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## **Institute of Government Speech**

**19 October 2011**

### **Introduction**

Thank you for your kind welcome, and for the opportunity to speak here this evening.

It's not so long ago that the idea of a representative of the Green Party rolling up at the Institute for Government might have seemed a bit odd.

Would there be much of a role for Government in an England filled with yurts and yoghurt?

And would a party of protest have anything of interest to say about how our country is run – particularly about the need for government to balance competing interests to find the best possible outcome for all?

Greens in Power

Well, if it was ever thus, times have certainly changed.

Internationally, Green Parties have shown they can join governments, take tough decisions, and make a difference.

Take Germany.

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Having Joschka Fischer as Foreign Minister during the Iraq War surely helped ensure that Germany, at least, kept out of that particular trap.

Here in the UK, the Greens have had their own breakthrough in Brighton Pavilion.

And perhaps you had to be part of that campaign, and experience all the barriers set up on the road to Westminster for smaller parties, to really understand just what it meant.

Even getting to the starting line can be a challenge.

### Barriers

If the Greens were to field candidates in every seat in Britain in a General Election, it would mean spending over £300,000 just in deposits alone.

That's more money than we'd have available to spend on the entire election campaign.

And the question of how much you'd get back in saved deposits isn't very relevant if you've no money left over for leaflets or posters or broadcasts.

But without candidates in every constituency, the media and the commentators have every excuse to marginalize your campaign.

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And so it becomes self-fulfilling.

Without that coverage, the chances of being elected are much reduced.

Without candidates in every seat, your share of the national vote is reduced.

And then, once the votes are in, the commentators can point to your low share of the vote as 'proof' that you were only ever representing a tiny proportion of the public.

Add to this, the way that the parties already in Westminster provide themselves with various forms of support from public money, and you can see how the odds are stacked against small parties and independent candidates.

And it's not in the interests of any of the main parties to change this.

Indeed, if politics was a business – and I sometimes wonder whether that is so far-fetched an idea – if politics was a business, it would be a prime case for a referral to the Competition Commission for monopolistic collusion in excluding new entrants to the market.

For Independents, the picture is even more bleak.

Martin Bell and Richard Taylor have shown what a very valuable contribution Independent MPs can make.

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But in both cases they had the advantage that one or more of the major parties had stepped aside to give them a free run at the incumbent.

In Brighton Pavilion, all the three main parties fought hard against us.

Had it not been for the hard work of my predecessor as candidate Keith Taylor – now doing an excellent job as MEP for the South-East – and of the Green Party activists and councilors over many years, we wouldn't have made it across the line.

And in terms of government, I think this year has brought a breakthrough which is more significant than my own election – that is, the Greens taking over the running of Brighton and Hove City Council.

Or to put it another way, the people of Brighton and Hove placing their trust in Greens to run their schools, social services, transport, housing and – yes – to empty their bins.

I think it's remarkable.

And it's certainly a baptism of fire, to come into local government and take on that kind of responsibility for the first time, just when the worst cuts for two generations are being imposed by this coalition.

How that turns out is perhaps for a future occasion.

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## Experiences in Parliament

Tonight, I wanted to cover three areas.

First, having jumped those hurdles, how I have found being a lone MP, and what you can achieve.

Second, from that experience, what I think needs to change.

And third, what I believe shouldn't change – but is currently under threat.

### Accommodation

Perhaps I should start with one of the most basic details of getting the job done, which is where you sit to do it.

When I was first elected as a Member of the European Parliament in 1999, I turned up at the Parliament building in Brussels, and an official handed me the keys to my new office.

So within a very short time, I was sitting at my desk, ready to start work on behalf of my constituents.

Arriving at the Palace of Westminster in 2010 was rather different.

The welcoming process was very efficient.

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I even had a mentor, or minder, from the Palace staff.

Of less value, but more period charm, I was at once allocated a coat hook with a pink ribbon on it where I could hang my sword.

But getting an office to work from was more of a problem.

For I discovered that it is not the permanent officials in the Palace of Westminster who allocate offices, but the party whips, and it was an immensely long, complex, and apparently politically charged process to allocate them.

Naturally, the most senior MPs – Cabinet Ministers and party leaders, chairs of select committees, and so on – are given the cream of what's available.

But after that, offices are another part of the patronage system by which MPs are kept in line.

Play the game, vote the right way, sit on the committees no-one else wants to serve on, and you might get an office with a view.

Troublemakers can expect a broom-cupboard with limited ventilation.

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While this elaborate game was played out, a matter of several weeks, I and another two hundred or so new MPs had to work in odd corners or camped around a table in the canteen.

I understand that J K Rowling wrote her first Harry Potter book in a café. All credit to her.

Personally, I found it a less than helpful place to try and deal with the personal concerns of constituents.

### Voting

First impressions did not deceive.

Compared to many other parliaments, including in many respects the European Parliament, Westminster is monumentally inefficient.

Take voting. In Strasbourg, voting on four bill amendments would take a couple of minutes.

In Westminster, it takes more than an hour because of the archaic system in which MPs file out of the chamber into the corridors to arrange themselves into “aye” and “no” lobbies for a head count.

That is not a good use of anybody's time and it certainly isn't a good use of taxpayers' money.

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At first sight, it seems that everything takes so long and is hard for any outsider, or novice, to understand - or influence - because Parliament is so steeped in tradition and pageantry

However, the reality is that Parliament is this way for a reason: it keeps power in the hands of the whips and the leaders of the main parties.

They don't want smaller parties or their own more independently-minded MPs to make full use of the powers of the institution, whether to legislate, or to scrutinise the government

A small but significant example of this is the lack of explanatory paragraphs for clauses and amendments.

The fact is, MPs often have absolutely no idea what they are voting on.

And the amount of legislation which is now being pushed through means that there is a severe democratic deficit.

I've seen colleagues literally being physically propelled through one lobby or another by their whips, even as they're trying to ascertain the significance of what they're being asked to vote on.

This is law making on the hoof.



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## Diversity

Another first impression of the Commons that has stuck with me is its maleness.

It is also unrepresentative in many other ways, but the gender balance is a particular characteristic of Westminster – a reflection of its clubland culture and family-unfriendly working practices.

The last election saw little progress made on women's representation, and men currently outnumber women 5 to 1 in parliament.

This means the UK is ranked 52nd in the world on parliamentary representation of women.

This isn't simply a matter of natural justice.

It also undermines the quality of law-making and scrutiny.

Decisions which affect us all, are taken overwhelmingly by men.

And you can see how a mix of ignorance of the problem, and self-interest, affect issues such as equal pay, rights for temporary and part-time workers, and funding for rape crisis and domestic violence centres.

Suggest quotas to increase female representation on the boards of companies in Parliament, and it is as if were the end of Magna Carta.

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Meanwhile other countries, with a more balanced political class, can debate the merits calmly and bring in more sensible rules.

My proposal to introduce job-sharing to the Commons, in particular to make parliament more accessible for women, met with similar “surprise”, shall we say.

Yet nothing would do more to open up politics to women.

How many times have people talked about career politicians, about politicians being “out of touch with reality”?

Job-sharing MPs would be able to keep MPs with a foot firmly in their community, they could keep their caring responsibilities, they could keep voluntary work, or they could continue part-time in their profession.

And it would enable far more women to get into politics.

#### What a lone MP can achieve

As you can see, there are any number of ways in which the system in Westminster is set up for the convenience of the power-brokers.

But that doesn't mean that any MP is helpless or unable to influence the process.

Fortunately, being a lone Green isn't a new situation for me.

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I was the first Green on Oxfordshire County Council over 15 years ago.

I know the feeling of being outside the comfort and solidarity of a party block; and also how, if you understand the system, you can get things done for the people you represent, and still stick to your principles.

Unlike MPs from big parties, I do have a lot of freedom to submit my own amendments, some of which have been supported by other parties, such as my calls for the Strategic Defence Review to include the Trident nuclear missile programme.

Admittedly, it wasn't put to the vote (to my astonishment, the Speaker has complete licence to decide which amendment to put to a vote, and which to simply ignore – believe me, if a Chair were to try that at a Green Party conference they'd be lynched).

So it wasn't voted on, but I know that many of my views have wide support among MPs, and it keeps open the debate.

And who knows, on another occasion, we may be more successful.

### Committees

The Energy Bill Committee was another opportunity to influence the terms of the debate.

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We've seen how much of the country's energy policy has been set behind the doors of Whitehall by lobbyists.

Setting out the alternatives in committee builds the case and also forges closer working relationships with other MPs, NGOs, and other campaigners.

Tabling questions and amendments to keep the Government under proper scrutiny, meetings with the unions, national NGOs and journalists, and crucially with visits to the large number of community groups in Brighton – all these also help to build influence.

There's also co-sponsoring bills in Parliament to raise the profile of individual issues.

I currently have a Private Members Bill which would tackle tax dodging, for example, and have had meetings on it with Treasury Ministers – they weren't too sympathetic, it has to be admitted.

### Building Alliances

As a sole MP, there's also scope for forming alliances with others.

For example, I worked with Douglas Carswell on an amendment to the AV referendum bill which would have included the option of genuine

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forms of proportional representation on the ballot paper, and so given the public a real choice.

I shared Yes to AV campaign platforms with other parties.

I collaborated with Labour backbenchers on anti-nuclear plans, and have worked with MPs from all sides in various All Party Parliamentary Groups.

And perhaps most significantly, I've had extensive cross party support for my report on Parliamentary Reform, including the best attended backbench Westminster Hall debate yet.

### Representing Alternative Views

These are all valuable ways to contribute to the political process.

But for the Greens, I think our main role at the moment is to provide alternatives to the narrow political consensus we now experience in the UK.

The formation of the coalition makes it even more important to have independent voices in Parliament.

On so many issues, from setting up Academies to bringing in the private sector to run the NHS, to tuition fees and privatizing the Royal Mail, the three main parties all line up on one side.

So it falls to the Greens to make the alternative case.

That is what we are doing, on climate change, fuel poverty, and a steady state economy, and on Afghanistan, electoral reform, nuclear power, and many other vital issues.

Of course, we are not alone.

The Nationalist parties are tremendously effective in fighting their corner – though naturally they don't become involved where the issue has been devolved.

There are also independently-minded MPs on all sides, though they suffer from being leant on by their own parties, and having even less infrastructure behind them than I do.

### What Needs To Change

So Westminster is a beautiful place, great with history and culture, but stuck painfully in the past.

I published a report in November, *The Case for Parliamentary Reform*, proposing measures to drag Parliament into the 21st century – like an electronic voting system, an end to late night sittings, and curbs on MPs' speaking time to ensure a better quality of debate and greater participation.

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Many MPs have already expressed support for some of these ideas and I'm working to push this forward.

We've had a well attended Westminster Hall debate, and in the main chamber last week, a pilot was agreed that would test the support for including explanatory statements alongside amendments.

This is about the institution itself, and how well it allows MPs to represent their constituents and legislate wisely.

And perhaps it is only from within Parliament that you can appreciate the full horror of its arcane and self-interested processes.

Yet the public clearly have some sense of what is wrong.

The esteem in which MPs are held has never been lower.

The expenses scandal has confirmed people's worst fears about Parliament being detached from their day-to-day reality of finding work and paying bills.

As the Government's spending cuts comes into force, the financial cost to the tax-payer of time-wasting in Westminster takes on a new and more urgent significance.

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Just queuing up to vote, for example, accounts for around £30,000 a week in MPs' total salary costs.

In the last Parliament there were over twelve hundred votes.

Since it takes about fifteen minutes per vote, that means an MP with an eighty-five per cent voting record would have spent over 250 hours queuing to vote over the course of the Parliament.

To put this into context, six votes in the European Parliament would take Members a minute and a half. Here it would be an hour and a half.

That's not only a monumental waste of time.

It also means that fewer amendments are put to the vote in the first place, because there's not time to put more – and so once again, it leads to a loss in terms of democracy.

An electronic voting system could make far better use of MPs' time.

Handheld electronic devices would help speed up the voting process, and various security options could be used to make sure it was operated only by the Member.

It's hard to defend Parliamentary procedures that allow a Bill as important as that on Academies to be pushed through in a matter of days.



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Or that wastes hours trooping through the aye and no lobbies to vote.

And unlike other parliaments around the world, you cannot abstain; only vote yes or no, or not turn up at all.

That prevents MPs from registering that there are viable alternatives to full support or outright opposition, and is symptomatic of a Parliament based on two-party conflict.

This adversarial system impacts on everything from the membership of select committees, one of the most effect tools for parliamentary scrutiny, to the selection of amendments for debate.

The MP for Totnes, Sarah Wollaston, famously tells the story of how she was denied a place on the Health and Social Care Bill Committee, because she had, perhaps naively, admitted that she had a small number of concrete changes that she wished to advocate.

Instead she was asked to sit on the Committee for Double Taxation in Oman.

And when she quite reasonably pointed out that she knew very little about single taxation in the UK, let alone double taxation in Oman, she received a note from the Whips to say that her only duties were to turn up on time, say nothing, and vote with the government – hardly the

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most compelling job description for a member of a parliamentary committee.

Everything is decided in a mysterious, opaque fashion that seems designed to obstruct and confuse.

And much of the supposed conflict is in fact a cover for back-stairs deal-making.

Take the British deployment in Afghanistan.

Whatever your views about that conflict, it must be right that Parliament debate it properly.

Yet the Official Opposition got us into it, and the Government has kept us there, and neither want to have alternatives debated on the floor of the house.

So in the most recent debate, the business managers colluded to ensure an amendment calling for the troops to be brought home was simply not taken.

I've talked a lot tonight about the flaws in our political processes.

They can be frustrating, inefficient, they can waste time and energy.

They can be undemocratic and unaccountable.

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And they can also be completely inimical to any serious debate and decision making about one of the greatest threats we face today – the growing environmental crisis.

There is a very real risk that our system based on adversarial, binary opposition, on short-termism, will mean that we are unable to consider the impacts of policies not just in the next focus group, not just in the next month or year – but in the next 50 years and 500 years.

As Edmund Burke said over 200 years ago, “Society is a partnership not only between those now living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born.”

Rather more recently, the World Commission on Environment and Development, the Brundtland Commission, in 1987, observed:

“We act as we do because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote; they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions.”

But in spite of almost all governments adopting the Brundtland definition of sustainable development that explicitly recognizes the rights of future generations, we have no parliamentary way of really operationalising that commitment.

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That prevents long-termism and the needs of those as yet unborn being brought into the heart of UK democracy and policy processes.

Models from elsewhere exist: one legal study has identified 17 countries where “future generations” have been recognized constitutionally.

In Hungary, for example, they have a Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations (a Green Ombudsman) whose role is not just to investigate organizational and functional maladministration relating to the environment, but also to go much deeper into the policy process – the ombudsman is mandated to act as a policy advocate for sustainability issues across all relevant fields of legislation and public policy, including acting as source of specialist advice to Parliament, as well as being able to broaden the knowledge base through commissioning more research.

With the scrapping of important bodies like the Sustainable Development Commission, there’s perhaps a strong case for a Green Ombudsman here. Maybe our new Climate Change Committee offers a model to build on.

### What Needs To Be Protected

Of course, any survey of what is wrong with our systems and processes can give a misleading impression.

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I've focused a lot on what needs to be changed – but there are things that need to be preserved and strengthened as well.

I think our system of government has some very considerable strengths, such as the accountability of the executive to Parliament; a skilled and impartial civil service; and the principle of public service.

Unfortunately, none of these can be taken for granted. So I'd like to finish my remarks this evening by turning to what we should value and what needs to be protected.

### Civil Service

As an MP, my formal dealings with the civil service are limited. But I'm conscious of their importance.

There are a hundred or so MPs in government.

But there are over 5000 senior civil servants.

Their contribution in developing and implementing policy is clearly crucial, and the principle that they should remain impartial – not only between political parties, but acting without any favour to individuals, organizations or sections of society – is essential to our country.

Yet this principle is under direct attack.

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Under successive governments, starting with Margaret Thatcher, the civil service has been reformed and reshaped.

Instead of a career for life, civil servants have been encouraged to take jobs in the outside world, and departments have welcomed applications from the private sector.

The idea has been to refresh the civil service, to make it more open, competent and businesslike.

Yet the consequence of this is that more and more civil servants have divided loyalties.

Once, they would expect to spend their life in public administration, just as they might have chosen the law, or become a doctor.

Now a more typical career path is time in a political think tank, then working for KPMG, followed by a secondment to a department and then back into business.

Civil servants know that without job security, they need to build networks of contacts in the private sector, where they can move when the time is right.

So to whom do these modern civil servants owe their loyalty?

The Crown? Their department? Or to their former or future employers?

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The temptation to be helpful to former colleagues, or to take their insider's knowledge into business, must be high.

In recent months, I have been probing the subject of secondments to and from the civil service.

The results are chilling.

Many departments don't appear to have any idea who has come in from outside, or where some of their own staff have gone.

Yet what is clear is that business is by far the main source of secondments in both directions.

Now companies such as British Aerospace or KPMG don't lend their brightest and best to the civil service just for the fun of it.

Yes, there is some personal development on offer.

But the main prize is influence.

And even if you think this is appropriate, it cannot be right that this benefit is concentrated on just one section of society.

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Charities, public services, campaigning groups, local government – even small businesses - none of them have the same access to central government.

Consequently, Whitehall doesn't understand them as well as it could, or should.

And Whitehall is also left open to the accusation that decisions are unduly influenced by large corporations.

This is just one area where the reputation of our public administration for impartiality is being eaten away.

Political donations.

The role of think tanks in setting policy.

Dubious research funded by mysterious sources, seeking to undermine scientific evidence on health or climate.

Still we have no proper rules controlling the work of lobbyists.

And special advisers are once more under scrutiny.

The civil service, of course, cannot speak out on its own behalf.

If the unions raise the alarm, this is dismissed as special pleading.



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So I believe it's time that we built a wider coalition to highlight these dangers and restate the core principle that the civil service must be there to serve all parts of society equally.

## Public Service

The wider public service, too, is being undermined from above.

I spoke earlier about how Labour and the coalition parties often agreed on issues, leaving alternative views without any effective representation.

Public service is one of the most striking examples of this.

All three parties believe that the private sector should have a significant role in the delivery of public services, and that competition, financial incentives and the profit motive are the most effective spurs for greater efficiency.

I think they're wrong.

I think there are a lot of people in this country who believe in public service.

Who want to do a job that benefits others.

That puts something back into society.

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They do this despite the difficulties of providing those services with sufficient resources.

And despite the denigration of those who are ideologically opposed to public provision, or who see profits to be made if the public services are broken up.

The debates about supposed gold-plated pensions or the spurious contrast between a valuable private sector and a wastrel public sector – these haven't come about by accident.

It is a concerted programme, and one for which supporters of the public services have yet to find an answer.

The extent to which the debate has been hi-jacked can be gauged from the debate over the latest set of NHS reforms.

We saw under Labour that the combination of PFI, competition and financial incentives for GPs made the service less effective.

Spending rose faster than improvements in the service.

Yet the coalition has determined that more of the same is needed.

This, despite the overwhelming evidence that neither health professionals nor the public believe in these reforms.

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They don't want the profit motive transplanted into the NHS.

It just doesn't fit with the DNA of public service.

Yet still it is driven through.

Wrap Up

These are just two areas where the values and traditions that we have inherited are of inestimable value to our country, but are under threat.

And though at the core is a disdain for the public realm and for the values of public service, the attacks come in many forms.

For example, the more that vital services are provided by private companies, the more important it is for some of the rights enshrined in Freedom of Information legislation to be extended to utilities and other major businesses.

This is crucial to ensuring true accountability to Parliament and the public.

We've seen this even in the last few days, with rising concern about the pricing policies of the electricity and gas companies.

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This has a huge impact on people's lives, and yet we have no rights to the information that would show if they are ripping people off or, as they claim, trying to cope with dwindling fossil fuel reserves and rising wholesale energy prices.

We have also seen how Liam Fox chose to brush aside advice from his private secretary and his permanent secretary about his dealings with Adam Werritty.

He may have now resigned, but the alarming picture of ministers behaving with such arrogance towards the professionals who are there to advise, and who have a crucial role in our constitution, is one that must be fully investigated.

It is, I believe, a chance to stop the rot that has clearly set in under successive administrations.

This is yet another reason why the future of the civil service and the public services must be properly debated, and one where their core values must be protected and, in many cases, restored.

And I'm very grateful to the Institute for providing this opportunity to provoke some debate.