

# Assessing the Policy Impact of Parliament: Methodological Challenges and Possible Future Approaches

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## Abstract

*Both academic and public discourse tends to dismiss the British parliament as a relatively marginal policy actor. Whilst parliament is clearly highly visible, and in many ways central to politics, it has long been seen as weak. Indeed, given for example that government legislation is defeated rarely in the House of Commons (including only two occasions in the past 12 years), some view it as having practically no policy influence at all. There are two difficulties with this analysis, however. First, it was probably never true. Much of parliament's influence is subtle, largely invisible, and frequently even immeasurable. An analysis based on crude indicators is therefore likely to reach incorrect conclusions. Second, even if such allegations had some truth in the past, there are clear signs that parliament is becoming more assertive - for example through increased rebelliousness in the Commons and greater resistance from the Lords. The time is ripe, therefore, for a reassessment of parliament's role in the policy process. This paper is an exploratory piece, which it is hoped will be the first output from a major programme of research in this area. It asks what are the challenges to measuring parliament's impact on policy, and what approaches might be taken to conducting such an assessment. It is based on a wide literature review of parliamentary policy impact, both in Britain and in other settings. It defines parliamentary impact broadly, looking at the legislative process, committees of different kinds, and different parliamentary actors. It identifies a range of possible methods, but also a number of significant gaps. The paper's purpose is to spark discussion, and hopefully interest, in the proposed future project and how it should proceed.*

## Introduction

The Westminster parliament is widely seen, from both a domestic and an international perspective, as relatively weak. Thirty years ago Richardson and Jordan (1979) famously referred to Britain as a 'post-parliamentary democracy', and this seems to remain the predominant view. Bruce Anderson's recent claim that parliament 'has been in steady decline for the past quarter of a century' (*Independent*, 12 January 2009) is typical of the picture presented by the commentariat. This is also accepted by many politicians themselves. For example Chris Hulne's description of the House of Commons as 'a legislature on its knees, meeting to elect a government once every four or five years and put on a pantomime at Prime Minister's questions' (*Guardian*, 27 January 2009).

Some academics have long disputed Richardson and Jordan's thesis. Notably David Judge (1993, 1990) pointed out the extent to which power relations in parliament create the framework in whose shadow negotiations between different policy actors occur. Since then much has been written about changes, many of them cultural, which may have strengthened parliament. In the Commons the high levels of rebellion amongst government backbenchers

have been closely documented since 1997 (Cowley 2002, 2005). In the Lords the removal of most hereditary peers in 1999 brought a seemingly stronger, more assertive chamber, and numerous government defeats (Russell and Sciara 2006, Russell 2009, 2007a, 2007b). A recent Hansard Society study (2008) showed that parliament can often bring about important changes to legislation, while Flinders (2006) notes that, despite Tony Blair's large Commons majorities, parliament could force important procedural changes on the government in the period 1997-2005.

Such arguments are far from universally accepted, however. For example Dunleavy complains that 'Westminster-model authors focusing on Parliament have always talked up the importance of majority-party dissidents in influencing the policy process. In fact it took eight years for the Blair government to suffer a *single actual defeat* in the Commons' (Dunleavy 2006: 325, emphasis in original). It is clear, therefore, that the means of measuring and assessing parliament's influence is disputed. If we want to understand the Lords' and Commons' true role in the policy process, measures such as numbers of defeats or rebellions seem insufficient. But can we find other measures that would tell us more? This question lies at the heart of our paper.

This paper is intended as the first step in a major programme of research assessing the real policy impact of the British parliament. Our goal is to seek out, refine and apply measures that can help demonstrate more objectively the role that parliament plays in the policy process. We acknowledge, and discuss in some detail, the challenges and limitations to such an exercise. We also do not, at this stage, present any new original research. Instead the paper comprises an extensive literature review in preparation for such research, covering previous works on the British parliament and other legislatures. We welcome comments on any aspect of the paper, and particularly on additional research methods or findings which we may have missed.

The paper has five main sections. The first sets out some general context from the British and comparative politics literature on legislatures, and focuses on some of the key measurement difficulties. The next asks what it is we should seek to assess when looking at parliament's role in policy: power, influence or impact? The remaining three sections tackle key research questions about parliamentary impact: first, parliament's impact on the legislative process, second, the impact of specialist committees, and third the impact of other distinct sets of actors. As discussed in the conclusion, these do not comprise a complete set of activities or groups that might be investigated, but in our view they offer the most fruitful possibilities. We conclude that while there are major obstacles to assessing the impact of parliament on policy, the failure to tackle this question head-on has significantly contributed to misunderstandings about Westminster's role. Looking globally we find that the shortage of empirical studies on this question is not limited to Britain, though there are some pockets of activity from which we can usefully learn. Developing more rigorous methods to explore and explain parliamentary policy impact will therefore not only be useful in Britain, but also to comparative politics. However it is also notable that the current trend away from domestic and towards comparative political study has, in some ways, contributed to the problem.

## **Context and Methodological Challenges**

The extent of parliamentary power, influence or impact is hardly a neglected subject. It has long been of mainstream academic interest in Britain, as well as many other countries, and particularly in comparative politics. Blondel (1970) was among the early scholars to address this topic, introducing the notion of 'viscosity'. Polsby's (1975) well-known classification

suggested a distinction between ‘transformative’ and ‘arena’ legislatures, with the US the classic example of the former. For many in the UK ‘the British House of Commons is now, and has been for a very long time, the archetypal arena assembly’ (King 2007).

Michael Mezey’s (1979) classification of the world’s legislatures based the importance of the legislature in the policy-making process on two dimensions: the institution’s formal powers, on the one hand, and its level of ‘support’ on the other. Formal power could be strong, modest or little, while a parliament might be either supported or unsupported (by the public and elites). Supported legislatures with strong powers were ‘active’, while those with more modest powers were ‘reactive’; less supported legislatures, or those with little formal power, were ‘vulnerable’, ‘marginal’ or ‘minimal’, respectively. The number of legislatures falling into the ‘active’ category was limited, though notably included the US Congress, while the majority of legislatures in developed nations, including Britain, fell into the ‘reactive’ category. This clustering led Norton (1990b, Norton 1990a, 1998) to later disaggregate the ‘reactive’ category (which he preferred to call ‘policy-influencing’, whilst ‘active’ legislatures became ‘policy-making’). Whether a policy-influencing legislature was strong or weak would depend on external factors - including constitutional arrangements, wider political culture - and internal factors - such as legislative resources and rules.

These classifications all remain influential in the comparative literature. Yet all assess legislative impact principally on the basis of institutional rules and context within which the legislature operates, rather than on its outputs. The concept of what policy influence or impact actually *means* therefore remains rather ill-defined. The authors cited have suggested the circumstances in which a legislature can be expected to be strongly policy-influencing; but without clearer definitions, and measures, their claims cannot be reliably verified. It is universally acknowledged, for example, that the policy impact of the US Congress is greater than that of the British parliament; but with no objective measure of the impact of either, how can we really be sure?

These are, arguably, questions too difficult to tackle as a comparative level, since we still lack an objective measure of parliament’s policy impact even domestically. The challenges of comparative study when there are so many variables on which countries differ, both outside and inside the legislature, are daunting to say the least (Hopkin 2002, Arter 2006, Landman 2000, Sartori 1970). It can be difficult reliably to compare even legislatures’ formal powers. But the if these are the main focus we will not learn very much. As Arter (2006: 245) observes this results in ‘a propensity to conflate “legislative capacity” and “legislative performance”’, which ‘in turn has fed a tendency to accept rather than confront the legislative stereotypes embedded in the existing classifications’.

Comparative study is not the only challenge in this area, however, and there are also understandable reasons why there have been limited attempts to assess the policy impact of individual parliaments. As further discussed below, crude measures such as numbers of bills passed or committee reports published can tell us little; but more detailed study of, for example, amendments or individual committee recommendations can be immensely time-consuming and difficult. Technology, including the online availability of parliamentary documents, eases this burden only to some extent. In practice study at a sufficiently detailed level of the complete output of any parliament is probably impossible, requiring sampling or more likely a case study approach. This however brings problems of its own in terms of case selection, including the risk of focusing on more ‘interesting’ policy cases, which may result in a distorted view (Oppenheimer 1983).

The most fundamental challenge relates to the nature of parliamentary influence itself. It is widely recognised that the relationship between parliaments and governments depends to a large extent on what Friedrich (1937) first termed the 'rule of anticipated reactions', whereby one actor shapes their behaviour to conform to what they believe are the desires of another. This is the pattern which Judge (1990) emphasised when responding to Richardson and Jordan (1979). Other legislative studies scholars have often made the same point (Griffith 1974, Loewenberg and Patterson 1979, Krehbiel 1992, Mezey 1979, Norton 1993, Thomas 2003). Blondel (1970) pointed out that much of what we can see, and measure, in parliamentary activity is parliaments' 'reactive' work while the, perhaps more important, 'preventative' influence remains largely hidden. This corresponds to Bernard Crick's (1968: 80) description of legislative control in Britain as 'influence, not direct power; advice, not command; criticism, not obstruction; scrutiny, not initiation'. As a result parliament may appear a relatively marginal actor, but this is not necessarily the case. In fact it could be that 'significant changes in policy wrought by parliament... tend to be achieved not in parliament, but in advance of a measure being submitted to it' (Arter 1985: 68). Here there is a parallel with the exercise of power in international relations and diplomacy, where the language of 'hard power' and 'soft power' is often used. As Cooper (2004: 179) puts it, 'behind every law there stands a policeman, willing in the end to use force... soft power is the velvet glove but behind it there is always the iron fist'. In parliamentary terms a chamber such as the House of Commons may have a formal veto, but the fact that this is rarely used does not necessarily mean the chamber is powerless. After all, as Cooper suggests 'one of the objectives of civilisation is to turn hard power into soft power' (ibid). In a well-established system a lack of conflict could indicate that the threat of 'hard power' being exercised is well understood and efficiently avoided.

This means that measures of conflict, such as legislative defeats, may only scratch the surface in terms of demonstrating parliamentary influence. Indeed, they could even give a contrary impression. In recent years it has become fashionable to describe executive-legislative relations in terms of delegation between principals and agents (Strøm 2000, Strøm et al. 2003). In this context McGann (2006: 454-55) has suggested that:

... if the executive is the creature of the legislature, then conflict between the two does not demonstrate legislative strength, but rather its weakness: we have agency failure, with the legislature unable to get its agent accurately to implement its wishes. Indeed, if the legislature was to find an agent that perfectly implemented its wishes, then [it might appear] ... that the legislature was a rubber stamp, because there was no resistance to the executive!

This leads McGann to suggest that, contrary to popular perception, the US Congress may not be a 'policy-making' legislature, but rather a 'policy-obstructing' one. In contrast, it might be argued, the UK parliament displays a more efficient and consensual principal/agent relationship. It is indeed US scholars (Polsby 1975, Bach 2008) who tend to see executive-legislative relations as a zero-sum game. This can appear simplistic from the perspective of a parliamentary system (Atkinson and Thomas 1993, Franks 1987, Jackson and Atkinson 1980, Russell and Benton submitted).

Turning to other problems, Anthony King's classic exposition of executive-legislative relations in Britain (1976) demonstrates that even when power is exercised by parliament in a 'reactive' sense it may be hidden in a party-dominated parliament. He argued that the real power in the House of Commons lay with government backbenchers, meaning that the most influential

meeting is potentially that in the party room. Additionally power may be exercised indirectly rather than by directly. Hence in the Commons chamber ‘many words are spoken, few of which are intended to persuade the other side... The hope is that some of the words will reach the public outside through the press, television and radio (Griffith and Ryle 1989: 518). Influencing public opinion, particularly via the media, may prove an effective means for parliamentarians to get government to change its mind. And parliament also does not act alone. Both parliament and government are subject to lobbying by outside interests, with members often taking up the causes of pressure groups in a way which means ‘it can be difficult to evaluate where the influence of one ends and the other begins’ (Hansard Society 2008: 190). Attempts to trace the origins of policy ideas are therefore ‘bedevilled from the outset by problems of causality.’ (Drewry 1985a: 6).

All of this presents serious obstacles to assessing the policy impact of parliament, and certainly means that any such study must proceed with caution. Crude quantitative measures are unlikely to be enough, and could even prove misleading. There are also dangers in relying too much on the alternative, ostensibly more nuanced, method of seeking expert views on where influence really lies. Many studies have employed surveys and interviews of policymakers in order to assess parliaments’ role (Bochel and Taylor-Gooby 1988, Esaiasson and Holmberg 1993, Francis and Riddlesperger 1982, Hall 1992, Meyer 1980). This ‘reputational’ approach can be seen as complementary to the ‘behavioural’ approach of observing members’ actions (Hall 1992). But it is also necessarily subjective and, as Polsby (1980) points out, having a reputation for power is not the same thing as having power. The truth is, methodologically, that a ‘mixed methods’ approach combining objective and subjective measures, quantitative and qualitative data, is likely to prove most effective. This is the approach that has been taken in some recent UK studies, as further discussed below.

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### **What do we want to measure?**

In the previous section we used the terms ‘power’, ‘influence’ and ‘impact’ more or less interchangeably. All of these terms are frequently used by scholars when considering the role of parliament - as Barber (1966) points out, it is rare for the study of politics not to employ the language of power, effectiveness, influence or success. But while ‘influence-terms’ are consistently used by political scientists, these are rarely properly defined (Dahl 1976). The danger with assuming rather than clarifying these terms is that ‘[c]onclusions about power in legislative politics thus get smuggled in rather than systematically established’ (Hall 1992: 224-5). We need to know what we are trying to measure in order to get a sense of what it would mean to have demonstrated it.

In the legislative studies literature ‘power’ is variously used to describe formal constitutional arrangements, actual influence or strength. But its measurement is often limited to formal, rather than de facto, power. For example in work on the US Congress ‘[t]he linkage to policy impact is often presented in logical argument, hypothesized rather than given empirical backing’ (Oppenheimer 1983: 458). This ignores the interesting, empirical question of what power parliament exercises in practice, within or despite its formal constraints. While formal power is likely to be related to influence or impact, it is not a direct correlate. In fact, as Friedrich (1968: 206) argues, ‘influence frequently operates as a corrective to direct and institutionalized (structured) power’.

Legislative ‘influence’ as a concept lends itself to more empirical analysis. Many studies have focused on the influence of specific actors, particularly individual members and committees, because influence is thought to be connected to preferences - on the ability of one actor’s desires to affect the actions of another (Nagel 1975). It makes less sense to treat parliament as an actor that has preferences, as it isn’t a single agent. In this context Wright (2004: 871) argues that ‘there is no “Parliament”, in a collective sense, at all’. Influence is also associated with the *perception* of relevant actors; this is sensitive to anticipated reactions, but may conflate reputation for influence and actual influence, as discussed above. We want to examine reality, not potential.

So we seek to focus more explicitly on outputs, but at the same time not to ignore the more subtle role parliament plays. Some bills proposed would be enacted in a different form without parliament’s intervention, so we can assess parliament’s impact by looking at their initial and final form. But we must also recognise that some bills may not be proposed at all because of the obstacle presented by parliament. Similarly, some new policies, and changes to existing policies, have resulted from discussions in select committees. But government may also consider in advance how something would look if examined by a committee and therefore choose not to do it. In its crudest sense our question is what would be different if parliament wasn’t there (though this is of course an impossible question if taken too literally: if parliament wasn’t there we would either need to accept living in a dictatorship, or reinvent it!). By using direct measures to capture visible impact, and by pursuing less visible impact through less direct measures, we can begin to put together a picture of parliament’s overall role. We can also make some predictions, and even collect some measures, regarding the power of ‘anticipated reactions’ on the basis of this other data. Throughout the paper we use the term ‘parliamentary impact’ to get at this issue, although we sometimes use the word ‘influence’, particularly in referring to studies where this term has been used by other scholars.

### **Parliament’s Impact on the Legislative Process**

When seeking to assess the policy impact of parliament, the legislative process is the obvious place to start. Passing legislation is not only the best-known of parliament’s roles, it is also a process which is public, well-documented, and offers clear measurement possibilities. When making broad generalisations about the role of parliaments in the policy process scholars commonly refer to their legislative achievements. For example, Olson’s widely cited observation that ‘[i]n most democratic legislatures’ there is something approaching ‘a “90 percent rule”’: the Cabinet proposes at least 90 percent of the legislative agenda, and at least 90 percent of what it proposes is adopted’ (Olson 1994: 84). Loewenberg and Patterson (1979: 268) also use the ‘rate of enactment’ in their comparison of four legislative institutions. Many authors provide data on the success of government bills versus bills originating in the legislature (such as private members’ bills): for example Arter for the Nordic parliaments (1985), and Scotland (2004), Capano and Giuliani (2001: : Italy) and Maurer (1999: : Spain). Others such as Di Palma (1976: : Italy) and Keeler (1993: : France) also consider the relative numbers of government bills passed under urgency procedures, compared to other bills.

But these measures are - often by the authors’ own admission - too simplistic to tell us much about parliamentary impact (and become still more problematic when used for comparative purposes, due to differences of procedure and definitions). Di Palma (1976) long ago noted that legislative success rates may be misleading, as numerous unimportant government bills could pass while more important ones fail. For the same reason Kornberg and Campbell (1978)

suggested looking at both the number and importance of government as against members' bills. Trying to assess the relative importance of bills introduces more subjectivity and complexity into the exercise, but has been attempted by various authors (Blondel 1970, Clinton and Lapinski 2006, Mayhew 1991). Options include elite interviews or measuring media coverage, though both have obvious shortcomings.

Even if this is conducted successfully, however, a 'rate of enactment' alone will be insufficient. Government bills may pass, but be heavily amended by parliament in the process. Yet a straightforward count of amendments is also too simplistic, given that in many parliaments (including Westminster) the majority of amendments can originate from government itself. In measuring 'viscosity' Blondel (1970) dealt with this by counting number of government and opposition amendments passed. This may get closer to the truth, but raises fresh questions of its own.

Scholars of the Westminster parliament have made some important contributions to this field, and started to address the more difficult questions. Most notable among them is Griffith (1974), whose book-length study methodically traced amendments to all government bills in both the Commons and the Lords in the 1967-68, 1968-69 and 1970-71 sessions. This included analysis of each legislative stage, taking account of the origin of amendments and their outcome (e.g. whether agreed/defeated with or without division, withdrawn). It was a partially quantitative and partially qualitative analysis. Importantly, study of debates enabled the author to determine where non-government amendments were withdrawn because the government had promised to 'look again' at the measure in question, and where government amendments therefore responded to non-government concerns. No such complete, or rich, a study has been carried out in the 35 years since, though there have also been some smaller-scale examples. Walkland, studying the standing committees, traced origins and outcomes of amendments but concluded that 'the effect on legislation of its consideration in standing committees is difficult to generalise about or quantify' (1979). Wood (1991) focused on the Commons' impact on industrial policy, using voting records supplemented by interviews (and other sources such as parliamentary questions). The Hansard Society's well-regarded commission on the legislative process (1992), collected detailed data on amendments to two bills in 1990. Meanwhile several scholars have pursued similar studies to Griffith, but with more limited scope, on the House of Lords in the 1970s and 1980s (Shell 1992, Baldwin 1995, Miers and Brock 1993, Drewry and Brock 1993).

There is a great deal of quality in this work, and it provides a good basis on which to build a more contemporary assessment of the Westminster parliament's policy role. But the work is clearly now outdated, given the changes in both Lords and Commons indicated earlier. The methods used could also potentially, given the development of political studies in recent years, be improved. We therefore examined the broader legislative studies literature, and methods which might be replicated or applied in Britain. At the end of this section we return to more recent British studies.

Our study to date suggests that the literature on the legislative impact of other national parliaments is underdeveloped in comparison to that for the UK.<sup>ii</sup> In Canada Thomas (2003) has compared the roles of the House of Commons and Senate, but is suspicious of a 'scoreboard' approach. In Australia Uhr (1998) provides data on the number of bills amended but notes that, since many amendments originate from government, legislative impact is difficult to quantify. A new study by Bach (2008) focuses on the impact of the Australian Senate, suggesting that because many Senate amendments are government amendments the Senate's role may be

overstated. But this, as we have pointed out, takes no account of the extent to which government amendments in the Senate respond to non-government concerns (Russell and Benton submitted). Elsewhere, a recent study of the impact of the Spanish Congress 1979-96 used very limited quantitative analysis and largely depended on elite interviews (Maurer 1999). A recent collection in the *Journal of Legislative Studies* led by Arter (2006) sought explicitly to 'question the Mezey question' by finding more 'precision tools' to explore legislative influence. But the measures applied to France (Kerrouche 2006), the Baltic parliaments (Pettai and Madise 2006), Italy (Newell 2006) and Denmark (Damgaard and Jensen 2006) were fairly crude, including the success rate of government versus opposition bills and amendments. More surprising, perhaps, is that the extensive US legislative studies literature gives relatively little attention to questions of legislative impact. This is in part due to the major differences between the US and British (and Commonwealth, European) systems. Where US scholars have focused on impact this has principally been on the relative impact of individual legislators, for example through tracing the success of the bills they sponsor (Anderson et al. 2003, Ellickson 1992, Fenno 1973, Frantzich 1979, Ganghof and Brauning 2006). This is clearly an approach which would be of little use in the UK. More interesting is the widely cited work of Price (1972), who indicated a need to move away from conceptions of bills as 'executive' or 'congressional', noting that even in the US responsibility for the development of bills was shared.

Much of the comparative literature on the legislative process focuses on the role of committees. Here it is the UK, not the US, which is unusual, for lacking specialist legislation committees. Consequently some authors (Mattson and Strøm 1995) essentially treat the UK as if it lacked legislative committees altogether. The recent committee literature is very much dominated by game theoretic/rational choice approaches, and the testing of competing theories of the 'distributive', 'partisan' or 'informational' purposes of committees (Ciftci et al. 2008, Gilligan and Krehbiel 1989, Krehbiel 1992, Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991, Rohde 1994, Strøm 1998, Weingast and Marshall 1988). Where authors make reference to the power/influence of committees at all, such as Young and Heitshusen's (2003) claim that the majority party will seek to control the more powerful committees, any assessment of which committees *actually are* most influential tends to be anecdotal.

There are studies which focus on committee power. But these largely depend on comparisons of committees' *formal powers* rather than their actual policy impact. For example Hamm et al (2006) conduct a study of committees in US state legislatures, based solely on rules of procedure. Their study was modelled on that by Mattson and Strøm (1995) in Europe, which used an expert survey in 15 countries to gather data on committee rights to, for example, amend and reject legislation, propose bills, and issue minority reports. No data was included on the actual use of these powers, and the principal purpose was to test the competing committee theories indicated above. Later work by Mattson and Strøm (2004) looked at committee effects on 650 bills in employment and welfare in 18 states, but the measures employed were fairly basic, including number of hearings, minority reports and proportion of bills passed and much focus remained on formal powers. But we know that formal legislative powers can be a poor indicator of actual policy impact. The classic comparative study conducted by Lees and Shaw (1979) used principally qualitative approaches to study legislative committees in eight countries. It concluded that Japanese committees were the weakest, despite sharing almost identical formal powers with US committees, which were judged the strongest (Shaw and Lees 1979). This was due to informal factors such as party influence. Such conclusions are very useful, but still fail to provide an objective assessment of committee impact. In comparative study the clearest conclusions are still based on institutional factors, such as suggestions that permanent or well-staffed committees will be the most effective (Olson and Crowther 2002, Shaw and

Lees 1979, Shaw 1998). But these are of little help when assessing impact in a single country. Some studies of other national parliaments do, however, provide ideas. In the US authors have sought to track committee influence over time by looking at the proportion of bills amended on the floor and in committee (Cox and McCubbins 1993, Deering and Smith 1997). In Canada Mallory and Smith (1972) used a mixed methods approach to find evidence of committee impact by one case study committee, while Thomas (1978) studied five committees, combining an amendment analysis with interviews. Two recent studies of committees in the Ukrainian parliament have also shown some interesting results. Khmelko, Pigenko and Wise (2007) used member surveys to explore the extent to which committees were valued, while Whitmore (2006) combined this method with quantitative data and media analysis to conclude that committees are highly influential. Despite their usefulness, however, such studies do not go far beyond those already conducted in the UK.

In assessing legislative impact overall, the most sophisticated recent work is to be found in studies of the European Parliament. Here various scholars have pursued amendment analyses going further than that of Griffith (1974) and other UK authors. These seek to address, variously, difficult questions of the importance of amendments, their origins and the extent of their acceptance. Kreppel (1999) looked at 512 amendments made under the co-operation procedure to examine what influenced their success. She coded on a 5-point scale for the extent to which an amendment had been adopted (word for word, with minor modifications, 50/50, modified in ways the Parliament did not want, not adopted). She also recognised that ‘not all amendments are created equals; some may have clear political significance, while others are technical and noncontroversial’ (1999: 522), but felt ‘it was impossible to make informed decisions about the relative importance of each amendment’ (ibid526). A fairly mechanistic measure (on a 4-point scale) was therefore used for the extent of each amendment. She found that the Parliament was influential, was more influential at the second reading than the first, and was more influential on technical and clarificatory amendments than on major ones. Tsebelis and Kalandrakis (1999) conducted a mixed qualitative-quantitative study of around 100 amendments on environmental policy. This used the same coding in terms of level of adoption, but included a 5-point scale for significance of amendments. This ranged from insignificant, significant or highly significant to important or highly important - with the latter two categories referring to amendments that would change the scope of the bill. The more qualitative nature of this study enabled the authors to look at groups of ‘complementary’ amendments and trace the success of ideas, rather than treating all amendments independently. They also tackled the question of ostensibly ‘important’ amendments which were ruled inadmissible as they were outside the scope of the bill, and cases where the Commission proposed compromises in lieu of amendments from the Parliament. They concluded that ‘the picture that the aggregate statistics provide may be inaccurate because of a series of biases which cannot be corrected without in-depth analysis of amendments’ (ibid142).

Several later studies have explored whether the European Parliament’s legislative impact was enhanced by the move from the co-operation to the co-decision procedure. This has been investigated by Tsebelis et. al. (2001), Kreppel (2002) and Kasack (2004), using similar codings to those in earlier studies. Writing later, Häge & Kaeding (2007) used a similar amendment analysis to suggest that the Parliament has more influence under the informal ‘trilogue’ procedure than the formal co-decision procedure. They again took account of linked amendments, avoiding double counting of those moved at more than one legislative stage. As they suggest, ‘amendments have to be traced through the complete legislative process. In identifying Parliament’s impact, the whole history of an amendment has to be taken into account’ (ibid351). Other criticisms levelled against earlier studies include a failure to take

account of the 'propagandistic' nature of some amendments, which may be intended purely to spark debate rather than as serious candidates for adoption (Judge and Earnshaw 2003). As these amendments will normally be rejected, including them could underestimate the Parliament's role. Maurer (2003) points out the relative lack of focus on 'indirect' influence, including the Commission taking up Parliament proposals as its own. All of these studies, of course, also fail to tackle the wider problem of 'anticipated reactions'. For example, if the number of Parliament amendments adopted under co-decision had fallen in comparison to co-operation, this might have indicated an improvement in drafting quality, or that the Commission was making greater attempts to accommodate the Parliament's views in advance, rather than a drop in its policy influence. Only wider study, beyond the walls of the Parliament, would uncover this.

The first time these more advanced methods were applied in the UK context was with respect to the Scottish Parliament. Shephard and Cairney (2005) analysed all amendments made to executive bills in the period 1999-2003. These were coded for both outcome and significance (the latter on a 3-point scale). Key to the study was the tracking of amendments from initial idea to ultimate conclusion, which enabled the authors to identify those executive amendments responding to earlier non-executive concerns: a similar approach to that of Griffith (1974, Shephard and Cairney 2005), but with clearer quantitative conclusions. The results showed the Parliament to be significantly more influential than it might initially appear. In a separate paper Shephard and Cairney (2004) used an amendment analysis to show that the Parliament's impact varied by administration. Cairney (2006) has also published a stage-by-stage analysis, painting a picture of a consensual legislative process with significant parliamentary influence.

There has recently been a minor resurgence of interest in the legislative process at Westminster, and some similar methods have been applied. Russell and Sciarra (2008) examined the ultimate policy impact of government defeats in the House of Lords 1999-2006. These can be, but are not necessarily, overturned by the government in the House of Commons. The analysis avoided 'double counting' of amendments where defeats occurred repeatedly, and also coded for amendment significance. This used a two-dimensional system, with one dimension based on Shephard and Cairney's (2005) scale, and the other seeking to capture importance to the bill, with reference to issues mentioned by ministers at second reading (but with no assessment of the importance of the bill itself). The study found that - contrary to expectations - around 40% of Lords defeats are largely or wholly accepted, and the acceptance rate is marginally higher for significant amendments. This clearly describes only one mechanism by which the House of Lords influences legislation: defeats are a last resort, and many other amendments will be accepted, or repackaged as government amendments. Hence a 2005 survey found 85% of peers agreed that the 'chamber's real influence is exerted as much through persuasion as through defeats'. A synoptic paper assessing whether the Lords has strengthened since 1999 draws on such surveys, as well as analysis of defeats, and also assesses changes by government itself to anticipate and avoid Lords opposition (Russell 2009). This wider approach perhaps offers a way forward, but more detailed study of bill passage is also clearly possible, and remains to be done.

Other recent studies include two papers assessing, using qualitative case studies, the impact of pre-legislative scrutiny committees (Power 2000, Smookler 2006). The Hansard Society (2008) has also revisited the legislative process with a major study, tracing passage of five case study bills. This found that 'Parliament, as a whole and through its constituent parts, makes a difference to legalisation, sometimes in major ways' (Kalitowski 2008: 707). One of the most important reasons why parliament's influence tends to be underestimated is that, as Page (2003)

has also found through interviews with civil servants, the government prefers not to accept 'hostile' amendments, but to draft substitute amendments of its own. In the House of Lords 'the government usually makes concessions before it risks being defeated' (Kalitowski 2008: 706). A key finding, not investigated by Griffith (1974), is that there is significant coordination (amongst both government and non-government forces) between the Commons and the Lords. This aspect was specifically explored in another study, of the Identity Cards Bill (Russell and Johns 2007). It comprised a quantitative analysis of the more than 800 amendments proposed to the bill, which were coded for significance. The two innovative features of this study were, first, the construction of policy 'strands', often comprising several amendments, to explicitly link ideas from their inception to their conclusion, and second, the bicameral nature of the analysis. The results showed that many government amendments responded to non-government concerns expressed earlier, and that many issues raised in the Commons went on to be resolved in the Lords. This creates a quantitative, and transparently objective, demonstration of the point made by the Hansard Society (2008). To be conclusive the analysis needs extending to further bills.

Finally, the need for a bicameral approach to studying legislative impact is also demonstrated by two interesting recent studies of the German parliament. Miller and Stecker (2008) found that government was more willing to compromise with opposition parties in the Bundestag when it lacked a majority in the Bundesrat. In other words, it was anticipating the views of the second chamber and seeking to avoid conflict. Similarly Manow and Burkhart (2007) showed that fewer controversial bills were proposed by government (measured by opposition voting in the Bundestag) during periods when it lacked a second chamber majority. As well as taking a more holistic bicameral approach, some of these last studies go some way, at least, towards tackling the biggest challenge in measuring parliamentary impact: that of capturing the power of 'anticipated reactions'.

### **The Impact of Scrutiny Committees**

The committee system in the British parliament is generally seen as weak, as legislative committees are temporary and non-specialist. However the House of Commons select committee system has grown in stature and importance. The Liaison Committee's *Shifting the Balance* report (2000: para. 4) concluded that the '1979 select committee system has been a success', providing independent scrutiny 'at a bargain price'. The Modernisation Committee has compared the British system to international counterparts favourably, saying that the British committees 'have a more clearly defined role in the scrutiny of executive decisions and are more transparent in their proceedings' (2002: para. 4). Measuring the impact of non-legislative oversight or investigatory committees throws up particular challenges, however, as they 'cannot compel the government to do anything' (Shaw 1998: 232). Liaison Committee reports (e.g. 2009) tend to report on the activity, rather than impact, of select committees, using measures such as number of meetings, reports published and costs, to compare to previous years.

One potential measure of impact is to examine the outcome of committee recommendations, which yields findings such as that the Education, Science and Arts Committee had its recommendations accepted more than a quarter of the time in the period 1979-83 (Rush 1985). However scholars have identified several limitations with this approach. Impact may be exaggerated if the committee is echoing recommendations already being floated by other interest groups or the government (Blackburn and Kennon 2003, Rogers and Walters 2006), and committees can tailor their recommendations to be more readily acceptable (Aldons 2000, Monk 2009). A focus on recommendations may also *underestimate* the degree of impact if the

existence of an inquiry leads to a change in government policy before the committee reports (Rogers and Walters 2006) or if the ‘delayed drop effect’ comes into play – where proposals hard to swallow in a particular political climate are revived in later years or by new governments (Hawes 1993). Measuring recommendations risks making no distinction between proposals already implicitly accepted and ‘hard’ recommendations which have no chance of being accepted but might change ‘the whole nature of public debate’ (Rogers and Walters 2006: 375).

Again, UK scholars seem to be the most advanced at addressing the difficult question of impact of oversight - as opposed to legislation - committees, probably because of the peculiarities of the House of Commons committee system. Early evaluations of select committees adopted a more descriptive, anecdotal approach, rather than depending on simple counting (Davies 1980, Drewry 1985b, Englefield 1984). These studies were predominantly narrative; highlighting instances of impact and presenting the views of insiders. For example Drewry’s widely cited (Drewry 1985b) edited volume of case studies of departmental select committees is a non-quantitative, example-led analysis of context, ministerial replies and the outcomes of recommendations, supplemented by interview findings. This approach is justified by Giddings’ (1985: 369) chapter in the volume, which suggested that committees have an impact through ‘indirect influence, information and accountability’, so ‘[n]o easy measure of their achievements or effectiveness is possible’. Other studies focus on *perceived* influence rather than measures of impact, through surveys or elite interviews - for example Jogerst (1991, 1993) interviewed MPs, clerks and House of Commons staff about attitudes to committees and committee membership, including asking questions about their interest in and ability to influence policy.

A book length study by Marsh (1986) also relied mainly on interview evidence, based on the premise that the influence of committees can be indirect and two-way, through a build up of pressure on government from backbenchers, the media, interest groups and policy experts. He argued that we should consider broader channels of influence such as how committees affect the relationships between ministers and officials and the impact within and between committees. A study surveying MPs on the impact of television of select committee proceedings also highlighted indirect, multi-direction influence. The authors concluded that it is difficult to determine whether committees are covered in the media because they are important, or whether they have become more important through coverage. The significance of television may therefore be that it facilitated greater accountability and wider education (Barnett and Gaber 1992). This supports the idea that ‘the power of select committees is not the power to legislate, it is rather the “power of publicity”’ (Leloup and Woolley 1991).

Thus raising the political profile of an issue is also an important dimension of influence. This observation is a linchpin of Hawes’s (1993) ‘matrix for assessing committee effectiveness’ which sees impact in terms of inputs, outputs and processes at each stage of the policy process. He adopts three main methods: case studies examining outcome of recommendations in terms of acceptance level and substantiveness, surveys and interviews of MPs, pressure group witnesses and policy experts, and quantitative data analysing the ‘political profile’ of an issue before and after committee inquiries - on the basis of debates, parliamentary questions and ministerial statements. Findings included that 60% of recommendations were accepted to some degree but only 15% for immediate action, and that committees have more impact when they have clear purposes in mind and make recommendations based on scientific or technical knowledge.

A similar mixed methods approach is taken in a recently published study which examines the impact of the Education Committee on government, parliament, media and parties (Hindmoor et al. 2009). Three measures for assessing impact on government were adopted: government responses to recommendations made over eight years were classified according to a 5-point scale, recommendations were compared with the content of government legislation, and the results were cross-referenced with interviews with politicians, civil servants and special advisers. Influence on parliament was measured on the basis of parliamentary time devoted to the discussion of committee reports and committee members' interventions in debates, and influence on the media by analysing the number of stories on the work of the Education Committee. In a study of the Australian parliamentary committee system, Monk (2009) also analysed recommendation take-up and supplemented these data with media analysis in order to alleviate the problems with analysing recommendations. Factors correlated with a report's effectiveness were the type of committee, type of inquiry, level of bipartisanship and level of press coverage. These studies offer useful pointers to how a broader analysis of committee influence might be conducted, but their rounded, mixed-methods approach is also very labour intensive.

In addition to general approaches which might usefully be applied to departmental select committees, there are of course various other specialist committees at Westminster whose impact might be worthy of study. These are discussed below.

#### *The Public Accounts Committee*

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is consistently rated as powerful: described as 'the one select committee before which even the most exalted permanent secretary can be made to tremble' (Drewry 1989: 157). Wehner (2003: 24) argues that PACs perform a crucial role in financial scrutiny in Westminster-system parliaments, which have 'in essence abdicated all *ex ante* decision making power [over these matters]... and instead invest much energy in the *ex post* assessment of public spending in the PAC.'

There have been a small number of attempts to quantify the impact of such committees. Flegmann (1979) measured the impact of Westminster's PAC through departmental replies to recommendations and found that 45% of replies contained statements that certain actions were being taken as a result of the recommendations. A recent comparative analysis of PACs in Commonwealth countries drew conclusions about government responsiveness on the basis of powers and structure, supplemented by survey data which also relied on questions about powers (Wehner 2003). Pelizzo et al (2006) compared PACs in 51 national and state/provincial parliaments in Commonwealth countries using data from a World Bank Institute questionnaire and found that PAC chairs believe almost 80% of committee recommendations are accepted by government, while in almost 65% governments implement these recommendations. Such studies are clearly useful. But much of the British PAC's impact may come, like that of other parliamentary activity, through anticipated reactions. The PAC has been described by Peter Hennessey as 'the queen of the select committees... [which] ... by its very existence exerted a cleansing effect in all government departments' (Public Accounts Committee 2007: 7).

#### *The Joint Committee on Human Rights*

A far newer arrival is the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR), which has a combined executive oversight and legislative scrutiny role. The creation of this committee has sparked significant interest, particularly in the legal community, and perhaps due to its recent creation,

various attempts to assess its impact. It has also been contrasted by comparativists with other parliamentary mechanisms to protect rights elsewhere.

Human rights specialists have been interested in which benchmark of human rights is used, as well as parliaments' performance against that benchmark (Feldman 2002, Oliver 2006), and in the extent to which parliamentary oversight should supplement judicial oversight (Hiebert 2005). Feldman (2004), formerly specialist adviser to the committee, pointed out ways in which the committee could maximise its effectiveness, for example through intervening earlier rather than later in the legislative process. He provided some examples of influence, as did Hiebert (2006) and Lester (2002). Feldman (2002) has also provided some more quantitative assessment of the JCHR compared to existing committees, such as the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, in terms of success of its recommendations. Hazell (2004: 498) points out however that, whilst having a lower success rate than these other committees, the JCHR has 'helped to focus the minds of Ministers and officials on human rights issues, and to remind them that these issues go further than just the ECHR'. Hiebert (2006) also emphasises that in assessing the impact of the committee it is necessary to consider two dimensions: its direct impact on bills, and its indirect effect in terms of creating a 'culture of rights'. Evans and Evans (2006) suggest a methodology, in a comparative context, for evaluating the performance of legislatures in protecting human rights, agreeing that that this needs to be sufficiently nuanced to take into account different forms of influence, focusing on 'processes' as well as 'outputs'. The Joint Committee on Human Rights itself (2005) expressed a desire to find a 'more systematic approach' to assessing its impact. This was provided by the appointment of a specialist adviser, Francesca Klug, to conduct an assessment. The 'Klug report' was used to consider revisions to the working practices of the committee (Joint Committee on Human Rights 2006). The methods used included content analysis of Hansard, for references to the JCHR, and analysis of amendments that it influenced (Klug and Wildbore 2007). Tolley (2009) adds citations of JCHR reports in legal cases as an indicator of wider impact.

### *The Delegated Legislation Committees*

The impact of parliament on delegated legislation is difficult to quantify, not least because it may be rational for the legislature to delegate authority to the executive in order to concentrate on more important political matters (Reich 2002). The fact that 'debates are rare and defeats all but unheard of' on delegated legislation may therefore be an indication that the system is working well, particularly as 'avoiding embarrassment... rather than defeat is the main objective of seeking parliamentary support' (Page 2001: 175).

In his book length study, Page (2001) found that parliament had a subtle but significant impact in this area, due to the collaborative approach to delegated legislation. He examined 46 regulations, conducted 150 interviews and surveyed 400 interest groups. Government officials expressed their desire to secure parliamentary approval. However one of the regulations examined was effectively killed off due to an EDM signed by over 50 MPs. The mere presence of the various delegated legislation committees constrained government action. The impact of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments (JCSI) was said to be 'pervasive' because lawyers draft regulations 'as if the JCSI is looking over their shoulder' to avoid litigation and the time consuming process of scrutiny (ibid175). Other evaluations of the relevant committees have also been positive. The Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee has been referred to as 'the only committee that the government listens to regularly' (Hansard Society 2008: 199). It has a near 100% acceptance rate for its recommendations (Tudor 2000, Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee 2005). The newer Lords Merits of

Statutory Instruments Committee has been associated with, for example, raising concerns that led to the chamber rejecting the Gambling Order over 'super-casinos' in 2007. However, no systematic study of such impact (which would need to consider items withdrawn, as well as defeated) has been carried out.

### *The European Committees*

The European committees, in both Commons and Lords, clearly have a distinct role from the domestically-focused committees, as they seek influence on policy over which parliament does not have sovereign power. This presents obvious challenges. But the UK committees are also part of a family of similar committees in other parliaments around Europe, so many scholars are interested in their role.

There have been many comparisons of the strength of such committees across Europe but, as noted earlier with respect to other elements of comparative study, these are almost entirely dependent on the committees' formal powers, rather than actual influence (Bergman 1997, Hamerly 2007, Holzacker 2005, Raunio 2007). The weakness of this approach has been widely noted. As Raunio (2009: 6) points out 'much of this research has consisted of little more than descriptions of the various scrutiny arrangements', while '[o]nly through in-depth empirical analyses can we assess whether national parliaments really influence government behaviour'. Various scholars have pointed out that formal powers may be a poor guide to true influence. Auel (2007) notes that the Austrian parliament has the strongest formal powers over European affairs, but rarely uses them. Bono (2005) similarly concludes that while the British and French parliaments are formally among the weakest, the reverse is actually the case. Others note that formal vetoes issued by parliaments can be so widely drawn that they are in effect unenforceable (Fraga 2000, Modernisation Committee 2005). In summary what matters is *influence* rather than *power*, and this may come through informal means, such as the threat of public embarrassment (Auel 2007, Carter 2001). As Raunio (2009: 1) says, '[t]here is a demand for more theory-driven analyses of actual behaviour that extends beyond describing formal procedures'. But there is little sign so far of such analyses. Only a few authors have tried to incorporate variables going beyond formal powers (Rozenberg 2002, Saalfeld 2005).

The UK parliament nicely illustrates the problem. As Blackburn and Kennon (2003: 647) suggest, the Lords EU committee was set up 'opting for influence rather than power', and yet is widely noted to have 'established a formidable reputation for its work' (Norton 2005: 36). The Lords committee examines the merits of EU policies and legislative proposals and Cygan (Cygan 2001: 87) suggests that '[n]o committee that does this can be ignored and the government accepts this'. The same author claims that the committee 'does have a measurable influence' (ibid89), but few such measurements, with respect to European committees in either chamber, have been offered. The Commons committee publishes annual summaries of its work (e.g. 2007, 2008, Select Committee on European Scrutiny 2006), including the number of documents examined, the number recommended for debate, and instances of the use of scrutiny override. But there is no explicit attempt to capture impact, as such. The Lords committee has held an enquiry on its impact on European legislation (Select Committee on the European Union 2002), and other authors have provided some evidence of influence in case studies (Pownall 1995, Shell 1993). These note, for example, reference to committee reports in Lords debates. Norton (2005: 154) suggests that 'there are few changed decisions that can be attributed to the work of the scrutiny committees'. But much of the influence that is attributed to the committees is indirect, influencing the minds of ministers before negotiations, and sometimes arming them with arguments to use in European Council meetings. And when

analysing the Lords committee many note that its greatest influence may be on the European institutions themselves, including through COSAC (Giddings and Drewry 1996, Pownall 1995, Select Committee on the European Union 2002, 2005). Shell even suggests that 'it is not so much how the Committee is viewed in London that matters, but its standing elsewhere in Europe that counts' (1993: 281). And of course much impact, particularly of the Commons committees, may come through anticipated reactions. For example a former chair of the European Scrutiny Committee has said that 'Ministers think very, very carefully now before they lift a scrutiny reserve because there are consequences... they will appear before our committee in a public session and be held to account for their actions' (Modernisation Committee 2005: Ev 14). Investigating the impact of the committees may therefore require study outside parliament itself, in the corridors of Brussels and Whitehall. In this vein Baines (2004) points out that all government departments have now appointed European scrutiny coordinators.

### **The Impact of Other Groups**

Finally, it is worth noting that there are groups in parliament other than those formally recognised in the rules whose impact on policy might usefully be analysed. This provides a complementary, rather than alternative, approach to the study of parliament's policy role.

Returning to the key point made by King (1976) above, one of the most obvious groups worthy of study is government backbenchers. As King pointed out, it is they who have the greatest potential leverage over government in terms of negotiating policy changes, as ministers depend on their votes. We have seen a great deal of careful study focused on backbench rebellions in recent years (notably Cowley 2002, 2005), which has sought to shatter the myth of docile government backbenchers, pointing out that levels of rebelliousness are in fact relatively high. Those pursuing this work have had limited success in changing views about the effectiveness of the House of Commons, however. One reason, perhaps, is that such results can be dismissed (see Dunleavy quotation above) as unimportant given that they only very rarely lead to government defeat. The truth, of course, is that the power exercised by backbenchers is more subtle, and their real policy impact is likely to come through actions taken by government in order to avoid defeat - or more frequently to simply avoid disunity or public embarrassment. To get at this requires moving from the very quantifiable matter of the size and timing of rebellions, to the more hidden question of negotiations behind the scenes. Cowley (2002, 2005: and elsewhere) has addressed this question indirectly, providing case studies based on numerous interviews with MPs. However, policy impact has not been the focus of his studies. Only one paper (Cowley and Stuart 2007) has addressed the topic head-on. A more complete account, which might even be constructed from existing interview data, would be extremely worthwhile.

Another group which has been the focus of much study, both in the UK and overseas, is women parliamentarians. A great deal of attention has focused on whether women in parliaments have a different policy style and political preferences to men (e.g. Thomas and Welch 2006, Wangnerud 2000, Diaz 2005). This tends to be couched in arguments about whether women's 'descriptive' representation leads to their 'substantive' representation, rather than in terms of policy outputs *per se* (Mansbridge 1999, Pitkin 1967, Phillips 1995). The focus is therefore on behaviour, rather than tangible effects. In the UK it makes little sense to analyse such behaviour in terms of voting patterns (though see Childs and Cowley (2003)) as has been done in the US (e.g. Swers 1998), and the main argument has been about whether women change political culture and policy agendas (e.g. Childs 2004). There has been some analysis of women's debate

contributions (e.g. Childs 2002), and actions such as signing of early day motions (Childs and Withey 2004), but the analysis of women's contribution to actual policy outcomes has been more limited. One exception was a recent article tracing how women MPs had successfully brought about a change to the VAT rules with respect to sanitary protection (Childs and Withey 2006). This was a qualitative study based on interviews with the protagonists, and tracing of policy developments. The possibility exists to extend such work, and indeed to conduct similar studies with respect to the impact of other groups, in particular minority ethnic parliamentarians. One such example from the overseas literature with respect to women's policy contribution is Swers' (2002) work on the US Congress - though much of this analysis would not travel well, due to institutional differences. There are no doubt other examples, but we have not explored this literature extensively as yet.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have considered whether methods can be found to assess and communicate the policy impact of the British parliament more effectively. We have looked at this in terms of key functions: the passage of legislation and work of committees, as well as other groups of actors. We acknowledge that this is not a complete account of what might be considered when judging parliament's policy role. There are other activities with even less direct influence on policy, such as parliamentary questions, debates and early day motions, which may be important. But given the challenges of assessing even the more obviously measurable aspects of parliamentary work, and the relative lack of past study in these areas, we have limited our scope. We do, of course, remain open to other suggestions.

We conclude that there are many challenges to measuring parliamentary policy impact. This helps account for the relative shortage of literature in this area, both nationally and internationally. Indeed we find that, in some important respects, work on the British parliament is ahead of that on other parliamentary institutions. Notably Griffith's (1974) work on the legislative process at Westminster was groundbreaking, while Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon (2009) offer one of the most convincing assessments to be found of the impact of non-legislative committees. The recent work on the Joint Committee on Human Rights (Klug and Wildbore 2007) and the delegated legislation process (Page 2001) is also impressive and useful. We do not therefore wholly agree with the assessment of Atkinson and Thomas (1993: 432) that 'when it comes to a more refined theoretical understanding of power and influence in the parliamentary process, there are few promising developments to report'. Nonetheless the material to be found in the comparative, and US, literature is fairly disappointing.

In some ways this is a comment on the state of contemporary political science. The focus on comparative study, combined with the difficulties of comparing real parliamentary influence across borders, has resulted in a focus on formal powers which tells us relatively little about the impact of parliaments in practice. The desire, even within single country studies, to compare, and to find causal relationships between variables (e.g. which committee is most productive, or scrutiny mechanism is most effective) has shifted attention away from the basic question of where we are now.<sup>iii</sup> Our central question is what difference parliament makes to the policy process, and how. The comparison here is the (hypothetical) one between government policy without parliament, and government policy as modified by parliament's presence. In part this is a question of inputs and outputs, which itself has been only partially answered in the past; but it is also a bigger and more complex question of relationships, culture and anticipated reactions. Though this is an immensely challenging question, and any answer is bound to be less than

perfect, we believe that not tackling it is a mistake. The lack of any kind of considered answer has contributed to the pervasive myth that parliament has become marginal and unimportant. At a wider level, given the subtle nature of much parliamentary influence, it even feeds misunderstanding about the nature of politics itself.

If we are to tackle this difficult question, some of the studies in this paper offer useful ways forward. We have seen that simple counting mechanisms, of numbers of bills, amendments or committee recommendations, are imperfect measures of impact. They do play a necessary part in such an analysis, but must be looked at in context. This requires, for example, careful coding of importance, and study of debates. In order to build a fuller picture, survey methods and interviews can be a useful supplement. It will often not be enough to limit these to parliamentary officials and members, but also be necessary to engage those outside parliament, including civil servants, ministers and journalists. Each of these methods reinforces and complements the other: simple counting is inadequate without more contextual qualitative information, but studies solely based on narrative accounts or opinion will alone not be sufficiently convincing. A mixed methods approach is therefore obviously essential. This is labour-intensive, which is another reason why such work has been limited in the past. But it seems to us essential. We welcome any comments or suggestions about how such work might most usefully be pursued.

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<sup>ii</sup> Once again we emphasise that our search is necessarily incomplete, and reiterate our request for any suggestions of useful studies that we may have missed.

<sup>iii</sup> Not that the kind of questions addressed in the bracket have been addressed particularly effectively either.