I am sorry I haven’t been able to attend as many of the excellent series of seminars as I would have liked to but many of them have clashed with meetings of the ad hoc Select Committee on Inter-Generation Fairness which will be reporting at the end of March.

At the 4 December Seminar Lord Stern and Alun Evans talked about their proposals for restructuring the Lords Select Committees. You may recall that their proposal was remarkably similar to the ideas I put forward in April 2018 and which I subsequently discussed with the Chairman. Although issues relating to the place of the Science and Technology Committee in any new structure have been well rehearsed, my proposal related to a possible new over-arching structure more generally.

To summarise, I argued strongly for a fresh approach given that the current committee structure has clearly grown up in a piecemeal way over the years with the result that its rationale is hard to discern. I also felt that with so many committees currently devoted to scrutiny of EU legislation, this in itself provides an opportunity to completely re-draw the committee structure post Brexit.

As you know, I have been a strong supporter of the current ad hoc select committees, having served now on five including chairing the Financial Exclusion Select Committee and been the original proposer of two of them. They provide a very helpful means of addressing topical issues and allow members to contribute their wide ranging expertise to a raft of important policy areas. That said, the big downside is that it leads to a fragmented committee structure with little overall coherence in the range of subjects selected and crucially a real loss of corporate knowledge as ad hoc committees are currently simply disbanded and have no formal follow up capacity.

You may recall that my solution was to establish around six broad, **thematic standing committees** which would each conduct a series of inquiries but crucially build up and make best use of the body of knowledge that they have acquired through those Inquiries rather than starting from scratch each time. Whilst there are clearly a number of ways of cutting the cake my suggestion was something along the lines of broad based, cross cutting standing committees in the following areas:

- economic affairs
- domestic affairs
- social policy
- environmental affairs
- science and technology
- international affairs.
The Chairman also suggested at the time we might also want to retain a constitution committee, which I feel would have real merit.

I explained that my rationale for separating out domestic affairs from social policy was that the weight of domestic issues around home affairs, immigration, policing, justice, civil liberties, equalities, culture, media etc is such that a separate social policy committee clustered around health, education, welfare, social care, poverty and disadvantage would ensure that these crucial matters received sufficient coverage and in a more joined up manner. Indeed I feel all five of the ad hoc select committees I have sat on, (ageing population, affordable childcare, social mobility, financial exclusion and Inter-Generational fairness) would have benefitted greatly from being discrete inquiries sitting within a broader social policy thematic committee which built upon a wider corpus of policy and research knowledge rather than approaching each new inquiry as from a blank piece of paper.

I felt that such a social policy based committee could develop a deep understanding of demographic trends, changing social attitudes and undertake horizon scanning to identify new social issues, thereby ensuring that it was ahead of the curve on key social issues which are of direct relevance to people’s everyday lives. My clear sense is that the Ad Hoc Committee on Inter-Generational Fairness (which I proposed) very much fits into this category. I continue to feel that this approach would allow the House of Lords to reach out to people in the country and appear a lot less remote. I do accept, however, that it would be possible to have one thematic covering the whole of domestic and social policy, although that would be an extraordinarily wide remit.

I am struck by the fact that there hasn’t yet been much discussion and debate in the seminars about a broad structure of the type that has been proposed above, and what little debate there was has been focussed primarily on the issue of what might happen to the Science and Technology Committee. Whilst that’s clearly important, it’s by no means the whole story and I have been disappointed by the lack of focus so far on broader social policy issues. With this in mind, would it be possible to have a seminar looking specifically at social and domestic policy and the wider case for broad, thematic Standing Committees?

As I said last year, I fully recognise the need for House of Lords Select Committees not to duplicate the business of Commons Select Committees but feel that around half a dozen broad based, cross cutting committees of the type I have suggested above would allow the House of Lords to do what it does best i.e. look at cross-cutting issues which range across
a number of Government Departments and take a longer term, strategic perspective – often a 10 to 15 year perspective.

March 2019