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Power lunch with Lord Razzall [1]

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Lord Razzall, the LibDem spokesman on business in the Lords, came in for an Adam Smith Institute Power Lunch this week. He's unusual among parliamentarians - a legislator who believes there is too much legislation. Quite so. Every year there are about thirty or more bills in the Queen's Speech. Ministers reckon it's a macho thing to get their department's pet bill on the agenda, and people think they are weak if they don't manage it. We've had nearly thirty bills on industry and employment issues in just a decade. Have they made us better governed - or safer, healthier, better educated? I think not.

And we're over-regulated too. Most regulation is actually home based, only a minority comes from the EU. But once UK lawyers get their hands on it, asking governments to define exactly what particular rules mean and when they will apply, the rule-book gets fatter and fatter. Like us, the LibDems propose sunset legislation on regulations - they fade out unless specifically renewed each year. But we have other ideas too, as readers of our report on regulation [3] will know.

However, that sunset policy may come up against the fact that House of Commons scrutiny of bills and regulations is inadequate. Thanks to timetables and guillotines - and the vast queue of bills all jostling for time - measures like the competition bill have gone through the House of Commons without being properly looked at. Asking parliamentarians to stay up until midnight to vote on regulations (there are just so many of them) might be asking a lot.

Another area that our discussion alighted on was the future of the Business and Regulatory Reform department. The LibDems argued that the old DTI should be broken up, with most of the business promotion stuff being put into the Foreign Office, and most of the consumer protection side being done elsewhere. I agree that this makes sense. Dare one say that officials have sometimes promoted business at the expense of consumers? Several of our experts round the table though that the regulators certainly had - with bills rising at the same time that utilities' share prices began to soar.

Maybe the LibDems have a point - there is a lot wrong in politics. But there's just as much wrong with the system by which politics operates. If only we could get them to trust the market.

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