Catherine Morgan, House Manager



*"We live in a representative democracy. The House of Commons exists because the people have elected its members. The government is not directly elected by the people (unlike the position in other democracies). The government exists because it has the confidence of the House of Commons. It has no democratic legitimacy other than that."*<sup>10</sup>

Despite this, the cabinet hold significant power over both the opposition parties and their own MPs. In the case of the opposition, this power is held as a function of majority rule. In the case of the ruling party, it is as a function of a promotion system that rewards patronage and loyalty over experience and skill.

Almost all recent literature on the topic notes this as a critical dysfunction of the current parliamentary system – the main route of career progression for MPs is promotion into cabinet, but this only comes to those whom the whips consider to be team players. As former Conservative Minister Rory Stewart put it, "we might be called legislators, but we were not intended to overly scrutinise legislation... votes would rarely entail a free exercise of judgement [and would] ensure you were never promoted."

Instead, policy and legislation are developed by the executive, normally without discussion with the other parties and whilst actively trying to avoid scrutiny<sup>11</sup>. When legislation enters the House of Commons for debate, an overriding sense of partisanship means that MPs from the majority party see it as their job to push it through without questioning the content, while the opposition parties see it as their job to contest it at all costs<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, MPs have reported that law making is eighth on their priority list and debating time has reduced by approximately a third – from ~1500 hours per year to ~1000 hours per year – since 1980<sup>13</sup>.

As a result, legislative scrutiny takes second place to party politics and, in many cases, it is left to the House of Lords to analyse and approve bills passing through the house. In the 2016-17 parliament, the Lords submitted 2,270 successful amendments of which 64% were immediately accepted by the responsible minister<sup>14</sup>. This means that nearly two-thirds of the time, the government readily agree that their legislation was not properly drafted or scrutinised before reaching the second chamber.

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<sup>10</sup> Judgment on R vs the Prime Minister, 2019, 20. <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2019-0192-judgment.pdf>. Quoted in White, *Held in Contempt*, 55.

<sup>11</sup> White, *Held in Contempt*, 37-38.

<sup>12</sup> Isabel Hardman, *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians* (Atlantic Books (UK), 2019). 140-141

<sup>13</sup> The Economist, "Lawmaking in Britain is Becoming Worse," The Economist, November 10, 2023, <https://www.theeconomist.com/britain/2023/11/07/lawmaking-in-britain-is-becoming-worse>.

<sup>14</sup> Dunt, *How Westminster Works*, 317.

COORDINATING STAFF AT ST GEORGE'S HOUSE

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Catherine Morgan, House Manager



However, these interventions by the House of Lords do not mean that parliament enacts good laws and Dunt describes a cycle whereby, "the poor quality of unscrutinised legislation results in dysfunctional government programmes, whose victims then have to seek help from MPs, who are then so busy dealing with casework that they do not have time to scrutinise the next raft of legislation"<sup>15</sup>. Hardman cites several cases where MPs only discovered how badly written their policies and laws are when faced with a constituent in crisis<sup>16</sup>.

So, if our legislative systems and processes ultimately lead to the production of poor-quality laws, what can be done to increase collaboration and deliver a well scrutinised statute book? How can parties work together to make sure that the law is fit for purpose and does, in practice, what it was designed and intended to do.

### Media and engagement

As discussed earlier, the public have a very poor perception of politicians and politics. In March 2023, Kings College London published research showing that Britton's confidence in our government, political parties, parliament and the civil service has halved since 1990 and that, of 24 countries researched, only Egyptians had lower overall confidence in their political institutions<sup>17</sup>. However, both this research and a similar study by the UCL Constitution unit showed that this was also matched by very low confidence in the media's portrayal of politics<sup>18</sup>.

The role of the media was the most frequently mentioned causal factor for political polarisation during syndicate discussions leading up to this consultation. There is a strong feeling that the emergence of highly politically partisan news outlets and the move to social media reporting has resulted in many people no longer receiving a balanced, fact-based view of events or political reporting, facilitating a shift away from the centre.

This issue has been exacerbated by many politicians using personal social media channels as the main form of communication to the electorate. While this seems a normal evolution of communications, it allows them to avoid the scrutiny that mainstream media demands. As Dorothy Byrne, the former Head of News, then Editor-at-Large of Channel 4 put it, "[politicians] think it's great

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>16</sup> Isabel Hardman, *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians* (Atlantic Books (UK), 2019). 163.

<sup>17</sup> King's College London, "UK Has Internationally Low Confidence in Political Institutions, Police and Press," *King's College London*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/uk-has-internationally-low-confidence-in-political-institutions-police-and-press>.

<sup>18</sup> UCL, "Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics," The Constitution Unit, March 7, 2023, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research-areas/deliberative-democracy/democracy-uk-after-brexit/public-preferences-integrity-and>.

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because they can say what they want unchecked. They think it is a clever strategy."<sup>19</sup>

This encourages a lack of scrutiny in mainstream media reporting with one senior BBC executive referring to the Brexit referendum stating that, "People with opinions and arguments have used the idea of impartiality to undermine the importance of accuracy."<sup>20</sup>

How the electorate engages with politicians has the single greatest impact on how both politicians are perceived and how they perceive the electorate. The media is key to this: if there is increased reporting on an issue, there will be a commensurate increase in the perception of it being a problem. If the electorate believe there is a problem, their politicians will feel the need to respond. As politicians develop policy to respond, there is increased reporting, and the cycle continues. Whilst this has the power to work for both good or ill, a polarising media influence will only lead to the cycle being moving to the extremes.

How then can we develop a more collaborative relationship between our politicians, our press, and our voters? What meaningful change could our political leaders enact that will enable them to shift the political discourse from one of polarisation to collaboration?

## Conclusion

We find ourselves at a unique moment in time where a brave rethink of our central political culture could result in the rapid development of a positive political culture that is fit for the purpose of ensuring a long-term vision for the UK that is elevated above partisan politicking.

To urge this on, we will aim to summarise the challenges and issues associated with each of the themes listed above and identify ideas and solutions that will enable collaboration and long-term planning across the party lines.

In doing this, we hope to enable our politicians to seize the initiative. Reforming and evolving our current political culture into one fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; replacing polarisation with collaboration in all the nations' political endeavours.

As you bring together your thoughts ahead of the consultation, we invite you to consider your perspective on the points listed above – alongside any other key issues you believe drives polarisation in British politics. And, crucially, what recommendations you believe could create a movement towards a better, more collaborate, future for our politics and our nation.

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<sup>19</sup> Bryne, *Trust me, I'm not a Politician*, 45-46

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

