

Talking to Honourable Members: advice for academics on giving evidence to Parliamentary committees

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*How do Parliamentary committees treat academics? What is like to feel ambushed when you hoped your opinion might make an impact in policy making? **Iain McLean**, Professor of Politics at Oxford University, offers some insight into the experience of giving evidence as an expert witness to Parliamentary committees, and gives some essential advice for academics who might consider offering their opinions in the future.*



In January I gave evidence as an expert witness to two very different Parliamentary committees, one in Edinburgh and one in London. It can be fun, but it is a challenge. It can count towards 'impact' but you have to earn respect.

In London, I joined other constitutional specialists to give evidence to the Commons select committee dealing with the constitution. It is currently very active, with several inquiries in hand. Our session was on the draft Cabinet Manual produced by the Cabinet Secretary. Was it a positive development? (we said Yes). Was it a revolutionary usurpation of power? (No). Should it be signed off by Parliament? (divided). Tristram Hunt MP, the historian and telly-don, was a particularly active interlocutor.

Compare Rivals

In Edinburgh, the stakes were higher. The Scottish Parliament was examining the Scotland Bill, which had been proposed by the UK Government and is supported by a majority of the (then) Scottish Parliament. I was one of those called to give evidence on the proposed tax devolution in the bill. The call for evidence invited witnesses to compare the UK government's plan with its rivals.

My evidence was uncontroversial. I was followed by two academic economists who later complained that they had been ambushed. They had previously written a paper that claimed that fiscal autonomy for Scotland would, in and of itself, cause GDP to rise. This was manna to the SNP Scottish Government (at that time a minority government) who cited it extensively in lieu of producing any studies of its own. But four of the MSPs on the Bill committee (from three different parties) established that the sources cited in the paper did not justify its claims.

Ambush?

Was it an ambush? There was hurt on both sides. The economists complained that they had come to give evidence on something else, and that they could not be held responsible for the use the Scottish Government had made of their paper. The committee majority retorted that fiscal austerity was one of the topics on which they had sought evidence, and that the public should know that claims made by the Scottish Government lacked foundation.

I draw some lessons for potential expert witnesses.

- Make only statements that can be verified by evidence
- Do not express party-political opinions
- Submit a written statement first
- Be prepared for hostile or unexpected questioning
- Check the party affiliation and likely interests of the members before going along
- If the questions go outside your expertise, say you don't know – don't speculate; but be prepared to send supplementary data to the committee if you find the evidence later

Being an expert witness is not everybody's cup of tea. It is hard unpaid work (you can step up and become a committee adviser, but don't expect that to make you rich either). But it can be rewarding. It is a public service; it exemplifies impact; and it helps redress the puny strength of the legislature against the mighty strength of the executive.

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