

Select committee influence is the stuff of parliamentary folklore: a handful of anecdotes rustle through parliament like Chinese whispers, but little about where select committees have changed policy is ever recorded or systematically assessed. The prevailing view is that while committee reports are largely ignored by government, committees have other subtle, immeasurable forms of influence.

So there were a few raised eyebrows amongst parliamentary insiders when we described our intention to trace the outcome of recommendations from seven different committees over the entire 13 years of Labour government.

The results of our one-year research project are that yes, select committee influence is subtle and complex, and yes, it is difficult to measure. It is always problematic to attribute policy change to a particular group, especially for committees working in a crowded policy field. Whether government implements select committee recommendations is therefore a crude measure.

But even taken with a pinch of salt our results suggest that committee reports are by no means ignored. About a third of substantive recommendations eventually make it into policy. More importantly, our interviews, including with people in government, corroborate these findings, as well as suggesting there are many more indirect but powerful forms of influence in play.

Our report *Selective Influence: The Policy Impact of House of Commons Select Committees* (June 2011) is the result of a large-scale collaborative study with the House of Commons Committee Office. With the help of seven parliamentary volunteers, we looked at a sample of seven committees.

The first thing we realised was that committees do an awful lot of work. Based on the figures we collected, we estimate that select committees ran around 1,450 inquiries from 1997-2010, and produced almost 40,000 recommendations and conclusions, of which 19,000 were recommendations aimed at central government.

Tracing whether a sample of nearly 2,000 recommendations were accepted in the government response and then ultimately implemented was an onerous task. But we found that 40 per cent of recommendations were given a positive government response. More surprisingly, this was not just government paying lip service; a similar proportion of recommendations were ultimately implemented, many of these substantive.

Of course, policy might have changed

Select Committees aren't just talking shops — they DO make things happen

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whether or not the select committee recommended it. This is why we went beyond the crude tracking of recommendations and spoke to the people who matter: committee members and chairs, parliamentary staff, and ministers and senior civil servants.

The interviews reinforced our sense that there are significant drawbacks to tracing recommendations. Committees might strategically make recommendations they know government will accept, or be echoing what other groups are calling for.

But interviewees also suggested that committees might in fact be *more* influential than a recommendation-counting exercise suggests. Some recommendations might be ahead of their time and re-emerge on the policy agenda many years later. Sometimes the government changes policy before the committee reports, because of the need to pay extra attention to the area that the committee is investigating. A committee can catalyse opinion and act as a tipping point in a debate.

Much of this influence is indirect, as when committees put political weight behind an evidence base. It tends to be quite subtle: for example, select committees can spotlight overlooked policy areas or raise them up the ministerial agenda. But the forms of committee influence almost uniformly brought to our attention by interviewees were even less visible than this.

Committees hold government to account in a way which can help departments think through their policy options and justify their

choices. The potential for an embarrassing hearing in the future makes it a risky strategy to ignore a report, or as one civil servant put it 'the worst thing you could do is ignore a recommendation and a scandal blew up' hence 'you forget what [a committee] said at your peril'.

The least visible dimension of influence of all is how government adjusts its behaviour in anticipation of how the committee *might* react should a certain course of action be taken.

This was referred to by one of our interviewees as the capacity of committees to 'generate fear'. This is a primarily *negative* and *prospective* form of influence: discouraging government from behaving in certain ways in future, for fear of how the select committee may react. In the words of one interviewee, government 'aims to make policy as committee-proof as possible'.

All this is not to say that committees should not have an eye to the success of their reports and recommendations. Select committees have been most influential when they have been strategic and timely — for example, the Health Committee intervention on the smoking ban acted as a tipping point.

Persistence on particular policy areas or recommendations also eventually pays dividends, as demonstrated by the Public Administration Committee's success in getting the core values of the civil service on a statutory footing. Drawing from a firm research basis, including commissioning original evidence, is also fruitful.

Of course, we heard many criticisms of select committees — many of them fair. One of the lines most difficult to tread is media attention. Select committees need press coverage to achieve the subtle forms of influence identified above, but they can sometimes veer towards 'ambulance chasing'.

A related point is the lack of follow-up on previous inquiries, including monitoring the progress of recommendations. We also heard the usual complaints about preparation and questioning.

We conclude that committees are undoubtedly influential, but not all of the time. This can be seen through tracing recommendations, but much influence is far less tangible. What is clear is that committees are now a respected part of the policy landscape, and engaged in constant dialogue with government.

It remains to be seen how the recent Wright Committee changes may strengthen committees further.

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