

Giving evidence in Parliament: training and support to engage with select committees

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/11/07/giving-evidence-in-parliament-training-and-support-to-engage-with-select-comr

11/7/2016

*Providing evidence to policymakers through select committees is a great way for researchers to influence current policy debates. But if you haven't done it before, the formality of the task may appear daunting. In the third part of a series on [giving evidence in Parliament](#), **Patrick Hanley** has compiled thoughts and experiences from several LSE academics and reveals tips on what support and training is available ahead of your select committee appearance.*



In the first two blogs of this series, we explored how academics come to have the opportunity to give evidence to Parliament, either [through chance](#) or proactive engagement with select committees.

If you believe your research is policy-relevant but don't find the opportunity to provide evidence comes to you by chance, there are some simple steps you can take to [put yourself on the radar of select committees](#). Getting a sense of what committees are looking for and submitting written evidence is a great start to engaging with them. The more you engage, the more you will likely find that select committees, often looking for new and interesting voices, will want to hear from you.

Either way, a key consideration for academics who find themselves engaging with Parliament is feeling appropriately supported to do so. To that end, there is much that they and professional service staff at higher education institutions can do to ensure those looking to engage feel properly prepared.



Image credit: [Parliament Sunset](#) by Greg Knapp. This work is licensed under a [CC BY 2.0](#) license.

The Houses of Parliament have an excellent outreach service that offers a [wide variety of courses](#), from public 'Parliament 101' to bespoke training. This isn't just a London thing; there are community outreach officers that

specialise in all parts of the UK.

There is even a specialised [programme for universities](#) designed to educate students, academics and impact staff on how best to get involved with Parliament and the policymaking process. The service runs [workshops and seminars](#) throughout the year to shed light on how academic research is used in Parliament, how to best identify opportunities to join your research with Parliament's work and how to best communicate your research to policymakers.

Continuing to explore the experiences of academics who have given evidence, today we hear from [Dr Jose-Luis Fernandez](#), Associate Professorial Research Fellow with LSE's Department of Social Policy and [Dr Jo Murkens](#), Associate Professor in Law at LSE. We'll hear their thoughts on training, being prepared to give evidence, how they found the session and its impact.

Academics on support and training

Dr Fernandez offers his perspective on how academics can be supported to engage with Parliament:

"I think the key support is:

- To have information about the process itself. And there are plenty of sessions recorded online by the different committees. Watching one before going in is likely to be very useful;
- To be able to present ideas clearly in front of a lay audience. MPs are meant to be particularly interested and therefore have a good understanding of the area, but often they will not be aware of the detail. Also, when quoting research, I would keep talk of methods to a minimum or exclude it altogether. If you have been selected to go in front of the committee it is because they trust you as an expert, and you can always follow your oral evidence with written evidence (and sometimes you are asked by the committee to provide further details after the session has finished)."

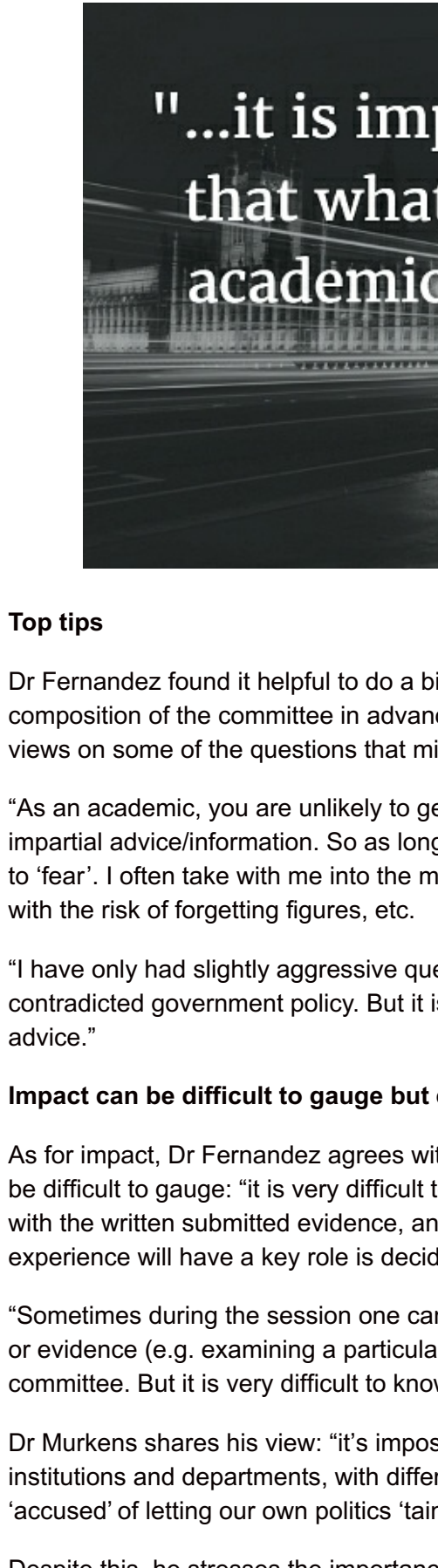
Dr Murkens' advice is to learn by doing: "in a way, the experience is the inverse of teaching a class. There are 12 people in the room but you are the one being grilled by them. It's vitally important to have done one's homework and to have written one's essay (i.e. submitted written evidence)."

Making it happen (after putting yourself on the map)

As with some of the academics from earlier posts in this series, Dr Murkens found the opportunity came through his published work: "I have given evidence three times in Parliament: on Scottish Independence, judicial independence, and the impact of the EU referendum on Scotland. In all three cases, I was invited to give evidence on the basis of publications, especially blog pieces published by the LSE ([British Politics and Policy](#) and [European Politics and Policy](#)). So, the shorter blog pieces are actually a great way to reach not just a wider audience, but also a strategically well-placed readership."

Preparing for the session

Dr Fernandez offers his experience on being prepared on the day: "usually the clerk or the specialist adviser of the committee calls you a couple of days before the hearing and goes through the areas of questioning that are likely to come up. In my experience, the degree to which they reveal the questions can vary depending on the committee in question and the clerk. They are not meant to say the exact wording of the questions, in part because MPs can change them (sometimes inadvertently!) on the day. But academics, as experts that are there to inform the committee, get a pretty good idea of all the questions."



"...it is important to remember that what they look for from academics is expert advice."

Dr Jose-Luis Fernandez
(LSE)



Top tips

Dr Fernandez found it helpful to do a bit of homework on the committee dynamics: "I found it useful to know the composition of the committee in advance and also to try to find out whether some might have particularly strong views on some of the questions that might be discussed during the session.

"As an academic, you are unlikely to get a 'grilling' and are more likely to be in front of the committee to give them impartial advice/information. So as long as you have prepared the questions you should be OK and there is nothing to 'fear'. I often take with me into the meeting, notes with detailed evidence, and this reduces the stress associated with the risk of forgetting figures, etc.

"I have only had slightly aggressive questions from MPs a couple of times, and this was because my evidence contradicted government policy. But it is important to remember that what they look for from academics is expert advice."

Impact can be difficult to gauge but engagement on the record is important

As for impact, Dr Fernandez agrees with other academics in this series that the full impact of the appearance can be difficult to gauge: "it is very difficult to know what the final impact of evidence is, as the evidence is put together with the written submitted evidence, and then 'mediated' by the preferences of the committee specialists, who in my experience will have a key role in deciding what the recommendations of the final report are likely to be.

"Sometimes during the session one can make recommendations for the committee to examine a particular question or evidence (e.g. examining a particular model in a given country, etc.) and this can be followed up by the committee. But it is very difficult to know what the final impact of giving evidence is."

Dr Murkens shares his view: "it's impossible to tell. At the last session, the three expert witnesses (from different institutions and departments, with different levels of seniority) were all saying the same thing. We were then 'accused' of letting our own politics 'taint' our evidence."

Despite this, he stresses the importance of getting your evidence before the committee, "I think it is very difficult to persuade MPs. They have their own views and their own considerations. But it's important to get the evidence on record."

In the final post in this series, we'll collect and review the top tips in the experience of our academics to create a 'how-to' guide on giving evidence. We'll look at best practices on creating the moment, preparing for the day, participating in the session and evaluating impact.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Patrick Hanley is the Public Affairs Officer at the London School of Economics where he focuses on parliamentary engagement and research impact. He has a background in public policy in the United Kingdom and the United States.

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.