

Democratic Reform in International Perspective

Professor Richard Rose FBA *introduces a series of seminars, established to open up the discussion of reform.*

Entitled the ‘Westminster Seminars’, the series has been created to provide a forum bringing experts from abroad to discuss ideas and institutions relevant to the current British debate. In this way, people of diverse views can hear and question people with first-hand experience of different representative institutions. Professor Rose is convener of the series.

Although Britain is a long-established democracy, Britain is now undergoing major constitutional changes intended to make British government more ‘democratic’. Debates among political theorists emphasize that this term does not have an agreed meaning, and there are potential conflicts and even contradictions between competing values. A look at other established democracies shows that the practice of democracy can take many forms, and often they are ‘un-British’, for example, the use of proportional representation. Concurrently, other democracies have often spoken admiringly of what is distinctively British in government.

A good way to understand the operation and consequences of ‘un-British’ institutions is to talk to people who are accustomed to using these institutions, in order to see what may be learned – positively or negatively – from what is happening

in countries that are not governed by the Westminster model.

The Westminster Seminars are intended to inform discussion and not to promote a single point of view. There is an all-party advisory committee with David Butler, President of the Hansard Society, Lord Holme, Professor Lord Norton of Louth, Professor Lord Plant, and Professor John Keane, Centre for the Study of Democracy. Funding has come from the British Academy and the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster.

Two seminars took place in Spring 1999:

Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?

Professor Fritz Scharpf, Max Planck Institute, Cologne, on 25 May

The New Zealand Experience of Electoral Reform

Professor Jack Vowles, University of Waikato, New Zealand, on 21 June

The seminar series will continue, and further details can be found in the diary of events on page 52.