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RESUSCITATING DEMOCRACY

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Our democracy is in crisis. Confined to the poorly ventilated corridors of Westminster, this year our stagnant politics turned fetid. Many commentators have leapt to draw parallels between the political crisis and this year’s other calamity— the collapse of the economy. Gordon Brown even argued that this double whammy is the reason we need him to limp on in power.

There are some similarities. Both are the sorts of convulsions we only see every fifty or a hundred years. We have blamed both on a few amoral individuals stealing from the rest of us. True, those villains exist. But to blame the political crisis on them alone is a weak excuse.

In fact, we all know that this problem is systemic. This is not a problem of expenses. It is a problem of power; not just power in a narrow legislative sense, of rights and representatives. It is a problem of control over our lives, of the ability to write our own life story.

We feel powerless in Britain for three reasons.

1. **British politics is unrepresentative**
   Our votes do not count, in the sense that we feel that we cannot sway the government one way or another. Think Iraq.

2. **Britain is far too centralised**
   We feel powerless because a tiny minority have far too much power. In France the ratio of voters to elected officials is 120:1. In Britain, it is 2,600:1. Real power in Britain rests with a handful of special advisers in Number 10. This creates two problems: it is neither fair, nor effective. However well meaning, a small coterie cannot effectively address any more than the immediate crisis of the moment. Power is too concentrated. It is too distant.

3. **The state is too confusing**
   Most people’s day to day interaction with the state is not with an MP or councillor. It is with our GP, tax return, or planning office and these services are often so complex as to be regressive. They exclude some, and infuriate others. We can elect Select Committee chairs or regulate expenses, but we will not make people feel powerful unless we also put people in control of accessing the 90 per cent of the state that is not constitutional.
How did it come to this?
The question answers itself. Progress on constitutional reform itself illustrates the mire. In Westminster and beyond, we the public knew that Parliament was Byzantine and exclusive, that election to most Parliamentary seats could be taken for granted, that turn out was falling. But what could we do about it? We all felt this problem was too big for us to solve; that we were too small an atom to have influence. We abdicated responsibility, and consoled ourselves that some learned committee somewhere would be taking care of it. Even MPs probably felt they could only live within the system, not change it. A very small number of people around the Prime Minister may have had the power to reform the constitution, but because they were powerful, they were busy. They had too much on their plate to address such vague long-term issues.

That is just the point: we have all failed. These sorts of brakes on constitutional reform are a microcosm of the overarching problem with our politics: no one has power, bar a tiny number who are too hard pressed to look beyond that day’s headline. Our politics, like our economy, has been built on sand for years.

This paper is a provocation to action.
The body politic is diseased. But Elliot Morley and Julie Kirkbride are the symptoms on the malady, not the cause. The broadsheets already heave with stale commentary on our woes. In this piece, The Progressive Conservatism Project at Demos diagnoses the illness, and recommends treatment at a national, local, and individual level.

Our proposals are not intended to be comprehensive. There are many adjustments that might improve political life. In this piece we do three things: pinpoint what has gone wrong, delineate three areas for reform, and present the most radical, progressive and conservative concrete actions we can take now to tackle apathy and jump-start democracy.
When our MPs — our voices — arrive at Parliament, they are likely to find themselves largely irrelevant. Most MPs are merely fodder for the whips. Few backbenchers have any role in setting party policy. Those who do are renegades, like Frank Field or John Bercow.

This is because there is no serious route to power in politics except to become a minister, or a special adviser. And there is no route to becoming a minister without genuflecting to the whips. So no sensible MP exercises their judgement on your behalf. They do as they are told.

Despite the theory, MPs cannot represent their constituents, speak up or use their judgement because the whips are their masters, not us. Therefore, the simple answer is to break the power of the whips.

Simple, but not easy. No founding father sat down in the seventeenth century to design whips into the British system. Crude bans on whip power will fail so long as the only interesting jobs in politics are being a minister, or a minister’s special adviser.

Our first challenge is to create powerful, independent, satisfying careers in public life beyond the front bench. Therefore, we propose to:

1 Commons’ Senators.
Create a new class of sixty-nine independent cross-bench MPs in the House of Commons to create a strong independent voice in the primary chamber of Parliament, rather than relegating that function solely to the Lords. Commons’ Senators would:

- Be legally forbidden from taking the party whip or standing on a party platform;
- Be elected by single transferable vote, one per county. Small counties would have the same representation as large counties, as in the American senatorial system;
- Overlap with the existing constituency MP system. Voters would elect their county Common’s Senator, in addition to continuing to elect their constituency MPs as at present;
- Be free from constituency case work. Commons’ Senators would of course meet constituents, but their role would be confined to national policy. Case work would be directed to constituency MPs just as it is at present;
· Be elected for two Parliaments consecutively, without the requirement to stand for re-election after the first Parliament, to preserve their independence of judgement. However, Commons’ Senators would, if they so wished, be allowed to stand as normal Members of Parliament before or after their Senatorial term;

· Be entitled to sit on Commons Select Committees. One seat on each Committee would be reserved for a representative of the Commons’ Senators, elected by their fellow Commons’ Senators;

· Be term limited to a single two-Parliament term only, a maximum of ten years, to prevent the emergence of a duplicate party system;

· Be allocated triple the standard Parliamentary research staff allowance, to equip them with a powerful policy capability, outside the party system.

· Be publicly funded to stand for election, but only after hustings. Being outside the party system, prospective Senatorial candidates will not have access to party funding. Since private donations would undermine a Senator’s independence, we propose that the public purse funds senatorial campaigns. Candidates who gather the signatures of one per cent of their electorate at a minimum of three public hustings around the county would be eligible for state funding.

Campaign funding should be limited to fifty pence per capita within the county – just over £30 million across the country;  

· Be forbidden from accepting donations of any kind to their campaigns;

· Be funded by cutting the number of constituency party MPs in the House of Commons by 79.4

2 More free votes.
At present, almost all votes are whipped. Although free votes are sometimes granted on matters of conscience, there is no requirement to do so. Labour whipped its MPs on the rights of Catholic adoption agencies for instance. To limit the power of the whips, we propose to:

· Establish a Joint Committee of both Houses to formalise convention and create a list of topics, which are always subject to a free vote in both Houses, beyond the grasp of the whips;

· Free topics might include both matters traditionally subject to a free vote, such as religion, abortion, medical ethics, decisions to go to war if brought to a vote, or constitutional reforms; as well as other matters of morality not always unwhipped;
- In addition to free vote listed topics, Members of Parliament or Lords could trigger a free vote by petitioning the Speaker. Any vote will be unwhipped if the Speaker receives letters requesting a free vote from more than two thirds of either House;

- In matters of dispute, the Speaker would adjudicate if an issue should be subject to a free vote or not.

3 **Cut back the Government pay roll.**
Since the 1970s, there has been a huge growth in the number of MPs paid an extra salary to join the Government below Cabinet level. There are now 14% more MPs on the Government payroll than in Margaret Thatcher’s day, including 18% more junior Ministers, and 23% more whips. Not only is this expensive, it compromises MPs’ independence. MPs on the Government payroll are obliged to vote with the Government or resign. By pruning the number of MPs who are paid-up members of the Government back to 1979 levels, we could save the tax-payer £521,274 a year, as well as dramatically reducing the power of the payroll to influence votes.

4 **Strengthen Select Committees.**
Gifted parliamentarians can sometimes use the chairmanship of a committee to good, independent effect, as Richard Reeves has argued. Frank Field on social security, and Chris Mullin and John Denham on home affairs spring to mind. These, however, are the exceptions, not the rule. Chairs are not elected, but imposed by the whips. Even the ordinary members of the committees are placed or blocked by the party machines. Therefore:

- All MPs should elect Select Committee members and chairs in a free, secret vote of the House, in order to prevent unofficial, surreptitious whipping. This is the same method used to elect a new Speaker.

- Committee Chairs should be paid £40,759 a year in addition to their basic MP’s salary, to bring them into line with Ministers of State. To extend this measure to the 22 policy-oriented Select Committee Chairs would cost a total of £896,698 a year. This would signal the power and value of this alternative route for advancement that lies outside the power of Government and the Whips.
- Select Committees should have confirmatory powers over ministerial appointments to the relevant departments and, in extremis, powers to remove ministers from office in the event of consistent under-performance. This will provide a prestigious, powerful alternative career to ministerial work and give Select Committees a mandate from the legislature rather than from the executive.

- The cost of this proposal will be funded by cutting the Government pay roll of Parliamentary Private Secretaries and other junior Government grades; and the salaries saved from the balance of reducing the size of the House of Commons, as outlined above.

5 The Speaker should not be an MP. At present, the Speaker and Deputy Speakers’ constituents are partially disenfranchised, because their elected representative cannot speak freely in the House. The Speaker and Deputy Speakers should be mandated to stand down from their constituency seat for as long as they hold that office. Speakers and Deputy Speakers would be eligible to stand as MPs or Commons Senators again at the end of their tenure.

6 Deputy Speakers should be elected as running mates to candidates for Speaker. At present, Deputy Speakers are selected through tenure on the Speaker’s Panel alone. To democratise the role, Deputy Speakers should be elected by MPs, as running mates to candidates for Speaker. To ensure party balance, Speaker candidates would be forbidden from drawing Deputy Speaker candidates from their own party.

7 Return control of the timetable to Parliament. The House, not the Government, should control the timetable of the House. We propose that a new Parliamentary Committee should set Parliament’s timetable. The Committee should be elected by, and drawn from Members of Parliament. The Committee should be chaired by the Speaker, to strengthen his or her role and activism within The House.

8 Expenses juries. The Commons’ Fees Office should be abolished and replaced with citizens’ juries to examine, and if necessary veto MPs’ and councillors’ expenses. Juries would consist of nine people each, and would be able to verify any expense claim by a simple majority. Any citizen over 18 would have to serve if called. Juries would not sit full time. This would be a part-time or evening requirement, perhaps meeting twice a year for two years. Jurors would be unpaid. Jury service would be part of the responsibility of being a British citizen. Juries for MPs, Commons’ Senators, and councillor’s expense would be drawn from the constituency or ward concerned. Juries for
officials would be drawn from across the country, in the same manner as for trial juries.

9 **Right to recall your MP.**
As the present scandal demonstrates, there is no way of getting rid of a bad MP except by waiting until the next election, or trusting to trial by media. This makes people feel powerless. We propose to create a new power to force a by-election if a third of the eligible electorate in a constituency petition to do so. Commons’ Senators would be subject to the power of recall in exactly the same manner. To prevent immediate attempts to overturn a general election result, by-election petitions could only be brought a year after an MP took their seat.

10 **Switch to an AV single transferable vote for local and national elections.**
A single transferable vote preserves the constituency link for MPs, but ensures that no voter can be ignored or taken for granted. Examples of this in practice include Ireland and Malta; European and local government elections in Northern Ireland; local elections in Scotland and New Zealand; and the Australian and Indian Senates.

11 **Hold elections at the weekend.**
With turn out so low, we must find ways to make it easier to vote. We should hold local, county, Senatorial, and national elections over two days at the weekend. Not only would weekend voting make it easier to vote, it would also save business the wage cost, in lost man-hours, of allowing staff to visit the polling station during office time.

12 **Vote online.**
We bank online. We should have the option of voting online. Online voting would be more convenient, cheaper, and cut paper waste. Online voting is progressive, because it makes it easier for marginalised groups like the elderly or infirm to cast their ballot. Many of the criticisms of online voting – issues of security – apply equally to postal or traditional forms of voting. Recent research suggests two thirds of the public would be happy to vote online. Registered voters would have the option of voting online, and receiving manifestos and campaign literature electronically.
Local Power Matters...
Resurrecting Parliament is vital, but it is not enough. Democracy as a whole is diseased, and if Westminster needs a facelift, town halls need CPR. Westminster is not the only place public decisions are made. Local democracy is also vital, for three reasons. Firstly, because local politics works. Problems like crime, antisocial behaviour, and transport need bespoke solutions. They are best solved locally.

Secondly, because localism should be natural. Decentralisation is not ‘a step down, decided upon by a generously minded centre’. Power should remain local unless there is a compelling case for it to be centralised.

Furthermore, better local politics will mean better national politics. Currently, the bulk of MPs’ mail sacks are about constituency matters that are actually the responsibility of local officials. If local politicians were visible, powerful, and accountable locally, then MPs in Westminster would have more time to raise the concerns of their constituents which are genuinely national.

…but it is far too weak.
Although it is worth promoting local power, local democracy is not healthy. Whilst Westminster has caught a cold, local democracy is briefly registering a pulse. The overwhelming majority of Europeans can name their local mayor or another official whom they can hold to account. In Britain, the only representative people can begin to name is their MP, and barely half can do that. Although expenses have yet to rock local authorities, turnout for the June 2009 elections was low. To excuse that as anomalous because of the current public mood misses the point. The current public mood is the problem. People do not see their local vote as influencing their neighbourhood. If they cast it at all, they do so as a comment on national politics, or with a vague aspiration that a Tory councillor will cut their council tax. It does not matter that local government is now perhaps the most innovative area of public service, or that it influences important aspects of our lives. Most people do not know what councils do, and do not care.

Our Proposals.
If we are serious about restoring control, we have to show that there is more to councils than council tax. Therefore, to revive local power, we propose to:
1 Legally enshrine the powers of local government to tax and spend. At present local authorities are servile service providers, rather than genuine expressions of local will. Local government should be able to raise, keep, and spend the bulk of their own revenues. The proportion of local government expenditure that came from central government tightly ring-fenced has risen from 5.1 per cent in 1997–98 to 14.0 per cent in 2007–08. Camden Council’s 2007–08 budget contained 73 different items of grant or income from central government — each with a precisely specified purpose, and none of which could be spent other than as prescribed.14

2 Allow local politicians to control local services. Local government does not really govern at all. It liaises. That is because Britain suffers from a patchwork of overlapping jurisdictions for different state services. Often different bodies control the police, transport, health, child, education, and family services. For example, local authorities seldom control their Primary Care Trusts. The government has taken steps to untangle this muddle with Local Area Agreements. Sir Michael Bichard’s forthcoming work on Total Place should help too. However, this is the wrong way to approach the problem. These are work-arounds to navigate a poorly designed system. Britain should follow Boris Johnson’s example with the London City Charter, and align local authority jurisdiction with local services, so that the leader of a council controls the local police, health and transport services. Putting this into practice will undoubtedly be complex, and is beyond the scope of this short piece, but a progressive government should make putting local politicians in charge of local services a core principle of reform.

3 Create a right to reclaim power. An incoming progressive government should enact a legal right of subsidiarity, the principle that all powers should be held at the lowest possible level. Local authorities would have a legal right to wrest control of services from central or regional government, unless it could be proved that those services can only provide greater public value — a measure of quality and efficiency combined — at a more centralised level. The Audit Commission would adjudicate in the first instance, with a legal right of recourse through the courts if necessary.

4 Live stream council meetings. All meetings for which public minutes are released should be posted and live streamed online for the public to see.
Pay councillors a full time salary. Being a good councillor is a full time role. By failing to pay a full time salary, we either limit the time councillors can devote to improving conditions for their constituents, or ensure that only the retired or wealthy can stand for office. Therefore, we propose that all councillors should be paid a minimum of the median British wage, currently £24,908, funded from local taxation.

Together these two sets of reforms at local and national level will create stronger, clearer, more responsive politics. However, there is one more area we need to reform, and it is an area that has been widely ignored in the current constitutional debate: public services.
It is no good having theoretical power if you do not know how to use it. Current discussions in the broadsheets and around Westminster ignore the fact that most people are not concerned with their constitutional rights from one day to another. What they want is to be able to access the right government help at the right time: to sort out their tax return, improve their GP’s surgery, or find out where their tax goes. The policy debate on public services focuses on how to make them cheaper, or better. It does not discuss how to make them easier to control. Yet ask any parent of a disabled child how easy it is to get the right state support, and it is clear that the ease of use is a very important part of real power.

To put people in control we must go beyond just thinking about our representatives. We need to give people power over the many parts of public life which make up the state as a whole. Rather than phoney consultations or focus groups, here we propose three exciting policies to give people real control over the things they pay for.

1 Smash secrecy.
The expenses scandal is definitive proof of the value of the Freedom of Information Act. A progressive government should go much further to open up government by:

- Requiring the Information Commissioner and Tribunal to indicate whether a judgement to disclose information applies only to the specific case or more broadly to similar data.
- Limiting extensions of the response time for a request to a maximum of 20 additional working days. At present delays can run indefinitely;
- Establishing a 20 working day statutory time limit for public bodies to complete their internal reviews if declined requests are queried;
- Requiring the publication of all freed information released under the Freedom of Information Act to be publicly listed. Currently freed information is only freed to the requester, not the public.

2 Create new ways for people to take control and place public services at their fingertips.
The modern state is now so complex, it is disempowering. It is hard to navigate the system, and not everyone can. Sometimes the barrier is inconvenience. If loud music from the bar down the road wakes you at three in the morning, how do you get it sorted out? These
kinds of problem sap our sense of personal power just as surely as MPs flipping their homes.

To give people the control over public services that they deserve, a progressive government should introduce a single access point for government, modelled on New York’s successful 311 number and website. 311 is so ubiquitous that New Yorkers now use it as a verb—‘just 311 that’. 311 might sound like the state nannying individuals. It is not. Because it is so easy to report problems or suggest solutions to the City, 311 is incredibly empowering. It puts people in control of what they pay for as surely as any senator does.

Moreover, 311 does not just help citizens. The patterns of complaint and queries help the Mayor to allocate city resources efficiently. If there is a spike in calls about rubbish in an area, officials can direct more crews to that area, or even get onto the existing crews to investigate the problem. So although the 311 is expensive, it also saves a great deal of waste and ‘failure demand’—the cost to citizens and the state of not being able to solve a problem at the first port of call. A British 311 is a key extension of everyday democracy. It turns the state upside down, making it the servant not the master, giving power to people over their own lives.

Case Study: New York’s 311—a Revolution in Personal Power.

In the UK, if you see a burst water pipe flooding the street, you know you ought to let someone know, but it is hard to think who. Is it the water company? Is there a government phone line for this sort of thing? Ofwat? Or the council? Which borough are you in anyway? And which department would they class this as? In the end, you probably would not bother.

In New York, you would know exactly what to do. 41,000 New Yorkers call 311 a day. 311 started out as a simple directory enquiries number—a sort of 118 for government. However, since its inception in 2002, 311 has rapidly evolved to become much more sophisticated and helpful. It is not a switchboard. It is a way to take control of public services.

· Always there.

311 runs 24 hours a day, 365 days a year with immediate access to translation services in over 170 languages. It covers all city services, and can connect you to state and federal help too. Most calls are answered in under a minute.

· Big and small questions.

311 does not just handle specific enquiries like the number for the dog catcher, or the deadline for tax returns. They can answer open-ended questions too, like ‘I want to lose weight—what should I do?’ 311 operators will tie together all the relevant services for you.
· **Built around people, not bureaucracy.**
311 now includes charities and private sector provision too. For instance if you want to know about childcare in your area, they can tell you about private and voluntary nurseries, and grants to help pay for them, as well as state provision.

· **Easy reporting.**
Citizens can alert and hand over problems to the city authorities. For instance, in New York, if you see a burst water pipe, or graffiti, you can report it to 311 and the operator will give you a reference number to track your request on their website, like a book delivery from Amazon. This feature plays a key part in New York Police’s zero-tolerance ‘broken window’ theory.

· **Suggestion power.**
If you have an idea, you can suggest it to the authorities via 311, who will see that your idea gets through to the right person.

3 **Allow citizens to participate in shaping policy.**
Teachers and doctors often say ‘it is mad the way we do x’, or ‘why on earth doesn’t the Government do y’. We need to connect these ideas to cash, advice, or the levers of power. We want to tap into public ideas or frontline professional experience. In the private sector, ‘outside innovation’ is becoming commonplace. Dell generates customer ideas from their Idea Storm site. The stationery company Staples gets many of their best selling products from an annual competition for new ideas. Goldcorp mining company is perhaps the best-known example of harnessing outside innovation. Their prize challenge drew thousands of entries, and generated billions in new revenue.

Now the technique is spreading to government. The Singaporean government has saved millions by crowd-sourcing innovations from its public sector employees through the PS21 scheme. Washington D.C.’s Apps for Democracy contest generated $400 for every dollar spent. Harnessing citizen innovation is not just good for the Treasury. It gives people real control. In Britain, Patient Opinion and Public Experience are attempting to gather people’s views, but struggle to feed them into public decision-making. Therefore, we propose to create a new website for citizens and professionals to propose innovations.

· **Citizens could suggest ideas to the site.**
Users rate ideas to remove the need for cumbersome bureaucratic processing.

· **The key to making the mechanism work is that participation must have a real impact.** Therefore, if an idea reaches the top twenty that week, the relevant government minister is mandated to meet the suggester, to consider, and to respond in public within one month.
Responses could be in a traditional text document, but could also be accompanied by a brief ministerial response by video, for posting on YouTube or Vimeo, so that everyone can get an idea of what the proposal was, and why the government was accepting or rejecting it.

If your idea is adopted, you win £1,000. Officials will then need to issue a detailed plan of how they will implement the proposal within three months, including timelines. The website would log milestone dates, so that citizens could see what progress is being made, and discuss how ideas could better be implemented.

If the minister rejects an idea from the top 20, he or she must explain fully the reason to the public. The site would carry mechanisms for popular appeal.

To ensure the site is not abused, users will be able to report content as offensive.

A figure of £1,000 for twenty prizes a week would cost £1.04 million per annum. Staff and funding would come from within the existing £5.2 million Transformational Government budget in the Cabinet Office.

Together, these reforms provide the new Speaker with a practical plan for re-establishing our sense of personal power, at national, local and individual level. Policy makers have spent years moaning that the public are not interested in politics. Well, they are now.

A window of opportunity has opened; we must not let it shut. We must resuscitate democracy.
Counties will be defined by their traditional pre-1974 boundaries. This avoids the complexity of including unitary authorities. For example, Berkshire would have only one Senator, although Slough is a unitary authority within Berkshire. A list of the pre-1974 counties can be found at http://www.ukniwm.org.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.36. For further information see http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/counties_nonmet ua.asp


At present, MPs receive an office allowance of £103,812. This is designed to employ 3.5 staff. To equip Senators with extra research capacity, we propose to cut the number of MPs further, in addition to those directly replaced by Senators. Based on the assumption that 1.5 of the 3.5 staff MPs currently employ are constituency staff (43%, or £44,490.86 of the present allowance), one of the 3.5 is for diary matters, and one is for research, £29,660.57 of MPs' present staff allowance is for policy & research staff. Therefore, to triple the research budget of Senators would require an additional £59,321.14 to be found for each of the 69 Senators. However, Senators would not require constituency staff, so would have more funding to pay for research staff in any case (£44,490.86 more). The remaining £14,830.29 per Senator, (£1,023,289.71 overall) would come from cutting a further ten MPs from the House, in addition to the 69 replaced by Commons' Senators. The office allowance for ten MPs is £1,038,120.00. Their salaries would be returned as a saving the taxpayer. This enable Senators to employ one diary secretary and three full time research staff, each paid £29,660.57 per annum, and a net gain to be returned to the tax payer of £662,490.29.

Limitations on the number of Ministers and the size of the Payroll vote, Thomas Powell and Paul Lester, House of Commons Library, p.6.

At present junior Ministers are paid £104,000 a year. Currently Committee chairs are paid £79,132 (including their MP’s salary of £64,766), http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/m06.pdf

The Speaker’s Panel is a body of senior Parliamentarians.

33% is around half the usual British general election turn out. Electoral turn-out was 61.28% in the 2005 General Election and 59.17% in 2001. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/frontpage/4519515.stm


Full turn out figures will not be known until July 2009.


This limit already applies to requests for environmental information, under the Environmental Information Regulations of 2004.

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