Two Steps Forward, One Step Back:
Procedural Reform in Westminster, 1945-2008

Philip Norton and Thomas Saalfeld

Philip Norton
Department of Politics and International Studies
University of Hull
Hull HU6 7RX
United Kingdom
Email: p.norton@hull.ac.uk

Thomas Saalfeld
Department of Politics and International Relations
University of Kent
Canterbury
Kent CT2 7NX
United Kingdom
Email: t.k.saalfeld@kent.ac.uk

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Philip Norton and Thomas Saalfeld

Introduction

In the past three decades Britain’s system of political institutions experienced significant change, which accelerated in the decade following Labour’s landslide election victory in 1997. The changes seemed to be of such magnitude that scholars began to ask whether the country still matched the ideal type of a largely majoritarian democracy. Placing the United Kingdom’s constitutional development under New Labour in a comparative perspective, Flinders (2005: 61) observed ‘significant change’ and decentralisation in relation to Lijphart’s (1999) ‘federal-unitary dimension’ (e.g., through devolution or the Bank of England Act 1998), whereas Lijphart’s (1999) executive-parties dimension (e.g., the single-member plurality electoral system to elect Westminster MPs, a competitive two-party system in the House of Commons with strong, relatively unconstrained one-party government dominated by the cabinet) ‘actually reflects a concentration of power under New Labour’. As a result, there had been ‘no dramatic shift from a majoritarian to a consensual model of democracy at the national level. The Westminster model continues to be the default option in terms of democracy in Britain’ (Flinders 2005: 61).

Parliament is at the heart of the Westminster model. Complaints about the decline of Parliament and calls for the need to strengthen it through reforms go back at least to Lord Bryce’s (1921) magisterial work on Modern Democracies (for a review of the reform debate see Norton 2005). After the end of the Second World War, an intense debate on parliamentary reform resurfaced in the late 1950s and early 1960s with a series of publications by scholars such as Stuart Walkland (1959; 1960; 1963) and Bernard Crick (1965). Whereas the discussion of the 1960s focused strongly on procedural reforms within the traditional Westminster framework, the 1970s saw an expansion of the reform agenda. Authors such as Finer (1975), Walkland (1976) and others began to see the root cause of the perceived weakness of Parliament in its wider constitutional environment. Therefore, mere ‘tinkering’ with House of Commons procedures seemed insufficient. The imbalance between government and democratic mechanisms of accountability could, so the argument went, only be restored through stronger remedies including electoral reform, an entrenched bill of rights and a system of constitutional jurisdiction.
This paper focuses on parliamentary procedure in a narrow sense and addresses a fundamental theoretical tension characterising the Westminster system: In constitutional theory, a parliamentary system ‘makes the executive an agent of the assembly majority, hierarchically inferior to it because the majority in parliament creates and may terminate the authority of the executive’ (Shugart 2006: 346). Yet at the same time, the parliamentary majority leadership forms the government and gains access to an extraordinary array of mechanisms of agenda control both vis-à-vis the opposition and its own backbenchers. This includes the Prime Minister’s power to attach a vote of confidence to any substantive motion; to dissolve Parliament; (in practice) to appoint ministers and other members of the executive; it extends to the government’s power to control of the Commons timetable; and the Chancellor’s veto powers over any legislation that makes a charge on the public purse. In addition, the majority leadership exercises control over the parliamentary majority party using a number of informal controls. In practice, therefore, the hierarchical relationship is often seen as having been reversed: the government controls the Commons rather than the other way around.

The paper deals primarily with the actors’ (main parties’) preferences for procedural and wider parliamentary reform. This allows to address the following puzzle: Under the Westminster model, parliamentary reform expanding the possibilities for Members of Parliament to scrutinise and influence the government is impossible, unless the government voluntarily abdicates some of its powers. The parliamentary majority’s leadership enjoys far-reaching control over the executive and significant parliamentary agenda powers. It thus benefits from the status quo, which provides it with relatively unconstrained means of enacting its preferred policies. As a result, the majority party and government have very little incentive to agree to changes in the status quo towards more opposition or backbench involvement. Those who would benefit from a change in the status quo ordinarily do not have the power to effect any change. Reforms, therefore, should not occur, unless they strengthen the government vis-à-vis Parliament. In practice, however, a constant stream of modest reforms has been enacted during the past five decades. Cumulatively, the effect of these reforms – combined with behavioural changes amongst MPs in the chamber (Norton 2005) – should not be underestimated. What, then, were the factors that allowed some reforms to happen even under the constraints of a majoritarian, hierarchical system, whereas others failed?

Strengthening Parliament in a Westminster System

The procedures of the House of Commons have been criticised throughout the post-war period. There is no shortage of drastic descriptions in British political writing: Referring to the 1950s, Walkland (1960: 486-487) complained that ‘in a period of prolonged one-party government, over-adherence to techniques of opposition, predicated on a constitutional theory of the
regular alternation in office of the parties, is reducing the Commons to complete ineffectuality’. Four decades later, a former government whip described the House of Commons as a ‘wizened, malnourished and cowed dependant’ and the victim of ‘generations of abuse accepted as normality, rather than separate, lively checks on the Executive’ (Allen 2001: 5). Yet, this does not mean that there has been no reform at all. The consequence of executive domination has been that the quality and extent of reforms has been limited, incremental and often ‘cosmetic’ rather than far-reaching. To clarify this, we can draw on a useful distinction developed by Flinders (2007), who distinguishes between far-reaching ‘parliamentary reforms’, ‘modernisation’, which is often ‘cosmetic’ in character, and an important intermediate category of limited ‘incremental-bounded’ reforms, which occasionally develop their potential in the longer run.

Far-reaching parliamentary reforms are changes ‘in which the infrastructure of the constitution is amended in such a way that power is either concentrated or dispersed in a manner which marks a stark departure from the previous constitutional arrangement’ (Flinders 2007: 179). Such reforms are hard to achieve, unless they strengthen the government majority and its leadership. The best example of far-reaching reforms may be the introduction of a ‘rationalised’ parliamentarism during the 1880s, aiming to limit the effect of obstruction by Irish nationalists at Westminster. Examples of far-reaching reforms that were never carried out would include changes to the electoral system, the removal of the power of the whips in relation to select committee appointments or a strengthening of the House of Lords as a second chamber.

If and when parliamentary reforms occur, they tend to be limited ‘cosmetic’ attempts at modernising Parliament with a ‘focus on procedural or legislative issues but … little or no impact on strengthening the House of Commons’ scrutiny capacity vis-à-vis the executive’ (Flinders 2007: 179). Examples for such reforms are far more easily observable and include the changes to the sitting arrangements and parliamentary calendar proposed by the Select Committee on Modernisation and supported by the government in 200*.

Flinders (2007) extends this traditional classification of reforms by introducing a third category of moderate, ‘incremental-bounded’ reforms, whose immediate impact on the balance of power in the House is limited, but which may open up opportunities for incremental change through slow, behavioural adaptation. Such reforms tend to ‘increase the resources of the House of Commons and thereby its scrutiny capacity but without threatening the executive’s control over core processes and power centres and within the broader constitutional configuration of executive government’ (Flinders 2007: 179). The gradual increases in select committee resources since the introduction of a system of permanent departmental scrutiny committees in 1979 is one example of a successful, albeit limited reform on which backbenchers on both sides of the House could build.
As mentioned above, one of the crucial questions addressed in this paper is concerns the conditions under which consequential parliamentary reforms can occur. In an earlier work, Philip Norton (2000: 13) pointed out that reforms are possible even under a majoritarian Westminster system, but only under a fortuitous constellation of political forces. He identified three conditions that have to be met, if a strengthening of parliament vis-à-vis the government is to be achieved:

‘One is a window of opportunity. This usually comes at the beginning of a Parliament, before ministers and MPs get bogged down in dealing with a mass of public business. The second is a reform agenda. MPs may favour change but they need a coherent set of proposals to unite behind. Third, there has to be leadership: this may come from the back-benches but may also come from the Leader of the House (a government minister who also has a responsibility to the House), or from a combination of both.’

This paper is primarily an attempt to ‘unpack’ these three conditions of timing, intellectual coherence of a reform agenda and leadership. It is tempting to focus on personalities and unique circumstances. It is not unusual, for example, to find references to the personal abilities of outstanding Leaders of the House of Commons such as Richard Crossman in the 1960s, Norman St John Stevas in the 1979 parliament or Robin Cook between 2001 and 2003 as key elements of an explanation of change. To be sure, the preferences and capabilities of such influential political leaders have undeniably shaped the dynamics of reform. Nevertheless, a general theory of political institutions and institutional reform – and an institutional analysis of the Westminster system’s ability to reform itself – will always seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of the political mechanisms of institutional change under conditions of majoritarianism by seeking to identify underlying systematic patterns (if there are any).

Procedural Reform as Institutional Choice

Parliamentary procedures are part of a polity’s institutional framework. Their design is crucial as they enable groups of individuals with conflicting goals to achieve stable policy decisions at all (Shepsle 1979). They also affect the nature of the policy choices made (Shepsle and Weingast 1981; Riker 1982; Bawn 1993). Institutional reform (or adherence to the status quo) are deliberate choices made by relevant actors in the political system, especially ‘veto players’ whose agreement is required to change the status quo (Tsebelis 2002). ‘Legislatures’, as Bawn (1993: 965) points out, ‘vote to adopt their own rules. ... Institutions are bargained over by parties and individuals with conflicting interests, just as policies are.’ The fact that institutional change usually requires, formally or informally, a higher level of agreement between political
actors (from a qualified majority to unanimity) makes changes to the status quo more difficult to reach, but does not fundamentally challenge this perspective.

We essentially analyse the dynamics of procedural reform as a ‘nested game’ (Tsebelis 1990), in which the choice of institutions is modelled as the first stage of a two-stage game. Behaviour in the institutional choice stage can be explained in terms of the payoffs in the policy choice stage. ‘The most important implication of the idea of derived institutional preferences is,’ as Bawn (1993: 966) suggests, ‘that there will be disagreement about the choice of institutions whenever there is disagreement about the policies these institutions will produce. Institutional choice is a political choice over which equally well informed people disagree, not a matter of social engineering …’. This political point will be crucial to our explanation of the conditions for successful procedural reform later on. Nevertheless, the British example also demonstrates that the activities of ‘constitutional engineers’ in think tanks, academe and public life can contribute significantly to the development of an intellectually coherent and politically compelling reform agenda.

Actors and Their Preferences in the Institutional Reform Game

If we used a tightly defined veto player framework with cohesive partisan veto players and assumed entirely discrete choice situations in which actors have no memory of past commitments, far-reaching reforms resulting in stronger minority and backbench powers would be extremely unlikely to happen. The only reforms that would improve the status quo from the perspective of a single, cohesive partisan veto player would be the removal of obstacles to the smooth passage of the veto player’s (government party’s) policy agenda. We know, however, that parties’ choices are influenced by past experience; that – even in the House of Commons – partisan veto players are not always cohesive; and that there have always been minorities within the main parties to whom the procedural status quo appeared unacceptable. It is, therefore, worth exploring the nature of all relevant actors in the bargaining game between reformers and those advocating the status quo.

André Kaiser (2002: 65-69, 229-302) suggests a useful distinction between a number of actors in institutional-choice situations: ‘deciders’ are actors whose agreement is needed to change the status quo. They take the final decision about reform proposals and could be compared to Tsebelis’ (2002) partisan veto players (i.e., the government party). These deciders can be modelled as policy seekers who will tend to manipulate institutional norms (or defend the status quo) in order to achieve their own policy goals at the lowest possible political cost (see above). The question whether their policy-seeking motivations are intrinsic or fully or partially
instrumental (e.g., in terms of a vote-seeking strategy) remains an empirical question beyond the scope of this paper.

However, veto players are not always cohesive and do not decide in a political vacuum. Kaiser stresses the importance of ‘campaigners’ who promote specific reform proposals. Such actors could be individuals within political parties (such as a reform-minded Leader of the House), factions or political parties. The existence of influential campaigners within the government party may undermine the cohesiveness of Britain’s single partisan veto player to such an extent that there may be scope for a change to the status quo towards more House of Commons independence. Britain has had a long tradition of organisations promoting constitutional change. Think tanks such as Charter 88, Liberty and later the Constitution Unit of University College London played a key role in promoting constitutional reforms. In the area of parliamentary reform, the Hansard Society or the Study of Parliament Group have played an important role in the reform discussion over several decades. The incentive structure of campaigners is likely to differ from those of ‘deciders’. They are less likely to have a predominantly instrumental approach to parliamentary reform. Their strategies are more likely to be intrinsically motivated by convictions, and they tend to consider institutional reform as a collective good that is under-provided (Kaiser 2002: 67).

In addition, Kaiser identifies a third group, so-called ‘designers’. He likens them to Sartori’s (1994) ‘constitutional engineers’ who provide campaigners and deciders with information about the likely ‘mechanics’ and consequences of institutional change. They include academic experts as well as Clerks of the House of Commons and other experts. ‘Deciders’ as well as ‘campaigners’ have always drawn on their expertise, especially when in opposition. The strongest involvement of academic ‘designers’ has been in the discussions about electoral reform during the 1990s, which involved almost all prominent experts in electoral studies in the United Kingdom (Kaiser 2002: 298-300). A further example is the Conservative Party’s Commission to Strengthen Parliament, which collected evidence during the late 1990s and produced a series of recommendations for parliamentary reform in 2000 (Commission to Strengthen Parliament 2000). It drew extensively on academic expertise and informed the development of the Conservative leadership’s thinking about procedural reforms in the House of Commons. The motivations of ‘designers’ can be assumed to display the strongest orientation towards the ‘public good’. Their self-interest in providing expertise relates largely to status, reputation or influence in their respective professional communities (Kaiser 2002: 67).
Opportunities for Reform: Some Theoretical Expectations

Based on the brief theoretical sketch above, the main parties’ preferences for institutional reform are modelled as being defined over expected policy outcomes. In other words, we assume the parties act to bring about procedural reforms in Parliament that they expect to result in the most desirable policy outcomes. With the exception of two short intervals (1974-79 and 1992), the House of Commons has witnessed single-party majority governments throughout the post-war period. Hence, the number of veto players required to change the status quo in House of Commons procedures has generally been one. Governments and government parties have generally had little incentive to support attempts to strengthen Parliament’s independent capabilities, because the institutional status quo was attractive: it allowed the government of the day to get its policies enacted. Minorities had very little chance of changing the legislative status quo. As a result, a number of proposals for procedural reform remained unsuccessful. Others were never tabled by ‘campaigners’ or potential ‘deciders’, even in the short period of a hung Parliament. Nevertheless, some significant reforms did occur. These include

- the introduction of some specialised select committees during the 1966-70 Parliament under Richard Crossman as reforming Leader of the House;
- the introduction of a comprehensive system of departmental select committees in the 1979-83 Parliament under the leadership of Norman St. John Stevas; and
- the reforms of the 2001-2005 Parliament, again under the leadership of a reform-minded Leader of the House, Robin Cook (2001-2003);
- the creation of public bill committees to replace standing committees in the current Parliament (2005-10), which differ from standing committees in their power to take written and oral evidence from officials and experts outside of Parliament.

All of these Leaders of the House had longer-term reform agendas of their own and played a vital role in brokering agreements between the government and ‘campaigners’ inside the House of Commons. In all cases, ‘campaigners’ could rely on the advice of outside experts or ‘designers’ in defining a compelling reform agenda. In other cases, reform proposals put forward by ‘campaigners’ or discussed amongst ‘designers’ were never taken up or failed to be accepted by the government party’s leadership. These include proposals to

- end the sessional cut-off in the 1980s;
- allow MPs to vote to elect the chairs of select committees;
- require ministers to appear before select committees;
allowing select committee reports to be debated on substantive (as opposed to 'take that') motions;

establish a business committee (in effect, to take control of the timetable out of the hands of the government);

take committee stage before the second reading of a bill.

Why were some proposals accepted by the government, whereas others failed? Based on the theoretical reflections above, we formulate the following testable propositions:

1) Governments will generally resist procedural changes of the status quo, unless it increases its control over the policy process. Opposition parties will be likely to agree with this, if their leadership expects to return to the government benches in the foreseeable future.

2) The main reason why governments may be willing to accept some reduction in their control over the policy process is that they may seek to protect their own policies passed during the current Parliament from swift amendment under a future government from a different party. This is most likely when government and main opposition parties have strongly diverging policy agendas and electoral defeat at the next general election is a real possibility.

3) Ceteris paribus, the lower the level of alternation in government and the longer the main minority party has been in opposition, the stronger its commitment to procedural reform and the more developed the reform proposals it commits itself to.

4) The stronger the level of ideological polarisation between the government and the main opposition party, the stronger the opposition’s desire to limit government power through procedural reforms, ceteris paribus.

5) Reforms are most likely to occur as a result of changes in government where an opposition, previously committed to procedural reform, is swept into power and has pledged reform in its manifesto. If this manifesto pledge has been salient, reneging on a promise could involve political costs (including conflicts with ‘campaigners’ on the government side).

6) There will be a tendency for incoming governments to ‘row back’ from such reform proposals by redefining procedural reforms, emphasising managerial improvements, modernisation and streamlining of parliamentary procedures rather than empowerment of backbenchers and opposition parties.

7) Under the conditions of the Westminster system, reform-minded Members of Parliament have incentives to rely on incremental change rather than radical reform.

Figure 1 about here
The logic of these arguments is illustrated in Figures (Scenarios) 1-3. All three scenarios capture two key dimensions of procedural reform: the continuum on the horizontal axis captures different possibilities for far-reaching or moderate procedural reform in the sense of Flinders (2007). The vertical axis describes a similar continuum for modernisation and streamlining of parliamentary procedures to strengthen the government’s agenda-setting powers. The location of the status quo (SQ) is assumed to be close to zero on the reform axis and somewhat further away from zero on the modernisation axis. In Scenario 1 (Figure 1), the government (Gov) has very little interest in moving away from the status quo on the reform axis (its ideal point is close to the status quo on that dimension), but would be interested to make the House slightly more efficient as a law-making body. Its ideal point is to the North of the status quo. The main opposition party (Opp) has a very similar position, perhaps with marginally more interest in procedural reforms strengthening Parliament vis-à-vis the executive. The ‘campaigners’ are assumed to be policy ‘outliers’ inside and outside the main parties. They would like to go much further in improving Parliament’s performance on both dimensions. The indifference curves around the government’s and opposition’s ideal points on this plane are next to irrelevant, if the government is firmly in power. The government will be able to attain its ideal point. Even if the government consults the opposition, the range of reform options is small and delimited by the Pareto set within the winset between government and opposition (i.e., the intersection of the two indifference curves). Some modernisation is possible, especially if there is a change in government with electoral commitments to reform (Proposition 5 above; the triangle defined by SQ, Gov, Opp offers some scope for movement to the North on the modernisation axis), but significant reform is very unlikely. Why should the scope for reform increase, if one of the major parties is replaced as government party by its main contender? We conjecture that the location of the government and opposition in the space described in Figure 1 are merely exchanged, if there is a transition in power without electoral commitments. If, however, the former opposition party wins an election based on a manifesto promising parliamentary reform, it may not be able to return to the status quo or the previous government’s position without risking some of its credibility, if certain other conditions apply (e.g., a reform-minded, tactically astute Leader of the House). This captures the content of Proposition 1 above.

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Figure 2 about here

Scenario 2 (Figure 2) captures the conditions in Propositions 3-4 above. The status quo and the government’s position remain unchanged. For the opposition, the status quo is now more unattractive. Because of the long time in opposition (Proposition 3) or the strong policy differences between government and opposition (Proposition 4), the minority party (Opp) is
paying a heavy policy-related price for its lack of parliamentary influence. Its ideal point, therefore, moves closer towards the ideal point of the ‘campaigners’, especially on the reform dimension. The winset between government and opposition increases. If there were bargaining between majority and minority parties, the size of the Pareto set would increase to the trapezium $SQ, \text{Gov}, a, b$. Yet, under normal circumstances, there is no bargaining. The government will remain the only veto player and be able to insist on its own ideal point. This may change, however, if the government is replaced by the opposition in a general election and the opposition is strongly pre-committed to the ideal point it chose before the election (e.g., through a manifesto pledge, Proposition 5 above). This would open up more scope for reforms as shown in Figure 2, even if the previous government (now opposition) party does not change its position at all.

More radical reform is possible even without an election and opposition pre-commitment, if there is a faction within the governing party ($\text{GovFaction}$) that is significantly more interested in far-reaching parliamentary reform than the party’s core leadership in government. If this faction is able to force the government to negotiate (e.g., in order to maintain party unity), a compromise may be found, most likely on the government’s indifference curve around its ideal point (the point $\text{Compr}$). The winset for the government party’s new position ($\text{Compr}$) and the opposition’s ideal point is vastly increased and allows a significantly larger move towards the ‘campaigners’’ ideal point on the reform axis (triangle $SQ, \text{Compr}, \text{Opp}$). If the government party sticks to its internal compromise, the most likely outcome is the compromise point between government leadership and the faction ($\text{Compr}$). Real-world examples would be backbench resistance against government attempts to defend the status quo (e.g., the rebellion against the whips’ attempt to dislodge two select committee chairs in 2001, see below) or, most importantly in our context, a reform-minded Leader of the House. The Leader of the House tends to be a senior MP with a certain amount of respect on all sides of the House. The existence of a Leader with a preference for far-reaching reform may change the dynamics of the discussions within cabinet and the parliamentary party. A similar effect (albeit without tough negotiations) can be expected through Flinders’ (2007) ‘incremental-bounded’ reform where backbenchers, including government backbenchers, propose a limited reform that opens up future opportunities for moving the procedural norms gradually towards their own ideal point, as long as they stay within, or on, the government’s indifference curve (Proposition 7).
Testing the Propositions

In the following section we will use the three main parties’ election manifestos to probe the plausibility of some of the propositions articulated above. Election manifestos are not often used to analyse parliamentary reform. Nevertheless in the context of our seven propositions above, which seek to identify the mechanisms generating the ‘windows of opportunity’ identified by Norton (2000) from a rational-actor perspective, they are a valid, reliable and accessible source of information on the parties’ pre-electoral positions on parliamentary reform. A large amount of research based on the Comparative Manifesto Project (Klingemann et al. 2001; Budge et al. 2006) has demonstrated their reliability as authoritative statements of the importance parties attach to particular policy areas. The following sections will rely heavily on these data providing a simple measure of the salience of parliamentary reform between 1945 and 2005. We do this by using word counts to establish the relative importance of specific proposals for parliamentary reform. In addition, we use the information in manifestos to describe qualitatively the positions the three main parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberals/Liberal-SDP Alliance/Liberal Democrats) have taken in relation to specific parliamentary reforms throughout the post-war period.

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Figure 4 about here

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Figure 4 demonstrates that parliamentary reform has not been a main concern of any of the three major parties in the election manifestos produced between 1945 and 2005. The values on the horizontal axis relate to general election years. The data on the vertical axis represents the share of words devoted to parliamentary reform by each party in each of its general election manifestos between 1945 and 2005 as percentage of the manifesto’s overall word length.¹ This measure can be interpreted as a measure of the relative salience the parties attached to parliamentary reform in their election campaigns. The values ranged from zero to a maximum of 6.2 per cent in the Liberal Party’s 1955 manifesto (148 words). Only the Liberal Party and the Liberal-SDP Alliance ever spent more than five per cent of their manifesto content (in words) on questions of parliamentary reform, namely in the general elections of 1955, 1966 and 1983. The two major parties generally gave much less salience to the issue, although this varied over time (see below).

It appears that the Liberals and their successor parties have always had the strongest incentives to push for reforms. This is not surprising. Given the electoral system and the two-party dominance it creates in the House of Commons, the Liberals had the strongest desire for far-

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¹ At the time of writing, we could not access the 2005 manifesto of the Liberal Democrats.
reaching reforms. In their manifestos, they almost consistently committed themselves to the introduction of proportional representation, the introduction of an elected second chamber and the devolution of legislative powers to regional assemblies, which were also to be elected by proportional representation. In addition, the party almost consistently committed itself to procedural reforms in the House of Commons since its 1964 manifesto.

The Labour Party, by contrast, was almost completely disinterested in parliamentary reform before its 1966 manifesto. The only question that played any role at all was a thinly veiled threat to the House of Lords in the party’s 1945 manifesto: ‘we give clear notice that we will not tolerate obstruction of the people's will by the House of Lords’ (for all references to election manifestos see the sources under Figure 4). This threat was carried out in the Parliament Act of 1949, which amended the first Parliament Act of 1911 and reduced the delaying powers of the Lords in relation to non-money bills from two years to one. As a result of the Parliament Act 1949 and the abolition of university seats by the Attlee Labour government (1945-51), the salience of parliamentary reform increased in the Conservative Party’s manifesto, but only in the short run. The party demanded a non-partisan approach to Lords reform and a reinstatement of the university seats. Other than that, procedural reform was not a salient issue in the party’s manifestos until the 1960s.

Figure 4 reveals some cyclical dynamics as period effects. There seem to be ‘reform cycles’ in which all three major parties devoted some space to parliamentary reform: This includes an increase in salience in the 1964 and 1966 manifestos, a stronger increase (especially in the Conservative Party’s manifesto) in 1979 and a third reform cycle starting in 1992 and culminating in Labour’s 1997 and the Conservatives’ 2001 manifestos. These cycles in the parties’ manifestos correspond to the major reforms witnessed by the House of Commons in the mid-1960s, 1979 and in the 2001-2005 Parliaments, but do not support the propositions put forward above.

The theoretical predictions in propositions 1-7 above are driven by the two major parties’ status as government and opposition parties. Norton’s (2000) ‘window of opportunity’ is very much based on a change of government following an election in which an incoming government (and previous opposition) party has committed itself to reform before the election. Figure 4 provides some support for Propositions 1, 3 and 4 above (opposition parties are likely to highlight the need for parliamentary reform, if they have been out of power for a long time, or if the ideological distance between government and opposition is large): The Conservatives’ growing interest in parliamentary reform (especially relating to the House of Lords) in their 1951, 1979 (in relation to modernisation and the introduction of a system of departmental select committees) and 2001 (with a strong emphasis on procedures ensuring government accountability) manifestos is consistent with these propositions. So is the Labour Party’s
growing focus on reforms in its 1992 and 1997 manifestos. The decline in salience of parliamentary reform in the Conservatives’ 1955, 1983 and 1987 manifestos and a similar decline in the Labour Party’s 2001 and 2005 manifestos are in line with Propositions 1, 3 and 4. Nevertheless, some changes in salience are more difficult to align with the propositions above: The Labour Party’s increased appetite for procedural reform and parliamentary modernisation in the 1966 manifesto seems to sit ill with the logic sketched above at first glance, because it followed a two-year period of Labour government. However, the 1964-66 Wilson government followed a long period of 13 years of uninterrupted Conservative governments. To be sure, these interpretations are still impressionistic and merely based on a relatively superficial notion of political salience, but they provide some general support for our interpretation of the political forces opening up or closing the ‘window of opportunity’.

Table 1 about here

The data on which Figure 4 is based and the information in Table 1 (which summarises those pledges made by the three main parties in their election manifestos between 1945 and 2005 that relate to parliamentary reform) show that it was not until the 1960s that the major parties devoted small but significant parts of their manifestos to questions of procedural reform. The pledges between 1945 and 1964 were strongly dominated by far-reaching reforms of the constitution (such as House of Lords or electoral reform). From 1966 onwards, the manifestos demonstrate far more detailed – and in line with Flinders’ (2005; 2007) observations – limited proposals for procedural reform. Most of these proposals first appeared in the manifestos of the Liberals/SDP-Liberal Alliance/Liberal Democrats, who have had a certain vanguard function. This observation is in line with our rational-actor perspective, which predicts that the two major parties (alternating in government) will only be interested in parliamentary reform under very specific conditions. In most manifestos since 1966, the Conservative and Labour Parties have presented reform as a matter of modernising parliament rather than fundamentally enhancing government accountability vis-à-vis the Commons. Nevertheless, the manifesto pledges demonstrate a certain ‘progressive’ element building, in particular, on the select committee reforms of 1979 and demonstrating a certain incremental ‘drift’ towards more detailed and far-reaching commitments to improve the Commons’ capacity to scrutinise and influence government policy.

We now turn to some first illustrative evidence pertaining to each of the seven working hypotheses proposed above. At a later stage, we will look to employ more rigorous tests for our hypotheses. The following paragraphs should primarily be seen as plausibility checks.
Resisting Governments, Failing Reforms and Reforms that Never Were (Proposition 1)

The government may not always take a stand on procedural reform. Procedural issues have traditionally been seen as a ‘House of Commons matter’. In this case, the influence of government is primarily in respect of non-decision making. It acts as a gatekeeper or veto player, not letting issues go before the House that it believes would threaten its interests (such as proposals for the creation of a business committee). Where it does allow issues on to the parliamentary agenda, then they are normally left to a free vote of the House (albeit occasionally with some unofficial whipping). On some issues, the government is essentially neutral (as on the televising of proceedings). Very occasionally, it even may find its preferences overruled by the House: in 2001, for example, the government whips tried to remove two chairs of select committees. However, the membership of the committees has to be approved by a vote of the House. In this case MPs on both sides united to vote down the motions and insisted on both MPs being restored to membership of the committees.

Nevertheless, the constitution allows governments to push through parliamentary reforms with more ease than is the case in systems where qualified majorities are required to amend the constitution. The Labour government’s Parliament Act 1949 (see above) is a striking example of this. Many failed reform proposals mentioned above were not enacted, because the government or the leaderships of both major parties did not wish to have their ability to shape policy constrained. Only occasionally, explicit government resistance to changes to the status quo can be documented. In the 1980s, Leader of the House John Biffen, on behalf of the Thatcher government, resisted the proposal to end the sessional cut-off (under which bills not passed by the end of the parliamentary session fail) on the grounds that it would deny the opposition the power to exert influence through its capacity of delay. This attitude may also explain why, when government did eventually agree, in 2001, to allow for some bills to be carried over from one session to another, the conditions for carry-over were limited and, in practice, the provision has rarely been used. The cut-off remains an important element in the government’s arsenal of mechanisms of agenda control.

Governments Tying Their Successors’ Hands (Proposition 2)

On the whole we do not find significant evidence of government parties acting with ‘rational foresight’ and using procedural reforms to tie their successors' hands. Nevertheless, the current (Brown) government’s proposals for post-legislative scrutiny could be interpreted in this way. The government has accepted the case for all Acts to be reviewed 3-5 years after enactment. This process of review is now getting under way. It will cover Acts passed under the Labour
Government, but the intention of introducing it is to act as a discipline on Bills when they are introduced (providing a clearer statement of criteria by which one can assess whether an Act has fulfilled its purpose) and so is more likely to affect a future Conservative Government, assuming one is elected next year.

**Long Service on the Opposition Benches Breeds Appetite for Reform (Proposition 3)**

Our claim that long service on the opposition benches breeds an appetite for procedural reform is especially apparent in the stance of Labour in 1992 and 1997. The long period in opposition between 1951 and 1964 may also have contributed to Labour’s commitment to modernisation in the 1966-70 Parliament (see above). However, there is a threshold where the length of period in opposition tends to push the appetite beyond limited procedural change within the House of Commons to one of change external to the House, especially through reform of the electoral system. The Liberals/Liberal Democrats – consistently out of government – have always pressed for it; the appetite for it increased on the Labour benches the longer the party was in opposition – one can see that in the 1992 and 1997 manifestos. In 1997, Labour made promises on the electoral system (independent review, referendum) and on reform within the Commons (modernisation). After 1997, modernisation has continued to the pursued but the idea of electoral reform largely disappeared after the report of the Jenkins Commission (the referendum was again mentioned in the 2001 manifesto but disappeared from that of 2005).

**Strong Ideological Conflict Breeds Appetite for Reform (Proposition 4)**

In our analysis of election manifestos provides some evidence to support this claim. One example is the Conservative Party’s response to the Parliament Act 1949 in its 1951 manifesto:

‘However well-meaning many of the present Socialist leaders may be, there is no doubt that in its complete development a Socialist State, monopolising production, distribution and exchange, would be fatal to individual freedom. We look on the Government as the servant and not as the masters of the people. Multiplying orders and rules should be reduced, and the whole system kept under more rigorous Parliamentary scrutiny. We shall call an all-Party conference to consider proposals for the reform of the House of Lords.’ (Conservative Manifesto 1951, source see Figure 4).

The ideological clash between the parties was perhaps most apparent in 1983: A neoliberal Conservative agenda versus a socialist agenda for Labour. In respect of Parliament, this was not
manifested so much in terms of procedural change in the Commons but rather in the clash over the second chamber. The Labour manifesto promised the party would take action to abolish the House of Lords ‘as quickly as possible’ and, as an interim measure, introduce a Bill in the first session of parliament to remove its legislative powers. It also promised the introduction of a Freedom of Information Bill. The Conservative Party, by contrast, committed itself to defending the House of Lords as a strong second chamber. There is some evidence that Labour’s comprehensive programme for constitutional reform and modernisation in its manifestos in the 1990s can be seen as a reaction to the Conservative hegemony during the Thatcher years. It is also clear from the evidence that many of the constitutional reforms slowed down significantly once Labour was in government (i.e., Freedom of Information Act, a referendum on electoral reform, House of Lords reform).

The Importance of Timing and Election Pledges (Proposition 5)

The most obvious examples are the creation of the departmental select committees in 1979. The Conservative Party had made relatively clear statements in its manifesto to give the House an opportunity to vote on the 1978 recommendations of the Select Committee on Procedure for an introduction of a system of departmental select committees:

‘In recent years, Parliament has been weakened in two ways. First, outside groups have been allowed to usurp some of its democratic functions. ... Second, the traditional role of our legislature has suffered badly from the growth of government over the last quarter of a century.

We will see that Parliament and no other body stands at the centre of the nation's life and decisions, and we will seek to make it effective in its job of controlling the Executive.

We sympathise with the approach of the all-party parliamentary committees which put forward proposals last year for improving the way the House of Commons legislates and scrutinises public spending and the work of government departments. We will give the new House of Commons an early chance of coming to a decision on these proposals’ (Conservative Party Manifesto 1979; source: see Figure 4).

This strong pre-electoral commitment helped sway the new Conservative Cabinet under Margaret Thatcher to agree to proceeding with the proposals of Norman St John-Stevas, the new, reform-minded Leader of the House of Commons. St John Stevas was conscious of the importance of timing and moved extremely quickly to bring his proposals forward (they were voted on, and approved overwhelmingly, in June 1979, approximately one month after the election). Similarly, the Modernisation Select Committee established in 1997 was set up very
quickly after the election of May 1997 and decided to bring proposals forward as a matter of urgency, not even bothering to take oral evidence. In both cases, reformers saw the time immediately after the election of a new Parliament and a change of government party as an opportunity to achieve more decisive reforms than would have been possible later on in the Parliament.

*Incoming Governments Trying to Row Back (Proposition 6)*

In its 1997 manifesto, the Labour Party declared: ‘We believe the House of Commons is in need of modernisation and we will ask the House to establish a special Select Committee to review its procedures’ (source: See Figure 4). The Modernisation Committee produced an important first report in 1997 including recommendations for pre-legislative scrutiny of legislation, on committee deliberations, programming and other important issues (House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons 1997), it did not clearly embed the reforms it proposed and thereafter tended to meander in terms of reform proposals (more geared to the convenience of members – e.g. sitting hours -than strengthening the position of backbenchers).

One example is the disappointment expressed by backbenchers on both sides of the House about ‘programming’, which was introduced on an experimental basis in the 1997-98 session and permanently since the 2004-05 session. Programming was an approach for the timetabling of legislation that was to be ‘more formal than the usual channels but more flexible than the guillotine’ (House of Commons Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons 1997: paragraph 89). The Modernisation Committee proposed it to improve the legislative process, not to weaken the role of backbenchers in the legislative process. Yet, in an evaluation of the experience of programming after over seven years of its operation, the Select Committee on Procedure concluded in 2004:

‘We believe that, if programming were used as originally envisaged by the Modernisation Committee, namely only when there is cross-party agreement, it would have the potential to be a more effective way of considering, and improving, legislation, and we regret that it has come to be seen as the same as the guillotine, though more widely applied’ (House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure 2004: paragraph 18).

In a similar vein, Gwyneth Dunwoody, then chair of the Commons Transport Committee, expressed concerns about the effect that the rules would have on ‘the role of every Back Bencher’ (House of Commons Debates 24 October 2004 column 1329). Whilst acknowledging that there was never a golden era of the backbencher she contended that ‘... certain methods
were open to Back Benchers to delay legislation, to inspect its true content or to negotiate with the Government of the day to secure changes that were tremendously important. Whichever way one looks at it, programming does away with that’ (ibid.). She concluded her speech by stating:

‘I do not necessarily want to go back to filibustering or to abandon programming, but I want something much more important. I want the Government to understand that we are not elected to the House simply to agree every bit of legislation that is put forward. Proposals are often unfinished, inadequate and insufficiently debated. I want the Government to agree that I came here to help produce good laws, not bad ones. The Procedure Committee has made some very mild suggestions; if the Government persist in not accepting them, I shall begin to have very grave doubts’ (House of Commons Debates 24 October 2004, column 1332).

Other ‘rowing back’ can be seen in terms of the promise that ‘Ministerial accountability will be reviewed so as to remove recent abuses.’ Since 1997 no significant changes were made in respect of ministerial accountability. Similarly, the Labour Party’s proposals in its 2005 manifesto for procedural changes in the Lords (codifying Lords conventions, 60-day limit on time spent on bills in the Lords, alternative forms of scrutiny to the Commons) were never acted upon, largely because they were shown to be impractical.

Incremental Reform and Strong Path Dependence (Proposition 7)

The gradual reform of the committee stage of legislation is an example of incremental reform. Unlike the House’s select committees, its traditional standing committees – the committees tasked with the line-by-line scrutiny of legislation after second reading – did not have powers to take evidence during their deliberations. The standing-committee format was often criticised for its partisan nature and the lack of detailed, expert scrutiny of legislation at committee stage (e.g., House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation 1997: paragraphs 8-10, 42-45, 95).

First attempts to enhance legislative scrutiny at the committee stage were made under the Thatcher government, which allowed the introduction of so-called ‘special standing committees’ as an experiment in 1980. Bills could now be referred to such committees, but only on the motion of a minister. The committees had powers to call for evidence and witnesses, including the responsible minister, although their work had to be completed within 28 days. Under pressure from the Commons, a permanent system was introduced in 1986 allowing for special standing committee not dependent on the motion of a minister. They had
powers to take evidence, although this was limited to one deliberative and three evidence-taking sessions (Standing Order 91). Nevertheless, referral still required a specific vote which could be carried only with the consent of the government. This procedure was not favoured by the government as special standing committees were seen to slow down the speed of legislation and increase the workload of Ministers and officials. As a result, they were only used seven times in 25 years).

The scrutiny of legislation during committee stage remained a matter for concern of various Commons Modernisation Committees (e.g., e.g., House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation 1997: paragraphs 8-10, 42-45, 95). In the 2005-10 Parliament, the Modernisation Committee report *The Legislative Process* of July 2006 proposed the replacement of standing committees and special standing committees by new ‘public bill committees’ to enable more public participation in the committee stage of bills (House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons 2006). These proposals were accepted. The Standing Order changes came into effect in October 2006 with a view to being used from January 2007. Although the standing orders envisaged the procedure applying to any bill subject to a programme motion (or any other bill to which it is specifically applied), oral evidence was initially taken only for bills which started in the Commons and had not already been subject to pre-legislative scrutiny (though there was pressure to extend this). The public bill committees were designed to allow committees to take evidence on bills before reverting to normal standing committee format, *but* without eating unduly into the time available to get a bill through. The evidence submitted to public bill committees has risen quickly, which demonstrates that interest groups and experts are seeing the new committees as an important way of influencing legislation. As a result, evidence tends to be rather rushed (experts often seen in a panel rather than individually) and there is little time for the committee (or government) to take account of the evidence in deliberating on the provisions of the bill, and the government gets its bill usually in the form that it wants it. (The government still has its majority on the committee.) However, over time, this procedure may start to alter the culture of the committees and possibly lead to demands for more time to consider evidence (leading to greater use of the carry-over of bills).

**Conclusions**

In most international comparisons, executive-legislative relations in the United Kingdom are characterised as being extremely skewed in favour of the government, the latter drawing on significant agenda-setting powers in the chamber (Döring 1995). If government parties behaved like rational actors wishing to use parliamentary procedures to enact their preferred policies, procedural reforms in Westminster should be highly unlikely and rare events (possibly triggered
by exogenous shocks such as wars or major crises) as the government has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and the opposition accepts the imbalance in the hope will be able to capture the reins of power themselves in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, there have been significant if limited changes to the procedures of the House of Commons in the past decades. On the whole, they have strengthened backbenchers and opposition parties. Despite the powers of the government whips, MPs have extended their opportunities to scrutinise and influence policy through select committees, public bills committees and other changes. To be sure, these changes have been gradual and fall short of a radical transformation (Flinders 2005; 2007). Nevertheless, they are generally seen as having had real consequences. The increase of lobby firms around Westminster testifies to the fact that interest groups, charities, social movements and other organisations today see MPs as important actors. In a nutshell, the puzzle addressed in this paper is this: Assuming that the governments are rational actors and their preference for the procedural status quo has not changed (because it has always benefited from it), how could they ever agree on significant changes to the status quo, if they were in control of the parliamentary agenda and their backbenchers? This question goes to the heart of the question whether, and how, the institutions of majoritarian systems can be reformed.

The answer is complex. In part, our brief account of parliamentary reform in the UK shows – as others did before (e.g., Cowley and Stuart 2001; Flinders 2007; Kelso 2003; Power 2007) – that governments have generally been successful in resisting far-reaching changes. The changes we do observe, can be explained as the result of two mechanisms: The first is incremental change over a long period of time, where the government allows relatively limited reforms. These limited reforms, in turn, open up opportunities for further gradual adjustments. Flinders (2007) has placed strong emphasis on this mechanism. The second is based on Norton’s (2000) notion of a ‘window of opportunity’. The main contribution of this paper is to develop this notion further and provide some first configurative evidence to test the plausibility of this framework. Three factors seem to be crucial:

Firstly, the availability of reform proposals and ‘campaigners’ and designers developing these proposals and keeping them on the political agenda. This has been the case in the United Kingdom. Bodies such as the Study of Parliament Group and the Hansard Society have produced widely respected proposals for procedural reform and kept them on the agenda for several decades. Some ‘excluded’ political parties such as the Liberals and their successor organisations could draw on these proposals. More importantly for reforms, they began to influence government backbenchers and ministers.

Secondly, the preferences of party leaders did shift on occasion, especially after long episodes of powerlessness in opposition. The Labour reforms of the mid-1960s and of the 2001-2005
Parliament are cases in point. The Conservative reforms of 1979-80 were strongly influenced by the experience of the growing ideological polarisation between the main parties during the 1970s and the economic crises in that decade. The lessons drawn from these developments were that governments needed to be scrutinised and constrained more effectively than before. As a result, for example, the Conservative manifesto for the 1979 general election contained a relatively strong pre-commitment to procedural reform early in the next Parliament. The incoming prime minister and government ministers may have rapidly come to the conclusion that such reforms constrained their work too much, but parliamentary reformers on the backbenches and in the Cabinet moved rapidly and effectively to translate the pre-electoral manifesto commitments into reforms. No doubt, governments occasionally sought to ‘row back’ and limit the reforms (e.g., the Blair government’s implementation of its pledge for a Freedom of Information Act, which dissatisfied many civil rights campaigners and opposition MPs), but at least in 1979 and 1997, transitions did open up ‘windows of opportunity’ that skilful reformers exploited. If they were connected to pre-electoral commitments made by the parties, it was generally very difficult for incoming governments to renege completely on their promises.

Thirdly, it is generally accepted that the presence of a reform-minded Leader of the House of Commons, the cabinet minister in charge of procedural reform, is crucial (Norton 2000). We argue in this paper that the role of the Leader of the House is an example of a more general theoretical point pertaining to the cohesiveness of veto players, which Tsebelis (2002) identified as a crucial condition. The Leader of the House is a senior member of the cabinet, often chosen because s/he enjoys the respect of MPs on both sides of the House. This position can, on occasion, give a reform-minded Leader of the House resources to argue the case for reform within the cabinet thus reducing the cabinet’s cohesiveness in this matter. Both Norman St John Stevas and Robin Cook may be cases in point. Such a Leader may become an important partner for MPs engaged in procedural reform (e.g., members of procedure or modernisation committees) and reduce the cohesion of the government party (and its leadership) as a whole. This, as we have shown above, opens up opportunities for reform. The same is true for government backbenchers when they defy their party whips and vote for reform or the defence of reforms (e.g., the Blair government’s failed attempt to remove two Labour chairpersons of two select committees).
References


Figures

Figure 1: Scenario 1 – Government and opposition preferences for reform and modernisation in the presence of cohesive parties, weak inter-party conflict and/or frequent alternation between government and opposition.
Figure 2: Scenario 2 – Preferences for reform and modernisation in the presence of cohesive parties, strong inter-party conflict and/or infrequent alternation between government and opposition)
Figure 3: Scenario 3 – Preferences for reform and modernisation in the presence of a divided government party, strong inter-party conflict and/or infrequent alternation between government and opposition
Figure 4: Salience of parliamentary reform in the three major parties’ election manifestos 1945-2005 (including electoral reform) – word count: Share of words as percentage of the manifestos’ total word length


We counted all specific pledges for the coming parliament. This includes justifications for specific reforms, but excludes general comments on the value of Parliament, general statements about political opponents or statements of past reforms supported by the respective party. We focused on Westminster and excluded pledges concerning local councils, devolved assemblies and the European Parliament, unless the pledges were explicitly linked to the UK national parliament.
Table 1: Parliamentary Reform Proposals in the Three Main Parties Election Manifestos, 1945-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election year</th>
<th>Party in government at election</th>
<th>Conservative Manifesto</th>
<th>Labour Manifesto</th>
<th>Liberal/ Alliance/ Liberal Democrat Manifesto</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>National government</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Threat to the House of Lords: ‘we give clear notice that we will not tolerate obstruction of the people’s will by the House of Lords’, but no concrete proposals for reform.</td>
<td>Introduction of PR; state funding for political parties</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Commons procedure</strong>: more time in debate and more independence of action to the private Member seeking to bring in ‘non-party’ legislation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Pledge to call an all-Party conference to consider proposals for the reform of the House of Lords; restoration of university constituencies in elections to the Commons; strict parliamentary scrutiny of nationalised industries.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>All-party consultations on Lords reform; redistribution of Parliamentary constituencies</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Introduction of PR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Introduction of PR.</td>
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<td>Election year</td>
<td>Party in government at election</td>
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<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Electoral reform: consultations about the introduction of postal voting.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Extension of franchise to all citizens over 18.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Commons procedure</strong>: scrutiny of public expenditure; speeding up the passage of uncontroversial legislation; consider whether adequate means are available to MPs to secure the redress of complaints of maladministration.</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Commons procedure</strong>: introduction of specialised committees; more free votes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Commons procedure</strong>: improve procedure and the work of committees; reform facilities for research and information; consider the broadcasting of Commons proceedings; legislation to ‘safeguard measures approved by the House of Commons from frustration by delay or defeat in the House of Lords’.</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Commons procedure</strong>: Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs, Defence, Economics and Science and Technology; broadcasting of debates by television.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Electoral reform: fairer constituency boundaries.</td>
<td>Reduce House of Lords veto powers.</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>1974 (Feb.)</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Parliament to play a more meaningful role in the scrutiny of European Community proposals.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Commons proceedings to be broadcast; introduction of a fixed five-year legislative period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Commons procedure</strong>: improvements in the organisation of business ‘to make Parliament more efficient and effective’.</td>
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*Electoral reform:*
<table>
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<th>Election year</th>
<th>Party in government at election</th>
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<th>Liberal/ Alliance/ Liberal Democrat Manifesto</th>
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<tr>
<td>1974 (Oct.)</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Establishment of a Speaker’s Conference on electoral reform.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Criticism of the electoral system as ‘fraud’; implicit pledge to introduce PR.</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Against introduction of a unicameral Parliament; willingness to discuss a number of broader constitutional reforms.</td>
<td>Commitment to abolish the delaying power and legislative veto of the House of Lords.</td>
<td>Comprehensive constitutional reform including introduction of PR and fixed electoral terms; replacement of the House of Lords; Freedom of Information Act.</td>
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<td>Commons procedure: seek to make the House effective in its job of controlling the Executive; expresses sympathy with the approach of the all-party parliamentary committees which put forward proposals in 1978 for improving the way the House of Commons legislates and scrutinises public spending and the work of government departments; pledge to give the new House of Commons an early chance of coming to a decision on these proposals.</td>
<td>Commons procedure: ‘major improvements’ in the legislative process, including new methods of considering Bills in committee, and of scrutinizing the work of government through select committees.</td>
<td>Commons procedure: Parliament should ‘set up powerful Select Committees, to assert vigorous democratic control over the Executive’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Commitment to a strong second chamber.</td>
<td>Introduction of a Freedom of Information Bill; take action to abolish the House of Lords ‘as quickly as possible’ and, as an interim measure, introduce a Bill in the first session of parliament to remove its legislative powers.</td>
<td>Introduction of PR; Lords reform: reform Lords powers and introduce a significant elected element.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Commons procedure: Commitment to ‘continue to pursue sensible, carefully considered reforms where they are of practical value’.</td>
<td>Commons procedure: ‘improvements in the legislative process and procedures in the House of Commons’.</td>
<td>Commons procedure: ‘Increase the accountability of Government to Parliament by reforming the operation and procedures of the House of Commons, to make its control of the executive more effective’.</td>
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<td>Election year</td>
<td>Party in government at election</td>
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<td>Labour Manifesto</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Commons procedure: Parliamentary scrutiny of the security services.</td>
<td>Introduction of PR; fixed-term parliaments; reform of the Lords. Commons procedure: Introduction of an all-party business committee; make more use of selection committees; give more parliamentary time for widely-supported private members’ bills.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 1992          | Conservative                    | Commons procedure: Commitment to parliamentary reforms ‘to ensure that the House of Commons conducts its business more efficiently and effectively, taking into account the benefits of modern technology, the increasing constituency demands upon Members of Parliament and the need to attract more women to stand for election’. | Reform of the House of Lords; establishment of a commission on electoral reform; introduction of fixed-term parliaments; Commons procedure: ‘improve the procedures and facilities of the House of Commons, strengthen scrutiny of EC legislation, and end ministerial misuse of the Royal Prerogative’. | Introduction of PR; fixed-term parliaments; House of Lords reform, introduction of a partially elected Senate. Commons procedure: ‘boosting the powers of Select Committees, improving staff backup for backbenchers and increasing financial and civil service support for opposition parties’; ‘improve the quality of legislation by establishing pre-legislative committees and better scrutiny of delegated legislation’; ‘improve the quality of debates by allocating time for business more fairly, timetabling Committee sessions of bills and ending Parliament’s late-night sittings’.
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<tr>
<th>Election year</th>
<th>Party in government at election</th>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Explicitly opposes electoral reform and Lords reform; pledges to defend the rights of national parliaments in EU legislation and oppose more powers being given to the European Parliament at the expense of national parliaments. <strong>Commons procedure</strong>: continue to introduce reforms ‘to make parliament work more effectively’; give parliament more time to consider legislation thoroughly by extending the Queen’s Speech ‘to cover not only legislation for the immediate year but also provisional plans for legislation in the year after that’.</td>
<td>End the hereditary principle in the House of Lords; appointment of a commission to review options for electoral reform; commitment to a referendum on the electoral system. <strong>Commons procedure</strong>: establishment of a special Select Committee to review Commons procedures and make recommendations on modernisation; ‘Prime Minister’s Questions will be made more effective. Ministerial accountability will be reviewed so as to remove recent abuses. The process for scrutinising European legislation will be overhauled.’</td>
<td>Introduction of PR; reform of the Lords to create an ‘effective and democratic upper house’. <strong>Commons procedure</strong>: Modernisation of the Commons; reduction of the number of MPs by 200; introduction of tougher rules for their conduct, behaviour and outside sources of income; improve drafting and consultation on legislation; strengthen MPs’ ability to hold the government to account.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>All-party committee on Lords reform; retain electoral system; following devolution of legislative powers to regional assemblies, only English and Welsh MPs will be entitled to vote on Government Bills relating to England and Wales; English MPs alone to vote laws which apply exclusively to England. <strong>Commons procedure</strong>: Committed to support reforms of the Commons ‘to make ministers more accountable’; ‘require the Prime Minister to appear before the House of Commons twice a week, and make sure that Select Committees are independent of party managers’.</td>
<td>Consider recommendations of the Jenkins Commission on electoral reform; complete reform of the House of Lords; commitment to legislate with a view ‘to allow each party to make positive moves to increase the representation of women’. <strong>Commons procedure</strong>: Committed to ‘continue to modernise the procedures of the House of Commons so it can effectively fulfil its functions of representation and scrutiny.’</td>
<td>Replace Lords with a smaller directly elected Senate with representatives from the UK’s nations and regions; more family friendly and efficient working practices for Parliament. <strong>Commons procedure</strong>: increase the powers of Select Committees; more pre-legislative scrutiny of bills; MPs to be allowed to propose spending amendments in the budget; Tax Bill for greater consultation on tax matters; new parliamentary commission to support Parliament with expert analysis of expenditure proposals.</td>
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<td>Election year</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Committed to seek cross-party consensus for a substantially elected House of Lords; cut the number of MPs by 20 per cent.</td>
<td>Removal of remaining hereditary peers; more effective and efficient division of labour between Commons and Lords; introduction of a limit of 60 days to scrutiny of legislation in the Lords; review experience of new electoral systems.</td>
<td>Not available at the time of writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Commons procedure:* ‘strengthen select committees and make time for proper scrutiny of all legislation’.  

*Commons procedure:* ‘continue to support reforms that improve parliamentary accountability and scrutiny led by the successful Modernisation Committee’.
