

Rt Hon John Bercow, the Speaker of the House of Commons delivers open lecture: 'House of Commons: On the Road to Recovery?'

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Students, alumni and staff enjoyed an evening with John Bercow, the Speaker of the House of Commons on Thursday 02 February 2012.

Mr Bercow delivered a talk on the "[House of Commons: On the Road to Recovery?](#)" ([/Documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/polsis/news-events/house-commons-speech.pdf](#)), where he provided a brief history of the role of the House of Commons; its recent "decline" in public perception; and the sweeping changes that have taken place to restore the House; the impact of the coalition and his belief that the House can revive further.

A lively audience of students, alumni and staff from the Department of Political Science and International Studies (POLSIS) were joined by previous staff and students from across the University as well sixth form students from local Schools.

The event also marked the creation of the new Chamberlain Club – a new student society at the University of Birmingham created by Tom Heath (President) and Alexander Ford-Cox – both students with the Department of Political Science. Tom and Alex had invited the Speaker to mark their inaugural event.

Mr Bercow's lecture was followed by a lively open question and answer session where he was quizzed on a range of subjects, from his views on foreign policy; changes to Health and Social Care; the US elections; the reform of the House of Lords; and even what advice he would give someone on retaining names and facts for an exam!



Asked if he had any advice to a member of the audience who aspired to be an MP – he suggested that he should "Graduate from this fine Institution with a good degree, take his time and get as much experience as possible", before suggesting that the best MPs were usually in their mid 30s and 40s.

Professor Colin Thain, Head of POLSIS added "This was a unique opportunity to quiz one of the most influential figures in British politics and a great experience for current students. I'm delighted to be able to support such a student focussed event with the Chamberlain Club. Being able to provide current students with the opportunity to meet such an influential person in today's political environment will have a lasting effect – not just for their current studies with us – but for their future too. Our students asked some fantastic questions. As the evening progressed I think the audience warmed to his style and personality. His lecture was thoughtful and made some strong points about the recovery in the Commons' reputation. He was persuasive that structural changes in the role of select committees, the backbench business committee and 'Urgent Questions' had all contributed to a rebalancing in the relationship between Parliament and Executive"

The event was coordinated by the Chamberlain Club with support from POLSIS and the College of Social Sciences. It is one of a number of events taking place in the School of Government & Society during this academic year designed to [enhance the student experience \(/schools/government-society/teaching/enhancing-student-experience/index.aspx\)](#).

Report by Hannah Lane (2nd Year B.A. International Relations)

On Thursday 02 February, the Rt Hon. John Bercow MP, came to talk to students at the University of Birmingham. He has been the Speaker of the House of Commons since June 2009, and prior to his election to the office of Speaker, he was a member of the Conservative Party.

Speaking under the title of 'The House of Commons: on the road to recovery?' **Bercow argued that** 'analysts have been too willing to bury Parliament when the alleged corpse was still perfectly capable of breathing'. **Bercow maintained that Parliament is clearly on the road to recovery** due to the revival of the Commons following the 2010 election. This election led to an influx of new blood as 227 new MPs were inducted into Westminster. The 'Class of 2010' has increased the diversity of the Commons; the new generation are highly technologically capable; are determined to make an impact; and are older and wiser than previous generations. Bercow commented: 'the quality of people is exceptional and again this is true for the Opposition side as well as the Government benches'.

The Speaker also highlighted various reforms which have improved the House of Commons, the most obvious being that Select Committee chairs are now elected by a secret ballot of the whole House of Commons, rather than vetted by Whips beforehand or as a reward for discipline. **The second change is the creation of the Backbench Business Committee**, which now ensures that 'a proportion of the chamber time formerly devoted to matters of concern to backbenchers is now under their control'. This development has encouraged debates and votes to occur on questions which could have been swept under the carpet. Bercow stated that this 'change has been as invaluable to backbenchers as it has been inconvenient to the government'. **The third change is that of 'The Urgent Question'**, which is a parliamentary device by which any Member can ask the Speaker to permit a question to be put to the relevant department that morning or afternoon and if granted the department concerned must provide a minister. This enables matters which are highly topical to be addressed straight away in the chamber. Bercow stated that he has allowed 86 urgent questions since his election, which he believes has restored scrutiny to the Chamber. **He concluded by stating that** 'the evidence demonstrates that it has helped revive the standing of the House by demonstrating its relevance'.



Colin Thain, Professor of Political Science and Director of POLSIS, commented: 'This was an excellent event. Our students invited the Speaker and then asked some fantastic questions. As the evening progressed I think the audience warmed to his style and personality. His lecture was thoughtful and made some strong points

about the recovery in the Commons' reputation. He persuasively made the argument that structural changes in the role of select committees, the backbench business committee and 'Urgent Questions' had all contributed to a rebalancing in the relationship between Parliament and Executive'.

Student reaction to the Speaker was mixed, with a third year History and Political Science student commenting that the speech was 'informative if a little bit dry, he handled his questions well and you can tell he's been in politics for a long time'. However one first year Political Science student enthused after the event that his faith in politicians was gradually being restored.

Read John Bercow's lecture "[House of Commons: On the Road to Recovery?](#)" ([/Documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/polsis/news-events/house-commons-speech.pdf](#))

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