

Explaining Change in Parliaments: Dilemmas of managerial reform in the UK House of Commons

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Paper presented to the PSA Annual Conference
26-28 March 2018, Cardiff City Hall, Cardiff

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Abstract

Explaining parliamentary change and reform has been a significant topic in the sub-field of parliamentary studies. A range of studies have sought to explain how change happens and under what conditions, and the different types of changes that can occur. While this has been able to shed light on a range of issues, the majority of insights depend on institutionalist lenses. In this paper, we hope to demonstrate the value of using an interpretive approach, and specifically the concept of ‘dilemma’ (in tandem with a focus on parliamentary actors’ beliefs and everyday practice) to explain how change occurs. We use the recent appointment of a new Clerk of the House in 2014 as a case study. Specifically, we argue that the process of appointment opened a dilemma for Parliament between conflicting beliefs about the House of Commons Service. In this way, we make a theoretical contribution to understanding political change, in general, and parliamentary reform, in particular; and, an empirical contribution to understanding governance of the House of Commons, something that has not been subject to significant academic study.

Key words: interpretive parliamentary studies, parliamentary reform, managerial reform, dilemmas, parliament, British politics

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Exploring parliamentary change and reform is far from a new topic; it is often at the forefront of debate given the continuing decline in trust in politics and politicians (Hansard Society, 2017). Legislatures are at the epicentre of debates about changing politics and political cultures because they remain the ultimate representative institution on which parliamentary democracies rest. The United Kingdom Parliament is no different in this respect, in which various organisations and individuals have called for reform of the electoral system to the House of Commons, abolition or elections to the House of Lords, changes to scrutiny capacities of parliamentarians, modernisation of procedures, etc. These approaches and debates are necessarily shaped by proponents' views of what is perceived to be wrong with Parliament and rooted often in a belief that the legislature needs to be more democratic, legitimate, or effective in holding the executive to account. Meanwhile, academic analysis of reforms has been centred on the types of reforms that have taken place over time, their possible causes, and their impact (e.g. Flinders, 2002; Kelso, 2009; Russell, 2011). This has often been within a broader frame about the functions of Parliament. At the same time, however, reforms that explore the organisation of Parliament in managerial or administrative terms have been largely missing (though see Yong, 2018). Indeed, we generally know very little about how Parliament is organised and/or the support capacities of parliamentary officials (Crewe, 2018; Geddes and Mulley, 2018; Judge and Leston-Bandeira, 2018). This is a significant oversight because the way that Parliament is administered essential to the conduct of an effective democracy, and the House of Commons Service, specifically, has been subject to considerable and ongoing reforms in recent years.

In this context, this paper seeks to widen perspectives in terms of how we think about parliamentary change both theoretically and empirically, and with specific reference to the UK Parliament. First, we seek to build on a debate that has not been re-evaluated in quite some time, despite ongoing changes (or talk of changes) to the structures of the Houses of Parliament. In particular, we look at the ‘attitudinal’ and ‘contextual’ perspectives to studying parliamentary reform, and the related insights and shortcomings to these approaches. Second, we reinvigorate debates about change through the introduction of insights from the ‘ideational turn’ in political science (Gofas and Hay, 2010). We draw on the work by Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (2003, 2006, 2010) to argue that we can better understand change in legislative institutions through a clash of situated agents’ beliefs, their everyday practices, wider parliamentary traditions, and – most importantly – *the dilemmas that parliamentary actors face in adjudicating between different beliefs, practices and traditions*. This builds on previous work calling for an Interpretive Parliamentary Studies (Geddes and Rhodes, 2018). And third, we apply our theoretical framework to the 2014 appointment of the Clerk of the House of Commons, which was widely debated in Parliament and led to the creation of the Governance Committee to consider the administration of the Commons. This reveals the importance of beliefs in adjudicating between different reform proposals and thereby offers a new perspective on reform in parliamentary settings. In sum, this paper makes a distinctive theoretical contribution to debates about institutional change, as well as a rigorous and original empirical contribution to small but growing research on parliamentary administration (Egeberg *et. al.*, 2014; Neunreither, 2002). This is significant for the study of legislatures because it helps us to better understand the effectiveness of our democratic institutions and how institutional change takes place in complex organisations.

1. Established views on parliamentary reform

Before we begin, it is worth clarifying what we mean by parliamentary reform. Traditionally, the literature has distinguished between two types of change: ‘efficiency’ versus ‘effectiveness’ reforms (sometimes also referred to as ‘modernisation’ and ‘reform’, respectively). Efficiency reforms (or modernisation of Parliament) are summarised in the following way by former MP and academic, Tony Wright (2004, pp.869-70):

[It] is the kind that wants to process business more efficiently and predictably, at more agreeable hours. As such, it is essentially executive-minded, although it wins adherents from those who are frustrated by Parliament's archaisms and so well disposed towards change.

In other words, these reforms exist to streamline the workings of the House of Commons, something which disproportionately benefits the executive. Meanwhile, effectiveness reforms can be understood as those which, according to Wright (2004, p.870), shift the existing balance of power between the executive and the legislature, notably to strengthen Parliament's scrutiny function. This type of reform is less likely to find support from government as these are more likely to detrimentally affect government business.

Though this has been long-established in thinking about reform, Matthew Flinders (2007, pp.177-9) writes that this dual definition 'tends to polarise debate', 'may overlook the existence of incremental change' and 'does little to explain the reasons for change or the framework within which change occurs'. He argues that a third approach to understanding reform, namely 'incremental-bounded reform', can help overcome these limitations. These types of reform 'increase the resources of the House of Commons and thereby its scrutiny capacity but without threatening the executive's control over core processes and power centres and within the broader constitutional configuration of executive government'. One example of such change might be an increase in committee resources, something which happened during the 2001-05 parliament with respect to select committees. These smaller changes then have more substantial consequences at a later stage. Flinders' intervention seeks to contribute to a wider debate about the *causes* of parliamentary reform. This debate is generally marked by two views (which Flinders had sought to overcome): an 'attitudinal' perspective (or 'Norton View'), promoted by Philip (now Lord) Norton (1983, 2000, 2013); and, a 'contextual' perspective, promoted by Alexandra Kelso (2003, 2009) and others. It is worth summarising these.

The so-called 'Norton View' posits a 'change of attitude' by MPs as a 'necessary albeit not sufficient' condition for parliamentary reform (Norton, 1983, p.60). Norton goes on to say that this 'does not reject structural changes but argues rather that an attitudinal change is a prerequisite to effective structural and procedural change' (*ibid.*, p.61). Political will is crucial because MPs already possess all the powers necessary to change executive-legislative relations, and sometimes use that power – or the threat of that power – to defeat government on the floor of the House (Cowley, 2002; Norton, 1980). This political will

can be used to effect change in the House of Commons, too, if MPs desire it (Norton, 1983). Since this initial view was expressed, Norton (2000, p.13) has expanded on it by identifying three core conditions necessary for reform:

One is a window of opportunity. This usually comes at the beginning of a Parliament, before ministers and MPs get bogged down in dealing with a mass of public business. The second is a reform agenda. MPs may favour change but they need a coherent set of proposals to unite behind. Third, there has to be leadership: this may come from the backbenches but may also come from the Leader of the House ... or a combination of both.

These conditions (a window of opportunity, a reform agenda and leadership) have been used to explain the introduction of departmental and cross-cutting select committees in 1979 and reforms to committees in 2010 (Norton, 2013).³

Other scholars, however, have argued that the Norton view is not sufficient to explain parliamentary reform, and that this perspective is unable to explain the lack of reform when those conditions were met (such as during the 2001-05 parliament). Challengers to the attitudinal view have proposed a 'contextual' perspective and argue that, 'it is the political context within which these MPs operate that is frequently the stumbling block to reform, a context characterised by an executive mentality and partisanship' (Kelso, 2003, p.68). For example, Flinders (2002, pp.30-1) argued that 'the supremacy of parliament over the executive is thwarted by the latter's tight party management and procedural control of the House's timetable' and that, in this context, reforming parliamentarians will face significant difficulty in enacting changes. The 'executive mentality' is widespread in the UK and, while it arguably forms part of a much broader political tradition in the UK (Hall, 2011; Judge, 1993), it is particularly incisive in explaining the stability of parliamentary structures.

In addition to the executive mentality, importance is attached to the political party in the organisation of parliamentary and political life. For example, Wright (2004, p.871), suggests:

There is no 'voice of Parliament' that can be collectively orchestrated. Parliament is a place where the parties do permanent battle, and this fundamental reality trumps attempts to build up Parliament itself ... those accounts which say that Parliament

³ Alternative lists of factors that may inhibit or stimulate reform have also been identified, though not integrated in a theoretical perspective (e.g. House of Commons Library, 1997).

should do this or that to make itself more effective fail to understand that there is no 'Parliament', in a collective sense, at all.

Other practitioners have made similar comments. Robin Cook, Leader of the House between 2001 and 2003, and his special adviser at the time, Greg Power (2007), conclude from failures of reform in 2002 that those failures arose in part because MPs are both parliamentarians *and* party politicians. Consequently, MPs are 'deeply ambivalent as to whether we want Parliament reaching independent decisions or whether we want our party securing its own agenda' (Cook, quoted in Kelso, 2003, p.71). And, while some reforms did occur during his tenure as Leader of the House, Flinders (2007, p.174) argues that these were 'shaped and controlled within a broader context of executive government'.

So, how can change be explained? According to Wright (2004, p.871), 'it is a matter of exploiting cracks and getting wedges into doors'. This echoes Flinders' idea of 'incremental-bounded reform', in which smaller changes may lead to larger ones in future (see above). Elsewhere, Kelso's articulation of the contextual view has been informed by Historical Institutionalism (HI), in which 'institutions constrain politics and structure political battles' (Kelso, 2009, p.11). Actors are perceived as rule-following, which means that they tend to abide by the rules set by institutions. Institutional rules become entrenched over time, and this 'path dependency' means that institutions act in the future as they have done in the past. Relatedly, 'sunk costs' means that actors become invested in pre-existing rules and change will only occur once sunk costs become too great. Although this approach is very good at explaining stability, Kelso (2009, pp.12-14) identifies at least three ways to explain change. First, punctuated equilibrium, which argues that longer periods of stability are punctuated by change as a result of crisis or exogenous shock. Second, critical junctures, 'which assumes constancy or inertia until there is a confluence of circumstances that are together capable of provoking change'. Third, policy learning, in which 'change happens because of a destabilisation of the institutional framework concurrent with a weakening of the institutional barriers to change'. The central point of HI is that institutional change is difficult but not impossible (see also: Armitage, 2012).

While the HI approach can be linked effectively to explain the endurance of parliamentary institutions (as Kelso's work attests), a noticeable missing element of the approach is a purposive role for agency (Bell, 2011, pp.885-6). So, other approaches have focused their analysis of change on parliamentary actors. For example, Power (2007, p.493) argues that,

if parliamentary reform is to happen, it has to be driven by the Leader of the House of Commons. His analysis revolves around the critical importance of the Leader between 2001 and 2005, and his relationship to other actors in the House (e.g. Chief Whip, cabinet colleagues). Elsewhere, feminist scholars have argued the importance of ‘critical actors’ (as opposed to ‘critical mass’) in achieving parliamentary change to make institutions more accessible and increase the focus on women’s issues (Chaney, 2012; Childs and Krook, 2009).

Although these perspectives overcome the limitation of Historical Institutionalism’s often marginalisation of agency, these perspectives also re-open the question over the precise relationship between parliamentary actors and their political context – and thus returns us to Norton’s view about the importance of parliamentarians’ will to consider change, and the three conditions necessary for change to occur. In going full circle and back to the attitudinal perspective, we argue that there is an element of truth to both the attitudinal and contextual accounts. However, we come to this view because we believe that the debate over these two perspectives presents a false dichotomy. Instead, we wish to propose that parliamentary reforms should be understood through the articulation and adjudication of ideational dilemmas, which we develop in the next section. We do this not only because we want to integrate both actors *and* context in our perspective, but also because the current debate only touches on parliamentary reform in the sense of reforming the functions and powers of the House of Commons (almost exclusively *vis-à-vis* the executive), and does not include managerial reform (e.g. the executive mentality and partisanship do not apply to managerial reforms in the same way). It also only rarely touches on House of Lords reform. Finally, we believe that interpretive political science has much to offer parliamentary studies as a sub-discipline, and so we want to use this opportunity to contribute towards an emerging ‘Interpretive Parliamentary Studies’ (Geddes and Rhodes, 2018), and broaden how we can understand and explain parliamentary change.

2. An interpretive approach to understanding parliamentary reform

For a number of years, political science has undergone a reflexive turn and embraced the importance of ideas (Wagenaar, 2011). A significant contribution to the ideational turn in political analysis can be seen through the work of Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (2003,

2006, 2010). While their work has arguably made the most important impact the literature on public administration, the approach has recently begun to make inroads into parliamentary studies (which has been largely resistant to theoretical reflection) (Geddes and Rhodes, 2018). This complements other scholars that have sought to explore parliamentary practices and behaviours from anthropological or constructivist perspectives (Crewe, 2005; Leston-Bandeira, 2016; Rai, 2015). However, these approaches have not yet been used to explain parliamentary change. We use this section to outline precisely what an interpretive approach can offer to understanding parliamentary change.

2.1. Theoretical principles and concepts

Our approach is rooted in an anti-foundationalist philosophy, which ‘asserts that none of our knowledge is certain’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010, p.42). Anti-foundationalism suggests that there is, as the name implies, no foundation or essence to reality. In contrast to positivists, who assert that objective meanings are ‘out there’ in the world waiting for us to find them, anti-foundationalists take as their starting point the principle that social (and political) realities are constructed through our experiences of and engagement with what we perceive of the world. This philosophical assumption has clear implications for our understanding of objectivity, facts and truth. Facts are not ‘given’ to us, but ‘intersubjectively constructed’ (Bevir, 1999, pp.78-126; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006, pp.26-30). This approach is important because it stresses the significance of individuals’ interpretations to make sense of their everyday lives – including, for example, in parliamentary institutions. Simply put, we must take seriously the way in which political actors interpret the world around them. Individuals do not have given interests, as rational choice theorists (for example) assume; they are constructed, learned, shared, debated. In this way, ideas (or beliefs) become the basic block of analysis and, as such, attributes a causal role to ideas, beliefs and desires.

A further implication from the social construction of realities is that individuals are not autonomous from their social context. Ideas and beliefs do not arise in a vacuum. However, this does not mean that we need to necessarily marginalise agency (as institutionalist approaches can sometimes do). As Bevir and Rhodes (2010, p.74) point out:

To accept agency is to imply people have the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own, and in so doing they can transform the social background. So, agency is possible, but is always situated in a particular context.

By context or social background, the authors use the concept of ‘traditions’. Traditions are the settings in which agents find themselves; the ‘situation’ in ‘situated agency’. They are webs of belief that act as organising perspectives for individuals, groups and other political actors. There are echoes of such notions as episteme, social structure or paradigms. However, we do not argue that traditions ‘fix’ behaviour. Rather, traditions offer starting points to political actors, who are under no obligation to follow a tradition. That said, traditions can be sticky in that they suggest what is acceptable or legitimate within a particular web of beliefs (for a discussion: Bevir and Rhodes, 2008; Glynos and Howarth, 2008; Smith, 2008).

Beliefs and traditions play out through everyday practices. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that practices can be conceived of actions that exhibit a pattern, which may remain stable across time. They are intimately linked to the beliefs and traditions surrounding actors both in parliamentary settings and beyond because those beliefs and traditions manifest themselves in everyday life, and often through routines, rituals and so on.

How does their interpretive approach explain change? For this, the authors rely on the concept of ‘dilemmas’. It is rooted in Mark Bevir’s *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, in which he argues that (1999, pp.221-2):

People develop, adjust, and transform traditions in response to dilemmas, where dilemmas are authoritative understandings that put into question their existing webs of belief. Dilemmas prompt changes of belief because they consist of new beliefs and any new belief necessarily poses a question of the agent’s webs of belief.

So, a dilemma comes about through a tension between two or more beliefs but, crucially, it depends on an actor interpreting two (or more) beliefs in this way. Without interpreting two beliefs as posing questions for each other, beliefs may co-exist in contradictory harmony. However, and once an actor (or multiple actors) finds two beliefs in conflict, a ‘dilemma’ arises. In this case, the actor needs to adjudicate between those beliefs. They are resolved creatively by actors in different ways. New beliefs could: (i) be discarded as unconvincing, (ii) be accommodated within a web of beliefs, or (iii) replace an older belief.

Table 1. The interpretive approach: concepts

Concept	Definition
To decentre	To decentre is to unpack practices as the contingent beliefs and actions of individuals, challenging the idea that inexorable or impersonal forces drive politics.
Narratives	Narratives are a form of explanation that works by relating actions to individual beliefs and desires that produce them. This allows us to capture how events happened in the past or are happening today.
Situated agency	Individuals are situated in wider webs of beliefs (traditions), which largely shape their beliefs. Yet they keep a capacity for agency in that they respond to traditions, beliefs and dilemmas in novel ways.
Beliefs	Beliefs are the basic unit of analysis, in that they are the interpretations of individuals of their world and their surroundings.
Traditions	Traditions are ‘webs of belief’, and form the background of ideas in which agents find themselves. Agents will adopt beliefs from traditions as a starting point, but may amend them.
Dilemmas	A dilemma is an idea that stands in contradiction to other beliefs, posing a problem. Dilemmas are resolved by accommodating the new belief in the present web of beliefs or replacing old beliefs with new beliefs.
Practices	A set of actions that often exhibits a stable pattern across time. Practices are the ways in which beliefs and traditions manifest themselves in everyday life.

This could then lead to ripple effects because it could now come into conflict with other beliefs within a wider web. This is how – incrementally, slowly and painfully – traditions and practices change over time. Alternatively, the introduction of a single new belief could have such substantive effects that the coherence of whole traditions is ripped apart. Dilemmas are fluid, indeterminate, and usually creative responses to traditions and beliefs in conflict. Importantly, there is always agency involved: change happens only after agents interpret beliefs, practices or traditions in conflict with one another. This also means that dilemmas can come from anywhere; any type of experience and any type of belief can be an authoritative question to an established web of beliefs.

In sum, the interpretive approach is based on taking ideas seriously in political analysis. We must focus analysis on actors’ interpretations of the world around them in order to explain their behaviour. We do so through a conceptual toolkit of situated agency, traditions (or webs of belief), everyday practices and dilemmas (summarised in Table 1). This gives us conceptually rich ways by which we can analyse parliamentary behaviour as part of an ‘Interpretive Parliamentary Studies’ (Geddes and Rhodes, 2018). Most importantly for this paper, we can use the concept of dilemma to explore parliamentary

change. It is worth going into a little more detail about this concept in order to link to the debate about parliamentary reform.

2.2. Dilemmas in parliamentary politics

Examples of dilemmas are not difficult to find in Bevir and Rhodes' work. They talk about dilemmas caused by the rise of Thatcherism and the dilemmas that this caused for the Labour Party (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003); how the National Health Service was reformed between 1948 and 2001 as a result of unresolved tensions over various beliefs (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006); and to explain the resignation of a secretary of state (Rhodes, 2011, pp.244-79). However, while the concept is used extensively, it is not often a central concept through which interpretive analysis is conducted (Geddes, 2018; see also Hay, 2011, pp.178-9). That is to say, while dilemmas are identified as the *cause* of change, the *process* of change is not explored. So, the concept is under-theorised and we seek to develop it here by drawing on Geddes (2018) and the concept of 'problems' and 'problematizations'.

As a wider philosophical and empirical literature has acknowledged, 'problems' are a useful way to think about policy and political change (Colebatch *et. al.*, 2010; Gusfield, 1981; Hoppe, 2010). This literature suggests that 'problems' are often a framework through which political issues are discussed, disseminated and adjudicated. Dilemmas in legislatures, like problems, can be thought about as making a problem out of otherwise unquestioned beliefs, practices and traditions; it is to put into question parliamentarians' taken-for-granted truths. Social order, as the previous sub-section explained, is sustained through beliefs and practices. So, in questioning those, dilemmas can destabilise social orders and parliamentary practices. However, they inevitably do so within existing webs of belief (or parliamentary traditions, such as an executive mentality or partisanship). As such, we need to understand how actors make sense of contradictions and tensions of beliefs and practices as they navigate their social worlds. This means exploring how dilemmas are framed because actors use their pre-existing beliefs, practices and traditions to interpret dilemmas. As a result, we can say that dilemmas develop the very conditions within which possible responses can be given by limiting what is perceived to be an acceptable, legitimate or even imaginable question to ask.

In order to explore how dilemmas unfold, we additionally need to look at how situated agents (MPs, peers and staff) act on dilemmas in their everyday lives. We need to focus on how agents deal with problems to explain how change occurs. This means exploring how situated agents run into dead ends, other problems, conflicts and confrontations with each other. This relational focus means that we need to take conflicts between actors – and thus, power relationships – seriously. Framing dilemmas in particular ways are thus also an act of power. Power has the ability to sharpen, blur, strengthen, weaken and link policies and arguments together. It is a force that mediates a rupture of contesting practices and traditions and, consequently, sets boundaries for how dilemmas may be resolved.

In sum, what these insights demand is that dilemmas are explored as they unfold, through a focus on how they are framed by actors and how those actors relate to each other (for a discussion, see Geddes, 2018). With respect to parliamentary change, it suggests that we need to focus on the ideas, beliefs and passions of situated agents to make sense of their interpretations of the proper role and function of parliamentary institutions and/or procedures. As part of this, we must also look to the wider parliamentary traditions in which those ideas and beliefs arise. This approach thereby seeks to overcome the dichotomy of an ‘attitudinal’ and ‘contextual’ perspective to parliamentary reform (as described in the previous section) because we argue that both matter in explaining change. Change itself can only occur once parliamentarians interpret something as a dilemma. We need to study why this dilemma emerges with references to the beliefs, practices and traditions of parliamentary actors. In order to explain the consequences of a dilemma in terms of parliamentary change, we refer to everyday practices and power relationships of competing actors. These are crucial to explain how dilemmas are framed and what solutions can be given, as well as how actors seek to resist and promote change. In order to apply these insights in a detailed way, we turn to our case study.

3. Case study: appointing a new Clerk of the House

At 12.37pm on Wednesday, 30 April 2014, David Cameron sat back down at the end of a lengthy Prime Minister’s Questions. While the chamber would usually empty immediately, it remained full for a rare Speaker’s Statement. The Speaker, John Bercow, rose to his feet and announced to the House that he had received a letter from the Clerk and Chief Executive of the Commons, Sir Robert Rogers (now Lord Lisvane), in which

Rogers stated: ‘I have indicated to Her Majesty The Queen that I wish to surrender my Patent as Clerk of the House at the end of August this year’ (HC Deb, 30 April 2014, c829). Rogers spoke of serving in ‘one of the best jobs in the world’, expressing gratitude for the support of MPs. As the Speaker read out his letter, Rogers was sitting at the Table directly in front of him, with the Clerk Assistant David Natzler, and Principal Clerk of the Table Office, Paul Evans. In line with convention, Rogers did not speak while his letter was read out, but kept a straight face, albeit with a hint of emotion when MPs responded to the letter with a spontaneous and sustained outburst of applause — a contravention of the rules of the chamber, on which Rogers had been the principal adviser. The Speaker noted, ‘it may be unparliamentary, but it bears eloquent testimony to the esteem in which Robert is held’.

Few could have been aware that this fateful Wednesday in April 2014 marked the beginning of a significant dilemma for how the House of Commons is run. Over the summer of 2014, the recruitment for the next post-holder was subject to significant controversy, ultimately halting a controversial recruitment process and challenging the authority of the Speaker, instituting a one-off but wide-ranging investigation into House of Commons administration, and eventually splitting the dual Clerk/Chief Executive role into two posts. It was not until March 2015 that a new Clerk of the Commons and a further six months, September 2015, when the inaugural Director General was appointed (for a full timeline of events, see Table 2). Why did Rogers’ resignation spark a dilemma in the House of Commons? And how did this dilemma unfold and come to be framed? Through a narrative analysis, that is the subject of our empirical section.

3.1. The roots of a dilemma: how to find a Clerk

Shortly after Rogers’ resignation, the media began to speculate as to why he stepped down after less than three years’ in the role. According to many reports, the relationship between the Clerk and the Speaker had deteriorated, and it was rumoured to be one of the reasons for his departure (Watt, 2014a). These discussions fed into a larger debate about the Speaker’s working methods, style of leadership and modernising priorities in the House of Commons. This would form a significant issue for the recruitment process, which was described in *The Mail on Sunday* as a ‘worldwide search’ for a new chief executive to drive forward the Speaker’s ‘controversial plans to commercialise the Palace of Westminster’ (Owen, 2014). It was stated that the successful candidate would need to combine business

experience with constitutional expertise: arguably the origin of the dilemma. Debates over the summer focused on the extent to which the Clerk should be primarily concerned with procedural matters or with managerial reform to update and improve the effectiveness of the House of Commons Service. The reason for this is the dual nature of the role that comes as a result of the evolution of the Clerk and Chief Executive of the House of Commons.

The role of Clerk has a long history as a procedural adviser to the House, dating back to at least 1363. Holders of the role are appointed by the monarch and cannot be dismissed by MPs or the government, reflecting the impartiality of the role. The post has evolved from a primarily procedural adviser to also include the role of chief executive for the administration. The House of Commons Service is made up of over 2,000 staff across a nine-acre World Heritage site, and a budget of over £200 million per year. In general, the post of Clerk is not high-profile outside Parliament. Within, it is steeped in constitutional importance and the office holder is almost always widely respected. However, could the office holder be both the principal constitutional adviser to the *prima facie* political institution of the United Kingdom while simultaneously running a large-scale organisation? It is this question that was exposed after 30 April.

The recruitment process itself proved to be controversial for some MPs almost immediately after Rogers' resignation was announced. Until 2011, the appointment of the Clerk was made after their predecessor recommended two names to the then-Speaker, who would subsequently make a choice from those candidates. In 2011, a recruitment panel had been appointed to 'trawl' for a new Clerk (HC Deb 4 May 2011, c677; HC Deb, 30 June 2011, c1106). This was done on Speaker Bercow's initiative (HC Deb, 2 Sep 2014, c197W). In 2014, the appointment procedures changed again: the post was advertised in *The Sunday Times* and Saxton Bampfylde, a headhunting organisation, was used – both for the first time. The emphasis of the job description also shifted considerably towards the managerial side of the job, with media reports suggesting an external candidate is favoured – though 'very much against tradition' (Owen, 2014; see also Osborne, 2014). The Speaker was actively involved throughout this process (e.g. HC Deb, 19 Jun 2014, c726W; HC Deb, 23 Jun 2014, c49W), causing the House of Commons Commission to later note that it was 'agreed that, in future, all aspects of recruitment of a Clerk/Chief Executive would be explicitly agreed in advance by the Commission', implying this did not occur in April 2014 (House of Commons Commission, 2014).

Table 2. Timeline of events.

30 April	Sir Robert Rogers' resignation is announced to the House of Commons; media coverage in the following days.
29 May	Headhunters Saxton Bampfylde are appointed to help with the recruitment process
11-24 June	The recruitment of the new clerk is raised on the floor of the House for the first time, by Simon Burns MP. Multiple Written Parliamentary Questions follow.
29 June	Rumours begin to circulate that Carol Mills is the perceived front-runner to replace Sir Robert Rogers.
16 July	MPs are given an opportunity to pay tribute to Sir Robert Rogers in the Commons.
01 August	The recruitment panel recommends that Carol Mills is appointed as the new Clerk/Chief Executive.
17 August	Growing media coverage of the issue is sparked by an email from Rosemary Laing, Clerk of the Australian Senate, in which she allegedly expresses surprise at the choice of Mills.
18 August	An increasing number of people call for the recruitment process to be paused, including former Speaker, Betty Boothroyd, in an interview for the BBC World at One radio programme.
20 August	Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, Bernard Jenkin, calls for the process to be delayed; meanwhile, former Clerk of the Commons, Max Davidson, publishes opinion piece in <i>The Telegraph</i> . Over the coming days, more MPs from across the Conservative and Labour parties make their unease public.
23 August	The chair of the Liaison Committee, Sir Alan Beith, writes to the Leader of the Commons in support of a pause of the recruitment process.
26-27 August	With only a few days before the Commons is due to meet – without a new Clerk – the newspaper coverage of the issue increases. The Speaker has let it be known that he would be willing to split the role of Clerk and Chief Executive to resolve the issue, but this is not enough to stem the growing tide of MPs that oppose the appointment. Some suggest that this has become a confidence issue for the Speaker.
01 September	As the Commons returns, the Speaker announces a 'modest pause' in the recruitment process. The Speaker's statement does not quell further Points of Order raised in the chamber on the issue.
02 September	Jesse Norman and Bernard Jenkin apply for a debate on a motion calling for a select committee to be established in order to examine the governance of the House of Commons. The application is successful.
10 September	The Commons debates the proposed new Select Committee on Governance of the House, and agrees the motion to appoint the committee. It is tasked to look at the allocation of tasks for Clerk and Chief Executive, as well as wider issues of transparency in House governance. It begins its work in mid-October, chaired by Jack Straw.
17 December	The Governance Committee publishes its report, setting out a package of reforms. Amongst other things, this includes terminating the current recruitment exercise and splitting the procedural and management functions of the Clerk.
22 January 2015	The House of Commons debates the report and endorses the recommendations without a vote.
23 March	The Speaker announces that the Queen has approved the appointment of David Natzler to the position of Clerk of the Commons (who had been interim Clerk since last September).
14 September	The first Director General, Ian Ailles, is appointed, becoming responsible for the delivery of effective and efficient services to MPs and the public.

The recruitment process and possible applicants were raised indirectly during the July 2014 House of Commons debate on the retirement of Sir Robert Rogers. On the whole, the nature and tone of the debate was positive, with most Members paying tributes to Rogers, and noting his dexterity at fulfilling the twin roles of Clerk and Chief Executive, which require ‘totally different portfolio of skills’ from each other (HC Deb 16 Jul 2014, c893). During the debate, others noted the procedural prowess required to be Clerk. For example, Sir Peter Tapsell, the then Father of the House, described Rogers as ‘a man of immense scholarship, steeped in a life dedicated to the rules, practices and conventions of this House’ and warned that ‘any Clerk of the House who was not so equipped would leave the Speaker of the day hopelessly floundering in a crisis’ (HC Deb, 16 Jul 2014, c892). Jacob Rees-Mogg MP explained that MPs want a Clerk that is ‘steeped in the history’ of Parliament (HC Deb 16 Jul 2014, c903).

By this point, it is clear that the emerging ideas over the role of Clerk of the Commons are settling: on the one side, there is a greater push towards a more managerially-focused appointee that would be able to modernise a House of Commons Service; but, on the other side, traditionalists are increasingly uneasy about a recruitment process that may appoint an outsider without the necessary constitutional and procedural skillset required to be Clerk.

3.2. A clash of beliefs: attempts to appoint an outsider

On 1 August, after weeks of speculation, news breaks that Carol Mills is to be appointed Clerk and Chief Executive of the House. She had previously been in the Australian Parliament for two years as Director of Parliamentary Services. In the coming days, an increasing number of MPs call on the Speaker to pause the process citing Mills’ lack of procedural expertise. In mid-August, an email from the Clerk of the Australian Senate, Rosemary Laing, leaks. She describes Mills as someone ‘without parliamentary knowledge or experience’ (Watt, 2014b). The issue explodes: former Speaker, Betty Boothroyd, tells the BBC’s World at One radio programme that Mills is ‘totally out of her depth. She has no experience, she has no knowledge of the constitutional role of a parliamentary clerk’ (BBC Radio 4, 2014). A range of other commentators (Richards, 2014), former parliamentary staff (Davidson, 2014) and MPs (Duncan, 2014; Norman, 2014a, 2014b) add their voices to the debate. The dilemma is no longer about Carol Mills, but two-pronged. The first issue is about the authority of the Speaker, and thus a personal battle

over his working methods and style of leadership as first chair of the House of Commons. By July the complaints go wider than the usual suspects; there are rumours about an Early Day Motion being drafted to replace him (Savage and Elliott, 2014), and in August, Sir Alan Duncan MP, a long-standing ally of the Speaker publishes a letter to Bercow, in which he warns ‘your recommendation is starkly at odds with the view of the House’ (Duncan, 2014).

The second issue is a broader debate about the administration of the House of Commons. Once again, the Speaker’s personal approach is relevant here. For Bercow, creating a modern House of Commons Service requires someone with management experience and, quite simply, someone that looked and felt different from the previous Clerk. What could be any more different than a comparatively young, Australian woman to replace an older bearded man who had worked in the same institution for 42 years?⁴ For proponents of reform, the House of Commons Service needed a more diverse workforce and undergo changes to ensure more efficient service for Members. Bercow is not alone in supporting this reforming agenda (e.g. comments made by MPs in tributes to Rogers on 16 July (HC Deb, 16 Jul 2014, cc886-905); Points of Order raised on 01 September (HC Deb, 01 Sep 2014, cc61-6); and the recruitment panel that, after all, recommended Mills).

On the other side were those that believed in a more traditional House of Commons Service and role for the Clerk to focus on the procedural side, as summarised in Betty Boothroyd’s comments, for example, and Jesse Norman MP’s (2014b) opinion piece in *The Daily Mail*. It also included others that called for a pause in the recruitment process, including the Chair of the Liaison Committee and many other MPs. David Heath MP, summed up the feeling of the time between ‘two camps in respect of where the responsibility should lie, which might be described as the chief executive-ites and the Clerk-ites’ (HC Deb, 22 Jan 2015, c450). The process of recruiting a new Clerk turned into a dilemma, pitting contrasting views about how Parliament should be managed, and specifically about the primary role of the Clerk and Chief Executive.

This dilemma was tested to breaking point. With tempers high among MPs on the first day after the summer recess, the Speaker announces a ‘modest pause in the recruitment

⁴ Indeed, much of the press coverage emphasised Ms Mills’ nationality, and some even referred to her as ‘an Aussie Sheila’, a derogatory term (Black Dog, 2014; Kidd, 2014). It was also implied in the press that David Natzler’s schooling at Eton had caused him to be rejected in favour of a more ‘politically correct’ candidate (Carlin, 2014).

process' while all issues raised over the previous two months can be explored; he is heckled by Conservative MPs during his statement (HC Deb, 01 Sep 2014, c1). The statement was not enough, and a range of Points of Order were raised later in the day (and on subsequent days) to clarify the nature, extent and length of the pause, as well as the future of the post. By this point, the dilemma was no longer primarily about the role of the Clerk and Chief Executive, the framing expanded to include wider issues about the modernisation of the House of Commons Service and the role of the Speaker.

3.3. Looking beyond the Clerk to governance of the House

The expansion of the framing became clear the following day (2 September 2014), when two MPs (Jesse Norman and Bernard Jenkin) apply to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate on the establishment of a time-limited select committee to examine the governance of the House of Commons and the allocation of responsibilities for the role of Clerk (Backbench Business Committee, 2014). The debate takes place on 10 September, on a cross-party motion co-sponsored by the Chair of the Liaison Committee, Sir Alan Beith, demonstrating the widespread concern among MPs about the governance issue. Speaking to the motion, Norman says that the 'debate arises because of widespread concern among Members in all parts of the House that the process governing the appointment of the next Clerk of the House was seriously flawed' (HC Deb, 10 Sept 2014, c1014). Norman goes on to list a number of facts which he says 'are not in dispute', including that Mills 'was not qualified for the specifically constitutional and procedural functions exercised by the Clerk' and that she 'was, in effect, recruited for a job that did not then exist as such, that of chief executive of this House' (HC Deb, 10 Sept 2014, c1015). Norman's statement re-frames the dilemma about the appointment of Clerk to a wider issue about 'the proper governance of this House', which is 'a matter of enormous public importance' (HC Deb, 10 Sept 2014, c1016). Several MPs highlight frustrations with the current governance system and call for the administration to be made fit for the 21st century. A member of the recruitment panel, Margaret Hodge MP, is forthright in responding to criticism of the process; arguing that the row has arisen because MPs are downplaying the importance of the Chief Executive role. Mrs Hodge argues that 'we overspent massively on the building of Portcullis House, yet managing capital projects seems less important than who is sitting in a chair in the Chamber' (HC Deb, 10 Sept 2014, c1033). What this debate demonstrates is the different ideas and beliefs that MPs have over the role of Clerk, specifically, and Commons governance, generally.

The Governance Committee is swiftly established. An initial dilemma over a specific post in the House of Commons administrative structure was re-framed into an inquiry about the governance of the House of Commons, with a range of contrasting ideas and beliefs between MPs, parliamentary staff, academics and other interested parties – as shown in the written and oral evidence received by the committee. For example, a need for more diversity among the senior staff was argued by Keith Vaz MP, who said the Clerks had made ‘very little progress’ on diversity in 27 years: ‘It has taken them a long time to get a woman Clerk, and women Clerks of Committees. I can’t think of a single ethnic minority Clerk of a Committee’. He added that the clerks ‘should reflect the whole of the UK’ (Governance Committee, 2014c, Q503).

The final report is published on 17 December, with a package of recommendations to ‘address the immediate problem of the appointment of a new Clerk of the House and include necessary reforms to the governance of the House’ (Governance Committee, 2014a). The committee recommend that ‘the “paused” recruitment process be formally terminated’ immediately and call for the creation of a new post of Director General of the House of Commons, who will formally report to the Clerk of the House (who will remain Head of the House Service) but with the two posts acting together as a partnership (Governance Committee, 2014a, pp.73-8). The report is debated on 22 January 2015, when the expanded framing of the dilemma is emphasised again: not only the UK constitution, but also the UK government and parliaments across the Commonwealth rely on the procedural expertise of the Clerk (HC Deb, 22 Jan 2015, c442). The Committee’s recommendations are agreed without a vote.

Three months later, the new Clerk, David Natzler – an internal candidate – was appointed (HC Deb, 23 Mar 2015, c1119) and a further six months later Ian Ailles, an external candidate, becomes the first Director General, tasked with ‘the delivery of effective and efficient services to MPs and the public’ (UK Parliament, 2015).

3.4. Managerial reform and the interplay of beliefs, traditions and practices

The resignation of Sir Robert Rogers, and the subsequent row about the role of the Clerk became a ‘rude surprise’ in the language of Rhodes (2011, p.245). Many MPs reported that they had expected Rogers to stay longer in post, and it is apparent that little thought or

preparation had been given to either the recruitment process or any potential changes to the role. The uncertainty created by the resignation did not automatically mean a crisis however; Rhodes (2011, p.245) argued that ‘whether a rude surprise becomes a crisis depends on whether the actors so define it’. The previous subsections indicate that a range of factors were at play: (i) beliefs over the role of Clerk; (ii) governing traditions in the Commons; and (iii) practices of the actors involved (in particular, the style of the Speaker), wrapped in power relationships. We cover each in turn.

First, and most important, competing beliefs over the role of Clerk, as covered extensively in the previous sub-sections. The debate was informed and shaped by a variety of ideas and beliefs, which were themselves informed by different traditions in the House of Commons over governance arrangements. This brings us to the second point: as the summer progressed, MPs’ concerns went wider than the specifics of the recruitment for Rogers’ successor into a more general concern about House of Commons administration. For some, there was a perceived need for greater managerialism and professionalism in running House services. For example, Jenkin argued that it ‘really is time to have a root-and-branch look at how we run the facilities of this House in support of the work that Members undertake on behalf of their constituents and on behalf of the country’ (Backbench Business Committee, 2014). This was reinforced by comments from Peter Hain MP (HC Deb, 01 Sep 2014, c62) and Hazel Blears MP (HC Deb, 01 Sep 2014, c63), for example, and took place in the context of a growing issue about rebuilding the parliamentary estate (Flinders *et. al.*, 2018).

Others noted caution for wide-ranging reforms of the historical role (e.g. Crispin Blunt, HC Deb, 01 Sep 2014, c63). The arguments of many Members demonstrated the competing beliefs present in the dilemma: they supported change in theory, but believed that any reforms needed to respect the history and traditions around the role of Clerk. Andrew Tyrie MP supported splitting the role to ensure that ‘the Clerk’s role should be fully protected for the purposes of delivering the essential functions of the Clerk, which the House has felt it has depended on for so much of its life, perhaps for hundreds of years’ (Governance Committee, 2014b, Q717). This was often linked to scepticism about claims that reforms entailed ‘modernisation’: Margaret Beckett MP stressed her experiences of driving forward administrative reforms in the Commons but told MPs that ‘no proposal merely by being labelled “modernisation” will thereby gain my support’ (HC Deb, 10 Sept, c1018). Jack Straw, Chair of the Governance Committee, paid tribute to Rogers’

‘considerable radicalism—meaning not rampant, mad modernisation, but sensible reform’. The position of this camp was summarised by Jenkin in the January 2015 debate, when he described himself as a ‘traditionalist’ but who was also opposed to ‘business as usual’ (HC Deb, 22 Jan 2015, c414). These Members were not opposed to any reform, but demonstrated how any reform proposals were bound to create a clash of competing beliefs. This was in no doubt exacerbated by the Speaker’s innovations, including departing from traditions in the recruitment process: in the use of head-hunters, an external advert, the composition of the selection panel and the job description (e.g. HC Deb, 10 Sept 2014, c1021). These beliefs were informed by longer traditions over the role of Speaker and Clerk, and more general voices that opposed the reform agenda of the Speaker since 2009. As such, the dilemma over appointing a new Clerk was also about the practices, personalities and power relationships of key individuals, and brings us to our third theme.

The style of chair in John Bercow was – and continues to be – divisive. It should come as no surprise that the main sources that identified the Clerk appointment as a crisis were longstanding critics of the Speaker (e.g. *The Daily Mail*, *The Mail on Sunday*, Guido Fawkes blog, etc.). An early source of debate was the relationship between Rogers and Bercow. However, as these specific issues receded, the wider issue of accountability of the Speaker became an issue. Members frequently used Points of Order, but this was proving inadequate, especially when Deputy Speakers were in the chair (e.g. HC Deb, 2 Sep 2014, c191). Moreover, the spokesperson for the House of Commons Commission is not its chair, i.e. the Speaker; a problem of accountability when the Speaker personally identifies himself with an issue. This therefore suggests that everyday practices themselves played out in such a way that exacerbated the dilemma over who should be Clerk and, perhaps more importantly, who should be in control over the recruitment process. The power relationship between MPs and the Speaker became an issue: the Speaker was viewed as acting beyond his authority, and was reminded by a predecessor, Betty Boothroyd, that he was a servant, not master of the House (Coates, 2014). In his evidence to the Governance Committee, Duncan warned that ‘the Speaker is now being asked to do far too much and may, indeed, have changed the nature of the speakership, without the authority of the House, to do things in the way he chooses’, a development that, he said, had not been debated in the House (Governance Committee, 2014c, Q493). A final power imbalance is between parliamentary staff and elected Members. Though this goes slightly beyond the

purview of this paper, it is interesting to note that Sir Robert Rogers himself declined to publicly comment on the relationship between him and the Speaker (Wintour, 2014).

In sum, the appointment of a new Clerk became a dilemma over contrasting beliefs over the role and purpose of Clerk of the Commons. These beliefs drew on wider sets of traditions that coexisted uneasily within the House of Commons, namely between the need to improve managerial capacity, contrasted with the belief that the constitutional role must maintain primacy. These beliefs and traditions clashed through everyday practices between different actors on the floor of the House and behind the scenes over the summer and autumn of 2014, and wrapped in power relationships and personalities of the different actors involved.

4. Concluding remarks

What can we learn from the above case study? It is clear that parliamentary change is dependent on actors' beliefs and often wrapped up in power relationships between different actors. We make three general conclusions.

First, the announcement of Rogers' resignation opened a dilemma of contrasting beliefs over the role of Clerk and Chief Executive. Although this was the root of the dilemma, the beliefs drew on wider traditions over the purpose of the House of Commons Service and its management, and it is this clash of traditions – clerks as managers versus clerks as procedural guardians – around which the dilemma played out. The ripple effects are still felt through a changed administrative structure and ongoing reforms to the House of Commons Service (Executive Committee, 2016).

Second, the dilemma opens up further issues that go beyond the purview of this paper. For example, what accountability mechanisms exist for the Speaker and his decisions? The use of Points of Order and Early Day Motions suggest that current mechanisms do not work effectively. To take another example, the dilemma opens an issue over the role of parliamentary staff more generally and their ability to serve MPs adequately (especially given the evidence received by the Governance Committee). The debate over the Clerk showed hints of a need for greater diversity and further modernisation to serve MPs. Both

of these institutions, the Speakership and the House of Commons Service, remain significantly under-researched, and we would suggest deserve more attention.

Third and finally, the empirical case study opens a new way of studying parliamentary change. Using the concept of 'dilemmas' allows us to focus on a range of issues and overcomes some of the problems identified in the theoretical discussion of this paper about how change occurs and the relationship between structures and actors. We argue that an interpretive approach can offer much here, and can be applied beyond the issue of managerial reform. For example, the MPs' Expenses Scandal created a significant dilemma for parliamentarians because it created a crisis of confidence in Parliament. As the dilemma began to unfold, the crisis over the salaries and expenses turned into one about reforming scrutiny of the executive. The ensuing battle to implement changes to committees was a battle of practices and beliefs between frontbench and backbench politicians (returning to a battle of ideas over which the tradition of an executive mentality almost overturned the reforms) (for a summary, see Russell, 2011). The interpretive approach is therefore able to explain parliamentary reform in a different way that takes account of both beliefs and attitudes of MPs as well as the broader context.

This brings us to the opening sections of this paper about how we can understand parliamentary change more generally. The UK Parliament has not been standing still in recent years, and continues to face significant potential dilemmas (e.g. Brexit and parliamentary scrutiny; how to achieve Restoration and Renewal). However, academic perspectives on parliamentary change have not kept up with these dilemmas. This paper has sought to change this through an extended theoretical discussion of change, and proposed a new way to approach reform. This is significant for gaining new insights as part of a wider interpretive turn in parliamentary studies. We applied this to an original case study on managerial reform. As suggested above, this is an important yet overlooked topic because of the many questions it raises about parliamentary administration, MP-staff relationships, the role of the Speaker, the functioning of effective democratic institutions, and beyond. As such, this paper contributes to these debates, and opens space for further theoretical discussion and new empirical avenues for research.

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