

~~The~~ select committee system is more effective than ever before. Now, a thorough review of their core tasks and resources is needed, to avoid them being bogged down under the weight of increasing workload and expectations.

Select committees in government are not new, but they have recently had a boost to their status and reputation – in July, millions watched the Culture, Media and Sport select committee question Rupert and James Murdoch over phone hacking. The Hansard Society's [Matt Korris](#) argues that the increasing role and public expectations of select committees now places them with an unprecedented workload. A thorough review of the system is needed to ensure select committees can build on their successes and remain effective.



Select committees are one of the great success stories of Parliament. Over the last 30 years they have become the principal mechanism through which the House of Commons holds the executive to account and have influenced the direction of government policy and legislation. Reforms in the past decade have increased their status and sharpened their operation, particularly the recent change to elect committee chairs and members, and events such as the banking crisis and the phone hacking scandal have given committees and their work a higher profile than ever before.

However these successes mask underlying questions about the functioning of the select committee system. Many new demands have been placed on committees in recent years, their workload is increasing and public expectation of them has been heightened, and yet resources are finite and will come under increasing pressure in the future as a result of budget cuts.

The workload of committees

Committees have a set of 10 [core tasks](#), set out in 2002 (following a recommendation of the [Hansard Society's](#) Scrutiny Commission), to guide their work. These include examining government policy proposals (white papers, green papers etc.), departmental decisions and outputs, pre-legislative scrutiny of draft bills, scrutiny of the implementation of policy and legislation (post-legislative scrutiny), departmental expenditure, the workings of Executive Agencies, Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) and regulators, and major appointments made by the department.

The sum total of these tasks, for even a medium-sized government department, represents a huge workload for a committee of 11 MPs (and four or five staff). And while no committee can be expected to cover everything during the course of a parliamentary session, there are concerns that an impending increase in the weight of work is going to stretch their ability to cover even a sensible, representative fraction of it.

The new or expanding areas of work cover a variety of the core tasks, the most high profile being an increase in pre-appointment hearings for appointees to senior public offices.

These were introduced in 2008 on a pilot basis, and after more than 30

hearings in three years, are here to stay. The Treasury Committee last year secured the right to veto the Chancellor's appointment, and crucially also the dismissal, of the head of the new Office of Budget Responsibility. The Liaison Committee has recently set out a [list of just over 60 posts](#) that it believes select committees should hold veto-enhanced pre-appointment hearings for (while leaving to the committees' discretion whether to hold hearings for the many other lesser posts).



Credit: Parliament TV

Committees are also likely to be burdened with more pre-legislative scrutiny as the government embarks on its second legislative programme from May next year. Ministers in both Houses have [repeatedly stated](#) their intention to bring forward more draft bills in subsequent sessions, and while similar undertakings were made and not realised under the previous administration, an increase in the number of draft bills is likely and will put significant pressure on committee time and resources.

Another reform that potentially brings with it extra work is the new system for post-legislative scrutiny. In 2008 the government committed to publishing [a review of every Act of Parliament](#) (other than financial measures) between three to five years of Royal Assent to assess their impact, with the intention being that select committees would analyse these reviews and undertake their own investigation if required. This was backdated to start with Acts passed in 2005, so only recently have these reviews started to be published in any number for select committees to consider.

A number of other reforms also have significant workload implications; improved financial reporting by government departments will heighten expectations that committees undertake detailed scrutiny of public spending, especially during a time of economic uncertainty and austerity measures, while the [2008 Planning Act](#) requires committees to scrutinise proposals for National Policy Statements on planning.

The expansion of the role and function of select committees in this way, and the extra demands and opportunities that arise as a result raises questions about the extent to which committees are in command of their own agenda. There is a danger that the very success of committees makes them the default option for all additional parliamentary activity that arises and that government may have too much influence upon them by adding new tasks to their workload. The increasing demands on select committees and their members have been explicitly referred to in the last 18 months both by the [Reform Committee](#) and the [Liaison Committee](#), with both recommending that a review of the core tasks is needed. It is now essential that this takes place.

Reviewing the select committee system

A review must balance the case for a more prescriptive approach with the clear predisposition of committees to retain their ability to set their own agenda. While the current formulation of core tasks has helped move select committees towards a more systematic form of scrutiny, any attempt to expand them would bring the system up against both its own limited resources and in conflict with the members who perform these roles.

Greater definition of the core tasks is therefore essential for committees to plan their work more effectively over the course of a parliament, ensuring that they are making the best choices possible about what policy areas and bodies to scrutinise, and providing some form of accountability and transparency for those choices. For example, scrutiny of the work and expenditure of 'executive agencies, NDPBs, regulators and other associated public bodies' referenced in Tasks 5 and 7, and 'major appointments' in Task 8 leave it entirely open to each departmental committee to decide which bodies and appointments it will focus on. As a consequence some bodies and appointments attract more attention than others, and large areas of departmental operations go unscrutinised.

The review should also examine how committees follow-up their work. The current model encourages committees to undertake inquiries, hold hearings and produce reports, but then often leave the subject entirely and move on to other things. Committees should seek to maintain a watching brief on areas they have scrutinised, examining whether their recommendations have been implemented, and calling ministers to fresh evidence sessions to account for progress.

This should go alongside some self-examination by committees. They should review the inquiries they have undertaken and recommendations made, and reflect upon their coverage of the core tasks over a parliament. Committees in Scotland produce legacy reports at the end each parliament that perform this function, setting out the areas they have covered, the progress made, and a possible roadmap of future work for their successors. Committees in Westminster should look to maximise the value of such a system both for self-evaluation and improvement and also the cementing of institutional memory.

The review should also consider whether cross-cutting policy committees, involving members and resources from a number of committees, would be beneficial to tackle cross-departmental issues (such as government policy on young people). There is the potential for committees to take a more innovative approach to the use of their resources and the harnessing of external support.

The select committee system is more effective than it has ever been. But to maintain their development, and avoid being bogged down under the weight of increasing workload and expectations, a thorough review of their core tasks and resources is needed for them to continue to develop and prosper in the future.

This article is heavily adapted from '[Reviewing Select Committee Tasks and Modes of Operation](#)' by Alex Brazier and Ruth Fox in the Hansard Society's journal [Parliamentary Affairs](#).

An audio recording of a Hansard Society event last week entitled 'Select Committees: Are they as effective as they think they are' is available [here](#).