



## Parliament 2.0: How can the internet revolutionise British democracy?

Monday 21st July, 6.00pm – 8.00pm in the Macmillan Room, Portcullis House

### Event report

**Stephen Mosley MP**, Co-Chair, PICTFOR, introduced **John Bercow MP**, The Speaker of the House of Commons and President of PICTFOR who, whilst admitting to being *“not the most agile user of technology”*, presented a bold vision for how technology might enhance democracy in the UK.

The Speaker confirmed that the Digital Democracy Commission (DDC) would publish its recommendations to Parliament in January 2015 following an extensive consultation exercise using new technologies to ensure that the views of a wide and diverse demographic were heard. This included a Skype call with a Brazilian parliamentarian, dialogue via social media platforms and “crowd sourcing” of evidence in video format as well as dozens of round tables with young people up and down Britain. The Speaker was proud of the 1300 Twitter followers the DDC had amassed since March and was keen to make *“the methods part of the message”*.

The question to which Bercow was keen to find the answer was *“how do we do our jobs as Parliamentarians better?”* *“Will the ancient walls of Parliament come tumbling down if we introduce digital democracy?”* he asked the audience, made up of PICTFOR members who included Parliamentarians, technology companies, academics and civil society. Bercow was acutely aware that digital tools would help to encourage participation but they would not be able to fix endemic problems such as a mistrust of politics and declining voter turnout at elections. He was keen for the DDC to look at e-voting in Parliament to improve efficiency but was mindful of the potential to damage the nature of debate in the Chamber. The Speaker talked of the 2010 new intake of MPs, 227 of them, who with their independent-minded assertiveness were harbingers of changes that were needed to make Parliament more relevant and accessible to UK citizens. He reflected on his own relationship with Government whips in the past quipping that he had a relationship of trust and understanding with them: *“I didn’t trust them, and they didn’t understand me!”*

The Speaker answered a range of questions from the audience and in doing so showed that he would welcome the trialling of digital tools – *“You need to respect the past but not live in it”* he concluded.

In the panel debate that followed, PICTFOR members received an introduction to Estonia’s model of digital democracy. A system, we were told, founded on authentication and authorisation of people in the digital environment via unique, mandatory digital signatures. **Jaan Priisalu**, Director General of the Estonian Information System Authority (ISA) highlighted the enhanced participation opportunities afforded to Estonian citizens by digital democracy and painted a picture of a small but digitally savvy and engaged population. It was revealed that active e-ID card users (approximately 92% of the population), each used their digital signatures around 40 times per year, highlighting the extent of citizen/state interaction taking place online.

As well as interacting with Government services online, Estonian citizens can access up to date and easily navigable online databases of both draft legislation and legal acts and are able to directly submit ideas, comments, and proposals to the Government. Mr Priisalu described Estonia’s digital legislative procedure and drew particular attention to the ‘EIS’, a public directory of draft legal acts (national and EU), and the ‘ESTLEX’, a database of all valid legal acts in Estonia. It was stressed that



the capacity to directly comment on draft legislation online ensured that Estonian citizens could be actively involved in state issues.

The ISA Director General went on to examine the future opportunities of, and threats to, a thriving digital democracy and identified interoperability, sharing and usability as critical success factors in addition to the more widely recognised requirements for security and transparency.

Following Mr Priisalu's presentation, Stephen Mosley MP invited **Katie Ghose**, CEO of the Electoral Reform Society, to share her opening remarks. She welcomed greater efforts to use technology to foster more citizen participation in politics but expressed her concerns over relying too heavily on technology to deliver fundamental improvements to the quality of British democracy.

Ms Ghose made clear her view that voter turnout was one of the most important metrics of a healthy democracy and despite excitement from many regarding the potential of electronic voting, it was revealed that there was no proof that 'e-voting' actually boosts turnout. Having examined the social and economic aspects of political participation, she contrasted engagement levels of the poorest in society with those of the better off and called for a more targeted use of technology to close that gap. She added that whilst the internet's potential to support the shift to a more representative political system was to be applauded; digital democracy should not be considered an end in itself. Of prime importance for Ms Ghose was to use technology as one of a range of tools to tackle the underlying causes of dwindling engagement in order to improve both electoral turnout and the quality of participation.

*"The public love democracy, but hate politics"* began **Dr Ruth Fox**, Director of the Hansard Society, referring to the unfortunate situation experienced by some in which their desire to engage democratically is diminished by their intense distaste of politics. Dr Fox articulated a vision of a digital democracy based on accountability and transparency but highlighted her concerns over the lack of leadership on parliamentary reform. Dr Fox considered the internet's potential to foster elements of direct democracy and outlined ways in which it could tangibly improve our current representative system, namely through voter education and better use of referendums. Following an explanation of the unavoidably complex nature of many policy issues and subsequent legislation she expressed hope that technology could be used to increase public knowledge levels and thus improve the quality of British democracy.

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The Digital Democracy Commission began its work in January 2014 and plans to publish a report in early 2015 to coincide with Parliament's 750th birthday.

The Commission is keen to listen to and talk with a wide range of people from across the UK. The Speaker, the Rt Hon John Bercow MP, welcomes submissions in any format, including blog post, video, tweet and forum post.

The Commission is currently seeking views on its representation theme. The deadline for responses is 31 July: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/speakers-commission-on-digital-democracy/representation/call-for-evidence/> (click on "Have your say on representation here" to access our online consultation form). For more information:

**Website:** [www.parliament.uk/digitaldemocracy](http://www.parliament.uk/digitaldemocracy)

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