

Submission on the effectiveness of select committees

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1. Summary of recommendations

- 1.1. In only 40 years select committees in the UK have established themselves as probing and authoritative, producing reports of public interest and catching the attention of the media with matters of substance. The significance of this in the face of increasing political cynicism¹ cannot be overstated.
- 1.2. Select committees offer tremendous potential to deepen the relationship between parliamentarians and the public and, therefore, our democracy. They have made huge strides in outreach and public engagement in recent years but the need for a more sophisticated approach to evidence, management and the process of citizen engagement remains.
- 1.3. The following key recommendations would enhance the effectiveness of select committees:
 - 1.1.1. Reflect on the assumptions about the value and rigour of evidence provided by different disciplines and groups (in partnership with those inside parliament, such as POST, and out, including universities).
 - 1.1.2. Do fewer, longer inquiries and allocate more time for politicians and citizens to compare and debate the value, rigour and inevitable contradictions between different pieces of evidence.
 - 1.1.3. Expand the continuing professional development opportunities for chairs and members of committees.
 - 1.1.4. Develop both technological capacity and partnerships to diversify witnesses and improve processes of listening to and debating evidence.
 - 1.1.5. Monitor and report the identity of witnesses by age, gender, income, ethnicity, nationality and disability.
 - 1.1.6. Innovate the processes of engagement with witnesses, building on the learning from past innovations (reverse evidence session, citizens' assemblies, social media experiments) and matching such processes to the aims of the inquiry and session.
 - 1.1.7. Give the public more opportunities to influence the topics for inquiries.
 - 1.1.8. Create more partnerships with organisations and groups who can assist with the above (including but not only universities, UK Research Innovation and other funders, schools, professional associations and networks).

¹ Hansard Society, The Audit of Political Engagement 2018, <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/research/audit-of-political-engagement>, accessed 4.3.19.

2. Researchers' areas of expertise

- 2.1. Professor Emma Crewe specialises in researching parliaments, especially the UK House of Commons and House of Lords, is Director of the [Global Research Network on Parliaments and People](#), Chair of the Royal Anthropological Institute's Committee on Policy and Practice, and a member of the Study of Parliament Group. These observations and suggestions are based on in-depth research on the House of Lords and House of Commons, including the observation of eleven different committees, and on Parliament and public engagement in other countries (see E Crewe's *Lords of Parliament*, 2005, and *House of Commons: an anthropology of MPs at work*, 2015).
- 2.2. Dr Ayesha Siddiqi is a geographer whose research focuses on better understanding disasters and development in the Global South. She was recently involved in a collaboration between the International Development Select Committee and the Arts and Humanities Research Council to bring diverse perspectives, from the researchers in the Global South, to a conference in the House of Commons. As part of this project Ayesha was on a part-time secondment to the ID Select Committee.

3. Chairing and managing committees

- 3.1. The election of committee chairs by the whole House has been positive. Chairs vary in the extent to which they encourage reflection and carry other committee members with them. Most Chairs show leadership – ensuring that the committee is well-run and gains influence – without personally stealing the limelight or driving through their personal views. Some continually innovate and find ways around challenges, e.g., making sure that MPs only ask witnesses questions if they are present for the whole session (or at least for that panel of witnesses) and varying the style of questioning for the type of witness.
- 3.2. In general, those who give evidence to committees, or observe their proceedings, are impressed by the outstanding skill of committee staff and the high quality of reports. Witnesses comment on the breadth of experience of most committee members, including that derived from MPs listening to their constituents. Some are perplexed by MPs leaving mid-meeting and a feeling that they are not listened to carefully on specific committees, as if members have already made up their minds.
- 3.3. Committees tend to embark on so many inquiries that there is insufficient time for debating evidence, reviewing their own work and achieving follow-up to their scrutiny and investigation. Regular reflective discussion within committees may inspire better attendance and a wider sense of ownership across the committee. It would also bring new members up to speed far more effectively than a separate induction.
- 3.4. Perhaps the Committees might consider the following to consolidate good practice from some committees to all: (a) fewer, longer and more in-depth inquiries that allow more time for reflection; (b) the Liaison Committee developing a good practice guide, to encourage effective chairing, innovation and engagement with the public? (c) facilitated away-days for all chairs to exchange ideas about what works well and badly. Such events need to be

facilitated by those that understand politics and the uniqueness of members' work (e.g., the [Complexity and Management Centre](#) at the University of Hertfordshire) (c) ensuring that professional development of select committee chairs and members includes sessions on research and public engagement. So far more emphasis has been given to the skill of 'questioning' but understanding the nature of evidence and developing the practice of debate and deliberation in the specific settings and modes of select committees deserves attention.

4. *Understanding the nature of evidence given to committees*

- 4.1. Select committees take evidence from a huge range of 'witnesses' – those directly affected by the issue, civil society representatives, academics, Ministers etc. The academics range from across the science, social science, arts and humanities backgrounds. All these groups have completely different foundations to their 'evidence' and yet select committees do not appear to spend much time discussing how to compare different types of evidence.
- 4.2. Select committees seem to be influenced by assumptions made in wider society about the value of 'evidence'. In all societies (at least in the urban centres) we tend to give the greatest value to either legal or numerical evidence, or that which is considered science. But the rigour of these is tested by completely different criteria and process. Legal 'facts' are verified in specific contexts and the process of evidence-taking and decisions made by judges or juries is what separates fact from opinion. The natural sciences are interested in generating universal laws that can be replicated across contexts and the methods for establishing this are governed by ideas about objectivity and, often, experimentation.² The gold standard for many researchers are randomized controlled trials. However, social science, arts and humanities disciplines establish rigour in different and equally valid ways. For example, for pragmatic philosophers a process of abduction – testing and developing theories through observation and dialogue – is the well-established method while anthropologists rely on induction, reflexivity, and a sense of history. For both these disciplines (and some natural science theorizing) objectivity is not achieved by assuming you can stand outside your object of study but rather your involvement and impact becomes part of the research. Objective research that draws on positivist approaches is neither always the best nor necessarily the most rigorous research. It is important that select committees understand these different types of rigour so that they accord equal respect to different disciplines.
- 4.3. Different academic disciplines are good at answering different types of questions. Randomised controlled trials are essential for testing medical drugs while psychology can probe motivations, and historical-ethnography can get at difficult questions about why change happens. So, it is worth asking for those giving submissions to explain their disciplinary influences as part of their evidence. It is also important to encourage those academics working in the arts and humanities disciplines to give evidence as select committee engagement tends to be dominated by science, social science and legal scholars.
- 4.4. Academic submissions are only one type of evidence and not necessarily the most important. The evidence by the public, whether through representatives, professionals or citizens, should be taken as seriously. Experience of people living through the subject of the enquiry is highly relevant. While the value should be given equal weight, the significance on select committee

² Bruno Latour, 2009, *The Making of Law*, Polity Press.

conclusions may be different depending on how successfully the academics or others have summarized a broad range of evidence and achieved some detachment from their own experience. However, the gold standard is not necessary pure detachment – in fact such a position is impossible. It is the ‘involved detachment’ of some analysts, neither so involved that it is as if they are swimming in the topic nor so detached that they are flying far above it, that makes them able to offer especially penetrating insights.³

- 4.5. Officials, library researchers and committee specialists do an incredible job weighing up different types of evidence and its value. The time allocated for politicians and citizens to compare and debate the value, rigour and inevitable contradictions between different pieces of evidence is inadequate. It is only possible to make the most of the officials’ work, recognize the time spent by witnesses and explore different views of the members by having fewer inquiries.

5. *Diversifying committee membership and evidence providers*

- 5.1. Select committees are clearly committed to taking evidence from a range of people. They now monitor the gender of ‘witnesses’. However, all committees should monitor at least the age, gender, income, ethnicity, nationality and disability of witnesses. Creating a form (for witnesses to fill in when giving evidence, with questions about identity detachable so that it can be confidential) and then space for the public submission, might in any case make it easier for people unfamiliar with the process.
- 5.2. The number of submissions from scholars and activists from overseas appears to be extraordinarily low. The International Development Select Committee has only received 35 submissions from the Global South in the last twenty years despite their inquiries more directly affecting them than people in the Global North.
- 5.3. In February 2019 the IDSC hosted a conference for scholars, activists and MPs, especially from the UK as well as countries in Africa, Asia, and South/Central America, to explore how both research funders and parliaments could enhance opportunities for scholars from the Global South to access funding and advocacy spaces. This was funded by the UK Research and Innovation, Global Challenges Research Fund and Arts and Humanities Research Council while the two authors acted as academic leads for the event. It was a collaboration between the IDSC, UK Research and Innovation and academics that greatly benefitted by the strengths of each sector.
- 5.4. During this highly innovative conference in the Attlee Suite (with simultaneous translation):
 - (a) MPs from around the world listened to the research findings of scholars on two themes (forced displacement and climate change);
 - (b) in a ‘reverse evidence session’, IDSC MPs and staff gave evidence to diaspora and Global South scholars about how the committee takes evidence;
 - (c) a Question Time debate about how scholars might be taken more seriously by politicians;
 - (d) training for scholars about research carried out within parliaments. It generated recommendations about how the IDSC might improve its effectiveness but also how other committees could learn from this experience.

³ Norbert Elias as summarized by Chris Mowles, 2012, <https://complexityandmanagement.com/2012/04/30/247/>.

- 5.5. Other select committees could try and replicate this model with evidence giving groups and individuals most relevant to them. We would be very willing to share reflections on this collaboration and lessons learned.
- 5.6. The committees holding enquiries on issues that profoundly affect those overseas should pro-actively encourage witnesses to give evidence from those locations. UK universities and CSOs might assist in identifying and facilitating this process and/or translating/interpreting where needed.
- 5.7. Oral evidence could be taken via video links. Although these can be unreliable in some locations, parliament could make an arrangement with the British Embassies/British Council to offer access to video conferencing (with translation where required).
- 5.8. Enabling non-native English speakers to give oral evidence through translation aids could also help. The IDSC did not ever remember taking evidence in a language other than English but were ready to explore the idea.
- 5.9. The commitment to diversity of witnesses is likely to be fortified by diversity on select committees. Having only one woman on the IDSC will shock overseas witnesses or at the least fail to inspire confidence. The political parties need to ensure that reasonable diversity, at least on grounds of gender and ethnicity, is achieved on all select committees.
- 5.10. Parliament has stepped up its efforts to broadcast calls for evidence across society. We would encourage both Houses to expand their partnerships to encourage other organisations not only to alert people to opportunities to express their views but also offer advice and guidance. All universities and UKRI and other funders could advertise select committee inquiries across their organisations to academics, students and grantees.
- 5.11. Creating an online portal for UKRI (and other UK funded research projects) that automatically sends out alerts or requests for evidence could be another effective way of ensuring that the academic community, and emerging research, is fully informed and engaged. This would ensure more diversity than the current notices on UK Parliament website that are only frequented by academics who engage with Parliament already.

6. *Innovating the processes of public engagement by committees*

- 6.1. Parliamentary outreach has been transformed. Parliament's outreach programme and education work are outstanding and their public engagement is innovative and world-leading.⁴ Connections with higher education institutes have become far stronger, with at least two academic fellowship programmes being established in recent years. The handling of the media (both traditional and digital) by Parliament has vastly improved, with far more and better-informed coverage. All of these deserve still more investment. However, the potential for a deepening of the relationship between citizens and politicians in both Houses is clear and it is within select committees that the strongest potential can be found.

⁴ The Parliamentary Outreach Service featured in the Hansard Society's 2012 review of good practice in public engagement and academics have documented the huge strides made in public engagement, e.g, Cristina Leston-Bandeira editor of a special issue of *Journal of Legislative Studies*, on Parliaments and Citizens, 2012, vol.18, 3/4, and Alexandra Kelso, 2007. Parliament and Political Disengagement: Neither Waving nor Drowning. *The Political Quarterly*, 78(3): 364–373.

- 6.2. Inclusion is not just a question of numbers. *How* people engage should be considered also. Parliament should learn from witnesses about how they experience the process of engagement. In evidence giving sessions there is still a tendency to collect opinions in a series of individual interventions, rather than enable deliberation, discussion and debate.
- 6.3. When observing encounters between politicians and citizens during the scrutiny of law, at times it is informal APPGs that achieve more probing discussions rather than formal select committee sessions. While the court-style interrogation of witnesses is entirely appropriate for holding Ministers to account, a more gentle and (where possible) discursive style generates more interesting engagement. It is only lawyers who appear to be totally at ease in the court-like atmosphere and language ('evidence', 'inquiry', 'witnesses') of formal committee sessions.
- 6.4. In our personal experience of giving evidence to committees, the tone of the committee members has ranged from respectful to the opposite, despite our status as a 'friendly witness'. In one case this arose when one of us was expressing an unpopular opinion albeit in a polite manner. Such bluntness from members of the committee to those outside government (Ministers or senior officials), may discourage participation in general. It is the responsibility of the chair to ensure that all witnesses are treated respectfully. But since we recognize that it can be politically difficult for MPs to reprimand each other in public (that is, to get things done in politics, alliances are continually needed), this is also a shared responsibility across committees.
- 6.5. Committees have been innovating their modes of learning – interaction during trips, citizens' assemblies, social media experiments – and should be commended for doing so. They should continue to develop new processes for engaging with citizens face to face and via digital means. But they should also be open to participating in events and processes run by other organisations, whether UK Research and Innovation, universities or think tanks like the Hansard Society. All committees might take the time at the beginning of each inquiry to establish their aims in detail and work out what kind of engagement (if any) is appropriate for that specific topic and type of scrutiny.
- 6.6. Select committees all take evidence from experts and those affected by the issues they choose to focus on. But only some consult about what topics to investigate in the first place. The Science and Technology Committee invites pitches about topics for inquiries so something similar may be interesting to other committees. It would be inspiring to the public if they were invited to express their views, or better still debate, which topics should be investigated as a matter of priority.

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