DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

UCL

THE POLICY IMPACT OF HOUSE OF COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEES

The Constitution Unit

Selective Influence:
The Policy Impact of House of Commons Select Committees

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Contents

Short-termism and media focus.....91

List of figures

Box 1: Summary of the s

Acknowledgements

It is common for publications to start with an acknowledgement that they would not have been

committee reports, and suggest some common success factors that they demonstrate. These include basing reports on clear evidence and new research, following up previous inquiries to assess what (if any) changes have been made as a result, and examining more 'niche' subjects that ministers may have overlooked.

There was general consensus, however, that adoption of committee recommendations is only one form of committee success, and perhaps not even the most important one. Select committees influence the policy process in many other more subtle, and less measurable, ways. We suggest seven forms of non-quantifiable committee influence: contributing to debate, drawing together evidence, spotlighting issues, brokering between actors in government,

Introduction

Recent years have been characterised by scepticism – sometimes verging on cynicism – about the effectiveness of the British House of Commons. Particularly during the time of large government majorities following the 1997 and 2001 elections, MPs came to be characterised as 'poodles', and doubt was expressed about the extent to which the Commons could have a genuine impact on government policy. This was reinforced by the fact that during the entire period of Tony Blair's premiership, the government was defeated only four times in the House of Commons (though far more frequently in the House of Lords).

Whether this picture of the Commons' limited legislative influence is justified has been called into question (e.g. Cowley 2002, 2005, Hansard Society 2008, Russell and Johns 2007), and the issue is certainly worthy of further research. But it is notable that one aspect of the House of Commons' operation is almost universally viewed more positively: the departmental select committees, responsible for scrutinising government departments and

of the select committees. We therefore hope that it will be of use to those involved in the work of the committees, as well as those outside who simply want to know what they do. The second quantitative section approaches the question of committee influence, asking to what extent committee recommendations go on to be accepted and implemented by government, and in what circumstances this is most likely to occur. Here we are able to test the claims of the sceptics that ministers 'can (and generally do) ignore' committee reports. Our results suggest that this is not in fact the case, and that the government in fact adopts numerous recommendations made by select committees.

We acknowledge, however, that this is only part of the story of committee influence. In a section in

The ‘departmental’

select committee system was established, it was subjected to assessment by a group of authors from the Study of Parliament Group (Drewry 1985c, 1989). They suggested that the influence of select committees was relatively slight, though difficult to measure. A number of other studies over this early period drew similar conclusions (Hawes 1992, 1993, Marsh 1986). The committees have at times been subjected to criticism for their lack of influence on key policy issues: for example their failure to report on the controversial community charge ('poll tax'), widely considered a policy disaster (Butler, Adonis and Travers 1994).

In more recent years, more anecdotal evidence has suggested that the select committees, at least at times, can be influential on policy outcomes (Blackburn and Kennon 2003, Horne 2006, Rogers and Walters 2006). The only systematic study in the last decade

The means by which select committees are composed was therefore unchanged during our study period of 1997-2010. However changes to select committee composition were agreed at the end of the 2005 parliament, and put in place after the general election of 2010. These followed recommendations from the 'Wright Committee' on Commons reform (Reform of the House of Commons Select Committee 2009). As a result of these reforms, select committee chairs are now elected in a secret ballot by all members of the House of Commons, following a formal division of chairs between the parties on a proportional basis. Subsequent to this, committee members are elected in secret ballots within their parties. At the same time, the size of committees was reduced and penalties were introduced for members' non-attendance. The full effects of these reforms

Each member of the parliamentary team initially collected and stored summary data about a wide range of reports published by their case study committee during the period of Labour government 1997-2010. Our primary focus was on reports made at the end of select committees inquiries, whicg

had been directly involved in the work of the seven case study committees over the period. These included ten committee chairs, six other committee members, 18 parliamentary staff and committee advisers, eight ministers, 14 civil servants and other officials external to parliament, and four representatives of other outside groups.[2] These interviews were almost all conducted by the UCL researchers. Our interviewees are listed in the Acknowledgements section.

A particular challenge in carrying out research which relies on human coding against an agreed coding scheme is 'reliability'. That is, ensuring that results are as far as possible replicable, such that if different coders looked at the material again (or the same coders looked at it on a different occasion), the results obtained would essentially be the same (Krippendorff 2004, Neuendorf 2002). In respect of many of our codes some element of human judgement was required. We sought to ensure reliability as far as possible through circulation of the detailed coding guidelines, training exercises, and consultation amongst the team. We unfortunately did not have sufficient resources to conduct double coding on a sample of our data or formal reliability testing. But most of the data were quite thoroughly checked by members of the UCL team, as the analysis of reports

Our choice of committees was determined by two factors: the desire for a relatively representative spread, and the expertise of the parliamentary staff who worked on the project. Four staff worked for clearly departmental committees (Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Business, Innovation and Skills) and a fifth worked for the Public Administration Committee. These committees therefore provided the starting point for our sample. The two remaining parliamentary staff worked for other committees clearly outside our scope (the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the House of Lords EU Committee). We thus chose two alternative committees complementary to the initial five: the Health Committee and the Treasury Committee. These are

Box 1

Basic information about committee inquiries

In this first section of the report we provide basic quantitative information collected about the activities of our seven case study committees over the period 1997-2010. The primary purpose of the project was to assess the policy influence of the select committees, in particular with respect to committee inquiries and government policy. The first step towards this is to explore what the select committees actually do. This section therefore presents descriptive data summarising the types of reports produced by our committees, and the types of recommendations included within them. This descriptive data represents the first such major study of select committee activity in this level

Pre-appointment scrutiny. The last few years have seen an increase in pre-appointment or

respect to PASC, whose size and chair did not change. Another factor may be committees conducting more, shorter, inquiries in part in order to maximise their media impact.

Point in the policy process

The main purpose of inquiries is to influence government policy. But there are various ways that committees can engage with the policy process. For example, they can seek to proactively develop new ideas by identifying policy gaps or areas of emerging policy and making suggestions for government action. Alternatively, they can react to policy development by government by responding to consultations, tracking progress in policy development and implementation. At other times they can respond to external events. This assumes a ‘stagist’ or ‘linear’ model of policy-making beginning with agenda setti

Table 5: Point in the policy process of reports, by committee

	Agenda-setting	Examining proposals	Reviewing progress	Responding to failures	External initiatives	External events	Follow-up	Total
BIS	9 (8%)	25 (22%)	51 (44%)	7 (6%)	8 (7%)	14 (12%)	2 (2%)	116
Defence	4 (6%)	19 (29%)	36 (55%)	2 (3%)	2 (3%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	65
Foreign Affairs	1 (2%)	3 (6%)	31 (61%)	5 (10%)	1 (2%)	8 (16%)	2 (4%)	51
Health	4 (7%)	16 (27%)	11 (19%)	26 (44%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	59
Home Affairs	1 (2%)	9 (17%)	26 (49%)	13 (25%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	53
PASC	11 (18%)	11 (18%)	18 (30%)	15 (25%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	3 (5%)	60
Treasury	9 (9%)	29 (29%)	37 (37%)	8 (8%)	8 (8%)	8 (8%)	2 (2%)	101
Total	39 (8%)							

Terrorism (2002-2005). In contrast the Health Committee and PASC produced a relatively much smaller number of 'reviewing progress' reports.

Most committees also produced a relatively large number of reports examining government proposals. The regular Treasury Committee reports on the Budget and Pre-Budget Report for example use the opportunity of these big announcements to gather evidence from a range of experts. Other examples of reports that examine proposals include the Home Affairs Committee

Number of 'true' recommendations

Our first step was to categorise each of these points according to whether it was a conclusion, a recommendation, or neither of these. The categories that we used were the following:

Expression of approval. These are positive

There are several reasons why a committee can end up being unclear whether it is making a

Local or sub

> ‘We recommend that a very close watch is kept on developments in the Kosovo Protection Corps to ensure that its avowed civilian and multi-ethnic purpose is not subverted’ Kosovo (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2000).

In many cases such recommendations may be implicitly targeted at central government, though in some cases this is not obvious. Again, lack of clarity from committees may make it easier for government to dodge their recommendations.

What do recommh(s)-245.03.0(nm)1

Not clear. Finally it was once again necessary to create a category for recommendations where it was impossible to tell what action would be required.

Table 9: Action called for, by committee

	Legisl.	Guid.	Research	Camp.	Discl.	Fund.	Attitude	Several	None	Not clear	Total
BIS	17 (5%)	13 (4%)	76 (21%)	11 (3%)	60 (16%)	15 (4%)	22 (6%)	33 (9%)	103 (28%)	16 (4%)	366
Defence	2 (0%)	1 (0%)	111 (26%)	5 (1%)	59 (14%)	10 (2%)	16 (4%)	57 (13%)	155 (36%)	13 (3%)	429
Foreign	5 (1%)	4 (1%)	41 (7%)	3 (1%)	98 (17%)	13 (2%)	8 (1%)	131 (23%)	207 (36%)	68 (12%)	578

committees on this point, with PASC making considerably more recommendations for legislation than the other committees. For example:

> 'One of the major lessons to be drawn from the events of the last two years is that the rules for entry to the House of Lords are far too ad hoc. They must be clear; they must be widely agreed; and they must be of unquestionable legitimacy. In short, they must be statutory. We call upon the Government to legislate as soon as parliamentary time allows to put the House of Lords Appointments Commission onto a statutory footing' *Propriety and Peerages* (PASC, 2007).

The proportion of recommendations calling for 'several of the above' actions is relatively high. Sometimes this form is used because the committee wants action from government (e.g. research and review), plus an update on the progress the government has made (i.e. disclosure). This might work well, but recommendations for multiple action in general seem less likely to be effective.[7] This has implications for the clarity and ultimate success of a recommendation as it may be easier for the government to dodge part of such a recommendation in its reply to the committee, and also

Medium measurability. For recommendations neither easy nor virtually impossible to measure.

Virtually or entirely impossible to measure. Here it would not be possible to determine whether the recommendation had been implemented without making a subjective judgement or guess. Such recommendations were often vague, or suggested changes to dynamics, attitudes, relationships, prioritisation of goals, etc.

Table 11 shows data for the measurability of all recommendations not previously excluded as 'unclear', broken down by type of action called for. In total, roughly a third of recommendations were considered easy to measure, roughly half to be of medium measurability, and the remaining 16% to be virtually or entirely immeasurable. Although this category again makes up a relatively small proportion of recommendations, the number is large. And of course, this is only a sample of the recommendations made by these committees over the period. The two examples below were both classed as 'immeasurable' due to the subjective judgement involved in terms like 'high quality' and 'fully resourced to operate effectively'.

'The Government should recognise that, in pursuit of its laudable objective to eliminate world poverty, all foreign investment by UK firms should be of high quality. British firms investing in countries which have signed up to international standards should at least respect those standards, even if the host country fails adequately to enforce them' Multilateral Agreement on Investment (BIS Committee, 1999).

'We welcome the launch in April 2008 of the 'Honour Network' helpline for survivors of "honour"-based violence and forced marriage, and urge the Government to ensure that it is fully resourced to be able to operate effectively' Domestic Violence, Forced Marriage and "Honour"-Based Violence (Home Affairs Committee, 2008).

There are clear relationships between different types of action and different levels of measurability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, r579.07 2.64 13.44 re W n BT 0 0 0 rg /F2 12 Tf

substantiveness according to two dimensions: first, the degree of policy change that the recommendation called for (which we called ‘alteration’), and second, the type of policy that this change was applied to (which we called ‘policy significance’). Taking these two dimensions together, we can create a combined measure of substantiveness. For example, a committee might formulate a recommendation which repre

'We recommend that a pre-appointment hearing should take place only where the final decision on appointment remains in the hands of a politician' Parliament and Public Appointments: Pre-appointment Hearings by Select Committees (PASC, 2008).

Table 12: Level of policy change demanded by recommendations, by committee

	No/small change	Medium change	Large change	Not clear	Total
BIS	214 (61%)	128 (37%)	4 (1%)	4 (1%)	350
Defence	59 (14%)	336 (81%)	10 (2%)	11 (3%)	416
Foreign Affairs	281 (55%)	187 (37%)	24 (5%)	18 (4%)	510
Health	113 (30%)	249 (64%)	25 (7%)	0 (0%)	387
Home Affairs	122 (26%)	240 (52%)	73 (16%)	29	

Recommendations which fall into the ‘major’ category included this example from the BIS Committee:

> ‘The Trades Union Congress wants a statutory right for employees – to be able to train for a level 2 qualification in work time – a proposal that the Leitch report has recommended should be implemented if sufficient

A score of 2 is achieved by a medium change (1) to a medium significance policy (2) or a large change (2) to a minor significance policy (1).

Recommendations for a medium change (1) to a major policy (3) score 3.

A score of 4 means a recommendation for a large change (2) to a medium policy (2).

And a score of 6 is achieved only by recommendations representing a large change (2) to a major significance policy (3).

The final two columns show the proportion of recommendations coded as

Table 15 provides data on the number of divisions held in each committee

committee (2240

another report by the same committee Police Disciplinary and Complaints Procedures (1998) had 19. The Treasury Committee report The Run on the Rock (2008) had 17.

Non inquiry-related articles include those simply making reference to the chair, for example giving a comment on government policy announcement, and to other members in the context of their membership of the committee. There is some variation between the committees here, with some committee chairs being quoted considerably more often than others. The highest number of references was to the chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Key factors affecting committee influence

Before embarking on our quantitative analysis of the success or otherwise of select committee recommendations, and wider qualitative discussion of the forms of influence that committees can have, it is worth reflecting on some general factors liable to affect the degree of influence of all select committees. Introducing these factors here may help to illustrate further how these

chair as ‘more strategic’ and the other as ‘more active’. Some chairs are seen as more ‘academic’ and others as more media savvy. These kinds of attributes may have both advantages and disadvantages, but one way or another go on to shape the character of the committee. When the chair of a committee changes, its culture, and perhaps its level of influence, can therefore change as well.

One characteristic which is often considered important in academic analyses of parliamentary committees is the party affiliation of the committee chair (e.g. Calvo and Sagarzazu 2010, Costello and Thomson 2010). In the House of Commons, select committee chairs are shared out among the parties, as described above. Our sample of seven committees included two (Defence and BIS)

other departments, dealing as it does with sensitive security issues. These factors were all critical to relations with the departments' respective committees, and may affect these committees' levels of influence.

Minister

Wider policy community

In terms of the wider policy environment in which the committee operates, the structure of interest groups is also likely to be important. In some policy areas where there is a wide range of different groups – e.g. industry groups, charities, campaign groups, think tanks – operating, the committee may be only one voice amongst many. Where groups such as these take an interest, there will be many who are keen to give evidence to a committee inquiry, and may help to provide a research base. This is the case, for example, in the more 'mainstream' policy areas of health and home affairs. In other policy areas, such as defence, there are many fewer groups operating, and the same can be true in more 'niche' areas of other government departments. Where there are fewer groups operating this can create challenges for the committee because it has a more limited evidence base and weaker stakeholder reinforcement. But it also means that the committee may be able to make a more unique contribution through its reports.

Nature of the issue

While the general culture of the department determines to an extent the kind of policy that it deals with, there will be a range of policy issues in all departments, and some will be more susceptible to influence by a committee than others. For example some policies are higher profile than others, some policy changes have greater cost implications, and some are more 'political' and of greater symbolic importance to the government in power. In addition, opportunities for committee influence sometimes arise suddenly as a result of crisis. This occurred during our study period for the Foreign Affairs Committee as a result of the war in Iraq, and for the Treasury Committee as a result of the financial crisis.

We have tried as far as possible in our analysis to take account of the particular characteristics of policies covered by committee reports and recommendations: for example by coding reports for 'point in the policy process' and recommendations for type of action called for, extent to which the recommendation would require a change to existing government policy, and centrality of the policy

Defence Select Committee
The Defence Committee seems to face even greater problems than the Foreign Affairs Committee in influencing sensitive international issues. The Ministry of Defence was described by various interviewees an extremely closed, with the danger that the committee was shut out. There are very few policy experts outside the MoD itself, limiting the committee's witness base. The committee was also limited in terms of what it could publish, as much information was classified, and negative conclusions and recommendations could risk undermining the Armed Forces. The committee's main objective, and main area of success, was seen as being improving transparency in defence policy, and in particular in ensuring that parliament was adequately informed.

Treasury Select Committee
Decision-making in the Treasury is key to all government policy, and relatively difficult to influence given its centrality. The committee however also had important responsibilities monitoring outside organisations, in particular the Bank of England and FSA. In these regards (what one member described as the committee's 'day job') its recommendations were often relatively minor and

committees with one another and avoid the rather more subjective approach of judging influence on the basis of anecdotes or case studies. In fact, Rush (1985a: 101), rather generously, describes '[t]racing the fate of recommendations' as 'no doubt the most important measure of the impact of the Committee'.

Several previous studies on select committee influence have adopted a similar approach to tracing recommendations, while acknowledging the limitations of this method. Both of the chapters by Rush (1985a, 1985b) in the initial Study of Parliament Group book on the early committees edited by Drewry (1985c) grouped government responses into categories such as accepted, rejected, or 'under consideration'. More recently, Hawes' (1993) study of the role of committees in the formation of environment policy graded government responses according to their level of acceptance and whether the government committed to immediate or future action. Hawes highlighted the necessity of looking beyond initial government response, however, due to the potential for government to implement a recommendation several years later: a phenomenon known as the 'delayed drop'. He therefore supplemented his quantitative methods with case studies. For the Study of Parliament Group, it was too early to measure whether recommendations were ultimately implemented, and different chapters in this early volume differed in their approaches to measuring impact, with no consistent definitions or methods.

Thus far only Hindmoor, Larkin a3.0(a)-3.9no

closer to the first ‘fully accepted’ point on our five point scale. Taking this into account, their results are commensurate with our findings on full acceptance of Health Committee and PASC recommendations, at 8% and 4% respectively.[12]

Table 17: Acceptance of recommendations by committee, 5 point scale

Likewise the government was more likely to give a ‘soft’ no than to reject a recommendation completely. As shown in the Appendix, many recommendations were ‘ignored’, ‘dodged’, or given

recommendations coded as virtually or entirely immeasurable. To be sure we therefore need to consider the same sample of recommendations, and this comparison is shown in Table 20.

Table 20: Acceptance and implementation, on smaller (implementation) sample only

	Fully or partially accepted	Fully or partially implemented
	N	N

small number of recommendations which were initially accepted also showed evidence of non-implementation.

There are several explanations for these discrepancies. The first is that we coded recommendations which were ignored in the government response as partially or implicitly rejected, despite the fact that the government did not explicitly rule them out. Recommendations can also be rejected initially because of something outside the government's control but circumstances may subsequently change. Plus sometimes the government seems to genuinely change its mind. In the example below, the response to the recommendation to remove Robert Mugabe's honours received a politely negative response, but his honorary knighthood was annulled by the Queen in 2008.[14]

> Committee: 'We recommend that the Government take steps to strip Robert Mugabe of all honours, decorations and privileges bestowed on him by the United Kingdom' Zimbabwe (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2003).
>
> Government: 'The Government has made it clear that removing Mugabe's honorary knighthood, conferred on him in 1994, on the recommendation of the previous government, is not our immediate priority. We may revisit this question in the future'.

There are also good reasons why the government may not implement a recommendation that it responded to positively at first. Recommendations may turn out to be more expensive, politically unviable or just harder than the government initially envisaged. For example the PASC recommendation in Propriety and Peerages (2007) to remove the last remaining hereditaries from the House of Lords was not implemented despite the government's commitment in principle to this change. Ultimately the provision – after many years of delay – included in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill, but removed in the legislative 'wash-up' before the 2010 election.

At other times it is simply that time passed and things changed. At the beginning of the Labour administration the Home Affairs Committee advocated retaining the status quo for the age of parliamentary candidates at 21, and the government agreed. That the policy was later changed does not mean the government reneged on its commitment, but the passage of time showed the committee to have been overly cautious.

> 'We recognise the argument for reducing the age for candidates to 18, but on balance we do not recommend such a change' Electoral Law and Administration (Home Affairs Committee, 1998).
>
> Government: 'We agree with this recommendation.'

The age of candidacy was later reduced from 21 to 18, in the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

In what circumstances do committee recommendations have impact?

At a basic level there seem to be some clear differ8 287.71(ion.)]TJ 1 0 0d(le)-3.9(a)-3.9(

politic

Media profile. The attention given by the media to committee recommendations may also be an indicator of their 'importance' and/or their controversy. As indicated earlier, we collected a great deal of data about newspaper coverage of committee inquiries and reports. Again, we could hypothesise that higher-profile recommendations are more likely to be taken seriously

The overall rate of implementation for legislation recommendations, at 39%, is in fact only slightly below that for research and review. This presents quite a positive picture. It is difficult to compare these results directly with those found by Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon (2009) with respect to the Education Committee, due to the use of very different methods. They searched backwards from legislation, and found that a third of legislative proposals brought forward by government in this policy field showed some overlap with committee recommendations. But the two findings are consistent in suggesting that there may be significant select committee influence on government legislation.

At first glance the figures for implementation in are higher than the government acceptance rate indicated in Table 23

‘We recommend that the DTI continues its constructive dialogue with the testing and certification authorities in central Europe and welcome the fact that standards and certification are areas that the DTI has put forward proposals for “twinning” secondments’

circulated to all Trusts for dissemination to all their staff as a matter of urgency' Patient Safety (Health Committee, 2009).

Government: 'We accept that proposals should be brought forward as recommended to improve protection for whistleblowers. We will consider the practicalities of establishing a model whereby whistleblowers can complain to an independent statutory body…. We are working with PCaW and with NHS Employers, the organisation which represents the majority of NHS employing organisations in England, to ensure that the guidance we issued on whistleblowing is kept up to date and that access to PCaW's helpline is well publicised through bulletins and events.'

Similar patterns emerge when we consider implementation. As we would expect, Table 27 (again based on the smaller sample, and including acceptance figures for comparison) shows that

Government: 'The Government notes this recommendation but continues to believe that the current arrangements, based on precedent under successive Administrations, provide for full accountability to Parliament. As with all Ministers, the Prime Minister is accountable to Parliament for his decisions and actions. He appears before the House more often than any departmental Minister. The Prime Minister's weekly 30 minute Question Time provides the House with an opportunity to question the Prime Minister, as head of the Government, on any issue of Government policy, including the operation of the Ministerial Code. The Government fully supports the role of Select Committees in holding the Government to account, and questioning Ministers on matters of policy. However, it believes that those best placed to answer these questions and to account for their actions and decisions are the Ministers with responsibility for the specific area of interest.'

We can also apply this knowledge to take a more sophisticated look at which committees are impactful. Table 28 shows implementation data on recommendations broken down by committee, excluding those which called for only a small change to policy. Previous studies of parliamentary committees have noted that committees can make themselves appear more influential by making trivial recommendations or advocating action that the government would have undertaken anyway (Aldons 2000, Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon 2009). Looking at substantive recommendations only is a more meaningful way to consider which committees are most influential.

Table 28: Implementation by committee, excluding recommendations for no or little change

	Full	Partial	Limited	No evidence	Evidence not impl.

government is likely to have considered alternatives and criticisms in considerable detail, and u-turns will be more embarrassing. Table 29 therefore shows the result of combining the two dimensions

Media attention

Monk (2009b) found that the

culture of producing executive summaries, or of flagging up recommendations in any other way, so all of its recommendations were coded as ‘report does not identify main recommendations’. There is also likely to be considerable overlap between what is defined as a ‘main’ recommendation and what receives newspaper coverage, as committees’

with implementation as the dependent variable. With respect to implementation, the first model considers implementation independent of acceptance, and the second includes acceptance level as an explanatory variable. Following various exploratory analyses, all three models simply use the 'enter' method for all of the independent variables previously identified, including the committee concerned (NB. as committees are coded as dummy variables, the Health Committee does not appear in the table). All other independent variables are as identified above. All are dummy variables with the exception of acceptance and substantiveness

likely. The presence of an opposition chair also appears to make it significantly more likely that a recommendation will go on to be implemented. In terms of differences between the committees, the Foreign Affairs Committee appears to be significantly more likely than others to have its recommendations implemented. This committee showed up earlioreimple tav

the large volume of recommendations produced by the select committees, and their focus on the

we would expect around 2000 recommendations in total to have been implemented by government over this period, and almost 6000 (450 per year) to have been implemented from all 20 select committees. Again, these figures may downplay influence, however, because the government could have implemented recommendations that we considered to be immeasurable.

This suggests that it is quite wrong to allege that government ignores committee recommendations, or that committees have relatively little influence on government policy. If 450 recommendations from select committees are indeed implemented by government per year, that is a substantial figure. It is true, however, that government is more likely to accept and implement recommendations which propose little or no change to existing policy. We found that over 60% of small/no change recommendations were accepted and implemented, compared to around a third of recommendations calling for medium/large change. That is, two thirds of more substantive recommendations made by select committees go on to be rejected or simply ignored. This may be seen as a negative finding. Nonetheless, it must be put in the context of the very large number of recommendations that select committees make. Over our study period we estimate that around 1000 recommendations for medium or large change were accepted from the seven committees, and around 900 were implemented. If this is representative of the departmental select committees as a whole, it suggests that over 2500 substantive recommendations for change from select committees were implemented over this period, or around 200 per year. In terms of raw numbers, select committees therefore appear to contribute much to the policy process.

We also looked at various other factors and their relationship to the 'success' of committee recommendations. We found no evidence that committees' 'main' recommendations stand a greater or lesser chance of success than others, and similarly no evidence that media attention on committee recommendations affects their success (though, like other authors, we found that there is much media attention on the committees). We ended our analysis with a multivariate (regression) analysis, to determine which factors are associated with the success of recommendations; but all of the effects that we found were relatively small. One interesting result was that committees chaired by opposition members seem to have a slightly higher level of success. This was consistent with suggestions from some of our interviewees that these chairs work harder to achieve cross-party consensus. We also found some small differences between the committees, with the Home Affairs Committee slightly more likely to see its recommendations accepted, the Foreign Affairs Committee slightly more likely to see its recommendations implemented, and PASC slightly less likely to have its recommendations accepted.

Throughout these sections of the report we have highlighted various other differences between the committees. For example the BIS and Treasury committees produce a relatively higher number of reports, while the Foreign Affairs Committee and Home Affairs Committee include higher numbers of recommendations in their reports. As already indicated, the Treasury Committee makes relatively more recommendations aimed at non-governmental bodies, and it also makes a high proportion of recommendations for disclosure of information, while the Health Committee makes a relatively high proportion of recommendations for guidance, and PASC a relatively high proportion of recommendations for legislation. The BIS and Foreign Affairs committees make more small/no change recommendations, while the Home Affairs and Defence committees call more often for medium/large changes than other committees. These kinds of differences have some impact on the success of committees' reports. But one of the striking conclusions from our analysis is that quantifiable factors can only explain a relatively small proportion of the variance in the acceptance and implementation of recommendations. To understand these relationships better we therefore need a more qualitative analysis, and this is what the report turns to next.

fact that the select committee is endorsing it is important'. Thus if the committee recommended something this 'gives it a much stronger chance of being legislated on', and in the competition for legislation, committee support is 'a very strong factor in pushing it up the pecking order'.

Another more subtle attribution problem is the challenge of disentangling the influence of the committee and its chair. Some chairs have influence in their own right, more or less independent of the committee. The Transport Committee's reputation, for example, was inextricably linked with that of Gwyneth Dunwoody as an outspoken critic of government. Chairing a select committee lends gravitas to what an individual says, while the reputation of an individual chair can similarly bolster the potential influence of a committee. Within our study several chairs had respected reputations and were listened to by government only in part because of their chairing of a committee. Personal reputation and committee reputation are therefore mutually supportive.

Box 3: How counting successful recommendations may fail to capture influence

May overestimate influence	May underestimate influence
If recommendations accepted/implemented are relatively trivial	If recommendations affect long-term government thinking and are accepted years later
If committees tailor recommendations to those that it believes government will accept	If committee makes 'probing' recommendations which it knows government cannot accept
If the committee simply echoes concerns expressed by other influential groups	If committee catalyses opinion and its report acts as a 'tipping point'
	If reports are only part of inquiry influence, e.g. because evidence sessions matter as much/more
	If government changes policy in anticipation of/during an inquiry
	If successful recommendations are targeted at other bodies, beyond central government

In summary, there are numerous reasons to be sceptical about the outcome of a quantitative analysis based purely on acceptance or implementation of committee recommendations. In various ways this may both exaggerate, and significantly downplay, the real influence of select committees, though on balance it seems likely that committees are more influential than simple counting suggests. Our quantitative analysis certainly appears to indicate, on its own, that committees are influential. Despite all of the observations made here, it is very unlikely that the 340 recommendations from committees 'fully implemented' in our sample all reflected actions taken coincidently by government which would not have occurred without pressure from a select committee. If this is representative of all departmental committees, some 3000 were probably 'fully accepted' over this period, and around 7000 accepted overall. Committees are therefore, at least to some extent, influential. The greater concern is that a quantitative analysis of recommendations completely ignores important less formal means by which committees influence government. These less quantifiable forms of influence are discussed in the following sections.

The policy impact of select committees: a qualitative analysis

The previous section has demonstrated why a purely quantitative analysis may give us only a partial understanding of select committee influence, and may even be misleading. This is why we complemented our data collection about the success of committee recommendations with interviews to provide greater context, as many other authors have previously done. We used these interviews to explore various aspects of select committee work, and particularly committee influence. In this part of the report we set out findings from this more qualitative research. In the first section we briefly explore some factors which contribute to successful committee inquiries and their reports. After that we propose a series of discrete forms of non-quantifiable influence.

Influential committee inquiries

One key question that we explored with our interviewees – many of whom had worked as staff or members of committees, and many others of whom had worked on the government side – was which particular committee reports they would single out, from our study period, as being influential. Some reports were mentioned repeatedly by interviewees, and examples of these are given in Box 4. By looking at these examples we can begin to draw some conclusions about factors which are associated with successful reports, as they share several interesting features. Reflecting on the exampl

Box 4

***Pub Companies* (BIS Committee, 2009)**

In 2004 the committee published a report also entitled Pub Companies. It investigated the role of the large property companies that own more than half of UK pubs, many of which are let to tenants who must purchase most of their drink from the company. There was concern that the companies were too powerful, and that the terms set for tenants were contributing to increasing pub closures. The 2004 report

Although our techniques for t

committee's report put new evidence into the public domain and was therefore harder to ignore. The BIS Committee report on Pub Companies (2009) benefited from a survey of tenants, which

One committee of our seven, the Public Administration Committee, ticks several of these boxes at once. As demonstrated by our earlier figures, over our study period it conducted more 'agenda setting' inquiries than any other committee, and also published more reports following up on previous inquiries. One reason for this repeated return to particular topics was perhaps its continuous chairing for 11 consecutive years by a single member. The nature of its policy responsibilities also meant that many of the topics that it investigated were relatively niche or low-profile compared to those covered by, for example, the Health Committee or Home Affairs Committee. Because it is not strictly a departmental committee it also has slightly more freedom to

Others writing on select committees, along with many of those we interviewed, have articulated problems with a purely quantitative analysis. One of the key purposes of the interviews was therefore to gain a fuller understanding of the nature and forms of select committee influence on

example of this working effectively was the PASC report on Taming the Prerogative (2004), which in the words of one interviewee 'set the tone of debate and discussion', and proved very influential on the Governance of Britain green paper published three years later.

The way in which a select committee brings unique input to debate may be subtle. As already indicated, the select committee is often just one of many voices advocating particular forms of policy change. Various interest groups may have lobbied government, and perhaps also had a

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with the covert support of the minister in the department that the committee shadows. The most obvious such form of tension is between individual departments and the Treasury over demands for spending. An example during our study period was when the Treasury removed currency protection from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2007, which made departmental spending very vulnerable to currency fluctuations. In its report Foreign and Commonwealth Office Annual Report 2007-08 (2009) the Foreign Affairs Committee described this change as 'deplorable', and the position was reversed in 2010.

Lastly, the committee may also play a brokering role between government and external actors. Obviously this often takes the form of the committee putting forward a case to government that has been made by outside interest groups, or by other MPs, and pressing for a change in policy. Sometimes, however, the committee's influence can work the other way, if it concludes that the evidence supports the government's position. In these circumstances a committee report can help legitimise the government's position and/or delegitimise the claims of its critics. When this happens ministers will often seize on the committee's report and use it to claim that their policy is independently supported.

Accountability

Although the previous four forms of committee influence are clearly very important, the next three were almost uniformly brought to our attention by interviewees, and are probably where the greatest extent of overall influence really lies. However, these forms of influence are even less visible and measurable than the ones just discussed.

Several interviewees suggested that the key contribution of select committees was ensuring 'transparency' and 'accountability'. In this respect select committees carry out a kind of auditing role: checking what government, and to a lesser extent outside bodies, are doing, and reporting on whether there are things that parliament should be concerned about. At times, reports may indicate that policy is being well handled, and suggest no more than minor change. Such reports do not look influential, and even acceptance of all their recommendations would indicate little change on government's part. But the fact that this form of accountability exists is nonetheless important. At times the way that reports put forward evidence and inform debate is simply a transparency mechanism: as with the Defence Committee's Estimates reports, described by one interviewee as giving 'parliament a real insight into what all the money it was voting in the main Estimates was actually going to be used for'.

But this form of accountability not only improves parliament'

government because of the negative response expected from MPs and peers. The problem with this is... measuring it.

variance in terms of government acceptance of recommendations, and 13% in terms of

Weaknesses of the select committee system

The earlier sections of this report have demonstrated that the House of Commons select committees do have influence of various kinds, although this is not always easy to trace in quantitative terms. The evidence also demonstrates that, in the eyes of many in government, parliament and beyond, the committees are held in high regard. But it is important to add that this was not, by any means, a universal conclusion. Some of those that we interviewed held quite negative views of the select committees, and even many of those who praised them also drew attention to certain weaknesses or failings.

The primary purpose of this report has not been to assess the overall 'effectiveness' or 'quality' of the select committees, nor indeed to focus on possible future reforms. But the data that we have collected, both from quantitative analysis and from interviews, suggests some ways in which the system could be improved. In this final section, therefore, we make some recommendations of this kind. Some of them are based on specific points raised by our interviewees, and others on our more quantitative analysis. Several of the points made here have already been alluded to earlier in the report. In some cases it is not so much a matter of committees doing something wrong, but that we have noted activities pursued by committees which have been successful, but which are not widely used. Some of the points made in this section have been raised previously by other authors – in some cases repeatedly – but still await implementation by parliament.

Short-termism and media focus

One of the commonest complaints made by interviewees related to the relationship between select committees and the media. It has already been noted above that this relationship is complex. Select committees rely on the media, to a great extent, to get their message across, and their ability to attract media attention to their hearings and reports is a crucial to their influence. Three of the less visible forms of influence identified above – contribution to debate, accountability and exposure – would not operate effectively without media coverage of select committee activity. But at the same time, too great a focus on grabbing headlines can also weaken a committee's influence on important subjects which a longer term or less eye-catching. It can also undermine the committee's authority. There is a danger that given the increased media attention on select committees, and the increased focus within parliament on generating such attention, these negativeent on genommitt

a delicate balance, however. As one chair put it, to succeed committees 'have to walk the narrow line between sensationalism and wisdom'.

Lack of preparation and poor questioning

An even more common complaint related to the quality of select committee hearings, including preparation, quality of questioning, and attendance by members. This was an issue raised particularly by ministers, civil servants and others who had given evidence to committees, though some committee insiders raised it too. In the course of our study some particularly bad examples were brought to our attention.

Thus while committees were praised for putting pressure on witnesses, and for the value of their 'exposure' and 'accountability' roles, there were clearly feelings that they could do better in this regard. One insider complained that 'members regard their job as to ask the question rather than get the answer'

had a formidable reputation in many ways, and it is said that she forbade members of the committee from leaving the room during witness sessions, and also put pressure on them to prepare. This clearly requires a forceful chair, and even then there are limits to what MPs can be forced to do.

Lack of research base

One of the strengths of the select committee system is the gathering of information to inform policy recommendations, as acknowledged above. If reports are based on clear new evidence, this is often when they prove most influential. When discussing examples of influential reports earlier in this report, we noted that two of our examples in particular were of inquiries where a select committee itself had conducted original research: in the case of the BIS report on Pub Companies (2009) when a survey was conducted of pub tenants, and in the case of PASC's report The Second

and find useful, these forms of committee influence – though some former ministers were also relatively dismissive of committees, and some civil servants strongly appreciative.

Various complaints were raised about the quality of formal government replies to committee reports. It was suggested that departments often do not read reports properly, focusing only on the emboldened recommendations and conclusions. And responses may be given only to recommendations, when some conclusions also are worthy of a response. One committee clerk claimed to often redraft conclusions to include the words 'we recommend...' just in order to ensure that they got a reply. More generally committee insiders complained that government responses may be slippery. One committee member claimed that 'sometimes [they] are so mechanistic it's untrue', and that civil servants may trawl through a decade'

Again some committees seem to make more effort to connect with the business of the chamber than others, for example through members raising issues in adjournment debates or questions. One link which is less commonly made is that to legislation. An important step in bringing about the civil service legislation referred to above was PASC's publication of a draft bill. But to date, this remains a unique intervention by a select committee. The publication of a bill is clearly a major exercise, though again the Backbench Business Committee may create new opportunities for such bills to be debated in future. But several interviewees noted that select committees could also make a greater impact by tabling amendments to government bills. As the example given above of the Health Committee's intervention regarding the smoking ban shows, this kind of action can be effective.

Conclusions

Taking all of the material in this report together, we almost inevitably end up with a mixed picture. The select committees are influential, but not all of the time. Much of this influence can be seen by tracing committee recommendations, but much of it is far less visible and tangible. A lot of what committees do, and have achieved, is impressive. But there is also room for improvement.

The policy impact of select committees

We have emphasised since the start of this report that it is difficult to reliably assess select committees' policy influence or impact. There are so many ways in which this influence may be exercised that it remains a very slippery subject. In addition, it is difficult to know what benchmark committees should be assessed against. How influential would we want them to be? If the select committees were routinely simply ignored by government – as some incautious commentators have claimed – that would clearly be a bad thing. But at the same time, few would suggest that they should have ultimate power to force government to take decisions. What we are looking for is clearly something in between.

We tried asking our interviewees a rather non-scientific question, which made sense only if answered quickly and instinctively, and would not stand up to careful analysis or deconstruction. This was, 'on a scale from 1-10, how influential on government policy is the ... committee?'. Not all interviewees were asked this question, and not all chose to answer it. But the responses are perhaps illuminating. Nobody rated the committee that they knew about at 1 or 2 on a 10-point scale, and equally nobody rated any committee at 9 or 10. All (20+) responses were clustered in the centre of the scale, with the modal (i.e. most popular) response being 5. This seems consistent with our wider findings, and also with what we would want to see from the select committees.

For example, our data showed that roughly 40% of committee recommendations were accepted and implemented by government, though two thirds of recommendations calling for a medium or large policy change ultimately failed. What would be the 'correct' success rate for either of these? We might worry if all committee recommendations were routinely ignored, but we might also be concerned if government uncritically implemented every committee recommendation. What we see from our qualitative analysis is that there is in fact a constant dialogue between committees and government, and also between committees and outside groups. Committee reports are therefore simply one factor contributing to policy debates, but one which is taken seriously. When reports are timed correctly, or built on a particularly firm body of 0 0 1 .8.9(e) Tf 1 0 5nougs, buton

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Appendix: Detail of acceptance coding

This section provides further details of the scheme that we adopted for coding degree of

The departmental select committees of the House of Commons are well respected for their detailed scrutiny of policy and their non-partisan ethos. But much less is known about the extent to which the committees have an impact on government policy-making. This report explores the question of select committee influence, through analysis of committee reports and recommendations, and interviews with parliamentary and governmental insiders. It is based on a collaborative research project between the Constitution Unit and the Committee Office of the House of Commons, which was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

The Constitution Unit was founded in 1995 to do detailed research and planning on constitutional reform in the UK. The Unit is the leading research body on constitutional change in the UK, and part of the School of Public Policy at University College London. The Unit conducts academic research on current or future policy issues, organises regular programmes of seminars and conferences, and conducts consultancy work for government and other public bodies. We work closely with government, parliament and the judiciary. All of our work aims to have a sharply practical focus and be clearly written, timely and relevant to policy makers and practitioners.

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