

*Mapping and Assessing Accountability:
Institutional Rules and Political Dynamics
in the
New Zealand Parliament*

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Paper presented at the
Annual Conference
Australasian Study of Parliament Group
6-8 October 2005
Parliament House
Sydney

In this paper I argue that the capacity for effective committee scrutiny and oversight cannot be assessed as an independent characteristic. Rather, these important functions need to be understood as inextricably entangled with wider issues such as institutional design, formal committee powers, the relationship between government and opposition, and the historically developed norms and values of those participating in the committee process. The evidence in support of the paper's argument is drawn from the New Zealand Parliament and, also, the international political science literature on legislative and committee powers.¹

The first section briefly discusses the development of the New Zealand committee system, explaining its current structure and main features and the two committees that have particular oversight functions: Officers of Parliament and Finance Expenditure. I also note some shortcomings of the committee system in so far as oversight is concerned. The second section tests the New Zealand system against internationally developed indicators of committee strength in relation to the powers of the executive. Understanding the overall system is important for assessing any committee system; but where committees are designed to play several roles, general powers and overall institutional design become even more important. I conclude by identifying some of the gaps in the internationally developed indicators, and argue that we need to add further criteria derived from democratic criteria.

First, however, a word on the notion of 'oversight'. Ian Marsh sees oversight as intrinsically linked with, or even part of, the act of 'scrutiny', writing that, 'Scrutiny and oversight covers committee review of current government activities, legislation and the budget, including the medium-term strategy and proposed annual expenditure, and taxation measures' (1995, p. 248). Marsh illustrates his analysis using inquiries of the British House of Commons and argues that, 'Strategic policy making, scrutiny and oversight, and interest integration can only be realized through a "strong" committee system' (p. 262). Richard Mulgan also uses scrutiny alongside oversight when discussing committee investigations and accountability (2003, pp. 52-5). Gareth Griffith similarly links the two terms by beginning his paper by stating that his focus is on parliamentary oversight committees and the role they play in scrutiny mechanisms (2005, p. 1). At other stages of his paper he uses the term 'watchdog' (for example, pp. 22 and 38). On the other hand, two further writers identify oversight of the public sector as one major theme in the parliamentary literature along with two others, independence of the Parliament and scrutiny of the Executive, implying that the two terms, oversight and scrutiny, have rather different functions (Lewis and Coghill, 2005).

In this paper I use oversight as a synonym for supervision, a task that is a step removed from scrutiny, but one that is interwoven with committees' scrutiny functions. This respects the very real difficulty of distinguishing activities that are close to one another in the real world of committee activities. It is also worth remembering that jurisdictional differences are reflected in the language used about our parliaments, and this is particularly so when it comes to those functions that can be loosely grouped under the umbrella term of 'accountability'. For instance, the term 'oversight' is not generally used in discussions of the New Zealand Parliament, and nor is it anywhere mentioned in

¹ I am grateful to the Research Committee, Victoria University of Wellington, for awarding me a grant to support my research on parliamentary committees. I would like to thank my excellent research assistants, Harshan Kumarasingham and Janet Cockburn, for all their help and suggestions with the 2004 project. I am also greatly indebted to the Political Science Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, which generously awarded me a Visiting Research Fellowship, during which time I developed parts of this paper. I am also very grateful to all the members of the New Zealand House of Representatives, staff and MPs, who patiently allowed me to interview them.

the *Standing Orders of the New Zealand House of Representatives* (2004). And scrutiny and oversight functions are not separated institutionally in terms of the architecture of the committee system, as they are in many other parliaments. Indeed, the *Standing Orders* eschew all similar terms, such as ‘scrutiny’, and ‘accountability’. These purposes are implied in their functions rather than specified, almost as though these key roles were incidental to the purpose of Parliament. Almost prosaically, the *Standing Orders* establish an agenda rather than a normative purpose, an agenda that is itself part of the wider parliamentary agenda and yearly programme. This angle on what committees do is at least in part a consequence of New Zealand’s creation of multi-functional committees that track the departments of state. Incidentally, the idea of ‘review’—an associated term for many writers—is also scarcely ever used in New Zealand. This might not be surprising, given that in Australia it is usually employed in analyses of the role of the Australian Senate (and see Mulgan 1996), and of course New Zealand is unicameral.

The Committee System: Development, Shape, Scrutiny and Oversight

The reform of the New Zealand committee system was one of the revolutions initiated by the 1984-1990 Labour Government. It promised to create a more open and responsive government and parliament (including reviewing the electoral rules). The strengthening of government accountability to Parliament went alongside the emphasis on reforming internal accountability within public agencies. That the restructuring of parliamentary powers was a significant element of the radical changes has not always been fully understood. But as an MP in the House at the time (and subsequently a minister) has written, ‘There was a desire to open up the process of government to greater public and parliamentary scrutiny. Committees would also help Parliament to reduce the power of an overly dominant executive’ (Goff, 1993, p. 166; and see McLeay, 2001; and Palmer, 1987, pp. 132-8). There is no doubt that the reforms of the committees improved their capacity for holding the executive to account in the broadest sense and, more narrowly, enable effective scrutiny and oversight.

The restructured committee were given extensive formal powers, explained in some detail in the overall assessment in the next section of this paper (and see Boston et al., 1996; Ganley, 2001; and McLeay, 2001). Since 1985 the subject committees have dealt with legislation as well as scrutiny and inquiries: they are multi-functional committees. All the subject committees, including Finance and Expenditure (see Table 1), have the following roles:

- Legislative.
- Consideration of petitions (and reporting on them).
- Inquiry.
- Scrutiny.

Thus, as well as dealing with legislation, the committees scrutinize estimates and supplementary estimates in their own subject areas, and review departmental and ministry annual financial statements and annual plans. They have the independent capacity to conduct specialized review inquiries. To some extent the latter two roles overlap with one another, since inquiries tend to include scrutiny of the executive. This means that scrutiny and oversight functions are spread across the thirteen subject committees.

The review of *Standing Orders* (Standing Orders Committee, 1995) conducted before the first election under the Mixed Member Proportional electoral rules in 1996 looked again at the 1985 decision to combine the legislative and scrutiny roles by creating all-purpose committees rather than having ‘distinct legislative and scrutiny committees’ (Standing Orders Committee, 1995, p. 31). After noting the heavy legislative load

experienced by some committees, exacerbated by the extra work that had resulted from the public submissions and public hearings, the Standing Orders Committee concluded that the roles should continue to be combined. The reason given was: 'to the extent that members can, through their select committee work, build up specialized knowledge in a particular subject area, legislation undoubtedly helps. Also, doing a combination of legislative and scrutiny roles does give members a wider variety of experience than they would have if they were confined to one or the other' (Standing Orders Committee, 1995, p.32). The interviews conducted in 2004 of parliamentary staff and MPs reaffirmed the general feeling that the multi-functional system worked well.²

There is one quite serious disadvantage to the multi-functional system, however: the pressure to deal with legislation can crowd out the capacity for the committees to conduct full scrutiny of departmental estimates, reports, and conduct inquiries. This was a feature brought up in some of the interviews, although everyone believed that, on balance, the expertise gained through the multi-functionality of the committees outweighed the disadvantage of legislation overload. It should be noted also that time is the overwhelming problem for committee members, whether or not a committee system has specialised or non-specialised functions. MPs as individuals have only so many hours to devote to committee work after spending time on other activities, whether they are in several committees, each with particular roles, or in one committee with many.

The tasks that the subject committees perform in relation to their scrutiny and oversight roles, can be understood better by looking at their overall work schedule (see Table 2). Most aspects of these functions are dealt with according to the yearly parliamentary timetable as far as the financial year and reporting requirements are concerned. How effective the committees are when they report on the estimates and actions of the areas for which they are responsible depends greatly on the time they have available and whether or not the opposition members on a particular committee wish to highlight perceived failings of government departments and ministries. Effective accountability does not depend only on formal jurisdiction, powers and resources. Whatever institutional designers might expect, MPs are highly political actors, and publicity remains as much a goal for opposition members as a quiet life is for the government. Nevertheless, the evidence from a range of sources, including interviews, indicates that a number of interesting changes have taken place in the New Zealand committee system. Because committees now comprise a number of parties rather than just two, there are more agendas and ideas being brought to discussion and scrutiny. The multi-party Parliament has also meant that there is a number of senior politicians who will probably never become ministers and who therefore concentrate more on being effective 'parliamentary men and women'. Committees now work more consensually to achieve effective scrutiny and oversight, although the extent to which that happens still depends on the leadership of the chair, the members themselves and, I suggest, their gender composition: there is some evidence that women generally pursue more consensual behavioural styles in committees than do men. These points demonstrate that party dynamics and the power balance between governing and opposition parties matter, and that electoral system change has strengthened the powers of committee to scrutinise and oversee the executive.

One aspect that has shown some evolution in New Zealand since the introduction of proportional representation has been the allocation of chairs to non-government MPs. After 1985, the Opposition chaired one committee, Regulations Review, and this has continued since then; after 1996, MPs from the two governing

² In 2004 I conducted twenty in-depth interviews (including committee clerks and a sample of MPs) on the committee system, focusing particularly on inquiries and, also, the role of the Business Committee.

parties chaired all the committees bar one, which was headed by a 'co-operative' party MP; after the 1999 election, with a different government, the same situation occurred again with the support party chairing just one party; but after 2002, in response to a demand by a new support party, the non-governing parties were given more committees to chair and the deputy chair was taken by an MP from another party. This meant that nine out of the thirteen committees were chaired by MPs who did not represent one of the two government parties (Labour and the Progressives).³ But this is still a distance from proportional distribution of chairs, an indicator of an assertive parliament. Since 1995, however, the chair has not had a casting vote.

Plainly, the reform of the committee system in 1985 followed by electoral system change with its multiparty parliaments combined to give 'teeth' to the scrutiny functions of the committees. That governments have almost all been minority administrations has also meant that they have been unable to maintain majorities on all the committees, adding to their ability to hold governments to account. If a majority coalition were to be formed in the future, however, especially a cohesive one with a substantial parliamentary majority, then the situation might be rather different. Informal power relationships can give teeth to formal powers or, alternatively, emasculate them. What do the MPs themselves think of the effects of MMP?

In 2000-2001 (during the second parliamentary term since MMP when a Labour/Alliance minority government was in power) interviews were conducted with 101 out of the 120 MPs in the House at that time.⁴ One of the open-ended questions asked was, 'What impact did MMP have on select committees?' The responses were divided into: those MPs who believed that MMP had positively impacted on committees (by giving them more power to influence legislation, for example); MPs who believed MMP had made a negative impact (or no impact at all) on select committees; and MPs who did not express a view on the matter, or who expressed an equivocal view (See Tables 3 and 4).

MPs from the smaller parties were more positive than MPs from Labour and National, with the Greens unanimously in approval of how MMP had impacted on the committees; there was very little difference between the viewpoints of men and women, although women were marginally more positive than their male colleagues; those with ministerial experience were more negative than those without it; and those with experience of FPP were more negative than those without it. Being in either government or the opposition did not appear to demarcate MPs from one another.

Typical positive points were that: under FPP positions were entrenched prior to going to the select committee, which were a formality, while under MMP the select committee processes have been more meaningful (National); MPs were starting to see more quality work being done, less was done on a partisan basis and the committees were working better under MMP (ACT); and that the fact that the Government no longer had a majority was good, as was the greater diversity of views being expressed around with more parties in Parliament (Greens). I quote a Labour MP fully:

Select committees will become increasingly independent, to the displeasure of Ministers who see the role of the select committees is to drive through legislation as

³ Excluding the Privileges Committee, of the other 16 committees appointed after the 2002 general election, two were chaired by the Speaker (Standing Orders and Officers of Parliament); nine were chaired by Labour (Government) MPs; one MP from each of United Future, the Green Party and New Zealand First held chairs; and National MPs chaired two committees. Except for the Law and Order Committee, the Deputy Chair represented a party other than that represented by the Chairperson.

⁴ The New Zealand Political Change Project conducted interviews with MPs between November 2000 and May 2001. I wish to thank Ricarda Vandervorst who conducted the interviews, and Michael Appleton for analysing the data.

untouched as possible...Ministers are increasingly becoming aware that the select committees do not have a majority and that even when there is a majority there is sometimes a divergence in opinion between the Labour and the Alliance MPs and that has to be managed...Select Committees are more and more going to provide what a second house would have...They will become a stronger and stronger check on the executive

Even MPs who generally approved of the changes since 1996 (and were therefore classified as 'positive') could frequently see some disadvantages, however. A New Zealand First MP said that there was more consultation, and that the committees are the 'engine rooms' of Parliament, reflecting the diversity of New Zealand society very well, but, 'after all of the consultation and hearing of submissions, it still relies on how much the government half of the committee is prepared to move; and FPP is still operating in some key committees, the only difference [being] that there are two parties in Government'. This MP observed that there are some committees 'where the outcomes aren't that important and it is there when things can be more open', for example the Arms Amendment Bill dealt with by the Law and Order Committee. The MP said that the committees fail when 'politics override them'. Further, 'the quality of the scrutiny is falling with MPs who are on multiple committees turning up to meetings with no understanding of the issues' when 'the strength of the special select committees is that it allows MPs to totally focus on an issue'.

More equivocal comments emanated from others. A National MP said that the committees had had a significant impact but this was not as significant as had been predicted; their powers depended very much on their composition, numbers and personalities; and the House could end up overriding a select committee decision. Another National MP believed that there was no difference between the committees under FPP and MMP, except that there were more people on them under MMP; a real difference was that on some committees the Government did not have a majority; and that there was more negotiation, and that MMP slowed everything down, but that these were probably good features of the committee under MMP. On the other side of the House, an Alliance MP felt that MMP had not had enough impact, that the opposition need to act more constructively as it was always divided between having influence and trying to score points, and that the committees needed to improve, but that it was difficult to generalize since the committees were all very different.

Relatively few MPs made solely adverse comments. Some representative criticisms came from a Labour MP committee chair who observed that when the committees did not have a government majority, it could be very difficult: 'compromises are made and negotiations may occur before the select committee meets' and 'there would be more discussion outside the Committee than in'. The government caucus members had to be very disciplined due to the Committee not having a majority. At times the Committee had to make divided reports as a result of the 50/50 split between government and opposition members. 'In those instances the Bill goes back to the House for it to sort out.' A Labour member, commenting on the vulnerability of governing without a majority, said:

You have got to remember that Government is about power, unadulterated, raw power [and] that means half plus one. It has got nothing to do with holding hands either under MMP or anything else. It's a numbers game and a lot of commentators and university people have gone on about how wonderful it is to sit around holding hands and singing "ring a ring a roses"?

A somewhat different perspective was expressed by a National member who had chaired two select committees under FPP and felt that it had been much easier to gain consensus under FPP: 'There is a lot more people on the committees now to gain consensus from

and to develop decent arguments'; there had been 'more of a retreat into government versus opposition, especially with a contentious bill'; and that the quality of select committee work was worse than it had been under FPP.

To summarise, the 2000-2001 responses displayed varied and equivocal comments, telling us quite a lot about the whole problem of coming to a simple answer to the general question of how powerful are the committees or the more specific, but equally difficult, question of whether or not MMP had made a difference to the impact of committees on public policy, government, and the legislative process. Further, the interests of the parties themselves influence the responses of the individual MPs. Plainly, in committees as well as in the House itself, numbers matter, and with minority governments, the political executive cannot always get its way. Furthermore, issues count. There are some matters on which governments are prepared to listen to others' views and to take on board quite significant changes to bills and criticisms of government policies and processes, while on other issues governments—if they can get enough support from other parties—will push their own preferences and move to protect their reputation from too much scrutiny.

Having briefly discussed the overall scrutiny functions and general powers of the committee system, I now focus on the two committees with specialist oversight functions.

The Officers of Parliament Committee

This committee is the only committee that could be said to exist solely because of its oversight and scrutiny functions (and see Beattie, 2005). Indeed, David McGee refers to its 'particular responsibility for the oversight of officers of Parliament' (McGee, 1995, p.57). It is responsible for the budget and appointment of the three parliamentary officers: the Auditor-General, the Ombudsman, and the Parliamentary Commission of the Environment. Chaired by the Speaker, decisions are made consensually. Interview evidence suggests that the committee is assertive against the political executive (on budgetary issues, for example). As McGee points out, it is responsible for overseeing the management of the Officers, but the relevant subject committees deal with the substantive aspects of their activities (McGee, 1995, 62).

There are other bodies that have a particularly close association with Parliament in that they are involved with the approval and/or removal of officers. According to McGee, these are the Representation Commission, the Broadcasting Standards Authority, the Electoral Commission, the Clerk of the House of Representatives, the Parliamentary Services Commissioner, and some judges (1995, 62). Arguments could be developed in support of the incorporation of some of these bodies under the oversight of the Officers of Parliament Committee. Another one might be the Police Complaints Commission, although this body might be excluded by the Committee's own terms of reference that confine Officers of Parliament to non-judicial functions.

The Finance and Expenditure Committee [FEC]

Until 1982 the New Zealand House of Representatives had a Public Accounts Committee that primarily concentrated on the parliamentary Estimates. This was succeeded by the Public Expenditure Committee, which possessed more powers than the other committees at that time. It became the model (along with the specialist committees produced by the 1979 House of Commons reforms) for the 1985 changes to the New Zealand select committee system.

FEC has overall responsibility for the review of financial management in all government departments and public bodies' (McGee, 1995, 210. It has the primary responsibility for auditing government on behalf of the New Zealand Parliament. Like all

the subject committees it conducts its share of scrutinizing bills and proposing amendments, scrutinizing estimates, conducting financial reviews, and carrying out inquiries. The FEC also has special responsibilities. Its jurisdiction includes:

- Allocation to the various subject committees of the Votes contained in the Estimates and financial reviews and, also, the reviews of Crown entities and organisations and State enterprises.⁵
- Audit of the Crown's annual financial statements and the Report of the Controller and Auditor-General on the Crown's financial statements.
- Reporting on the budget policy statement within six weeks of the publication of that statement (or within four weeks of the first sitting day of the next year). The Committee can request the Minister responsible for presenting the budget statement to the House to attend the Committee's considerations. The Committee's report is debated in the House.
- Reporting to the House on the fiscal strategy report and the economic and fiscal update presented to the House on the day the Budget is delivered.
- Considering the monetary policy statements of the Reserve Bank. The Reserve Bank Act 1989 requires that these statements are referred to FEC but FEC is not required to report on them.⁶

The powers and authority of the FEC are contained in a number of sources. Apart from the *Standing Orders*, the Committee has specific responsibilities under the Public Finance Act 1989, the Reserve Bank Act 1989, the Fiscal Responsibility Act 1994, and the Public Audit Act 2001.

FEC retains certain areas for itself insofar as departmental reviews and estimates are concerned. For example, in 2000/2002 it conducted nine financial reviews, spending a total of 24 hours on them. The remainder of the estimates and financial reviews are distributed to other committees as appropriate. In 2002, for instance, the Health Committee reviewed: the financial performance of the District Health Boards; the Pharmaceutical Management Agency; and the Ministry of Health. It scrutinized the Estimates for Vote Health (2002/2003).

The FEC has a special relationship with the Auditor-General whose office advises it (as well as advising other parliamentary select committees). The Controller and Auditor-General is an Office of Parliament for the purposes of the Public Finance Act 1989. The Controller and Auditor-General heads the Audit Office which includes the Office of the Auditor-General—which among its other duties is responsible for parliamentary reporting and advice—and Audit New Zealand. Private Sector Audit Service providers also carry out audits under the contestable audit arrangements. As well as routine audits, the Controller and Auditor-General conducts major reports on specific issues and programmes, and provides advice and guidance for public entities. (See *The Controller and Auditor-General, 2002*, for examples.) The Auditor-General is responsible for local as well as central government.

FEC has always been regarded as one of the more important committees, one in which aspiring ministers wish to be on and which governments prefer to chair. In 2002,

⁵ Under the Public Finance Act 1989, 'Votes' are the appropriations for the spending plans of ministers for the following year. Except for Offices of Parliament (for whom the Speaker is responsible) each vote is the responsibility of one minister (see Pallot, 1991).

⁶ The Reserve Bank 1989, 15 (3) states: Every policy statement shall, by virtue of this section, stand referred to---

- (a) The House of Representatives; and
- (b) Any committee of the House of Representatives responsible for the overall review of financial management in government departments and other public bodies.

after the formation of the Labour/Progressive minority government, the FEC comprised five government MPs (all Labour), one government-support party MP and six MPs from the opposition parties. At that time, the governing parties comprised Labour (52 MPs) and the Progressive Coalition (2 MPs). United Future (8) supported the government on issues of confidence and supply; and the Greens (9) co-operated with the government on a range of issues but did not guarantee confidence and supply (and therefore the Green MP on FEC is included in the opposition category). The other opposition parties comprised National (27); ACT (9) and New Zealand First (13). FEC was chaired by a Labour MP and the deputy chairperson was from United Future. FEC contained a high proportion of experienced MPs. Seven of its members, including the chair, had been on the committee in the previous Parliament. Two of the opposition MPs had held ministerial office, one of them (Winston Peters) also being the New Zealand First leader. Rod Donald was co-leader of the Greens. In a Parliament comprising one-quarter new MPs, the FEC contained its share of novices with four new MPs (although one of them, Don Brash, had resigned as Reserve Bank Governor in order to stand for the National Party at the 2002 election). There were some subsequent changes to the membership but FEC remained a committee of relatively senior MPs.

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As well as the AU providing advice to the FEC, that committee is required to report on the Annual Plan of the Controller and Auditor-General under the Public Audit Act 2001. In this way, FEC has an oversight role. Section 36 of the Act provides that the Speaker of the House proposes an annual plan on behalf of the Auditor-General; and the Speaker, or a committee, may request changes to the plan. As with the other parliamentary committees, the relationship between the Auditor-General and the FEC is governed by a code of practice. According to this, the Auditor-General may ‘interact with the House, its select committees and members’ in five ways (Officers of Parliament Committee, 2002, p.2). Four of these relate to the select committees. The Auditor-General assists the committees with:

- the examination of Estimates;
- the financial reviews of public entities and the reviews of the performance and operations of ‘each individual department, Office of Parliament, Crown entity, public organization or State enterprise’;
- inquiries; and
- consideration of the AG reports tabled in Parliament.

Also the Auditor-General assists with ‘members’ inquiries or requests made directly to the Auditor-General’ (p.2). The Auditor-General can give committees advice on the Standard Estimates questionnaires, what questions to ask when examining a particular vote, review evidence given when a committee examines a vote, and give support when a committee is compiling its report (*Code of Practice* 4.3). However, the FEC determines ‘the general nature and extent of the assistance to be provided to committees in their examination of Estimates’ (*Code of Practice* 5.1). Similar provisions exist for advice on financial reviews. Committees conducting inquiries into matters of financial administration, expenditure and organizational performance can be advised by the AO. Alternatively, the Auditor-General can take up the inquiry where the matter is within its

expertise. If an inquiry is conducted by a committee, advised by the AO, then the committee's powers to gather evidence are employed but if it is the AO conducting an inquiry then it relies on its statutory powers (*Code of Practice*, 10.2 and 10.3). In the case of the reports of the Auditor-General tabled in Parliament, then committees may examine those reports where they are in the committees' subject areas (*Code of Practice*, 11.3). There are also provisions regarding the taking of evidence and the position of the Auditor-General as witness and adviser.

Thus it can be seen that the FEC has a number of specific oversight and scrutiny functions that are distinctive to this particular committee.

Omissions and Possibilities

As suggested above, there are public bodies that might well be included within the purview of the Officers of Parliament Committee or, alternatively under the gaze of another specialist committee. The various bodies associated with election are possible candidates for particular parliamentary scrutiny, given that they should answer to Parliament and not to government. These are the Electoral Commission (at present statutorily independent) with its special educational function, the Chief Electoral Officer (stationed in Justice), responsible for organizing elections, and the Representation Commission, responsible for drawing electorate boundaries. Another candidate for special overview, particularly given the Australian experience, is the Police Complaints Authority. So far, there has been no need for an anti-corruption commission with parliamentary oversight committee to match, but of course that might come.

But the most glaring absence is a parliamentary committee with scrutiny and oversight regarding the Security and Intelligence Service. In Australia there is the statutory Joint Committee on the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. In New Zealand, there is merely a committee of five members that is constituted outside the House and is chaired by the Prime Minister: the Intelligence and Security Committee. Just recently, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee proposed several models for committee monitoring of the British Security Service, Secret Intelligence Service, and FCHQ. They could come under the relevant subject committees (Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs), they could be monitored by a single committee, or the present situation could be continued whereby the three agencies are monitored by a committee of MPs who are appointed on a statutory basis. A New Zealand version of one of the first two models should be instituted, albeit with the usual safeguards protecting matters such as foreign intelligence and individual privacy.

So far I have described the structure of the New Zealand committee system, paying particular attention to its oversight and scrutiny functions, and noted several problems with it. I now assess the committees against some internationally developed criteria on the effectiveness of committee systems.

Indicators of Committee Effectiveness and the New Zealand Parliamentary Committee System

Most of indicators are generated by the institutionalist literature; and they tend to assess the strength of the legislature as against the executive rather than, say, specifically isolating accountability, oversight and scrutiny powers. Griffiths, however, selects five criteria that he feels are particularly important for effective parliamentary oversight committees (2005, 22). But of course the general indicators serve as valid indicators for the latter purpose simply because, if committees are not in a position to demand and expect executive respect and compliance, then their capacity to perform their overview functions is slight indeed.

Committees have negligible or insignificant impact on public agencies if they have, first, insufficient formal jurisdiction and, second, political clout. Both rule-based and power-based resources are essential if MPs are to supervise the activities of public servants and hold them to account. The following section of this paper takes a range of indicators that have been used by academics to assess the strength of parliamentary committee systems (especially Mattson and Strom, 1995; Siaroff, 2003; Strom 1998; and Von Beyme, 2000). Because there are now so many propositions about committee powers, I have grouped them together under four headings: the basic design of committee systems; their formal powers; membership and attendance; and power dynamics. After briefly discussing each indicator I outline the New Zealand situation. Table 5 summarises this comparison and measures the New Zealand performance.

The basic design of the committee system

(1) The number of committees in a parliament is significant. As a general rule, where Parliaments have very few committees, those committees tend to be relatively powerless because it tends to be easier for governments to control them. Further, 'Economies of operation imply that as the number of committees increases, more bills can be dealt with at the same time' (Strom, 1995, p. 30). And we could also add that, where there is a range of committees, they can deal with more oversight and scrutiny tasks. New Zealand scores favourably here, with its 13 subject committees, plus its five specialist ones.

(2) The committee system needs to be permanent—to exist at least during the whole term of a parliament. When committees exist only at the will of governing parties, then they are more likely to be at the beck and call of those parties. Further, temporary committee systems lack institutionalised and agency knowledge and familiarity. In the New Zealand House, the standing committees, and their roles and powers, are established by the *Standing Orders*.

(3) Committees must not be too large. Small committees increase the incentive for MPs to specialize which, in turn, makes them more effective (Strom, 1995, p. 35). Of course committee size to some extent reflects the size of the legislature itself. In New Zealand the committees range in size but none is large.

(4) The pattern of jurisdiction affects committee influence and power. Committee systems tend to be more important where the permanent committees deal with legislation (and/or scrutiny of government departments) that shadow the shape of government agencies. Why? Because the committees can develop a solid understanding and knowledge of their subject matter—and public servants come to learn that this is the case and develop respect for the committees. This is particularly important for oversight and scrutiny. In New Zealand, as already established, the committee structure reflects the public sector. Further, the subject committees deal with legislation as well as scrutiny and inquiries: they are multi-functional, as already explained.

(5) Parliamentary business should be controlled by a Business Committee. This factor is an indicator of whether governments dominate the parliamentary agenda or whether there is the requirement for governments to negotiate with other parties on this important issue. The Business Committee of the New Zealand Parliament is a multi-party committee which operates under a rule requiring unanimity or near-unanimity as interpreted by the Speaker, its chair. Interviews have shown that the Business Committee is regarded by MPs (inside and outside the political executive) as influential. Its chief accomplishment is to make agreements about the parliamentary process more transparent. It plays an important role in so far as committees are concerned because committees must formally ask its permission if they want more time to consider bills.

Note also that it has accrued additional powers since its creation, including the power to make permanent and temporary committee appointments.

(6) A strongly institutionalized committee system is more likely to be effective than a weakly institutionalised one. This indicator rather overlaps with others, but it can be reinterpreted as the length of time a committee system has been established. New Zealand's current committee system goes back only to 1985, but committees have been in existence since earliest days. (The House of Representatives first met in 1854.)

The formal powers of committees and their resources

(1) Committees must be able to summon ministers, witnesses and documents in order to have effective legislative, scrutiny and inquiry functions. If committees do not have these powers, then they have a low level of authority. It is not that committees generally have to exercise their powers. Rather, it is the potential power of committees to do this that is important. Having said this, institutional norms and values about agency responsiveness build up through time, and these reinforce the duty of ministers and public servants to comply with committee requests. New Zealand committees can request the Speaker to issue a summons, on behalf of the committee, for persons, paper and records. Ministers can brief committees and hear evidence. They answer for policy. As far as examination of the Estimates is concerned, 'The committees expect Ministers to attend if invited' (New Zealand House of Representatives, 1995, p.35).

(2) Committees must be able to question civil servants. The informational needs of MPs and the purpose of scrutiny demand this power. In New Zealand, public servants appear as witnesses (as well as advisers) and regularly do so. Their role is to explain existing government policy and to provide factual information. Public servants are not responsible for justifying policy—that is the Minister's responsibility' (State Services Commission, 2002, 3). At times they face tough questions.

(3) The committee stage must be an obligatory part of the legislative process. This is an obvious requirement. In New Zealand, all bills (except for Appropriations and Imprest Supply) are sent to the relevant subject committee after the First Reading.

(4) Determination of the principles of bills by a plenary session before the bills go to committee weakens committee powers, and the converse is also true. New Zealand bills have their first reading before going to committee.

(5) The ability to initiate legislation is patently a significant power. This is neither specified as a power nor specifically denied in the New Zealand House's *Standing Orders* (2004). There are no recent cases of committees initiating legislation, but government legislation has emerged from committees' reports and inquiries, and individual MPs have taken up issues that have arisen during committee deliberations and proposed appropriate bills.

(6) The ability to rewrite legislation is also obviously a significant power for committees. Legislation is routinely substantially re-written (Ganley, 2001. New Zealand MPs have the power to propose legislative amendments that involve expenditure or taxation but government can veto such a proposal if it thinks it will have a more than minor impact on a range of fiscal aggregates.

(7) Whether committees can present minority reports to Parliament is important, because it provides a means of indicating to Parliament and government that there are differing views and arguments. In New Zealand, minority views can be included in committee reports: reports do not have to be unanimously agreed upon.⁷ Many reports now indicate where the lines of difference exist.

⁷ 'There is no such thing as a minority report, there is only one report presented to the House by a select committee. The minority or differing views of members may be indicated in a report. These differing

(8) The ability of committees independently to conduct inquiries is a significant power in itself. But it is particularly important for effective oversight and scrutiny. Since 1985, all committees have had the power to institute their own inquiries on, and receive briefings on, issues relating to their own subject areas. Since the first proportional representation election in 1996, more committees have had the opportunity and the political determination to institute inquiries. Their topics range from the more routine, scrutiny matters to major policy inquiries.

(9) Government responses to reports are mandatory for an effective committee system. The New Zealand government must respond to recommendations made within committee reports within 90 days of reports being presented to the House. Unfortunately, however, committee reports are seldom debated in the House, a problem that David McGee, the present Clerk of the House, has brought to the attention of the Standing Orders Committee (McGee, 2003). Responses are not required on bills, estimates and supplementary estimates, and financial reviews of departments, Offices of Parliament, Crown entities, or public organizations or State enterprises. These are debated in the House. The actual quality of the government responses tends to vary.

(10) Committees must to be well-resourced in order to exercise their powers. They need support from their Parliament officers and access to independent (non-government) specialist advice. In New Zealand, however, the committees are relatively frugally resourced. Each committee has its own clerk with an assistant. The Office of the Clerk of the House also holds a budget to be used for paying for specialist advice for committees. The Finance and Expenditure Committee has a specialist tax adviser who may be appointed to advise the committee on a bill-by-bill basis; and an adviser on Monetary Statements who holds a permanent contract for this task. Other advisers are brought in on a case-by-case basis. When asked about the adequacy of resources in the New Zealand committee system in 2004, MPs gave very mixed responses, ranging from criticisms to the lack of independent advice to the observation that not all committees used the budget for expert advice that was available to them.

Committee membership and attendance

(1) Whether or not committee membership is distributed according to the party shares of parliamentary seats indicates how dominant the government is over the committee. The New Zealand *Standing Orders* (2004) require that parties are represented on the committees (overall) in proportion to their respective shares of parliamentary seats. None of the international indicators ask, however, whether committee systems are representative of society's groups. Do committees represent social interests as well as political ones? Are political minorities, including women, indigenous groups, and members of other ethnic minorities, represented on committees? Of course committees are creatures of their larger institutions and thus any distribution of places relies essentially on other mechanisms, such as the preferences manifested through different electoral rules and the party gate keepers in the candidate selection process. Nevertheless, one measure of an institution's democratic attributes might be whether or not members of political minorities have proportionate shares in terms of the distribution of committee chairs.

How does the New Zealand Parliament fare on this indicator of democratic performance? After the 2002 general election, 28 per cent of MPs were women. Excluding the Standing Orders and Officers of Parliament committees (with their ex officio, Speaker chairs), but including the thirteen subject committee and the Regulations Review and Privileges committees, women chaired five out of the total of fifteen. So

views, if accepted by the committee for inclusion in its report, become an integral part of the report.' (New Zealand House of Representatives, 2002, p. 11)

women were taking senior positions in proportion to their representation overall. But much depends on which parties are in government, because of the discrepancies in how adequately the different parties represent women. As for members of ethnic minorities, after the 2002 general election only one Maori chaired a committee, and that was Maori Affairs, in a year when 16 per cent per cent of the House was Maori. None of the three per cent of MPs from other minority backgrounds chaired committees. So the record of the New Zealand House is mixed on this criterion. Whether or not committee style and performance—rather than composition—is sensitive to gender and ethnic difference is the topic of another paper.

(2) When committee members are appointed by Parliament rather than by parties, the committees are more powerful, it has been stated. One might challenge this criterion as simply unrealistic where there is cabinet government and cohesive parliamentary parties. It is a criterion that is more appropriate and achievable for presidential than for parliamentary systems. In New Zealand the Business Committee appoints MPs to the committees and Committee also decides on changes and replacements. In fact the parties make the decisions, usually after discussion with MPs on their preferences.

(3) Effective committees have limitations on their membership in order that they are not dominated by MPs who are part of the political executive. In New Zealand, ministers are excluded but, regrettably, some governments have placed ministers outside cabinet, and under-secretaries, on the subject committees. The problem is that these members of the political executive are bound by cabinet collective responsibility. This trend can at least in part be explained by the post-MMP predominance of minority governments in a small Parliament, with coalition parties under pressure to provide both ministers and, also, supply enough members to fulfil the requirement of proportionality on the committees.

(4) Governing parties should not hold all or most of the committee chairs in effective committee systems. As explained above, the governing party or parties have historically chaired the committees except for Regulations Review which, since its inception in 1985 has been chaired by a member of the opposition. However, an increasing number of chairs have gone to MPs from non-governing parties since 1996.

(5) An indicator of the independence of committee systems is when MPs want to be on the committees of their choice, and attend regularly. This indicator is not one of the usual institutional factors found in the academic literature. In New Zealand, it is generally but not invariably the case that MPs wish to be involved in the committee process. The evidence of the interviews was that senior MPs tend to be appointed on committees of their choice, and the allocation of committees is closely related to the allocation of areas to party spokespeople.

(6) MPs who are present at committee hearings and deliberations who are not members of committees tend to weaken the coherence and institutional memory of those committees, it has been argued. MPs relatively frequently attend the New Zealand committees with non-voting rights, and substitutions occur. This was regarded by those interviews as sometimes having adverse effects, as stated above, but as also improving the expertise of committees on particular topics and, also, facilitating the flow of information between committees and parliamentary caucuses. Thus the usefulness of this indicator as a viable measure of effectiveness must be questioned.

(7) Where government officials are present, they can inhibit committee independence of scrutiny and oversight. The dependence of committees scrutinising bills on the advice given them by public servants is often criticised in New Zealand, but it should be noted that public servants are only present at committees on request.

The broader power dynamics

(1) In effective committee systems, it is postulated, committees influence the views of the parties. Much of the legislative studies literature is concerned with the nature of the relationship between parties and committees, seeing party dominance of committee views and decisions as a key indicator of a weak system. Rather, it is argued, it is the committees that should affect the views of the parties. The evidence of the New Zealand interviews was that this is a two-way flow of information: committees are influenced, and are influenced by, party views and policies. Again, it is unrealistic to expect committees in cabinet systems to be completely independent of the parliamentary parties (and see Von Beyme, 2000, p. 71).

(2) In order to be effective, committees should not be numerically dominated by the governing party or parties. More broadly, since the impact of MMP in New Zealand, it has become much more difficult for governing parties to dominate the committees. There has been a wider divergence of views brought to the committee table, and this has affected what happens. Further, because since 1997 New Zealand has had minority governments, governments have not had a majority in all committees.

Up until this point, the indicators that have been discussed have related to their formal powers and other institutional factors. In particular, the thinking behind the indicators is that 'strength' and 'effectiveness' is assessed in terms of the relationship between the executive and Parliament. But there is another, under-researched and under-emphasised dimension to how committees function: their democratic attributes.

Democracy and Accountability

In this section, rather than deal with each indicator one-by-one, I have grouped them together, discussing in turn, citizen involvement, transparency of proceedings, and public access to information. These indicators are clearly important in assessing how well committees can perform their oversight and scrutiny tasks. Publicity and transparency, it has been frequently observed, are vital aspects in ensuring accountability of public institutions.

Public involvement is generally ignored in assessments of the capacity of committees to scrutinize and supervise the executive, but it actually enhances the process through involving people with new ideas and exposing activities to public appraisal. In New Zealand there is extensive public involvement in the committee process, and publicity for its activities, although the media coverage of committees needs to be improved and expanded. Committees publicly call for written and oral submissions as well as inviting expert individuals and interest groups to present evidence. This process occurs for legislation and for inquiries, although it was suggested to me in interview that it might be good were it to be also extended for the scrutiny of estimates and departmental and ministry financial reviews and annual reports. Another democratic attribute is that public access to hearings should be facilitated: in New Zealand, the committees travel beyond the capital city and also increasingly use video-conferencing.

Transparency of the committee process heightens public and elite awareness of the scrutiny process. The New Zealand committees generally hear submissions, hear evidence from ministers and public servants, and ask questions of witnesses, in public sessions. Committee deliberative proceedings are closed to the public however, which has the advantage of preventing grandstanding by MPs: transparency is not always advisable in democratic processes.

Ready access to information generated by committees is also plainly important for an informed and questioning citizenry, an area that is rapidly being opened up by electronic communications. All New Zealand committee reports are now online, as are government responses to them and some submissions. The situation in New Zealand is

somewhat lagging behind other Parliaments such as the Scottish Parliament, but there is an ongoing project that will put all submissions and, also, advice to the committees, on line. Unfortunately, however, transcripts of committee proceedings are rarely made, although the PEC does transcribe certain of its scrutiny proceedings.

Thus there are other sorts of indicators that should be considered when assessing the effectiveness of committees, all of which affect their legitimacy and importance.

Scrutiny and Oversight Reconsidered

This paper has identified a number of criteria for an effective committee system that are particularly useful of assessing parliamentary scrutiny and oversight. Further, it has argued that, when assessed against those criteria, the New Zealand Parliament demonstrates a high level of capacity to scrutinize the activities of the executive through its multi-functional subject committees. In addition, the New Zealand House has two committees with particular oversight functions: the Finance and Expenditure Committee and the even more specialized Officers of Parliament Committee. The multi-purpose committee system does however have one disadvantage, in that committees can become overwhelmed with legislation at the expense of their scrutiny and inquiry roles. There are also gaps in Parliament's jurisdiction, as has been explained. But overall the committees have formidable formal powers and operate in democratically acceptable ways, and they have been strengthened by the development of a multi-party Parliament after the introduction of the proportional electoral system.

The case study of the New Zealand Parliament thus shows how formal powers need to be reinforced by political will power, in particular an effective opposition that has some veto powers over government action. This is more important than expecting committees to become completely independent of the parliamentary parties, and unrealistic and probably undesirable development. Committees are the best chance we have to strengthen parliaments' capacities to supervise and scrutinise governmental agencies. They need to be judged against realistic and helpful indicators.

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Table 1: Committees of the New Zealand Parliament, December 2002

<i>Subject Committees</i>	<i>Specialist Committees</i>
Commerce	Business
Education and Science	Officers of Parliament
Finance and Expenditure	Privileges
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade	Standing Orders
Government Administration	Regulations Review
Health	
Justice and Electoral	
Law and Order	
Local Government and Environment	
Maori Affairs	
Primary Production	
Social Services	
Transport and Industrial Relations	

Note: the number of members on the subject committees ranged between 5 and 12.

Table 2: Select Committee Activities, 1990-2002

Committee business	1990-3 (average)*	1993-6 (average)*	1996-9 (average)*	1999-2002 (average)*
Meetings held	587	553	535	588
Petitions referred	1062	258	661	139
Petitions reported	900	272	191	260
Bills	66	60	65	70
Referred				
Bills considered	115	120	105	106
Bills reported	58	61	64	69
Estimates reported	103	70	62	67
Dept. fin. Revs. rep.	51**	17	47	47
CE's, SOEs. etc. rep.	32**	43	95	92
Inquiries reported	6	6	10	14
Inquiries on Int. Treaties reported	--	--	--	22
Other matters rep.		15	23	8

*rounded to the nearest whole number

**1991-2 and 1992-3 only

Source: *Report of the Office of the House of Representatives*, Wellington, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002.

Table 3: Views of the MPs on the impact of MMP on the select committees: by party and gender (2000/2001)

	No. elected 1999	No of Rs	Positive Impact	No impact or negative impact	No views or equivocal views
<i>By party</i>					
Act	9	8	4 (50%)	0	4 (50%)
Alliance	10	8	5 (63%)	1 (13%)	2 (25%)
Green	7	6	6 (100%)	0	0
Labour	49	34	11 (32%)	7 (21%)	16 (47%)
National	39	31	8 (26%)	5 (16%)	18 (58%)
NZ First	5	4	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0
United	1	1	1 (100%)	0	0
<i>By gender</i>					
Female	37 (31%)	28	13 (46%)	4 (14%)	11 (39%)
Male	83 (69%)	64	24 (38%)	11 (17%)	29 (45%)
Totals	120	92	37 (40%)	15 (16%)	40 (43%)

Table 4: Views of the MPs on the impact of MMP on the select committees: by ministerial and electoral system experience (2000/2001)

	No of responses	Positive Impact	No impact or negative impact	No views or equivocal views
<i>FPP experience</i>	37	13 (35%)	11 (30%)	13 (35%)
<i>MMP experience only</i>	55	24 (44%)	4 (7%)	27 (49%)
<i>Ministerial experience*</i>	28	10 (36%)	7 (25%)	11 (39%)
<i>No ministerial experience</i>	64	27 (42%)	8 (13%)	29 (45%)
Totals	92	37 (40%)	15 (16%)	40 (43%)

*11 of the 28 were ministers at the time of interview

Table 5: Indicators of Committee Effectiveness and the New Zealand Parliament, 2002-5

Indicators	NZ Score
<i>Basic Design and Permanence</i>	
Number of committees	0
Permanence	0
Committees must not be large	0
Committees shadow govt. agencies	0
Business Committee control of parliamentary business	1
Contemporary committee system well-established (institutionalised)	0
Subtotal	1/12
<i>Powers and Resources</i>	
Power to summon ministers, witnesses and documents	1
Ability to question civil servants	0
Committee stages an obligatory stage of legislation	1
Principles of bills are not first determined by a plenary session	1
Capacity to initiate legislation	1
Capacity to rewrite legislation	0
Minority reports can be presented to Parliament	1
Committees can initiate inquiries	0
Government must respond to reports	0
Committees are well-resourced	1
Subtotal	5/20
<i>Membership and Attendance</i>	
Membership distributed according to party shares of parliamentary seats	0
Parliament, not parties, determines membership	2
Ministers excluded from committees	1
Parliament, not government, determines committee chairs	1
Regular attendance of MPs	0
MPs present who are not committee members	1
Government advisers excluded from committees	1
Subtotal	6/14
<i>Power Dynamics</i>	
Committees independent of views of parties	1
Committees not dominated by members of governing parties	1
Subtotal	2/4
<i>Total</i>	14/50

Note: the scoring is as follows—0, not govt-dominated, and thus effective; 2 (govt-dominated); 1, to some extent. After: A. Siaroff, 'Varieties of Parliamentarianism in Democracies', *International Political Science Review*, 24:4 (2003), 445-64.

Table 6: Indicators of Committee Effectiveness and the New Zealand Parliament, 2002-5: Democratic Criteria

Indicators	NZ Score
<i>Citizen Involvement</i>	
Public participation in legislative and inquiry processes: interest group involvement (invited)	0
Public participation in legislative and inquiry processes: interest group and citizen involvement (self-initiated)	0
Committees travel beyond capital city and also use video-conferencing	0
<i>Transparency of Processes</i>	
Public meetings: oral submissions and questioning	0
Public meetings: deliberative stage	2?
<i>Access to Information (beyond written record)</i>	
Submissions available online	1
Reports available online	2
Public access to advice received by committees	1
Written transcripts of proceedings available	1
Total	7/18
