Giving evidence in Parliament: a how-to guide for academics

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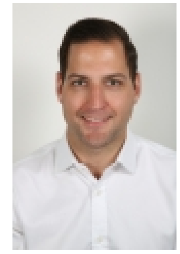

Providing evidence to policymakers through select committees is a great way for researchers to influence current policy debates. But if you haven't done it before, the formality of the task may appear daunting. ***Patrick Hanley*** *has compiled thoughts and experiences from several LSE academics with their tips on preparing and giving evidence to policymakers. This is part one of a series on giving evidence in Parliament.*

You've just received a last-minute call from a parliamentary clerk who, through some serendipitous Google searching, has come across your research. They want you to attend and share your expertise with the committee in the next few days. Having never appeared before a select committee before and with limited time to prepare, what do you do?

Academics are accustomed to presenting their research at conferences and through research papers, but speaking to policymakers presents a new type of audience. For those who are seeking opportunities to connect with parliamentary audience, or may have already been called upon to share their research with a committee, speaking before them may be a daunting task.

Over a series of posts this term, we will draw upon the experiences of those across LSE who have recently given oral evidence, creating a collection of tips to get the most of the experience. For the inaugural post in this series, I asked LSE academics Dr Joachim Wehner, Associate Professor in Public Policy and Dr Kate Meagher , Associate Professor in International Development about their experiences giving evidence to the Procedure Committee and International Relations Committee respectively

Palace of Westminster. Image credit: BySuperikonoskop (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0], via Wikimedia Commons.

How do opportunities to give evidence come about?

Often academics find that the opportunity finds them; parliamentary clerks searching for witnesses who can shed light on a particular issue may contact them and invite them to participate. Such was the case for Dr Joachim Wehner, "in my case, parliamentary staff asked me to make a submission. The topic is very closely related to what I work on in my research, and someone had read some of my work." This serendipitous case highlights the importance of making sure your work is available on institutional repositories, webpages and expert profiles. For more on how to increase the visibility of academic work, visit the archives of the Impact Blog.

Others, such as Dr Kate Meagher found the opportunity through professional networks, "I was nominated by some people from Chatham House who advise the Parliamentary Committee, and was invited by the staff of the Parliamentary Committee."

However, the chance to give evidence can be proactive as well; academics can create the opportunity for themselves through legislative monitoring and public affairs support. In future posts in this series, we'll look at *creating* opportunities to give evidence and engaging directly with Parliament.

How to prepare for your session

Joachim Wehner offers three key pieces of advice on preparation:

1. **Clerks are a font of knowledge**

> *"Talk to the clerk and/or other parliamentary staff to understand why the inquiry came about, [the] specific issues, political dynamics that gave rise to it…and which elements of the terms of reference are most likely to allow scope for changes and try to focus on those. The clerk may also help to identify key members of the committee, and what their approach and key concerns are."*

2. **Swot up on committee dynamics and previous evidence given**

> *"Read as much as you can about the background to the inquiry, relevant official documents, prior inquiries on the topics, submissions made by others, etc. It is also useful to watch evidence given to the committee at an earlier hearing (ideally as part of the same inquiry) to get a clearer picture about what to expect, how different members behave, etc."*

3. **Check in with other witnesses**

> *"…if you know any of the other witnesses, speak to them in advance. It can be useful to coordinate, to the extent possible, so that the evidence is mutually reinforcing and complementary."*

It is best to give complementary evidence rather than each witness offering the same information. This wouldn't be seen as in any way conspiratorial from a committee standpoint, committee clerks usually give out contacts for the other witnesses anyway (unlike a legal trial where you can't talk about it).

Dealing with nerves on the day

The atmosphere at many evidence sessions can be unlike what many academics or professional service staff have experienced. Kate Meagher describes, “the session was quite intense. There were three of us giving evidence at the same time, and we had 45 minutes in total to respond to seven questions posed by the Parliamentary Committee. That allowed just a couple of minutes per response. Even my notes were longer than that, so I just had to distil the most important couple of points in my responses.”

Despite this, Kate says, “there wasn’t really anything to feel nervous about, since I wasn’t on trial, and they were asking me about things I am familiar with.”

Kate Meagher stresses clarity and brevity in responding to the questions:

“My top tip would be to prepare about 2-3 clear points for each question that you want to address. You won’t have time for anything more, and it’s better to be clear than to try to say too much. It’s also worth noting that you don’t have to respond to every question. You can defer to the other witnesses you are testifying with on any question you don’t want to address. I would be more succinct if I did it again, and be more selective about my core points.”

Will your evidence influence or inform policy? On monitoring research impact

With the focus of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), much emphasis has been placed on creating policy impact through higher education research. As many in higher education will well know, judging the relative level of impact is a difficult task.

Joachim Wehner says, “as for impact, that’s too early to say. I am waiting for the Committee report, which will be the first thing to look at. The second will be what happens afterwards, and if any recommendations are followed by action.”

Kate Meagher adds, “impact is a long process in this business… I can say that some of my evidence made an impact on the members of the Committee, but whether it has an impact on policy remains to be seen, and has perhaps more do with the internal politics of the Committee…than with the actual content of the evidence. Impact is only partly about research quality, and is perhaps more about its compatibility with current policy orientations… impact is not always a short run issue.”

Conclusion

This first post in the series is meant to put you in the shoes of those who have been presented with the opportunity to give oral evidence in Parliament. As we have seen through the disparate views in this blog, academics will have a wide variety of experiences when giving oral evidence.

Throughout this series, we will explore how the opportunity to give evidence came about for others, how best to prepare for your time in the spotlight and what sort of impact your appearance may have had. At the end, we hope to have a list of ‘top tips’ to make your experience giving oral evidence a success.

Upcoming posts in the series

- *How academics can create opportunities for policy impact, including submitting written evidence, proactive monitoring and engagement.*
- *Training opportunities and what higher education support staff can do to help academics achieve policy impact.*
- *Top tips, lessons learned and more real-life experiences and advice from academics.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

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