

Parliament bounces back – how Select Committees have become a power in the land

By Democratic Audit

*Much reformist discussion of the House of Commons views it as an institution in permanent decline, operating in a museum-building with stuffy and out-of-date processes that MPs stubbornly refuse to change. But **Patrick Dunleavy** and **Dominic Muir** show that the reforms pushed through in 2009-10 by Tony Wright have already made a dramatic difference. The media visibility of the Commons' Select Committees has grown substantially, giving them unprecedented national (even global) attention.*

For ordinary citizens, many aspects internal reforms carried out in Parliament since 2009 are not very visible, because they do not attract sufficient media attention and discussion. However, the Democratic Audit recently gave evidence to the powerful Political and Constitutional



Members of the Commons take questions (credit: UK Parliament, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Reform select committee of the House of Commons about the so-called 'Wright reforms' carried out since 2009 (and named after the former MP and now Birkbeck Professor, [Tony Wright](#)). [Their report](#) is published today.

For once we were able to find a whole range of indicators that show that Parliament's media profile has systematically improved, making its activities far more perceived by people not already working within Parliament itself. As Tony Wright himself observed in a previous evidence session to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

'The [external, media] attention that the House gets comes far more now from the Select Committee system than from anywhere else. That is affecting perceptions, behaviour, incentive structures. It is making a big change'. (*PCRC, Oral evidence session, 21 March 2013: Q83*)

Although it is still early days to consider the evidence of the Wright reforms making a difference to public perceptions of the Commons and Parliament, the evidence so far is compelling and here present the full evidence given to Parliament. We undertook a *preliminary* analysis of the most important UK press database (run by Lexis-Nexis), comparing variations in press coverage from 2008 to 2012.

The results in Chart 1 show that there has been a substantial growth in the overall mentions of Commons committees across the five years. Setting 2008 levels at 100, then total mentions and one average indicators (the mean) both increased to 330 by 2012, while a further average (the median) grew to 274.

Chart 1: There has been a substantial increase in press coverage of House of Commons Committees since 2008

Detailed analysis in **Table 1** shows that much of the total increase in mentions has taken place in four exceptionally prominent committees:

- the Committee of Public Accounts, long rated the most influential Commons committee, is supported by the National Audit Office and has had a dynamic new Chair in Margaret Hodge MP since the 2010 general election;
- the Home Affairs Select Committee was already the second-most important committee in 2008. Its press mentions increased sharply in 2011 and 2013, following the summer riots and the Committee's inquiries into them;
- the Treasury Select Committee, again an already important committee in 2008; and
- the Culture, Media and Sport select committee, whose prominence has grown greatly during the media behaviour scandal and the subsequent Levenson Inquiry process.

However, **Table 1** also shows that there has been a more consistent growth of press coverage of a further seven other Commons committees, making the expansion of press coverage a broad-based trend.

Table 1: There has been a sharp growth in mentions of the top four committees (shaded yellow), and consistent growth in a further seven committees (shaded green)

Source: Democratic Audit analysis of Lexis-Nexis press database. Note: We searched across years in a standard grid, so committees may not exist in all years covered.

Table 2: Index numbers show that fourteen committees more than doubled their press mentions between 2008 and 2012 (orange cells), a further four saw smaller increases (white cells) and seven received less coverage (blue cells)

Source: Democratic Audit analysis of Lexis-Nexis press database

Looking at the index numbers comparing committees' coverage in 2012 with that in 2008, shows the largest group of committees with more than double their earlier coverage – but also several cases where coverage has declined.

Table 3: Statistical analysis shows that increasing UK press mentions was a broadly based movement, affecting many (but not all) committees

(focus: House of Commons Committees, 2008 to 2012)

Source: Democratic Audit analysis of Lexis-Nexis press database

Chart 2: Graphing the summary statistics for UK press mentions of Commons Committees confirms that all indices show growth over time

Source: Democratic Audit analysis of Lexis-Nexis press database

We have also sought to assess how general has been the increase in the media visibility of House of Commons committees using a number of more technical methods. Without going into too much technical detail, Table 3 shows that increases have also occurred in the 'quartiles' of the data across the years, as well as in the overall averages (median and mean) and the top scoring committee (first PAC, later Home Affairs). Graphing these data on a logarithmic scale in Chart 2 confirms this impression of consistent growth.

We conclude that there is strong evidence that UK press coverage of committees in the House of Commons has increased in the last five years. This trend offers prima facie evidence supporting the qualitative impressions of almost all external observers that the Wright reforms have been successful in greatly improving the external visibility of parliamentary activity. It is also likely that the data covered here under-estimate the extent of change, because press coverage as a means of communication has somewhat declined in salience across this period. In the digital era a large part of the surveillance of Parliament by citizens and outside actors is now focused on social media, which are more suited to the detailed communication of parliamentary activity to a wide audience. In addition, there is some evidence that although committee Chairs were not generally a focus of much press attention, in the growing area of 24 hour news TV (as well as in other broadcasting) their visibility to the public may well have increased. These are topics to which we hope to return in future work.

Some other important aspects are covered in the [Select Committee's report](#), including changes that affect the composition and operations of the House of Commons Select Committees. The Wright reforms were designed to make more effective – more independent of the executive in terms of their membership and in the selection of their Chairs – and there is less formal evidence that these changes have also been successful.

Note: To access the full Democratic Audit evidence to Parliament please see the uncorrected evidence session [here](#). Part 1 of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee report is [here](#), and part 2 is [here](#).

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