

# Political climate change

Britain's legislature needs a vigorous cleansing; but now is not the time to redesign government



OVER the past century, the British have lost a lot—their empire, their military might, their economic leadership and even their sense of superiority. But they still reckoned that they had one of the best parliaments in the world. The constitution

might be a mess, the executive insufficiently checked, but compared with America's Congress and most of the European systems, Westminster seemed relatively clean.

That is why the revelations of the past two weeks—that MPs have been picking taxpayers' pockets, pushing the rules to breaking point on second-home mortgage relief, massage chairs, moat-clearing and the like—have been such a shock. The public is apoplectic. The speaker of the House of Commons was obliged to resign on May 19th, the first time since 1695 that a holder of that office had been ejected (see page 31).

Such profound shifts in the political climate are rare. What to do about this one? A vast array of solutions are being rushed forward. Broadly, they fit into three categories. There is an electoral solution: the opposition Tories want a general election to let the people sweep the cursed crooks from office (and themselves into it). There is a range of constitutional reforms, from fewer MPs to proportional representation. And there is institutional spring cleaning—changing the allowances system, improving MPs' usefulness and getting rid of the most grievous offenders. This newspaper is not afraid of calling for elections or constitutional change, but in this particular situation the emphasis, especially now, should be on the last set of proposals. That is because this crisis—no matter how shameful the offences involved—is institutional, not constitutional.

## Going, going, Gordon...

Begin with the idea of an election. The prospect of a fresh start is certainly alluring. These are unsettled times, in Britain as elsewhere. Having been forced, teeth gritted, to support failed bankers in lavish retirement, taxpayers are rightly outraged by the discovery that MPs too have their noses in the trough. Although Britons usually take a dyspeptic view of their representatives, there is a different, bloodier mood now. Giving the people a say would in theory cleanse the system.

There may indeed soon be good reasons for forcing an election—especially if it becomes obvious, as it well might, that Gordon Brown's spindly government has lost the authority to govern the country. But the expenses crisis, if anything, weakens the argument for a contest now. If an election were called next week, Britain might well end up with a Parliament for the next five years that is defined entirely by its views on claiming for bath plugs, rather than on how to get the country out of the worst recession in 70 years.

The same yes-but-not-now logic applies to the calls for constitutional reform. Some elements in this crisis can indeed be traced back eventually to defects in Britain's system, notably the drift of power away from Parliament to the executive. But the heart of the matter was much smaller: a shoddy way of

dealing with expenses. You could re-engineer great swathes of Westminster—bring in an elected House of Lords, introduce a Bill of Rights, design open primaries for MPs, scrap the first-past-the-post electoral system—and it would not make a shred of difference if the people elected were left in charge of claiming their own expenses amid a "course-you-can-chum" culture. A pile of swimming-pool-cleaning receipts is not a good starting place for constitutional reform.

So focus on making a misused organisation work. Finding a new speaker is the first task. Michael Martin, the incumbent until June 21st, was inept, but it was his refusal to tackle—or even to air publicly—the laxness of the allowances system that did for him. His successor cannot be found among what Lord Rosebery, a prime minister in Queen Victoria's time, called "the mediocrities of the House". He or she will need heft to lead reform and to persuade the public to place its trust in a cleaned-up Commons. It is a mark of how bad the graft is now that some otherwise good candidates have been rendered ineligible by their own incontinence on expenses.

The second task is to deal with the most egregious envelope-pushers. Erring MPs cannot escape punishment by offering grovelling apologies and repaying the unjustified expenses they were caught claiming: that would be like letting off a shoplifter who volunteered to return the dress she swiped from Harrods. A few have been punished. Once the evidence is clear, all the rule-breakers should be chucked out of the parties, all the rule-benders dispatched from the front benches.

The third job is changing the way MPs' finances are regulated. An independent commission is beaver away to come up with ideas for this. All parties have agreed to interim reforms meanwhile, clamping down on what MPs can claim for. Mr Brown's main thrust is to replace Parliament's ancient system of self-governance with an external body that would set and police MPs' allowances. He is probably right in this: self-regulation is on the run in most walks of life, and recent experience of it in Parliament is dispiriting. But transparency will make much more difference than yet another quango. The reason MPs are likely to stay on the straight and narrow is the fact that their claims will henceforward be published online.

## The great accounting to come

Do these three things quickly and much of the sting will be drawn. That still leaves room to begin a broad review of the workings of Parliament and to tackle the constitutional issues.

One reason for Westminster's longer-run woes is that the job of an MP has become less appealing to capable independent minds. Ever more laws are in effect drafted in Brussels these days. A leaching of authority to the executive has left MPs too dependent for advancement on the goodwill of party higher-ups to hold the government to account. That could be corrected by giving more, not less, power to MPs—for instance by setting up permanent committees with long-serving members, more expert staff and power to compel evidence.

As for an election, one is due within a year. Better to save that great accounting for a time when voters care about something bigger than the dodgy expenses of some errant MPs. ■