

A New Deal for the UK

An outline plan for the reform of the British government

It is widely agreed that the Westminster model of adversarial government is out of touch with many of the people it serves. Many potential voters feel alienated from the system and constitutional crisis looms. If we wish to engage people in the process of government and hold the UK together, tinkering with the current system will be far too little too late. We are at a cross-roads and this gives us the opportunity for a bold and radical change of direction. Here are my personal ideas for reform:

1. The UK will adopt a federal system with most domestic policy decided and directly financed within each country and federal region.

2. We will abolish the House of Lords. In place of this we will create a new elected single chamber to govern the federal United Kingdom. This new round chamber for the 'Council of the UK' will be sited near the centre of Britain, somewhere between Derby and Durham. Perhaps Leeds or York would be good options? It will have a maximum of 400 members (possibly less) elected for a fixed term of 6 or 7 years, allowing the council to take a medium to long-term view. It will have responsibility for overall finance and financial regulation, foreign affairs, defence and environmental regulation. Most other departments of government will be devolved to the federal countries/regions.

3. We will abolish the House of Commons. In place of this we will create a new elected single chamber English Parliament to govern London, the home-counties and the south east of England, plus any region which wishes to remain part of England. This new round chamber could be sited in a refurbished Palace of Westminster. – Apparently the Palace of Westminster needs approximately £3 billion of restoration work. Here is a golden opportunity to remodel it. Pugin and Barry's world famous 1860 exterior with the Clock Tower (Big Ben), the Victoria Tower etc, will remain. The interior will be sensitively re-fashioned to suit its new uses. All this will be decided and financed by the new English Parliament.

4. Any other large English region will, if they wish, be allowed to hold a referendum on becoming a federal state.

5. The Council of the UK and all federal chambers will have the right to elect a panel of advisors, for the duration of the parliament, to help create and scrutinise legislation and policy. Meetings of these panels will be open to the public. They would NOT have the right to block legislation.

6. All UK and federal elections will be mainly by proportional representation. The voting age will be lowered to 16.

7. Local government also needs reform. Voluntary parish councils work well and give excellent value at grass-roots level. In England we need a shake-up at district, unitary and county levels, to create more openness and accountability. We need to bring decision-making much closer to the people. Any local government reform will be the responsibility of federal governments.

Some advantages of this new system:

- a) Circular chambers will encourage co-operative decision making. *
- b) Central UK government will have a much lighter touch throughout the UK.
- c) Decisions about nearly all domestic policy will be made closer to home.
- d) Elections mainly under proportional representation will be clearer and fairer. **
- e) Lowering the voting age to 16 will help to engage the next generation in politics, and to rebalance the electorate away from the increasing grey vote. +
- f) Financing of London's Palace of Westminster make-over by the English Parliament will avoid any friction with other members of the federation about the spending involved.
- g) In Scotland, the arguments of those who favour the union will be strengthened. If these radical changes are promoted soon, Scottish voters will have a clearer more balanced choice in any future referendum. ++
- h) The West Lothian Question will be solved. (The anachronism of Scottish MP's voting on English issues, when English MP's cannot vote on Scottish issues will disappear).

Notes:

* Sitting (or standing) in a circle allows us a rounded view of the whole gathering. It enables members to listen equally to all sides of a discussion. It is conducive to good communication, co-operation and compromise.

** Some methods of proportional representation are fairer than our current voting system of first past the post. However PR is not perfect and does favour political parties over individuals. We will need to build in a mechanism so that talented independent candidates have a chance of election.

+ The Scottish referendum showed that 16 year olds are mature enough to consider the issues and vote on them responsibly. The enthusiasm of the young is infectious. Lowering the voting age helps to re-kindle people's (of all ages) interest in politics. It also promotes inter-generational understanding.

++ If we wish Scotland to stay as a member of a federal UK, further assurances such as remaining members of the EU, and the decommissioning of Trident may also be required in order to keep Scottish voters on board.

Addendum:

In order to implement 'A New Deal for the UK,' or a similar plan, I support the concept (put forward by many others) of a Constitutional Convention, attended by all interested parties and ready to listen to and discuss fresh ideas. In fact, we need 2 Constitutional Conventions:

1. The most urgent is a cross-party convention for reform of the government of the United Kingdom.
2. A separate cross-party convention for reform of the government of England.

Following the general election of 7 May 2015, number one, the convention for reform of the UK, should be given urgent priority and convened within 3 months of the forming of a new government. It should aim to publish its final report and recommendations at least 3 months before the Scottish Parliament election of 5 May 2016.

The second convention for the reform of England could run parallel to the UK convention but, to make it less confusing and to lighten the work load, I suggest that it begins soon after the UK report is published.

Membership of these conventions should include a cross-section of the general public (people from all walks of life), plus non-parliamentary experts and representatives from all political parties.

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