

## Insight and comment on current issues and events

FROM  
HEARSAY TO  
HARD FACT

**Georgina  
Holmes-  
Skelton on**  
a new study

**which sheds light on  
the influence of select  
committee reports**

The Westminster select committee system has been the subject of both high praise and serious criticism over the years for the extent to which it allows Parliament to scrutinise government policy and hold the Executive to

account. In an attempt to understand parliamentary committees' real influence, academics from the Constitution Unit at UCL, in collaboration with Commons committee staff, have undertaken an extensive research project into committee reports and recommendations. Their final report, published this week, has some fascinating insights.

The project looked in detail at the work of House of Commons select committees between 1997 and 2010: namely BIS, defence, health, home affairs, public administra-

tion and Treasury. I was one of seven volunteers from the House of Commons committee office recruited during the 2010 dissolution period to assist with gathering and analysing information on the reports produced and recommendations and conclusions made. Each volunteer was responsible for the work of one committee. Most, as in my case, were staff members of the committee that they were analysing.

Over a period of several months we categorised each report that our committees had produced since 1997, and every recommendation within those coming from what we considered to be classic select committee 'inquiries'. For a sample of reports, each recommendation was then coded according to a number of factors: for example, to whom it was aimed; the type of action being called for; how measurable and how substantive it was; and the degree of change from government policy that the recommendation sought. Finally, we coded a sample of recommendations for the degree to which they were accepted and ultimately implemented by the government.

In relation to my committee, the defence

committee, this included coding a grand total of 111 reports, 76 inquiries and 2,066 recommendations and conclusions.

So what were the fruits of this laborious research project? Apart from instilling a phobia of databases in those involved, some very interesting statistics. Firstly, committees seem to be producing increasing numbers of reports, most of which are in response to government policy initiatives: only eight per cent could be considered to be 'agenda-setting'.

In addition, quite a high proportion (40 per cent) of committee recommendations call for only small changes in policy, but the rest call for larger changes. Finally, a rather surprising 40 per cent of committee recommendations are accepted by government, and roughly the same proportion go on to be implemented in practice. While calls for small changes are more likely to be implemented, around a third of those calling for more significant changes also succeed: encouraging figures, by all accounts.

However, for me and, I suspect, for many of those in Westminster, the most telling insight from the study is not in the statistics. In addition to

this huge coding project, the UCL team conducted interviews with a wide range of committee chairs, clerks, ministers, senior civil servants and others to gain their views on the influence of select committees.

The general consensus, perhaps unsurprisingly for those on the inside, was that despite the relatively high implementation rate, the adoption of committee recommendations is only one form of committee success, and perhaps not even the most important. The non-quantifiable influences cannot be underestimated, and they include: publicly gathering evidence, raising awareness of issues, improving the quality of government decision-making though accountability and, indeed, just being a watchful eye over departments.

In conclusion, both the statistics and the comments of those involved tell a very heartening story about the influence of select committees.

The study provides real evidence that committees do have an impact, both directly through making recommendations to government, and in a more subtle way by the fact of carrying out such public inquiries. A fascinating report and, I think all would agree, well worth the hours spent poring over old committee reports.

• *Selective Influence: The Policy Impact of House of Commons Select Committees* is published by the UCL Constitution Unit, and available on their website. 📖

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#### VOLCANIC CASH

Have you bumped into the Press Association's chief political correspondent Joe Churcher lately? It's more likely he's bumped into you, because he has an inherited eye condition known as retinitis pigmentosa (RP).

It is one of the most common causes of blindness in people of working age and in children. Among the symptoms are night blindness and tunnel vision – hence the regular bumps and bruises, including a brutal encounter with a Kuwaiti tree on the prime minister's Gulf tour.

There is still no cure for RP or any treatment to halt its attack on the retina, which often results in the loss of sight altogether. Advances have been made, but funding is urgently needed to maintain the momentum.

That's why Joe and seven other people with RP are taking on the challenge of hiking across Iceland's volcanic landscape.

If you would like to sponsor Joe, please visit his website at [www.justgiving.com/joe-churcher](http://www.justgiving.com/joe-churcher) or call him on 020 7219 4282.



Prime minister David Cameron faces select committee chairmen at one of the regular liaison committee sessions. Select committees are producing an increasing number of reports, most of which are in reaction to policy initiatives from the government. a study finds