



Constitution Unit Report to Leverhulme September 2010 FOI and Parliament, Leverhulme ref F/07 134/CQ

The project

One of the key bodies affected by the Freedom of Information Act is Parliament. FOI has presented an opportunity to MPs, who can use it to obtain information from the government. But it is also a challenge, as the public can use it to obtain information about Parliament and MPs. This project examines the two aspects of the 'sword' (how MPs and Peers have used FOI) and the 'shield' (How FOI has been used to access information about Parliament).

Summary

This two year project is running according to plan:

- The interviews with peers, officials and MPs are all progressing well.
- FOI requests have been made to central government departments for details of MPs' and peers' use of FOI.
- Parliament's FOI disclosure log has been coded and analysed.
- Media and parliamentary debate coding is ongoing.
- We have given presentations at the Political Studies Association conference in April 2010, have written a research paper on 'the sword' and publicised the project in a Parliamentary journal. More dissemination will take place between now and April 2011.

Interviews

The project aims to interview 20 MPs, 10 researchers and 10 peers.

Interviews thus far have been conducted with:

- 9 Parliamentary officials (2 Lords' officials, 5 Commons' and 2 members of the Information Commissioner's Office).
- 2 researchers (both in the Lords)
- 5 MPs
- 4 Peers
- 1 Journalist

The interviews have been slightly delayed by the General Election, as both the run up and post-election made it difficult to contact members.

FOI requests

- FOI requests have been made to all central government departments for details of questions asked using FOI by MPs and peers.
- Those that held the information responded with details of questions and details of whether the person was an MP or Peer, and their political affiliation.
- Results have been coded and analysed.

Analysis of disclosure log

- Parliamentary Disclosure log is the record of all requests made by the public to Parliament between 2005 until 2009 (when the latest log is available). The log has been coded and analysed. It has been passed to Parliamentary officials for comment.

PQs and debates

- Coding of parliamentary debates that mention FOI is now completed (from Jan 2005 to November 2009)
- Written questions that mention FOI have been coded up until 2008. 2009 is still to do.

Case studies of FOIs made to parliament, and made by parliamentarians

We have put together a set of small case studies relating to the use of FOI by the public, and by parliamentarians, for use in presentations and later articles. These include:

- MPs' expenses scandal (includes timeline and analysis)
- Costs of the new Parliament Visitors centre
- Carbon Emissions from the Houses of Parliament (started but not completed)
- MPs' restaurant bills
- The third runway at Heathrow
- The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Extraordinary Rendition
- Guests at Chequers

Media Coding

To examine how the media disseminates information about FOI and Parliament we are examining press articles using or about FOI and Parliament in the national press.

- Media coding – almost a third of the required sample has been completed 600 out of 1,400 articles (2005-2006)

Dissemination

Articles and conference papers: completed and upcoming

- Paper '*The sword: MPs' and Peers use of FOI*', PSA April 2010 (PSA paper available on Constitution Unit and PSA website. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/foi/foi-and-parliament/the-sword-parliament-and-foi> Has also been disseminated to a range of interested parties).
- Article '*Uncomfortable scrutiny: FOI and Parliament*' for Government Gazette (Nov/Dec 2010 edition)
- Article for January 2011 *Monitor* (Constitution Unit tri-annual publication)
- Planned PSA paper for April 2011.

Presentations: completed and upcoming

- '*The sword: MPs' and Peers use of FOI*' to the Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Edinburgh, April 2010
- '*The Sword and the Shield: FOI's impact on Westminster*' for Study of Parliament Group (SPG), January 2011, for debate and discussion of the preliminary findings
- Presentation to Unit's own FOI Seminar series, May 2011
- Proposal sent to present at the PSA Annual Conference, London April 2011