

Written evidence submitted by Dr Ben Whisker (FTP0022)

1. I am Dr Ben Whisker, a political scientist and historian. Using archival research and elite interviews, I recently completed a PhD thesis entitled 'Explaining departures from New-Right ideology in Conservative Party policy-making under Margaret Thatcher's leadership, 1975-1990: the role of institutional and electoral considerations' at the University of York. With Dr Jim Buller, I authored a research article entitled 'Inter-Organisational Distrust and the Political Economy of Central Bank Independence in the UK' published in the journal *New Political Economy*. I am submitting evidence to draw attention to the implications of the proposed changes for policy-making by governments, political parties and public officials.

2. During 2017-19, when combined with both a hung parliament and the exceptional circumstances of the entrenched divisions over the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 contributed to a lack of clarity and accountability in decision-making. Yet this recent experience should not lead us to overlook past problems when the length of each Parliament was determined by the Prime Minister's advice to the Monarch. In particular, within contemporary political history, uncertainty about the date of the next general election has impeded policy development by governing and opposition parties alike. Additionally, in selecting the appropriate maximum length of a Parliament, it should be borne in mind that five-year rather than four-year parliaments may make it politically easier for governments to pursue major policy changes.

3. The electoral cycle is a constraint on the policy-making behaviour of politicians and political parties. The time available to party-political actors to engage in policy development can be limited by the absence of a guaranteed duration for a Parliament. For instance, in the course of 1978, when the Conservatives anticipated a general election in the autumn, frontbenchers and Conservative Research Department staff re-allocated time and attention from long-term planning for government towards pre-election tasks. Even though no election occurred until May 1979, the 1978 shift in the Conservative Party's focus had implications for, as well as other initiatives, the work of Geoffrey Howe's Economic Reconstruction Group in relation to pay policy alternatives, labour relations, economic governance and personal taxation (Whisker, 2018, p. 20; Whisker, 2020, pp. 74-75, p. 163). If the October 1974 Parliament's end date had been fixed, this work could have continued for longer, possibly with consequences for policy choices at the beginning of the Thatcher governments.

4. The expected length of a Parliament shapes the timetabling of policy formation and implementation. Compared to a four-year term, a five-year term makes it at least slightly easier for governments to implement major reforms. In the first year of the 1987 Parliament, the Government took contentious steps (including legislation enacting the Community Charge, initiating the NHS review and large cuts in Income Tax). Ministers chose to act earlier in part because it was judged less dangerous electorally to act at the start of a Parliament (Whisker, 2020, pp. 101-102, p. 145). Cutting the amount of time before a Parliament ends reduces the window of opportunity to act. Particularly for complex and time-consuming changes requiring legislation followed by lengthy implementation, additional time prior to an election may be practically and politically valuable. In June 1990, Thatcher wished to delay rollout of NHS reforms until after the expected 1992 election, but

Kenneth Clarke advocated proceeding with the next steps in 1991, arguing that the reforms as implemented would pose less risk than offering the prospect of reform at a general election (Whisker, 2020, pp. 145-146). A Parliament's duration affects which policies are pursued before facing the electorate.

5. In submitting this evidence, my purpose is to highlight how both the degree of certainty about the duration of a Parliament and the maximum permitted length of a Parliament can shape the time available to develop and implement policies, with less certainty and less time potentially leading to some policies not being selected. I take no view as to whether it is, overall, more desirable to allow more time for policies to be developed or implemented before politicians face a new election. I make no recommendations regarding whether the length of Parliaments should be fixed and whether the maximum duration of a Parliament should be five years, four years or another length.

Ben Whisker

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Bibliography

Whisker, B. (2018). 'The Conservative Party and the West German Economic Model 1975-81', paper presented to a workshop of the Political Studies Association's Conservatism Studies Group. 14-15 June 2018. Edinburgh.

Whisker, B. (2020). *Explaining departures from New-Right ideology in Conservative Party policy-making under Thatcher's leadership, 1975-1990: the role of institutional and electoral considerations*. PhD thesis, University of York.