

20th Annual Attlee Lecture, 27th February 2002, The Reform Club

BETTY BOOTHROYD

“Reform of the Commons and the Lords”

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all, thank you so much for so many lovely people turning up. I've never seen so many numbers for a long time - I never had this crowd of people before me when I was Speaker! But much has happened of course since I urged the House of Commons on my retirement as Speaker to hold the Government of the day to better account and then by doing so to defend its rights as the Chief forum of the Nation. That is what I believe it is, and should remain. And at that time I reminded the House of the disillusion about the political process among the general public and I said that the level of cynicism about Parliament and the accompanying alienation of many of the young from the democratic process was troubling.

During my period as Speaker, I did what I could to halt the decline in our reputation, and I used the powers that were vested in the Chair to uphold Standing Orders, and I allowed debates on vital matters that Ministers often would rather had not been aired. I was in a very privileged position, and I rebuked Ministers not only privately but also very publicly, mostly for announcing new policies to the media instead of the floor of the Commons where they could be cross-examined.

Since then, I am delighted to say that the House of Commons has shown its muscle over the selection of Chairmen of its Select Committees. You will remember the tussle we had with Donald Anderson and Gwyneth Dunwoody. I was very pleased to play a little part in that from the red benches of the House of Lords. I am delighted to see that those Select Committees will no longer just do as the Whips tell them to do.

Further, I think the Cabinet's proposals for further reform of the Upper House are being re-examined after backbench opposition. And that too is very welcome. You know, the blind quest for the modernisation of procedures that bothered me when I was Speaker has been now replaced by a more sober realisation that modernisation is worse than useless if it encompasses everything and means nothing. I am glad to say a few goals at any rate are being scored.

Because I have been a Member for some 25 years, and have progressed towards the Speakership by the classic route of being appointed by Jack Weatherall here when he was Speaker as Chairman of Committees and then I worked for a term with Jack as Deputy Speaker. Some onlookers thought that when I went into the Chair they got it into their heads that I was a stick in the mud traditionalist, totally opposed to change. How wrong they were. My whole life has been devoted to change, but it's change for the better, not for the sake of it, or as an excuse for simply giving the impression of 'doing something'.

Now what we should be talking about is improving Parliament to make it more effective and in tune with the lives of the electors. That is why, Mr Chairman, I have to say that

loose talk about modernisation doesn't impress me, and why some of the early arguments about modernisation seem to me to have more spin than substance - not least when it comes to reforming the House of Lords. Certainly, the time is ripe for its reform, but you know I can't help at this stage and on this occasion with the Attlee Foundation, to reflect somewhat wryly, on the period of the Attlee Government in the late 1940's. That Government brought a massive, peaceful revolution to society with the acquiescence of a House of Lords, stuffed to the gills with Conservative hereditary peers. Attlee managed it.

But of course in examining reform and seeking to reverse the cynicism about what we do and how we do it, we have to change our attitudes and make Parliament more relevant to people's lives, not just cosier for its occupants. And the debate on the reform of Parliament has become I'm glad to say more focussed, and I welcome that. There have been a number of excellent reports from knowledgeable people in all parties and none, who are devoted to our system of democracy, and I commend them for it, and for the trouble they have taken.

Now Mr Chairman, one of the many advantages of being a cross bench Member in the Lords is that I am free to say and vote as I please and to play the magpie in search of all the best ideas. And when those ideas serve the cause of upholding Parliament's authority and strengthening its defences against the executive, I don't mind where they come from - all contributions are gratefully received!

One thing is abundantly clear - we can't go on as we are. I think the democratic process in this country is clearly in need of reform and our responsibility is to select from all those strands of opinion and take what is best suited to our culture and our historic development.

More than anything, we need to revive the sense of citizenship that underpins our way of life. But that I mean the development of a civic consciousness which, looking round here I think we in this room have grown up with and take for granted. David Blunkett's efforts when he was at the Department of Education brought the teaching of education for citizenship into our schools - most welcome. The Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government does splendid work with young people throughout the country, as the does the Education Section of the House of Commons Library - it provides display material and a wealth of information to schools; lecture facilities and lecturers at Westminster itself for pupils and students on a very regular basis. All of it aimed rightly at the coming generation. So all is not lost

What has gone wrong. The turnout at the last General Election was 59%. It was the lowest since men and women were given equal voting rights in 1928. I think the Labour pioneers would be appalled, not to mention Emily Pankhurst and her suffragettes.

Mr Chairman, I become perhaps more committed to public life after the 1949 By Election in a place called Batley and Morley. We had no spin doctors to tell us what line to take. We had no glib literature to distribute. We even managed, you know, without the instant

rebuttal team that every party now employs daily. That seat in West Yorkshire was held for Attlee's Government on a turnout of 82%. It's astounding by today's standards. The turnout at the recent Ogmire by-election was just 35%. It had been raining a lot they said. It wasn't much better in Ipswich last November - just 40% turnout. Not bad I suppose when you consider they had a local football derby that day.

I believe such apathy not only reflects badly on what I call the stay at homes. More worrying still, it gives a green light to individuals with vested interests to exploit the opportunities of the democratic vacuum at the heart of our national life. The less Parliament is able to monitor the executive, to scrutinise legislation, to air grievances and to put salt on the government's tail, the easier it becomes for power to be abused and finally corrupted.

You know, Britain I think whatever the cynics say, is still mercifully free from the levels of corruption, that disfigure public life in many countries. Not necessarily because we are more virtuous, but because we have been at the business of constitutional checks and balances a long time, and we are constantly working at it.

Mr Chairman, during my period as Speaker, it was necessary for me to call for swift action to settle public anxieties and media speculation about the outside interests of Members of Parliament. That led in 1996 to an inquiry into the conduct of 25 Members, five of whom were found to have fallen below the standards the House has a right to expect of its Members. It was an unprecedented inquiry, and the high profile

investigations that followed stemmed from it. And now of course the Committee on Standards in Public Life is looking at the way the Commons Commissioner for Standards works. All I can say at this stage is that I welcome very much the appointment of Philip Mawer, and I commend his approach to his new responsibilities. I particularly welcome his intention to give short shrift to vexatious and malicious complaints by one member against another - the tit for tat, which both sides have indulged in, and he is dedicated to deal with trivial cases by offering those who need it a word of advice.

The problem isn't that Members of Parliament are any more venal than people in other walks of life - after all, Parliament is a microcosm of the country. The real danger is that unless Parliament reasserts itself and we achieve a higher level of political activity in the country, I fear that two things might happen: what I call the insider traders of politics will take over - people with mercenary interests who know how to work the system and find friends inside it. They have an obvious interest in by-passing the proper channels of public accountability and Parliamentary scrutiny.

Secondly, I fear that groups of all kinds will turn to direct action as a means of securing their aims. We remember all of us I'm sure in this room, the mayhem brought to the City of London by anarchists. I inspected the devastation inflicted on Parliament Square and on Whitehall a couple of years ago. It was an outrageous affront to Parliamentary democracy.

So, what's to be done? I would like to see a two-pronged approach. Yes, Parliament must reform its procedures, but our political parties must play their role too. They must revive their own mass organisations and reconnect with their supporters in the country. As Philip Gould, Tony Blair's polling adviser wrote recently, and I quote he wrote on "connecting with voters with increasing sophistication". But of course he too recognised that modern communications have their limitations. Yes of course you can reach people more easily, but that is not nearly the same as forging them into a political force. So Mr Gould says it's time for a new campaign based on 'participation'. He calls it 'participatory campaigning'. It rings a bell, doesn't it? I imagine that some of you have done quite a lot of it.

Mr Gould says the public have become separated from politics by what he calls 'the glass wall'. They are on the outside and we, who live in the Westminster village are on the inside. I quote him again "People care as much about politics as ever, but they cannot connect with the politics they see articulated by the Westminster political process".

I think his answer is really the same as mine, but by a different route. He wants a new sort of campaigning, except that you and I know it really isn't new. I want a revived Parliament to break down the glass wall, to revive public interest in the real work that goes on there, and I want too the media and particularly the written media, to play a role with balanced coverage and comment on what goes on.

Attlee of course was, as most of us know, a media man's nightmare. Yet his Government inspired to us to work for record election turnouts. A senior political correspondent recorded the old man's one-line answers to questions which was put to Attlee at a rare lobby meeting. They went like this:

“nope - nothing in that”

“Somebody been kidding you again?”

“You've not done your homework”

And of course the final put down was when he told a Minister why he had been fired - “not up to it”. You know, he was almost as taciturn at Prime Ministers Questions, to which I now turn.

Ladies and Gentlemen I think nothing demeans Parliament so much as the horrendous shouting matches that disfigure Prime Minister's Question Time. I'm certainly not arguing for a docile Parliament when I say that. On the contrary, I take pride in the cut and thrust of intervention and exchange, and during the summer recesses I've done my share of explaining to many democracies throughout the world our robust system. Indeed we have a cut and thrust, those of you who have seen the Chamber of the Commons and I'm sure many of you have seen that green carpet with, in front of each front bench, a strip of red either side which is one sword length and a foot across. In the old days if they argued, they got out a sword and got on with it.

But of course we have arguments, but there is an enormous difference between what RAB Butler called the ‘ noise of democracy ‘ that erupts when passions run high on issues of crucial importance, and the routine verbal thuggery that accompanies most exchanges between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. An enormously valuable opportunity for the House to question the Prime Minister about the issues of the day is lost. Too often it resembles a gladiatorial contest between two men fighting as if their entire careers depended on the outcome. To what end? I sat there and I watched William Hague who gave as good as he got in his weekly jousts; it didn’t make a jot of difference at the general election.

Half an hour’s slanging match once a week across the Despatch Box with a quota of patsy questions from Government backbenchers to help pass the time, clearly won’t do. Apart of course from that half hour question time, we can expect to hear from the Prime Minister only on very limited occasions - after the Queen’s Speech, when he makes statements or when he comes back from Summit meetings. Apart from Censure Motions. I once did a Censure Motion - do you remember Jack? **“I remember the 27th March 1979. That this House has no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government.”** Yes, and I had one too with John Major. But they are few and far between and we don’t want those. But we don’t hear much from the Prime Minister other than as I say at Question Time.

And I think to overcome this, a recommendation I was delighted to see came from a Select Committee calling for the Prime Minister to appear from time to time before the Chairmen of all the Select Committees to discuss the direction of government policy. It

seemed a very good idea, to talk on a structured agenda to talk about the Government policy for the coming few months. Regrettably Downing Street rejected it on the grounds that other Prime Ministers hadn't appeared before Committees and it wasn't intended to break the tradition. So we're left with the status quo. There's no doubt that better balance has to be struck between a Prime Minister's executive duties and responsibilities to the House.

Perhaps we might examine procedural changes to Prime Minister's Question Time, whereby substantive questions related directly, directly to his responsibilities might be asked, such as the discussions he will be having on what I see from the newspapers is called Phase Two of the war on terrorism with President Bush in April. Why is he not asked - he is totally responsible for all that. Why is he not asked a question about what he hopes to obtain from the Commonwealth Heads of Government now meeting in Australia which he's off to this afternoon after Prime Minister's Questions. All relate directly to Prime Ministerial responsibilities as Head of Government. And who knows, we might be better informed from the replies. I listened today to I think it was the number of bedpans available in a West Sussex hospital.

But you know, Mr Chairman you took a quote out of my mouth - as Attlee says "Democracy means government by discussion but it is only effective if you can stop people talking". But not I hasten to add, altogether, we don't want to stop them altogether.

The Hansard Society for Parliament Government has proposed seven areas of reform - three of which relate to Questions. One, which I worked hard at, is aimed at improving the topicality of questions asked on the floor of the House. That's why I attempted to encourage the Opposition to be alert to the use of Private Notice Questions on urgent issues.

Don't forget, I had to deal with an opposition that had been in Government for eighteen years and who was very very unaccustomed to opposition, and didn't know how to operate. And one had to do all sorts of interesting and proper things behind the scenes to encourage that opposition. Democracy only flourishes when you have opposition. That is what we need, and I encouraged them. All right a lot of people think that after Prime Minister's Questions the House is dead on Thursday. I tried to encourage them to put down what is called a the Private Notice Question on Thursday or Friday to give them an opportunity on a matter of urgency.

The Hansard Society also suggested that the Opposition should be able to trade in some of the days that they have which were set aside for debates of their choosing and to use that opportunity to call for a Cabinet Minister to make a statement on a topical issue of policy, which can be questioned, it can be scrutinised and it can be debated to a much greater extent than it can at Questions Time. I think this is certainly a recommendation worth serious consideration.

I fully understand, I have been in Government long enough and so has Jack Weatherall, to know that Governments don't welcome scrutiny, always have to remember that one day they will be in Opposition. Well, I tell them that many a time. They come and have a gin and tonic with me and I say you're not always going to be sitting on that side, so you'd better watch it!

Another Hansard idea is that 150 to 200 MPs drawn proportionately from all parties should be able to demand a public interest debate on gross failure of policy or maladministration. And why not? The greater the flexibility of our work, the more interest there will be in it; the more the quality of MPs will be demonstrated and the more that Ministers will have to be on their toes.

There's no shortage of good ideas, so let's not do what we do with some Select Committee reports, and put them on the shelf to collect dust.

Mr Chairman, just let me digress for a moment if I may and say at this point something I feel very strongly about. I believe that a dangerous precedent was set just before Christmas when the Government swept aside the Oath of Allegiance by means of a motion that allowed some Members, who refuse to take their seats, special facilities and privileges. The Oath of Allegiance is an Act of Parliament, it is embodied in the Parliamentary Oaths Act, which is the only written constitution that we have. In my view, that was a constitutional change which gave a status that amounts to honorary membership of Parliament - a Parliament not recognised by those in question as having

jurisdiction over their area of the country, but whose advantages they are happy to accept on their own terms. Moreover, that Motion of a constitutional nature should have carried the Prime Minister's signature as head of government. Regrettably, it did not.

The end result of all this we don't know. But are we left with a situation that anybody who gets elected can become an MP with an office, and expenses but never sit, never speak or vote in the House? It makes a nonsense of Parliament, and I have reason to believe that there are many people who think as I do.

So maybe in this era of reform, there should be a new Oath of Allegiance with which all Members would be comfortable and find harder to dodge - an oath to support the rights of Parliament, the principles of democracy and liberty and most importantly, the rule of law.

Mr Chairman, let me turn to the issue of legislation. I am very pleased indeed that there is pressure from many quarters for a more structured system of examination of draft Bills before they actually reach the floor of the House. There are calls for a system whereby draft Bills are examined by the appropriate Select Committees and that those Committees are able to call in witnesses - Ministers, Civil Servants, witnesses from the voluntary sector, from the non-government organisations, to see that in its draft stage, the legislation is workable, and to ensure that it can be implemented. That seems to me to be a sensible approach. So much time is spent on the floor of both Houses dealing with detailed amendments, and yes, even re-writing whole sections of Bills. How much more efficient and effective it would be if those experts who have to implement the legislation

were able to give their advice at an early stage, before a Bill gets to the floor of the House and goes into Standing Committee. Of course I don't deny, none of us deny, that governments have the right to get their manifesto commitments on the statute book, but you know Parliament has the right to use expertise in scrutinising the claims of the executive.

And while we are about it, I think the Parliamentary calendar needs examining too. The summer recess is very long, a very long period, in fact it's too long. How much better to have a summer recess that ends in the middle of July, people come back at the end of August, work in September, have a break for the political Party Conferences. We never know in advance the dates of other recesses. No wonder Members of Parliament get tetchy, their partners get tetchy - they never know what they're doing. Some of them want to breast feed in Committees - they could go home and breast feed if they knew what they were doing. You know, at the beginning of each session, Canada publishes a little calendar. You put it in your top pocket, and everybody knows - Members, civil servants, House officials and staff - it's a calendar, they all know when they have a recess and they all know what they are working towards. I don't think we are too long in the tooth to learn from others that have had some good experiences in this.

Mr Chairman, the United Kingdom is now very much a devolved state, and I think it's time for a slimmer government and a slimmer Parliament. I wonder if we really do need 100 Ministers and their attendant retinues of parliamentary private secretaries and special advisers? I think not. Sometimes you know I'm inclined to think that Ministers talk

more to their apparatchiks and their media advisers than they do to their Permanent Secretaries. I had a supplementary question in the House of Lords the other day about the code of conduct of special advisers. I call them apparatchiks but when I am in the House of Lords I have to be very polite and call them special advisers.

And I wonder if we need 659 MPs? I'm not going into the numbers game, but I think there are far too many and it seems to me that the fewer there the more effective they will become. A smaller House could be better paid, better staffed and better equipped. It would be a good investment I think if it keeps the Government and Whitehall up to scratch.

The House of Lords too I think could be slimmed down. Jack, I'm sorry to say it in your presence. **I agree!** We think quite a lot on things. I accept the argument against having a fully elected Upper House, I don't want a challenge to the supremacy of the Commons, but the proposal of 20% elected I think is rather too low. In my view, somewhere about 60% of the peers should be elected and we can say goodbye to the remaining hereditary peers and the Law Lords and Bishops and of course the Bishops, some Bishops and some other clergy representing other religious groupings, now in our multi-racial society could come through the Appointments Commission.

And the role of the Law Lords in Parliament is an anachronism - I often wonder why we close our doors of the Chamber and the people with wigs come in and sit in there. I went up to one or two of them the other day and said I'm going to suggest that we do away

with all you coming here and give you your own. But they said we're not answering questions to you Madam Speaker. They thought I was still the Speaker!

But you know it rather is an anachronism, as is the role of the Lord Chancellor - and I said the role. Derry Irvine happens to be a very, very good friend of mine, I'm not talking about him, I'm talking about the role of the Lord Chancellor. Is it really acceptable in this age for a Cabinet Minister to head the judiciary, preside over the House of Lords and chair Cabinet Committees? I wonder if it would be the end of the world if the Law Lords had their own supreme court and the House of Lords had its own Speaker?

And the elections of new peers which is being talked about, there are all sorts of papers being put forward as to how this might be done, could be on a regional basis, probably some form of proportional representation. If that is the case I think that maybe that would perhaps increase the opportunity greater independence rather than two main parties. I have to say that the Liberal Democrats have produced an interesting paper which suggests a 15 year term of service starting with 80 new peers in the year 2004, another 80 in the year 2009 and a third tranche in the year 2014.

And of course there is always the possibility of a severance or retirement grant on a voluntary basis for Life Peers of a certain age. Was that a hiss Jack? You know the last figures that I looked at on this - there are actually 158 Life Peers between the ages of 70 and 80; 35 Life Peers didn't attend a single sitting of the House last session. They might like voluntary retirement, a bit of severance, redundancy, and of course people like Jack

Weatherall and I who are terribly well preserved - there's always natural wastage - that happens too.

Nobody gains when a large number of our citizens say "a plague on all your houses". I mean the best way to dispel that is to make Parliament a more efficient guardian of the public interest, and a more effective scrutiniser of Government. Before we start, we should have a public debate. I was saying earlier this evening, we've got to keep that momentum for reform going, but it depends of course, it always has on the willingness of Members of Parliament to assert themselves and to seize the opportunities that the current climate provides.

Let me end, Mr Chairman, on this note. Jack Weatherall said he didn't know Clem Attlee. To me Clem was a remote figure who actually nevertheless had a great influence on me in my formative years as I watched and listened to him at numerous gatherings in the north country. Many years later, I worked for a Member of Parliament called Geoffrey de Freitas. Prime Minister Attlee made Geoffrey his Parliamentary Private Secretary, I think largely because they had both been at Haileybury. One day Attlee said to Geoffrey "Are you taking young Graham to the Trooping of the Colour?" "No sir" said Geoffrey, "I'm far too busy". Clem said "Bring him in, I'll take him". I think Attlee, like all great men, kept things in perspective.

Applause

Thank you very much Betty for that marvellous talk, that marvellous lecture if I may call it that, although I don't regard it as a lecture ("Nor do I" - BB) I'm now going to ask Peter Hennessey to propose a Vote of Thanks

Peter Hennessey: Thank you very much Richard. I'm not sure if the equipment is working - can you hear me? Good. Richard's quite right Betty - that wasn't a lecture, it was the Boothroyd Manifesto. It was absolutely terrific and I do hope it gets very wide circulation. I was very taken tonight as I was with your farewell speech as Speaker, nearly eighteen months ago now, nearly two years ago, and that was a Manifesto too, and it was very timely. And I have to say as somebody who has always, though never a member of either House, very jealous of the rights of Parliament, I sometimes get very depressed by the condition of the House of Commons and I am reminded of Disraeli's wicked line that an injection of water would stiffen their backbone. And when I'm depressed I think of what you said and I think of what Jack did also when he was Speaker, and I'll give you a recent example. Just before Christmas the Select Committee that you were rightly praising got a reply from the Government whereby there was an agreement that in future announcements would be made in the House of Commons and not on the Today Programme. A month later, a Government spokesman on luvvie terms explained to the equally supine political hacks to reported it verbatim that this of course would only apply when practical. Who would decide when it was practical? Number Ten. It's a phrase of Ernie Bevin's actually rather than Clem Attlee's that comes to mind sometimes when I look at the condition of your old House, it's the poverty of their aspirations that's so depressing. But this is not an occasion to moan or to whinge because

Betty has cheered us up, she's shown us the way forward and I have to say Betty that I'm so pleased that you felt the need to have a go at the dear Prime Minister about refusing to go and talk to Select Committees. Now, it amazes me that, because he talks to school children who visit, foreign journalists, that lady on the Jubilee Line, you remember, but not to Select Committees of the House of Commons, and you will forgive me for this but we have the Prime Ministers principal adviser on procedure at the back today, my friend Sir Richard Wilson, the Cabinet Secretary, so Richard when the Prime Minister gets back from Australia you've got to go straight in and say "Betty says you've got to change the line on not appearing before Select Committees". So history's changed tonight Betty, thanks to you. But please, please, don't stop. Don't stop saying all this and pushing for it. And we're deeply in your debt and I do hope we can find some way between us of publishing this lecture Richard sooner rather than later. Thank you very much Betty - it's been smashing.

Applause

Question:

I just wanted to congratulate you on what you said about the Oath of Allegiance. I think there's far too little opposition to it, far too little talk about it. It's a fundamental constitutional change which has been sneaked through without any thought of going to the electorate, so please keep on complaining about it, and especially because it bears so much relation to the much vaunted war against terrorism.

BB: Thank you. May I just make a comment on that, if I may? I don't know whether you are aware that the Sinn Feiners came to see me, and I ruled against them coming into the House because they wouldn't take the Oath. They took my decision to the High Court of Northern Ireland where it was turned down. They took my decision in 1999 to the European Court of Human Rights. Seven judges there on five counts turned them down. It was July 1999. The British press were slumbering and made no reporting of it. But of course, what I have to say is that what the Prime Minister did with that motion is perfectly legal, but I did do battle for a long time before then on one or two court hearings.

Question:

Could you please comment on the future funding of the political parties?

BB: I don't really think I'm capable of commenting on that, but my instinct tells me that the great British public does not want to, and should not be asked to pay for the funding of political Parties. What I would like to see is the spending of political parties is restricted quite considerably. It seems to me that when, I mean I love General Elections, I've been involved in them all my life. I do know about them, and I do know something about the spending. But it does seem to me that when I watch a General Election these days there's a great deal of money spent on what? It's not going to persuade anybody.

Pulling ropes and seeing the side of a great pantechnicon saying vote Labour or vote Conservation or this is your hospital is not going to change anybody's attitude and I think there is a great deal of money which is wasted. I would like to see political parties raise their own funding, certainly from individual subscriptions which is nowhere near enough to keep them going, and all parties would have to have good contributions from business and from wealthy individuals, but that has got to be transparent. We need to know where it comes from, we need to know who has given it. But at the same time I would like to see that spending at General Elections is very strictly limited. And that we all don't have to pay for it.

Question: (inaudible in parts) I wonder if you would like to see a return to two Prime Ministers questions times on Tuesday and Thursday to improve topicality, rather than have just one session on the Wednesday?

BB: Quite honestly, I would like to see two sessions of Prime Minister's Question Time. I think it was better spaced. I quite understand that all Prime Ministers these days, the pressure on them is enormous and to have two lots of briefings which I know from both John Major and from Tony Blair takes a tremendous length of time and the staff provided to do all the briefings for them, and this is why I can well understand that a Prime Minister wants to do it all at once. But I think it's rather better to have it separated. What I wasn't consulted about - I didn't need to be consulted, it might have been polite to consult me, but I wasn't consulted, I was told. And then I said all right the Government has a right to organise its business as it will. John Major came to see me he

said “Betty, what do I do. I have three questions on Tuesdays and three on Thursdays” I said “You’ve got six John. On little subjects, I’ve doubled them up, I thought that was fair”. And then what I attempted to do to try to save my talk. It was in the House and certainly by the public outside that after questions on Wednesday there was a nosedive and there wasn’t a great deal of interest on the Thursday particularly as the House went off at 7 o’clock on Thursday so I tried to say without making it too blatant (I don’t think I did make it blatant) to the Opposition, Thursday is your day. Put in what we call a Private Notice Question and you can get a Cabinet Minister at the Despatch Box on a Thursday. Well as I say, I had an Opposition that had been in Government for eighteen years and it took them a long time to find their feet. I remember saying to somebody very senior in Whitehall who must remain nameless (and do not follow my eyes) that I was concerned about the balance between Government and Opposition and how it would develop and we talked about it. I was assured they will all find their way in a year or two, it does take time. But you’re right, from my point of view I would like to see twice a week, but I do understand the enormous pressure on the prime Minister and the briefings and everything he has to go through.

Question:

I was interested in the idea of the distance between Government and the public and the glass wall, and I was wondering what you think it is that is holding back members of parliament from trying to get through that glass wall?

BB Yes, I find it a very difficult question. To break down that glass wall - I think that Members of Parliament would like to do it, but they want to be more in tune with the electorate, because obviously it is to their advantage to do that and this is why I would like to see Parliament if you like more open to the acceptance of what I talked about - the voluntary organisations, the private sector, coming in to our Select Committees to help us and to give evidence about Bills that are coming before us.

We have a system now, I don't want you to run away with the wrong idea, we have a system now whereby Bills can go to a special Committee for that sort of examination, but it's not done as effectively as I would like to see. I want the majority of Bills to go through before that, and there I feel we would really be bringing groups of the public, whatever organisation it was in, and therefore there would be a better understanding of Parliament. I think too, and I began with this, although I didn't want to put too much emphasis on it, we have got to get to young people, the up and coming generation in breaking down that glass wall. I touched upon only a few things - education work that we do through the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the Hansard Society, what David Blunkett did in Education in Citizenship through Professor Crick report - breaking down that glass wall I think we've got to reach a younger generation in order to do it. It's not going to be easy but we've all got to do it as well as the press, the media outside. It cannot be left only to Members of Parliament - I don't know what your profession is, but people in all professions in all walks of life, we need their help with it too.

Do you have any concerns about what appears to be the increasing concentration of power in Number Ten to the extent that it seems to be becoming a separate department?

BB I think Downing Street has always been extremely powerful. I think what you are probably trying to say to me is that maybe the presidential style has come a result of that **Yes.** Yes, I am concerned about it, and I think it arises for a number of reasons, some of which I have already touched upon. We have a Prime Minister whatever we think in this room, who is in the country extremely popular. There is no doubt about that We have seen what happened to the Leader of the Opposition William Hague in the Election and he had to go. Tony Blair is popular throughout this country. You have two leaders of the opposition in quite a short amount of time who haven't been able to find their feet - let's hope this new leader does.

We've had also, which I've noticed this summer recess, when we were dealing with Washington on Afghanistan, Blair who then adopted, not of his own making, I don't blame him for this, a type of presidential style because Parliament wasn't sitting and I saw him on a number of times what you might call in the Rose Garden or outside Downing Street giving statements to the press, giving it to all of us in the country as to what was happening. I don't blame him as I've said because he had no Parliament to go to, and therefore the presidential style was there.

And I think too that Downing Street is becoming extremely powerful. A question was asked in the House the other day about the number of special advisers there. There were 25 of these advisers - special advisers only from Downing Street. It seems to me to be quite a lot, with all the other civil servants there - I don't know where they put them all actually, perhaps Richard Wilson will later when we're having a glass of wine, but it seems to me to be an enormous number of special advisers and I think it is becoming extremely powerful and the way we've got to deal with it is to bring the Prime Minister much more into the Parliamentary arena rather than allow these statements to come through Downing Street and through some of what I call the apparatchiks.

But of course you see what happened during the Afghanistan situation Bush stayed home, wasn't allowed out of America in case anything happened to him, so our Prime Minister had to go round the Middle East rounding up support. So that made him powerful presidential style. You can't blame him for that, it had to be done. But one is concerned about the increasing power and influence of Downing Street. I agree.

Question:

I wonder if you would elaborate on how you see the House being a microcosm of the country.

BB: Yes, it's a microcosm of the country because we're all different people. We have I can't remember how many women now, I would have to look up the number the other

day, not quite as many as we had, not quite as many as some of us would wish. We have some bankers, some engineers, we've no miners any more, we've got doctors, we've got teachers, we've got solicitors, we've got lawyers. That is what I call a microcosm of the country. And a few nutters! People from all walks of life. I mean this may well be a microcosm, this audience today - people coming from different backgrounds. That is what I call a microcosm.

I would like to ask the Baroness - you mentioned elections and including young people. I always find the Parliamentary process so slow and I wonder if this puts young people off? For example, the fox hunting bill and the new national stadium.

BB: Well, that's a very good point - I wouldn't disagree with that. There are times when people have written to me and they said there's an Early Day Motion on the Order Paper calling for so and so, and so and so. When are we going to get this? I said never, because it's only a question of opinion. It's not legislation. On fox hunting I can understand a lot of young people may be keen and interested in all of those things. One has to wait for a Parliamentary legislation, for a Prime Minister to find time for it. Our Prime Minister says he hasn't time for it - it was in the manifesto but there isn't time for it. And you're quite right in the placing of the stadium - I think after the mistake of the Dome, they're going to be very careful about it - take a long look at where it's going to be. But I can quite understand why it would worry a young person more than me. I'm well preserved but you're very young! And young people are, quite rightly, impatient

about things. I was impatient about abortion law reform and capital punishment. We got there in the end but go on being impatient and pushing us all.

Richard Davis: Well, again, thank you so much for that fascinating and marvellous evening. And I think we might once again show our appreciation. (Applause)