



Parliament & You

Notes from a public meeting held for the
constituents of Ogmore on the 17th July 2007

Foreword by
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Foreword by Your local MPs

I am delighted to be presenting these notes of a public meeting I held, together with Bridgend MP Madeleine Moon, in Aberkenfig earlier this summer.

It is so easy these days for a member of the public to gain access to the views of politicians. Articles in the local paper, interviews on the TV and websites on the internet have all brought our views directly in to our homes. With these developments, however, it is easy to forget the basic points of our democracy. It isn't supposed to be about me telling you what I think. It is meant to be a two way discussion, and to do that properly, people like me need to hear your views, discuss them with you, and take the details of that discussion back to Parliament with me.

These notes are taken from just one in a series of events designed specifically to develop this two-way relationship. "Parliament & You" was a lively meeting, almost 50 local people joined us to discuss, debate and argue what role Westminster does and should play in our daily lives.

I hope you find these notes interesting, and if you read something here that you agree or disagree with, something that makes you happy or angry or anywhere in between then I'm glad – because the whole purpose of these meetings is to encourage you to get involved with the process. If you weren't able to attend don't worry, I fully intend to continue holding such discussion forums for as long as I am your MP.

Best wishes

Huw Irranca-Davies MP & Madeleine Moon MP

Parliament & You

1. The deployment of our Armed Forces in both active combat and peace-keeping capacities.

The meeting considered who should have the final say in deploying our Armed Forces, under what conditions and in what circumstances.

Points raised include:

- The decision to commit to the war in Iraq was made not by the Executive but by Parliament. However, under current rules the Prime Minister has no obligation to consult Parliament first. This needs to be changed to ensure that all future decisions on going to war are made by a Parliamentary vote (unless an emergency decision needs to be made, in which case it should be the Executive).
- If emergency powers are used, Parliament should ratify the decision as soon as possible.
- Parliament's statement of approval for war/deployment should be very clear. i.e. "We authorise all necessary measures".
- Billions of pounds is often wasted and could be spent better on roads, hospitals, schools etc. Can ordinary people have influence over the spending of tax money? The meeting liked the idea of "people's budgets", such as the one trialled in Sunderland. Sums of money would be set aside for the public to designate through means of a localised referendum. More debate should take place about how best to develop this idea nationally.
- Ordinary people needing to be fully informed of decisions taken by Parliament/Executive. The meeting accepted that Government can not always release full information due to security measures/risks. Some anger on "dodgy dossier" hiding behind secrecy. Misleading is treason.
- Security information being sent automatically to Parliament, instead of going via Number 10 to avoid spin. There was significant evidence (Hans Blix etc, that Iraq had no WMD).

- Genuine assessment of security information by Parliament, instead of automatically believing it without scrutiny – not from Parliament as a whole (too many MPs), but by Defence Select Committee who report back to Parliament.
- This Defence Committee should be beefed up in terms of its strength. Members of this committee should be cross party and appointments should be ratified by Parliament.
- More resources for armed forces. Better equipment in the field.
- We have nothing in our foreign policy if we do not have the moral high ground.

Summary: Cabinet should be allowed to retain power in extraordinary conditions. Otherwise, the decision should be made by Parliament.

The meeting wanted all possible information being presented to Parliament for discussion. Instead of being debated amongst all MPs, the information should be given to the Defence and Security Committee for proper scrutiny, before reporting back to Parliament. The DSC should be “beefed up” in its powers, so that it can sobpina the heads of Security Services, Prime Minister etc to give testimony if it is felt necessary.

Over half the meeting felt that Parliament should have the final say on appointing MPs to the Defence and Security Select Committee.

2. The dissolution and recall of Parliament:

Who should have the right to dissolve/recall Parliament? How should it be done and under what circumstances.

Points raised include:

- Should Parliament be dissolved at all? Point was made as to long summer recess. (long working hours when the House is sitting, and that most MPs don't take the whole of summer recess as holidays, was discussed.). Perhaps Parliament could reconvene for one week during the middle of recess.
- It is vital that MPs spend a lot of time in their constituencies in order to engage with people.
- Either the PM or the Speaker should be able to recall Parliament, OR it could be recalled at the request of a set number of MPs (i.e. 100, which should be cross party to avoid the misuse of the rule as a political device).
- If it is given additional powers, the Defence and Security Committee should be able to recall Parliament if they receive intelligence that warrants it.
- Have a fixed term-Parliament which could not be altered – set at 5 years.
- Could summer recess be scaled down drastically so that MPs are in London throughout the year? To compensate, the Parliamentary week could be reduced from 4 days to 3 days, allowing MPs to spend more time in the constituency during the average week. This would also ease pressure on MPs family life.

Summary:

The mood of the meeting agreed that they would like to see the PM, the Speaker, or ordinary MPs (in sufficient numbers, and from at least 2 political parties) having the power to dissolve or recall parliament.

3. Appointment of public positions.

How should public positions be appointed? Should we move to the American system of a Parliamentary group cross examining any candidate as part of a formal interview process? Should the wider public play a role?

Points raised include:

- The public should have input into all committees that have powers to appoint a person to public office. If an individual has knowledge that a candidate is unsuitable for public office, they should have a right to bring such information forward in the form of a written submission. That will then be assessed by the committee.
- Matters have improved in recent years. Open recruitment/advertising of position, including a formal interview process. The Labour Government has introduced measures to ensure members of political parties can not hold such office. Is that right bearing in mind many political party members are talented and experienced individuals?
- Should experts be brought in to membership of Select Committees? A debate followed where it was pointed out that many experts are brought in to support the work of a committee.

Summary: After a vote, the meeting felt that the public should have a right to contribute towards the appointments by writing to the appropriate chairperson. The meeting recognised that significant improvements have been made in recent years and that these developments should be continued.

4. Petitions

How can we strengthen their use? Should they trigger Parliamentary debates? How important are they? Should there be rules on their accuracy?

Points raised include:

- We have to be careful, many petition campaigns have poor funding and therefore poor exposure, yet they can often be based on the most important issues. Therefore, the number of signatories should not define the success of the petition.
- Who should scrutinise the quality of the petition, and decide whether it is taken forward for further debate? The Public Affairs Administration Committee? A Petition Commissioner within the Civil Service?
- Do we accept petitions promoted by newspapers? Do we accept postcard campaigns as a petition?
- If they do have credibility, should that then trigger a real debate on the commons floor? Or are people happy with the existing structure of allowing MPs to call for a debate in Westminster Hall or an adjournment debate?
- Should E-Petitions be included in these developments?
- Should campaigns be forced to declare their funding sources? (I.e. oil companies funding anti-climate change law campaigns).

Summary: Whilst many in the meeting did not feel that any changes to current petition arrangements should be made, some did recognise the value in having a body set up to scrutinise petitions and make proposals on which campaigns should be highlighted for Parliamentary debate.

The meeting felt that E-petitions had validity and that the content of a petition was more important than its popularity.

5. The modernisation of Parliament

Is the use of Parliamentary language divisive, or is it a good way of maintaining a dignified discussion? Are ordinary people able to follow the debate? Should other practices in the chamber change?

Points raised include:

- MPs must reduce the barracking. It is demeaning to Parliament and the country.
- Should we re-introduce the “issues of the day” debates?
- Visiting MPs from overseas are excited by the idea of allowing interventions during a debate. Many other Parliaments do not allow it. This allows back and forth debate across MPs that is a mature way of discussing issues.
- PMQs – “two idiots facing each other. Call Ministers from departments together yes, but...PMQs is just silly”.
- The meeting was split on changing the language (i.e. Honourable Member for... etc).
- Scrap filibustering. “Dirty tactic”. The Speaker does have the right to impose a time limit, which he does use, but this only depends on when lots of people want to speak. Should we have a maximum for ALL speeches?
- Archaic quirks of Parliament isolate young people.
- PMQs were originally meant to be questioning by MPs, now it is a debate between the leaders.
- Have an electronic system of getting the eye of the speaker. Instead of standing up and down, use an electronic system.
- Redesign/relocate the chamber? The meeting was split.

Summary: Many felt that Parliamentary Language wasn't a particular issue, nor was the design of the Commons chamber. Most attendees did, however, agree that the barracking and tribalism often displayed in the chamber showed MPs in a poor light and damaged their credibility amongst ordinary people.

As Ogmore's MP, Huw has helped constituents in 8000 separate cases, if you need his help, support or advice; or simply wish to raise a concern, get in touch in following ways.

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These notes will be delivered personally by Huw to the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, to ensure that the views of Ogmore residents are heard at the highest level.



If you would like to attend future meetings, please email your contact details to irrancadaviesh@parliament.uk

For further information on Huw and Madeleine visit their websites:

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