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## Editorial

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### Constitutional Concerns

Included in the CBI's recently-published discussion document, *Change to Succeed*, in the midst of a seething mass of (generally unanswerable) questions covering such predictable problem areas as fiscal and economic reforms, industrial relations law and environmental policy, is a section cryptically captioned "our institutions". This sets out a range of constitutional issues such as excessive budget secrecy, the desirability of lengthening the present five-year maximum period between elections, whether to enhance the revising powers of the House of Lords, the case for proportional representation and for a Bill of Rights, and various matters to do with the finance and accountability of local government.

It may at first sight appear incongruous, even presumptuous, for a body like the CBI to include constitutional reform in an agenda-setting exercise of this kind. The British constitution has been slow to absorb the modern realities of prime ministerial government, still pays scant regard to the existence of disciplined political parties and knows nothing of the CBI. Which, in a nutshell, is precisely why the latter is right to draw attention to its shortcomings in the present context.

It is now very widely agreed that our constitution has become seriously out of step with the needs and realities of contemporary life, and that a simple faith in gradual evolutionary adaptation is no longer enough. All kinds of people from Lord Scarman (advocating a Bill of Rights) to Sir Douglas Wass (calling for a standing royal commission on constitutional reform) and the Alliance Parties, supported by a quarter of the electorate at the last general election (highlighting the absurdity of a first-past-the-post electoral system), have expressed profound unease about various aspects of our present constitutional arrangements.

Industrial prosperity and business confidence require both a secure economy *and* a sound constitutional infrastructure. People must have faith in the machinery of government if the policies — including economic and industrial policies — that emerge from that machinery are to enjoy legitimacy. There must be mechanisms, in an age of polarised party politics, to damp down the uncertainties generated by the swing of the electoral pendulum. These conditions are not satisfied at the present time. The CBI's sketchy and sometimes rather platitudinous observations on the subject add little to the substance of this important area of debate, but they are quite right to include it on their agenda.