

Parliament and Air Quality (2015-2020)

Introduction

It is well established that air pollution presents the largest environmental risk to public health in the United Kingdom (UK) (Coffey and Cosford, 2017: 4). Research by the Royal College of Physicians (2016), for example, finds that approximately 40,000 people in the UK die every year due to poor air quality, with those living in deprived areas more likely to be disproportionately affected.

Given the importance and pervasiveness of the issue of air pollution, this paper, in four parts, will seek to understand the nature of parliamentary engagement in this area. It does this through an analysis of: (i) 848 written questions tabled by Members of Parliament (MPs) (ii) the profiles of 179 witnesses giving oral evidence to select committees and (iii) 29 debates in the House of Lords pertaining to this issue.

In the first part, an overview of the extant literature and its limitations is offered as a theoretical basis from which to proceed. The paper then explains the methodological frameworks and typologies employed in designing the study. Subsequent to this, the results per parliamentary mechanism will be discussed and compared to findings from previous studies. Finally, conclusions are drawn about parliamentary engagement with the issue of air pollution.

1. Literature Review

There exist various mechanisms for policy oversight at Parliament's behest. Norton (2013: 111) identifies two sites wherein Parliament may employ such devices: inside the chamber, and

outside the chamber. In this vein, both arenas will be considered within the purview of this study.

1.1 Written Questions

In the language of Cole (1999) and Kellermann (2016), it is striking how little research exists on the contribution of written parliamentary questions (WPQs) to holding the government to account. The traditional view espoused by most scholars is that written questions are simply devices for eking out nondescript or unremarkable information, and their consideration is often secondary to oral modes of questioning, namely Prime Minister's Questions. (Bates et al, 2018; Kimber, 1974; Norton, 2013). Yet their omission is hardly surprising. As Chester and Bowring (1962: 29) write, "nobody has ever waxed lyrical about questions which receive a written answer".

There is, however, a case to be made for studying the *accountability value* of WPQs. In an empirical study on backbench specialization, Judge (1973: 171) noted that written questions "allow an outlet for the backbencher that is uncontrolled by the party whip... reflecting much more closely than any other procedure the everyday activities of Members, the problems that concern them, their predilections and idiosyncrasies". Such is also the view of Cole (1999), Kellermann (2016) and Martin (2011) who argue that WPQs should provide a cleaner test of parliamentary engagement with policy issues because they are seldom subject to these political constraints. In this way, questions for written answer will be analysed in order to understand how Parliament have engaged with the issue of air pollution, and whether this device is used to hold the government to account.

This task has, to some extent, been attempted by Franklin and Norton (1993) who identified ‘accountability’ as one of key functions of parliamentary questioning and interviewed MPs to understand their purposes in asking questions. However, their study did not attempt to analyse how individual questions may differ in their accountability value or devise a framework for identifying their differences. And while Chester and Bowring’s (1962) *Questions in Parliament* remains an authoritative figure in the study, their analysis of the role of WPQs in enforcing accountability was not an empirical one. In consequence, one of the goals of this contribution is to assist in redressing this lacuna.

1.2 Select Committees

The British legislature does not have a long tradition of utilising external evidence in their engagement with policy issues (Defty and White, 2018: 152). However, as Natzler and Hutton (2005: 96-97) argue, reports published by select committees often “derive their authority from being founded on the evidence which the committee has taken”. Scholars are not divided on this point (Berry and Kippin, 2014; Defty and White, 2018). However, there remains some scarcity in the *empirical research* on the witnesses whom these committees rely.

This is a disparity that Berry and Kippin (2014) and Geddes (2017) sought to remedy. Both studies analysed various demographic and socioeconomic factors in order to understand who the witnesses giving evidence to select committees are. While Geddes’ observations constituted the larger and thus more instructive study – analysing 3225 witnesses in comparison to Berry and Kippin who analysed 583 – a key contention with his work is that it neglected to go into more depth about the extent to which MPs may be using evidence sessions to ‘talk among themselves’ at the expense of other sources of expertise (Berry and Kippin, 2014).

It would be useful, moreover, to refer to Beswick and Elstub's (2019) analysis which drew insights from over 60 interviews with select committee chairs in order to understand their commitment to diversifying the pool of witnesses. Although this was a primarily qualitative exercise, Beswick and Elstub were convincing in highlighting the propensity for committees to rely on the 'usual suspects', an argument that coincides with the empirical evidence on witness selection for committee hearings. Therefore, while there is a need for further development in this area, the extant literature on evidence-taking in select committees is overall consistent.

1.3 Debates (Lords)

It is widely accepted, among scholars and academics alike, that the House of Lords is a valuable repository of expertise (Dorey and Purvis, 2018; Milner, 2018; Morrison, 2007). However, as Bochel and Defty (2010: 67) argue, there has been little effort to define what constitutes 'expertise' in this context, or to quantify or qualify the upper chamber's contribution to the policy-making process. This presents something of a challenge because "the perceived expertise of the current House of Lords remains central to claims for the retention of the House in its current form" (Ibid).

While the bulk of the literature on the House of Lords concerns itself with Lords reform or examining the democratic legitimacy of the House, some scholars have engaged with the subject of participation in debates. Connell (2017), for example, examines the extent to which levels of participation and attendance in debates varies among the Lords Spiritual and finds that, while Bishops' attendance at the Lords is still low by conventional standards, it has almost doubled since the 1960s. His study is perhaps one of the most outstanding contributions to the literature on Lords participation for its use of original interviews with Church of England diocesan Bishops, revealing much about what motivates (or de-motivates) Lords engagement

with a policy issue. For example, he cites one Bishop who professed that he tried to go to Parliament once a week but, “one found oneself sitting in on a debate which you didn’t necessarily know very much about at all... so couldn’t really make a meaningful contribution or any contribution at all” (Selsey cited in Ibid: 238). In this regard, Connell’s study offers a valuable insight into the challenges that may limit Lords participation in debates in a way that extends to various groups in the House, not simply the Bishops.

In addition to this work, Bochel and Defty (2010) also consider the extent to which the House of Lords serves as an ‘expert House’. Writing on the issue of welfare, they find that the Lords may be *less* of an expert than the Commons and demonstrated relatively little or no understanding of the benefits system (Ibid: 77). While, in Connell’s (2017: 250) study, the Bishops utilised “knowledge of local communities and life developed through a position as a locally significant leader”, Bochel and Defty suggest that a more nuanced understanding of the Lords is necessary, which is an interesting but valid deviation from the literature. However, a key contention with both studies is that they make no attempt to *quantify* the extent of Lords participation in debates over a sufficient period. This is a task that this research will undertake.

2. Research Design

2.1 Written Questions

A framework for assessing the accountability value of written questions can be developed by differentiating between the accountability objectives of questions in the sample (Cole, 1999). To that end, a six-category classification system was devised to understand whether or how Parliament are employing WPQs to hold the government to account.

In this model, questions that ask for information, particularly information that is unpublished, are rated more highly. This is because they enable backbenchers to acquire important

information about the executive, “that has extra authority because it is official” and can therefore be used to hold the government to account (Adonis, 1993: 92).

Table 1 Classification and Ranking System for Written Questions

Rank	Category	Description
1	Allocation of Departmental Funds	Questions asking ministers about how taxpayer finances are being used
2	Information on Deliberations	Questions seeking information on meetings or consultations between ministers
3	Ministerial Comments on Activity	Questions asking ministers to comment on their activities or policies
4	General Quantitative Information	Questions seeking general statistical information
5	Offering Recommendations	Questions comprising of recommendations for future policy
6	Other	Questions asking ministers about non-relevant matters

(Source: Cole, 1999).

Furthermore, written questions, obtained from the UK Parliament website, were included in the sample if they satisfied the conditions expressed in Kimber et al’s (1974) study, i.e., its primary concern was with: (a) carbon emissions from fossil fuels (b) air quality (c) pollution caused by transport. Taking this into consideration, 848 written questions from 2015-November 2020 were analysed. Quotation marks were used as search operators to ensure that only questions meeting the aforementioned criteria were included in the sample.

2.2 *Select Committees*

Building on Geddes’ (2017) study, this paper analyses the profiles of 179 witnesses giving *oral* evidence on matters relating to air quality from 2015-2020. Oral evidence was preferred to written submissions because, as Geddes observed, MPs tend to use oral sessions to practice arguments they would later make in the chamber; thus, they are especially important to shaping parliamentary engagement (Ibid: 287).

The key interests in this study are the geographic and occupational compositions of the witnesses in the sample. Although this information was unavailable in *some* instances, it was readily available online for the majority of the witnesses and was cross-referenced with the original report to ensure that the information obtained was accurate.

In total, witnesses from 12 select committee reports on air pollution were included in the sample.

2.3 Debates (Lords)

Within the period of study, 29 debates took place in the House of Lords on the issue of air pollution. Information on Lords participation in these debates was obtained from Hansard. From that, a database comprising of 138 Peers was constructed to reflect: (i) whether air pollution constitutes their area of expertise and (ii) the frequency of their contribution.

3. Results

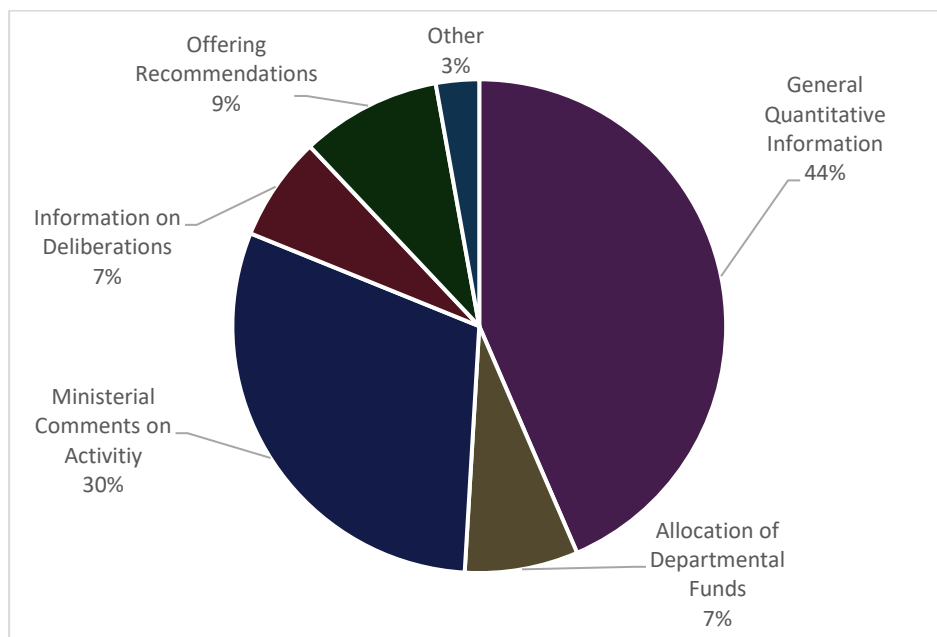
3.1 Written Questions

The division of WPQs into six categories is shown in Figure 1. Overall, questions asking ministers to provide general statistical information on air quality constituted the largest proportion in the sample (44%). But perhaps the more pertinent finding is that only 14% of the questions in the sample fell within the two highest-ranking categories identified in Table 1, while 56% of questions ranked low for accountability value.

In order to interpret this finding more deeply, we should consider Cole's (1999: 92) argument that, while questions seeking general information may be useful in providing "the basis for more searching scrutiny", they "do not contribute directly to holding bodies to account for their

decisions”. In this view, the data would suggest that parliamentary engagement in the form of written questions contributes relatively *little* to the accountability process, a finding consistent with insights provided by Bates et al (2018), Kimber (1974) and Norton (2013).

Figure 1 Breakdown of written questions by accountability objectives



(Source: Calculated from WQ 2015-2020).

Furthermore, it is interesting how small the percentage of questions asking ministers about the allocation of public funds (7%) is compared to those that propose changes to policy (9%), which ranked fifth in Table 1. As Martin (2016: 53) highlights, responses to written questions typically seek to portray “the minister and administration as positively as possible” and thus, constitute the “least effective questioning mechanism” by which to attempt policy influence. In this regard, our findings indicate a *low* (perhaps counterintuitive) consideration for the accountability value of written questions by MPs. Without a more comprehensive study of parliamentary behaviour, it is difficult to suppose the reasons for this or determine whether they are exclusive to this particular policy issue. But it may be useful to refer to the Procedure Committee’s (2009: 6) report which observes that the rise of websites such as

theyworkforyou.com put Members “under increasing pressure to demonstrate parliamentary activity”, and this *may* have undermined the extent to which MPs use written questions to effectively hold the government to account.

3.2 *Select Committees*

One of the key insights of Geddes’ (2017: 296) study is that, even when government, civil service and public sector figures are excluded, London remains the dominant region from which witnesses giving oral evidence are selected. Our findings (shown in Table 2) reflect this phenomenon. We can see that 43.5% of all witnesses (excl. the aforementioned personnel) reside in London. Moreover, 67.1% of all witnesses giving oral evidence in our sample are located in London and the South of England, which begs the question: does Parliament risk perpetuating imbalances of power since the information that select committees receive rests on contributions from an unrepresentative group of people? And since air pollution is an issue that affects regions *unequally*, this is an important factor to consider.

It should be highlighted, moreover, that zero witnesses from the Wales region were consulted on the issue of air pollution in any of the five select committees under consideration from 2015-2020. Combined, these findings suggest that parliamentary engagement with the issue has *not* been uniform. For Geddes (Ibid: 299), this can be explained by the fact that “committees are highly reactive to news agendas” and so it is unsurprising that the majority of witnesses are drawn from London because “they [witnesses] have to travel the shortest distance and are more likely to be available at a shorter notice”. But it is difficult to apply this logic given that the most high-profile inquiry in our sample, the 2015 Volkswagen emissions scandal, comprised the most diverse selection of witnesses and, contrary to Geddes’ argument, was the *only* report that contained international witnesses.

Table 2 Geographical distribution of witnesses giving oral evidence (n= 179)

Region	All Witnesses (%)	All Witnesses excluding gov, civil service and public sector (%)	Academic Witnesses (%)
London	55.3	43.5	34.7
South of England	17.8	23.6	28.6
Midlands	7.3	9.2	0.0
Wales	0.0	0.0	0.0
Scotland	2.8	3.8	19.4
North of England	9.5	10.7	13
International	1.1	1.5	0.0
Northern Ireland	2.3	2.4	4.3
Not Known	3.9	5.3	0.0

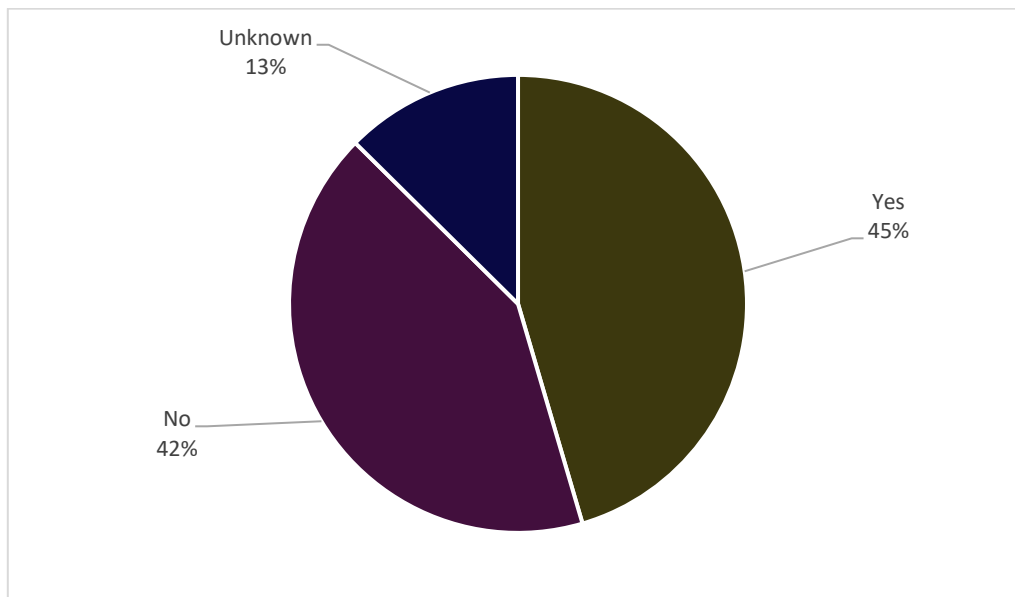
(Source: Calculated from 12 select committee reports on air pollution from the following committees: Transport Committee (2), Science and Technology Committee (1), Health and Social Care Committee (1), Environmental Audit Committee (6) and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2)).

It is also worth noting that this trend is, to a lesser extent, exemplified in the geographical distribution of academic witnesses. Although academic experts from *some* regions are omitted, the distribution is far more uniform suggesting that parliamentary engagement in this regard is more diverse and extensive.

3.3 Debates (Lords)

The extent to which those who participated in Lords debates on air quality were experts on the issue of air pollution is shown in Figure 2. Although we can see that slightly more ‘experts’ contributed to these debates (45%), it is difficult to interpret this for several reasons. First, the results are more polarised than anticipated, and thus it is difficult to definitively reach a conclusion about parliamentary engagement with this issue. Second, without more rigorous research, it is difficult to know the *extent* of expertise offered by Peers in these debates.

Figure 2 Breakdown of Lords participation in air quality debates by expertise



(Source: Calculated from HC Deb 2015-2020).

Invoking Connell's (2017) study which found that Peers tend to de-prioritise debates in which the topic of discussion falls beyond their expertise, our findings present a great challenge to this. As we can see, 42% of Lords contributing to debates on air quality are not 'experts' on the issue. Indeed, one of the most frequent contributors to the debates from 2015-2020 is Baroness Randerson who is not listed as an expert on air quality. In this view, it can be said that parliamentary engagement, and in particular, the Lords engagement with the issue of air pollution is not merely delimited to particular Members; rather, Peers of various backgrounds contribute their own expertise in a collaborative manner.

Conclusion

This paper conducts a five-year analysis of the following parliamentary devices: (i) written questions (ii) select committee evidence sessions and (iii) debates in the House of Lords. With regard to the use of written questions, it finds that parliamentary engagement with the issue of air pollution contributes little to the accountability process. Whereas the Procedure

Committee's (2009) report highlights the value of WPQs to parliamentary scrutiny over the executive, our findings suggest that MPs are not maximising the accountability value of their questions. As for evidence-taking in select committees, the resulting evidence suggests that parliamentary engagement rests disproportionately on contributions from South of England based witnesses, a criticism levelled by several academics. Although, witnesses from university institutions represent a wider diversity of regions in the UK, albeit to a limited extent. Finally, although our findings were inconclusive, it can be said that Lords engagement with the issue of air pollution extends beyond those who are experts on the subject.

In closing, it is worth noting some suggestions for improving the study. As Bochel and Defty (2010) identified, there is an earnest need for the discipline to devise a suitable framework for defining what constitutes 'expertise' in the Lords. In doing so, we should be able to assess the contribution of the Lords more constructively, and perhaps, even quantify it.

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