Written evidence from the Bishop of Birmingham and the Convenor or the Lords Spiritual – RIS0066

Re: Review of investigative and scrutiny committees’ inquiry

As Convenor of the Lords Spiritual I am happy to offer some general thoughts that I hope will be of use to you and to the Liaison Committee in its review of investigative and scrutiny committees.

In recent years bishops have increased their work on committees. In addition to the Communications Committee, on which bishops have served successively since its creation, Lords Spiritual have served on ad-hoc committees on Artificial Intelligence, NHS Sustainability, Financial Exclusion, and the new committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns. Ad-hoc committees tend to work better as far as bishops are concerned, given that they are for defined periods of time (so easier to plan involvement with) and are focused exercises on a topic that the serving bishop has either a formal role within the church or a developed interest in relation to. I would expect that this applies similarly for other members of the House who have significant and competing external responsibilities. One of my colleagues on the Bishops' Benches who has served on an ad-hoc committee told me that it made a valuable contribution to the work of the House by being able to receive a large volume of evidence (oral and written) and discuss it in a manageable group, meaning that the ensuing report went way beyond what could have been achieved through a debate alone.

I have few remarks to make about the process of committee selection and governance, except to observe that the criteria for membership of committees, for those outside the usual channels, does seem a little opaque. The assumption often made that bishops should use places allocated otherwise for the crossbench does also need to be looked at.

One of the advantages of Lords committees has always seemed to be their distinctiveness from the committee system in operation in the Commons. Their emphasis on subject areas that cut across departments ensures that the Lords complements the work of the Commons, instead of competes with it. In any re-evaluation of the role of Lords committees I would hope that this principle is guarded.

I must also stress the great opportunities afforded by Lords committees for performing outreach functions for Parliament as a whole and for the Lords specifically. Committee visits to parts of the country far from Westminster, to take evidence and meet with young people and with communities not often represented or invited to engage with our Parliamentary process is an area that could do with some greater attention. Alongside but complementary to that is the need to up the game for the Lords on the media and communications front. I concur with the view expressed by some others who have given evidence to your inquiry, that reports and findings from Lords committees, especially the ad-hoc ones, don't quite get the coverage that their quality often merits.

To me the key function that Lords committees can perform is to provide a
platform and a forum by which the big-picture, forward-facing and non-partisan issues can be explored. We have seen some of this work in the ad-hoc committees that have been created to date. A committee system that encapsulates in its function and focus what is the fundamental essence of the Lords' offer, namely expert, non-partisan, independent scrutiny of issues not determined solely by an election cycle, would be a system that is faithful to our guiding principles and embodies the greatest integrity.

Rt Rev. David Urquhart
Lord Bishop of Birmingham and Convenor of the Lords Spiritual

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