How productive are MPs?

Several correspondents of this blog, and others in the public debate, have rushed to raise the issue of how productive are MPs in response to any of us who highlight the general issue of public sector productivity. It is a fair question. MPs who want a more productive- and better paid – public sector do need to consider their own contribution. The total cost of MPs is tiny in relation to public sector output, but those who would lead must expect more scrutiny and should be expected to lead by example.

It was this issue which led David Cameron to make the cost of politics an issue in government. It led to the decision to back a reduction in the number of MPs. The current plan is to remove 50 out of 650, offering a 7.7% increase in labour productivity. The question for this Parliament is will the other parties now agree to this, as Conservatives still want to put through this reform.

Those of us who want England to be better represented can also do this in a way which does not add to the bills for political government. The twin hatted MP who is both a UK and an English MPs would be a lower cost more productive model than the one adopted in Scotland.

It is true that in recent years the number of peers has continued to expand. Peers are only paid if they turn up, so it is not quite as bad as it looks, but few can deny the Upper House is now overmanned. There are various proposals for dealing with this. A few are now in effect. Peers can now retire and are encouraged to do so. We need to consider more steps to limit numbers. It is mainly up to the Lords to decide what they think is best. Options include a use it or lose it rule, a fixed single term of appointment, or a high overall retirement age. It is easiest to bring in these changes by giving newly appointed peers different contracts with retirement built in at an appropriate future date in the light of each individual's circumstances. More retirements could be encouraged by letting people keep their courtesy titles without rights to sit in the Lords and vote.

The other main way political government can raise its productivity is by controlling numbers and costs in MPs offices. I choose to do all my own research, article and blog writing and speech making myself without researchers and writers working for me. Other MPs have other ways of limiting their demands on additional staff and costs. All MPs interested in raising public sector productivity should of course review what they can do within their own very small part of the public sector by way of example.