

Iconoplastic: An Institutional Reform Agenda

Polly Mackenzie

Polly Mackenzie is Chief Social Purpose Officer of University of the Arts London. She ran the cross party think tank Demos from 2018-2022 and was Director of Policy for the Deputy Prime Minister from 2010-2015. This article was written in the Summer of 2022.

The last few months, in particular the furore over Partygate¹, have scarred the reputation of many of Britain's most vital institutions. Police are investigating law breaking not just by the Prime Minister and his team, but among their own ranks. Parliament's ability and willingness to hold power to account has come into question. We face a government whose answer to the old question—'who guards the guards?'—is a simple one. No-one. This is a government that claims its democratic mandate trumps all constraint on its power, from the police, from the law, from the courts, from honour, convention, tradition, or rules.

Gone is the conservative mission of the Conservative Party: the instinct to protect and preserve institutions. In its place is a revolutionary, iconoclastic movement, far more interested in dismantling the things it doesn't like than in building anything to replace them.

It is clear we can no longer rely on what Peter Hennessy called the 'good chaps' theory of government: that those who rise to the top will always be honourable people, willing to submit to informal rules of behaviour.² Instead, we need to think creatively and imaginatively about a different kind of constitutional future: how to reform and rebuild the institutions that hold power, and those that hold it to account.

In this essay I'm going to set out—briefly—an institutional reform agenda for some of the most important institutions that frame our lives. Devolution, in my view, is fundamentally important, and a new settlement between the power of the centre and the power of the cities must be core to how we reform the United Kingdom, to stop it sliding into political self-destruction.

1 'Partygate' is the term given to the UK Government scandal that revealed the gatherings – which violated COVID-19 lockdown rules – taking place. The full timeline of events and police investigation results can be found at <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-59952395>>.

2 Cf. Robert Saunders, 'Has the "good chaps" theory of government always been a myth?' *The New Statesman* (London, 3 August 2021) <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/has-the-good-chaps-theory-of-government-always-been-a-myth-peter-hennessy-boris-johnson>> accessed 24 June 2022.

Principles for institutional reform

This is a central truth of all institutions, which they often struggle to deal with. They come under attack from their enemies for existing at all; their defenders get defensive and refuse to change anything; they worry that capitulation will start them down the slippery slope of institutional decay. This is wrong-footed.

Institutions play an essential role in creating binding relationships between people and each other, including and especially relationships between generations. They have the potential to last hundreds of years: an institutional mindset is far more likely to worry about the legacy for generations to come—generations that most of us are not even thinking about yet—than individuals are. And yet, if institutions fail to adapt to changing times, they come under attack from the iconoclastic impulse.

In physics, the word plastic doesn't just mean the stuff used in packaging and littering our oceans. Plastic, the adjective, is the opposite of elastic. An elastic material will snap back to its original shape if you stretch it, while a plastic material will stay in its new shape.

Instead of being iconoclastic, we need to be *iconoplastic*: ambitious and aggressive in reshaping our institutions to protect them from being smashed to pieces. An iconoplastic movement should be built around three core principles:

Acceptance of New Power: The thesis of Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms in their book *New Power* is that we have moved away from a primarily hierarchical system of political power to a collaborative, bottom-up one.³ Grassroots movements, membership uprisings, social media campaigns: all challenge the old power structures that vested decision-making at the top of organisations. New Power institutions need to be built to cope with this reality, not challenge or protect against it.

3 Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, *New Power* (Penguin Random House 2018).

Participation, not just representation: In an Old Power system, representation has been the primary way that members or voters' voices have been able to influence decision-making. Representative democratic systems have their place, but technology is increasingly making it far easier for mass participation in decision-making, including through deliberative methods. The great benefit of including people in the process of choice is that it builds a kind of democratic skillset: understanding, compromise and collaboration. Participative institutions will be far less focused on semi-regular elections to the top, and far more focused on maximising constant collaboration.

Openness: New Power and mass participation need to be facilitated by greater openness about decision-making, data, and opportunity. Organisations under iconoclastic threat can become fearful: hoarding information to protect it from bad actors who will use it to contribute to their destructive agenda. An institution confident in its own ability to continue its own process of constant reform has to stay open to challenge, sharing its weaknesses as well as its strengths.

Parliament

For too long we have believed the hype about Westminster being the 'Mother of Parliaments'.⁴ The truth is that all the pomp and tradition disguises the fact that Parliament is too often a hollow sham, ignored by an over-mighty executive of ministers and civil servants. No wonder, when new democracies were emerging from the Soviet bloc in the 1990s, not one of them copied our model of governance. Our system does not deliver what people want, it does not keep government or politicians honest, and it does not foster the meaningful debate we need.

First, I think we should move Parliament to Manchester, though I'd be open to a public consultation on the best place to put it. Our current Parliament buildings have become a potent symbol of political decay, propped up by scaffolding, beset by leaking roofs and drafty doors, even the clockwork of the nation's favourite bell running out of steam. Billions are being spent shoring up these crumbling edifices, misguidedly trying to preserve the old order in the old stonework.⁵

Those of us who love London have to accept that this city is toxic to millions of people. It is a byword for distance, disengagement, and disconnection from the rest of the UK.⁶ Government from London cannot offer the transformative moment the country needs: a recognition that the rage has been heard and that change will really come.

Moving Parliament offers the chance to fundamentally rebalance our economy, as well as our politics. For thirty years or more, governments have promised to regenerate the North, and rebalance growth away from the overheated south-east. Billions of pounds have been invested; entire civil service careers have been spent mapping and planning and designing initiatives with all the goodwill and ambition in the world. Some achievements have been wrung from this sustained effort. Labour transformed the city centres of many great Northern cities. Transport investment is finally arriving across the North's rail network, in a much more coordinated way than before.

But all this goodwill is fighting gravity and it isn't working. London and the south-east of England still outstrip everywhere else in wealth and growth⁷. The UK is Europe's most regionally divided nation⁸. Only when politicians have to go to work every day on the rickety trains of our northern cities will they really change this, and give the North the infrastructure investment it actually needs to grow and thrive.

There will be huge agglomeration effects of shifting this vitally important state institution to a city where it might do some good, rather than just contributing to the overheating of the housing market. It won't be just politicians who will move; it will be journalists, public affairs companies, regulators and regulated industries: anyone whose business relies on knowing what the government is up to.

London will remain our financial and cultural capital, and will recover from the economic shock quickly. In the process, the North will be transformed.

Countries do not need to have their economic and their political capitals in the same city. The US has four cities bigger than its capital. Australia and Canada each have five. Shanghai is larger than Beijing. And countries can move their capital for the sake of the nation: Canberra was established to stop Melbourne and Sydney from quarrelling; Abuja replaced Lagos as Nigeria's capital because the latter was considered a divisive place to be (as well as being hot and overcrowded). Brasilia was established as Brazil's capital, replacing Rio de Janeiro, in 1960. Belize, Botswana and Pakistan followed soon after. Myanmar recently moved its capital city to Naypyidaw.

But of course, the traditionalists will declare, it's alright for these funny foreign, modern sort of places to go 'messaging around' with the institutions of their government. We can't: we're English. We speak the language (as Bernard Shaw put it) of 'Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible'. We've got the very 'Mother of Parliaments'. They declare that Parliament is a symbol of a thousand years of history and must, therefore, be protected from anything that smacks of modernity or reform.

This is, of course, historical hokum. There have been buildings used for and by our rulers on the site of Westminster for a thousand years, but the vast majority of the current Palace of Westminster

4 UK Parliament, 'A beacon of democracy' (*UK Parliament*) <<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/big-ben/much-more-than-a-clock/a-beacon-of-democracy/>> accessed 13 April 2022.

5 Aubrey Allegretti, 'Parliament renovation could take 76 years and cost £22bn, report says' *The Guardian* (London, 23 February 2022) <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/feb/23/parliament-renovation-could-take-76-years-and-cost-22bn-report-says>> accessed 13 April 2022.

6 Roch Dunin-Wasowicz, 'London Calling Brexit: How the rest of the UK views the capital' (*LSE Blogs*, 13 November 2018) <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/11/13/london-calling-brexit-how-the-rest-of-the-uk-views-the-capital/>> accessed 13 April 2022.

7 Sam Bright, 'The Shocking Divides Between London and the Rest of Britain' (*Byline Times*, 28 April 2022) <<https://bylinetimes.com/2022/04/28/the-shocking-divides-between-london-and-the-rest-of-britain/>> accessed 13 April 2022.

8 Jamie Hailstone, 'UK one of the most divided countries in Europe, study warns' (*NewStart*, 27 November 2019) <<https://newstartmag.co.uk/articles/uk-one-of-the-most-divided-countries-in-europe-study-warns/>> accessed 13 April 2022.

was completed just 150 years ago. It looks older partly because Westminster Hall, which fronts the road, is truly ancient, but mostly because our national predilection for the ancient led to its being designed in the Gothic style.

In fact, Parliament's history is not of continuity but of a series of radical changes forced upon it. From the destruction by fire of the old Palace in the 1830s to the destruction of the debate chamber by bomb in the 1940s and the establishment of something approaching democracy in the Great Reform Act to the full national franchise for men and women in 1928, Parliament changes when it needs to change. A proper reading of history shows that our greatest institutions survive when they adapt. The adaptation Parliament needs now is to move, if it wants a chance of being loved again.

Democracy doesn't live in a building. We can take Big Ben north with us, if people want to. We can hold the state opening of Parliament once a year in our crumbling relic on the Thames, if it makes life easier for the Queen and her golden carriage. But now is a time for national rebirth, and we should mark that with change, not stagnation.

Political parties

To cross the divides of identity politics our political parties must be transformed too. This is because membership of parties is increasingly based on identification with a particular 'tribe' or group, contributing to the polarisation of our politics and weakening the ability of our parties to be representative of the country at large.

It was during the election of 2015 that I wrote the first draft of the constitution of the Women's Equality Party (WEP). We included one truly radical proposition: that party members were allowed to be members of other parties, too. WEP was set up to be a 'cross-party' party: to welcome feminists from across the political spectrum, and offer them a second home. This is a completely different conception of what politics and parties are for, and many people laughed at us and still do.

It's the direct opposite of the rules that are set by the other parties. They can throw you out of the party for even tweeting support for a friend who's standing under another party's ticket; for making a £50 donation to a friend in another party; or for admitting you voted tactically in your seat. The Labour party's constitution says that its primary purpose is to ensure the continued existence of the Labour party. Their idea is to create a community of trust in which everyone is fighting for the same purpose. Otherwise, your opponents could infiltrate your local party and, for example, choose an unelectable candidate.

Of course, there's an easy solution to this and it's to open up candidate selection to everyone in your constituency. The closed shop of political parties does more to sabotage good politics than anything else we do wrong in Britain. Open primaries are the only way to give real voice to constituents in a two-party system; I'd be happy to change our voting system instead, but that's a more structural reform that's hard to imagine happening.

So, for the moment, let's just open up the parties. Pass a law against party exclusivity so the Conservatives can't ban you from joining the Women's Equality Party and Labour can't ban you from campaigning for the Green candidate in your local area. Mandate and fund open primaries in every constituency. Allow people to donate a few

pounds, at the ballot box, alongside their vote, from taxpayer funds and ban big donations completely from party politics.

All elections should be majority publicly funded, and we should introduce legislation to force political parties to show all donors. Donations should not be more than £1000 per person, and can only be made once every year.

The monarchy and the honours system

It's hard to do much better than the proposals set out in Demos' early days for the British monarchy. The transition to a new monarch must be a moment of renewal and reformation. The honours system is an important first step: while in the last twenty years reforms have been implemented to honour more everyday people, and prevent those who don't pay their full taxes from being honoured, we need further change:

First, we need to replace the outdated references to the British Empire: an order of British excellence is a sensible shift to the naming conventions of our honours.

We should also think about the privileges conferred on those who receive an honour. Many recipients have the right to marry, or for their children to marry, in a special chapel at St Paul's Cathedral. This is a nice perk, but we should take a less London-centric view. We should work with our civic infrastructure—town halls, guildhalls, cathedrals, temples and more—to give real status and honour to those who've been recognised for their service in normal life.

We need a better system for stripping those who commit crimes or abuse the tax system, of their honour, in order to protect its integrity for the future.

We should use the Royal magic to celebrate places, as well as people. Let every town get involved in choosing the people to be honoured from their place—instead of having the lion's share of honours going to Londoners.

Create honours for towns and villages, too: the right for every place to be Royal for a year, instead of only Leamington Spa and Tunbridge Wells.

Devolution and community power

Over centralisation is one of the greatest failings of our system of governance. Over the last couple of decades we have slowly inched towards progress—establishing mayors, combined authorities and devolving some power to more local organisations. We need to go much further; the central assumption needs to be reversed. We must move away from a system in which local areas must come cap in hand to central government and beg for powers and responsibilities, to one in which central government must make the case for why things need to be standardised and centralised.

At Demos, we have made the case for transforming our public services by centering them around strong relationships—between citizens and the state, between citizens and each other, and—crucially—between the various services who so often work at cross purposes to one another. This is only possible if we devolve power and centre reform around places instead of the vertical specialisms of individual government departments and professional specialisms.

We've argued for complete decentralisation of employment support services, replacing JobCentres with a Universal Work Service to help all working people develop their career and find better work.⁹ That should be run and managed locally, built around the needs and opportunities of particular areas.

We've also argued for a new approach to crime prevention, putting local authorities in the lead role, and giving them oversight of the police.¹⁰ There is little logic in having a powerful City mayor and a separate Police and Crime Commissioner. And there is little logic in leaving crime prevention to the police alone, when the factors that reduce crime are usually to be found in social services, education, housing, and youth provision.

Of course, devolution has its critics. One of the best arguments against devolution, of course, is that it enables far more variation between places and that tends to benefit people who are better off: instead of a single national system, you get good services where people can pay for them, and bad services where need is highest—also known as the 'postcode lottery'. Thus, the desire to standardise across the country is driven by an ideological commitment to fairness and equity that has huge merit.

Of course, national systems tend to have huge variation in them, too, no matter what the theory says. But it's vital that we don't allow community devolution to exacerbate inequality: in fact, we should use it to push in the opposite direction. Efforts to build social capital and democratic capability need to be concentrated in areas of higher deprivation. Whether through the transfer of community assets, the investment of time and resources in training, education, and relationship building, or simply through more direct funding, poorer areas need far more support, to enable them to take power, and develop their capabilities.

Still, there's the risk that politics gets more intense locally, and you end up surrendering evidence about what works and replacing it with what people fancy, even if that's no housebuilding, unsafe hospitals, or expensively-subsidised, but hardly-used, post offices. So why open ourselves up to the risks associated with far greater democracy at the local level?

It's because taking decisions away from people absolves them of responsibility for managing trade-offs and complexity. It allows them to outsource difficult decisions to politicians who they then complain about, and this slowly builds resentment that eats away at the political system.

Many of the policy problems we face today are in fact better resolved at community level because it's where we have the best chance of building legitimacy for so many uncomfortable decisions. But the community level is also where you can leverage human relationships, voluntary networks, and community infrastructure to be far more effective, often for less money. The state can be mobilised at national level to meet demand, but only a really strong social system can actively reduce demand.

The Community Paradigm is the name given by New Local, a think tank working with local government and other organisations, to their work.¹¹ It identifies why the community paradigm is more likely to be effective at tackling the kind of systemic problems identified in earlier chapters. It engages people at a level that is far more likely to influence their own behaviour and choices. It has agility and personalisation that are vital in a diverse society. It builds connections and relationships between people that, over time, add up to social capital.

Starting the journey

It is far easier to set out ideas for reform than it is to implement them. Institutional reform requires careful, slow, patient, and confident work. Some may look at our government and feel hopeful: the Levelling Up White Paper does suggest a level of analysis and ambition that has rarely been paralleled.¹² Others may look at it and despair: where is the long-term financial commitment? Why has this generational goal of shifting power and opportunity in the country disappeared from public view within a few short months?

But neither naive hope nor despair are the right approach. Perhaps this government will become great, and perhaps it will be replaced by a great government. At some point in my lifetime, I do expect that we will have a government that is willing to initiate structural change from the centre. But we should not wait. It is in the nature of 'new power' that we do not need to. Organisations in the public and private sphere can start to take an iconoclastic approach. We can all add a little more participation and a little more openness to the way we run our businesses, our charities, our universities, and our local systems of government. Instead of waiting for the iconoclastic enemies at the gates wanting to tear us to pieces, we can think about how to share the power we have. Change is best started yesterday, but today will do. The government that replaces Boris Johnson's finally provides an opportunity for leadership to reset our institutions.

9 Andrew Philipps, 'Working Together: The case for universal employment support' (*Demos*, May 2022) <<https://demos.co.uk/project/working-together-the-case-for-universal-employment-support/>> accessed 13 April 2022.

10 Alice Dawson, Polly Mackenzie, and Amelia Stewart, 'Move on Upstream: Crime, prevention and relationships' (*Demos*, May 2022) <<https://demos.co.uk/project/move-on-upstream-crime-prevention-and-relationships/>> accessed 13 April 2022.

11 Adam Lent and Jessica Studdert, 'The Community Paradigm: Why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved' (*New Local*, 4 March 2021) <<https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/the-community-paradigm>> accessed 13 April 2022.

12 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 'Levelling Up the United Kingdom' (February 2022) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>> accessed 13 April 2022.