



# HISTORY & POLICY

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## **Historian calls for public primaries and face-to-face hustings to reinvigorate democracy**

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A Cambridge historian is calling for the reinvention of traditional election hustings to reconnect the public with politics and capitalise on the strength of feeling aroused by MPs' expenses.

Dr Jon Lawrence argues there is an opportunity ahead of the next General Election to reinvigorate democratic politics with an imaginative reinvention of the face-to-face politics made famous by Hogarth and Dickens.

Dr Lawrence said:

“Senior politicians being heckled on the BBC’s *Question Time*, MPs denounced at angry public meetings, and low-level violence against MPs’ property: the scenes of the last few weeks have been as tumultuous as anything in the days of the hustings, when politicians routinely faced the public at open meetings. They remind us, not only that the public still cares deeply about politics, but that democracy is at its most vibrant when politicians and public are brought into direct, face-to-face contact.

“There is an opportunity for bold reform of our democracy if we can harness the spirit of outrage and activism that the expenses scandal has generated. Candidates could be selected at open public ‘primaries’, official nomination hustings could again be held in every constituency, and broadcasters could be encouraged to hold *Question Time*-style encounters in every constituency, using technologies such as Skype to throw them open to the *Facebook* generation.”

In his History & Policy paper, [\*The hustings, broadcasters and the future of British democracy\*](#), published today, Dr Lawrence explores Britain's lost tradition of face-to-face interaction between public and politicians and ways it could be reinvigorated, including:

- The rise since the mid-twentieth century of broadcast media as mediator between electors and elected, and the uncertain place of the public in this 'mediated' politics
- The need for broadcasters to develop more inclusive and edgy programme formats: ensuring audiences are not packed with party members and using text messaging, live video booths and Skype to throw programmes open to the general public.
- The latent potential revealed by the expenses scandal to engage people more directly in the democratic process e.g. by introducing public 'primaries' to select candidates and reintroducing official nomination hustings.

Notes to editors:

1. Jon Lawrence's History & Policy paper, [\*The hustings, broadcasters and the future of British democracy\*](#), is published today at [www.historyandpolicy.org](http://www.historyandpolicy.org).
2. [Dr Lawrence](#) is Senior Lecturer in Modern British History at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Emmanuel College. His book *Electing Our Masters: the Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* was published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in March 2009. See also his recent [blog](#) for OUP and his [interview](#) for BBC Radio 4's *Westminster Hour* on Sunday, 24 May.
3. [History & Policy](#) is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the [Centre for Contemporary British History](#), at the [Institute of Historical Research](#), University of London. History & Policy is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.
4. History & Policy has a network of almost 200 historians willing to engage with policymakers and media and now publishes [rapid responses](#) by historians to the news of the day. To sign up for our monthly newsletter, receive press releases or to request an interview with a historian, please contact:

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