1. Over the past two decades I have worked as a special adviser to select committees in both the House of Commons and House of Lords, most recently to the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Participation. I have also supported the Houses of Parliament in relation to a number of projects concerned with promoting public engagement, utilising digital technology, developing new educational activities and (currently) preparing for the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster. The main argument of this submission is that the House of Lords investigative and scrutiny committees undertake an incredibly valuable role to the very highest standards but their work generally remains hidden to the wider public. This is a great shame because in a historical period that is almost defined by political apathy and democratic disillusionment the work of committees could play a valuable role in terms of promoting public understanding and, through this, facilitating greater engagement and, through this, further increasing the standard of scrutiny and investigation (i.e. a virtuous scrutiny cycle).

2. It is critical that committees in the House of Lords do not evolve towards a simple duplication of the role, approach or aims of those within the House of Commons. The central strengths of reports published by the House of Lords is that they tend to be longer, more authoritative, infused with expert knowledge and in terms of their final recommendations arguably slightly more considered when compared to those emerging from Commons. This flows into the issue of ‘overlap’ with the Commons in the sense that irrespective of the topic or theme the actual nature of Lords committee-based scrutiny will always be to some extent ‘different’ due to the tone, texture, length and depth of their inquires.

3. In terms of considering if the current committee structure in the House of Lords needs to be changed it is really necessary to step-back for a moment in order to ask the more basic question of ‘What are committees attempting to achieve?’ Once a coherent answer to this question has been agreed upon then assessing the current structure and making reform-linked recommendations should be easier. As a first step to answering this question I would suggest that where the Lords committees can really add value to the scrutiny and
investigatory work already undertaken in the Commons lies in relation to their **flexibility and depth**. The former in relation to its combination of *ad hoc* committees and thematic committees; the latter in relation to the length of committees and the dedication of members and staff.

4. I would suggest that the balance between *ad hoc* committees and standing committees is broadly appropriate but that some thought might be dedicated to the need to refresh the focus and approach of some of the standing committees. There will clearly be some need to restructure the European Union Committee (and sub-committees) in the post-Brexit era but this should be interpreted as a positive opportunity to re-fresh the committee system *in toto*.

5. The requirement for *ad hoc* committees to only select topics that can be completed within one-year seems unnecessarily restrictive. I can fully appreciate the rationale for keeping the *ad hoc* committees within a fairly narrow timescale as a general position but I would question the need to unnecessarily curtail the potential flexibility for an *ad hoc* inquiry to last longer than twelve months. The *ad hoc* post-legislative scrutiny committees perform an incredibly important role that could potentially be developed. **Having examined the impact of introducing elections for select committee chairs in the House of Commons I would not recommend copying this in the House of Lords.** It might, however, be worth increasing the transparency *vis-à-vis* how committee chairs are appointed in the Lords.

6. The key issue in relation to the *ad hoc* committees appears to be the lack of any formal procedure to monitor the government’s subsequent actions after the committee has ceased to exist. It strikes me that **this is a real scrutiny-gap** that urgently needs to be filled, possibly by the Liaison Committee (or a sub-committee or some other mechanism) formally assuming responsibility for follow-up and subsequent investigation. Another issue revolves around the selection of topics for *ad hoc* committees to examine. It might, for example, be appropriate to include an emphasis on ‘issues of particular public concern that warrant in-depth analysis’ as an additional yardstick. These might be issues that for one reason or another are not being examined by the House of Commons or they could be issues that are being examined from a specific but quite narrow perspective in the Commons due to the departmentally related nature of their select committees. Put slightly differently, **the House of Lords has**
a refreshing capacity to examine issues ‘in the round’ that should be cherished, protected and arguably developed.

7. It would be possible, if members of the House of Lords felt it appropriate, to be slightly more radical in the sense of inviting members of the public to suggest ideas for ad hoc committees. Several select committees have invited the public to invite suggestions for inquiry topics and this process can sometimes generate valuable ideas that would not have otherwise been considered. I am personally somewhat unconvinced about this idea but it might be an initiative that deserves discussion and possibly implementing on a trial basis.

8. In relation to engaging with the public I cannot help but think that this is where the most work needs to be done and also where there is the most benefit to be gained. Although there have certainly been a number of interesting experiments in terms of public engagement the House of Lords arguably needs to ‘lift and shift’ in this area. My sense is that there is a major emphasis on the exploitation of fairly passive social media techniques (tweets, emails, existing contact lists, etc.) by committees but very little in terms of creative pro-active engagement. Members of the Liaison Committee might be interested to examine some of the public engagement recommendations that were contained within the First Special Report of the House of Commons Liaison Committee, ‘Building Public Engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach’, (2015-2016, HC 470). There are a lot of low-cost high-gain techniques that committees can use to innovate and reach-out to hard to reach groups; there are also lots of ways that evidence sessions can be organised to maximise engagement and to make contributors feel welcome and at ease. Some of these techniques are incredibly simple and revolve around the layout of the rooms, the clothes that committee members where, the location of the event and even the language that is used.

9. There are, of course, procedures and protocols that must be followed but I cannot help but feel that sometimes these suffocate the nature and form of committee activity, especially when attempting to engage with the public. The work of select committees has to evolve and keep pace with the changing needs and expectations of the public. On many occasions - and in both Houses – I have made
recommendations that sought to respond to a public engagement challenge that has been acknowledged by a committee only to be told that the recommendation cannot be taken forward as there is no ‘precedent’ for such a departure from normal practice. And yet this clearly creates a paradoxical ‘double-bind’ (i.e. if no reform can be enacted because there is no precedent). In many ways what this points to is the need for a shift in relation to the institutional culture of the House of Lords towards a more ambitious and pro-active stance.

10. **One element of this more ambitious and pro-active stance might be a focus on translational skills and ‘engaging with multiple publics in multiple ways’**. The primary output of most scrutiny or investigatory inquiries is a report that tends to be fairly formal in tone, esoteric in language, lengthy in size and legalistic in style. It would, however, be possible to think slightly more creatively in terms of translating those full reports into a number of shorter and more accessible outputs in order to engage with a much larger organisation. This may not be appropriate for some of the more specialist inquires but in a lot of cases it will be possible to produce shorter documents that sections of the public will be interested in (schools, students, charities, older people, businesspeople, etc.). The problem is that (a) the main scrutiny outputs from the House of Lords are not made available in an accessible form; and (b) mass access dissemination platforms are not utilised to maximise ‘reach’.

11. ‘Lifting and shifting’ in relation to public engagement will clearly have resource as well as cultural implications but my argument is really that it is a false economy not to be maximising the public value of that scrutiny and engagement work that is already being undertaken in the House of Lords. I **would not, however, suggest that the ‘Easy Reads’ that have already been produced on a number of occasions provide a model to follow**. From the limited examples I have seen of these ‘Easy Reads’ I think the tone and style risks appearing patronising (i.e. ‘dumbing down’) when what is really needed is the clear, sharp and engaging translation of complex issues and facts into a vibrant and imaginative form.

12. Take, for example, the issue of experimenting with non-text based outputs. It is now **very cheap and easy to produce short, accessible and attractive informatic videos that could easily provide a précis of a committee report**. These could then be utilised by other elements of the
Houses of Parliament (Visitor Centre, Parliamentary Outreach, Educational Services, etc.) to promote the public understanding of politics. Once made these videos could be located on a number of mass access platforms and through this maximise usage while reducing costs.¹ The intention is that for the general viewer these videos would provide some insight into what peers actually do (as opposed to media promoted characterisations), and the for the specialist viewer they would provide a gateway through which the full report could be downloaded. Digital footprints could also be mapped, tracked and assessed in ways that are simply not happening at the moment in relation to written reports.

13. The point I am making is not that the House of Lords should immediately translate all of their committee reports into short informatics videos but simply that it might usefully consider demonstrating greater vigour, ambition and gumption in relation to maximising the public impact of its investigative and scrutiny work.

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¹ [http://www.crickcentre.org/why-do-we-hate-politics/]