

## UCL Research influences House of Commons Reform

One consequence of the recent MPs' expenses crisis was the establishment of a Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, and both the formation of this committee and its conclusions have been strongly influenced by research carried out by Dr Meg Russell of the Constitution Unit at UCL.

The committee was the brainchild of Dr Tony Wright MP, who wrote to the Prime Minister suggesting its establishment as an essential part of rebuilding public confidence in parliament. In his letter Dr Wright drew particular attention to a research report from the Constitution Unit analysing how backbench MPs could be given greater control over the running of the Commons and particularly over scheduling of business in the chamber. The report, *The House Rules? International Lessons for Enhancing the Autonomy of the House of Commons* (funded by the Nuffield Foundation) suggested that there should be a clear distinction between "government business" and "non-government business" in the Commons. Government,

which largely controls the Commons agenda, should relinquish control over scheduling non-government business to a committee of backbench MPs. The report also suggested that the House should vote on its business programme for the week ahead, rather than this being decided by government whips, and that chairs of select committees should be elected by the House as a whole.

Gordon Brown accepted Dr Wright's suggestion, and asked him to chair such a committee. It was established in July and asked to report by the end of the parliamentary session in November. Dr Russell was appointed as its specialist adviser and the resulting report, *Rebuilding the House*, echoes many of the recommendations drawn from her research. These include the establishment of a Backbench Business Committee for scheduling non-government business, such as general debates and debates on select committee reports (with this business allocated at least one day of time per week). The committee also supported giving the House power to vote on its weekly programme, as currently applies

in the Scottish Parliament, and to elect committee chairs. Commenting on the outcome Dr Russell said "it is immensely satisfying to have produced piece of research which has been so substantially taken up by parliamentarians, and which may shape the future House of Commons". Parliament has yet to vote on the committee's recommendations but if they are agreed, Dr Russell suggests, "the Commons will become a more internally democratic institution, and backbench MPs will have substantially more power".



Meg Russell

## Report on the Diversity Awareness Forum

The forum took place at Stewart House in Bloomsbury, being hosted by the School of Advanced Study of the University of London. The first session, chaired by Dr James Chiriyankandath (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London), began with Professor Vicky Randall (University of Essex) welcoming participants as the Chair of the Political Studies Association and of the Diversity Working Group. She briefly reviewed the background, noting how the 2007 International Benchmarking Review of political studies in the UK had identified the relative absence of ethnic minorities as a particular area of weakness (viz. in the 2009 Political Studies Association survey of the profession under one in twenty of the respondents identified themselves as belonging to ethnic minorities). It was in the light of this that the working group had been set up, with the intention to widen its remit in due course to cover other dimensions of diversity such as



Centre: Vicky Randall, Chair of the Political Studies Association and Jacqui Briggs, Association Executive Committee

gender and disability. After reviewing the activities of the group over the past year, and noting parallel efforts being made by the British International Studies Association (BISA), Professor Randall said that the main aim of the forum was

to share experiences and ideas about the way forward. The Working Group also hoped that it might help to facilitate networking and the emergence of some kind of concerted voice from outside the Association's governing bodies.