



Floating voters

MPs could switch to ferries moored on Thames during essential Commons repairs



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Political Editor

A PLAN to turn the ageing Greenwich passenger ferries into a floating Parliament moored in the Thames has been submitted to MPs.

A London firm of architects claims “HMS Parliament” is a low-cost solution to the problem of where to put members and peers when the Palace of Westminster has to shut down for essential repairs.

The three Woolwich ferries – launched in 1963 and due to be replaced soon – would be stripped down into floating pontoons capable of carrying full-sized debating chambers for both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

The concept was the brainchild of marine engineer Tim Beckett who realised that the existing chambers would almost exactly fit on the huge decks of the ferries.

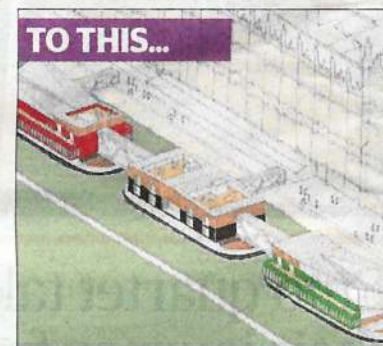
Architect Studio Octopi and structural engineer Expedition worked up the plans and calculated the costs.

Architect Chris Romer-Lee said: “The ferries have been serving London for 53 years but are due to be decommissioned this year.

“Recent surveys show that while their diesel engines are worn out the hulls are in excellent condition.

“And because they are already in public ownership, the costs of HMS Parliament would be much lower than alternative proposals.”

Backers estimate the bill for the Houseboat of Commons to be £55 million. For that, MPs would get two full-sized chambers, committee rooms, a central lobby, voting lobbies and stunning views of the Thames through bul-



let-proof glass windows. Current plans to demolish the Department of Health and build a permanent “spare” Commons chamber would cost about £1 billion more. A previous floating chamber, involving a glass-roofed raft, would have cost more than twice as much as the ferry scheme at £160 million.

The plans have been shown to the Port of London Authority and to a group of MPs including former shadow Commons leader Chris Bryant.

However, MPs seem reluctant to leave the historic palace, which is crumbling around them, and have repeatedly put off making a decision on when to move out.