

# Selective Influence: The Policy Impact of House of Commons Select Committees

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## Structure of presentation

- Previous work on select committee influence
- Our study
- Quantitative findings
  - Committee work
  - Recommendation attributes
  - Government acceptance and implementation of recommendations
- Qualitative findings
  - Factors associated with successful reports
  - Seven non-quantifiable forms of influence
- Weaknesses of the select committee system
- Conclusions

## Measuring select committee influence

- Little (particularly quantitative) done to audit committee influence.
- Few examples of committees evaluating their own influence.
- Academic studies predominantly anecdotal and now for the most part out of date (e.g. Drewry 1985, 1989).
- One recent study looked at both initial government response and ultimate outcome - but for just one committee (Education: Hindmoor, Larkin & Kennon 2009).

## Hence lazy assumptions may be made

*The biggest weakness for select committees is, really, that they don't have enough impact. Their reports are very good, very detailed, and they are getting much better at extracting information from civil servants, witnesses and ministers. But when it comes to their findings, government seems to be quite happy to brush aside, in a sort of terse memorandum, not taking any real notice of anything the committee has recommended, unless it happens to be in the interest of the government at the time.*

*Guardian* journalist David Hencke on the Westminster Hour, March 2011

**Are such claims supported by the facts?**

## The research

- Collaboration with House of Commons: team of seven committee staff volunteered during 2010 general election and summer recess.
- Examined reports, and sample of recommendations from these, produced by seven committees 1997 – 2010.
- Traced outcome of recommendations.
- Over 50 interviews: with committee chairs, members, staff and advisers; ministers, civil servants, other officials and outside groups.
- Largest volume of data ever collected about the select committees.

## The seven committees

- Business, Innovation and Skills\*
- Defence
- Foreign Affairs
- Health
- Home Affairs
- PASC
- Treasury

\* including as Trade and Industry and Business and Enterprise Committee

## Quantitative Findings

## Committee work

- Select committees produce a lot of reports, most of which report inquiries: 505 inquiry reports from the seven committees, suggesting 1450 inquiries in total from all committees over this period.
- Very few inquiries are ‘agenda-setting’ (8%), while most review progress (42%) or examine proposals (22%). Some respond to government failure (15%).
- Select committees produce a huge volume of conclusions and recommendations: 13,216 from these seven committees, suggesting almost 40,000 in total over this period (or 3,000 per year).
- Around 60% of these are recommendations, and 45% are recommendations aimed at central government, suggesting 19,000 central government recommendations in total (1,450 per year).



## Recommendation attributes

- Recommendations call for a wide variety of actions by government: the largest category is “research or review” of policy (23%), and many are for disclosure of information (14%).
- Relatively few relate directly to flagship policies in government manifestos and Queen’s speeches (20%).
- 60% call for significant policy change, the rest call for small change or continuation of existing policy.
- Very few recommendations attract divisions (1.5%).

## The impact of recommendations

- 40% of recommendations were accepted by government. Largely ‘soft’ yeses – e.g. policy change during course of the inquiry or agreement with general thrust of a recommendation but not same level of detail. Very few recommendations rejected outright (5%).
- A similar proportion of recommendations were ultimately implemented, including some that were initially rejected in the government response.
- Higher proportion of recommendations for small/no change to policy are implemented (60%), but 34% of recommendations calling for substantive change were also implemented: 263 in our sample.
- Suggests that government implemented 2,600 recommendations calling for substantive change by all 20 departmental committees in this period (or 200 a year).

## Problems with counting successful recommendations

May overestimate influence	May underestimate influence

## Qualitative Findings

## Factors Associated with Successful Reports

- **Timeliness:** even if acting in a crowded field, committees can act as a ‘tipping point’ at a time when policy is hanging in the balance (e.g. *Smoking in Public Places*, Health Committee 2005).
- **Firm research basis:** drawing on substantial evidence base or even externally commissioned research - rare but can put new evidence into public domain (e.g. *Pub Companies* 2009, BIS Committee).
- **Persistence:** repeated return to a policy area over long period of time eventually pays dividends (e.g. *A Draft Civil Service Bill* 2004, PASC)
- **Niche policy area:** committees can raise a neglected issue up departmental agenda (e.g. *Educating Service Children* 2006, Defence Committee).
- **Interpreting brief creatively:** similarly addressing issues neglected by dept (e.g. *Cash Machine Charges* 2005, Treasury Cttee).

## Non-quantifiable forms of committee influence (1)

- **Contribution to wider debate** Committees put new ideas on the agenda, “crystallise a body of opinion”, or “create a political narrative and give weight to a direction of policy”.
- **Drawing together evidence** Committees “put into the public domain a lot of evidence”, they “dig deeper” and “drill down” into policy issues; and this evidence is crucially “filtered through politicians”.
- **Spotlighting issues and changing priorities** Announcing an inquiry pushes issues up the departmental agenda; it can “set hares racing”, bringing problems to the attention of ministers.
- **Brokering** Some inquiries improve communication and transparency within the department concerned, it can be “politically useful” for a minister to say something to the committee; others can strengthen the position of one department against another.

## Non-quantifiable forms of committee influence (2)

- **Accountability** Committees “get people to explain themselves” and “hold government to account for poor performance”; they can also help depts think through policy options and justify choices: “the worst thing you could do is ignore a recommendation and a scandal blew up”.
- **Exposure** Exposing bad decision-making in a public arena has high potential for embarrassment, not just ministers but particularly officials and outside (including private) organisations.
- **Generating fear (anticipated reactions)** Committees have negative, prospective influence whereby government adjusts behaviour in anticipation of how committee might react; government “aims to make policy as committee-proof as possible”, ministers consider “how would this look if there was an inquiry into it?”.

## Weakness of the select committee system

- Short-termism and media focus
- Lack of preparation and poor questioning
- Lack of research base
- Government evidence and quality of response
- Report and recommendation drafting
- Poor follow-through, including in parliament



## Conclusions

- Committees are undoubtedly influential, but not all of the time.
- This can be seen through tracing recommendations, but much (and probably the more important) influence is far less measurable/ tangible.
- Committees are now an established and respected part of the policy landscape, and engaged in a constant dialogue with government (and non-governmental actors).
- They could nonetheless do better, and some proposals for improvement have been on the table a long time.
- The recent (Wright Committee) changes may strengthen committees further.
- But a key question: how influential do we want/can we expect select committees to be?