

The Challenge for Parliament: Making Government Accountable

Report of the Hansard Society Commission on parliamentary scrutiny.
Vacher Dod Publishing Limited 2001

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Dissatisfaction with the performance of the Mother of Parliaments has a long history and has provoked many scholarly works on parliamentary reform. This addition, a report of the Hansard Society Commission on parliamentary scrutiny, is one of the more recent, is most interesting and hence is recommended reading.

The Challenge for Parliament: Making Government Accountable passes several of the tests of quality research. First, the prose is clear and concise, a necessary requirement for any research. Second, the research is thorough and the methodology explicit and transparent. The Commission accepted written evidence, consulted widely through private meetings with a number of persons and groups and conducted a questionnaire survey of MPs attitudes to Parliament. The Commission also divided into three sub-committees — on the role of the chamber, the role of select committees, and financial scrutiny — and published three related discussion papers that reflected the interim conclusions of the sub-committees. Third, there is a good ‘fit’ between the problems identified and the recommendations made. However, the crucial question is this: does the Hansard Society Commission report pass the reality test?

Concern about the performance of Westminster is based on specific views of accountability. The report says that governments are directly accountable to the people at elections. Between elections this accountability, of holding the government to account for effective and efficient administration, is undertaken by the Parliament on behalf of the electorate. But the Parliament is ineffective in discharging this ‘control’ function or core role of making the executive accountable. The book enunciates seven principles and makes close to fifty related recommendations aimed at reducing this ‘accountability deficit’.

The Commission acknowledges that the executive dominates Westminster and that the Parliament has no collective ethos. Nevertheless, the report also recognises that an essential ingredient for the successful implementation of its reforms is the building of a culture of scrutiny in the Commons. It puts forward the principle that the task of holding the government to account should be central to the work of every MP and that this accountability should be achieved mainly by reforming the select committee system.

Thus the chapter on the select committees is central to the book. The Commission wants the Parliament to become a more committee-based institution. It finds that

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committee work is not systematic because of the excessive concentration on policy issues and advocates that the committees undertake scrutiny of finance and administration and oversee the work of the external regulatory bodies. The book advances the principle that financial scrutiny should be central to accountability and wants the select committees to play a greater role by scrutinising the estimates (before the Parliament authorises the spending of money) and undertaking 'value-for-money' inquiries (after the money has been spent). Tied to this expansion of committee activity is a mechanism for checking effectiveness. This requires the core duties of committees to be defined and for objectives to be agreed. These objectives would then become a set of criteria against which the performance of the select committees can be evaluated.

The Commission also wants to restore the centrality of the Commons chamber by making it the summit of executive scrutiny. It says that the Parliament should communicate better with the public and proposes that the Parliament be at the apex of the network of regulatory bodies and alternative scrutiny mechanisms. In short, the Commission has put forward a package of reforms that is specific, coordinated and interlocking. If implemented these reforms could reduce significantly or even eliminate the accountability deficit.

However, the major weakness of the report is that it uses a traditional approach to reform based on attitudinal change. For the reforms to work the average MP has to be converted, from a politician in the thick of adversarial party politics into a parliamentarian who rises above this conflict to make decisions in a collective, corporate way. The report notes the significance of party and the absence of a collective ethos. It also refers to the increasing politicisation of Question Time in the Commons. Some of this is not new. About 25 years ago when the Commons was debating a report from the Select Committee on Procedure (19 and 20 February 1979) an MP, I think he was Enoch Powell, said that the House is not a corporation and to talk of the House *vis-à-vis* government is misleading. The House comprised political parties and for the most part its partisan character overrides its corporate character. Former Labor Minister Neal Blewett says that reformers want to restore the golden age of Parliament by resurrecting the independent MP whose political decisions would be guided by a Burkean type of conscience (Gordon Reid Oration, August 1993).

Thus adversarial party politics compromises the Commission's position on accountability. It is not realistic to put into watertight compartments accountability of the government to the electorate at elections (party political) and accountability of the government to the Parliament between elections (non-party political). The reality is different because what happens in Parliament is perceived to affect the electoral fortunes of both Government and Opposition.

The Hansard Society has informed me that its report influenced the recommendations in reports from the Commons Modernisation and Procedure committees. As a result the Commons has accepted some of the recommendations

including the development of core functions and duties for the select committees. This points to some success but it also appears that reform will be incremental rather than fundamental.

Ideally what reformers should aim for is balance between political and non-political accountability. This is easier said than done. An alternative not explored so far is the adequacy of the checks and balances over the use of executive power. This could point to change at Westminster and consolidation in Canberra. Even if this happens it will be a long vigil and a long night before reformers see the dawn of a legislature whose corporate character dominates its party political character. ▲