Debates on further reform

Devolution:

Devolution has modified the UK’s heavily centralised constitution by enabling policies that meet the needs and wishes of people at local level. In Northern Ireland devolution has helped to end violence between the unionist and nationalist communities by creating a power-sharing system of government. On the other hand Scottish independence, which was rejected in the 2014 referendum, has been revived since the UK voted to leave the European Union in 2016. The Scottish National Party administration has called for a new referendum on independence. It argues that the wishes of the majority in Scotland, who wanted to remain in the EU, have been ignored. The devolution settlement is uneven in the way it applies to the component parts of the UK. A federal solution would create greater uniformity.

Electoral Reform:

Electoral reform has produced more proportional results in elections to the Scottish parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly. The rejection of AV in the 2011 referendum indicates that there is no public appetite for the extension of reform to Westminster. First past the post usually delivers strong governments with a clear mandate, and it preserves the valuable link between MPs and their constituencies. The under-representation of smaller parties, and the way in which the current system produces governments with a majority of seats but a minority of votes, are arguments for further reform.

House of Lords reform:

We now have an upper house based more firmly on merit and experience. Its greater assertiveness in holding the government to account is an argument for leaving the Lords as it is. An elected chamber would mirror the Commons, producing a house dominated by professional politicians and reducing the range of expertise currently available. On the other hand the Lords lacks democratic legitimacy because none of its members are elected. This is highly unusual in the modern age.

The Human Rights Act:

The 1998 act brought the UK into line with other European states by incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into national law. It provides protection of citizens’ rights without threatening parliamentary sovereignty. As the act is not entrenched, the government can modify the way it operates when required, such as the creation of control orders in 2005. However, there is a case for strengthening the act on the grounds that governments can currently take away important liberties by a simple majority vote in parliament. Conservative critics would like to see the act replaced with a British Bill of Rights, which would make the UK Supreme Court the final judge of citizens’ rights.

Overview: