

Dear Constituent,

Over 40 years or so, Parliament has become weak, emasculated and muddled. Brexit may be just what it needs. Our powers to scrutinise and hold to account the Government have been eroded - by the EU, devolution to Scotland, Wales and local government, and by 24-hour rolling news providing an effective opposition singularly lacking elsewhere.

We must never forget that Parliament's job is not to run the country but to scrutinise and hold to account those of its members who, by right of their Parliamentary majority, form the government and seek to do so. It's about scrutinising Bills, and like them or loathe them at least making them into good, workable law. It's about holding Ministers to account through debates and question times, Select Committees and so much more... It's about shouting the corner for the unique local needs of an MP's own constituency; and it's about speaking up for minorities and for the weak, and for those unable to speak for themselves, however they voted.

Tony Blair was the first PM to realise that the weaker Parliament is, the more unfettered Ministers' freedom to act will be, and he took steps to further that erosion. It was under him that we first saw the near universal use of Parliamentary 'guillotines' - the time-limiting of debate. By that means, he abolished one of the few real weapons at the disposal of the Opposition - time. We Conservatives voted against Timetable Motions for thirteen years arguing that they were a scourge of Parliamentary democracy. But in Government, of course, we love them and have preserved and extended them. Time limits on speeches mean that we err on the side of quantity rather than quality. Debates are pretty shabby little rags by comparison with the great old days of Thatcher, Churchill, Disraeli, and the quality of the legislation we send up to the Lords is as a result so poor that it demands dozens of amendments, many of them from the Government itself, during the much more thorough Lords' scrutiny of our Bills.

Mr Blair's emasculation of Parliament went further. He used to send his backbenchers home for 'constituency weeks' and brought in innocent amusements to keep the backbenchers happy. Westminster Hall debates are worthy enough, but being incapable of a vote are in no way 'binding.' Even less so are the recent invention of debates on public petitions which give people the entirely false impression that if they raise more than 100,000 signatures, they will get a debate in Parliament. The 4 million who petitioned for a second EU Referendum must have been more than a little disappointed at three hours of discussion concluded by a wind-up from a junior Minister.

Regular Opposition day debates in the main Chamber are routinely voted down by government backbenchers who have not been present for much of the debate; and the fairly recent invention of 'Backbench Business Committee Debates' allows a good airing of some topic dear to an MP's heart, but has little effect on policy or governmental behaviour. Debates and question times are largely formal and formulaic, the Prime Minister and Ministers pay them little attention, numbers attending from the backbenches are low and debates end early through lack of speakers.

Now they are keen to get rid of the visible signs and symbols of Parliament - the funny clothes, ancient traditions, wigs for the clerks at the Table; the long tradition of impartiality by the Speaker; the careful language, the powerfully influencing speeches. Soon they will close the building under guise of 'modernising it', making it more public-friendly and the rest of it. And in the meantime, unheeded by us, the Government are allowed to get on with whatever they want to unhampered by our only mildly irritating scrutiny. It is a weak, idle and emasculated Parliament indeed.

So what do we need to do about it? First, we should, as we Conservatives always promised to do, abolish timetable motions. That might well make life less comfortable for we backbenchers. The Parliamentary day would be less predictable. We might have to cancel some of our overseas trips, perhaps stay in Westminster for longer in the evening. It might well be a bit of a bore; but it's the job we signed up to. We should limit the worthy but perhaps relatively ineffectual Westminster Hall debates, Adjournment debates, Backbench Business Committee debates and Opposition Days. They give us the warm illusion of holding the government to account, but are in reality largely ignored.

We should seek to cut back on 'case-work' which largely involves us in doing things which actually ought to be done by local councillors, social workers, immigration lawyers. "He's a good Constituency MP" now tends to mean not that "he is representing the constituency well by speaking up for us in Parliament", but that "he is always here." Do we represent the constituency in Westminster, or Westminster in the constituency? It is my view that the pendulum has swung too far towards the latter.

Post-Brexit, many of the powers which we have lost to the EU over 50 years will be returned to the UK. We must ensure that they are not just hoovered up by the Government; and that Parliament is the body which must decide how they are used and then keep a watchful eye on it. Brexit may be the moment, and the means, to reinvigorate Parliament.

Best wishes,

**James Gray, MP for North Wiltshire**