I'm offering some very brief thoughts of my own. Brief because after 2 1/2 years I'm still learning about the procedures and ways of the House of Lords and the best way of how to make the maximum benefit both to our democratic practices and engagement and to the effectiveness of the House itself.

Question 1

There are on a weekly basis examples of how committees (both standing select committees and ad hoc committees) add to the scrutiny function of the House. Long-standing members will be able to pick out their own favoured examples but I would cite the committee established during the passage of the Trade Union Bill as a case in point. There is always a challenge in terms of the juxtaposition of what is being deliberated within select committees and bodies on the floor of the House (or potentially will be coming to the House of Lords as part the legislative programme). Ad hoc committees before as well as during the passage (of substantial legislation) can clearly help. I make no mention in relation to Brexit as the review will be inundated with thoughts on this matter.

Question 2

Outreach and engagement is critical. It strikes me that as we move towards the implementation of the decision taken by both Houses to decant for the restoration and refurbishment programme, we have an opportunity to "design for democracy". As I said in my very brief speech on the floor of the House, this will give an opportunity to link into and expand the activities of the outreach work and the staff undertaking this role, using the best of new technology and electronic communication providing a link to and linkage from those committed in the areas and deliberation, from around the country. It would be possible to start experimenting with existing facilities, and therefore to have pilot programmes for more ambitious work. This should not be at the expense of members visiting the regions and nations of the UK – talking to people face-to-face and experiencing the reality of life outside metropolitan London.

Question 3

Strengths and weaknesses - the obvious strengths are that it allows the enormous breadth and depth of experience and expertise in the House to be drawn together and brought to bear on key issues. The format (and this is true of the House of Commons) is considerably outdated, and the
nature of evidence taken almost by definition, tends to be from “the usual contacts and sources”. A great deal more imagination and creativity could be brought to bear on how evidence is gathered, the expertise around the table (and not just the voices of those who have given evidence) and the relationship of a paper review of existing in-depth research with the oral and contemporary written evidence submitted.

As with the answers above, new opportunities will arise with both the redesign and the technological possibilities of the years ahead. As was said wisely in the debate in the House on the restoration and renewal, this should be a forward look for the best and most advanced futuristic possibilities rather than the entrenchment of the here and now.

**Question 4**

As far as impact is concerned, I think from my own limited experience, it is important that more time is given to ad hoc committees, perhaps reducing the number of standing committees, and that they are not only debated on the floor of the House but that Government have to indicate when they will bring back (for debate on the floor of the House) their substantive response, recommendations and report on how those recommendations have been implemented (or otherwise). In other words, as standing committees have the opportunity to continue building on their work, and reviewing government responses, so ad hoc committees should have the opportunity of returning to the issues raised rather than seeing them disappear into the ether.

**Question 5**

As far as inter-parliamentary contact is concerned, I believe that following the restoration and renewal, the technological facilities will allow for much greater interchange but again this should not be at the expense of people meeting and talking – it will be important post Brexit to keep closely in touch with European colleagues, as we may have left the European Union but as so often is said, “we have not left Europe”!

**Detailed Questions**

On the broader questions I have in the above brief commentary answered some of the questions that are raised in the overarching review.

I would merely add that it is very difficult not to avoid some overlap with committees in the House of Commons. Where joint committees have been formed (for instance on the Investigatory Powers Bill), I think they are most effective. More joint working would be valuable but would need to be streamlined and focused on specific topics. Obviously standing
committees of joint membership (the Human Rights committee, and the Intelligence Committee) are obvious examples.

There is no reason why where short reviews have been undertaken by standing committees, that their work should not be picked up and built on by either of the other houses. In other words, to take the evidence, the interim conclusions and then build on them.

Account will clearly have to be taken in relation to the number and size of committees, when and if the Burns committee proposals are implemented.

Equally, the decanting process will have to be taken account of albeit that this is some six or seven years away. Looking at how committee investigations can continue effectively in the decant period, will be something that is worth reviewing now rather than later.

Under the wider review, on question 7 and 8, I think that there is room for real improvement. Where there has been a very clear groundswell of opinion within the House (and it is possible to monitor and judge this rationally), then account should be taken of this in determining which ad hoc committee proposals are taken forward. How judgements are made on which particular topics drawdown best on expertise and experience of members, might be reviewed!

From question 10 onwards I’d merely observe that there is an enormous amount we could still endeavour to provide prior to the refurbishment, which would improve the situation.

I mention above the possibilities of better communication and online outreach. This has to be underpinned by the excellent work that is being done to promote the work of the House of Lords and a greater understanding of its function by people going into schools and colleges.

This is also true of committee visits – where there needs to be a link with the communication staff to actually promote such visits, to undertake interviews with (old as well as) new media outlets, for the chair of the committee or appropriate members – with articles both in print and online put up before the visit takes place, interviews with the local radio stations and where appropriate, feedback to the locality or the specialist audience, from the visit.

It should be made easier not harder, more rewarding (in every sense) not less, for committees leaving the parameters of the M25! This broader point would be enhanced if in the implementation of the Burns committee, the political groupings took account of the fact that the House of Lords should reflect the whole of the United Kingdom in both background and
main residency. All of this would be a major bulwark against ill thought through and therefore politically inept proposals in respect of the reconstitution of the House of Lords as a Senate.

I have commented above on other aspects of the questions raised. Other than to say that I think that the staff serving the committee I'm currently engaged on, have been excellent.

Joining with my own support, to ensure that I had access to otherwise inaccessible material. I'm very grateful to them personally.

Lord David Blunkett

February 2018