

## The temporary House of Commons & restoration of the Palace of Westminster.

Walter Menteth [Project Compass](#). London 12 May 2019<sup>i</sup>



*1 Indicative image of the temporary House of Commons Chamber. Source:Alford Hall Monaghan Morris*

### **What was the question this proposed temporary Parliamentary chamber and the restoration of the Palace of Westminster endeavours to answer?**

- Is it reinstating and refurbishing Barry's 165+ year old Palace of Westminster which is now clearly no longer fit for purpose, too small and inadequate, in need of reform, and in a country desperately needing regional regeneration? And all at a time when Gov. has divested its civil service premises across Whitehall?
- Is this restoration being embarked on when a new constitutional settlement appears to be needed as the nations of the UK are perilously close to splitting, and what message will this contribute to that debate? Or for example at a time when there is a known need for reform of the House of Lords, which few have had the courage to face, while Parliamentarians still have constrained and inappropriate accommodation?
- Is this just another vanity project that has had insufficient public debate, lacks imagination, vision and leadership, due interrogation, scrutiny, evaluation and appraising of the underlying need. Because this appears to have been procured with Grayling panache and many similar deficiencies to Brexit, Crossrail, or the Garden Bridge etc. - that certainly won't elicit public confidence in either process or results.

- Might the lack of any interrogation and resolution be further manifestation, if any was needed, of the institution of Parliament failing its wider remit?
- Although the project management may be evolving towards an 'Olympics style' delivery, is the *raison d'être* simply expeditious, poorly considered and lacking foresight?

To some/all of these questions, and for many, the answer is increasingly **YES!**<sup>ii</sup>

*(whatever the merits of the architecture of this temporary Parliamentary chamber, the demolition of the grade 11 Whitefield building and the recent Bill to oversee restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster introduced only recently)*<sup>iii</sup>

**Why the Palace of Westminster and temporary Parliament building might be the most appropriately progressive upcycling of well-loved buildings has not been sufficiently debated, cogently argued nor tenably expressed.**

Unless persuasive arguments can be advanced, achieve consensus and national commitment within the current and emerging political context, the Parliamentary restoration project will likely become increasingly fraught, while, ironically, further undermining the institution it seeks to restore.

The MP's expenses scandal may pale to insignificance if in this context this is seen as another case of Gov. and parliamentarians 'open' accounting - ie spending recklessly, wilfully and on their own vain frivolity.

The IMF report that the Tories have now borrowed £816 bn in 8 years, while in 8 years they've increased debt by £1 trillion from £759 bn to £1.7 trillion, which is more than Labour ever did in 33 years in office. At issue is whether such sums might be better expended on addressing many pressing social, environmental and economic needs, as well as the robust institutions necessary to provide them. Yet instead hugely wasteful spending is detrimentally growing.

This project is equally in danger of becoming a national millstone. It forms part of the £1.6bn masterplan, the Palace of Westminster refurbishment is projected to cost £4bn while the temporary building will cost roughly £400m.<sup>iv</sup> The Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee recently reported that The Palace of Westminster refurbishment, relocation costs and programme remained vague and unverifiable.

*"the process by which and by whom some decisions have been taken on restoration and renewal to date are opaque"* and it concluded *"it is our view that it would be imprudent for the House to commit to a specific option or timetable"*.<sup>v</sup>

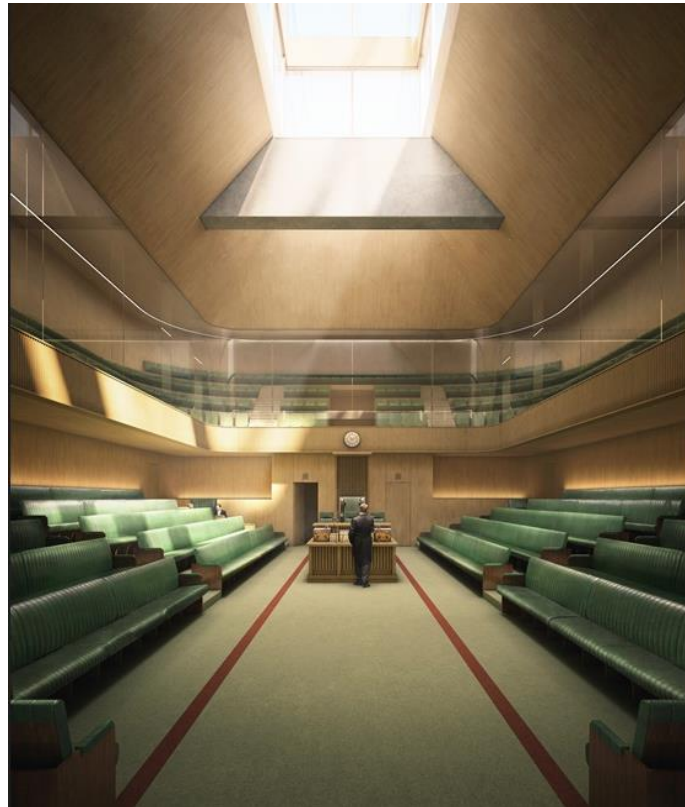
**The costs inevitably will rise yet the projects value and political suitability, beyond symbolism, nostalgia and geographic inertia, appear undefined.**

When Barry won the design contest in 1835 for The Palace of Westminster he estimated a construction time of six years, and a cost of £724,986. The public competition stipulated that the style was to be either Classical (associated with revolution and republicanism) or Gothic (associated with conservative values). Land was reclaimed from the Thames flood plain for the construction. The project in fact took more than 30 years to build, at a cost of over £2 million, with The House of Lords first sitting in their new purpose-built chamber in 1847 and the Commons in 1852.<sup>vi</sup> Perhaps

there are some lessons here, and in 100-165 years with sea levels due to rise this will be a strategically vulnerable site if government is planning for resilience and sustainability.

Because the current proposals don't seem to have any vision, foresight, logic or clear sense of the zeitgeist, the country might like to know where all this money is going and why this is an appropriate spend.

This project doesn't seem fit for a fluid, progressive, modern and advancing democracy.



2. An indicative image of the temporary House of Commons Chamber, which will feature new public and press galleries.  
Source:Forbes Massie Studio

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<sup>i</sup> Article in Project Compass CIC 12 May 2019 published online <http://projectcompass.co.uk/index.php/2019/05/12/what-problems-does-temporary-hoc-chamber-restoration-of-westminster-palace-answer/>

<sup>ii</sup> Temporary Parliament 'extravagant, time wasting and destructive', say heritage campaigners and architects. Harry Yorke, The Telegraph 10 May 2019  
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/05/10/temporary-parliament-extravagant-time-wasting-destructive-say/>

<sup>iii</sup> Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill 388 2017-19  
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2017-2019/0388/190388.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Parliament refurb: AHMM reveals first images of MPs' temporary home. Richard Waite, Merlin Fulcher. Architects' Journal 8 May 2019. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/parliament-refurb-ahmm-reveals-first-images-of-mps-temporary-home/10042396.article?blocktitle=News&contentID=19637>

<sup>v</sup> PAC. Report 16 March 2017 on Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster: Preliminary Report Contents. [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmtreasy/1097/109703.htm#\\_idTextAnchor006](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmtreasy/1097/109703.htm#_idTextAnchor006)

<sup>vi</sup> Architecture of the Palace. Rebuilding the Palace  
[www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/architecture/palacestructure/rebuilding-palace/](http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/architecture/palacestructure/rebuilding-palace/)