

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM PUT ON HOLD

Amidst the gathering economic gloom the government's constitutional reform plans are being quietly shelved. After the fanfare for The Governance of Britain in summer 2007, the draft Constitutional Renewal Bill was greeted by parliamentarians as a bit of a disappointment when they scrutinised its detailed proposals a year later. That might be why the Constitutional Renewal Bill did not feature in the legislative programme announced in the Queen's Speech in November. It may yet be included; but more likely is that some proposals (eg the Civil Service bill) will be introduced separately, in the summer.

The government promised to publish a consultation paper by the spring of 2008; then the summer; then the autumn. In August the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights published their own detailed proposals, with draft bill attached. That failed to galvanise things, and by the end of 2008 the government's proposals had still to appear.

This is not to say that the bill of rights debate is dead. All three political parties are committed to introducing a British bill of rights (in the case of the Conservatives, as a replacement for the Human Rights Act, which they are pledged to repeal). There is a longstanding commitment to a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, and growing interest in Scotland. But the Labour government is having proposals.

The devolved administrations have also raised strong objections. The proposed link to a British statement of values does not help. And now the economic crisis looms darkly over everything. £1bn over the next two years. Senior staff in the Constitution Directorate are moving on. Gordon Brown had hoped to give a new lease of life to the constitutional reform programme, with a bill of rights at its centre, but with time running out, he may have to accept that the time for big constitutional reforms has passed.

SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE ON DIVERSITY IN PARLIAMENT

In November, MPs approved a motion to create a Speaker's Conference to examine the under-representation of women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities in the Commons. The conference will be chaired by Prime Minister Gordon Brown in September 2007, when he suggested representation should

be considered against the 'backdrop' of declining voter turn-out. The Conference's mandate to discover ways to make parliament's membership mirror the diversity in the UK population at large is as urgent as ever: since 1918 a total of 4,659 Members have been elected to Parliament. Of

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DEVOLUTION

Devolution and the Centre

As the global economic climate has continued to worsen, the governments of the United Kingdom have increasingly had to work together to solve shared economic problems.

Inter-governmental co-operation has also been apparent on the passage of legislation. Welsh and UK institutions have continued to work together to progress further Legislative Competence Orders (LCOs) and in November 2008 the Scottish Parliament passed another Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) in relation to the UK Energy Act. The Queen's Speech contained a range of legislation with applicability in the devolved regions, suggesting that the relationship between the devolved administrations and the centre is going to continue to be lively over the course of the upcoming year. Much of the legislation will require the consent of the devolved assemblies and much of the remainder will at least need the co-operation of the devolved administrations in order to work effectively.

growing importance. The interim report of the Calman Commission on the Future of

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