

Summary

This submission argues that if the Restoration and Renewal (R&R) of the Palace of Westminster simply rebuilds as before, it will not deliver a diversity or gender sensitive Parliament. It notes that, however, there is little evidence to date that the needs of a diversity or gender sensitive Parliament have been given sufficient (or indeed any) weight during the planning for R&R to date, particularly when the issue was the responsibility of the House of Commons Commission. As a result key decisions have been taken without consideration of the impact on creating a gender or diversity sensitive Parliament. Subsequently, it is a serious concern that without political direction, the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body will not feel able to consider how the building and facilities can support a gender sensitive House of Commons. This political direction should be provided through an institutional replacement to the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, which can audit plans for decant and the rebuilt Palace of Westminster, and hold the Sponsor Body to account for issues of diversity, representation and inclusion.

Introduction

1. My submission draws on research carried out over the last five years, including semi-structured elite interviews of MPs, Peers and parliamentary staff as part of my PhD thesis: “Understanding the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster: An analysis of institutional change in the UK Parliament”. It also draws on my experience of working in Parliament and for MPs between 2004 and 2016.
2. The focus of my evidence is on the third bullet point of the Call for Evidence: *How should our Buildings and facilities be changed to support a gender sensitive House of Commons and the opportunities presented by the Restoration & Renewal Programme?* In answering this question, it also offers insights for the fourth and fifth bullet points: *How can a more inclusive culture be adopted in the House of Commons and Which individuals or bodies are responsible for taking action? What and who should drive change on this issue?*
3. My evidence highlights three key issues:
 - i) If the Restoration and Renewal (R&R) of the Palace of Westminster simply rebuilds as before, it will not deliver a diversity or gender sensitive Parliament.
 - ii) There is little evidence to date that the needs of a diversity or gender sensitive Parliament have been given sufficient (or indeed any) weight during the planning for R&R to date, particularly when the issue was the responsibility of the House of Commons Commission.
 - iii) It is a serious concern that without political direction, the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body will not feel able to consider how the building and facilities can support a gender sensitive House of Commons.

If the Restoration and Renewal (R&R) of the Palace of Westminster simply rebuilds as before, it will not deliver a diversity or gender sensitive Parliament.

4. There is significant evidence to highlight that the Palace of Westminster does not facilitate a diversity or gender sensitive Parliament. Parliamentary buildings are significant: as Goodsell argued, they have three effects: “they perpetuate the past, they manifest the present and they condition the future” (Goodsell, 1988, p 288). On the latter

point, Goodsell stressed that the effect of legislative buildings was not to “deterministically control the attitudes and behaviour of people” but to “condition their thoughts and actions in preliminary, subtle and interactive ways” (Goodsell, 1988, p 288).

5. Academic literature recognises that this effect is gendered (e.g. Childs, 2004, Ross, 2002). In my own research I have spoken to female MPs who have cited the layout of the chamber and artwork in the Palace as reasons why they feel uncomfortable or “put in their place” (Interview, anonymous MP, 2019).
6. The Ellenbogen Report into bullying and harassment in the House of Lords explicitly linked the design of the building to behaviour within:

“The Palace of Westminster is not designed to accommodate, or inculcate, modern ways of working. Staff work in small rooms (often housing only two individuals) on long corridors and can be physically distant from their managers and other colleagues. Contributors told me that, in particular when doors are closed, the environment can feel threatening and inappropriate behaviour can go unobserved by colleagues” (Ellenbogen, 2019, p84)

7. The building does not just shape the experiences of Members and staff within the institution, but also how the public perceive Parliament. Walker (2012, p 274) noted that “Parliament did not feel ‘open’” and that while “visiting Parliament makes a strong impact [...] the buildings can be intimidating in their splendour”. Puwar has written of her experience as a woman of colour visiting Parliament:

“As I walked through the grand entrance to Parliament I felt a sense of unease with my own bodily arrival in this monument to democracy, nation and Imperial Englishness. A set of stories come with the building.” (Puwar, 2004, p 35)

8. To rebuild the Palace of Westminster without considering how the current building is experienced will ignore this evidence and block any chance of building a gender or diversity sensitive Parliament.
9. This is also crucial for the rebuilding period. Any decant of the Commons should be designed to promote and facilitate a gender and diversity sensitive institution. Indeed, any decant must be recognised as an opportunity to trial new ways of working and conduct real-time evaluations of what should be retained in the rebuilt Palace of Westminster. This should include asking the public directly about their experiences of the Palace of Westminster and the decant accommodation.

There is little evidence to date that the needs of a diversity or gender sensitive Parliament have been given sufficient (or indeed any) weight during the planning for R&R to date, particularly when the issue was the responsibility of the House of Commons Commission.

10. From the start of the Restoration and Renewal Programme in 2012 there has been an aversion to considering the potential of R&R to deliver changes that offer benefits for the institution and nation.
11. For example, the House of Commons Commission ruled out any further consideration of a new parliamentary building in October 2012 (a decision endorsed by the House of Lords Commission the next day). This crucial decision was taken by just six MPs and not opened up to the Commons as a whole let alone to the public (House of Commons Commission, 2012).¹

12. A further example can be found in the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster (JCPW, 2016). While the Joint Committee did conclude that the policy solution should go beyond the bare minimum approach, stating that R&R offered “a one-off opportunity to renew and transform the Palace of Westminster into a home fit for a 21st Century Parliament” (JCPW, 2016a, p 81), it also revealed an institutional hostility to considering whether there are changes to the building which could deliver greater value for money than simply replicating the current building. The report stated:

“A key test for all the design decisions for the Programme should be the delivery of value for money for the taxpayer. In the current fiscal climate, we will need to be able to demonstrate convincingly that every penny which is spent on the Programme, beyond the bare minimum which is needed to secure the future of the Palace of Westminster, delivers a clear benefit to the nation.” (JCPW, 2016a, p 82).

The value for money of replicating the same design of the Palace of Westminster would not be required to show a “clear benefit to the nation”, but any proposed changes would have to face such a test. Without testing whether the existing design offers a “clear benefit to the nation”, however, we cannot know whether any proposed changes offer a greater or smaller benefit than rebuilding the *status quo*.

13. Repeated references to the need to avoid “gold-plating” (e.g. HC Deb, 16 Jul 2020 c1739; HC Deb, 4 Feb 2021, c1133) highlight again how rebuilding the Palace as an exact replica is considered as the cheapest approach to R&R, without any analysis of whether changes to the design might offer greater value for money.
14. Yet another example can be found in the Statement of Accommodation Requirements for the Northern Estate Programme/Richmond House which, as stated in the R&R Strategic Review, approved a “like for like” Commons chamber during the decant. Once again, this decision was taken by the Commission, with no debate by the Commons as a whole, let a discussion with the public. This will prevent the decant period from being used to trial new layouts in the Commons chamber, as recommended by Professor Sarah Childs in *The Good Parliament Report* (Childs, 2016, Recommendation 26)
15. My research has shown that even supporters of R&R have sought to play down the potential for changes to the building or the opportunities that R&R may offer for changing the culture of the institution, instead highlighting the need to act because of the serious risks to the building. This reflected in part a lack of outright support for change to the Palace (e.g. Chris Bryant MP, HC Deb 25 Jan 2017, c97WH). Crucially, it also reflected a belief that the only way to secure political support for R&R was to build a consensus across the whole House, including among those who were strongly opposed to any radical change. Meg Hillier MP, who had tabled the successful full decant amendment to the R&R motion in January 2018, told the Commons in July 2020:

“I remember that there was a very loud cacophony of voices here saying, “We will not consider leaving this Chamber unless we have an exact replica.” (HC Deb, 16 July 2020, c1766)

16. This has been successful from a tactical point of view, but has meant that there has been no formal recognition of the effect of the physical building on the culture of the institution within. Key parliamentary decisions have been taken without a broader debate about creating a parliamentary building fit for the 21st century.

¹ The Commission members present the then Speaker, John Bercow, the Leader of the House, Andrew Lansley, and the Shadow Leader of the House, Angela Eagle, and three backbench MPs: Sir Paul Beresford, Frank Doran, and Viscount Thurso.

It is a serious concern that without political direction to do so, the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body will not feel able to consider how the building and facilities can support a gender sensitive House of Commons.

17. The Sponsor Body, while independent of Parliament, has placed a high priority on maintaining political support for its work (e.g. the 2019 election cited as a reason for reviewing the plans in the announcement of the Strategic Review and the reference in the Strategic Review (Restoration and Renewal, 2021, para 131) to the “low appetite” among MPs and Peers for continuing with remote working after the pandemic).
18. This approach is entirely sensible, given the high pricetag of the work. It has, however, meant that, in practice, the lack of a debate about the potential of R&R and a diversity sensitive institution during the parliamentary debates on R&R has prevented the Sponsor Body from considering this issue itself.
19. This is linked to a concern about the diversity of the parliamentary members of the Sponsor Body. Since the formation of the Sponsor Body in shadow form in July 2018, not a single female MP has served as a member. Indeed, out of the twelve current or former parliamentarians who have served on the Sponsor Body, eleven are men. The Sponsor Body has thus not had any direct input from any woman elected to Parliament.²
20. In addition, no person of colour has served as a parliamentary member of the Sponsor Body.
21. This is not meant as personal criticism of any current or former parliamentary member of the Sponsor Body. Furthermore, it is not necessarily the case that only female MPs or MPs of colour can ensure a gender or diversity sensitive Parliament. From the lack of transparency around parliamentary appointments to the Sponsor Body, however, it is difficult to have confidence in whether the members of the Sponsor Body have been tasked with or have chosen to systematically seek out and represent the views of the Commons as a whole.
22. The lack of diversity within the parliamentary representatives of the Sponsor Body and the absence of a clear structure to promote thinking about gender sensitivity within the R&R programme (as well as the Northern Estate Programme), means there would be significant value in the establishment of an institutional group with this responsibility, to replace the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion. This new group would have the responsibility for holding the Sponsor Body to account on issues of diversity, representation and inclusion.
23. If such a new group is not established, the responsibility for holding the Sponsor Body to account for consideration of diversity should become part of the work of the Women and Equalities Committee.
24. To aid the House in holding the Sponsor Body to account, in whichever format it decides, the Sponsor Body should provide an annual report on the steps taken to promote a diversity and gender sensitive Parliament through the R&R programme.

² At the time of writing there is a motion on the Commons Order Paper under Future Business to appoint Kirsty Blackman MP to the Sponsor Body, which would make her the first woman MP to serve on the Sponsor Body (although the proportion of female MPs will only be 25%). The motion had been due to be moved on Monday 22 March but the Leader of the House declined to move it.

25. Ahead of the Commons vote on the R&R Outline Business Case (OBC) (due late 2022) the new group or the WEC should report to the House on the potential of the OBC to facilitate a gender and diversity sensitive Parliament.
26. The new group (or the WEC) should also formally consider the plans for any decant accommodation for the potential effect on the gender and diversity sensitivity of the institution. The Sponsor Body should be required to publicly respond to the new group or WEC. This should be repeated on an annual basis during the decant, to ensure that opportunities to learn from any changes within temporary accommodation are not lost.

Conclusion

27. The R&R programme is at a critical point. Without explicit political support for exploring the potential effects of R&R (and decant) on the gender and diversity sensitivity of Parliament, this analysis is unlikely to happen, and the opportunity to create a gender sensitive Parliament will be lost.

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