



Parliamentary Briefing: Westminster Hall debate, 25 January 2017 The Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster

Summary

- The Palace of Westminster, an iconic global symbol of democracy, is at risk of a catastrophic infrastructure failure. While successive governments and parliaments have delayed necessary repairs, doing nothing is no longer an option.
- This week marks 20 weeks since the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster reported, and stated “it is essential that the R&R Programme now proceeds to its next stages without delay”. The Leader of the House has not yet scheduled a debate in government time on the Committee’s report, and its recommendation for a vote on the establishment of a Delivery Authority to draw up a full business case. This delay leaves the building, and our heritage, at risk.
- There are alternative proposals for the Commons to sit in the Lords Chamber, and the Lords to move into the Royal Gallery. All available evidence is that this approach will be at substantially higher cost to the taxpayer; would place Members and staff at considerable risk; and may not even be feasible, given the work required on the mechanical and electrical infrastructure that runs underneath the Palace as a whole.
- Although criticism from the media and sections of the public is inevitable, the Restoration and Renewal programme should be embraced and promoted as a rare opportunity to ‘design *for* democracy’ in a manner that blends continuity and change. Framed in this manner the Restoration and Renewal programme can be defined as part of a new ‘politics of optimism’ that seeks to close the gap that appears to have emerged between the governors and the governed. As part of this approach it is vital that a public conversation is launched that reaches far beyond London and the south east of England; based upon a firm and independent evidence base, and that injects fresh ideas into the design process.
- There is never a good time to spend large amounts of money on political institutions but the Restoration and Renewal programme is not about *just* politics – it is about democratic politics. Bernard Crick argued in *In Defence of Politics* (1952) about the importance of democracy (and therefore the institutions that support it) having a value almost beyond any price. The costs of Restoration and Renewal should be seen as an investment in democracy and one that will, especially if the public are embedded into the process, yield a significant return for future generations.

Why is the Restoration and Renewal (R&R) programme necessary?

- The [Joint Committee’s report](#) is thorough and well-considered. As the report notes, many Members were extremely sceptical of the need for the R&R programme when the inquiry started. The Committee found however that the “weight of opinion provided to us by experts has made it impossible to ignore the fact that the Palace of Westminster does now need a significant renovation programme, and that the works are becoming increasingly urgent”.
- The vast majority of the identified capital expenditure is to be spent on refurbishing essential services such as water, heating, electricity, and sanitation, in addition to removing asbestos from the building. The mechanical and electrical (M&E) infrastructure is dangerously antiquated: the [2015 Independent Options Appraisal](#) concluded that ‘the risk of catastrophic failure is increasing... a major failing of the existing service infrastructure is inevitable’.
- In addition to this real and urgent risk, the Palace is failing to meet the needs of many people who use it, whether on a daily or occasional basis. The status quo is not sustainable: public access, signage and facilities—most notably for people with disabilities—is unacceptably poor.
- More broadly, although the building is admired and loved by much of the public, some people feel disconnected from the Palace of Westminster, and consequently Parliament itself, and not welcome. A sense of ‘them’ and ‘us’ creates an artificial divide that can have far-reaching consequences if not challenged by a clear responsiveness capacity. At present levels of democratic inequality and disengagement from traditional forms of political expression seem to be growing.

Decant

- The Joint Committee considered three options for how the essential work should be delivered: (1) through a rolling programme of work while Parliament continued to operate; (2) a partial decant of each House or (3) a full decant.
- The [Institution of Civil Engineers](#) cautioned that the risks of a rolling programme may so significant that they could not be managed or mitigated. The Joint Committee concluded that the disruption could become ‘intolerable’ and would last into the 2050s or 2060s.
- The partial decant option has gained the support of some Members who do not wish to leave the Palace for a temporary period. The Joint Committee concluded, however, that it could ‘combine the worst of all options’; as each House would be operating alongside a major building site for over a decade: not only disrupting the work of Parliament, but increasing

security and health and safety risks. The [Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers](#) warned that ‘It is scarcely imaginable that Parliament would contemplate a course of action which risked exposing anyone working within the estate to asbestos’. The partial decant would also require a new network of mechanical and electrical plant to be constructed prior to the start of any building work, in order to serve the remaining House. The complexity of this option would also make it more expensive than the full decant. It is worth noting that in November 2016, a sitting of the House of Lords had to be suspended due to the noise of stoneblasting work being carried out while the Commons was in recess. The work had to be stopped so business could proceed.

- The longer programme times required by the rolling programme or partial decant means that there is an even greater risk of catastrophic failure of the existing M&E infrastructure before the programme is complete, which could require a full move out of the Palace in any event.
- While it is understandable that Members may not wish to leave the Palace temporarily, they have a duty to the taxpayer to choose the delivery option that offers the greatest level of feasibility and value for money.

A new building?

- As the Joint Committee’s report notes, the idea of constructing a new, permanent parliamentary building away from the Palace of Westminster was ruled out by the House of Commons Commission in 2012. The [2012 Pre-Feasibility Report](#) had concluded that the cost of such a new building would be substantial, and noted that the cost of maintaining the historic Palace would still fall to the Treasury. While there has been some press comment calling for both Houses to be moved away from London permanently, we do not view this as viable. Separating parliament from government geographically would reduce ministerial accountability, reducing the relevance of Parliament and making it harder for Members to hold the Government to account.

A Restored and Renewed parliament

- At the heart of the Restoration and Renewal programme is the ambition to deliver a parliament that is ‘fit for the twenty-first century’. But exactly what a ‘fit for purpose’ twenty-first century parliament should look like has not, as yet, been discussed or decided. It would probably not look like a historic Grade 1 listed Royal Palace that is also a World Heritage Site and that dates back to the eleventh century. The need to deliver a parliament that is fit for the twenty-first century *within* the fabric of the Palace of Westminster may therefore create tension between heritage considerations and democratic aspirations.
- ‘Muddling through’ in terms of making *ad hoc*, unprincipled adaptations to the building is unlikely to satisfy anyone. Although not very British in terms of historical precedent, the Restoration and Renewal programme demands a focus on strategic and coherent constitutional design in order to minimise financial risk and maximise successful completion. A focus on embedding the physical footprint of the building with a rejuvenated digital footprint is one way of responding to competing pressures. Adopting an emphasis on flexibility in terms of seating or room use, for example, would also create new and fresh opportunities.
- The ‘politics of pessimism’ currently hangs over British politics like an energy-sapping blanket or a dementor in the Harry Potter stories. The Restoration and Renewal programme provides an opportunity to show that the Palace of Westminster is not ‘Hogwarts-on-Thames’ and that it can redefine itself in terms of both perception and form in order to deliver exactly that legislature that is fit for the twenty-first (and twenty-second) century.
- In many ways the Restoration and Renewal programme is about demonstrating national confidence and belief, alongside clear cross-party political leadership.

The business case

- The Joint Committee did not recommend a vote on the full decant recommendation, or any proposals for a restored and renewed Palace. The Joint Committee instead asked that the validity of their conclusions and the feasibility of their recommendations be tested by the new Parliamentary Delivery Authority, who would then bring forward detailed designs and business case for a vote in both Houses.
- The Joint Committee has recommended a clear governance structure for delivery, with a Sponsor Board (including a cross-party composition of Members of both Houses) sitting above a statutory delivery authority. We would recommend that the Sponsor Board regularly reports to both Houses. This structure will help to avoid scope creep, maintain strong governance and ensure accountability to Parliament.

Further information

- In April 2016 the Sir Bernard Crick Centre launched [Designing for Democracy](#)—a major, inter-disciplinary research and public engagement programme which is examining how the design of our parliamentary buildings affects the way our politicians act and how we view politics. The project is led by Matthew Flinders, Director of the Crick Centre, and includes Ralph Negrine, an expert in political communication, architects Jeremy Till and Malcolm Fraser, anthropologist Emma Crewe, and organisations including NESTA, YouGov, and the History of Parliament Trust.
- To discuss this briefing paper or the **Designing for Democracy** programme please contact Matthew Flinders: m.flinders@sheffield.ac.uk / 07773 144 155