

ENHANCING THE IMPACT OF SELECT COMMITTEES IN THE UK PARLIAMENT: A FOCUS ON MP ENGAGEMENT

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Despite recent reforms, this report addresses the persistent challenge of low engagement of Members of Parliament (MPs) in Select Committees (SCs). While SCs have gained credibility and increased activity, the issue of insufficient participation persists. The paper identifies key factors contributing to this problem and proposes policy options, focusing on streamlining committees and implementing revisit inquiries. Rejecting alternatives is based on a thorough evaluation of potential drawbacks. The synthesis of findings emphasises the significance of these proposed solutions, providing a foundation for subsequent policy recommendations. The recommendations highlight practical steps to implement streamlining committees and revisit inquiries, acknowledging the need for a nuanced strategy to enhance engagement and the impact of SCs in the UK Parliament.




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Tony Wright, former MP and House of Commons Reform Committee Chair, told us, “SC are a work in progress; they are not the finished article”.¹

INTRODUCTION

SCs have a long history dating back to the reign of Henry VIII. It wasn't until 1979 that departmental SCs were officially established, constituting 'the most important reform of the latter half of the twentieth century.'² From subsequent reforms, SCs have gained greater credibility and become more active; 'John Bercow stated they are now "pivotal players in politics".'³ According to the Modernization Committee, the SCs have 'served Parliament well...they have allowed MPs to hold the executive accountable through more meticulous scrutiny than possible on the House floor.'⁴ Praised for exposing failings, SCs make the political process more accessible and provide unbiased information.⁵ Despite this, a critical issue persists – lack of MP engagement. This deficiency, characterised by high workloads, limited incentives, and expertise constraints, compromises the committees' effectiveness in fulfilling their vital role within the parliamentary system. The problem has significant repercussions for society. It diminishes the quality of policy scrutiny and recommendations, potentially leading to suboptimal legislative outcomes; this affects public well-being and interests as policies may not address societal needs. Ultimately, the problem undermines the democratic process, as MPs play a crucial role in representing and advocating for the concerns of their constituents. This report aims to critically examine and propose solutions to the

¹ UK Parliament, "The Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System Fourth Report of Session 2017-19 Report, Together with Formal Minutes Relating to the Report," 9 September 2019.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmliaisn/1860/1860.pdf>

² Norton, Philip. *Parliament in British Politics*. Second Edition..., 2013, 30.

³ Bates, Stephen, Steve McKay, and Mark Goodwin. "Everyone loves select committees these days. But have they really changed?" *Democratic Audit UK*, 10 Nov. 2017. <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2017/11/10/everyone-loves-select-committees-these-days-but-have-they-really-changed/>

⁴ Modernisation Committee. *Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee Publications*, First Report of Session 2001–02, HC 224-II. HMSO (London: 2002).

⁵ Andrew Hindmoor, Phil Larkin & Andrew Kennon. "Assessing the Influence of Select Committees in the UK: The Education and Skills Committee 1997–2005", *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 15:1, (2009);71-89.

common problem of insufficient engagement of MPs in parliamentary proceedings. The aim is to improve parliamentary processes and policy scrutiny for democratic governance, addressing:

- a. High workloads: MPs face overwhelming workloads and multiple responsibilities, limiting their time and capacity to participate in SC activities actively.
- b. Lack of incentives: insufficient incentives or rewards for MPs to engage actively in SC can diminish their motivation, leading to reduced commitment.
- c. Limited Expertise: MPs may encounter challenges applying specialised knowledge required for effective participation in SC activities, impacting the quality of police scrutiny and recommendations.

This paper will explore the reasons behind insufficient MP engagement, such as high workloads, lack of incentives, and limited expertise. It will then analyse these primary obstacles and offer comprehensive policy options to mitigate them. Finally, the paper will conclude with recommendations for enhancing MP engagement and the effectiveness of the parliamentary process.

BACKGROUND

WORKLOAD

MPs on SCs are ‘increasingly expected to hold the executive accountable.’⁶ Attention has resulted in expanded responsibilities for the committees and heightened visibility of their efforts, ‘with some MPs investing more of their time into this role.’⁷ Despite reforms, MP engagement remains a challenge. Indicators like attendance and turnover showed no marked improvement after Wright Reforms, suggesting increased MP engagement post-Wright is not statistically supported.⁸ It indicates that although there may be more focus on MPs, it might not equate to more involvement. Attendance at committees ‘has long been problematic,’ to the extent that ‘some committees have occasionally struggled to be quorate.’ When analysing attendance rates, ‘it's important to consider the workload pressures faced by Members’ as a

⁶ Marc, Geddes. “Dramas at Westminster”. In *Dramas at Westminster: Select Committees and the Quest for Accountability*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019) <https://www.manchesterhive.com/>.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Stephen Bates, Mark Goodwin. Written evidence. In *Liaison Committee Inquiry into the Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System*. HC 1860 (London: 2019), <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/99801/html/>

potential reason for stagnant progress.⁹ “Structural barriers” prevent MPs from fully engaging with SCs.¹⁰ According to studies, engagement is primarily influenced by the ‘parliamentary cycle’; their focus shifts depending on their responsibilities.¹¹ Indeed, parliamentarians face challenges in fulfilling their role due to ‘time constraints, competing loyalties, and multiple demands.’¹² There are concerns about MPs' ability to fulfil their responsibilities due to their membership on multiple committees.¹³ Constituency casework and other duties can affect attendance rates and ‘make filling vacant positions difficult for parliamentary work.’¹⁴ Despite innovations, the ambition of the Wright Committee to reduce the number of SCs was not achieved. Instead, the number of committees and vacancies has grown over time; this is further evidence that MPs spread themselves too thin to dedicate enough time to SC work (see Figure 1 in Appendix).¹⁵

INCENTIVES

‘Members need to take their committees seriously.’¹⁶ The problem of insufficient MP engagement in SCs is underscored by a surge in committee positions, reaching 573 by the end of the 2014-15 session.¹⁷ This abundance of opportunities, however, has not effectively incentivised MPs, as indicated by persistently low attendance rates. The perceived

⁹ Bates, and Goodwin. Written evidence. In *Liaison Committee Inquiry into the Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System*.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/99801/html//>

¹⁰ Bates, Stephen, Steve McKay, and Mark Goodwin. "Everyone loves select committees these days. But have they really changed?"

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Geddes. In *Dramas at Westminster: Select Committees and the Quest for Accountability*.

¹³ The Liaison Committee. “*The Legacy Report*.” 2010-2015 HC (London: Published by the Liaison Committee, 2015).

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmliaisn/954/95402.htm>.

¹⁴ Bates, Stephen. Goodwin, M. and McKay, S., “Do UK MPs engage more with SC since the Wright reforms? An interrupted time series analysis, 1979–2016”. In *Parliamentary Affairs*, 70(4): 780-800.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsx007>.

¹⁵ Sophie, Wilson. “Are MPs spending more time on scrutiny?” *Institute For Government*, Feb 09, 2017.

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/comment/are-mps-spending-more-time-scrutiny>

¹⁶ House of Commons Liaison Committee. *Select committee effectiveness, resources, and powers*. Second Report of Session 2012–13. HC 697. (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2012).

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmliaisn/697/697.pdf>

¹⁷ Wilson. “Are MPs spending more time on scrutiny?”

‘burdensome nature of committee work’, limited prestige, and recognition, compounded by high workload pressures, contribute to MPs viewing committee Membership as a routine rather than an honour.¹⁸ The issue gained attention through unaltered attendance rates, reflecting MPs’ reluctance to participate in committees despite ample opportunities.¹⁹ Past policies addressing the case, including incentives (“carrots”) for boosting the status of SC work, have failed to overcome the turnover challenges.²⁰ The difficulty in filling committee vacancies is exacerbated by increased demands on Members and a finite number of backbenchers.

Moreover, ‘committee work is often underappreciated by local party activists and supporters’, creating a disincentive for MPs to participate.²¹ Similarly, frequent turnover in government, reshuffles, and machinery changes make filling vacancies challenging.²² The relatively low tolerance for absenteeism – allowing Members to be absent for up to 40% of the time - may not sufficiently encourage active engagement.²³ Despite innovations such as the payment of chairs and election of Members, SCs have still not resolved the problems of non-attendance, the regular turnover of Membership, and the disruptive effects these can all have on their work.²⁴ MPs may prioritise other responsibilities over committee duties if not incentivised, complicating the task of maintaining committee effectiveness. The perception that committee Membership lacks prestige also contributes to this challenge. Addressing these issues is vital for more engaged MPs.

¹⁸ House of Commons Parliamentary and Constitutional Reform Committee. *Revisiting Rebuilding the House: The Impact of the Wright Reforms*. HC 82. HMSO, (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2013).

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpolcon/82/82.pdf>

¹⁹ Christopher, Tyler. “Three Simple Ways to Strengthen Parliamentary Democracy”, *The Guardian*. 2011.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2011/mar/04/democracy-commons-select-committee-reform>

²⁰ Stephen Bates, Mark Goodwin. Written evidence. In *Liaison Committee Inquiry into the Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System*.

²¹ Brazier and Fox, "Reviewing Select Committee Tasks and Modes of Operation".

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ UK Parliament. *Liaison Committee Inquiry into the Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System*. Written evidence.

EXPERTISE

Lack of comprehension is a significant risk as it may result in dismissing essential findings. Such behaviour ‘can be interpreted as laziness, arrogance, or incompetence’ on the part of the Members; these actions can further undermine the credibility and impact of the committee’s work.²⁵ Expertise in subject areas is a crucial mechanism for committees to ensure that they are taken seriously by the government and civil society.²⁶ Knowledgeable committees in policy areas enhance the overall quality of policymaking.²⁷ It is also crucial in shaping the accountability relationship within the Commons.²⁸ Following the phone hacking scandal, there was an increased focus on MPs’ questioning skills, highlighting the importance of expertise in conducting rigorous inquiries. Murdoch described the experience as “the most difficult day of my life”, implying the significance of competence in such rigorous investigations.²⁹ However, due to budget cuts and limited resources, MPs face constraints that impede their proficiency.³⁰ Increased demands and attention on MPs and limited resources hinder their ability to dedicate sufficient time and readiness to committee work for robust scrutiny. Russell and Benton’s observation that MPs are ‘unprepared, come and go without explanation, and ask repetitive questions’ indicates a lack of preparedness and commitment, diminishing the value of traditional question sessions.³¹ Furthermore, MPs with ‘multiple loyalties create a short-term and occasionally last-minute framework.’³² This adds another layer of complexity. This reactive position gives staff little time to write scoping notes or organise committee activities, affecting the evidence and the spectrum of witnesses that provide testimony.³³ The inefficiency reduces the usefulness of inquiries and raises questions about the overall quality of the

²⁵ Hannah White. “Select Committees under Scrutiny: The impact of parliamentary committee inquiries on government”, (*Institute for Government*, June 2015).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hannah White, “My Advice to New Select Committee Chairs,” *Institute for Government*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/advice-new-select-committee-chairs>.

²⁸ Marc, Geddes. “Performing scrutiny along the committee corridor of the UK House of Commons”, (*Parliamentary Affairs*, 2019).72(4): 821-840. doi:10.1093/pa/gsz037

²⁹ Elstub, Stephen. “The Role of SC.” UK Parliamentary Studies, Newcastle University, Newcastle, November 2023.

³⁰ Brazier and Fox. “Reviewing Select Committee Tasks and Modes of Operation.”

³¹ Meg, Russel, and Meghan Benton. “Selective Influence: The Policy Impact of House of Commons Select Committees”, (London, Constitution Unit, 2011).

³² Brazier and Fox. “Reviewing Select Committee Tasks and Modes of Operation.”

³³ Geddes. *Dramas at Westminster*.

committee's work. Addressing these interconnected challenges to expertise is crucial for fostering engagement.

POLICY OPTIONS

Streamlining Committees. When 'MPs are spread too thin' across multiple committees due to high numbers, reducing the number of committees allows them to focus on fewer committees.³⁴ Among academic recommendations, 'there should be a serious consideration about reducing the number of SCs in line with the Wright Committee's recommendation.'³⁵ Indeed, the Legacy Report suggests that reducing the number could help manage MPs' time and commitment more efficiently.³⁶ Reducing committee numbers can help address the problem of MP engagement in several ways; MPs can dedicate more time and attention to each, improving engagement; it may also enhance attractiveness as it may incentivise MPs to prioritise it over other responsibilities.³⁷ One warrant to this would be that reducing the number of committees may break the direct link between departments and committees. However, having competent and fully attended committees with broader scopes could compensate for this.

Reducing Members. The option will serve as a complementary measure, not a primary solution. Reducing the number of Members per committee to 9 or 7 is considered to improve attendance and engagement, creating a competitive environment.³⁸ According to the Liaison Committee's report, "a smaller group of Members" can incentivise attendance and participation and prevent committees from being seen as burdensome.³⁹ However, reducing the number could increase the workload per member, leaving less effective scrutiny if Members are overburdened. It could also make achieving proportional representation of parties and Parliament more complex, leading to the underrepresentation of views in committee discussions. To mitigate issues of

³⁴ HC. The Liaison Committee. *"The Legacy Report."*

³⁵ UK Parliament. *Liaison Committee Inquiry into the Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System.* Written evidence.

³⁶ HC. The Liaison Committee. *"The Legacy Report."*

³⁷ Bates, S., Goodwin, M. and McKay, S. "Do UK MPs engage more with SC since the Wright reforms? An interrupted time series analysis, 1979–2016", 780-800.

³⁸ UK Parliament. *Liaison Committee Inquiry into the Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System.* Written evidence.

³⁹ HC. The Liaison Committee. *"The Legacy Report."*

workload and underrepresentation, an increase in support staff would be necessary to assist Members in their tasks, but this comes with its limitations on feasibility.

Revisit Inquiries. This policy option is a strategic component of preferred alternatives. The proposal aims to foster increased engagement by addressing inefficiencies and providing incentives for active participation. This option aligns with the recommendations of Hansard Society's Commission on Scrutiny in 2001, which advocated a more structured approach to committee operations.⁴⁰ While there may be initial challenges in implementing these changes, improving efficiency in committee operations can lead to streamlined processes and reduced workload for MPs. It also aligns with the suggestion that 'SC should be held more accountable to MPs and the public' and that committees' should be more self-critical in evaluating their actions and methods.'⁴¹ This approach introduces a built-in incentive for MPs by establishing a review mechanism encouraging active participation. MPs are more likely to engage, knowing their work will be scrutinised, enhancing accountability. The streamlined work processes created through this review can create a conducive environment for providing incentives. MPs who engage in more efficient and purposeful work are more likely to be motivated when their contributions are recognised and valued through review processes.

Revising Attendance Rules. This decision should be treated cautiously and not prioritised as a primary solution. If a rule regarding attendance is to be kept and meaningful, the cut-off level should be higher than 60%.⁴² However, setting a higher attendance threshold may be impractical and not accommodate MPs' diverse responsibilities.⁴³ Indeed, while encouraging engagement, it may carry the risk of discouraging MPs.

Enhanced Training and Resource Allocation. The decision to include this option is logical but will not be prioritised as a standalone solution. Focused training and increased resources may enhance MP's capabilities but not address deeper issues such as workload pressures or perceived lack of incentives. Therefore, solely relying on training and resources may not tackle the root causes of disengagement. A comprehensive approach that combines training with other

⁴⁰ Brazier and Fox, "Reviewing Select Committee Tasks and Modes of Operation".

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² UK Parliament. *Liaison Committee Inquiry into the Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System*. Written evidence.

⁴³ Geddes. *Dramas at Westminster*.

policy options, such as streamlining committees or revisit inquiries, is recommended to create a holistic and effective solution.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

In addressing engagement challenges, a preferred policy alternative emerges: Streamlining Committees and Revisiting Inquiries. This approach combines the benefits of reducing the number of committees for workload management and revisiting inquiries to enhance motivation for engagement. Streamlining can effectively manage the workplace by reducing and promoting focused discussion, ultimately creating a more engaged environment. Simultaneously, revisit inquiries introduced a system of accountability and motivation. MPs aware of potential reviews are incentivised to participate actively in committee activities, ensuring a more thorough scrutiny and effective utilisation of resources. Due to their limited scope, rejecting committee size, enhancing training allocation, and revising attendance rules are insufficient solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The synthesis of significant findings reveals a multifaceted problem in parliamentary engagement, marked by persistently low attendance, inadequate committee participation and an overarching reluctance among MPs. The root causes extend beyond workload pressure, including crucial barriers and a lack of incentives, highlighting the issue's complexity. Notably, the analysis identified that recent reforms have failed to impact the MPs' engagement significantly. The synthesis underscores the interconnected nature of the problem, where issues of workload, incentives and expertise converge to impede parliamentary participation. Despite reforms, the deficiency in MP engagement is a critical concern that demands a comprehensive and integrated policy response.

1. Streamlining Committees: Initiate a phased reduction in SCs, emphasising consolidation based on thematic relevance and workload distribution. Introduced periodic review mechanisms for committee structures to adapt to changing parliamentary needs.
2. Revisit Inquiries: To enhance efficiency and accountability, ensure periodic reviews of MPs' work. Implement a structured review of inquiry processes. Foster a culture of

accountability by documenting discussions leading to decisions and justifying outcomes.

These recommendations suggest specific strategies and steps for implementation to increase parliamentary engagement while acknowledging the challenges involved.

APPENDIX

Commons committees have increased in number

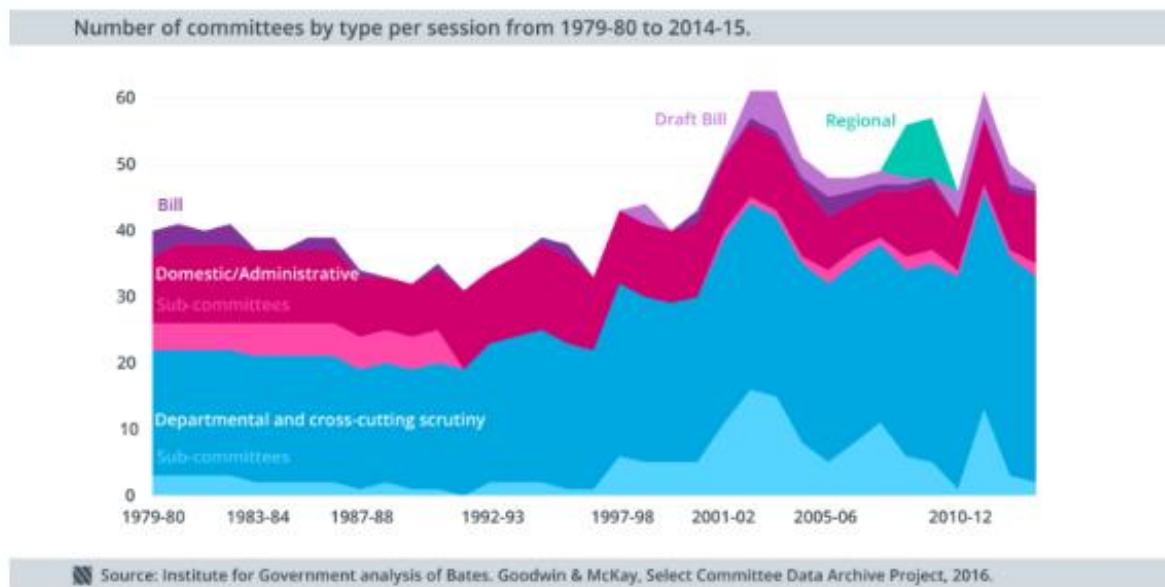


Figure 1.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Wilson. "Are MPs spending more time on scrutiny?"

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