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# The Meaning of Modernisation

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## **Modernisation—implications for the work of Parliament**

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The broad principle of the Modernisation Committee proposals has been accepted. However, there are several areas where detailed work is necessary to achieve the aims of better scrutiny. Select committee chairs expressed concern in the debate on 29 October 2002 about the knock-on effect of the change in hours on the timing of committee meetings. The change in hours was achieved by a very narrow margin. The Liaison Committee was divided about the impact of the shift forward of the parliamentary day. Shorter speeches in the Chamber may not necessarily lead to higher quality of debate unless Members believe that it is

# Lords Reform

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## Northern Ireland

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If devolution in Northern Ireland has been a roller-coaster ride, this quarter the roller-coaster came off the rails. opposed power-sharing even with the SDLP, never mind SF.

The suspension of the devolved institutions in October was precipitated by revelations of an IRA spying operation taking in thousands of individuals and going as high as the British and Irish premiers. The suspension pre-empted a threatened walk-out from government by Ulster Unionist ministers. It was the fourth since December 1999 but Tony Blair, suddenly descending on Belfast, made it clear that this time only a fundamental reconfiguration—namely the sloughing off by republicans of paramilitary trappings—would allow the stars to be restored to the political firmament.

The prospect of assembly elections in May had concentrated everyone's minds. Selections in the UUP were indicating a drift towards anti-agreement forces and only Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party could anticipate the contest with equanimity. Few believed that a DUP-SF dyarchy in the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister could replace that between the UUP and SDLP.

More worryingly, opinion evidence during the quarter revealed a haemorrhage of Protestant support for the Belfast agreement, down to one third. Worse still, a majority of Protestants now

The London and Dublin governments would not allow the DUP its 'renegotiation' demand when difficulties emerged across the institutions. Moving to the review allowed for in the Belfast Agreement

## Scotland

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The main news from the last quarter to attract media interest was the saga surrounding irregularities in the constituency finances of Jack McConnell's constituency party. Coming a year after the resignation of Henry McLeish following disclosure of irregularities in the financing of his constituency office it was little wonder that this should excite much attention. Significant differences, however, exist between the two episodes: McLeish was directly involved in the matter that brought him down, and McLeish's case involved public money rather than irregularities in party funds.

Other matters of significance have included the break-down in collective responsibility at cabinet level when Mike Watson, Culture Minister, was allowed to disagree publicly with hospital policy so long as he voted for the Executive's policy. Watson had a constituency interest in a proposed reorganisation in the south of Glasgow. There were more than the predictable number of calls for his resignation as Minister, including those from a former Scottish Office Permanent Secretary as well as from Susan Deacon, former Health Minister.

## English Regions

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The Queen's Speech on 13 November 2002 announced that legislation would be introduced "to provide for the holding of referendums on the issue of regional governance in England". On 14 November, the Government introduced the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill to

## Elections and Parties

### Candidate Selection

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The political parties have completed their candidate selections for the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly elections to be held in May 2003. They are also finalising their selections for the GLA and European elections of May 2004. Most parties now use a form of membership ballot to select candidates although a great deal of control is still exercised by local selection boards made up of party officials. The Labour party is once again engaging in positive discrimination by placing women and ethnic minority candidates high on party lists. Further details on candidate selection methods can be obtained by emailing [simon.w.king@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:simon.w.king@ucl.ac.uk).

### Electoral Commission

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The Electoral Commission has recently launched a new website ([www.electoralcommission.gov.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk)). The site provides access to all the Commission's reports as well as giving news of forthcoming events. On 13 November 2002, the Commission issued a report outlining its role in the conduct of referendums. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) provides the legal framework for the future conduct of major referendums in the UK. It gives the Commission certain duties and powers to oversee the fair conduct of referendums. Amongst the responsibilities set out in PERA, the main functions of the Commission are:

- to comment on the referendum question
- to register campaign groups and regulate campaign fund-raising and expenditure

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# Constitution Unit News

In February we welcome back **Ben Seyd**, who has been on a year's sabbatical in Melbourne, Australia. Amongst other things Ben will revive his interest in coalition government, to study the process of coalition negotiation after the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections in May.

**Alan Trench**

## New Freedom of Information and Data Protection Newsletter

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The Constitution Unit is launching the *Freedom of Information Newsletter* which will provide detailed coverage of Freedom of Information and Data Protection both in the UK and overseas. An introductory copy is enclosed with this issue of the *Monitor*. To join the mailing list for this new publication please fill in the form on the enclosed copy or email [m.butt@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.butt@ucl.ac.uk) and include your mailing address as well as your email address. Future editions of the *Monitor* will cover Freedom of Information and Data Protection as normal.





## Useful Websites

**Centre for European Reform:**

[www.cer.org.uk](http://www.cer.org.uk)

**Cleanpolitix:**

Website of the New Politics Network's campaign for transparency in political funding  
[www.cleanpolitix.com](http://www.cleanpolitix.com)

**Forum of Federations:**

International Network on Federalism  
[www.ciff.on.ca](http://www.ciff.on.ca)

**Information Commissioner:**

[www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk](http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk)

**International Conference on Federalism 2002:**

[www.federalism2002.ch](http://www.federalism2002.ch)

**Lord Chancellor's Department:**

Gives guidance on Freedom of Information and Data Protection, which the department has responsibility for  
[www.lcd.gov.uk](http://www.lcd.gov.uk)

**Your Mayor Your Choice:**

New Local Government Network site giving information about referendum campaigns for directly elected mayors  
[www.nlgn.org.uk/~yourmayor/index.php](http://www.nlgn.org.uk/~yourmayor/index.php)

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## Project Reports

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### Effective Scrutiny

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The Unit's research into Effective Scrutiny is gathering momentum. A review of literature on scrutiny is underway and is expected to be published early in the New Year. The research team has been strengthened by the arrival of Lucinda Maer as Research Assistant in October. Research will shortly begin on the scrutiny role in the three devolved institutions. Outputs from this stage of the work will be available shortly after the May 2003 elections in those bodies.

Mark's article 'What the regions can do for us' appeared on the Guardian website on 15 November 2002. You can read it at [society.guardian.co.uk/regionalgovernment/comment/0,8146,840259,00.html](http://society.guardian.co.uk/regionalgovernment/comment/0,8146,840259,00.html).

### Nigel Forman's textbook on Constitutional Change

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Nigel Forman, an Honorary Senior Research Fellow with the Unit, has written a detailed and comprehensive account of Labour's constitutional reforms. Drawing on 30 years' experience as a former MP, he adopts a seasoned and questioning approach. The book is one of the first to examine all

