



# Reversing our democratic decline

Labour's plan for Parliament and political reform



## Foreword

Trust in politics and politicians is at a record low. Voter turnout has been in decline for sixty years and fewer and fewer people see Parliament as relevant let alone effective.

People are struggling to get by, but they don't see politics as the answer to their problems. Westminster plays out on the TV screen, but vast swathes of the population just aren't tuning in.

This reality isn't just regrettable, it threatens our democracy. As more people give up on politics, more power will be concentrated in the hands of a privileged few. That is why a Labour government will prioritise reversing our democratic decline, and building a country where everybody has a stake and a say.

Over my time as Shadow Leader of the House, I've spoken to non-voters across the UK about why they feel detached from our political system, and I've spent time in Commons committees talking about the minutiae of our legislative process. I've seen our politics operate at every level and I know that at every level we need change.

This document details Labour's four point plan for political reform, building on work from colleagues across the Shadow Cabinet. We are going to make sure everyone has a voice by reforming voter registration and the process of elections. We are going to overhaul the scrutiny process to deliver better quality legislation that gives the public a real say. We are going to stand up to vested interests in Parliament and politics. And we are going to oversee the biggest devolution of power in our history.

It is only a Labour government that will do what it takes to reverse this democratic decline.



**Angela Eagle MP**

### Labour's four-point plan to reverse our democratic decline

1. Reforming elections so everyone has their say (p. 3)
2. Overhauling how Parliament works to improve legislation and give the public a role (p. 5)
3. Standing up to vested interests in our politics (p. 7)
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# 1. Labour will reform elections so everyone has their say

There is a saying that rings true in Britain today - if you don't do politics, you get it done to you. But still millions of people think that politics isn't relevant to their lives, and don't bother to vote. The scandal in politics today is not that this-or-that party has this-or-that percentage in the polls, it is that as many as 16 million people might not vote at all.<sup>1</sup>

During the People's Politics Inquiry, Annette, a Mum from Oldham who has never voted, said that instead of asking how we can re-engage people with politics, we should ask how we can re-engage politics with people.<sup>2</sup> She's right, and Labour will start with reforming elections so that everyone can have their say.

## Coalition failure

Before the last election the Tories promised to "build a new political system that serves people rather than politicians"<sup>3</sup>, but what they've actually done is the opposite.

- They introduced the Lobbying Act to gag charities and campaigners in the run up to the election, while letting vested interests off the hook
- Their reckless and rushed changes to voter registration have meant that nearly one million people have disappeared from the electoral register in the last year alone, including hundreds of thousands of young people
- David Cameron has consistently opposed giving 16 and 17 year olds the vote

## Labour's plan

A Labour government will strive for a Britain where everyone plays their part in our democracy. We will not sit back as the voices of young people, marginalised groups, charities and campaigners are silenced. And we will not ignore the continuing decline in voter turnout at elections. We learned from the People's Politics Inquiry that our most important weapon against apathy is education, but we also know that we need reform to help voting fit around people's busy lives.

That's why we will:

- **Legislate for votes at sixteen**

We will give all 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote in elections from May 2016. We will place an emphasis on the importance of education about politics in schools to accompany this.

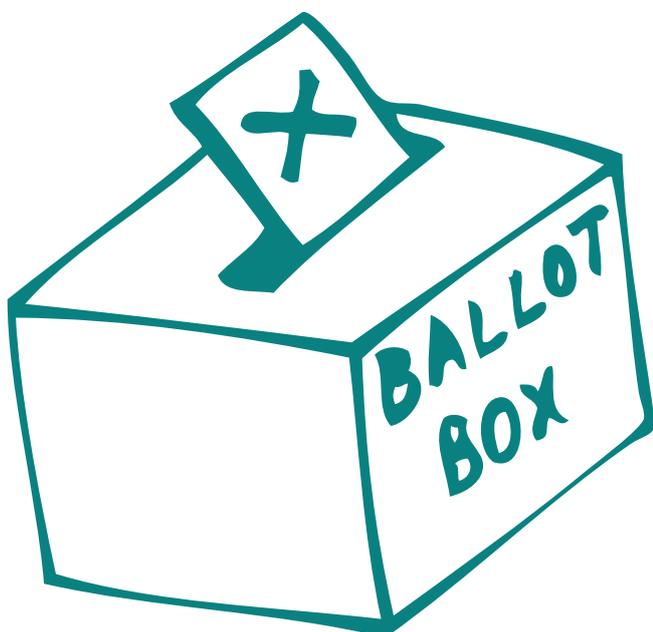
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1 35 per cent of eligible voters did not vote in the 2010 general election, that percentage of eligible voters in today's population is 16 million (Source: Office for National Statistics, Electoral Statistics for UK, 2013)

2 Angela Eagle speech to the Electoral Reform Society, 17 June 2014

3 2010 Conservative Party Manifesto, p 63

- **Overhaul how people register to vote**  
We will shake up the system of voter registration that currently leaves millions off the register. We will deliver a legal obligation on schools and colleges to give details of students approaching voting age to electoral registration officers. We will encourage universities to block register students, and we will trial election-day registration.
- **Provide more information on how to vote and why**  
We will launch a new online democracy portal which draws together all of the things you need to know before you vote, including who your MP is, how you vote, who the political parties are and what they stand for. We will also provide more information on polling cards about the process of voting, and encourage local councils to email first time voters with basic information.
- **Trial online voting**  
To make it easier to vote, we'll trial online voting to see if we can do it safely and cost effectively.
- **Scrap the Gagging Law and replace it with fair regulation**  
We'll repeal the gagging law and consult with charities and campaigners about a fair replacement that doesn't restrict democratic debate.



## 2. Labour will radically overhaul how Parliament works

Our Parliament should be the fulcrum of our democracy but over the years it has become less effective at scrutinising the executive, and it seems increasingly remote from people's lives. Last year the Hansard Society found that only 51 per cent of people agree that Parliament 'debates and makes decisions about the issues that matter to me'.<sup>1</sup> Labour will deliver a holistic look at how Parliament works so that we can begin to make it work for everyone again.

### Coalition failure

This Government has treated Parliament with a complete lack of respect. Ministers add the majority of content into their Bills in the unelected Lords, they habitually ignore votes on backbench business and the phrase zombie Parliament has been coined because of the the lack of government legislation. They have also failed to keep their promises on parliamentary reform despite Nick Clegg's grand claims of the 'biggest shake up' since the Great Reform Act of 1832.<sup>2</sup>

- The Tories promised to "restore the balance between the government and Parliament, by allowing MPs the time to scrutinise law effectively".<sup>3</sup> But their established practice is to rush badly drafted Bills through the Commons before adding reams of amendments in the unelected Lords. For example, the Banking Act grew sevenfold in the Upper House, making any meaningful scrutiny by MPs impossible.
- The 2013-14 session had the fewest number of government bills since 1950, and there's now such little work for government backbenchers that Tory MPs are working just two and a half days a week.

### Labour's plan

A Labour Government will reconnect Parliament with people by introducing wide-ranging reforms to how the Commons works. The Tories have ignored and abused the Chamber, but Labour recognises that a strong and active Parliament is crucial to rebuilding trust in politics.

We will overhaul how laws are made so that the public are given a central role in the legislative process and so that backbench MPs are empowered to better hold the government to account. And we will change the culture in Westminster to become less combative and more conducive to the genuine debate that people expect from their MPs.

We have always been committed to modernising Parliament so the voices of those who have long been shut out of Westminster can be heard. For example, this election will see us fielding a record number of women in our key seats to ensure that the next Parliament is more representative of the people that it serves. We remain committed to the use of All Women Shortlists.

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1 Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement, 2014

2 Nick Clegg speech, 19 May 2010

3 2010 Conservative Party Manifesto, p 67

Labour will:

- **Change the way that laws are made**

We will introduce a new public evidence stage for bills where everyday people as well as experts in the field will be asked for their views on proposed new laws. We will also free up more time in the Chamber for a whole house scrutiny stage so that backbench MPs have even more opportunities to question Ministers about legislation.

This new process will make it much harder for half-written Bills to be presented to the Commons, and it will subject Ministers to a much more searching and timely examination of the content and intention of their legislation at a time when exposing inadequacies will actually make a difference. (See figure 1).

- **Introduce a people's question time for the Prime Minister**

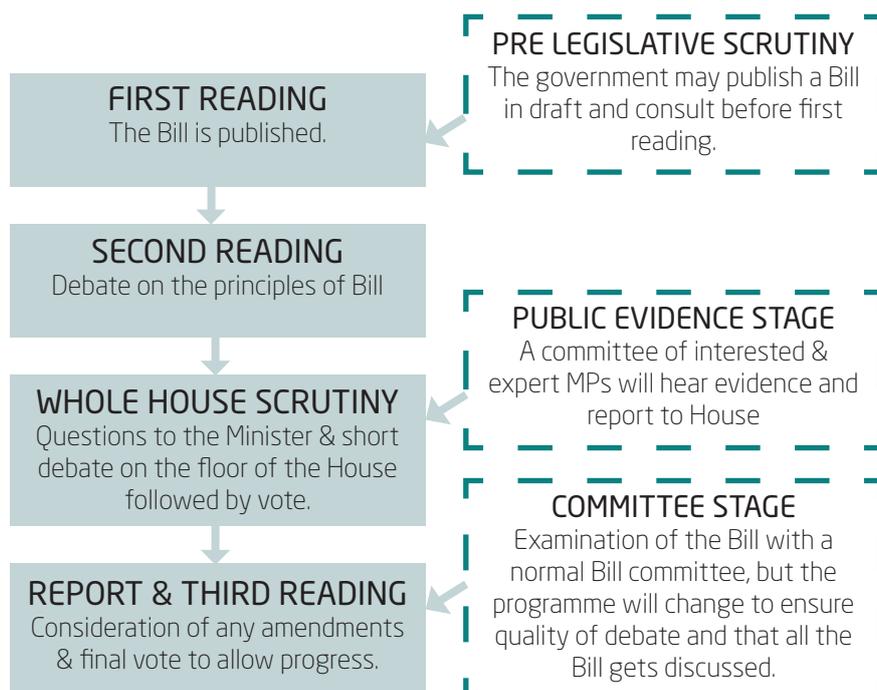
We will introduce a public question time where people will be able to question the Prime Minister one every week or fortnight. This will give the public unprecedented opportunity to scrutinise the Prime Minister and hold the government to account.

- **Discourage off putting and aggressive behaviour in the Chamber**

Recent research from the Hansard Society revealed the words people most associate with Prime Ministers Questions are 'noisy', 'childish', 'over the top' and 'pointless'<sup>1</sup> and MPs have reported hearing sexist and other offensive insults thrown at them in the Chamber. Our politics works on an adversarial system, but sometimes MPs take it too far and it turns the public off.

We will consult on updating the rules so that the Speaker has new powers to control behaviour in the Commons. MPs who behave in a disorderly way by shouting down or barracking other MPs could face a 'sin-bin' and have to leave the Chamber for a short period.

Figure 1 - new process for scrutinising legislation:



1 Hansard Society, Tuned in or Turned off? Public attitudes to Prime Minister's Questions, 2014

### 3. Labour will stand up to vested interests in our politics

While ordinary people feel increasingly shut out of Westminster, those in powerful positions are enjoying increasing access to Parliament and the government. Over the last five years we've seen a series of lobbying scandals and a raft of big money donors buying influence in the Conservative Party. It has been suggested that lobbying in Westminster is amongst the least transparent in the world, and it is estimated that almost one in three Tory MPs have a second job or a paid directorship.<sup>1</sup>

MPs are public servants, a position that comes with an unparalleled level of responsibility that must not be abused. To rebuild people's trust in politics, we need to be absolutely clear that decisions are taken in Parliament in order to represent constituents and not as a result of undue financial influence. And we have to tackle the big money culture in politics that distorts our democratic debate and allows the already powerful to have their voice heard louder.

#### Coalition failure

The Conservatives have made it easier for big money, big business and unregulated lobbyists to buy influence on our politics.

- Before the election David Cameron promised to 'shine the light of transparency'<sup>2</sup> on lobbying, but we've had five years of lobbying scandals from Adam Werrity and Fred Michel to Lynton Crosby. And instead of cracking down on vested interests, the Lobbying Act actually made it easier for lobbyists to operate unchecked in Westminster.
- David Cameron also promised that he'd take political power out of the hands of the elite and give it back to ordinary people, and he promised that there would be no "money buying influence".<sup>3</sup> But the latest donation figures show that the Tories are reliant on the donations of a rich few, with hedge funds having donated £55 million. Hedge funds received a tax cut worth £145 million from the Chancellor two years ago.

#### Labour's plan

Labour's record on challenging vested interests is clear. Whether it's the banks, the energy giants or media bosses, Ed Miliband has stood up for a fairer Britain where people exercise the greatest power.

And we don't just talk about reform, Labour has implemented root and branch changes to our membership structure to ensure that we reach out to millions of working people around the UK. We were on the side of British charities and campaign groups in fighting the Government's Lobbying Act and we have led the way in promising to regulate second jobs for MPs.

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1 Register of Members' Financial Interests (as at 9th February 2015)

2 David Cameron speech, 8 February 2010

3 David Cameron speech, 8 February 2010

A Labour Government will stand up to vested interests and put political power back in the hands of people and not just a few at the top.

To do that, Labour will:

- **Introduce a universal register of lobbyists backed by a code of conduct and sanctions**

We will create a code of conduct for lobbyists that everyone in the sector will have to sign. This will ban inappropriate financial relations between lobbyists and MPs and Peers. Any lobbyist found to breach the code will face strong sanctions, including being banned from practicing.

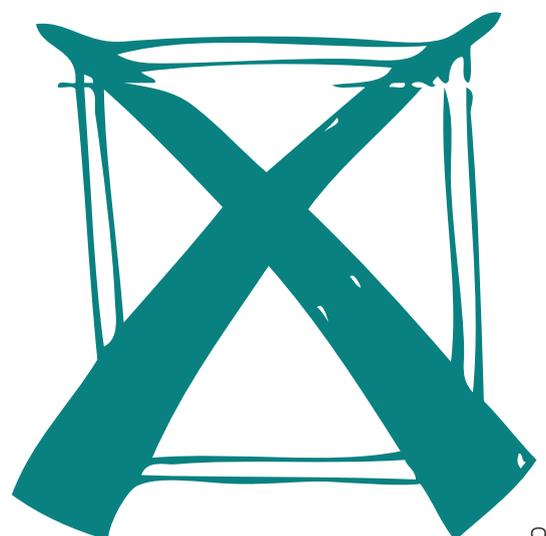
We will also review whether lobbyists should be allowed to provide the secretariats for All Party Parliamentary Groups, and continue to support the ban on parliamentary passes for any APPG staff.

- **Regulate second jobs for MPs**

Members of Parliament will be banned from paid directorships and consultancies and we will consult on introducing a cap on other forms of earned income. This would mean that Members could do the necessary hours to retain a professional qualification, for example as a doctor or engineer, whilst ensuring they put their constituents first.

- **Act to tackle the revolving door between government and lobbying jobs**

We need proper oversight to make sure people don't abuse the connections they've made during their time in office. So we will give greater powers to the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments to prevent damaging conflicts of interest when politicians and senior civil servants take their knowledge and contacts in to the private sector.



## 4. Labour will devolve power so that people feel closer to politics

In every community there are people with the vision and capacity to change their neighbourhood and the country for the better. But the levers of power feel far away and inaccessible.

We need a new approach to government. So we will devolve more power and control, not only to Scotland and Wales, but to our English cities and counties too. And we will share power and responsibility with people in their communities to help them help themselves and shape their services in response to their circumstances.

### Coalition failure

The Conservative Party opposed devolution from the outset and since David Cameron became Prime Minister the interests of the UK's nations and regions have been side-lined. While the Tories have used the rhetoric of devolution, all they've actually done is devolve the blame for their cuts.

- Despite promising a "massive redistribution of power in our country from the powerful to the powerless,"<sup>1</sup> Tory cuts have disproportionately hit some of the poorest places in the North of England.
- Just hours after the people of Scotland voted to stay in a strong United Kingdom David Cameron put everything at risk with his divisive plans to create two classes of MPs
- And despite promising reform of the House of Lords, the coalition has woefully failed to deliver anything. Instead David Cameron has packed the Upper House with scores of new Tory peers which has seen staff costs rise by 13 per cent since his government came to power, while Members' expenses are up by 25 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

### Labour's plan

Labour has a proud record of delivering political and constitutional reform, and a proud record on devolution. We brought in freedom of information, the Human Rights Act, and created the Supreme Court. We established the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly and gave them substantial powers over domestic policy. We created an elected Mayor in London and offered that option to towns and cities across England. And we gave substantial new powers to combined authorities allowing local government to work more effectively for the communities it represents.

Devolution is the future for Britain and Labour will now build on our record by guaranteeing a greater voice for people in the towns and cities of England, whilst ensuring a fair deal and more powers for devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

It was Labour who led the fight to defend the Union and we will reject policies that support separation, like the damaging Tory plans to split Parliament into two classes of MP. We will bring forward our own proposals to give English MPs a greater say over laws that affect only England.

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1 Data from 325 local authorities, compiled by HofC Library and Newcastle City Council's finance department  
2 House of Lords Annual Reports, 2009/10 & 2013/14 Eds

And where the Tories have failed we will finish the job of radically reforming the House of Lords. When Labour was in office we delivered the biggest changes in the history of the Upper House, halving the number of Lords and removing hundreds of hereditary peers. We must now deliver the elected Second Chamber that the public deserves. The Lords must also be balanced to better reflect communities across the UK. It's not right that the North West has almost the same population as London but only a small fraction of London's number of peers. We must place every part of our country at the heart of our democracy to ensure people's voices are heard in Westminster.

Labour will:

- **Establish a constitutional convention**

Labour believes that ordinary people are best placed to decide how their country should be run, so we will establish a constitutional convention to consider the future of devolution in the UK. This will hear evidence from communities across the country and will consider fundamental questions about how Britain is governed.

- **Create a Senate of the Nations and Regions**

We will replace the House of Lords with an elected Senate that is representative of the nations and regions of the UK. We will remove the remaining hereditary peers and ensure that the Senate is a forum for regional representation.

- **Introduce an English Devolution Act**

We will devolve an unprecedented £30 billion of resources to city and country regions giving them powers over housing, transport and economic development. We will also allow them to keep any extra business rates generated by growth in the city or region.

- **Strengthen England's voice**

We will hold regular meetings of a new English Regional Cabinet Committee chaired by the Prime Minister. This will be attended by relevant Secretaries of State and leaders from major City and County Regions.

We will ensure that English MPs have the opportunity for greater scrutiny over legislation that only affects England by considering a new English-only committee stage for some Bills during the Constitutional Convention. We reject the hastily drawn up divisive Tory plans to create two classes of MP which could undermine the union for narrow political advantage.

- **Pass a new Scotland Act**

We will implement the proposals of the Smith Commission and go further by giving the Scottish Parliament unprecedented powers over welfare spending in non-devolved areas.

- **Devolve more powers to Wales**

We will enact proposals from the Silk Commission and go further in devolving powers over elections to the Welsh Assembly. We will ensure that devolution to Wales is put on the same footing as in Scotland and ensure fair funding for Welsh Government.

- **Continue to support the Northern Ireland Assembly**

We will continue to work with Northern Ireland's political leaders to maintain political stability and tackle the economic inequality that continues to breed division and extremism.

