Written evidence from Lord Howell of Guildford – RIS0038

This submission is concerned with Lords investigative committees, sessional and ad-hoc, and does not address the issue of pre- and post legislative committees, joint committees, procedure and management committees, scrutiny or delegated legislation committees (although the latter will certainly need major expansion in the light of Brexit, as I understand is already accepted).

Preamble:

We are entering a new era. The global context has changed radically, and within it the United Kingdom’s relative position is changing and so are its overseas interests and priorities. This transforming process was in train well before Brexit, and affects almost every aspect of our lives and of public affairs, both international and domestic. But the decision to leave the main European Union treaties has accelerated it and is defining new national goals.

This paper directly addresses the detailed questions posed in the Call for Evidence.

1. Should the current committee structure be changed?

Yes. A new structure of investigate committees is required, both dealing with external issues and, to a lesser extent, with internal domestic policy areas – although there is considerable overlap between the two.

2. What changes are needed?

We have moved into a world defined as much through networks as by regions and states, with far greater fluidity of issues and relationships than in the past. It is going to be difficult to identify and segregate the precise subjects for investigation. But the following is a first suggested draft of what is going to be needed, primarily in the external and overseas areas:

i) The existing EU six-committee structure of course goes, but an EU withdrawal committee will continue to be needed for an indefinite time ahead to deal with the immense complexities of our disengagement and their implications, possible with subject-related and ad-hoc sub-committees
The areas covered by the six EU sub-committees will have to be reallocated – e.g. justice, environment, home affairs etc.

ii) For foreign and international affairs a number of vital new areas will need to be addressed by Committee work. These might best be organized under an overseeing Foreign, Commonwealth and Soft Power committee, with sub-committees (on the same pattern as the existing EU group of sub-committees and the existing Economic Affairs sub-committees) looking at the following:

iii) First, a new European Committee will be required to monitor and report on the evolution of our new (‘deep and special’) relations with our European neighbours and institutions, both within the EU and beyond, as well as our relations with the European dimensions of Russia.

iv) Second, a new and sharper focus will be needed on Indian, African, S.E.Asian, Pacific and American spheres of growing British influence and interest, as well as at soft power deployments of all kinds.

v) Third, with the greater part of world economic growth, and more gradually, political power and technological prowess, moving to the Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific regions, and to Central Asia, we shall need a committee or sub-committee to focus on these areas, especially China and Japan -the second and third biggest industrial nations- where chief UK interests will increasingly need to be pursued.

vi) Fourth A UK-Atlantic-USA committee will be needed to uphold and monitor continuing vital interests and alliances both with the USA and North America, and with the new Latin America.

vii) UK-Middle East-Africa relations will become increasingly important and complex, and require a committee focus.

viii) Defence, Intelligence and cyber-security are all areas where thinking is currently being revolutionised, with new alliances and partnerships being contemplated. The Defence and Security Committee will need substantial strengthening to address conditions that have changed almost beyond recognition and will require a new Committee focus.

ix) The Science and Technology Committee may also need expanding. New technology has unravelled the
international order, as well as disrupting domestic economic and social patterns, and will require a high-expertise committee focus.

x) A new global latticework of multilateral and international institutions is replacing the 20th century pattern. British access to and involvement and membership of these will need close committee monitoring.

Existing committees all of course do excellent work on economics, industry, energy and social affairs. All of them have an increasing international and global dimension which will need to be factored into their work programmes.

3. Avoiding Overlap with the House of Commons.
   This can be almost entirely avoided. Commons committees have a different orientation (and I have sat on both for many years). Commons committees are focussed on Departments. Indeed, the original conception for the expansion of Select Committees (in which I played a part in the 1970 government) was that they should have influence not only over policy -a major advance from the previous Estimates Committees – but also over budgets, on American Congressional lines. This ‘Expenditure committee and sub-committee’ structure, (first established 1970) then evolved nine years later (1979) into the Commons Select Cttees we have today. (My pamphlet circa 1970 ‘A New Style of Government’ outlined this new -and at that time novel – change).

   By contrast with the Commons, Lords investigatory Committees are concerned with issues, strategies and major developing trends – indeed, to some extent with the future – and with matters that may well extend across Departments and Agencies and actually reach outside Government altogether, and into which they can go far more deeply.

4. Best balance between ad-hoc and sessional committees?
   Ad-hoc committees give flexibility to focus on new and priority issues. Sessional committees should cover the main broad areas – Economics and Industry, International Relations, European and Neighbourhood Affairs, Trade, technology, Defence and Security, Social and Health Policy, Community Relations etc, but possibly given authority to propose ad-hoc sub-committees as exigencies and new aspects arise.
5. **Balance between short and long-term enquiries?**

Committees should **interweave** their longer term enquiries with short reports based on one or two hearings, and linked to current issues and events. This gives the right balance between being ‘in touch’ and giving the long-term perspective which so many aspects of public policy badly need.

6. **Engagement with the public and promotion of Reports.**

This is a long-standing issue where there has been considerable improvement in recent years. For example, the March 2014 Lords Report on soft power, entitled ‘Persuasion and Power in the Modern World’, had world-wide resonance and was referred to at conferences as far away as Japan, the Middle East and the USA.

Follow-up events can be organised and youth forums arranged, as have been successfully done already.

More can always be done (at a cost) but I believe that reforms are already on the right track.

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**The Broader House of Lords Context 2018**

A broader issue is how we successfully depict the overall work and character of the House of Lords, and the way in which its members are ‘networked’ in a hive of activity, not only in Lords Committees, and not only in a myriad of other parliamentary groups and interests, but in the wider network of civil society through countless individual links and connections.

This makes the Lords, condemned by critics as backward-aligned, in fact a body uniquely suited to the digital modern and future age of high connectivity and a unique bridge between the necessary central institutions of governance and legislation, and the public – in a manner found nowhere else in the world.

It is this intense pattern of both committee activity, and of links and ties across the nation, which makes the Lords today so very much ‘a platform for the future’ – although how this reality is to be explained, and how the misleading image of the Lords as an overcrowded, ermine-robed care home can be set aside, is, of course, a broader story and another challenge.

But this is the better framework we need to construct within which the excellent work of Lords Committees can be best assessed and developed.

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