

Using the past to help us to understand the future of the Palace of Westminster

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i. Introduction

The Palace of Westminster is, in the eyes of Sawyer (2003, p 238), “the emblem of British national identity”. This iconic building, however, is in a state of advanced disrepair, and faces what has been described as “an impending crisis which we cannot reasonably ignore” (Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster (JCPW), 2016, Summary). This ‘impending crisis’ developed over many decades, as the infrastructure serving the building was allowed to go far past its expected lifespan, and essential maintenance neglected. As a result, the building risks a catastrophic fire, flood or failure of the infrastructure, with the potential to cause a significant loss of life and the destruction of a Grade I listed building (JCPW, 2016). Baroness D’Souza, the Lord Speaker between 2011 and 2016, described the building as:

“A fire hazard of such enormous proportions that every day in Parliament thereafter when I visited the cellars, I was to think how lucky we are to have survived another day. The question of urgency was one that was very great.” (Interview, July 2019)

The primary concern is in the depths of the building, described by former Clerk of the Commons, Lord Lisvane, as “the cathedral of horror” (Lisvane, 2015, p 10). An internal survey revealed the perilous state of the basement in 2000, but it was not until early 2018 that a major rebuilding project was approved by the House of Commons and House of Lords. This rebuilding project—the Restoration and Renewal (R&R) of the Palace of Westminster—marks a significant policy change for the institution, moving away from decades of piecemeal alterations and patch-and-mend, towards a strategic plan to develop a parliamentary building “fit for the 21st Century and beyond” (JCPW, 2016a, p 54).

This paper considers on the history of the Palace of Westminster to consider why the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace was approved in early 2018. It draws on 35 semi-structured elite interviews with MPs, Peers and parliamentary officials and extensive textual analysis with the key actors involved in the decision-making process in order to understand how R&R was approved. It first explores the value in a historical approach to understanding this current-day issue. It then moves to offering a brief history of the policymaking decisions relating to the Palace as a legislative building, leading to the identification of five themes which help to explain why both the physical building of the UK Parliament was able to deteriorate to

such an extent and how the 2018 decision was taken. Finally, it will conclude by discussing how these themes continue to delay the planned refurbishment of the Palace to this day.

ii. [Why a historical approach?](#)

This paper uses Historical Institutionalism (HI) to understand the approval of the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster. This section does not attempt to provide a detailed summary of HI (“a sprawling literature characterised by tremendous internal diversity” (Thelen, 1999, p370)); it is necessary simply to note that it is a theoretical approach which “examines how temporal processes and events influence the origin and transformation of institutions that govern political and economic relations” (Fioretism, Falleti and Sheingate, 2016, p 3; see also Hall and Taylor, 1996). Its core theme is that institutions structure interactions and thus influence—but do not determine—outcomes (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). This influence, it is argued, is enacted through path dependency, a concept originally developed in economics, which was adopted in HI to explain “why institutions persist, even after they are no longer efficient” (Fioretism, Falleti, and Sheingate, 2016, p 11). Paths are set during critical junctures, “brief phases of institutional flux” during which radical change is possible (Capoccia and Keleman, 2007, p 341). The exact mechanisms by which path dependency determines future outcomes has been subject to debate. Bevir and Rhodes (2010, p 77) have argued that the “metaphors” of critical juncture and path dependency are used to describes processes and mechanisms that are “entangled” with “determinism, reification and foundationalism”. Historical Institutionalism, (along with the other new institutionalisms), they argue, views “the past through modernist-empiricist and positivist spectacle” (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010, p 26)—a position contested by Hay and Wincott (1998). Bevir and Rhodes base this argument on the definition of path dependency used by Pierson which it is worth setting out in full:

“In an increasing returns process, the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that path. This is because the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time. To put it a different way, the costs of exit—of switching to some previously plausible alternative—rise”. (Pierson, 2004, p 252)

This definition, Bevir and Rhodes claim, relies on a rational decision-making process, in which policies are chosen based on a calculation of the costs of each option. Similarly, Bevir and Rhodes criticise HI for what they perceive to be an implication “that there is a causal mechanism that fixes the content or development of an institution by fixing the agency of the relevant people”: that structure negates agency (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010, p 62). It could be argued that this is a simplistic view of HI, which sets up a strawman in contrast to Bevir and

Rhodes' proposed alternative of an interpretive approach. Contrary to Bevir and Rhodes' arguments, many Historical Institutionalists do not adopt the narrow path dependency definition used by Pierson, choosing instead to consider how past policy decisions influence future decisions through the shaping of traditions and practices, which in turn affect how problems are viewed and the scope of alternative policies (for example, Sager and Thomann, 2016; Weir, 1992; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013). In a parliamentary context Kelso (2009, p 181) described this as "a 'logic of appropriateness' that MPs use as a reference point in order to perceive events around them and to determine their goals and actions". This approach to path dependency enables HI to be used in a more nuanced way than Bevir and Rhodes contest. This paper thus moves to explore the historical roots of Restoration and Renewal.

iii. The evolution of the Palace of Westminster: 1042-2010

When construction of the Palace of Westminster began in 1042, the building was intended to be a royal residence, not a parliamentary building (JCPW, 2016a). It was not until 1258 that the legislature met in the Palace, and not until 1547 that it became the permanent home of the Commons and Lords together (Bryant, 2014; Given-Wilson, 2009). The new status of the Palace reflected less a verdict on its suitability for the role than its availability, following the decision of King Henry VIII move into the newly completed Palace of Whitehall (Blackburn and Kennon, 2003). Within the Palace the Commons adopted the chapel of St Stephen as its chamber, prompting immediate complaints about the acoustics and size—it could not accommodate all of the 379 MPs at the time (Hawkyard, 2009; Bryant, 2014). This worsened: in the early 17th century only half of MPs could be accommodated in the Chamber (Hunneyball, 2009; Seaward, 2009). The overcrowding (also in the Lords) was further exacerbated after the Act of Union with Scotland in 1707, when limited alterations to each chamber still did not provide sufficient room to accommodate the new parliamentarians (Thomas, 1971; Colvin, 1976).

Throughout the 18th century there were numerous, unfulfilled plans to construct a new parliamentary building (Summerson, 1993). The issue was not simply about capacity, but also the dilapidated state of the Palace. In 1789 a select committee reported that:

The House of Lords, Princes Chamber, and Painted Chamber are Buildings of great Antiquity, in many Parts defective [...] All the Buildings east of the House of Lords are in so bad a State, that many of them are in immediate Danger of falling down [...] the other Buildings [...] are in Part built with Timber, liable to rapid Decay, and Accident' from Fire and the remainder extremely old and ruinous. (House of Commons, 1789, p 5)

The Committee concluded unanimously that the risk of fire was “so great” that they were “astonished at their having so long and happily escaped” a major fire within the Palace (House of Commons, 1789, p 8). Plans for a radical refurbishment of the Palace were taken up by Sir John Soane in 1794, at the request of a Lords Select Committee (House of Lords Journal, 30 June 1794; Mordaunt Crook and Port, 1973). The plans were approved by the King, but went no further. The issue of overcrowding in the chambers, however, could not be ignored, particularly when Parliament began discussing plans for a legislative union between Britain and Ireland, which would lead to a substantial increase in the numbers of MPs and Peers (Mordaunt Crook and Port, 1973; Thorne, 1986; Pole-Hennessy, 1975). Only minor alterations to the Commons were made, however, (although the Lords moved to a larger chamber), as the legislative union was viewed solely as a minor expansion of the existing parliament and there was no appetite for a new building (Davis, 2009; Innes, 2003).

As in 1707, these alterations (and further piecemeal changes in the early nineteenth century) failed to address the long-running concerns about the building (Salmon, 2009). The Commons chamber in 1830 was described by the writer James Grant as:

“dark, gloomy, and badly ventilated, and small that not more than four hundred out of the six hundred and fifty-eight members could be accommodated in it with any measure of comfort [...] the members were really to be pitied; they were literally crammed together, and the heat of the house rendered it in some degree a second edition of the Black Hole of Calcutta” (Grant, 1836, p 3).

In the early 1830s Commons attendances increased when MPs debated electoral reform (what would become the Great Reform Act 1832), exacerbating the overcrowding (Port, 1976). Two separate Select Committees, reporting in 1831 and 1833 called for a new chamber for the Commons; the first arguing that “no such alterations or improvements could be made in the present House of Commons as would afford adequate accommodation for the Members,” (House of Commons, 1831, p 3; see also House of Commons, 1833). The Chair of the 1831 Committee, Colonel Trench, warned the Commons that:

“the bad state of the atmosphere, and the exposure to unequal draughts of air had already caused the death of several hon. Members in the course of this arduous Session” (HC Deb, 11 Oct 1831, c555).

Neither Committee, however, could agree on what should replace the existing chamber (HC Deb, 11 Oct 1831, cc555-6; HC Deb, 2 July 1833, c 65). Further, they failed to convince the majority of their colleagues of the need for change (overcrowding was seen, for example, as a temporary problem (HC Deb, 2 July 1833, c65)) and no action was taken. Fifteen months after the Commons voted down the motion for a new chamber, however, the decision was taken out of their hands when fire destroyed almost all of the old Palace (Shenton, 2012).

After decades of inaction and indecision, MPs and Peers could not escape making a decision about their future. Any suggestion that Parliament should leave Westminster, even temporarily, were rejected by the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, who warned the King that such a move risked changing the “character” of the Commons (Melbourne, 1889, p 214). Instead, Parliament chose to stay on site, both temporarily and for the future, in what has been viewed as a commitment to continuity rather than change, reflecting the “inherent Conservatism of the Commons” (Salmon, 2009, p 251). This conservatism can also be seen in the terms set for the public competition to rebuild the Palace, which required an Elizabethan or Gothic design, described by Fredericksen as “a romantic gesture, prompted by the overwhelming response to the destruction caused by the fire, relief that Westminster Hall had survived the blaze, and nostalgia for the lost structures” (Fredericksen, 2000, p 101; see also Quinault, 1992). The winning design, by Charles Barry (which would be complemented by Augustus Welby Pugin’s décor) resulted in a building described by Cannadine (2000, p 15) as “more a royal residence than a democratic legislature”, focusing on the monarch and the Lords, with the Commons in a secondary role.

The construction of the new Palace of Westminster, detailed by Shenton (2016) and Cocks (1977) is a story of delays, overspending and political interference. MPs did not move into their new chamber until 1850 and were immediately critical of its capacity, acoustics, and lighting (White, 1897, Cocks, 1977). On the latter, Colonel Sibthorp warned that:

“Members were in danger of breaking their necks even before dinner, and what might be the case afterwards he could not say [...] The New Palace at Westminster was not a house built for business” (HC Deb, 2 Aug 1850, c727).

Minor alterations were carried out, but it became clear by the mid-1860s that these could not address the lack of capacity for MPs in the chamber. In an echo of events thirty years previously, overcrowding was exacerbated during debates to further extend the franchise, in what would become the Representation of the People (or Second Reform) Act 1867 (HC Deb, 25 Jun 1867, c539). The overcrowding was caused, Thomas Headlam MP suggested, by the combination of a new cohort of MPs, more active than their predecessors and a chamber “built for quite a different state of things to what now existed” (HC Deb, 6 April 1869, c259-66). This view was not shared by many MPs, who viewed the increased attendance as a short-term problem (e.g. HC Deb, 6 April 1869, c284, 293). Crucially these members included the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, who cited his own experience in the Commons during the 1830s and the “perceptible decline” in attendance during subsequent sessions after the Great Reform

Act as a reason not to increase capacity in the chamber (HC Deb, 6 April 1869, c303). On Gladstone's urging, Headlam's motion was withdrawn (HC Deb, 6 April 1869, c305).

As with a century before, concerns about the Palace were not just limited to the size of the chamber. In contrast to the past, however, the frustrations focused on the suitability of the Palace and its facilities, rather than the risk of fire or decay. The new Palace of Westminster was considered unable to cope with the changes that had occurred in the institution of Parliament during the nineteenth century, including a rapid growth in the activity of committees; an increase in the number of constituents visiting Westminster; greater public interest in events at Westminster; the need for government ministers to conduct departmental business in Westminster, and the increased demand for dining space caused by fewer MPs being members of clubs (Port, 1976; Port, 2002, Chester, 1981, House of Commons, 1868; HC Deb, 6 April 1869, cc270,271,300). There was no political appetite to change the building, however, and, while a small minority of MPs continued to push for a new chamber, they gathered even less support than previously (House of Commons, 1894). By the early 20th century such calls for a new chamber were viewed as an inconsequential part of Commons life: the then Minister of the Works commented that such a demand was made at the start of each new parliament, "but in the second session it becomes less urgent; and, as a rule, it wholly disappears in the third" (HC Deb, 24 March 1908, c1309).

It would not be until some 90 years after the new Palace opened that Parliament would consider seriously its future. As in 1834, this was not a result of concerns about overcrowding but a response to a crisis: the damage to each chamber by incendiary bombs on the nights of 10 and 11 May 1941. Both Houses had already temporarily moved to nearby Church House, after plans for an evacuation out of London were made but abandoned at the wishes of MPs (Herbert, 1950). While rebuilding of the Palace would be delayed until the war was concluded, in 1943 the Commons was asked to approve a motion, tabled by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, establishing a select committee to consider rebuilding the chamber and "such alterations as may be considered desirable while preserving all its essential features" (HC Deb, 28 October 1943, cc406-9). In his opening speech Churchill spoke passionately in support of replicating the previous chamber:

"Our House of Commons was destroyed by the violence of the enemy, and we have now to consider whether we should build it up again, and how, and when. We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us. Having dwelt and served for more than 40 years in the late Chamber, and having derived fiery great pleasure and advantage therefrom, I, naturally, would like to see it restored in all essentials to its old form, convenience and dignity." (HC Deb, 28 Oct 1943, c403)

He received a broadly supportive response (e.g. HC Deb, 28 Oct 1943, c410), but not all MPs were convinced by his arguments. Viscountess Astor (one of just nine female MPs at the time) cautioned that Churchill was looking “backwards instead of forwards” (HC Deb, 28 Oct 1943, c417). Colonel De Chair told the House that:

“The Prime Minister, in a pregnant phrase, said, “We shape our buildings and our buildings shape us.” That is very true, but do they shape us so very well? They shaped the Parliaments which twice failed to prevent world wars [...] We may not, therefore, conclude that the type of building we had before will necessarily produce the most sparkling Legislatures in the future.” (HC Deb, 28 October 1943, c463)

When the Commons divided, however, only three MPs voted against the decision to preserve the essential features of the old chamber (HC Deb, 28 Oct 1943, c473). This position was confirmed in 1944 when the select committee reported unanimously, “that the sense of intimacy and almost conversational form of debate encouraged by the dimensions of the old Chamber should be maintained” (House of Commons, 1944, p 4). Calls for a more modern and convenient chamber persisted, but were overwhelmingly defeated (HC 25 Jan 1945, cc1009,1018-20,1067).

After moving into their rebuilt chamber, the focus of MPs’ concerns was the rest of the building. Office space was described in 1954 by Richard Stokes MP as “quite deplorable and inadequate” (HC Deb, 22 July 1954, cc1647-8). In 1960, Barbara Castle MP described the Palace as a “neo-Gothic monstrosity in which we have to work” (HC Deb, 31 March 1960, cc1530,1546). In an echo of debates a century earlier, the changing role of MPs (in this instance, the significant increase in secretarial staff (Ryle, 1994)) had changed the demands on the legislative building. The limited space within the footprint of the building meant that, instead of changes to the Palace itself, the focus was instead on expanding the parliamentary estate. New buildings at 1 Parliament Street and on Bridge Street—Portcullis House—opened in 1991 and 2001 respectively (Blackburn and Kennon, 2003). The focus on new buildings, however, meant that essential maintenance in the Palace was neglected. In 1990 a review of Commons management structure by Sir Robin Ibbes found that Members’ greatest dissatisfaction was with the quality of accommodation within Parliament. Sir Robin also identified that “a substantial amount of work” was necessary “to bring the buildings and facilities up to reasonable standards”, describing the work as “essential” (House of Commons Commission, 1990, p 5). By 1999 a follow-up review by Michael Braithwaite found that accommodation was “no longer the source of dissatisfaction [for MPs] it once was” (House of Commons Commission, 1999, p 72). The focus on member satisfaction perhaps missed the main problem with the building: the derelict state of the infrastructure hidden from view in the basement. Indeed, Braithwaite found that while “half of the ‘neglect’ work” identified by

Ibbs had been completed, “some remaining neglect work was substantial” (House of Commons Commission, 1999, p 71). Rush and Giddings (2011, p 199) have noted that progress on the Ibbs recommendations was “slow”. A “basement condition survey” carried out in 2000 found that that much of the infrastructure would need replacing before 2010 (PFS, 2012, p 15). In 2007 a further review warned of “the growing backlog in maintenance of the Estate, including the roof of the Palace and the Basement Mechanical and Electrical project” (House of Commons Commission, 2007, p 44).

It is important to note that concerns about the neglected infrastructure were held mainly at an official level. Shailesh Vara MP suggested that when he was first elected in 2005 the state of the Palace “was not on the radar, of myself or indeed the vast majority of parliamentarians” (interview, July 2018). The opening of Portcullis House had improved the accommodation for the majority of MPs, so while conditions were still poor within the Palace this did not affect all MPs. Discussions around the state of the building first became public in 2007, with an acknowledgement from the House of Commons Commission that repair work would be necessary over the next ten years (HC Deb, 18 Oct 2007, c322WH). A change in approach, was later reported, following “growing concern about the widening scope and escalating costs of the project”, it was decided to “revisit the assumptions behind the work done so far” (Pre-Feasibility Study (PFS), 2012, p 16). By October 2008, however, the prospect of moving out seemed to be likely, once again, when a year-long feasibility study was jointly commissioned with the House of Lords in order to “examine whether substantial savings in cost, time and risk could be made by moving some operations of both Houses out of the Palace for a period to enable modernisation to be carried out continuously until its completion” (HC Deb, 15 Oct 2008, c1243-4W). At the start of the 2010 Parliament, there was no long-term strategy about the future of the building.

iv. [The approval of Restoration and Renewal: 2011-2018](#)

The roots of the Restoration and Renewal programme can be traced to late 2011, when the most senior clerk in the House of Commons and House of Lords, Sir Robert Rogers (now Lord Lisvane) and Sir David Beamish, both of whom had been appointed sought approval from the Management Boards in their respective Houses, for a piece of work that demonstrated the need for a major work programme to address the long-standing problems within the Palace. This work would be completed in October 2012 with the title: “Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster: Pre-Feasibility Study and Preliminary Strategic Business Case” (PFS). The findings were stark, emphasising both the known risks of the antiquated nature of the infrastructure and the unknown risks posed by the inaccessible parts of the building:

“... there has been no general renovation of the building and its services since the partial rebuilding of 1945-50 and some of the services are older still. The original basements and vertical shafts are now crammed with pipes and cables making further work difficult and expensive. [...] Much of the work undertaken over the past half-century is undocumented and since many areas are inaccessible, the state of dilapidation and therefore of risk is largely uncharted.” (PFS, 2012, p 5)

This message was emphasised in a single, powerful sentence: “If the Palace were not a listed building of the highest heritage value, its owners would probably be advised to demolish and rebuild” (PFS, 2012, p 5). A clear conclusion was identified: patch-and-mend solutions are no longer sufficient, the risks to the building are growing and “fundamental renovation can no longer be avoided” (PFS, 2012, p 27).

In response to the PFS, the governing bodies of the Commons and Lords (the House of Commons Commission and the House of Lords House Committee) endorsed further research into the options for a rebuilding programme but ruled that moving to a new parliamentary building away from the Palace of Westminster would not be one of these options. The subsequent research, carried out by a consortium led by Deloitte, was published in June 2015, entitled: *The Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme Independent Options Appraisal* (IOA). It concluded that the main factor affecting the costs and risks of any refurbishment of the Palace was not the outcome level—the extent of improvements to the building—but how the work would be delivered and specifically the extent to which the Palace would be emptied for the work to take place.

A joint select committee was established in July 2015 “to consider the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster”. The Joint Committee reported in September 2016 and, as with the PFS four years earlier, their conclusions were stark. The opening lines of the summary set the tone:

“The Palace of Westminster, a masterpiece of Victorian and medieval architecture and engineering, faces an impending crisis which we cannot responsibly ignore. It is impossible to say when this will happen, but there is a substantial and growing risk of either a single, catastrophic event, such as a major fire, or a succession of incremental failures in essential systems which would lead to Parliament no longer being able to occupy the Palace.” (JCPW, 2016, p5)

The urgency of the work was stressed, with the warning that: “unless an intensive programme of major remedial work is undertaken soon, it is likely that the building will become uninhabitable” (JCPW, 2016, p5). They concluded that “in principle, a full decant of the Palace of Westminster is the best delivery option”, arguing that it offered the least disruption, the quickest timescale, the lowest overall capital cost, the lowest risk, and the greatest scope for improvements (JCPW, 2016, p5). Conscious of the delay caused to its own work by the political

climate, the Joint Committee warned of “a potentially costly delay” unless Parliament “now takes some key decisions”. To enable this, the report included a draft motion, which they recommended “both Houses should agree [...] as soon as possible” (JCPW, 2016, p100).

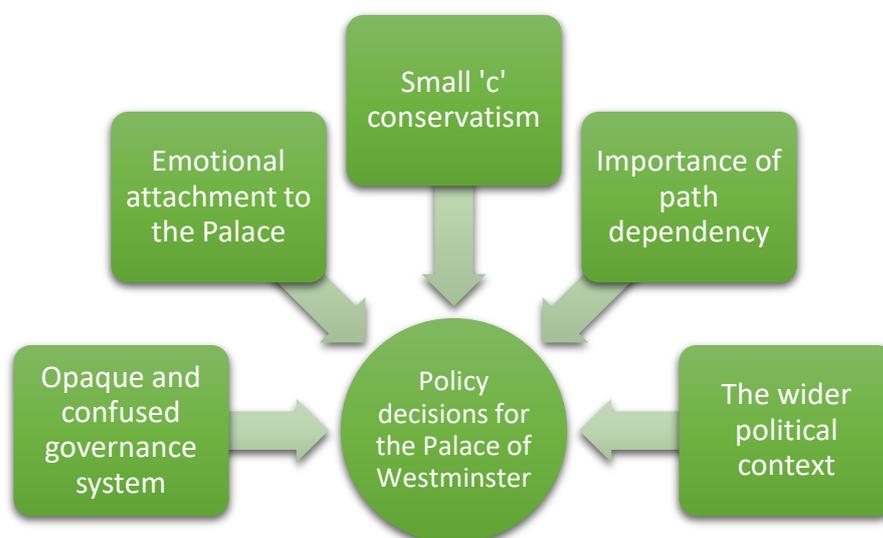
It was not until January 2018 however, that the House of Commons would consider the report—the Government, who control the Order Paper¹, declined to schedule the debate for almost 17 months after the Joint Committee reported. Furthermore, the Government, once the debate was scheduled, sought to prevent MPs from endorsing the full decant option recommended by the Joint Committee. In an unusual move, two motions for the debate were tabled, both in the name of the Leader of the House, Andrea Leadsom. The first stated that “there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure”, but committed only to reviewing the need for the work at the end of the 2017 – 2022 parliament, in effect further delaying policy change for several years (HC Deb, 31 Jan 2018, c878-879). The second motion sought to establish governance bodies for a future refurbishment programme, who explore the options for delivery—but did not commit to the full decant option (HC Deb, 31 Jan 2018, c879). The then Leader of the House, Andrea Leadsom, also told MPs that “because of the seriousness of the decision before the House, the two motions will not be amendable” (HC Deb, 18 Jan 2018, c1062)—an approach which would prove to be unsustainable almost immediately. By the time of the debate five amendments were tabled across the two motions. The first amendment to be voted on—tabled by the SNP and calling for more analysis on moving Parliament away from Westminster—failed to gain significant support outside of the nationalist parties and was defeated easily. But the second vote—on an amendment tabled by Meg Hillier, the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, which endorsed the Joint Committee’s report and the full decant option—was approved by 16 votes. The amended motion, supporting full decant, then moved to the House of Lords where, on 6 February 2018, Peers approved it without a vote. Major policy change had been agreed, marking a distinct departure from years of indecision and delay. How can we explain this? This article posits that we can identify five themes which influence policymaking relating to the Palace of Westminster, which can explain both the years of inaction and the 2018 policy change.

v. Learning from history: recurrent themes

An analysis of the history of the Palace of Westminster, as set out in section iii, can help to explain the approval of the Restoration and Renewal programme, as discussed in section iv,

¹ The agenda of upcoming business in the House of Commons.

through the identification of five recurring themes (below). This section considers each theme in turn.



a. A confused governance structure

The first recurring theme is immediately apparent from the analysis in sections iii and iv: a confused and opaque governance structure for decisions relating to the Palace. In the eighteenth century this manifested through the divided patronage between the King and Prime Minister in the appointment of architects to work on the Palace (Mordaunt Crook and Port, 1973; Sawyer, 1996; Goodall, 2000; Sawyer, 2003). Where changes were made to the Palace, accountability was opaque: responsibility for alterations to the House of Lords at the start of the nineteenth century "was denied by every leading politician in or out of office" (Mordaunt Crook and Port, 1973, p 519, for further, see HC Deb, 13 June 1808, cc863-865). During the rebuilding of the Palace after the 1834 fire, responsibility was again unclear. Augustus Stafford MP's comments on the new Commons chamber, which he viewed as "a complete, decided and undeniable failure" demonstrate this belief:

"But wherever they attempted to place the blame, it was shifted to someone else. If the blame was charged on Mr. Barry, he charged it upon a Committee, the Committee charged it upon another Committee, both the Committees put it upon the Woods and Forests, the Woods and Forests charged it on the Government, and the Government upon that House." (HC Deb, 2 Aug 1850, c728)

Nearly a century later, accountability appeared just as labyrinthine. Earl Winterton MP described governance of the Palace as "worthy of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera", listing four

individuals all “interwoven in the control of the building” (HC Deb, 28 Oct 1943, c457). Gay (2017, p 37) has noted how “the frustrations of MPs with their accommodation in the post-war period, detailed above, was “the main driving force behind backbench demand for effective Commons management for the rest of the twentieth century”, but that “changes emerged only slowly”. The hereditary post of the Lord Great Chamberlain remained in control of the Palace during non-sitting hours until 1965, when responsibility was transferred to the Speaker and Lord Speaker, (HC Deb, 22 July 1954, c1643). Even after this point, the “fabric of the Palace” remained the responsibility of the Minister of Public Building and Works and all expenditure on the Palace of Westminster remained directly under the control of the Treasury (HC Deb 23 March 1965 c332; Seaward, 2009b. It was not until the 1978 House of Commons (Administration) Act that MPs took control over its financial estimates (Seaward, 2009b), and not until 1992 that responsibility for the works on the parliamentary estate was transferred from the Government to Parliament itself (HC Deb, 24 Feb 1992, c778).

Responsibility for the building is divided between the Commons and the Lords, but also the Queen (it remains a royal palace) and, through its status as part of a UNESCO World Heritage site, the Treasury. Even within Parliament itself, there is no one single figure, either for the institution as a whole, or even within either House, either on an official or political level, that has both the responsibility and power to make decisions about the building’s future. There was no single chief executive, or even a board of directors, that could make the decision to address the growing risk posed by the building. Tom Brake MP, a member of the House of Commons Commission, noted how “the processes in the Palace of Westminster, are not very well-suited to having a clear hierarchy of decision-making processes”, adding:

“things like the Restoration and Renewal, whilst probably in any other business or any other field, there would have been a clear process involving the people in charge of the estate saying "this is something that is critical if we don't deal with this now, something drastic is going to happen, we've got to deal with it". That's not the way it works in Parliament.” (Interview, May 2018)

Decisions made within the Commons governance system have regularly been criticised by MPs for being opaque and lacking accountability (e.g. HC Deb, 15 Mar 2012, cc413-414; HC Deb, 01 Feb 2010, c66). Even where decisions fall within the purview of the House of Commons Commission, MPs have questioned the transparency of appointments to the Commission and the communication of these decisions (e.g. HC Deb, 5 Nov 2018, cc1304,1312; HC Deb 18 Jun 2019, cc197-198) and even the Speaker, who chairs the Commission, has declined responsibility for some of its decisions (e.g. Mendick, 2017).

While this confused governance structure is certainly a factor in the neglect of the Palace and delays in approving R&R, it should also be considered as part of the reason why R&R was

indeed eventually approved. Once the debate on the Joint Committee's report was finally scheduled in 2018 and R&R was officially on the Order Paper, the governance structure meant that there was a shift in power to MPs themselves. Once parliamentarians had the issue on the agenda, how could they persuade their colleagues to act? To answer this, we must look to the Palace of Westminster itself.

b. Emotional connection to the physical structure

To understand how policy is made relating to the Palace of Westminster requires an understanding that, for its occupants, it is not simply a case of bricks and mortar. Many parliamentarians feel an emotional attachment to the physical building, for example in the form of a connection to their predecessors, transmitted through the very fabric of the Palace. John Wilson Croker MP said of St Stephen's Chapel in 1831:

“He could not forget that it was the place in which the Cecils and the Bacons, the Wentworths and Hampdens, the Somers's and the St. Johns, the Walpoles and the Pulteneys, the Pitts, the Foxes, the Murrays, and the Burkes, had ‘lived, and breathed, and had their being.’ [...] as long as the human mind was susceptible of local associations, he could not disregard the beneficial effect that might be felt from their continuing to assemble on the scene where so many illustrious actors had performed such splendid parts. If patriotism could grow warmer on the plain of Marathon, and piety amid the ruins of Iona, the zeal and talents of British senators might also be exalted by the religious and legislative sanctity with which time and circumstances had invested the ancient chapel of St. Stephen” (HC Deb, 11 Oct 1831, c558-9).

By working within the same building, MPs aligned themselves with great names from the country's past, placing their own achievements on the same level. A century later, when decisions were again to be made about the future of the Commons, the same predecessors were again invoked: Dr Russell Thomas MP argued for Parliament to stay within the same building where “Burke, Sheridan, Charles James Fox, Pitt and others there laid down the foundations” of parliamentary democracy (HC Deb, 28 Oct 1943, c452). The building and the institution were intrinsically linked. Crucially, by the mid-20th century it was not just about the same location, but about the very design of Barry and Pugin's chamber, which was seen as symbolic of a golden age of parliamentary democracy (for example, HL Deb, 14 May 1941, c171). The emotional attachment to the Palace, and all it symbolised, acted as a deterrent against changes to the Palace.

This theme can also be identified when MPs debated Restoration and Renewal: there were several references to the decision of the Commons to use the chamber of the House of Lords during World War Two, including from Sir Edward Leigh:

“When the chips were down in 1941, Clement Attlee and Winston Churchill decided that this Chamber would not move from this building.” (HC Deb, 31 Jan 2018, c909)

Leigh’s speech and his amendment to the motion, were based on a belief that the Commons should not meet away from its historic home, again proving the power of precedent. This view was echoed in the debate by Sir John Redwood MP:

“I agree with those who think there is something very special about this place and something important about it for our democracy. This is the mother of Parliaments and this building does have great resonance around the world, being associated with the long history of freedom, and the development of the power of voice and vote for all adults in our country [...] it is important that our visitors can come to be reminded of our national story and why we are where we are. All those of us who seek to represent people should be daily reminded of that national story when we come here”. (HC Deb, 31 Jan 2018, c918)

Supporters of full decant could also draw on the emotional attachment to the Palace, however, using the strong feelings about the building as an incentive to act urgently on the need to carry out necessary repairs. Speaker Bercow explained how his position changed between 2012, when he was “very sceptical” about a major programme of works, and 2015, when he described himself as:

“[...] slightly influenced by one or two other people you know, in the House, among Members, you know, who I know love the place just as much as I do, and who sort of said to me ‘you know, well I don't think there's much alternative’” (Interview, Bercow, September 2018)

Sir David Natzler, the then Clerk of the House of Commons, said that the argument he used with decant-sceptic MPs was: “Because you love the building you have to save it” (Interview, Natzler, July 2018). Dr Richard Ware, former Director of the R&R programme, attributed the approval of R&R to this attitude :

“I think in many ways, the hero of the piece is the Palace itself, you know, the Palace speaks very powerfully and is in distress and the idea that this fantastic building could burn down or just fall into an unusable ruin, and actually would if we didn't do the right things with it, is so counter-intuitive and so horrible to contemplate that I think it does bring people together” (Interview, Ware, June 2018)

Therefore, while some MPs attempted to cite the emotional attachment to the building to argue against R&R, other parliamentarians and officials used this same attachment to argue, successfully, for R&R to be approved.

c. Small 'c' conservatism

A further recurrent theme that emerges in the historical analysis is a clear unwillingness to make radical change to the Palace. When disaster occurred, there was a tendency to recreate the past: either in the exact replica of the previous Commons chamber in the 1940s (described by one MP as taking “nostalgia to the stage of absurdity” (HC 25 Jan 1945, c1031)), or in Barry’s design for the new Palace after the 1834 fire, which, in the words of Cannadine (2000, p 17) “embodied in stone and ceremony a view of Britain’s constitution and society that was more Tory and backward-looking than progressive and forward-looking”. In the absence of disaster, any changes to the building, that went beyond piecemeal alterations or gradual evolution, were seen as unnecessary. The link between the institution and the building meant that admitting changes were necessary to the building would be admitting a fault in Parliament itself, damaging their sense of institutional, and even national, identity. In 1869, the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, argued that making significant alterations to the new Palace, as requested by some MPs, would require parliamentarians to “make a very deplorable confession” about the failures of their building, adding:

“It certainly is remarkable that a great country qualified to overcome the obstacles that stood in the way of her enterprise, and to perform feats which make the world almost stand aghast for their arduous and difficult character, should prove itself totally incompetent at an expense of £3,500,000 to erect a Chamber which should last for a single generation.” (HC Deb, 6 April 1869, c304)

The aversion to radical change can also be attributed to the “incredible and innate conservatism” of the Commons in “organisational matters”, as described by Walkland (1979, p 2). Lord Lisvane confirmed this from his own experience, noting that: “parliamentarians on the whole don't like change, especially when it is their home, their workspace” (interview, June 2018). This manifested itself through the governing bodies: Yong (2018, p 88) argued that “inertia is the default position” of the Commons Commission. In this context, the absence of radical change through the history of the Palace of Westminster, despite opportunities to do so, can be considered unsurprising.

We can see how attitude manifested during the discussions around Restoration and Renewal. Sir Edward Leigh, a senior Conservative MP who campaigned against full decant, described himself as “very worried [...] that once we move out, all the customs, everything will go”. This opposition to even a temporary move out of the Palace helps to explain how the prospect of a

permanent move was never seriously considered. Interviews further demonstrated that the prospect of using the need to repair the old Palace to explore radical change to the building was not viewed as realistic or even desirable by the limited group of officials and parliamentarians involved in the decision-making process, and as such received little consideration. A policy change which reflected continuity was therefore far more likely to succeed—as indeed occurred in 2018.

d. Path dependency

The analysis of the history of the Palace shows how each decision against radical change served as a precedent to be followed for future decisions. Section iii showed how the idea of a new parliamentary building was repeatedly raised and rejected throughout the eighteenth century, and that after the 1834 fire, the prospect of leaving even temporarily was rejected. Prospects of a permanent move after the bomb damage in 1941, were almost unanimously dismissed. Maintaining the Palace as the institution's permanent home became the tradition to be followed when decisions were taken between 2011-2018: MPs referred to these earlier decisions to justify their own opposition to decant when the issue was raised in the Commons.

A further example of path dependency in the Restoration and Renewal debates can be seen in how some parliamentarians reacted to the warnings of a crisis within the building. Despite warnings of a further fire, or catastrophic failure of essential infrastructure, there was no physical crisis in the Palace during the 2011-2018 period (parliamentary staff were in fact working desperately to avoid one—the building is allowed to stay open due to the presence of fire marshals patrolling the building twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, to ensure that the regular minor fires caused by the derelict wiring do not escalate). Baroness D'Souza suggested that for some members of the House of Lords were of the opinion that “well it's been alright for the last 200 years, or 600 hundred years, so why shouldn't it go on for another fifty years, what's the rush?” (interview, July 2019). Similarly Lord Lisvane suggested:

“I think it was successive generations of politicians and all the habits of thought ‘too soon after the war’... If you look fifty years back it was easier to say ‘well actually we can muddle along for a while, surely’, and then you look thirty years back and people are saying ‘well it's worked alright so far’.” (Interview, June 2018)

How then did supporters of R&R use path dependency to help support rather than block change? There was a focus on continuity rather than radical change: as noted above, the R&R policy remained conservative: the restoration of the Palace rather than moving to a new building. This can be viewed as partly strategic: supporters of R&R both on the official and political side appeared to believe the best chance for achieving action was to secure as wide a

base of support as possible, by framing the problem by focusing on the clear risk to the physical infrastructure (and heritage) of the Palace, rather than opening up new options for the parliamentary building. It also reflected a genuine lack of desire for opening up new options: It was clear from interviewees that while there was support from the sole Green MP, Caroline Lucas, and MPs representing the nationalist parties in Wales and Scotland, for a new building, this was not widely shared by MPs from the two main parties in the Commons, the Conservatives and Labour (which made up 89% of the MPs elected in the 2017 general election). As highlighted above, supporters of full decant were able to draw on this opposition to a new building to demonstrate the need to protect the Palace to which they were so attached. The commitment within the Hillier amendment to return to the Palace of Westminster after the refurbishment is complete, and the lack of a wider reform programme within R&R demonstrate the strength of institutional traditions and path dependency.

Once the issue moved to the Lords, we can again see path dependency acting to promote, rather than block change. One reason why Peers were so supportive of R&R and full decant, especially in contrast to the more divided Commons was the need to agree with the Commons. Baroness Evans told Peers “this House must agree a Motion which is substantively the same as that agreed by the other place—otherwise we will once again reach an impasse” (HL Deb, 6 Feb 2018). Baroness Evans’ argument may not therefore have been necessary to swing the vote but it did persuade some of the minority of Peers who had been minded to vote against the motion. Lord Cormack, a former MP, who did not support full decant, agreed:

“Before the Commons took its vote last week, I was minded to argue for remaining. I took advice from architects and others, all of whom said that it was an entirely practical course. But I have often said in this House, in debates on Brexit and on the size of your Lordships’ House, that we should defer to the elected House, and this is a case in point.” (HL Deb, 6 Feb 2018)

Lord Norton agreed that this mindset was a factor in the Lords approving R&R:

“Once there was a majority in the Commons, however small, we weren't going to go against the Commons. So, it shut up those at our end, who I think were not as numerous as in the Commons anyway.” (Interview, Norton, September 2018)

Peers were thus advised to continue with a decision taken by the Commons, because the cost of deviating (further delays to R&R) would be too high.

e. The importance of the wider political context.

The historical analysis further demonstrates, however, that you cannot explain decisions about the Palace of Westminster purely by considering what was happening *within* the building. The

intrinsically political nature of the legislature means that wider political events influenced the policies chosen for the building. For example, one of the eighteenth-century plans for a new Palace, a neo-Palladian design by William Kent in 1739, was approved, but not constructed, with Colvin (1976) attributing this to the cost of foreign wars and Walpole's loss of office. Cost was a recurring issue: during times of austerity, when the public faced spending cuts, expenditure on the Palace—home to politicians and a political institution—has been considered politically impossible. During the rebuilding after the 1834 fire Colonel Dunne told the House that he “protested against sums being lavished upon objects of national vanity, while the hospitals of Dublin were to be robbed of the trifling sum they had hitherto received (HC Deb, 24 May 1850, c358); in 2008 Sir Nick Harvey accepted that it would be “a serious challenge for the House to seek funding for [repairing the Palace] at a time of economic restraint” (HC Deb, 23 Oct 2008, cc142-3WH). Other political events also mattered: Soane's plans for a new Palace of Westminster in the 1790s were rejected as the style of his designs fall out of favour as neoclassical styles became identified with the French Revolution (Goodall, 2000), and political unrest, demonstrated when the King's carriage was attacked when he arrived for the 1795 State Opening of Parliament, meant that the priority for the Palace was securing the building from public demonstrations, rather than a big architectural project (Sawyer, 2003).

The wider political context during which decisions are taken around the Palace of Westminster thus impacts how these decisions are taken, including during 2011-2018. The 2015 and 2017 general elections and the 2016 EU referendum were stated by interviewees as reasons for delays in the policymaking process: there was a concern among MPs that the potential cost of R&R would be used by as a dividing line between parties during an election, or, in the case of the referendum, internally within the Conservative Party. The impact can also be seen on the nature of the decisions, not just the process. The limited scope of the Restoration and Renewal programme can be attributed in part to the wider political context when key decisions were taken in 2012: the UK was deep into a period of austerity policies, introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. With public spending reduced and schools, hospitals and local councils cutting their budgets: the contrast with plans to spend billions the Palace would have been stark. This influenced whether actors would agree that there was a problem—and what that problem entailed (a larger problem would potentially mean a larger, and more expensive, solution). The Liberal Democrat MP, Tom Brake, argued:

“I think the political climate, particularly, I guess since 2008, after the crash, is one in which no government [...] feels that they've got a lot of spare cash to spend on big ticket items, and this is a very big example, it would be perceived as being another big project, in London.” (Interview, May 2018)

The austerity of the 2010-2015 Parliament had continued after the 2015 general election and MPs remained concerned about the prospect of spending money on their legislative building. Shailesh Vara told the Westminster Hall debate in January 2017:

“at a time of austerity when we are writing to our constituents and saying that they cannot have an additional few pounds for whatever they are seeking money for, do we really want to go to the public and say that, nevertheless, we want to spend billions of pounds on our place of work? I do not think that in the present economic climate that is sustainable.” (HC Deb, 25 Jan 2017, c113WH)

To counter this, as noted above, supporters of R&R sought to limit the project to simply an essential rebuilding programme in order for the cost to appear more acceptable (although concerns about carrying out any work at all during a period of austerity would continue to be raised—as to be discussed further below).

vi. Conclusion

Looking to history helps to explain not only how the infrastructure of the Palace of Westminster was allowed to deteriorate and exist beyond its lifespan, but also how the necessary repairs were approved in 2018. It can also explain how, following the 2018 decision, the path for Restoration and Renewal has been rocky. While the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 legislated for two independent governance bodies, the future of the R&R continues to be subject to the whims of the House of Commons Commission (to the concern of the House of Lords). A number of MPs remain opposed to leaving the Palace of Westminster even for a temporary decant, demonstrating the same attachment to the building as has been witnessed for generations. There have been repeated efforts to scale back the scope of programme, in a further sign of the tendencies towards conservatism and to reflect the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. A key lesson from the historical analysis is that major work to the Palace of Westminster has tended to occur only when unavoidable: despite the approval of the Restoration and Renewal Programme in 2018, it may be that history repeats itself. The “impending crisis” of which the Joint Committee warned in 2016 may still occur.

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