



How strong is the case for having fewer MPs?

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1. Introduction

A variety of proposals to reduce the number of MPs have been made since the 1980s, principally by backbench Conservative Parliamentarians.¹ Since 2000, the most vocal advocate of a smaller House of Commons has been Andrew Tyrie MP. In 2004, Tyrie suggested a 20 per cent reduction in the number of MPs,² and in 2006 he argued that even a more modest 10 per cent reduction would save £10-15 million per annum.³

However, it is only since the MPs' expenses crisis in 2009 that the size of the House of Commons has become central to debates about political and constitutional reform. In his speech on 'Fixing Broken Politics' made on 26 May 2009, David Cameron made the case for reducing the number of MPs on two key grounds – the House of Commons is too large by international standards, and the cost of 650 MPs is unjustifiable:

Today, we've got far too many MPs in Westminster. More people sit in the House of Commons than in any other comparable elected chamber in the world. This is neither cost-effective nor politically effective: just more people finding more interfering ways to spend more of your money. I think we can do a better job with fewer MPs: we can, to coin a phrase, deliver more for less - David Cameron, 26 May 2009.

These justifications formed the basis for the Conservatives' manifesto commitment to reduce the size of the Commons by 10 per cent (i.e. to 585 MPs). They have since become the rationale for the coalition's policy of reducing to 600 MPs, as contained

¹ These proposals have taken the form of a variety of Bill Amendments and Private Member's Bills tabled by, among others, Robert Rhodes James MP, Peter Emery MP and Lord Baker. For details, see: I. White and O. Gay (2010) *Reducing the size of the House of Commons*, Standard Note SN/PC/05570, House of Commons Library.

² A. Tyrie (2004) *Pruning the Politicians: The case for a smaller House of Commons*, Conservative Mainstream.

³ A. Tyrie (2006) *The Conservative Party's proposals for the funding of political parties*.

in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill.⁴ In his statement on political and constitutional reform made to the House of Commons on 5 July 2010, Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister argued:

Reducing the number of MPs allows us to bring our oversized House of Commons into line with legislatures across the world. The House of Commons is the largest directly elected chamber in the European Union, and it's half as big again as the US House of Representatives.

It was never intended that the overall size of the House should keep rising, yet that is precisely the effect of the current legislation – the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986. Capping the number of MPs corrects that, and it saves money too. 50 fewer MPs saves £12m a year on pay, pensions and allowances alone.

In this short paper, we pose three important questions in relation to the government's own rationale for reducing the number of MPs. First, is the House of Commons really 'too big'? Second, is the number of MPs really growing, and without justification? Third, will reducing the number of MPs really save money?

2. Is the House of Commons really 'too big'?

The suggestion that the British House of Commons is larger than any comparable legislature among established democracies is not inaccurate. As table 1 shows, none of the most populous OECD countries had more members in its principal (or 'representative') parliamentary chamber in the early 2000s, although Italy with 630 came relatively close. Taking population into account, the UK had the lowest population per member of the representative chamber (91,500), but was by no means radically different to Italy (92,200), France (104,700) or Canada (105,500). The contrasts are far more dramatic if the total number of Parliamentarians is considered: there were 1259 UK Parliamentarians in the mid-2000s, with no other large OECD democracy coming close to this figure. It is therefore the substantial membership of the House of Lords (currently 750) which contributes most to making the British appear 'over-represented' at a Parliamentary level.

Moreover, most comparisons with other countries with smaller lower houses and larger population fail to consider other tiers of representation, particularly in large countries with federal systems of government or substantial devolution of powers to elected local authorities. Germany and the US, for instance, have federal and state

⁴ The Liberal Democrat manifesto committed the party to reducing the House of Commons to 500 MPs, but only as a by-product of replacing first-past-the-post with the single transferable vote.

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tiers of government. Elections to Germany's 16 powerful regional (Land) Parliaments return almost 2,000 additional representatives. In the United States, there are 50 states and (as of 2007) a total of 89,527 elected governments including local authorities and single-function districts. In 1992 there were 513,000 elected officials in the United States, or one per 485 people.⁵ Achieving a similar ratio of elected politicians to people in Britain would mean having around 125,000 elected officials rather than the current total of around 21,000.

Table 1: Legislative representation per population in select OECD countries with populations of 20 million and above, early 2000s

Country	Total No. Parliamentarians	Total No. elected to representative chamber	Population (millions)	Population per Parliamentarian (000s)	Population per member of the representative chamber
Australia	226	150	19.9	88.1	132.7
Canada	413	308	32.5	78.7	105.5
France	923	577	60.4	65.4	104.7
Germany	672	603	82.4	122.6	136.7
Italy	945	630	58.1	61.5	92.2
Japan	722	480	127.3	176.3	265.2
Mexico	628	500	105.0	167.2	210.0
Spain	609	259	40.2	66.0	155.2
UK	1259	659	60.3	47.9	91.5
USA	535	435	293.0	547.7	673.6

Source: Adapted from R. Dahl (2006) *On Political Equality*, Yale University Press, p.62

⁵ United States *Census of Governments*, 2007 and 1992.
http://www.census.gov/prod/2/gov/gc/gc92_1_2.pdf
<http://www.census.gov/govs/cog/GovOrgTab03ss.html> as accessed 10 October 2010.

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It should also be noted that the legislature in some countries, including the USA and France, does not supply the ministerial bench. In the UK, by contrast, around 100 MPs are also executive members of the government. As Professor Anthony King has highlighted, a smaller House of Commons will therefore reduce the size of the 'gene pool' from which the executive can be drawn and 'reduce at a stroke the number of backbench and opposition MPs available to scrutinise legislation'.⁶

It is even clearer that the British are not over-represented when one examines local government. Local authorities are, by international comparison, very large units and the ratio of people to elected local councillors is much larger than the international average. The number of local councils and councillors has also been on a steady downward trend with each reorganisation, including the recent creation of large county unitary authorities. France is at the upper end of the spectrum for similar sized countries with 36,000 local authorities, but Germany has 14,000 municipalities. By contrast, there are 433 local authorities in the UK.

Table 2: Population per elected councillor in Western Europe, early 2000s

Country	Population per councillor
France	116
Germany	250
Italy	397
Norway	515
Spain	597
Sweden	667
Belgium	783
Denmark	1084
Portugal	1125
UK	2605

Source: D. Beetham et al (2002) *Democracy Under Blair: A Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom*, Politico's, p. 174.

⁶ A. King (2010) 'A cutback in MPs will make Commons even more feeble', *The Observer*, 14 November 2010.

Table 2 shows that, if we consider elected representatives per population at a local level, UK voters appear to be dramatically 'under-represented' in comparison with their counterparts in other European countries. In the early 2000s, the average population represented by an elected councillor in the UK was around 2600, compared to just 397 in Italy, 250 in Germany and 116 in France.

The evidence that political representation in the UK (and particularly in England) is skewed towards the national level has barely featured in current debates about reducing the number of MPs. However, before 2010, the Liberal Democrats had a rationale for reducing the size of the House of Commons rooted in the restructuring of political representation at all levels. The party's policy was for a thorough overhaul of the UK state and the introduction of a federal form of government, which would involve many decisions being devolved to existing institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the establishment of a regional tier of government in England.

With new and strengthened representative bodies at the sub-national level implementing considerable areas of policy, there would indeed be less for the UK government to do and therefore less casework and less scrutiny work for Westminster MPs. However, in the absence of UK-wide measures to devolve and decentralise power to democratically elected bodies, the pressure on political representation at the centre will show an inevitable tendency to grow – as we highlight in the next section.

3. Is the number of MPs growing without justification?

There has been an overall growth in the size of the House of Commons over the last six decades. As table 3 illustrates, the number of MPs has grown from 625 in 1950 to the current figure of 650. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 has had the effect of causing the number of MPs to keep rising; the House of Commons has been stable at around 650 MPs since the 1983 General Election.

While the size of the House of Commons has increased slightly since the immediate post-war decades, there are at least three grounds on which this could be seen as justifiable. First, the UK electorate and population have grown in this period (there are 10 million more UK voters today than there were in 1950). Second, recent decades have seen increasing casework demands put upon MPs. Third, the development of the select committee system since the late 1970s has placed greater demands on MPs via scrutiny and committee work. Taken together, these mean that the 650 MPs of 2010 are doing much more work than their 650 counterparts in 1983 or the 670 a century ago.

Table 3: Seats in the House of Commons, 1974-2010, by year(s) of election

Period	Number of seats
1950-1955	625
1955-1974 (Feb)	630
1974 (Oct) -1983	635
1983-1987	650
1992	651
1997-2001	659
2005	646
2010	650

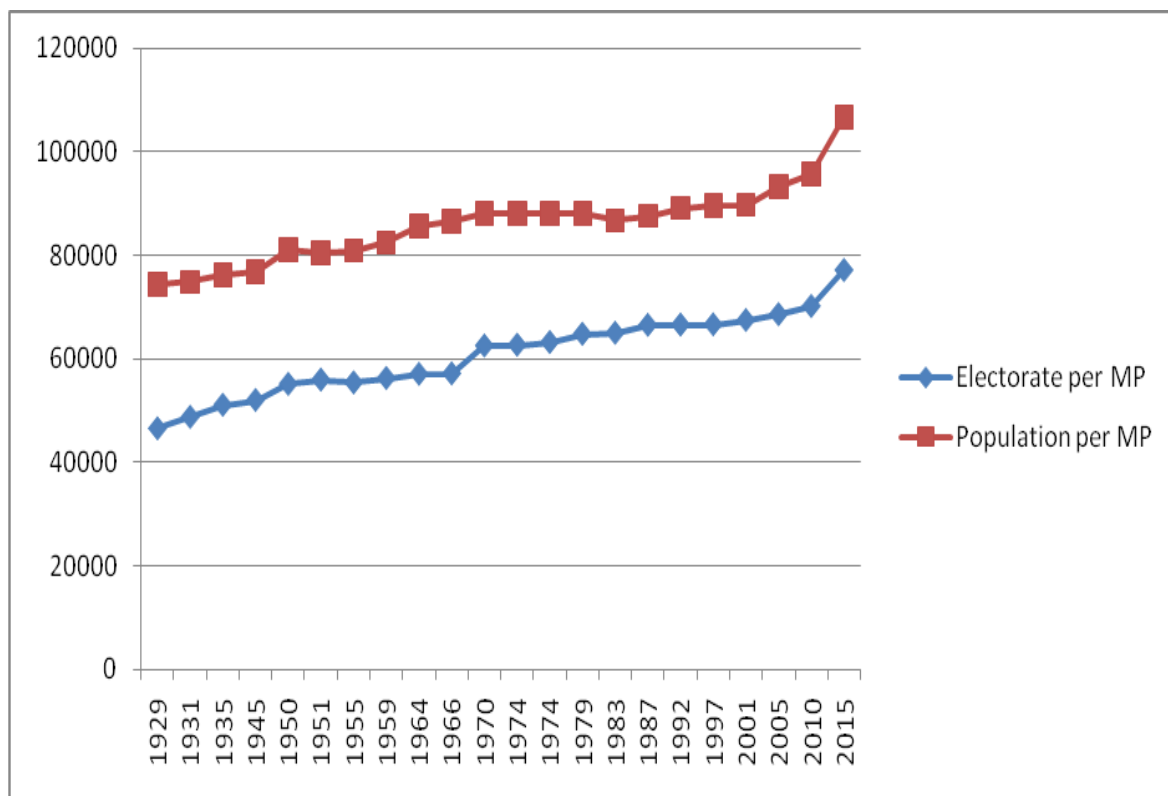
Source: C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts*, Total Politics, 2009, p.127.

i. More people to represent

The average constituency electorate has risen from 55,000 in 1950 to 70,000 now, and population has also increased steeply; there has been an upward trend ever since a universal adult franchise was introduced with effect from 1929. The rise in population per MP has mostly been gradual, with the sharp projected jump up in 2015 being unprecedented (the more modest up-tick in registered electors per MP in 1970 reflects the lowering of the voting age to 18).

It is also worth noting that the two largest reductions in the number of MPs during the twentieth century were associated with significant changes in the franchise. The removal of 89 Irish seats in 1922 was associated with a concomitant fall in the size of the UK electorate. Likewise, the abolition of the 12 university seats in 1950 was associated with the ending of the dual franchise available to university graduates.

Figure 1: Number of people and electors per MP, 1929-2015



Sources: Rallings and Thrasher, 2009; Office for National Statistics.

Note: 2015 figures based on 600 MPs and ONS population projections.

ii. Casework demands are increasing

It is sometimes argued that MPs do too much casework. This may well be true, but a high level of constituency casework service has become increasingly expected by the electorate and MPs have generally responded by devoting a growing proportion of their time to it.

There are also electoral incentives for MPs to provide a high level of constituency service; constituency-oriented MPs have often achieved exceptional election results (in 2005 and 2010 note the performance of Gisela Stuart, Grant Shapps and Tim Farron). It is possible, though by no means certain, that a reduced caseload burden might enable MPs to be a more effective legislators, ministers or committee members. However, without putting alternative provisions in place, it would be difficult to demand that MPs should downgrade this aspect of their work, or suggest that their electoral opponents should refrain from capitalising on perceived neglect.

It very difficult to offer a satisfactory objective measure of casework load, but there can be no argument against the general observation that the demand has grown

massively over the last 40 years. An MP in the 1950s or 1960s might have required less than a few hours each week to respond to the handful of letters she received from constituents.⁷ By contrast, a newly-elected MP told a Hansard Society meeting at a party conference in Autumn 2010 that she had received over 20,000 emails to her parliamentary address between May and September 2010.

The trend seems to have become particularly obvious since the 1990s, with the development of a more professional culture of representation and the ease of access for constituents to MPs thanks to email and other communications developments. Rising office costs allowances have helped MPs to cope, but there is a rising tide of communications from constituents, and rising expectations among electors about what they can expect to hear from their MP in return. The House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation reported in 2007 that:

Prioritising constituency work over other parliamentary work is nothing new. Professor Rush and Dr Giddings found similar patterns in 1994, 1997 and 1999. Members regard themselves primarily as constituency representatives and spend more time on constituency work than any other part of their job. The problem is constituency demands are ever increasing. **To give one illustration, in the 1950s and 1960s Members received on average twelve to fifteen letters per week. Today the average is over 300 per week; and then there are the e-mails, faxes and telephone calls.**

Martin Salter, Member for Reading West, said that today Members were faced with a 'tidal wave' of constituency work. Sir Patrick Cormack, Member for South Staffordshire, felt the balance of the back bench Member's life has been tilted too far towards the constituency role, and away from Westminster duties. Professor Philip Cowley, University of Nottingham, said, 'There must now be a real concern that MPs are so focussed on the parochial they have no time for the national, let alone the international, picture'. He thought the problem with constituency work was out of control and getting worse. Public expectations have changed and the level of work from constituents is unlikely to diminish. But we are concerned that the greater pressure that Members face from constituency work has the potential to divert attention away from other important aspects of their work. The House is likely to suffer unless we can find ways of bringing the attention of Members and the public back to the work of the Chamber. However, the fact

⁷ S. Wilks-Heeg and S. Clayton (2006) *Whose Town is it Anyway? The State of Local Democracy in Two Northern Towns*, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, pp.92-3.

that constituency work and involvement have dramatically increased cannot be denied.⁸

An eloquent description of the crushing casework demands of an inner London MP was written by Greg Hands, then Conservative MP for Hammersmith & Fulham, in December 2007:

Incredibly, I have at present between 700 and 800 unresolved immigration cases – that’s out of a total constituency of just over 80,000 electors. This is around 35% of my casework... We have in this country literally hundreds of thousands of people in limbo, many unable to work or otherwise contribute, but living off the state in one way or another, partly or fully. For inner city, especially inner London MPs, immigration casework is such a large part of the job that some MPs even have a specific full-time immigration caseworker, paid for out of their taxpayer-funded staffing allowances.⁹

If a third of an inner London MP’s casework is immigration-based, then compared to an MP with very few such cases, an inner-city MP is likely to be doing half as much casework again, or else rationing the attention given to other constituents. This is not satisfactory in terms of equality of representation. If constituency services and two-way communication with constituents is important – and although it might be regretted that casework demands have grown so exponentially, there is no solution on offer – this heightens the importance of equal sized constituencies.

However, this logic would point to equality of *population* being the key criterion, rather than registered electorate, as an MP represents the whole population. It might even be argued that MPs with particularly difficult constituencies that produce high casework loads and serious social problems (particularly those in inner London) deserve to have smaller constituencies than those in areas with fewer problems – or at least a larger office costs allowance to deal with the demands made upon them. However, with or without such provisions, there would still be a danger that the proposed cut in the number of MPs, and the introduction of uncertainty by the threat of boundary changes every parliament, will make MPs even more focused on the ‘parochial’ than they are already.

iii. Scrutiny of the executive is more important than ever

The role of MPs in scrutinising the executive has become more complex and time-consuming over the years. Departmental Select Committees were introduced in 1979 and their development since then, including the election of Chairs and

⁸ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmmodern/337/33706.htm#a3> as accessed 10 October 2010. Emphasis added.

⁹ From <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2007/12/greg-hands-mp-h.html> as accessed 10 October 2010.

members since 2010, has added to their authority and independence. Select committees involve structured work and the development of expertise by MPs, which was not demanded at all in pre-1979 parliaments, other than a few exceptions such as the Public Accounts and Nationalised Industries Committees.

The committee structure established following the 2010 election has 240 places on departmental select committees, and another 227 on other select committees which perform cross-departmental functions (like Public Accounts), work jointly with the Lords, and administer the Commons itself. Of course, some MPs sit on more than one committee (and some sit on none). The growth in expertise and scrutiny in the Commons, and the more regulated environment on standards and administration, are welcome developments and enable parliament to better conduct its functions, but they do mean that Parliament needs adequate numbers of MPs to function properly. The 467 committee places in this parliament, compared to fewer than 70 in pre-1979 parliaments, indicate that the organisation of work in the Commons has changed fundamentally.

4. Will reducing the number of MPs save money?

It is commonly assumed that reducing the number of MPs will result in savings, due to reduced salary, pension and office costs. A 10 per cent cut, reducing the House to 585 MPs, was estimated by the Conservative Party to save £15.5m, implying that the decision to reduce to 600 MPs should result in a proportional saving of £11.9m.¹⁰

However, such figures are essentially a matter of conjecture. They are largely based on a calculation of the 'average cost' of an MP. As such, estimates of cost-savings take insufficient account of the fact that running parliament involves considerable fixed costs (buildings, administrative support and staff) which cannot readily be cut in proportion to the number of MPs. Meanwhile, the casework load of MP will have to be shared out among a smaller number of MPs - who will have a strong case to increase their office costs allowances.

Since the reduction in the size of the Commons has also been tied to provision to equalise constituency electorates, the costs of organising frequent boundary reviews also have to be taken into account. The review prior to the 2010 election cost £13.6m.¹¹ The forthcoming review will probably cost less because the new rules propose to abolish the right to a public inquiry when there are local objections.

¹⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1211853/Axeman-Cameron-slash-Ministers-pay-reduce-number-MPs-cut-perks--target-public-spending.html>

¹¹ House of Commons Hansard, written answer 26 July 2010
<http://services.parliament.uk/hansard/Commons/bydate/20100726/writtenanswers/part014.html>

Calculations about cost savings also neglect the deterioration in quality of service – it is not a ‘free’ cut because representation of constituents is more thinly spread and the work of scrutinising the executive and proposed legislation is also shared among fewer MPs (and effective scrutiny can itself save money).

5. Conclusion

Complaints that there are too many politicians strike an easy populist chord, and all the more so in the wake of the MPs’ expenses crisis and deep public expenditure cuts. Yet, despite claims to the contrary, there has been no growth in the number of MPs since the early 1980s. Moreover, it is equally clear that the average MP now does more work, for more people, than ever before. Even the ‘common sense’ suggestion that having fewer MPs will save money is based on questionable assumptions.

The proposition that democracy works better with fewer elected representatives is also highly debatable. Meaningful international comparisons, which take account of sub-national tiers of elected government, indicate that Britain does not have an excess of elected politicians. Indeed, given obvious differences between political systems, and in the roles of elected representatives, the argument that we should seek approximate parity with the German Bundestag or the French National Assembly simply does not hold water.

The case for reducing the number of MPs has not been convincingly made; it has been assumed and asserted. But even if the current case for having fewer MPs were well founded, it is by no means obvious why there should be 600 as opposed to 500, 550 or virtually any other number above 300. If a decision about the number of MPs is to be anything other than an arbitrary imposition, the only rational means of proceeding is to assess the nature of constituency representation, and the functional needs of Parliament, before reaching conclusions about what the appropriate number of MPs might be. Instead, we are in danger of doing little more than fixing a number and leaving Parliament to cope as best it can.