Supplementary written evidence from Lord Clement-Jones – RIS0061

Lord Clement-Jones Submission to the Liaison Committee Review of Ad Hoc Committees

Timing

Artificial intelligence was a broad topic, and could have been almost impossible to complete within the time limit dictated by the House. The unexpected election was a mercy, as it allowed staff to spend time talking to stakeholders in the sector working out where a committee could be most effective, and informing their advice from the outset.

This indicated to me that the current timing of ad hocs is flawed. Appointing committees so that calls for evidence have to run over the summer recess makes it difficult to get good, quality responses to calls for evidence. This is because organisations have lower staff presence, and decision makers are usually away in August, delaying responses until they have been able to consider them internally. Alternatively, it can mean rushed responses, which are usually of lower quality.

We should therefore change the timing of ad hoc committee appointments and allowing them to run across Sessions. For example, to avoid the long summer break shortly after appointment, they could be appointed in January and asked to report in December.

However ad hoc committees should have set deadlines. A deadline is a great incentive to get the job done. Committees will always want to find more evidence, to write more thorough reports and to speak to more witnesses. It cannot be the solution to not seeking internal compromise, and the deadline is a useful tool to encourage agreement. It can also assist in ensuring the Committee sticks to its remit. That being said, the deadlines should take into account disruptive events such as general elections, extended sessions or expansive remits given to ad hocs.

Selection of topics/Subject Matter

My experience of the AI Committee is that one can take a range of members from across the political spectrum and pull them together to form conclusions and recommendations which are based on evidence and unanimous: the Liaison Committee should not be afraid to pick controversial
topics with the fear that committees will not be able to reach a shared view. The committee process has great advantages in that regard.

The system of *ad hoc* committees allows inquiries to be conducted on issues that do not fall in the remit of the sessional committees or the EU Committee and its subcommittees, such as domestic health and agriculture policy.

While gaps such as these remain in the patchwork of remits of Lords committees, the creation of *ad hoc* committees responds effectively to the interests of the House and its Members. The current system serve the interests of the House more effectively and it does not and should not mirror the Commons’ Committees.

As regards suggestions that the process of selecting topics for *ad hoc* committees should be made more transparent, I do not agree that with allowing Members of the House to vote for the final topics, as opposed to the Liaison Committee deciding, as this will lead to less innovation in the choice of subjects.

I do agree however with:

- Re-writing the criteria which the Liaison Committee uses in order to decide on topics. For example, the Liaison Committee could invite topics in particular subject areas each year, or require a certain level of detail / minimum number of signatories, etc.
- Enabling the public to suggest possible topics, in order to encourage greater engagement and dialogue between the House and wider society.
- Allowing committee staff to suggest possible topics, or to provide honest opinions on whether suggested proposals are likely to work as ad hoc committee inquiries.
- Using different terminology instead of “ad hoc” committees, such as “Special Enquiry”

As regards the choice of AI as the subject for our Select Committee we were to some extent running to catch up with the Government and developments in policy in the area, but I and the Committee welcomed being in the swim. The pace of developments was a real spur to our work.

**Staffing, structure and follow-up**

In terms of resources, the current system works extremely well with the
staffing model we have but depends on an enormous amount of hard work the teams. A clerk, policy analyst and committee assistant plus external policy adviser are able to provide good support to an ad hoc committee that has a clear idea of its remit.

I would however be in favour of reallocating some existing committee staff resourcing to the post report period.

There are a number of other relevant suggestions which I support to make up for the fact that government departments may not take an ad hoc committee’s recommendations seriously. This can be seen in the quality of the responses given to ad hoc committees compared to sessional committees. The Government might be inclined to treat ad hoc committees more seriously if they know that scrutiny of their policy response will be ongoing.

- Once a report is published, having private meetings with ministers to explain the report’s recommendations and to let them put it in context of their own thinking/constraints, to help inform a response from the Government.
- Holding a hearing with Ministers once the response has been received with the original committee (or with the Liaison Committee co-opting former members of the relevant ad hoc).
- A debate on the report to happen after the Government response has been received, and also one year from the date of publication.
- Government departments should also be required to provide a memorandum on progress against implementing recommendations annually for three years after the publication of a report, unless agreed by the Liaison Committee it is not required.
- In addition a dedicated team, and committee, (?the Liaison Committee?) once a Parliament, following up ad hoc reports of previous sessions or Parliaments could have great advantages.

**Communication Support**

The staff of the AI Select Committee had to spend a lot of time working on press activity, and amending proposed press notices and strategies from press officers (this is because press officers are not as familiar with inquiries as the staff of a committee).
This lack of familiarity also leads to the staff of a committee having to become PR experts in what can be a new field, and having to work out who and how to communicate the work of a committee effectively. This is done in addition to their core roles running and supporting inquiries.

Innovative approaches, using social media,. reflective of a committee’s inquiry (such as with AI and the general tone of the tech sector), are not adopted or considered. Staff to committees have to do this work themselves, and there is little support from the dedicated digital communications team for the production or identification of novel approaches to explaining and communicating the work of a committee.

If a committee has its own twitter account (which can work very effectively, if the inquiry is appropriate), staff are left to their own devices. The Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence was fine, as they had staff who were happy to work at finding innovative approaches to interacting with the public.

In addition, if Committees need additional research completing to inform their work, then this should be much more straightforward than it proved to be. POST are slow in response and not in sync with the time pressures of committees, and although the Committee did appoint a specific special adviser to conduct historical research, the process of doing so and getting agreement from the administration was difficult

I understand that Lord Forsyth has proposed a model whereby media officers are based within the Committee Office, with responsibility for one committee (perhaps two at stretch) and under the auspice of the Clerk to the Committee. I support this.

Tim Clement-
Jones 15/7/2018