Summary

1. This submission addresses the main themes of the inquiry on select committee effectiveness, focusing especially on ‘the work of select committees’ and ‘witnesses, evidences, and select committee powers’.

2. In this submission, I argue:
   a. First, that MPs have a diversity of interpretations of what it means to do effective scrutiny. These interpretations may be at odds with traditional interpretations, and so I recommend that committee members, chairs and officials think about how their interpretations affect the scrutiny process.
   b. Second, that select committees must think of effectiveness and impact in broader terms. Committees are able to play diverse roles in the House of Commons that extends beyond writing reports and making recommendations. So, I recommend that committees think about each element of an inquiry (and beyond) and what this can add to the work of the House of Commons.
   c. Third, that the evidence-base of select committees could be construed as too narrow. At the moment, witnesses that give oral evidence come from a particular background. Some of these issues have been acknowledged by the Liaison Committee, but further work needs to be done to broaden the diversity of witnesses – especially if committee inquiries aim to give the public access to the political process in some way.

3. This submission is based on research conducted between 2010 and 2018, and includes data from 48 interviews with MPs and parliamentary officials, textual analysis of key documents, a three-month research placement in the House of Commons Committee Office, and a focus group with parliamentary officials. This is based on a research grant funded by the ESRC (ref.: ES/J500215/1) and currently being prepared for a book.¹

The work of select committees

Are select committees doing the best job they can, and if not, what is stopping them? What should select committees aim to achieve? Do they focus on the right things?

4. Traditionally, discussion about select committees focuses on their policy impact as a way to understand their effectiveness. Based on my research, however, scrutiny is a

term that is interpreted differently by lots of different committee members, chairs and officials. I would like to suggest that we must, similarly, think of committee work, their aims and achievements in a broader fashion.

5. To be specific, some MPs interpret scrutiny to be about policy implementation, others focus on value for money. Some are interested in practical outcomes, while others still want to look at the wider implications of policy. These perspectives play a crucial role throughout a committee’s inquiry, including the types of questions that committee members ask and the sorts of recommendations they would support or oppose in report consideration. I identify six ‘styles’ that MPs may adopt in scrutinising the executive through committee work:

- Specialists: the core of a committee, these MPs will drive forward committee work through their policy knowledge and interest.
- Lone wolves: MPs that zealously promote their particular interests throughout an inquiry, regardless of remit or relevance to the committee’s aims.
- Constituency champions: these members link their work to their constituency, including asking questions of high-profile witnesses for local gain.
- Party helpers: rather uncommon, but MPs that seek to provide government with a safety net if questions become too hard on ministers (or other witnesses).
- Learners: MPs that are more interested in learning about a policy issue than critically engaging with evidence to hold government to account.
- Absentees: these members have poor attendance records and, if they do attend, ask one or two questions without paying attention.

6. Why do these different approaches matter? They matter because they push scrutiny in lots of different directions. This might inhibit committee effectiveness because the focus of an inquiry may get lost. However, the diversity of approaches could also benefit the committee’s reach.

7. A key issue that every committee must therefore address is the extent to which MPs’ talents are brought out in committee scrutiny. This will make the work of committees more cohesive and more effective because it plays to each MP’s strengths. In order to achieve this, it requires a frank acceptance from MPs that they might be useful for some types of scrutiny and not for others. Three consequences follow from this:

a. First, the role of chair is critical in fostering an environment that pushes scrutiny in one direction or another. The chair’s style of leadership will have a significant bearing on the way that their committee works (especially since 2010), and therefore also on the possible policy impact of a committee report.

b. Second, MPs should be open-minded about training, including about different questioning techniques and understanding the impact of their actions on witnesses and inquiries, for example.

c. Third, relationships more generally are vital to understand scrutiny in the House of Commons. Committees should pay attention to building networks and relationships between committee members, chairs, officials, witnesses, ministers and civil servants.

8. The above feeds into two broader points.

a. First, select committees have a number of functions in the House of Commons; they do not exist purely to hold government to account.
Committees can act as training grounds for MPs to practise their questioning skills and to learn about policy. Committees also act as information-gathering tools. Both of these functions are in some tension with traditional ideas about accountability – committees need to be aware of this.

b. Second, and as a direct consequence of the first, committees can be effective if we consider more than the policy impact of recommendations alone. Committees can achieve things through agenda-setting and by bringing evidence out into the public domain.²

9. I recommend that committees think broadly about their work, and are proactive in tracking these different types of impact.

Witnesses, evidences, and select committee powers

Are committees getting the right evidence? What barriers are there to select committees getting the information they need? What is it like to give evidence either oral or written evidence to a committee? Is the experience appropriate for the different sorts of people and organisations committees invite to appear?
What more can be done to encourage witness diversity and wider public engagement?

10. Committee scrutiny, reports and recommendations depend on evidence. Based on my research, oral evidence is particularly important to committee members for at least three reasons: first, it is the most high-profile form of participation, and so it is more likely to be picked up by the public and the media; second, hearings bring advice and evidence to life, so they are more likely to draw attention from MPs; and third, while anyone can submit written evidence, you need an invitation to give oral evidence – making it a privileged arena.

11. I have previously published data on who gives oral evidence to committees, based on data collection for 24 departmental and cross-cutting committees during the 2013-14 session. This data was broken into three themes:
- Organisations. As shown in Figure 1 (end of document), the most frequent witnesses in front of select committees are civil servants and public sector staff. The other large category is non-profit organisations, including charities, campaign groups, trade associations and professional associations. Only 8.1% of all witnesses were from higher education.
- Geography. Data for the 2013-14 session indicates that, when government, civil service and public sector witnesses are excluded, the majority of witnesses come from the south of the UK (making up more than 60% of witnesses). More witnesses came from abroad than from Wales and Northern Ireland combined (see Table 1, end of document).
- Gender. For this research, 24.6% of witnesses in 2013-14 were women. As other data has been published since then reinforces, some committees call more women than others. Some sectors are slightly more representative than

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others too (see Figure 2, end of document). Gender parity remains a persistent problem that the Liaison Committee has acknowledged and seeks to address.

12. According to my research, a number of factors can be identified to explain the data:

- The agenda of an inquiry limits the choice of who is appropriate. Some policy areas have few professionals coming from a diverse background, making it difficult for some committees to diversify their witness lists.
- MPs themselves often indicate what witnesses they want. This is likely to be taken from the people, groups and networks they already know, entrenching a possible pre-existing network of the ‘usual suspects’.
- Pressures on timetables. Some committees have a reactive approach to inquiries, which means that timetables are often redrawn and witnesses called at short notice. This privileges those groups that find it easier to get to Westminster, i.e. people based in London or the south of England with no childcare responsibilities, often men.

13. In addition to the above, evidence sessions themselves can be highly political and sometimes unnecessarily partisan. Over the course of my study, a number of witnesses were treated in a way that was far more political than they had expected or wanted given that they had attended to impart information (which interviewees also suggested). This may be off-putting to witnesses, but raises a more general issue about the effectiveness of questioning techniques adopted by MPs, and the need for a strong chair to ensure that academic witnesses are not harangued.

**About the author**

14. I am Lecturer in British Politics at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. I am a member of the Study of Parliament Group and Convener of the Political Studies Association Parliaments Group, which holds a number of annual events in relation to the study of legislatures.

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**Figure 1.** Breakdown of witnesses
Table 1. Geographical distribution of witnesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>All witnesses</th>
<th>All witnesses excluding gov’t, civil service and public sector</th>
<th>Academic witnesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South of England</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North of England</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International and overseas territories</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>