Political Thinking

Meeting No 13 18th September 2017

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking' Group Meeting 18 September 2017, 10am-noon

No vote was taken in respect of the topic.

Topic: "What type of Second Chamber should the UK have?"

Discussion

The Discussion centred on four main themes

The need for a second chamber.

Is the Commons working?

Membership of the Second Chamber

Powers for the Second Chamber

Is a Second Chamber required and, if so, for what?;

General agreement on "yes" as a revision/ reviewing/ correcting inadequacies/ scrutiny forum.

A source of new ideas to put to the First Chamber (House of Commons).

A tool for better parliamentary governance (and to control corruption..???).

Use the power of argument based on knowledge and experience.

Party politics dominates the Commons so there's a need for checks/ balances controlling that.

Is the Commons working?

An integral part of the discussion re the need for a Second Chamber was; 'Is the Commons working?'

There was some strong feeling that it isn't; the Commons is too dominated by party politics, although there was also some sense that it's strengths overcome the weaknesses (don't just knock it)

MPs now represent the government or opposition (via party whips) rather than their constituents; and the workings have become too confrontational based on political parties with inadequate collaboration 'for the benefit of the country as a whole' As a generalisation, it was felt that many MPs are now not 'externally expert' ('never done a

proper job' syndrome), hence the need for knowledge and experience in another chamber.

Arising from these thoughts was a passing question: ' How might the Commons be reconstructed'

It was observed that US Senate Committees were powerful and often very effective. There are, of course, Commons Committees which it was felt were becoming more powerful (possibly because of more public exposure through TV, etc…?);

If Commons Committees became as effective as US Senate Committees apparently are, would that eliminate the need for a Second Chamber? No, because of the inevitable infusion of party politics!

So, there was a reiterated need for a Second Chamber.

Membership of the Second Chamber

How, then, should the membership of that Second Chamber be determined?

Some basic thoughts: should be a different constituency from the Commons; members should not have to think about 'the next election', but members time-limited (probably 7-10 years for some continuity); total size limited and no larger than the Commons.

There were strong feelings that this chamber should contain 'experts' in their field nominated, for example, by bodies representing different aspects of society: professional bodies (e.g. lawyers/ accountants/ engineers/ education/ business etc, etc), trade unions, religions (a definite need for moral and ethical issues to be addressed in this chamber), armed forces, the voluntary sector, etc, etc, etc. [However, maybe experts were not needed as part of the chamber's membership but could be called in as appropriate to address important issues within sub-committees under the chamber's aegis].

Additionally, perhaps half the chamber, there could be elected members but based on what? – perhaps regional (although Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Stormont (??) and new regional mayors already provide a strong regional platform). BUT, if elected who would fund their candidacy activities if political parties were not involved?

A quite different methodology – all UK citizens, by law, to have the responsibility of serving a term (how long) in this chamber, membership determined by ballot/lottery (i.e. random selection); a sort of National Service, which exists currently for jury service. Pros: certainly creates 'engagement' by society and statistically would reflect the composition of society as a whole. Cons: some members would serve the country better by 'carrying on the day job'; others would feel aggrieved at being selected and some unable to make a contribution (mentally/ educationally incapable).

Powers for the Second Chamber

What powers for the Second Chamber?

Veto??? Probably not – maybe similar powers as currently in the Lords,

Or, perhaps, veto for pre-defined reasons.

One suggestion (vigorously dismissed !) was giving greater power to the Monarch.

An alternative to a second chamber would be to conduct referenda on all major issues as determined by the First Chamber; if this were the procedure would a second chamber then be necessary?