

# Westminster Beyond Brexit: Ending the Politics of Division

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## Introduction

The health of our democracy is failing. Westminster's outdated, broken voting system and unelected House of Lords reinforce Westminster's power-hoarding tendencies, leaving voters powerless and distant from where decisions are made, with no real say over who represents them.

The Brexit paralysis in parliament is a symptom, not a cause, of our political crisis. The UK's broken Westminster system lies at the root of most of the problems we see in politics today, from a lack of trust in our institutions to the toxic polarisation which paralyses policy-making. But the Brexit vote could be the UK's long-awaited constitutional moment, serving as the impetus for thorough review and reform of Britain's constitutional structures.

The need for a wholesale renewal of our democracy is now more urgent than ever – power needs to be dispersed across political institutions and citizens need to be empowered and engaged. This will require structural and cultural change – and citizens must be brought into the debate.

Political reform will require a top down and a bottom up approach:

- We need to see leadership from the top in order to break the dysfunctional, executive-dominated Westminster model, which has remained unreformed for so long.
- But we also need to bring politics closer to people, to engage and to give meaning to political participation.

## Top-Down Reform: Reimagining the State

Constitutional reform has occurred outside of Westminster, but the centre remains largely unchanged from its original model. This has led to:

- *Executive dominance*: the system underpinning our politics hands almost unrestrained power to the leader of the government, however few citizens voted for them. When it comes to the distribution of power in the Westminster System, the possibility of 'elective dictatorship' is not far away. The Brexit process has so far been, for the most part, an exercise in executive power and constitutional flexibility. It has already exposed the central UK state's hyper-centralising and power-hoarding tendencies.
- *An unrepresentative and weak second chamber*: the House of Lords starts from a place of maintaining class-based hierarchy rather than enfranchising. No amount of tweaking its size can cover for the fact that it fails on almost all democratic principles. Reform of the House of Lords has been on the political agenda for over 100 years and engagement with this issue has been long-standing and cross-partisan. Twenty years on from the House of Lords Act 1999, reforming the House of Lords remains firmly unfinished business. In the past 20 years there have been around nine attempts at reforming the House of Lords, if we only consider white papers, commissions, draft bills and acts. Since the most recent attempt at large-

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scale reform, the House of Lords Reform bill, was withdrawn in 2012, the UK has been through unprecedented constitutional change making reform even more pressing.

- *Lack of voice for the UK's nations and localities:* the current mechanisms for cross-border working in the UK do not appear to be working as well as they could. While there have been more formal and regular meetings of ministers from the UK's constituent parts since the EU referendum, the devolved governments have had little influence in shaping the UK government's Brexit position and have been effectively excluded from EU negotiations. England lacks any distinct representation in these cross-border forums, with UK government, parliament and ministers expected to take on a 'dual hat' role, representing both the UK as a whole and England.

### **What We Propose: Shifting Power at the Centre**

Reforming our second chamber can improve the health of our democracy by allowing for the fair and equal representation of the UK's nations and localities, particularly in this post-Brexit era. A second chamber elected on a territorial basis could serve as a forum in which the four nations (including English localities, depending on how they choose to be represented at the national level) can work together in the 21st century.

An elected second chamber could be the place where UK-wide, sub-national, and cross-border issues are discussed, where sub-national interests and concerns can be raised and given a fair hearing away from the more politicised and short-term ethos of the House of Commons.

Key considerations for reforming the second chamber:

- Composition of the chamber
- Election of members
- Specific powers over territorial issues
- Relationship with the House of Commons
- Further devolution to the nations and localities of the UK – including to and within England

### **Bottom-Up Changes: Enhancing Democratic Participation**

Politics has become increasingly distant – institutions do not reflect identities and political choices and the majority of the UK has not had a say in its constitutional future.

This has led to:

- *Disengagement:* our research shows that almost half (47%) of people do not feel at all or very represented by parties at Westminster and that two-thirds (67%) feel like they have no or very few opportunities to inform and influence decisions made by their elected representatives.<sup>1</sup> Recent polls also show a historically low combined vote share – around 50% or less – for the Conservatives and Labour, which indicates that voters are not only less closely aligned with the two 'main' parties, but also wish to support a wider range of parties. This year's Audit of Political Engagement finds that 47% of people feel they have no influence at all over national decision-making – a high for the Audit series.<sup>2</sup>

1. ERS poll conducted by BMG Research (fieldwork 7–10 May 2019), sample 1,541 GB adults. Data weighted.

2. Hansard Society (2019). *Audit of Political Engagement 16: The 2019 Report*. [https://assets.ctfassets.net/rdwvqctnt75b/71QEHtrkIbLcrUkduGmo9b/cb429a657e97cad61e61853c05c8c4d1/Hansard-Society\\_Audit-of-Political-Engagement-16\\_2019-report.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/rdwvqctnt75b/71QEHtrkIbLcrUkduGmo9b/cb429a657e97cad61e61853c05c8c4d1/Hansard-Society_Audit-of-Political-Engagement-16_2019-report.pdf)

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- *Political polarisation and geographical inequality*: the dominance of two-party politics has excluded a range of voices from the conversation, pushing locality-specific concerns to the margins as parties chase their national median voter. England in particular remains highly centralised and is still primarily ruled through UK-wide institutions – it is the ‘gaping hole in the devolution settlement’. So far, devolution within England has been a top-down project. Within England, citizens have not had a chance to discuss their constitutional future or to consider whether an institutional change might be desirable.

### **What We Propose: Bringing Power Closer to the People**

Fundamental constitutional change and a recalibration of how we practise our democracy cannot be imposed from Westminster. Bottom-up citizen involvement is necessary to ensure the legitimacy of, and trust in, our institutional set-up, new governing arrangements, and democracy more broadly. This will require a shift in culture which views citizens and local government and councillors as co-creators of policy and collaborators in shaping the future of the country.

People can and should be given the power to shape the future of politics in a more active and consistent way. This would take two primary forms:

- People should be involved in shaping the big constitutional questions of our time, supplementing the piecemeal and incremental work that has thus far been undertaken, primarily – if not solely – by politicians. An English constitutional convention should be established to address devolution to and within England. A UK-wide constitutional convention should also be set up to consider the democratic future of the union in a holistic manner. The work of the other sub-national conventions and assemblies could feed into the UK Convention, which would then focus on the broader constitutional questions such as the relationship between the constituent parts of the UK.
- People should be involved in politics throughout the decision-making process, not just at election time. Multiple entry points for democratic participation should be created at different levels to address local policy issues.

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## Conclusion

To save our democracy we need to reform it. We need to give our second chamber legitimacy to do its job, we need to create a political culture that contains the full range of political tools – including those of negotiation and compromise – and we need to find a space to bring together our nations in their shared interests, rather than allow the centre to dominate and override.

We must deal with the toxic polarisation of our politics by building mechanisms to bring people together to hear each other's views as well as expressing their own and we have to create opportunities for citizens to influence politics, both at the national level and closer to home, giving people a voice in shaping the future of their communities.

Reform needs to be both top-down and bottom-up. It is essential that citizens are brought into the debate about their constitutional future, but this will only have meaning if there is a commitment at the top to change – a bold vision of a new democracy which breaks with the past power-hoarding of the centre and paves the way for a fresh new way of doing politics that Britain can be proud of.

## Five Key Recommendations

1. The UK should **shift away from the centralised 'Westminster model'** of governance, towards a consensus model: People can and should be given the power to shape the future of politics in a more active and consistent way. 1. The public should be involved in shaping the big constitutional questions of our time. 2. The public should be involved in politics throughout the decision-making process, not just at election time
2. **The next government must reform the House of Lords as a priority.** No more reviews: there have been nine attempts at reforming the House of Lords, if we only consider white papers, commissions, draft bills and acts. It is time for real action.
3. An elected second chamber must serve as the **forum in which the four nations – and England's localities – can work together** in the 21st century. This reformed chamber would be where UK-wide, sub-national, and cross-border issues are discussed
4. An **English Constitutional Convention** – led by citizens – should consider devolution within England, building upon the work of local citizens' assemblies and other deliberative democratic processes to give people a say on how they are represented
5. **Citizens' assemblies** should be used at the local level in a systematic and embedded manner to deal with complex and contested issues

The full report is available at: <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Westminster-beyond-Brexit-Ending-the-politics-of-Division.pdf>