



Ministry of
JUSTICE

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The Rt Hon Jack Straw MP
Lord Chancellor and
Secretary of State for Justice
102 Petty France
London SW1H 9AJ

T 020 3334 3720
F 020 3334 3669
E general.queries@justice.gsi.gov.uk

www.justice.gov.uk

The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

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**EDM 148 AND THE CITIZENS' CONVENTION (ACCOUNTABILITY AND ETHICS)
BILL**

Thank you for your letter of 24 November on behalf of a number of your constituents who have written in support of the Citizens' Convention (Accountability and Ethics) Bill and Early Day Motion 148.

As you know, this Bill proposed a convention be established of not less than 100 registered electors of the United Kingdom, chosen randomly by the Electoral Commission within the next 12 months. The purpose of the convention would be to consider and make recommendations regarding several issues:

- allowances and expenses payable to Members of Parliament;
- the system or systems of election to each House of Parliament;
- the means by which electors may hold to account Members of Parliament, including any mechanism for the recall or disqualification of such Members;
- the way in which business is conducted in both Houses of Parliament; and
- the funding of political parties.

I understand the attractions of such a convention. The Government is committed to developing new forms of engagement with the public and is keen to pioneer deliberative democracy in this country. That is why, for example, we are taking forward proposals for deliberative events that involve the British people on the key constitutional issue of rights and responsibilities.

However, the Government does not believe that this particular Bill is necessary. A number of measures to tackle these issues are already in hand. The Government reacted quickly to the allegations of improper expenses claims and taken a number of actions, including measures set out in the Parliamentary Standards Act, which gained Royal Assent on 21 July 2009.

The Act creates a new Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) to regulate the system of allowances and sets a framework for rules to deal with financial interests. The IPSA will be independent of Parliament and will have the power to set an allowances and expenses system without requiring Parliamentary approval. It will regulate and oversee Members' expense claims and oversee the new allowance system and it will ensure that accountability and transparency are placed at the heart of the new system. This is vital if we are to restore the public's trust in MPs, politics and Parliament.

On 24 January 2008, the Government published a Review of Voting Systems to contribute to the continuing debate on electoral reform and is interested in people's views about which voting system they favour. The Review can be accessed at:

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/voting-systems-review.htm>. The Review examines the experiences of the different voting systems introduced across the United Kingdom and considers other systems, including some in operation internationally. As the review makes clear, there are a variety of views about which electoral system is best – all have their advantages and disadvantages.

On 10 June, the Prime Minister made a statement to the House on Constitutional Renewal, in which he confirmed that we should only be prepared to propose change if there is a broad consensus in the country that it would strengthen our democracy and our politics by improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of both Government and Parliament; and by enhancing the level and quality of public representation and engagement.

The Prime Minister has also published a plan for Building Britain's Future which sets out his aims to make Britain a fairer, stronger and more prosperous society. This White Paper, issued on 29 June, restates the Government's commitment to a debate on electoral reform. It is available at: <http://www.hmg.gov.uk/buildingbritainsfuture.aspx>

Last year, the Government published its proposals for comprehensive reform of the House of Lords. It invited and received views and comments in areas where the proposals explored a number of options for reform, such as whether the reformed second chamber should be 80% or 100% elected, and what electoral system should be used. The Government has been considering both an 80% elected and 100% elected second chamber. This is because, when the House of Commons voted on the composition of the reformed second chamber, a majority of MPs voted for both these options.

The Government's main criterion for choosing the electoral system for the reformed second chamber is that it should encourage those from smaller political parties and independents to be elected, while allowing the prevailing political mood of the country to be reflected. There has now been a year of debate and discussion on the proposals in the Lords reform White Paper. You can find the full details of these proposals in the Government's White Paper *An Elected Second Chamber*. It is available at: www.justice.gov.uk/publications/elected-second-chamber.htm. In developing more detailed plans for reform, the Government has listened to and reflected on this debate.

The Government has taken steps to build greater confidence in our system of political party finance and expenditure to help build higher standards of public confidence in our politics. We have put in place reforms in the Political Parties and Elections (PPE) Act that further enhance the transparency and regulation of political funding. The Act strengthens the Electoral Commission so that it is better equipped to regulate party spending and political donations - both through giving it greater powers and reforming its governance so that it can benefit from Commissioners with recent experience of politics. The Act also puts in place new transparency requirements for donations from unincorporated associations and new controls on candidate spending.

We will also continue to look for suitable ways of developing deliberative democracy.

The example email enclosed with your letter also mentions recall. In his speech to the Labour Party Conference, the Prime Minister announced that the Government would give constituents the right to recall their Member of Parliament where there is proven financial corruption by an MP but Parliament fails to act. The Government intends that a recall mechanism of this type will be available in the new Parliament and will therefore set out detailed proposals in due course

Yours,
Jack

JACK STRAW