Thank you for inviting me to give evidence to your Committee’s inquiry into the review of investigative and scrutiny committees, and your subsequent letter. I too found it an extremely stimulating discussion and have given further thought to a few of the issues we covered.

Committee Bills

Baroness Garden of Frognal asked me to explain how I envisaged committees' possible role in the legislative process. As mentioned, the Work and Pensions joint report, *A framework for modern employment*, had a draft Bill appended to it, demonstrating how the Committees' recommendations might be implemented in practice. The Government was supportive of the Committees' recommendations, but introduction of the necessary legislation has been frustrated by parliamentary timetabling.

Our report shows the effective way committees can use the inquiry process to produce cross-party, evidence-based legislative proposals. But without any means to influence the legislative timetable, or introduce legislation on our own accord, such a valuable output is lost. Creating a procedure to allow committees to introduce legislation would be a positive extension of parliament's increasingly successful Select Committee system. As I said to Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town, involving their Lordships in this process would only strengthen the credibility and quality of legislative proposals.

Following our exchange, I thought Baroness Garden of Frognal, and other members of the Committee, might be interested to see the letter I have sent to the Chair of the Procedure Committee on this matter (appended).

Video evidence

One particularly interesting idea that you raised during the session was accepting videos as evidence, be they recorded and submitted by individuals, or obtained by the committee getting out and about. While this is not something the Work and Pensions Committee has done, I think it is an excellent idea, particularly as we attach such great importance to making the inputs to our work, as well as our reports, as accessible as possible. For example, our recent report on assistive technology was published in six different formats: a traditional PDF, an audio file, a video in British Sign Language, Easy Read, large print, and as a Word document compatible with assistive technologies such as screen readers.

I understand that when it has been done in the past, for example during the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee’s inquiry into adult literacy and numeracy, videos have been transcribed. It is then the transcript that gets reported to the House and constitutes evidence to the Committee. There would therefore be challenges if the video conveyed information that could not be captured by transcribing the dialogue. Perhaps the question we need to ask is: does everything received in the course a committee’s work need to be treated as formal evidence? Committees already make very effective use of informal
engagement activities, which complement formal evidence taking. A more flexible approach, and reducing the barriers to engagement, would be a very positive innovation indeed.

Use of technology

Since our meeting I have read with interest the evidence from Lord Mendelsohn and I agree wholeheartedly with his views on the need to keep pace with advancing technologies. As Lord Mendelsohn said, technology is enabling us to shift away from the one-way streets of us receiving evidence and sending back a report. We can, and should, be using technology to create an ongoing dialogue in which the public and stakeholders have their voices heard. In turn, their contributions need to be reflected in a timeframe and format that is aligned with the fast-paced digital world in which we live.

The Work and Pensions Committee’s web forum for its inquiry into PIP and ESA assessments showed the power of such forms of engagement. As I said when giving evidence, the forum received over 3,000 submissions, which formed the basis of a report dedicated to claimant experiences. I agree with Lord Mendelsohn that we need to ensure there is in-house capability to enhance our use of technology. The Work and Pensions Committee’s experience suggests that we can do this well, but we must not become complacent. The world of technology is only moving in one direction and we must ensure we stay hot on its heels.

Regulators

I was very interested in the suggestion made by Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town of establishing a committee to look specifically at regulators. I very much support this idea. The lack of scrutiny of these bodies is an important issue that needs addressing. In fact, I have recently written to the Chair of the Commons Liaison Committee on this very subject. While arm’s length bodies’ formal accountability to Parliament is often defined in legislation, the reality of how this relationship works in practice is, in my experience, at best mixed, and at worst, unconstructive. I have asked the Chair, Sarah Wollaston MP, for her views on how we might encourage arm’s length bodies to engage more constructively with Select Committees to ensure effective scrutiny. I am therefore very interested to see what conclusions the Lords Liaison Committee will reach on this issue.

Joint inquiries

I thought it might be helpful for me to clarify joint working between the Work and Pensions and BEIS Committees to inquire first, into the collapse of BHS, and second, that of Carillion.

In 2016 the Work and Pensions Committee launched an inquiry in the Pension Protection Fund and Pensions Regulator, and the then Business Innovation and Skills Committee launched an inquiry into the sale and acquisition of BHS. It was in the context of these respective inquiries that the committees came together to take evidence on BHS. As you said, this was a coincidence of mutual interest and benefit. Procedurally speaking, however, we did not form a sub-committee and each evidence session, as well as the final report consideration, were formally separate, but concurrent, meetings of the two committees.

The only difference with our investigation into Carillion was that the committees agreed joint terms of reference for the inquiry. Again, our evidence taking and deliberations were simply concurrent meetings of the two committees. An important next step might be if Committees of one House were able to draw members from the other for particular inquiries.
Many thanks once again for the opportunity to give evidence to the Lords Liaison Committee and I very much look forward to following its progress.

Best wishes and all the best for your inquiry,

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee
Annex
From the Chair

Charles Walker MP
Chair, Procedure Committee
House of Commons
SW1A 0AA

Dear Charles,

Committee Bills

The Work and Pensions Committee’s joint report, *A framework for modern employment*, included draft text for a Bill, demonstrating to Government how our recommendations could be implemented. The Government was supportive of our recommendations, but introduction of the necessary legislation has been frustrated by Parliamentary timetabling.

Our report showed the effective way Committees can use the inquiry process to produce cross-party, evidence-based legislative proposals. But without any means to influence the legislative timetable, or introduce legislation on our own accord, such a valuable output is lost.

With this in mind, might your Committee please consider the merits of introducing a procedure for “Committee Bills”?

I would imagine such a procedure could be quite straightforward. A set number of days within the parliamentary calendar could be assigned “Committee Bill days”, akin to the existing 13 Private Members’ Bill Fridays. Committees could pitch their Bill perhaps to BBCom, PBL or Liaison Committee, who in turn would assess the credibility of proposals and decide which Committees are allocated time for debate on a Committee Bill day. From this point, the procedure could match that for a Private Members’ Bill, with a nominated member of the relevant Committee acting as the “member in charge”. Of course, a Bill backed by a Select Committee report would in all likelihood already have demonstrated cross-party support.

Select Committees’ inquiry process of evidence gathering, public engagement, and rigorous analysis resulting in cross-party conclusions, is Parliament at its best. Translating this work into the legislative process, not beholden to the Government’s own busy agenda, would surely be a positive extension of Parliament’s increasingly successful and credible Select Committee system.

Best wishes and I look forward to hearing from you,

Rt Hon Frank Field MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee