

Parliamentary select committees: who gives evidence?

Richard Berry & Sean Kippin



About the authors

Richard Berry is managing editor and researcher at Democratic Audit. His background is in public policy and political research, particularly in relation to local government. In previous roles he has worked for the London Assembly, JMC Partners and Ann Coffey MP. He is the author of the book *Independent: The Rise of the Non-Aligned Politician* (Imprint Academic, 2008). He tweets at @richard3berry.

Sean Kippin is managing editor and researcher at Democratic Audit. He studied Politics at the University of Northumbria, and has an MSc in Political Theory from the London School of Economics. From 2008 to 2012 he worked for the Rt Hon Nick Brown MP in Newcastle and in the House of Commons, and for Alex Cunningham MP. He has also worked at the Smith Institute think tank, and as an intern for the Co-operative Party. He tweets at @se_kip.

Democratic Audit is an independent research organisation, established as a not-for-profit company, and based at the London School of Economics Public Policy Group. Our core objectives are to advance education, enhance democratic engagement and to undertake and promote research into, the quality and effectiveness of UK democracy. We produced our most recent audit of UK democracy in 2012, and manage a blog with publishing daily posts with new research and opinion from democracy experts and practitioners. www.democraticaudit.com



Published by Democratic Audit
democraticaudit@lse.ac.uk
Twitter: @democraticaudit

Cover images: [UK Parliament](#)
[Catherine Bebbington/
Parliamentary Copyright] (CC BY-
NC-ND 2.0); [Jas Gawronski](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)



This work by Democratic Audit is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 UK: England & Wales.

Introduction

Parliamentary select committees have become an increasingly important part of our democratic process. Aided by the [Wright reforms](#) from 2010 onwards, they have grown in visibility, influence, reach, and workload. These changes included open elections for the membership, and crucially chairs, of committees, where these positions had previously been in the gift of party whips. Research from Democratic Audit's co-Director, Professor Patrick Dunleavy has shown that committees are now [cited by the media a great deal more](#), with some in particular (such as the Home Affairs committee) more than doubling their coverage since the reforms were implemented.

By calling witnesses to appear at hearings, select committees hold the government are able to account publicly for its policies and their implementation. Many witnesses also come from outside government, including key stakeholders in a particular policy area or independent experts. These witnesses provide an important source of external input into parliamentary scrutiny and, ultimately, public policy.

Indeed, much of the attention that Select Committees have garnered over the last three years has been as a result of their choice of witnesses. For example, the Culture, Media and Sport committee infamously saw [Rupert and James Murdoch](#) fielding questions in Parliament, leading Murdoch Sr to unconvincingly remark that it was 'the most humble day of his life'. Likewise, the redoubtable Margaret Hodge's [Public Accounts Committee](#) has made senior civil servants and outsourcing company chief executives squirm with her aggressive questioning and well-targeted inquiries.

Our research

We wanted to find out more about which people are invited to appear before committees as witnesses, to explore how representative the group is and what types of organisations have access to Parliament in this way.

We compiled a database of all witnesses appearing at a select committee (including in the Commons, Lords and joint committees) from 8th October to 7th November 2013. In total, we examined 167 committee sessions, featuring

583 witnesses. The data is derived from a single snapshot of committee activity, therefore, but we believe the scale of committee activity is such that it provides sufficient information to enhance our understanding of this topic.

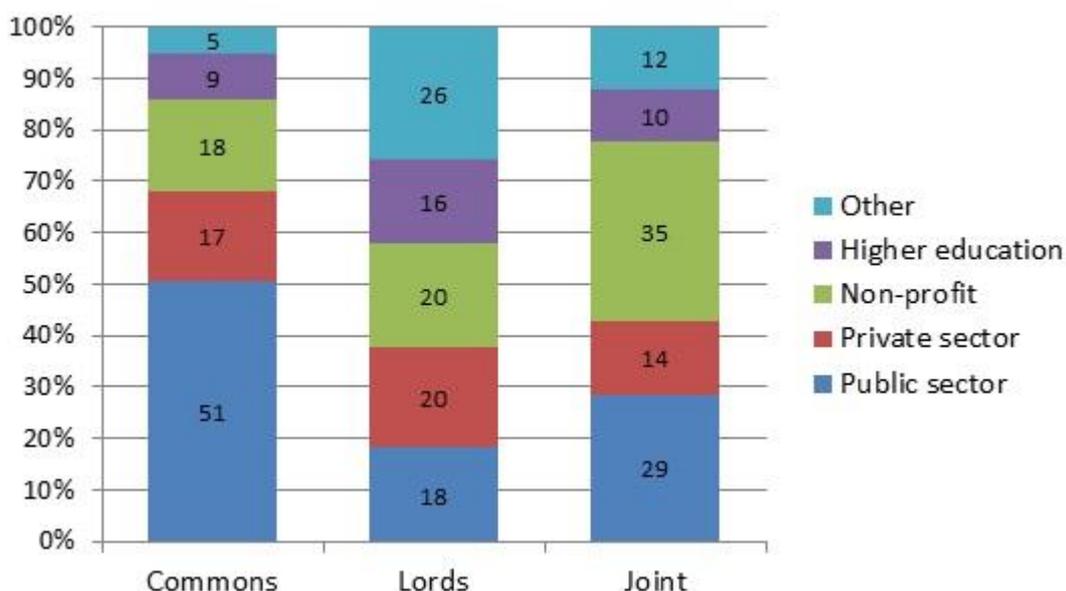
We have published our data alongside this report: it is [available to download here](#).

Organisational affiliations

Sectors

First, we considered the sectors witnesses were drawn from. Unsurprisingly, the public sector was the biggest source across committees as a whole, providing 41% of witnesses, compared to 18% and 20% for the private and non-profit sectors respectively. However, this was largely due to House Commons select committees, most of which focus on specific government departments – Lords and joint committees had a more even spread of witnesses from different sectors:

Figure One: Select committee witnesses by industrial sector (%)



The private sector witnesses were evenly split between individual companies (58%) and trade associations (42%). A large majority of public sector witnesses (see Figure Two overleaf) were from central government departments, agencies and commissions (including ministers), with a fifth from other public organisations. There was more variety among witnesses from the non-profit sector, as shown in Figure Three overleaf.

Figure Two: Organisation type of select committee witnesses from public sector (%)

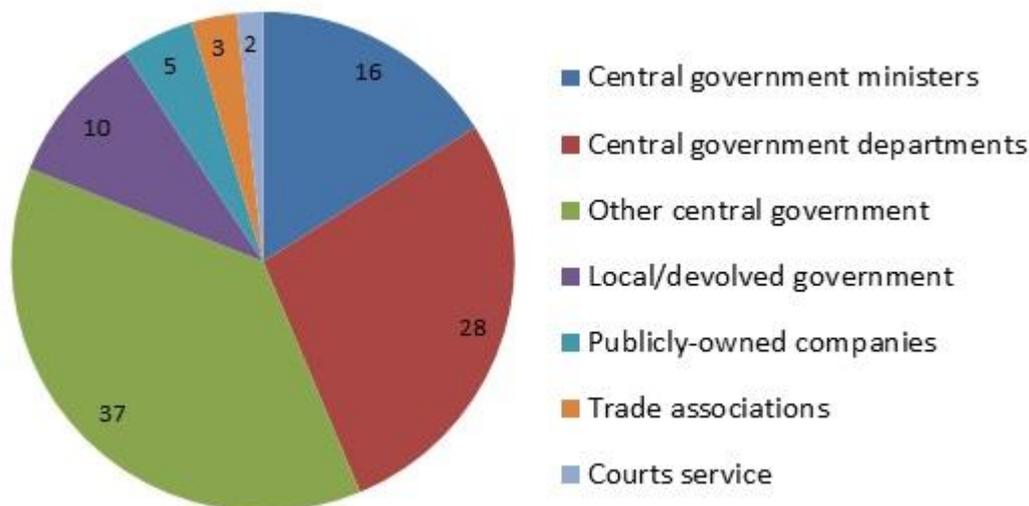
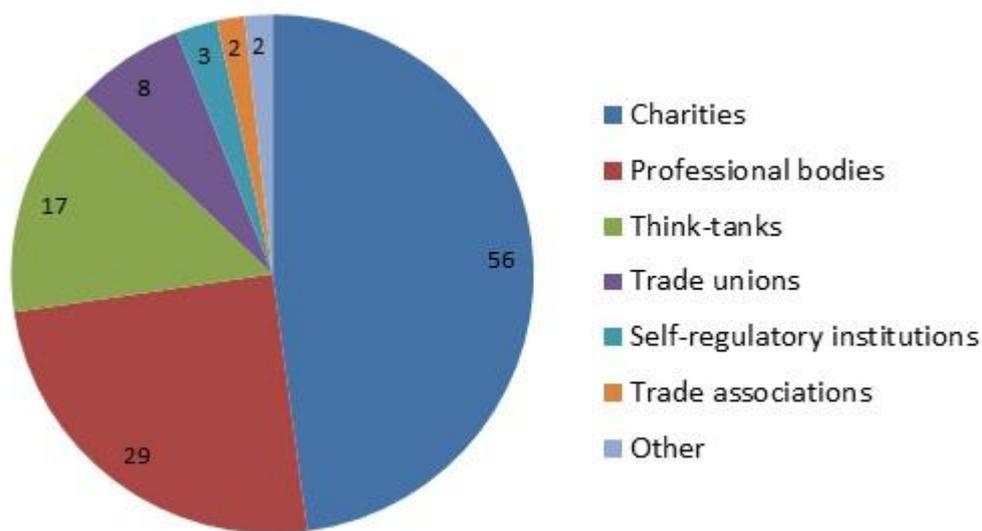


Figure Three: Organisation type of select committee witnesses from non-profit sector (%)



Note: 'Charities' refers to non-profit organisations with charitable purposes that do not fit into one of the other categories.

Trade associations and trade unions

The data reveals a stark contrast in the prominence of trade associations in trade unions. 55 representatives of trade associations appeared as witnesses in this period, which was 9% of all witnesses. 78% of these witnesses were

from trade associations representing the private sector, with 13% from the public sector and 8% from non-profits or higher education.

Several trade associations made repeated appearances: in the month we collected data, the Local Government Association and National Farmers Union each appeared at four sessions, while the Federation of Small Businesses appeared at three.

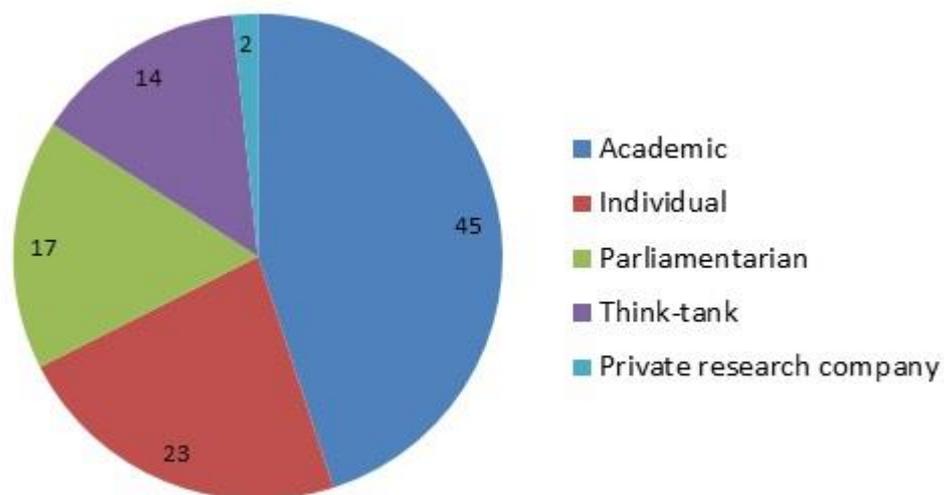
Trade unions provided eight witnesses in this period, only 1% of the total number. However, six of these were from the Police Federation, whose representatives appeared at two Home Affairs Committee sessions dealing with the [‘plebgate’](#) row. Just two witnesses from non-police trade unions appeared (0.3% of the total) – one each from the NASUWT and Unison. This does not include professional bodies - such as Royal Colleges for medical professions – which appeared 29 times in this period.

Independent experts

We categorised a number of witnesses as ‘independent experts’. Although it would of course be expected that all witnesses have expertise in the issue being discussed, in most cases witnesses are primarily sharing the views of the organisation they represent. Those we place in the independent expert category are university academics, researchers from think-tanks or private research firms, parliamentarians (excluding ministers), and individuals without any organisational affiliation.

There were 120 such witnesses in the data collection period, representing 21% of the total number. They were more prevalent at Lords committees, where 39% of witnesses were independent experts (compared to 14% in the Commons). Figure Four overleaf gives the breakdown of different types of expert.

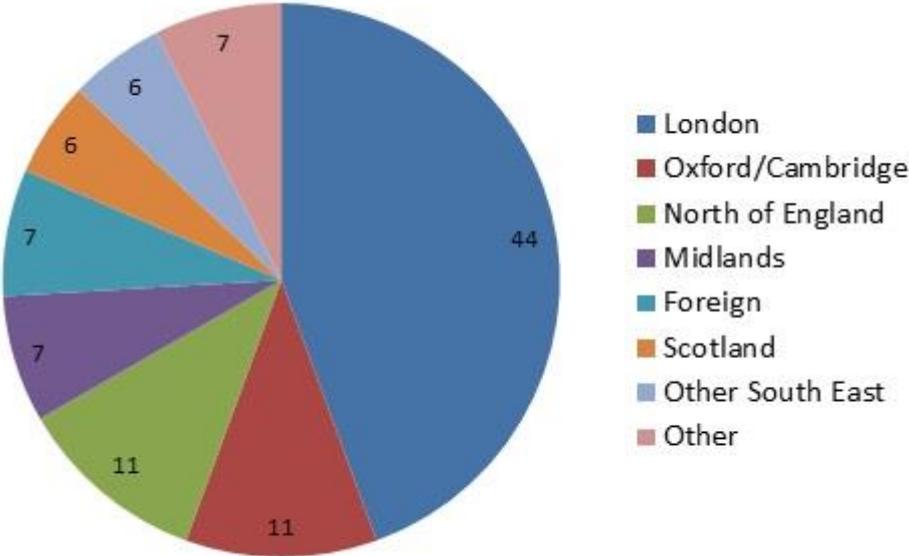
Figure Four: Organisational affiliations of 'independent expert' witnesses (%)



Twenty witnesses in this period were parliamentarians, (3% of all witnesses), including eight MPs and 12 peers. Three-quarters of these witnesses appeared at House of Lords committees. Indeed, the fact that over 10% of all witnesses at Lords committees were parliamentarians in this period may invite accusations that peers are spending too much time questioning their own colleagues.

We examined the largest of the expert groups, academics, in more detail, in order to understand the geographical spread of these witnesses. Our analysis revealed that London universities were significantly over-represented among academic witnesses (see Figure Five overleaf). This, of course, reflects the location of Parliament and the greater convenience London academics have in appearing at select committees, although the disparity is wide enough to warrant further attention from committees in the future.

Figure Five: University academic witnesses by geographical location (%)



Gender balance

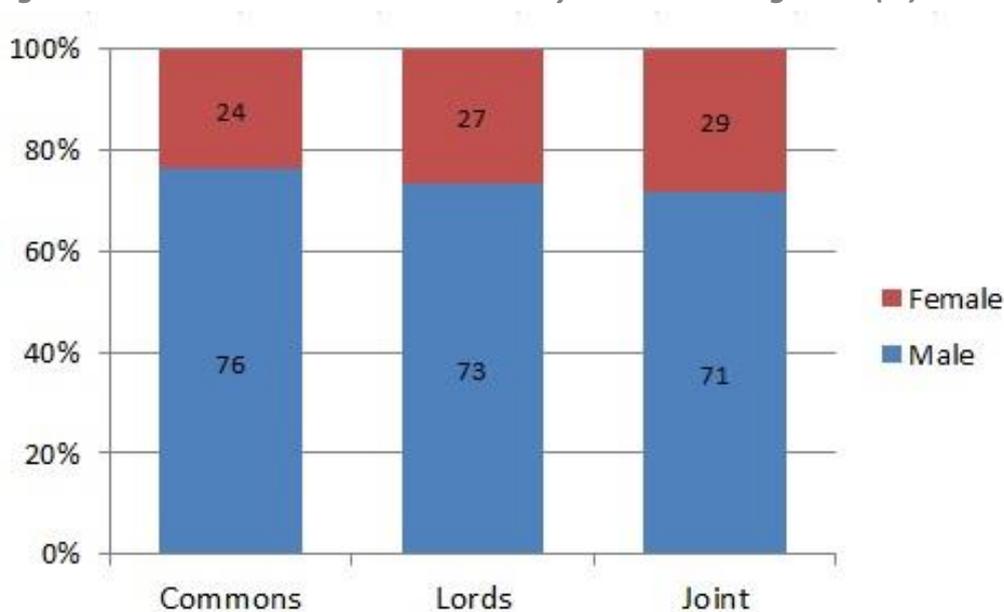
Overview

The figures produced by our analysis of the gender balance among select committee witnesses are stark. As Table One shows, of 583 witnesses, 439 were men, 75% of the total. Figure Six shows with the number for the Commons committees (76%) marginally more inclined towards men than the Lords (73%) or joint committees of both houses (71%).

Table One: Total witnesses by gender

	Number	%
Male witness	439	75.3
Female witness	144	24.7
Total	583	100.0

Figure Six: Select Committee witnesses by chamber and gender (%)



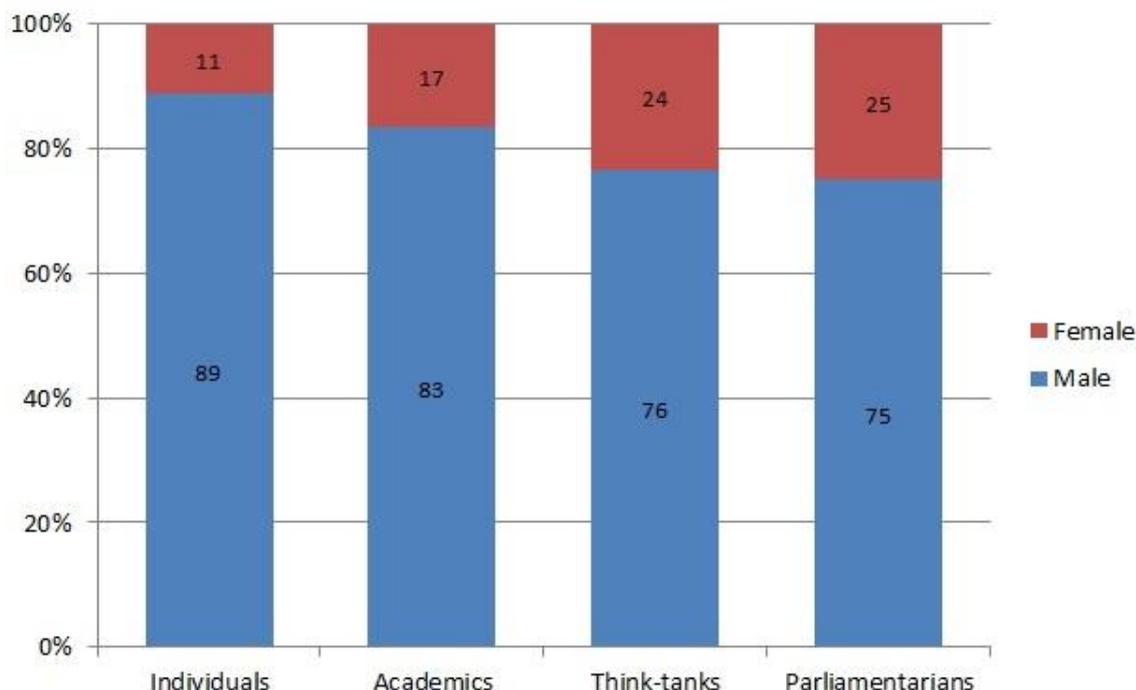
Independent experts

Where the committees may legitimately come under fire for their choices of witnesses are what we have called the ‘independent experts’ category: those

witnesses, independent of Government, who are brought in to provide their take on a particular issue covered by their expertise. These are often academics or individuals with accumulated professional expertise in a subject. By definition, committees have a wider range of choices, and may legitimately select any one of a multitude of options. For example, the Public Administration Committee held a session on ‘statistics and open data’ on the 22nd October, and asked Stephen Shakespeare of YouGov, and Nigel Shadbolt of the Open Data Institute to give evidence.

Obviously, both of these are eminent within their world and perfectly equipped to talk about the issues in question, however it does not seem credible that there were no qualified women willing to contribute. Worryingly, as Figure Three below shows, it is the experts category which shows the greatest disparity between men and women, with 83% of those appearing during the survey period who could be classified as experts being men. The disparity was similar across each category of expert, specifically individuals (those without an organisational affiliation), academics, think tanks, and parliamentarians (excluding ministers).

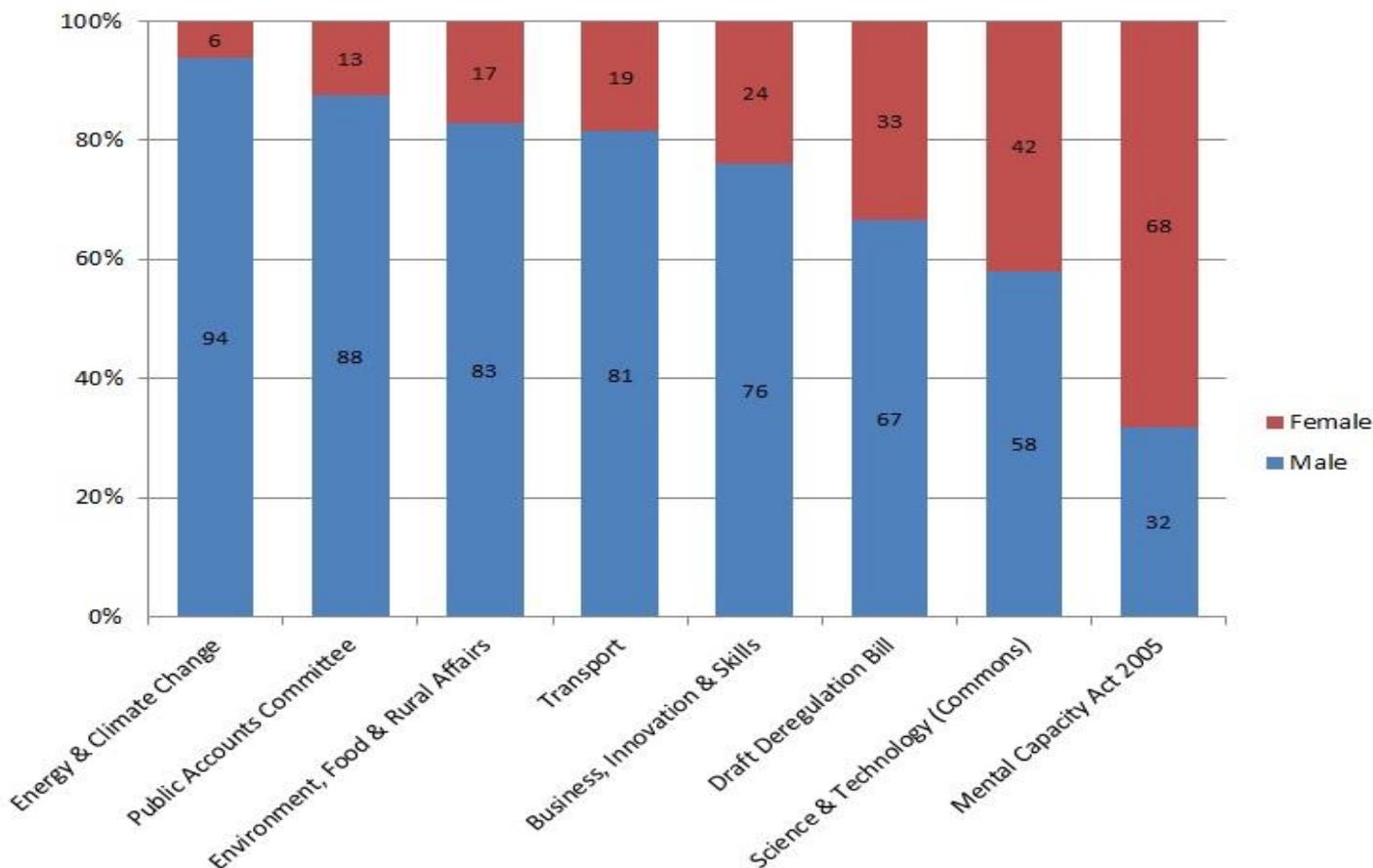
Figure Seven: Independent experts giving evidence to select committees by gender (%)



Individual committees

We looked at the record of a number of individual committees - specifically those calling more than 20 witnesses in this period, providing a larger sample size. Some individual committees fared particularly badly: as Figure Four below shows, the Energy and Climate Change Committee only took evidence from two women out of 32 (or 6%). Likewise, the Transport Committee only spoke to five women out of 27 (19%) and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee only 5 out of 29 (17%). The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee fared better, with 13 out of 31 committee witnesses being women (42%); however this is likely to be because the subject of the sessions in question was 'women in STEM careers'. Likewise, the only committee to hear from more women than men - the (temporary) Mental Capacity Act 2005 Committee - heard mainly from caring professionals, from industries with a higher degree of women in senior positions.

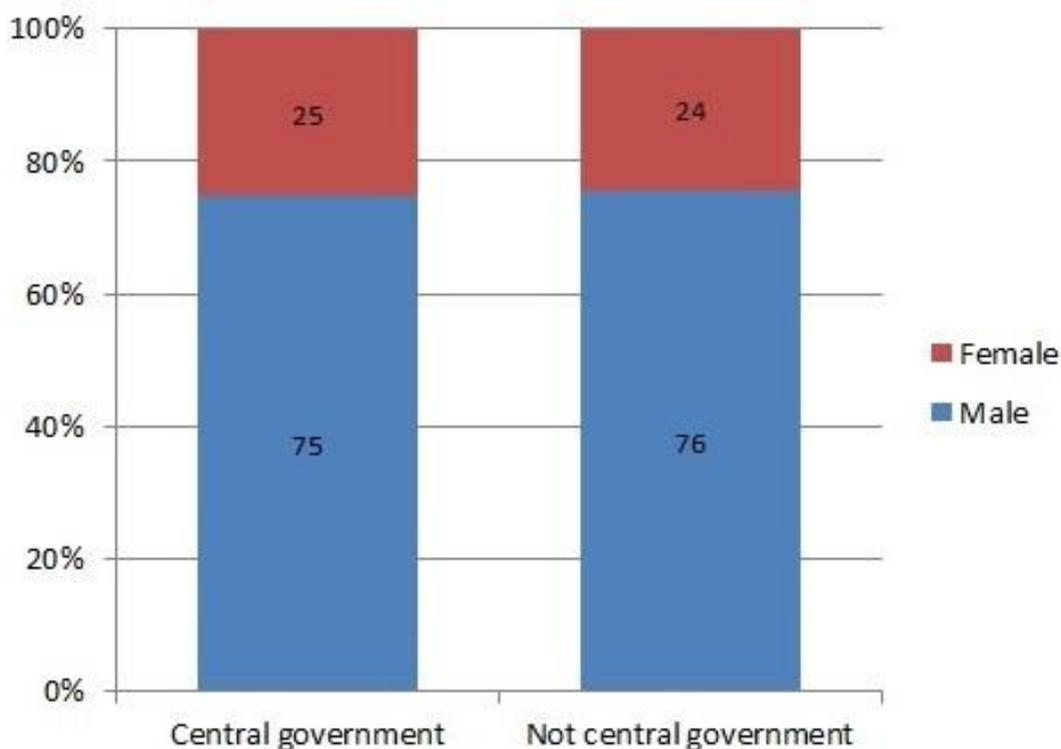
Figure Eight: Gender breakdown of individual committees' witnesses (%)



Central government

Those witnesses that could claim to be either a member of, or employed by, the Government (that is, Ministers, quango employees, and civil servants) manage to achieve a greater degree of representativeness. As Figure five shows, 144 of 193 witnesses being men (this is a similar ratio to those who aren't associated with the Government, with 295 men out of 390). It is striking, here, that the availability of a greater range of options (that is the 'independent experts' category) has manifested itself as a more unequal gender divide than the more circumscribed 'Central government' category.

Figure Nine: Central government witnesses by gender (%)



Clearly, committees have not been successful in achieving a gender balance in the witnesses they invite to give evidence. Committees should, where feasible, work towards an even gender balance. This rule does not have to apply to every single hearing, but certainly to committee activity over the length of a year.

Of course, these findings also speak to a wider societal discrepancy. Our political and governmental institutions are not representative – either in

terms of ethnicity, religion, socio-economic grouping, or, crucially for our purposes here, gender. Where committees have the choice, they should seek gender equality. But this problem is indicative of a wider set of issues confronting us. Closing the gender divide when it comes to select committee witnesses won't solve these problems, but as they become more visible and influential, they should at least attempt to lead by example.

Conclusions

We should celebrate that select committees are more powerful. They are increasingly influential and capable of shaping political opinions and exerting pressure on government to change course if the direction of policy is wrong. But we need to consider whether the information they receive rests on input from an unrepresentative group of people invited to participate in parliamentary scrutiny. If it does, Parliament risks perpetuating power imbalances.

In undertaking this analysis we recognised that committees do not have a completely free hand when choosing who will appear before them as witnesses. When investigating a particular topic, committees will invariably invite ministers and senior officials from the relevant department or agency. There is little the committee can do to ensure the representativeness of these witnesses. The same can also be said of some witnesses outside government, for instance the chief executives of organisations that a committee needs to hear from.

However, we did find that gender disparities exist among witnesses that committees have much more control over – independent experts such as academics and other researchers – suggesting that committees are contributing to this problem as well as being subject to its effects.

We believe there is a case for further research in this area. Firstly, we have not considered the other ways committees gather evidence, for instance through written submissions, informal meetings and site visits. Secondly, we could learn more by examining the profile of witnesses over a longer period, or by repeating the exercise to track changes over time. Finally, there are other pieces of information about witnesses we did not have access to, particularly their age and ethnicity; further consideration of their organisations' geographical location would also be useful.

With regards to the organisational affiliations of witnesses, it was striking to see how regularly trade associations are called to give evidence. While these organisations do exist to represent sectors politically, committees may want to consider whether they are too reliant on the 'usual suspects' for evidence.

A related challenge for the House of Lords committees is that many of their witnesses are parliamentarians, suggesting a propensity for peers to ‘talk to themselves’ at the expense of external expertise. Beyond this, we noted the wide variety of expert guests called to give evidence; one blemish is that academic witnesses are disproportionately drawn from London.

Our findings on the gender balance among witnesses are much more troubling. Although we only examined a short period of committee activity, the fact that men were over-represented among the witnesses of almost all committees across both Houses of Parliament suggests, and among every type of witness, suggests this is an ongoing problem. Committees need to consider what steps they can take to address this, beginning with the setting of milestones for increasing the proportion of female witnesses and regular monitoring.