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Summary

1. This submission addresses the theme of election of select committee chairs and the theme of electing committee members. It emphasises the importance of speedy reconstitution of committees following a general election.
2. This submission is based on research conducted between 2010 and 2018, and includes data from 48 interviews with MPs and parliamentary staff, textual analysis of key documents, a three-month research placement in the House of Commons Committee Office, and a focus group with parliamentary staff.¹

Election of select committee chairs

“The process of determining the division of chairs between parties, and the present incentives for timely agreement”

3. Based on my research, there is some lingering concern about the allocation of chairships to parties. In one interview, a chair believed that if the whips did not like a particular MP chairing a committee, then they could offer this to the opposing parties (Interview with Chair 06). Other allocations might prevent large numbers of MPs from standing. For example, 32 out of 40 Welsh MPs were denied the chance to lead the committee in 2010 because it was allocated to the Conservatives (Flynn, 2012, p.34). My research was not able to get to the bottom of the allocation process, and I would recommend that the Committee examine this issue (echoing the Wright Committee’s call for detailed examination in its initial report, Rebuilding the House (2009)).

“The present arrangements for elections of chairs as set out in Standing Orders and operated under the Speaker’s direction”

4. In 2010, chairships were allocated three weeks after the general election, with nominations closing two weeks later. Elections took place one day after the close of nominations. In 2015 and 2017, there was approximately a week between the close of nominations and the ballot, which allowed candidates to campaign and circulate election literature. This arguably makes these elections more competitive, and allows newly-elected MPs time to learn about candidates. This period between nominations and the ballot should be clarified in Standing Orders.

“The rationale for not making certain committee chair posts subject to election”

¹This submission is based on research funded by the ESRC (ref.: ES/J500215/1) and currently being prepared for a book on how MPs and parliamentary staff interpret scrutiny in the Commons (Geddes, 2019).
5. There are a variety of types of committee, which the Institute for Government (2018, p.60) classifies as: departmental (19), cross-cutting (6), domestic (9), legislative (5), and joint with the House of Lords (6). Of these, all departmental and cross-cutting chairs are elected, some domestic committee chairs and no legislative committee chairs.

The rationale is not clear, and I would recommend that all domestic committees are also elected. There is a rationale not to elect joint committee chairs because it would impose decisions on the House of Lords. Legislative committees may fall more closely under the remit of legislative work and so it is justifiable that the executive continues to exert some control over these.

“Whether candidates to be chair of a Committee ought to be required to commit to a certain period of service”

6. Since 2010, there have been six by-elections for committee chairs (two in 2014; one in 2015; and three in 2016). Half of these occurred because chairs accepted ministerial roles. This suggests that most chairs are committed to serving their committee. It is not clear how ‘requiring’ chairs to commit to a certain period of service would be done or enforced. It might also act as a disincentive to MPs to run for election if they are subsequently prevented from joining the government.

A final note on chairs:

7. The election of chairs has had a considerable impact on how they view their own role, with many interviewees noting that it has raised their status and become more independent-minded. This independence has consequences for the internal workings of committees. Some interviewees have noted that chairs are more likely to ‘follow their own agenda without much reference back to the committee’ (Interview with Staff 04), which has allowed chairs to take the initiative and calling for inquiries without necessarily getting the approval of committee members (e.g. Frank Field starting investigations in August 2017 about university pensions schemes (Cumbo, 2017); or Rachel Reeves’ outline of commitments on being elected chair (UK Parliament, 2017)). For this reason, it is especially important that committee members are expeditiously appointed.

ELECTING SELECT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

“The effect on the reputation and integrity of the select committee system of undue delay in the House’s appointment of its select committees”

8. As noted in other written evidence, the delay in appointing committee members has affected the reputation of committees. Other written evidence has summarised the effects very well. I would like to emphasise a number of effects:

- Conduct of scrutiny. The delay has prevented committees from undertaking scrutiny. Although summer recess would have prevented committees from
undertaking inquiries, investigations could have begun and/or prepared. Importantly, chairs of committees were able to make pronouncements on behalf of a non-existent committee.

- **Scheduling business.** Some committees have responsibilities beyond the conduct of scrutiny, such as the scheduling of business in the chamber or in Westminster Hall – notably the Backbench Business Committee, Petitions Committee and Liaison Committee. Delaying their establishment means that Parliament was not fully functioning until long after the general election in June 2017.

- **Function of committee scrutiny.** My research suggests that MPs use select committee work as a way to build expertise in different policy areas or build on previous professional experience, which reinforces previous quantitative research (Kellermann, 2014). Furthermore, committee service builds professional skills, such as learning different questioning techniques. Other interviewees (including chairs) noted that committee service provides structure to parliamentary work. This seems especially important to help socialise newly-elected MPs, yet it was considerably delayed.

- **Public and media profile of Parliament.** If investigations by committees could have taken place earlier, they would then have been more likely to inform debate on a variety of issues not only inside Parliament to, but also outside of it, including important issues such as withdrawal of the EU and the Grenfell Tower disaster.

“Changes which might expedite the election of committee members by parties”

9. The above bullet points make it essential that committees are reconstituted as quickly as possible. In 2017, the widely-accepted reason for the delay came from the fact that the government did not have a clear majority, leading to significant haggling over membership of committees. As noted by the Hansard Society in their evidence, the volatility of electoral outcomes may continue. Therefore, in line with other written evidence, I suggest that Standing Orders are amended to ensure that select committees are speedily reconstituted, as the Hansard Society suggests in its written evidence.

**December 2018**

**References**


