



PRESS NOTICE

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UCL Constitution Unit research is key influence on Commons reform proposals

The report of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, published today, was heavily influenced by research conducted by Dr Meg Russell of UCL's Constitution Unit.

The committee, chaired by Tony Wright MP, has made a number of key suggestions for how control of the House of Commons could be wrested from government whips, with backbench MPs given more power. Several of the central proposals were first made in a 2007 report written by Dr Russell and former Unit researcher Akash Paun. Indeed, the very creation of the committee was influenced by Dr Russell's report, which was specifically mentioned by Tony Wright in his letter to the Prime Minister proposing that the committee be established.

The central recommendation of Dr Russell's report, *The House Rules? International Lessons for Enhancing the Autonomy of the House of Commons*, was 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 Wright committee has backed this proposal, recommending the establishment of a Backbench Business Committee.

Another key committee recommendation, that the House of Commons should vote on its business programme for the week ahead, rather than this being decided by government whips, also features in Dr Russell's report and draws from experience in the Scottish Parliament.

Dr Russell was seconded from UCL for two years to act as specialist adviser to Robin Cook when he was Leader of the House of Commons, which sparked a research interest in how the Commons managed its business. This was explored through a major research project studying other parliaments, which resulted in the 2007 report.

In response to today's committee report Dr Russell said: "I am delighted that my research has proved so influential on this group of parliamentarians, and 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. It would be very satisfying to think that I had helped to bring that about."

Notes to editors

- The report of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, *Rebuilding the House*, was published on 24 November 2009. Paragraph 7 notes the influence of Dr Russell's report. The committee's website is http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/reform_committee.cfm
- *The House Rules? International Lessons for Enhancing the Autonomy of the House of Commons*, by Meg Russell and Akash Paun, was published by the Constitution Unit, University College London, in October 2007. The research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The report is available in full at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/publications/unit-publications/142.htm>

- Dr Meg Russell is Reader in British and Comparative Politics and Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit. She acted as a specialist adviser to the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, and in 2001-03 was a specialist adviser to Robin Cook as Leader of the House of Commons.
- The Constitution Unit is an independent and non-partisan research centre based at University College London (www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit). Contact via the Constitution Unit's press officer Brian Walker on 07802 176 347, williambrianwalker@gmail.com, or Vicki Spence on 020 7679 4977, v.spence@ucl.ac.uk.