

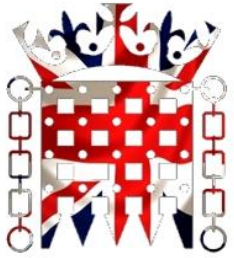


Parliamentary Select Committees

**More influential than
you thought...**

and maybe more interesting too!

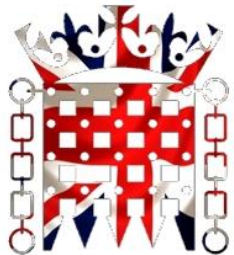
**[http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-
unit/research/parliament/select-committees](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/parliament/select-committees)**



Select Committee Influence

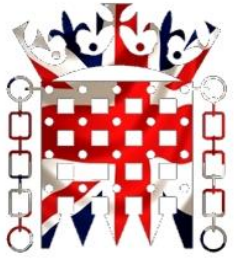
- **22 Departmental Select Committees in House of Commons**
 - e.g.s Defence, F Affairs, Education, Business – all shadow govt depts
 - Also Public Accounts Cttee, European Scrutiny Cttee, Petitions Cttee + 7 others
- Cttees always part of Parl but Select Cttees formally set up to scrutinise Govt Depts in 1979, powers extended in 2000s:
 - Pre-appointment scrutiny of some govt apptmts
 - Pre-legisl scrutiny of some draft bills, some post-legisl scrutiny
 - Liaison cttee of S Cttee chairs set up + since 2003 Chairs paid extra
- Significant increase in independence and status with Wright reforms 2010
 - Chairs and membership voted on by backbenchers, without whipping
 - Smaller (usually 11), so more effective, more pressure on MPs to contribute
 - More opp for S Cttee reports to be debated in Commons (e.g. via BBBC, but Speaker Bercow also gives members, esp Chairs opps to speak prominently on debates in their topic area)
- Most S Cttee activity involves taking evidence from Mins, civil servants, outside groups – and then producing a report
- General view has been that Govt largely ignores these reports, so S Cttees can be embarrassing for govt, but lack real power and influence
- This view tested by major UCL study of 1997-2010 Parliaments





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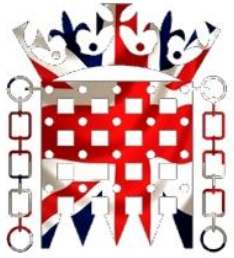
- Most S Cttee reports respond to government policy initiatives. Fewer than one in 10 reports could be considered ‘agenda setting’.
- Most reports unanimous - divisions v rare despite all Cttees reflecting party balance in HoC
 - Chairs work hard to keep all MPs “on board”
 - But may mean some conclusions, criticisms and recommendations get watered down
- UCL estimate that 1997-2010 select committees produced
 - 1450 inquiry reports (approximately 110 per year)
 - and almost 40,000 recommendations and conclusions
 - of which 19,000 (around 1450 per year) were recommendations aimed at central government.
- Update: 226 Select Committee reports published in 2015-16 session.



Select Committee Influence

Direct government acceptance of committee recommendations

- UCL study found that **c40%** of S Cttee recs were implemented by Govt - c500 per year
 - Many of these were successes in getting Govt to disclose information
- Only c 1/3 of recommendations accepted were medium/major policy shift recs - **c200** per year – still quite impressive
- Govt also found to **act** on recommendations – not just accept them publicly but do nothing subsequently
 - e.g.s of PASC's impact through recommendations:
 - changes in the Ministerial Code,
 - reform of the Government Information Service,
 - introduction of Prime Minister's appearances in front of Liaison Committee
 - pre-appointment hearings by select committees
 - changes to the rules on lobbying, the granting of honours and the Royal prerogative.



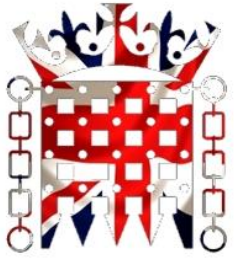
Select Committee Influence

Direct Govt acceptance of recs, cont

- Some recs may be implemented for other reasons (e.g. pressure groups also pushing that way – Smoking Ban?)
- Ideas may take years to filter through
 - May take a change of minister or a policy failure
 - some S Cttees revisit recs although this varies and is uncommon - e.g. BIS with PubCos and tied leases, PAC on corporate tax avoidance
- Recs may impact more outside Govt itself
 - e.g. on agencies of govt (NHS, Police)
 - or on business, etc. (PubCos, Banks and cash machines)

Overall infl of S Cttees through recs is clear

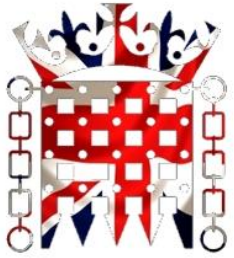
- ***But - gen view among those close to cttees is that about 50% of their infl is through reports/recs, the rest is through other means***



Select Committee Influence

Influencing policy debate

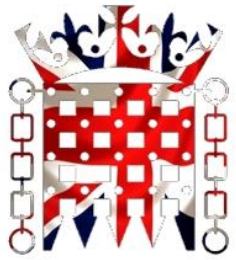
- Even in areas with lots of interest groups, NGOs, think tank reports, existing govt inquiries, etc. (e.g. F Policy, Health) S Cttee reports can
 - crystallise opinion
 - test evidence
 - call broader range of witnesses, etc.
- And may particularly influence opinion in Parl itself
- Also rise in media coverage of S Cttee reports in last 15 years, magnifying impact of reports on govt and beyond
- Govt has to respond (within 2 months) to S Cttee reports
 - unlike any other body
- e.g. Health S Cttee and workplace smoking ban, Obesity



Select Committee Influence

Spotlighting issues and altering policy priorities

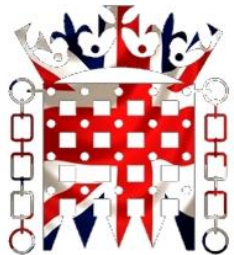
- esp imp in niche areas within govt depts and for policy areas that are otherwise ignored/neglected
 - e.g. Defence S Cttee on welfare and schooling of service families
- Only 1 in 10 Cttee reports in this category
- But Govt may be more willing to listen and act in these areas, as they are less high-profile and policy is less fixed.
- so decision to hold inquiry /process of taking evidence may be more influential on govt than actual report recommendations



Select Committee Influence

Brokering in policy disputes

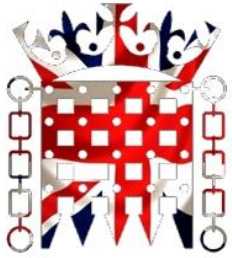
- Cttee investigation and report may strengthen the hand of ministers seeking to impose change on large, disparate Dept, overcome vested bureaucratic interests
- may also strengthen hand of one Dept vs another (e.g. vs Treasury)
- May have been esp influential in coalition environment?



Select Committee Influence

Providing expert evidence

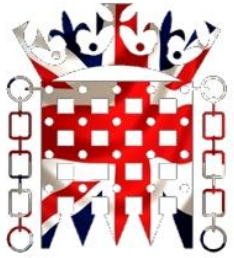
- Reports may be esp influential if based on new data
 - v limited budgets for this are a major constraint – average 1 Clerk + 5 other staff members per cttee (c.f. large budgets / staff of US Congressional cttees)
 - but new tech has been v useful in past decade or so – e.g. dedicated websites soliciting public views
 - But cttees variable in ability to do this – and in time/focus to achieve it



Select Committee Influence

Holding government and outside bodies accountable

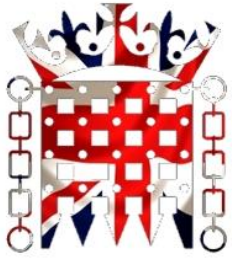
- Important for transparency, audit of govt work
 - includes looking into perceived govt failures – e.g. [Windrush 2018](#)
 - not just Ministers but civil servants have to appear, unlike other forms of parl scrutiny
 - esp imp for govt agencies, only Parl forum in which their Heads can be questioned (e.g. Environment Agency Head on 2013 flooding crisis)
 - but also requiring depts to explain/justify their work/policies,
 - probing into Dept annual reports – esp imp for Defence spending
 - Encourages govt to better decision-making
- Cttee Expertise, non-partisan character and sustained questioning more effective than other parl means of scrutiny (e.g. written Qs, Q times, Opp Day and BB debates, Adj debates, etc.)
- Can also be used to hold non-govt bodies, e.g. businesses accountable
 - where media attn on evidence sessions can be very signif (CEOs not used to it)
 - e.g. Treasury S Cttee credit card charges & cashpoints enquiries; Home Affairs enquiry into phone hacking, Business into Sports Direct employment practices
 - 2018 DCMS S Cttee enquiry into fake news: controversy over summoning Leave campaign figures Arron Banks and Dominic Cummings



Select Committee Influence

Generating fear (anticipated reactions)

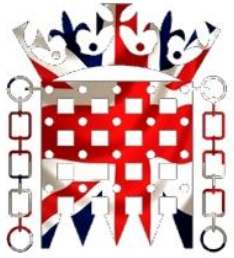
- Govt adjusts its behaviour because Minister/civil servants, etc know they may have to justify themselves to a Cttee in future
- Cttees just one of a number of groups whose reactions may be anticipated – e.g. Opposition, Media, Pressure Group community
- but S Cttee can be particularly influential here
 - Reason why Ministers/ civil servants don't just ignore reports: *What if cttee published warnings come true and you ignored them?*
 - Ministers / civil servants don't like going in front of committee and explaining policy / administrative failures on camera – can be used by either side to pressure the other
 - fate of Amber Rudd 2018 a terrible warning within Whitehall!



Select Committee Influence

Weaknesses and Criticisms

- Quality of cttee work suffers because not all members take work equally seriously, in terms of attendance, preparation. Some just keen to get media attention -
 - *Smaller cttes part of Wright reforms, with new attendance rules – both meant to help to address this – but study suggests it's still an issue*
- Some accusations of “grandstanding” – brief, media-friendly enquiries that attract publicity for Chair and members, but don't have sustained impact – e.g. Home Affairs under Keith Vaz, DCMS on fake news ?
 - *or is this connecting Parl to people better? Grandstanding an accusation by those who don't want cttee scrutiny?*
- Mostly cttees cannot commission research due to lack of resources, but some of the most infl reports were those that did have orig data/ strong evidence base
- Lack of clarity in expressing concls / recs may be due to wish for consensus/ avoid divisions
- Varied follow-up to reports, review of govt response, devs in area – often poor at this
- Reports used to be hardly ever actually debated in HoC -
 - *but Wminster Hall and now BBC have allowed much more of this*



Select Committee Influence

Trends in recent years

- **Cttee chairs** have become a route for senior pol figures out of frontbench roles to continue an infl pol career – e.g. Nicky Morgan, Treasury – Yvette Cooper, Home Affairs – Hilary Benn, Brexit
- Chairs now elected across HoC, but allocated across cttees in party proportions – so Treasury, Health chairs reserved for Con; Home Affairs, Brexit for Lab – tendency now for other parties bbenchers to put their votes behind a senior MP out of step with their party leadership
- Cttees beginning to push for **more legisl influence**
 - e.g. Health Cttee pushing for sugary drinks tax, doing investigations, reports, holding debates, members moving amendments on bills until Govt pressured into promising a tax – and then held to it when new May govt looked like renegeing on Cameron’s commitment.
 - e.g. ii Bob Blackman MP on Communities & Local Govt Cttee successfully pushed the Homelessness Reduction Bill through as a PMB in 2017, drawing on the Cttee’s previous enquiry and using its influence to convince the govt and overcome opposition.
- **Weakness/abiguity over powers** has been exposed by the reluctance of some public figures to attend hearings – usually media publicity leads them to agree to turn up, but in 2018 refusal by Dominic Cummings has led to a motion of censure by the HoC. But beyond that an attempt to enforce attendance could be struck down by the courts on Human Rights grounds.
- **Pre – apptmt hearings** – there are now about 60 govt appointments subject to pre-appointment hearings by a Select Committee. Over the first 10 years 2007-2017 of this new S Cttee role there were 96 pre-appointment hearings
 - Of these 96 – only 5 negative assessments of the Government’s preferred candidate:
 - For 3 of these, the appointment went ahead in any case (Children’s Commissioner 2009, Director of Office for Fair Access 2012, and Ofsted Chief Inspector 2016).
 - The Minister withdrew their candidate for Inspector of Probation 2011 and the candidate for Chair of the NHS Monitor body themselves chose to withdraw in 2013.
- **Pre-legislative scrutiny** – in decline?

Draft bills published by session 1997-2019

