



Changing Politics For Good

A 100 Day Action Plan to save Britain's Democracy

Britain's democracy is at a turning point. Not in living memory has confidence in politicians, trust in the system, or faith in the government's capacity to change things been as low as it is today. The expenses scandal has exposed a culture of arrogance and secrecy that has long been at the heart of our democracy.

Now the true extent of the rot in the system is clear to people, there is huge and growing public demand for change. This has become a once in a generation chance to reform politics completely, putting power back into the hands of the people, where it belongs. The need for constitutional renewal is now recognised across the political spectrum.

Many of the proposals put forward, however, are full of caveats and caution, proposing committees to consider change rather than change itself. This approach would be a disaster, delaying in the face of an emergency and allowing the opportunity for change to seep away. So reform must be swift and decisive. It must address all the key issues of accountability and transparency because unless all the dead wood is cut out, the rot will continue.

This paper sets out an action plan to save Britain's democracy. Almost all the reforms needed can be achieved in the next 100 days, and we should not let the process go on longer than this. This is possible because most of the necessary legislation is already before Parliament – it is just currently being blocked by establishment figures. The remaining legislation can be drawn up quickly – there have been Private Members' Bills promoted by the Liberal Democrats and others in the past that can be recycled – and taken forward.

Of course, those who have a vested interest in the status quo will argue that things can't be done this quickly, secretly hoping that momentum will, indeed, dissipate. They are mistaken: the changes needed have been long discussed, and many even agreed in principle. There can be no more excuses or stalling. Those who seek to delay are barriers to reform: they want to ride out the storm with warm words without letting any change actually happen.

The upcoming 11 week summer recess would hand them a victory – potentially destroying the momentum for change. Therefore, Parliament should not break for the summer recess until the following steps are agreed and passed into law:

1. Commitment to accept Kelly expenses reform in full
2. Recall power for MPs suspended for misconduct
3. House of Lords reform

4. Party funding reform
5. Fixed term Parliaments
6. Enabling legislation for a referendum on AV+
7. Changes to House of Commons procedure to reduce executive power

Together, over the next 100 days, we could achieve nothing less than the total reinvention of British politics, underpinned by the fundamental principles of accountability, transparency and probity. These months would become a great moment in British political history, rather than a shabby footnote to a shameful month of scandal.

100 Day Action Plan

DAY 1: A resolution of both Houses to accept Sir Christopher Kelly's expenses review

WEEK 1: Clerks to draw up Members of Parliament (Recall) Bill

WEEK 2: Government to table Hayden Phillips amendments to Political Parties and Elections Bill currently before the House of Lords

WEEK 3: Parliament to pass Lord Tyler's Constitutional Renewal Bill currently before the House of Lords

WEEK 4: New Speaker to convene Party talks to agree changes to Commons procedure. Changes to be agreed by Day 100; implemented for the new Parliamentary Term.

WEEKS 4-5: Parliament to pass enabling legislation for a referendum on AV+

WEEK 6-7: Parliament to pass enabling legislation for an elected Senate

WEEKS 8-9: Parliament to pass Members of Parliament (Recall) Bill

WEEK 10: Commissioner to report on all MPs to Parliament; votes to be held on suspension

WEEK 11+: Petitions to begin in relevant constituencies if voters choose

DAY 100: Referendum to be held on new proportional election system

Detailed proposals

1. Commitment to accept Kelly expenses reform in full

The expenses scandal is at the heart of the collapse in public trust in politicians, and must be the first thing to be cleared up. By accepting Sir Christopher Kelly's recommendations "blind" – before we see them – MPs would demonstrate a clear commitment to act in the public interest rather than their own. Parliament cannot legally bind its own hands, but MPs who agreed to the Kelly review now would find it difficult to go back on their word come the autumn. We should therefore pass a resolution in both Houses of Parliament to abide by Sir Christopher Kelly's recommendations in full, without seeking to amend or challenge them.

DAY 1: A resolution of both Houses to accept Sir Christopher Kelly's expenses review

2. Recall power for MPs suspended for misconduct

People are rightly furious that there is nothing they can do to get rid of their MP even if they have committed the most egregious fraud on their expenses claims. We should create a power of recall so if an MP is recommended for suspension by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, 5% of constituents can petition to remove that MP from office, prompting a by-election. All of those against whom serious allegations have been made - claiming mortgage payments without having a mortgage, "flipped" their home for personal profit or avoided Capital Gains Tax - should be investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to this end.

WEEK 1: Clerks to draw up Members of Parliament (Recall) Bill. All MPs who have claimed mortgage payments without having a mortgage, "flipped" their home or avoided Capital Gains Tax to be referred for investigation to Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

WEEKS 8-9: Parliament to pass Members of Parliament (Recall) Bill

WEEK 10: Commissioner to report on all MPs to Parliament; votes to be held on suspension

WEEK 11+: Petitions to begin in relevant constituencies if voters choose

3. House of Lords reform

Agreement has already been reached - MPs have voted decisively for direct elections of all peers, and agreement largely reached about the powers of the upper chamber. This must now be implemented.

The new House should be called the Senate to detach it permanently from the peerage. Elections should be on a different basis from the Commons but the need to choose a mechanism should not be an excuse for delay. The Power Commission's recommendation that Senators be elected for three Parliamentary terms, with a third of the House elected at each General Election, should be adopted because it was decided by an independent, non-partisan and consultative process. Senators should represent a larger area than MPs: for simplicity, our suggested model is that this should be the top-up areas used in an AV+ voting system (see 6. below). A third of current peers could then be expelled at each of the next three elections, volunteers first, followed by those chosen at random but according to party balance.

WEEK 6-7: Parliament to pass enabling legislation for an elected Senate

4. Party funding reform

The relationship between money and politics is rotten and is hollowing out our whole political system. We need to remove the influence of big money from politics for good. While the Liberal Democrats want to go much further than proposed by the Hayden Phillips process, in the interests of swift action, we are willing to support the Hayden Phillips recommendations. The Conservatives pulled out of the negotiations but should either return to them or see the proposals pushed through regardless, with the addition of vital restrictions on spending in individual constituencies; on donors using dummy companies registered in Britain to channel money to political parties; and on donations from individuals who are either not resident or not domiciled in Britain for tax purposes.

Hayden Phillips' proposals, in brief, are: donations from a single individual or organisation in any given year should be capped at £50,000. Spending by political parties (including national, regional and local branches) should be capped at £100m across the electoral cycle. Trade union affiliations to the Labour Party should continue only to the extent that individual members give genuine annual consent to their subscriptions being used in that way and should otherwise be treated in the same way as other donations.

WEEK 2: Government to table Hayden Phillips amendments to Political Parties and Elections Bill currently before the House of Lords

5. Fixed term Parliaments

It is completely wrong for the government to be able to give themselves an electoral advantage by choosing the date of the election to suit them. Fixed term Parliaments are the norm across the democratic world and should be introduced in the UK. Now is not the time for consideration, but action. Paul Tyler's Constitutional Renewal Bill, currently before the House of Lords, would limit all further sessions of Parliament to four years, fixing the dates of all future general elections after the next. The bill will also enact government manifesto and ministerial commitments on Freedom of Information, the power of the Attorney General, civil service reform, parliamentary scrutiny of international treaties, and public protest rights, which should also be agreed as part of this reform programme.

WEEK 3+: Parliament to pass Constitutional Renewal Bill currently before the House of Lords

6. Enabling legislation for a referendum on AV+

There is growing consensus that a new electoral system is needed in the UK. The Liberal Democrats believe the best system would be multi-member constituencies elected by Single Transferable Vote, but it is unlikely that agreement could be reached on such a system in the timescale necessary.

Roy Jenkins' review of electoral systems in 1997 recommended the Alternative Vote + system; Labour committed in their 1997 manifesto to a referendum on this; and there are an increasing number of people, including cabinet members, supporting the move now. We therefore recommend that the Jenkins AV+ recommendation be put to the country immediately at the end of this 100 Day Reform Programme. It must not be put to the country by the government, but by Parliament as a whole; and must not be put on the day of the General Election, where the unpopularity of the government could damage the referendum.

If passed, the new electoral system should be introduced for the election after next, with the Boundary Commission charged with drawing up the new larger constituencies and top-up areas (for additional members and Senators) in time. The aim should be to reduce the total number of MPs by 150 and Peers by 300.

*WEEKS 4-5: Parliament to pass enabling legislation for a referendum on AV+
DAY 100: Referendum to be held on new proportional election system*

7. Changes to House of Commons procedure to reduce executive power

The election of a new Speaker on 22 June offers an opportunity for radical reform of the way debate and scrutiny is organised for the House of Commons. We recognise that changes within the House of Commons are only part of political reform: they alone will not renew democracy and must not be used as a smokescreen for leaving other issues untouched. However, the new Speaker will have a mandate for reform and should use that unprecedented influence to drive forward change immediately upon his/her election, with new rules in place for the new Parliamentary term that begins in October. This should address:

- Legislation: the Parliamentary timetable should be controlled by Parliament, not the government, as it is currently too easy for Ministers use the timetable to evade scrutiny of contentious or complicated legislation. Arrangements for post-legislative scrutiny should also be considered, along with greater use of “sunset clauses” to stop obsolete laws from causing problems.
- Spending: Parliament needs time to scrutinise the government’s spending programme, with the ability to amend proposals.
- Public appointments: Ministerial and high level public sector appointments should be subject to confirmation hearings in Parliament. Parliament should be able to vote Ministers and politically-appointed quango heads out of office with a super-majority of two-thirds.
- Backbench initiatives: Early Day Motions with substantial support must be given time for debate and votes and Private Members’ Bills given additional time, too. It should no longer be possible for ministers to ‘talk out’ private members’ bills.

*WEEK 4: New Speaker to convene Party talks to agree changes to Commons procedure.
Changes to be agreed by Day 100; implemented for the new Parliamentary Term.*