Written evidence from Baroness Kidron – RIS0040

I very much welcome the Review of the Committees and apologise in advance that my contribution is not more detailed.

**How can Committees add most value to the scrutiny work of the House of Lords as a second chamber?**

Legislation that proposes a significant overhaul, or which covers a subject about which the House has less expertise, would benefit from a short committee inquiry to canvas current thinking, pull evidence together and uncover issues that might be relevant. Having the latest information and a deeper understanding would enhance the House’s excellent reputation for informed debate.

*During the Committee stages of the Data Protection Bill, colleagues raised concerns that they lacked sufficient understanding or knowledge about several issues that were of consequence in the bill. The Bill was wide-ranging and technical. It intersected with EU legislation and with proposed domestic legislation that had yet to be looked at in detail. It is to the Members’ great credit that so much was done to transform and enhance the Bill, but we all would have benefited from the kind of intelligence that a recent committee report provides. At one point it was suggested that an (existing) Committee might take evidence on behalf of the House to fill the gap, but this was deemed not possible given its existing program.*

The Data Protection Bill is an excellent example of a Bill that would have benefited from a background committee report, but there are many others.

**How can House of Lords Committees develop a national conversation to complement their inquiry and scrutiny work?**

Reconceiving the Committee’s relationship with the media would be beneficial. Committees do important work and more could be done to ensure that reports reach the widest possible audience and contribute to public debate. Whilst I am aware this is something currently under discussion, I wonder if the House has done enough to canvas the opinion of the sector itself. Meeting with lobby journalists, and a range broadcasters and websites could prove valuable. Understanding their needs, in addition
to inviting their opinion, might in itself create a closer bond.

A swifter response from HMG to Committee reports would help develop a 'national conversation'. The long gaps between publication and response mean that momentum is lost and often the issue has moved on. Debates then take place when Government's view is already known, and recommendations have been accepted or rejected in advance.

My own view is that HMG should be expected to respond within 4-6 weeks. Whilst I am sure that there are some very real hurdles to undertaking a swift response, the current system that allows reports to linger for 4-6 months undermines the Committee system and does not make for lively and relevant debate.

**What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current House of Lords Committee structure and what should change?**

The work of the standing Committees offers a valuable service in looking at issues of public interest, particularly those that sit outside the legislative programme.

The features that are of most value are;

- Building a detailed knowledge base, based on primary evidence, on a broad range of subjects
- Collegiate and non-partisan methods of working
- Publishing reports and recommendations that form part of the evidence for civil servants, policy makers and civil society
- Independence from the immediate political agenda

I would like to see more activity to disseminate the findings of reports, for example;

- A publication launch or briefing (media, public, stakeholders and colleagues)
- Outreach to relevant stakeholders to discuss findings and impart learning, as a norm of Committee work
- Coordinating with the HoL Schools programme so that a Committee Member(s) undertakes to host or visit a group of school students for each inquiry, as well as inviting remote/virtual interaction
- More media engagement (as above)

**How should the structure and working practices of House of Lords Committees be rationalised?**
The current structure has served the House well, but it could better reflect changes to the political and technological landscape and be conceived in a way that is intrinsically more flexible to anticipate future changes.

I would like to see a smaller number of thematic Committees that covered broad policy areas with the flexibility to respond and change. The exact division would necessarily be a question for detailed discussion, but as a starting point;

**Home Affairs:**
- Health, Welfare and Wellbeing
- Education and Training
- Housing
- Communications
- Public Engagement

**Defence, Security and Foreign Affairs:**
- Justice
- Human and Children’s Rights

**Constitution:**
- Nations, Regions and Local Government
- Legislative Committees

**Economic Affairs:**
- Business, Infrastructure and Industry
- Energy and Environment
- Science and Innovation

**Exiting the European Union**

**The Digital Environment**

As indicated, each area would require sub-committees or possibly joint sub-committees on interdisciplinary issues. Whilst the overall Committee will sit for a predetermined period, sub-committees could be set up, refreshed and disbanded in a more flexible manner.

For example, it would be useful if Committees were empowered to propose a limited number of Ad Hoc Inquiries on related subjects with a (single) representative from their Committee. This would allow useful overlap and the ability to activate subjects that complement their long-term work stream or respond to emerging events.

Policy issues are increasingly interconnected, having general
headings and more flexibility reflects the reality of urgent issues in public policy.

I have suggested a standalone Committee on the Digital Environment. The advent of digital technologies is the single biggest factor impacting government, business and civil society. The changes that have come in its wake, and the changes that will emerge over the next decade will make much of our current world unrecognisable. The workload involved in updating our understanding, our legislation, our own processes and preparing and responding for this change that will leave no aspect of UK life unturned - such a Committee will undoubtedly be called upon to support the work of other Committees as their own work intersects with the digital environment.

I have also separated out Europe from International Affairs. Whether the phalanx of current sub-committees are still relevant I am not equipped to say, however the detailed work necessary to engage with and disengage from the EU will require undivided attention for many years to come and might unhelpfully preoccupy a Committee constituted to serve a broader landscape.

Leaving the EU and the seismic change brought about by digital technologies will impact all aspects of public policy. The House would benefit from a fully-resourced and dedicated place for both, within a new Committee structure.

My understanding of the resources available and cost of Committees is not adequate to make a substantive case for the number, length and frequency of Committees. However, I should like to suggest that the Ad Hoc system remains and, if practical, is expanded. My view is that there should be three paths to setting up an Ad Hoc Committee:

1. For the purposes of preparing a background paper on a sector or issue relating to forthcoming legislation
2. To undertake detailed or complementary work instigated by a standing Committee(s)
3. By open application (as now), but possibly the short list chosen by vote

These Ad Hoc Committees may be short or long but fit within the resources allocated for each area.

A few detailed points
The process of Committee Membership is opaque. Whilst rotation and balance are necessary, it does not seem that the skills and expertise of members is routinely taken into account. The size of the House dictates that there are more willing Peers than places, given that, the criteria for appointment should be made clearer.

Committee work is exacting, rewarding and prestigious. It would be beneficial to have a clear understanding of the expectations inherent in Committee membership, including, but not limited to, attendance. Additionally, a corresponding system that allow members to resign or be replaced if they routinely fail to meet those expectations would energise Committee work.

The tradition of providing questions to witnesses in advance can make for over-rehearsed responses particularly from the well-funded witnesses with policy support. I would like to suggest that witnesses are given areas and matters of interest, so that the questions are more powerful, and the evidence is more authentic.

I hope that the above is useful in your deliberations.