

The Commons Select Committee System in the 2015-2020 Parliament.

The House of Commons select committees witnessed some of the most constructive political theatre of the 2010-2015 Parliament. Recall the Murdoch's public contrition, Margaret Hodge's assault on MNC tax evasion, and Keith Vaz's timely interrogations of G4S etc. All of these represented the public face of a newly empowered system. Less noticed longer term activity was no less significant – for example, Andrew Tyrie's Banking Commission, the Energy Committee's reports on the challenge of decarbonising the UK, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's focus on a written constitution or the Education Committee's inquiries on the multiple causes of under-achievement in education.

Behind these developments lay significant changes in the standing of the committee system. Following the Wright Committee proposals, the Coalition government agreed to the election of Committee chairs by the whole House and the election of Members by their own parties.¹ The former augmented committee work as an alternative career track for ambitious MPs.² The latter resulted in an influx of new members – indeed 58% of seats on committees went to first-term members.³ Both developments no doubt enhanced committee independence and standing. The establishment of a fixed parliamentary term also encouraged some committee's to adopt a longer term perspective.

Their enhanced standing was exploited in various ways by individual committees – some by a focus on media attention, some by a concern for longer term policy issues, some by reaching out to their publics, some by more stringent scrutiny and most by various combinations of such approaches.⁴

Can momentum be sustained and developed in the 2015-2020 Parliament? The system sets sail with counsel from four reports. These are: a 2015 report for the Centre for Policy Studies by Treasury Committee Chair Andrew Tyrie⁵; one for the Institute for Government by Dr Hannah White⁶; a 2013 report for the Hansard Society on digital media⁷; and finally a report

¹ Surveyed in Matthew Flinders, 2002. 'Shifting the Balance? Parliament, the Executive and the British Constitution', *Political Studies*, 50 (2), 23-42; Matthew Flinders 2007. 'Analysing Reform: The House of Commons 2001-2005' *Political Studies*, 55 (1), 174-200.

² 'Overall the evidence we found was that, rather than simply seeing a committee chair as a commiseration prize for loss of ministerial office or a reward for stalwart party loyalty, the MPs who stood to chair committees between 2010 and 2015 did so because they actively wanted to take on a particular scrutiny role.....More elected chairs had evident expertise or prior experience in their policy area, either inside or outside Parliament than was previously the case..... elections had narrowed the distance between opposition and government chairs. Many opposition chairs were previously weak – reliant on securing a majority from other parties to progress their programme. Election had given them greater legitimacy to do so.' White 6-7

³ White p. 6

⁴ Committee activity is surveyed in House of Commons Liaison Committee Legacy Report, First Report of Session 2014–15, 11 March 2015 HC 954 House of Commons London: The Stationery Office Limited.

⁵ The Poodle Bites Back, Select Committees and the revival of Parliament, 2015, *Centre for Policy Studies*.

⁶ Select Committees under Scrutiny, The impact of parliamentary committee inquiries on government, 2015, *Institute for Government*.

⁷ #futurenews, Beccy Allen, Joel Blackwell, Luke Boga-Mitchell, Aisling Bolger, Ruth Fox, Virginia Gibbons,

on public engagement commissioned by the Liaison Committee from several academics⁸ (Flinders et al. 2015 – this group includes the present author(s)).

These reports differ somewhat in their primary orientation - but in complementary ways. Thus Tyrie is concerned with the health of the system of representative democracy and consequently focuses on the power and effectiveness of its preeminent institution, the Parliament. In his analysis, committees are the one instrument most likely to rebuild its broader stranding. For her part, White is concerned with good or effective government. She focuses on building the internal effectiveness both of individual committees and of the overall committee system. The Hansard Society turns to the many implications of radical technological change reflected in the emergence of social media. Finally, the Flinders et al paper focuses particularly on citizen disaffection and disengagement and on the ways public linkage via the committees might ameliorate these pathologies. These orientations reflect differences, often tacit, in normative and conceptual frameworks – and these logics colour ambitions for development of the system. Despite these differences, all envisage a continued expansion of committee activity and influence.

The committee system is not insubstantial. It consists of some thirty-six individual committees seventeen of which shadow particular departments and nine pursue cross-cutting themes (such as Science and Technology, Women). Committees have the power to appoint sub committees, to join together and to delegate investigation to rapporteurs. In the last parliament committees filed around 1400 reports although as we will see a formal report was far from the only expression of committee activity. Each committee is staffed by some 6-8 clerks. They can appoint specialist advisers. They can also call upon specialised media, social media and events staff. Committee staff can include secondments from other agencies such as the NAO or the Treasury. They can also call on other support offices in Parliament, such as POST, the Education etc.

The total cost of this system is approximately . Benchmarks are hard to find but assume the Parliamentary system is roughly comparable to the specialised investigatory qangos (OFTEL, OFGAS, OFWAT etc). There is not much doubt that such a comparison would be extremely favourable to the committee system.

This short article surveys the findings of these four reports. These are sketched in succeeding sections. A concluding section evaluates their ambitions for the committee system.

The Poodle Bites Back⁹

Matt Korris, Michael Raftery, Jess Smith, and Malcolm Smith, 2013, *The Hansard Society*.

⁸ Building Public Engagement: Options for Developing Select Committee Outreach, A Report for the liaison Committee, Matthew Flinders, Ian Marsh & Leanne-Marie Cotter.

⁹ The title comes from the epigraph to this report: ‘In 1908, Henry Chapman MP claimed that the House of Lords was the “watchdog of the constitution”, to which Lloyd George replied, “You mean it is Mr Balfour’s poodle.” By the late 1990s, decades of executive dominance had left the House of Commons as the poodle of the then Prime Minister – Mr Blair’s poodle. However, the Commons has been reviving in recent years. It is more effective and assertive, especially through the work of Select Committees. The Poodle is biting back.’

Andrew Tyrie has been indefatigable in his support of the select committee system. His 2015 report is his third on its role and standing.¹⁰ The present report draws principally on the work of the Treasury Committee over the 2010-15 Parliament, on his experience of the Liaison Committee (the committee that brings together chairs of all the individual select committees), and on the Parliamentary Commission on the Banking System of which Tyrie was chair. His particular focus is the relationship between committees and the parliament, the independent standing of this institution and its role in creating public trust.

This reflects Tyrie's conception of democracy, which he introduces through Balfour's concise claim: 'Democracy is government by explanation.'¹¹ In this context, select committees have a unique role. They can seek explanations which are informed, comprehensive and truthful. They can act deliberatively and civilly and if necessary forensically. For example: 'The Treasury Select Committee extracted detailed explanations from the Chancellor as well as from powerful quangos (Bank of England, Financial Conduct Authority)'. He notes many of the departmental Select Committees have probed powerful institutions and individuals including multinational companies, banks and corporate leaders who are unaccustomed to public scrutiny. 'Committees...posed the questions that the public wanted asked and answered' (p.2).

One powerful buttress of committee standing in and beyond the Parliament is their cross-party character. Whilst this is grounded only on convention, chairs have generally sustained this outcome. For example, Tyrie notes that dissent did not occur on any of the 65 reports issued by the Treasury Committee, many of which addressed controversial topics. This accords with the public's 'increasing appetite for a less adversarial form of discourse'. (p. 14).

Wider social developments also reinforce the development of committee roles. At one level, the collapse of deference, evident in the public's approach to many formerly authoritative institutions, especially affects attitudes to Parliament and to politics. To preserve its legitimacy, Parliament must respond constructively. The committee system represents its most potent agent. And this social change is also affecting Parliament's own culture. 'Deference to the party hierarchy, as to so many institutions, is in decline. Independence of mind is also more often rewarded by balanced or positive national media coverage than, as was all too often the case, ritually dismissed as the actions of a maverick or a "wrecker"' (p. 9).

Tyrie holds democratic explanation now needs to extend to the some 600 quangos which have been accorded quasi-political regulatory or other authority. In seeking explanations from these bodies, the Treasury Committee developed new tools. It appointed special advisers to oversee independent reviews; by checking the adequacy of terms of reference, it ensured that purportedly independent reviews were just that; it pressed changed governance arrangements

¹⁰ *Mr Blair's Poodle: an agenda for reviving the House of Commons* (CPS, 2000); Mr Blair's Poodle goes to War, *The House of Commons, Congress and Iraq* (CPS, 2004).

¹¹ In a footnote, Tyrie comments: 'The phrase is widely attributed to Balfour, though he was scarcely a leading exponent of this approach himself.'

on the Bank of England; and it advanced scrutiny of powerful businesses and executives. The near collapse of the banking system and the nationalisation of several banks attracted its particular attention. The committee obliged the FSA to publish a full report on the collapse of the RBS, an institution for which it had regulatory and prudential responsibility, but an outcome which it had sought to avoid. Similar reports were required on the collapse of HBOS. The Committee was also influential in establishing enhanced independence for the Office of Budget Responsibility, although this body remains with the Treasury.

Perhaps the most notable development involved the establishment of the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards. Both Tyrie's own report and that of the Institute for Government describe this development. Tyrie sees great potential in such commissions, the first since the implosion of the Marconi Inquiry in 1913. In the public mind they show the Parliament not as a rubber stamp for the executive, but as an independent and influential arm of the political system. Efficiency is also served. Such investigations are quicker and cheaper than royal commissions or expert inquiries. Above all, on particular controversial issues, critical backbenchers from all parties become informed advocates. They are thus in a position to influence colleagues and the executive. Through their direct and indirect access, they are able to defend and reinforce outcomes. All this was perfectly illustrated in the legislation which the Banking Commission recommended and subsequently advanced in the face of sectional and executive opposition.

His specific recommendations reflect a general concern to expand opportunities for democratic explanation by augmenting the powers of the committee system. This would entail extending the need for Committee approval of particular appointments and an enlarged list of appointments subject to committee scrutiny. He also envisages more frequent and more intense Prime Ministerial appearances before the Liaison Committee, more powers for committees to appoint independent advisers to investigate quangos, more powers to committees to require evidence and the production of papers and more extended use of Parliamentary Commissions.

In sum, extension of committee powers will increase public confidence in Parliament and will thus also help repair the standing of the overall political system.

Select Committees under Scrutiny

The Institute for Government report was authored by Dr Hannah White who came to the task after substantial experience as a committee staffer. She focuses specifically on the work of three committees: Home Affairs, Defence and the Parliamentary Banking Commission, but her interviews ranged much more widely across chairs, committee members and the civil service. This report is distinguished by its attention to internal committee processes and to the overall effectiveness of the system.

At the outset, she notes the varied and essentially contingent sources of committee influence. Formal authority is a distant second to that which committees can create for themselves. Thus relations with ministers and departments, with the media and with committee publics are all open to cultivation and development. The actions that committees take determine the quality and effectiveness of their impacts. Similarly, the authority of reports and the respect with

which witnesses are treated are both contingent outcomes. Together, these variables create perceptions of the standing and effectiveness of the committee system amongst a wider public, the parliament and the executive.

Her empirical analysis points to the unevenness of committee impacts on the executive which she traces to differences in basic practices: ‘... the way committees conduct their inquiries means they tend to be better at delivering certain types of impact than others..... Overall our case study committees were judged by our interviewees to be strongest at identifying and exposing new evidence and helping government to be more open, but relatively weaker at undertaking analysis of evidence and creating the circumstances to enable government to learn lessons. Where the committees behaved predictably they generated impacts on processes within government, which adapted to respond to its expectations of committee behaviour. Committee work was rarely designed to produce impacts on third parties who might subsequently influence government, but influencing views of the role of Parliament within our democracy was an important motivation for MPs and did affect how they approached their work’ (p. 11).

This empirical analysis, taken in conjunction with her general reflections on the scope for leveraging committee impact, leads on to eight specific recommendations. These cover particular aspects of committee processes, starting with agendas. Once a topic is selected committees need to think clearly about whom they need to influence, who they want to influence and then how these outcomes can be best furthered. In particular, the mobilisation of coalitions to support committee findings needs to be recognised as an important source of influence. Means may include some or all of informal seminars or workshops, targeted national media coverage, closer relations with ministers and departments, selection of witnesses, approaches to cross-examination and so on. Whereas means are many and varied, time and resources are limited. So deliberate choices are required..

Amongst the tensions that need to be faced are those between short term and longer term goals and impacts. In the last Parliament the Home Affairs Committee attracted very substantial and very effective media coverage through its pursuit of current topics. ‘The HAC shaped its agenda of evidence sessions around the main inquiries it had launched, but it reserved a portion at the end of each scheduled evidence session for ‘topicals’ – issues which had only just arisen. Very often in practice the planned agenda was disrupted by events or news stories which led to the announcement of evidence sessions to be held at short notice.’ (p. 13). Hearings became a magnet for media attention.

There were constructive outcomes. For example the committee questioned police in 2011 on their response to the summer riots. ‘The public could see that elected politicians were paying attention to what was going on and fulfilling their role in the democratic system’ (p. 15). But other encounters were less happy - particularly for affected departments and civil servants - and more controversial and less certain in their longer term impacts.

Other recommendations cover attention to departmental and inter-departmental influence. But relations between chairs and ministers are critical. For example, White notes the Defence Committee’s fraught relations with successive ministers: ‘The example of the MoD’s relationship with the DSC..... provides a benchmark of poor practice..... The Ministry of

Defence had three different secretaries of state during the course of the 2010 parliament (Liam Fox, Philip Hammond, Michael Fallon). Who was in charge at any given time was probably the single most important factor determining the Committee's ability to have an impact on the Department. It was clear that the relationship between the chair and the minister, and the tone they set from the top, affected the attitude of the Department to the Committee. We were told that, following a number of leaks (none of which were attributed to the Committee) one secretary of state had explicitly prohibited civil servants from speaking to the DSC except with formal permission from ministers' (p.25-26).

At the level of individual committees, the Institute report urges more focus on outcomes, more exchange of information across committees, more continuity of membership and staff, more feedback and evaluation, particularly of committee processes and of impact and a stronger and more powerful Liaison Committee, better able to give leadership to the overall development of the system.

This last is perhaps the most critical suggestion. Several steps are proposed to enhance its leadership role. One is to have its chair elected by the whole House from amongst committee members. Another is to establish a small executive sub-committee to oversee and develop 'good practice' across the system. A third is the development of an independent mechanism to benchmark and evaluate committee impact.¹²

#futurenews

For a social media novice *#futurenews* proved a stimulating and thoroughly engaging report. Although prepared for the Digital Democracy Commission in 2013 and addressed to Parliament as a whole its many concepts and ideas are no less applicable to the select committee system. The study was convened by Dr Ruth Fox, the Director of the Hansard Society.

It defines the emerging communications and linkage challenge, which arises as citizens mobilise in more fragmented and more specialised communities of interest: 'Increasingly the media landscape needs to be seen not as a pyramidal ranking of outlets according to perceived influence, whose foundational base is television, radio and newspapers, but as a flat, networked sea in which are interspersed a series of 'hubs' which represent a particular brand or community around which a specific audience interest can be built. Each of these entities will have connections to others through social networks, meaningful connections between them being drawn through a series of 'likes', 'recommends', '+1s', 'follows' and re-tweets. ...what matters is the inter-connectedness of each entity; where they sit in the networked sea. The more connective capacity they possess, the greater their 'amplifying' power and influence. The landscape is unstructured and in a state of permanent evolution. As such it represents a significant communications challenge but may also afford many new opportunities for innovation and experimentation.'

This new world is still taking shape alongside conventional media channels which, whilst themselves being reshaped, nevertheless remain dominant. 85% of the public still get their general news from television. A lesser proportion, 53% in each case, rely on newspapers and

¹² The report appropriately invites much more attention to this as such external norms can become ends in themselves. In practice performance management in government, however well intentioned, has often proven over-centralising. It has thwarted the innovation and diversity it is ostensibly meant to encourage.

radio. 41% go online. For specifically political news, television is also the primary source (75%), followed distantly by tabloid newspapers 27%, radio 26%, news websites, 20% and broadsheet newspaper 16%.

But social media is on the march. In terms of penetration, the UK is second only to the US and Japan in the incidence of device ownership. ‘Smartphone take-up is currently higher in the UK than anywhere else in the world with the use of mobile phones at home to access the internet running second only to Japan.’ In terms of usage, 60% of all internet users in the UK maintain an on-line profile. Usage rates are on the rise. 71% of all UK online consumers said they visited a social network site at least once a day and 20% five times a day.

Perhaps reflecting the worrying level of citizen disaffection from politics in the UK, the Reuters Institute found that only 37% of citizens rated political news as important, some 20% less than the proportions recorded in the other countries that it surveyed. However those who are curious about politics are still likely to go first to a known newspaper branded site (51%). Search engines attract 30%, news aggregation sites 22% and social network sites 20%. The report also notes there are around 400 local community or hyperlocal sites across the UK. These offer particular opportunities to disseminate messages of primarily local concern.

The report also notes the critical role of search engines. At least 50% of visits to www.parliament.uk come from a Google referral. It offers prudent advice on Parliament and committee positioning: ‘Parliament has enormous online brand potential as an authoritative source of information and news, *particularly if its role and work is pitched in the context of ‘democracy’ rather than ‘politics’*.....Its unique selling point is its authoritative place at the apex of our democracy’ (p.18) (emphasis added).

An authoritative brand built around an attractive and positive concept is the best defence against shifts in the way that people access information, but this also requires that the content is properly curated and accessible. This latter finding has particular implications for the committee system. Its comprehensive reports and evidence may represent one of the best sources for anyone seeking comprehensive understanding of a particular subject – but they are now virtually inaccessible. ‘The official record (in the Chambers, committees, Westminster Hall or Grand Committee) could be live-logged rather than reported after the event and the XML (eXtensible Markup Language) should be time-coded, tagged and keyworded to enable people to access relevant material more quickly..... Future business information datasets – including for written questions and deposited papers – could be released in XML or CSV (Comma-Separated Values) format, with automated feeds and APIs (Application Programming Interface)....Improving the ‘findability’ and ‘search’ functions of the parliamentary website must be a priority through search engine optimisation and tagging of material.’

Access is not however by itself sufficient. To become the go-to site for those curious about democratic developments content must also be ‘interesting engaging and relevant.....On the most topical issues of the day more effort should also be made to curate material from across Parliament... thereby creating an essential ...resource hub for any person or organisation that is interested in it. At present, for example, it is possible to get to House of Commons material about phone hacking in one place but users have to dig down five layers into the parliamentary website to locate it via the business page, then the news page, then the crime-civil-law-justice and rights theme, then the privacy subheading where the viewer will finally

alight on phone hacking via a further sub-heading..... What is needed is a topic page that curates in one location all the key reports, evidence sessions, parliamentary questions, and library briefing papers about the topic which can then be disseminated through social media networks' (p. 36).

Staff must become 'multi-platform' communicators with the website as the core communications medium. They can repackage material using *YouTube*, edit live streams, and anticipate other media needs and opportunities. 'Parliament needs to establish how to give voice to its multiple identities; mainstream a digital mindset in all areas of its work; and augment and prioritise its resources. In an online, networked world in which people are overwhelmed with information and don't know what and who to trust, Parliament could develop a stronger digital identity or brand in the political domain by leveraging to greater advantage the institutional neutrality, gravitas, and authority of both Houses. (pp. 48-49)

Resources of course also figure no less for the committees than for parliament as a whole. 'On the current resource base it is not possible for Parliament to develop the close relationships and collaborations with the array of general and specialist journalists, policy experts, and community hub networks that are necessary to flourish in the digital environment in the future. The aim should not be just an increase in coverage but the fostering of a more informed perspective among key opinion formers and stakeholders: even a small increase in resources dedicated to outward-facing communications would allow for a greater investment of time in providing more focused, higher quality briefings and multi-media content packages' (50).

Building Public Engagement

The Flinders et al report was commissioned to explore the way committees have built public engagement. This was recommended as a committee priority in a 2012 report by the Liaison Committee.¹³ This assessment approaches the task from a number of angles. First it explores the case for public engagement and the particular advantages that select committees have in responding. It also sketches the historic evolution of committee roles covering both agenda setting and emerging issues as well the more familiar scrutiny and oversight. It notes that public engagement can enrich all these activities.

It then focuses on five committees as a representative cross section of the larger system – Business, Innovation and Skills, Justice, Work and Pensions, Science and Technology, and Political and Constitutional Affairs. It documents their pattern of reports and formal outreach across four of the five sessions in the 2010-15 Parliament. Formal outreach has figured in every type of inquiry, but not surprisingly it proved most extensive in relation to inquiries concerned with emerging issues and major government announcements. These particular inquiries also figured most prominently in the work of the 'theme' committees – Science and Technology and Political and Constitutional Reform. Meantime, the 'average' committee was

¹³ House of Commons Liaison Committee, Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers: Second Report of Session 2012–13, HC 697 Incorporating HC 1844-i, Session 2010–12 Published on 8 November 2012, London: The Stationery Office Limited

shown to have taken formal oral or written evidence from around 1000 organisations each session.

A third section looks at formal and informal outreach as it has developed in the 2010-15 Parliament. In assessing patterns of outreach the report covered the entire array of committees. Evidence was drawn variously from individual committee reports and interviews with chairs, members and witnesses. It documents an array of initiatives covering both direct or physical outreach and connections via social media.

The former included informal seminars with experts and stakeholders to help select agendas, the adoption of cross-sessional themes or agendas to guide committee work, deliberate efforts by committees to project their findings to wider audiences both directly and via the national media, limited outreach to excluded groups like young people and ethnic minorities, also efforts to make hearings accessible to people with various forms of disability.

Social media was used to get committee publics to suggest topics for inquiry (Transport Committee); to generate questions for Ministers via Twitter (e.g. Business, Transport, Education); it was also used as a channel for video clips of informative evidence sessions (Education and Transport using *Vine* and *Storify*); and for video clips supporting findings and reports (International Development to further its campaigns against female genital mutilation; Energy of decarbonising the economy; Environment on endangered species); social media was also used by celebratory bloggers to spread the messages emerging from inquiries (Science and Technology); it was also used to gather *Instagram* pictures of broken down school facilities (Education again) and to engage the public in thinking about a new constitution (the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee attracted some 16 000 responses).

In keeping with the approach foreshadowed in *#futurenews* there were also a number of experiments with efforts to reach new audiences via secondary platforms like *Mumsnet*, *Money Saver Expert* and *The Student Room*. In all some ten intermediaries provided platforms that allowed committees to reach out to new audiences involving individual citizens who share a common interest. This supplemented the more conventional channel for evidence represented by organised interest associations and NGOs.

But much social media activity was either broadcasting out or one-off engagement. Flinders et al suggest a different perspective, one that reflects the deliberative or serial and reciprocal character of political engagement. They illustrate possibilities by looking to the way political parties structured agenda development. 'Recall the way an individual citizen can try to persuade her fellows to support a motion at party branch level. If successful the motion might pass to a regional conference where extra support would need to be mobilised to sustain the argument and indeed to advance a further step. If successful here the motion might then proceed to a national conference. Here an agenda committee would consolidate similar proposals into a composite motion. This would then be debated and if successful would in some form enter a manifesto or platform. Although this process provides multiple opportunities for proposals to be rejected, it provides a clear procedural framework for this to happen. Even in the case of unsuccessful proposals, then, procedural norms will have been fulfilled – proponents would have the satisfaction of participating in a process that was

regarded as legitimate.The challenge is to create a functionally equivalent outcome in digital space and via other media' (p. 55).

Other recommendations reflect the imperative to build public engagement, the complementarity between this goal and effective committee inquiries and also the types of inquiries that might be the focus of committee work. Unlike the other three, this report envisages a substantial committee role in relation to new agendas or emerging issues. Indeed, in practice, committees are already focusing a substantial element of their activity in this area.

It also suggests that this might be reinforced by the proactive adoption of cross-sessional agendas or themes – as for example the Education Committee did with its focus on underachievement or the Energy Committee with its focus on decarbonising the UK economy. These themes informed work over several sessions and allowed the committees concerned to be proactive in planning their outreach activity and much more ambitious and adventurous in imaging ways to enhance impact.

Other recommendations relate to the opportunity to fold deliberative approaches into committee inquiries and to the way committees approach marginalised and minority groups. Here the report suggests reframing room lay-outs, witness preparation and hearings in ways that are sensitive to the experience and likely inhibitions of participants. The importance of building the range and number of committee followers is also emphasised. For example, one interviewee suggested that the Defence Committee only had appeal to a specialist, mostly expert audience. The report counters this by pointing to the array of ex service and regimental clubs and other associated organisations all of which could be potential followers, an outcome which social media makes much more feasible.

Conclusion.

All these reports embody high aspirations for the future development of the committee system. All point variously to imperatives arising from public disaffection and disengagement. But because they frame imagination and ambition, conceptions of the wider systemic roles of committees are fundamental. Three of the reports more or less draw on familiar scrutiny and oversight activity. This orients imagination in the first instance on impacts on parliament and the executive. For example, as Hannah White expresses it: 'Good parliamentary scrutiny has significant potential to improve the effectiveness of government, shaping the way government goes about its business and succeeds or fails in achieving the outcomes it desires' (p. 1).

Elsewhere however White also recognises what she terms the 'campaigning role of committees'. This places them much more directly in an agenda setting role. The case for seeing committees as contributors to agenda setting and to the public conversation around emerging issues is developed most comprehensively in the Flinders et al report. In part this involves looking backward to the role of committees in the pre collectivist period and in part it involves a diagnosis of the travails that currently afflict the adversarial political system.

Contemporary disaffection and disengagement is interpreted as (in significant part) a consequence of two fundamental and interconnected structural changes. One concerns the

standing and influence of the major parties and the other the changing identities that define citizen political affiliations.

In their great days the major parties, through their extra-parliamentary organisations, provided much of the tissue that linked political leaders to their publics. Once around 50% of the community had strong or very strong affiliation to one or other of the major parties. Party organisations enrolled activists. Party brands cued public opinion. Party programmes signalled longer term values and ambitions. Each party stood for a clear and distinctive position in the eyes of its supporters. Political loyalty was then underwritten by class identification, which constituted the dominant social fault line.

But these days are long gone and one important reason lies in a second structural change whose origin lies in the new agendas championed by the social movements of the 1970s. The women's, gay, environment, consumer, animal rights, Indigenous, ethnic and other movements of the 1970s have transfigured the former binary divide. Not that social class has ceased to be a relevant political marker. But this is now cross-cut by a variety of other identities. Further, the 1970s movement have stimulated neo-liberal, conservative and nationalist reactions which have compounded social differentiation. On specific issues, this can create distinctive coalitions which often sit uneasily within the more familiar party divide.

The community is now pluralised and differentiated in ways which can be belied by the formal structure of the political system. The systemic consequences are fundamental. They include first, a representation gap – citizen opinion has pluralised but systemic capacities to listen and respond have diminished; and second, a strategy gap – the key role of party conferences as tantamount to agenda setting forums for the nation is, if not negated, at least much diminished. These two gaps are alternative faces of one inter-dependent social transformation.

In addressing these gaps, select committees begin with some singular advantages.

- First, they focus on single issues which, in an era of pluralised citizen identities and more fluid partisan attachments, seems to align with the way increasing numbers of citizens relate to politics.¹⁴
- Second, formal committee inquiries and other activities can cover the policy process through all its phases – from the moment an issue emerges and seeks a place on the public agenda through to its definition, assessment of its significance, an enumeration of possible remedies, and (much later) legislative, executive and administrative action.
- Third, although reports and other documentation need to be made much more accessible, these processes occur in transparent settings. Transparency is a critical asset.
- And finally, findings usually involve a search for common ground that can cross partisan lines – but without succumbing to anodyne fudges. This is particularly evident in inquiries on issues that are seeking a place on the political agenda; or that are longer term

¹⁴ One symptom of the publics' desire to become engaged around single issues is reflected in visitors to the Government Digital Service petitioning site. This has registered fifteen million unique visits. Even allowing for repeats, this seems an astonishing number - in total representing some 25 per cent of the UK population.

in nature; or that are not yet the subject of explicit partisan contention; or in inquiries on the detail of proposed legislative or administrative measures.

But whilst much has been accomplished much more remains possible. Conceptions of their 'proper' role are as varied amongst the practices of the committees as they are amongst these four reports. Since it allows possibilities to be proposed and tested, this variability is both positive and constructive. Yet the narratives that explore the contemporary potential of the committee system can either limit or expand imagination. As these reports proclaim, the potential to build the profile and influence of the system is considerable. They offer an abundance of specific proposals and suggestions. The 2015-2020 Parliament thus has the opportunity to initiate pioneering experiments or pilots that could have far wider and far reaching democratic implications.