RESPONSE ON CANADIAN SENATE COMMITTEES TO THE QUESTIONS FROM THE CALL FOR EVIDENCE

The Liaison Committee has agreed the following key questions to be addressed by the review.

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

Senate Committees do so in three ways:

- Legislative Review: by examining legislation in detail and taking care to note technical writing flaws, problems in concordance between the two official languages, and by protecting the interests of groups potentially unfairly treated by proposed legislative changes.
- Budget review: thorough examination of the annual Estimates by the Standing Committee on National Finance ensures that all senators have a comprehensive account of the provisions in the annual Estimates process, and the committee conducts intensive examinations of areas of particular emphasis.
- Special Studies: public policy issues are explored and detailed reports provide a narrative background on the issues involved, what the committee heard and a set of conclusions/recommendations that inform public understanding and debate on the topic. Reports on special studies have contributed significantly to public debate and understanding of important public policy issues, like euthanasia, illegal drugs and mental health, to name a few, and committees can move to have government responses to their reports.

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

- Senate committees have long used permission to adjourn their proceedings to locations outside the National Capital Region in order to hold public hearings in communities all over the country, in particular targeting communities directly involved in or impacted by public policy issues.
- Public hearings allow committees to carry on a dialogue that is both formal and informal and attract the interest of Canadians not normally directly involved in the parliamentary process. In addition to formal public hearings, committees also conduct less formal fact finding visits to facilities and locations relevant to their work where they can have informal conversations as well.
- Social Media tools, like Twitter, FaceBook and Instagram have proven to be valuable means to engage communities of interest in the discussion around individual hearings as well as final reports. Through the establishment of hashtags and the cooperation of senators and witnesses, these conversations can be far reaching and provide immediate feedback.
opportunities for ideas, suggestions and even provide inspiration for questions to be posed.

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

- Senators are currently asking themselves this very question as part of the mandate of the Special Committee on Senate Modernization. This phase of its work is not yet formally structured, but anecdotal evidence would suggest that senators want to determine the ideal number of committees a senator can properly serve; the ideal number of senators on each committee to ensure that issues are profoundly explored while not being so numerous that individual senators are prevented from active participation; an appropriate range of committee mandates that respect the jurisdictional powers of the federal parliament, reflect modern issues facing the country, and do not overlap with other committees too much.

How can House of Lords Committees maximize their impact inside and outside the House?

- Senate committees make use of the opportunity provided for debate in the Senate of reports on special studies of public policies, resources for publicizing the work of committees, provisions for requiring government responses to committee reports, when desired, and the means to engage through social media.

How can House of Lords Committees promote inter-parliamentary dialogue both within and outside the UK?

- Senate committees do not have a formal program of interparliamentary activity. However, it is common for them to meet with visiting delegations/committees/parliamentary individuals and to arrange to meet with parliamentary committees when they conduct fact-finding visits internationally.
- Senators and MPs do belong to interparliamentary associations – both bilateral and multilateral – that allow them to pursue issues that can touch upon public policy questions related to their committee work.

Subject matter and structure

To what extent does it remain desirable to avoid overlap with the House of Commons?

- Senate committees provide an alternative perspective to their work, in part, by organizing along general public issue lines, rather than government department lines, as in the House of Commons.

What is the best balance between ad hoc committees and sessional committees?

- Most Senate Committees are Standing Committees, which are reconstituted under the same mandates every session/parliament.
Unusually, the Senate currently has three special committees, whose mandates only last sessionally. Special Committees allow for studies that are either specialized or where the mandate crosses over into several other committee mandates. Adding special committees does have impacts on senators’ ability to cover their usual assignments by adding to their workload, and on resources used to support committees.

Engagement with the public

How can Lords committees engage more effectively with the public and media to encourage a national conversation?

- See above

What has been successful in increasing the levels of engagement on social media, and what more could be done?

- See above

How should committees engage with stakeholders in evaluating their activity?

- Senate committee clerks are required to send a short survey to each witness in order to evaluate their experience. It includes questions about logistical arrangements to appear and more subjective evaluations of their appearance. A copy of the survey has been included.

Chairmen and members

What is the ideal number of members for investigative and scrutiny committees?

- Recently, the Senate made an ad hoc accommodation of a significant change in party/group ratios by adding seats to each committee in order to balance respective party/group membership. The results, while being a good compromise to satisfy proper ratios, meant that senators were unable to participate effectively or to their satisfaction, due to increased competition for time. It was generally agreed that returning to the status quo of 12 or 9 members was preferable.

Should there be a written role description for Committee chairmen and members to clarify expectations from the outset?

- The Senate has a guide for Committee Chairs (included) to help new chairs in their responsibilities.

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