

The Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy

Dc Tue 1 April at The Blue Mugge pub

Notes from the Speaker's (John Bercow, MP) speech to The Hansard Society, November 2013, launching his Commission on Digital Democracy.

1. The Speaker said that the 'House of Commons has been in decline for some decades' and then in 2009 the 'MPs expenses scandal rocked Parliament to its very foundations...'. 'The Mother of Parliament was divorced from the electorate'.
2. He argued that since 2010 there have been some improvements linked maybe to the very large number of new MPs (227) and the necessity for coalition government. Specifically, following the Wright Committee recommendations the HoC embraced the election of Deputy Speakers; the whole House selection of Select Committee Chairs, and the whole party caucus election of Select Committee Members. Since then the impressive work of the HoC Select Committees has gained widespread publicity and acknowledgement.

Also Speaker Bercow added a procedural innovation – the Urgent Question (UQ). Any MP can demand a Minister to answer some issue or matter that has arisen suddenly. 154 U.Q.s have been granted ...

3. However, to better connect the electorate with Parliament there is a need to reconcile representative democracy with technical innovations.
4. John Bercow gives the specific example of Estonia, where in 2011 one quarter of the votes in national elections were cast on line. He speculates that in 2015 maybe half of the votes in that country will be cast on line. Why not similar here?
5. Arguments for greater use of internet and social media for participation in electoral processes:
 - i) The decline in voter turn-out for national and local elections is significant and serious. This innovation could help reverse that decline.
 - ii) Younger people are less involved with politics and voting than older people – this will help redress the balance. (Note a possible consequence politically - older adults and the retired support the Conservative Party and UKIP in greater numbers... younger people support Labour and the Greens in greater numbers...).
 - ii) People of all ages are using the internet and social media more frequently and with increasingly sophisticated awareness, anyway. 'Clicktivism' - or e-petitioning is now well established and has, in some instances, proved to be well organised and effective. Digital democracy will simply extend and enhance this trend for the benefit of everybody.
 - iii) Adoption of digital democracy will not replace traditional voting methods - it will add an important new dimension.
 - iv) All the necessary checks and balances can be in place to ensure fair voting procedures...

6. What are the disadvantages?