

The House of Commons' Select Committees are now more independent of government. But are they any better informed?

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MPs exert their most effective influence on UK public policy via the network of select committees in the Commons that monitor each Whitehall department and the cross-departmental Public Accounts Committee. Last boosted in 1979 by the Thatcher administration, select committees have just won enhanced autonomy from government and party control, with the election of their chairs and choice of their members by all MPs. But [Patrick Dunleavy](#) and [Chris Gilson](#) argue that they also need to increase their salience in attracting MPs' attention, and to urgently find a better way of researching the implementation issues they investigate.

It was the elegant Tory 'wet', Norman St John Stevas, who in 1979 founded the modern select committee system, by setting up a committee to shadow each of the main departments of state. A minister despised by (and eventually sacked by) Margaret Thatcher, St John Stevas none the less made the most important advance in Parliament becoming a more effective policy-making influence ever since. The Committees became more influential over time, forcing government ministers and departments to explain how policy implementation has been undertaken and to explain where things have gone wrong. The committee Chairs began to be paid a small token salary on top of their MPs basic pay, reflecting their increasing importance in UK governance. And the Liaison Committee of chairs under Tony Blair began to quiz the Prime Minister every six months.

One of MPs' biggest grievances about the Committees, however, was that they were too open to control by the party whips (especially the government whips, since governing party members are in a majority on each committee). In particular, the whips could select the members (often apparently selecting perverse choices) and try to rig the choice of committee chairs to give the government an easier ride. Some of the Blair era manipulations of committees' deliberations were breathtaking, such as the attempt to deny Gwyneth Dunwoody the Chair of the Transport Committee in 2001. There were also concerns that former ministers had on occasion been given the committee chair as an extension of the already pervasive system of party '[patronage](#)'. And Labour ministers rarely missed the opportunity to delay setting up committees or calling their first meetings for months after each general election.

Now with another liberal Tory, Sir George Young, as Leader of the House of Commons, a programme of reforms drawn up by the Labour MP Tony Wright in the last Parliament has been fully implemented which should curb future abuses. Essentially the key changes enhance the committees' independence and their ability to form a 'corporate' or cross-party identity to counteract the ever-present partisanship in the Commons and to push for information and explanations in the interest of better scrutiny and good government.

The Committee chairs have now been elected for the first time, producing a balanced set of government party and opposition chairs, and with MPs as a whole clearly opting for the more independent-minded and dedicated candidates. The next stage will be that MPs as a whole settle the committee memberships, a complex task that has now been taken out of the whips' control. Parliament also has until 29 July to actually form the Committees, and with rumours washing around Westminster that actually almost no legislation is ready to be considered, this seems like a good opportunity for the committees to kick off their activities promptly.

The reforms enacted have also done a little to address a second problem that has plagued the committees, namely



the difficulties of attracting the active participation of even those MPs appointed to them. A recent study of the longest-lived and most influential committee, [the Public Accounts Committee](#), showed that over a long period up to 2009 the average attendance of its members was just 45 per cent of meetings. Yet the PAC has a critically important role, scrutinizing public spending and reviewing more than 60 reports a year from the National Audit Office. The new rules enacted by the Commons mean that any member of PAC or one of the select committees who fails to show up for 60 per cent of meetings will be automatically removed from the relevant Committee.

A third key problem remains untouched, however, namely the plain obsolescence of the predominant way in which committees operate, without any capacity to do research or independent information-gathering of their own. Each committee has a Clerk (usually a generalist official), whose role is mainly procedural and focuses on keeping the committee's secretarial staff on top of its many papers and activities. In addition there is a researcher called 'committee specialist', often in fact a not too well-qualified and fairly junior staff member. The committee Chair will also recruit two or three 'specialist advisors', usually outside professionals or university academics, who are paid tiny amounts to advise the chair and clerk on issues and people for the committee to talk to. This leaves the committees very reliant on calling witnesses, taking oral evidence, and making the odd visit here or there, as their main ways of gathering evidence – an essentially nineteenth century model of investigation.

It would not be hard to bring in better methods of information gathering, at little or no net additional cost. The National Audit Office already has teams of researchers covering each of the Whitehall departments, and masses of information that never gets considered by PAC or makes its way into the public domain via the NAO's now increasingly abbreviated and rather vague reports. The whole of the NAO's £80 million annual budget (covering 750 staff) also produces just 60 'value for money' reports that funnel through one single Commons committee, PAC. Given the fiscal stress on UK government for the next five years, an attractive way of NAO beginning to deliver more value for money for taxpayers would be for their departmental-monitoring teams to also begin to advise the relevant select committee on where to look and what to ask about policy implementation.

[A more far-reaching reform](#) would be for the Public Accounts Committee to stop trying to consider any single-department reports, which should be handled by the relevant select committee instead. This would leave the PAC free to develop its really critical and unique roles of covering all cross-departmental issues (like monitoring spending cuts, or combating the information technology disasters plaguing UK government), taxation and the some big-spending zones (like defence spending and the Department of Work and Pensions benefits systems) in a more professional and focused way.