I am delighted that you are undertaking a wide-ranging review of the Lords select committees. In this brief note, I wish to confine myself to one subject: communications. To put it in a nutshell, the quality of Lords Select Committee reports is in my experience admirable. However, much of the hard work that goes into them is wasted. This is because more effort is put into internal aspects of communication than external.

Broadly, what typically happens is this. The Press Office prepares a press release. This is either taken up or not depending on the newsworthiness of the report. Press conferences have on the whole been abandoned as few journalists are now able to or find it worthwhile to attend them. Thereafter however the whole concentration is on obtaining a debate, which may come before or after a ministerial reply. I had the privilege of sitting on the recent Select Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS which followed this model. Though I have no doubt that the debate scheduled for 26th April will be of the highest standard, I am not sure it will attract the attention it deserves, nor that ministers will feel under as much pressure as they should to adopt the measures recommended by the report as a result of it.

A broader model, which I and my colleagues are following for the Political Polling and Digital Media (PPDM) Committee report published on 17th April, works broadly as follows. It has a wider objective than just influencing ministerial statements and decisions. Instead it aims to set out a view of its subject and to maximise the chances of that view permeating the wider discussion in society of that subject.

Part of the success of this lies in titivating interest in the report and its result before it appears. In the case of the polling report, when the Committee was appointed, we got Martin Kettle, chief leader writer of the Guardian, to write a full length feature which reflected on our subject matter. We tried to sustain interest during the process of drafting the report. For example, I as Chair wrote an article for the i newspaper; the BBC was persuaded to prepare a package based on our evidence and on an interview with me; and efforts were made to ensure that interest was as high as it might be before publication.

Of course, a press release setting out the content followed. It is part of that process. A good deal of work should go into making that as attractive as possible and that requires an iteration between our Press Office and the Chair. But it should be supplemented by other techniques. One is articles by members of the committee (often the Chair). Another is that
the Chair or other members should make themselves available to brief leading commentators. There is no guarantee of course that they will buy the committee’s line but no matter: it is more important to be talked about than to be slavishly adhered to. Of course, whatever the inconvenience, availability to broadcasters is essential. I cannot claim to be an expert on social media but it clearly is playing an important role in making sure content is widely disseminated.

If the aim is to change the climate of opinion, a sustained period of activity may be required. So for example the PPDM Committee launched with a seminar including many experts set up by the UCL Constitution Unit. We are in discussion with the Institute for Government and the Royal Statistical Society for follow-ups. To a varying degree, penetration of the academic community for each subject is necessary. So LSE are considering a seminar on our report; as is Nuffield College Oxford for the autumn of 2018. I understand that other ad hoc committees, including the Committee on Sexual Violence in Conflict and the Committee on Soft Power, have hosted similar well attended post-publication events and perhaps it should become the norm. It allows us to make the most of the cachet of Parliament in order to increase engagement with the report and gives the report a longer shelf life.

Better debate will ensue if bodies active in the field are involved in the launch. So for example the PPDM Committee briefed the British Polling Council (the main industry body) before publication. We did not expect to persuade them of our case. We hoped to make sure that debate with them was well informed on the basis of mutual respect. Our expectations were very much exceeded by a press release from the BPC commending the quality of the report and promising to pursue its BPC-oriented recommendations.

I should say that the Lords Press Office (Head of Press and Media) responded with enthusiasm and skill to this slightly different way of doing things. It draws on their imaginative skills in a way that should add satisfaction to the job they do. It also has the capacity to improve the standing of the House of Lords and its work in the polity. There is a real benefit to having the Committee’s agreement to a communications strategy prepared by the Press Office and committee staff at the start of the inquiry. Sometimes members may feel it is too early to think about communications, but the process focuses minds and helps define a programme of work to support the inquiry from the outset.

Of course, every committee will have its views on how best to conduct its communication strategies. Some Chairs will want a different approach to others – I have no doubt that my approach is conditioned by my 17 years in journalism as a writer and editor. I am not selling a blueprint but rather
offering an alternative. That said, I think there is a case for an official note of guidance to Chairs setting out what they might like to consider doing in propagating their reports. I should be happy to offer such expertise as I possess to work with the Press Office and others to prepare such a note.

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