

Liaison Sub-Committee

Oral evidence: The effectiveness and influence of the Select Committee system, HC 1860

Monday 13 May 2019

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Dr Sarah Wollaston (Chair); Chris Bryant; Kate Green; Ms Harriet Harman; Sir Bernard Jenkin; Stephen Twigg.

Questions 82-122

Witnesses

I: Esther Webber, Political Reporter, *The Times*; and Carole Walker, former Political Correspondent, BBC.

II: Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP, Leader of the House.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Carole Walker and Esther Webber.

Q82 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Thank you both very much for coming to share your thoughts on our Select Committee effectiveness inquiry. Obviously, we are very familiar with your work, but would you mind introducing yourselves for those following from outside?

Esther Webber: I am Esther Webber. I am the reporter for *Times Red Box*, which is *The Times's* morning political email. Before that, I was a reporter for the BBC website, focused on parliamentary coverage in particular.

Carole Walker: Hello. I am Carole Walker. I was one of the BBC's political correspondents for over 20 years. I left a couple of years ago, and I am now working freelance doing political journalism and analysis, and presenting for various different outputs—some for my old employer and some for CNN, RTÉ, international radio stations and that sort of thing.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am going to hand over to Harriet Harman.

Q83 **Ms Harman:** Thank you for coming to give evidence to us. Can I ask you about communicating the work of Select Committees? We are all very well aware that individual MPs no doubt will be on the phone to you, Esther, and texting you with their latest nugget of information; that special advisers brief on behalf of Cabinet Ministers; and, indeed, that departmental Committees' press teams keep a close relationship with those in the political lobby as well as the specialist correspondents. How does that work, as far as you see it, from the point of view of Select Committees? Is it just the Chair engaging with you, or do you have relationships with the comms teams individually, whereby you are kept abreast of their stories? How well developed is that muscle of communications between the Select Committees and the media that we are so keen to get our thoughts and news out to?

Esther Webber: I think it probably needs some work. There are individual press officers for certain Committees who are very proactive about saying, "We've got such an inquiry, or such a report, coming up," and putting it on our radar. It is quite variable from Committee to Committee. The main publicity seems to revolve around report publication. That is when the vast majority of contact—the contact I get, anyway—from Committee press officers happens. The other thing I would say, which is related to that—we were discussing this in the office earlier—is that when a topic that a Committee has been looking into is in the news for some reason, it would be nice to hear a bit more from the press operation for the Committee that, "Actually, we looked at this specific question," or, "We heard this evidence on this particular issue," to really promote some of their work when it becomes topical.



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Carole Walker: I would agree with a lot of what Esther says. The arrangements when you have a report coming out actually work pretty well. Quite often you get an embargoed copy of the report and you can see it, and the Chair very often will be available to do an embargoed interview. All that is incredibly useful. It really helps, because if you have a busy newsroom, you might only have technically one person on overnight looking at whatever is bubbling up, so getting advance notice often helps to get coverage on the day that the report comes out.

Otherwise, certainly at the BBC, we had a brilliant planning team and we would always be scanning the lists to see who was coming up and what witnesses were going to appear, but there is certainly scope for a bit more proactive, "Watch out for this, that and the other." Some of the Committees seem to have their own Twitter feed, but sometimes it is the Clerk of the Committee, who you might not necessarily be aware of, who does the tweeting and tweets out important lines. Obviously, there is only a limited number of different sessions that any news organisation can stay across.

Q84 **Chair:** What do you think makes for a really effective Select Committee inquiry? Can you perhaps give us some examples of ones you thought were particularly impactful?

Carole Walker: I was thinking about this. It is a question of how you want to measure effectiveness, isn't it? By "effective" do you mean that you want to change Government policy or get new proposals or changes in the way the Government works, or that you want to expose that a Government Department is being completely rubbish in the way it is dealing with a particular issue? For example, there was the big DCMS Committee inquiry into fake news and whether the various platforms were doing enough to tackle it. The Committee came up with a series of proposals requiring them to take greater responsibility, and—lo and behold—a couple of months later the Government's proposals were remarkably similar. You could say that that was a fantastically effective piece of work, but was it something that the Government would have done in any case?

If you look at the other end of the scale—I looked at a few examples—the Home Affairs Select Committee has done some fantastic work on, for example, accommodation for asylum seekers. Nobody could forget those fantastically dramatic confrontations between Yvette Cooper and Caroline Nokes. Two years on from the previous report, it exposed that nothing much had happened, so I am not sure that since then anything particular has changed in terms of accommodation for asylum seekers. The Committee might have been extraordinarily effective in exposing that particular issue and the standard of the accommodation, but has it actually resulted in action being taken? It depends on what you want to achieve in terms of being effective.

Esther Webber: To add to that, where some of the recent inquiries have been really effective is where they have dealt with a quite complex policy area or issue, and maybe there would not be anyone else who has the



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time or the resources to go into the real detail of what happened. Two examples spring to mind. The Work and Pensions Committee has done work on universal credit, which has been going on for a long time and has had various different reports. That has helped to keep the problems with the system in the public eye. Some of the pressure created by its different inquiries and by those of the Public Accounts Committee have led or contributed to some of the changes that have been made or accepted.

The other example is the Home Affairs Select Committee looking at the Windrush scandal and what happened there. Obviously, those are two different areas, because one was a planned Government policy and one was unplanned. The role of the Committee has been really important in drilling down into what exactly happened and where the systems have not worked properly. That combination of detail and scrutiny is really important. Also, you cannot underestimate the importance of having a really forensic and possibly confrontational evidence session that really does tap into key issues now and then and allows, hopefully, progress to be made.

Carole Walker: To pick up on that, Esther gave the example of the PAC looking at the tax issue and Google, Facebook, Starbucks and so on. That was particularly effective in raising public awareness of that issue and also making the bosses of such companies realise that they could well be facing you guys and having to explain why they pay the rates of tax that they do. You could argue that that is a particularly effective one.

- Q85 **Chair:** That brings me on to my next question, which is about the level of media interest in the hearings themselves, not just the reports. Does there always have to be either a high-profile individual or a session that is likely to be very combative for the media to pick it up? There is a danger that we end up going down the route of trying to make it deliberately combative in order to get airtime. How do we make sure that there is press coverage and interest in sessions without making them too sensationalist?

Esther Webber: That is always going to be tricky, because I am not sure it is realistic to pretend that news organisations will have something really technical, or routine scrutiny of certain public appointments. On the other hand, I do not think that everything has to be about a really aggressive session with a Cabinet Minister.

It is certainly true that having a high-profile name will attract attention, inevitably. On the other hand, less prominent figures speaking on subjects that are of big national importance will always be of interest. We have seen what you might call less traditional Committee witnesses—for example, SEN students talking to the Education Committee. That does make for extremely compelling viewing, so that is a different kind of interest.

The other thing I would say is that there are technical, or seemingly technical, niche Committees that will attract interest at different times, because they tap into some aspects of Brexit—which, as we all know, we



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can't get enough of—for example the hearings that were done on things like the no-confidence motions and how they work. Probably not that many people would have been interested before, but because procedure is in the spotlight at the moment, that became more of interest.

The other thing I would say is that journalists like to look at things that they think no one else is looking at, so if they think that a hearing on agriculture in Northern Ireland could potentially produce something that no one else has spotted, journalists who work in that area would follow that regardless.

Chair: Yes; suddenly ferry contracts can become very exciting.

Carole Walker: I'm afraid we love a bit of drama, frankly. If you work in TV news or radio news—and, these days, online—some of those moments that we have all seen when some of you have been really giving someone sitting here a hard time can be fantastically watchable drama. It makes a news story in itself.

Obviously, there is the question of whether MPs are just grandstanding. I do not necessarily think that it is a bad thing if politicians are seen to be holding to account, in particular, the rich and the powerful, and people who are in charge of big organisations. Politicians do not have a great deal of public esteem at the moment, and I think it is actually quite a good thing if the public see you stepping out of your party roles, or your traditional Commons roles, and saying, "Hang on—what are you doing? Why aren't you paying this tax?" or, "What is going on here?"

Yes, big names will always help to get a hearing put on, but one of the things that very often yielded quite good stories was when you got the most senior civil servants on to speak, because quite often those are people you don't very often hear from and they quite often reveal certain facts or shortcomings about what is happening or not happening.

The other thing is deciding what the most important thing is that you want to get out of a hearing. The classic example was when there was all the argument about whether the Department for Exiting the EU, under David Davis at the time, had done the sectional assessments on a no-deal Brexit. There was all this argument about it, and he had to admit in front of the Committee, "Well, no, they don't actually exist." Obviously, there will be a range of things that you want to get out of an evidence session, but in terms of getting on the news that night, those moments—those episodes—are what make it happen.

I would just add that you still find—I know I do—when you look back at those reports and some of the stuff that is buried in them, when you need to remind yourself of things or remind yourself of evidence, that it is absolutely invaluable; I'm talking about the stuff and the facts that are there. And in an era when, as we know, sifting to make sure that what you are looking at is genuine, factual and accurate isn't necessarily easy, that is a tremendous—



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Q86 **Chair:** It is a useful resource.

Carole Walker: It is a resource in itself, yes.

Chair: Thank you. Chris, I think you had a supplementary question.

Q87 **Chris Bryant:** Yes. I remember Boris Johnson appearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee and—because it was Boris, I guess—all the journalists were there, and then he got into terrible trouble, but not until two days later, for what he had said about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. It was quite interesting that the press did not spot it at the time, although we were all, sitting in the Committee, spotting it.

I understand that senior politicians are a key part of what we do on Select Committees, but some of the people you have been referring to are not politicians at all; they are people who run businesses—Rupert Murdoch and people like that. We have had difficulty getting some people, because they simply say, “No, I’m not coming.” Do you think we should have stronger powers to force people to come? Some people argue that we no longer have any powers at all.

Esther Webber: I don’t know whether that in particular is the route to go down. I think people refusing to appear, in and of itself, looks quite bad. I remember that, before Rupert Murdoch showed up, there had been a lot of criticism of Michael O’Leary for never coming in front of Committees. I know there has been discussion of perhaps giving more legal weight to the idea of being in contempt of Parliament, but I can’t see how forcing people to appear would really make them more willing than they are at the moment. I would say it’s quite extreme cases where people do not appear, and generally, at that point, they are exposed as not wanting to answer questions.

Carole Walker: I can understand the argument for greater powers, and I know that some of the American committees do have greater powers, but I think I would have reservations about this idea. How are you going to enforce it? Are you actually going to start calling the police in to prosecute people for being in contempt of a parliamentary Committee? I am not sure that that would be a route that the public would necessarily be very receptive to. And how far are you going to go? Are you then going to require people to show evidence of things? Could they be forced to—

Q88 **Chris Bryant:** But you just said that you think the public quite like politicians giving the great and the good a proper grilling, and if the message gets out that, frankly, nobody cares whether anybody turns up, the great and the good are just never going to turn up, are they?

Carole Walker: People are aware that it gets reported when people refuse to appear, and people can then be tackled over it. I just question whether, if you go down the route of legal powers, that is going a bit too far. That would be my personal view.

Esther Webber: Yes, and I think if that were the case, surely we would see a knock-on effect, of anyone who did not want to appear just saying, “No, I’m not going to”, whereas I think it is still relatively rare for people

to point-blank refuse. It seems to me that the system works relatively well at the moment.

- Q89 Chris Bryant:** It is increasingly common—that is the problem. It did not happen for decades, then it happened, and it has started happening again and again. Now, it will be interesting when we get the figures in—perhaps Kate’s Committee is doing that. In the Foreign Affairs Committee, we have had three refusals this year.

Can I ask you a different question? We have been talking about Select Committees, but there are also House Committees, such as the Finance Committee, the House of Commons Commission, and the Administration Committee, which makes important decisions about the building and the Palace. They all meet in private. Do you think they should meet in public?

Carole Walker: I am always generally in favour of having everything in public, so we can see what is going on. Particularly at the moment when there is a big debate about the Commons and the repairs, and all that sort of thing, and given the importance of engaging the public with what happens in Parliament, I would think there was a strong argument for having all those hearings in public.

To quickly pick up on the previous thing you said, I wonder whether more consideration could be given to other ways of kicking up more of a fuss when people refuse to appear, without actually going down the route of greater parliamentary or legal powers. You know, it is completely outrageous that Dominic Cummings has refused for the fourth time to appear, or whatever, and I wonder whether more could be done to generate news stories about people who refuse to appear—to go back to the previous point.

Esther Webber: Certainly, as someone who takes an interest in parliamentary stories and everything that happens here, I would welcome having more access to the House Committees’ proceedings. Whether everyone else takes an interest is another matter, but I would.

- Q90 Stephen Twigg:** Can I ask specifically about the work of some of the international committees, including the one I chair, the International Development Committee? What do you think makes the report of an international committee interesting to you, and therefore potentially one that would be covered in the print or broadcast media?

Carole Walker: Different factors can come into play. Clearly, if it is a report on an issue that is up there in the media in any case—obviously, there is Brexit, but things that touch on relations with Iran, the behaviour of the Saudis, maybe relations with Turkey, and so on—that always helps.

I talked at the beginning about how we get embargoed Select Committee reports. Quite often, our planner might say to me, “There are about two or three interesting Committee reports out tomorrow. I’ll whack them over to you and you have a look,” and it is like, “Yeah, okay, right. I’m going to quickly read, in the next hour, these three reports.” But they are pretty well laid out with a summary and recommendations.



Q91 Stephen Twigg: Do you think it would be helpful if we co-ordinated more, so you did not get three in one day?

Carole Walker: Sometimes there are quite a few—maybe you need a grid. Also, if there is a particularly strong top line, that often makes a difference—if you have the Chair of the Select Committee spelling out in very strong language a problem about the behaviour of a particular country or the way an international aid budget is being distributed. I am sure you will also know that there will be certain newspapers that will have particular agendas and will be more interested in some particular reports than others.

Esther Webber: As Carole mentioned, obviously we are always looking for a strong top line, but I think some of the international committees do catch the attention or are a good peg for op-eds or other stories, because they serve as a reminder that we have been focused on what is happening here. If there is a big report out on Yemen or what's happening in Rakhine, then people respond to that and realise that it's something that they should be paying more attention to; I include myself in that. A grid would definitely be a nice idea. There was another point, but I have forgotten it.

Carole Walker: I will just make another quick point, while you think about that. Obviously, we both work at Westminster doing politics quite widely, but I am sure all of you deal with specialists in your areas. Sometimes, if you can say to one of our foreign affairs team or our diplomatic team or, from some of the other Committees, to the health or the education specialists, "We've got a really big, interesting report coming out next week"—on hospital failings, post-16 education or the way a particular aid budget is being delivered—sometimes those specialists might be another route to getting the story on to the bulletins or into the newspapers.

Q92 Stephen Twigg: So there are two aspects to that: the specialists, and giving information much earlier, not leaving it to the day before with the embargoes and talking to the specialists a week before.

Carole Walker: Yes, especially if you have got a detailed report there. If you did it a couple of days before, then a specialist might look at it and say they could go and do some relevant filming, set up some other interviews, et cetera.

Esther Webber: I have remembered what I was going to say. Sometimes when I am just skimming the agenda for what's coming up in the next few days, some of the Select Committee inquiries can be almost kind of slogan-y—there's a lot of "Global Britain" and stuff like that. At first glance, it is not immediately clear to the reader what that means or what they are going to be quizzing the witness on. Sometimes a less snappy, but more basic title would help to say, "Oh, so we are going to scrutinise the future of diplomatic relations after Brexit." Personally, that makes more sense to me than "Global Britain" or an equivalent for quite a specific policy area that other people might not necessarily understand.



Carole Walker: One other little thing is that, apart from those formal ways that reports and so on are put out, there is never anything wrong in Committee Chairs ringing up people that they know, especially if you know they have got a particular interest in something that you're doing or you have got coming up, especially if it is something that is not necessarily on the main agenda. As Esther was saying, journalists are always quite open to something that they think no one else is particularly looking at, and a personal approach might make a difference.

Q93 **Chair:** What sort of changes would you recommend that Committees make to keep abreast with rapidly changing technology? Esther, I know you have made some points to us about our website. Could you say a bit more on the record about that and other ways we can improve on engagement around that?

Esther Webber: If there was one thing I wanted to say when I came here today, it is that one of the big barriers I find at the moment in trying to cover Select Committees, or to use their previous work to inform the stories I am working on now, it is that there is not a very good search function for going back through Select Committee evidence or reports. I might remember that a certain Cabinet Minister gave evidence on a certain subject, but not remember whether that was to the Procedure Committee or PACAC or whatever it was. Having an improved search function would really change things.

Mostly what I end up doing is actually searching the Committee name plus the witness name plus the name of the inquiry on Google and trying to find it that way, rather than going through the dedicated site. I know there are people working on this, and the Parliament website is constantly being updated. However, if we had a resource that was more like *Hansard* for the Select Committees, that would be a really laudable aim.

In terms of the social media output, which I think Carole touched on earlier, one thing I find slightly overwhelming is the proliferation of Select Committee Twitter accounts, because there are so many Select Committees. I don't know if there is any way in which they can be streamlined or something like that. It can make it a bit disparate, and they each tend to have a different approach. The point about search is the most important to daily work, but maybe also there is some room for improvement on the social media output as well.

Carole Walker: Picking up on one of the things I mentioned earlier, I think it is just partly being conscious that there is a huge amount going on. Most political journalists are literally running to stay on top of everything, so it is perhaps not surprising if you miss something. Chris talked about that moment in the Boris Johnson hearing. I think certainly one thing would be to tweet, even if it could not be done immediately; I know that, if you are in the middle of an investigation, you don't necessarily want to be tweeting while you are cross-examining the next person giving evidence or whatever. I don't know whether the Committees could think, if there were particularly important moments that you are not aware that anybody picked up on—



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Q94 **Chris Bryant:** After that event, we on the Foreign Affairs Committee now sit together for 10 minutes after the witnesses have gone to decide whether there is anything we want to do as a result of what we have heard.

Carole Walker: Sounds a bit like being a journalist.

Q95 **Chair:** One final question from me. How disruptive is it for you when we are sitting in Committee meetings and we have a series of votes and we all have to troop off, sometimes for an hour, or backwards and forwards, because of the way that we vote in this place?

Esther Webber: Not really so much any more. It might be if you have been asked to monitor a certain Committee and then you realise it is going to take much longer; that can affect deadlines. I think the main people it affects are my former colleagues at BBC Parliament, who sit there captioning the whole thing and then have to edit it together at some point. That is tricky, speaking as one who used to do that.

I think where it maybe would have an impact is if the Committee was being held later in the day, and you're covering that Committee, potentially trying to make a newspaper deadline of seven or eight in the evening.

Carole Walker: I think there is just a general acceptance that that is the way this place works. The only time that I would be aware of it being an issue is if you are just in the middle of giving somebody a particularly hard time and they're squirming in their seat, and then, phew, the Division bell goes. Apart from that, I think people just realise that that is the way the Commons works: people go off and vote.

Q96 **Chair:** So it's less of an inconvenience for journalists than it is for our witnesses? It is certainly a huge issue for witnesses.

Carole Walker: Almost certainly yes. I mean, if you are the journalist who has just been following the Select Committee for the last couple of hours, you might think, "Phew, great. I can have a cup of tea."

Q97 **Chair:** Thank you. Were there any final points that either of you wanted to make that you were hoping to be asked about today?

Esther Webber: The only other thing I was going to say—a very small thing—for ease of covering it is that, although I know most Committees do, it is very useful if the witnesses can say who they are at the beginning, and if the Committee website can be updated when extra witnesses are added. I definitely have experience of tuning in and seeing five people there when I expected two, and not knowing who they are.

Carole Walker: I have made most of the points, but generally, we do find the Select Committees a fantastic institution and a great way of holding people to account. You do get a combination of the moments of drama, which is what we all love, but also some of that detailed investigation and details of the way things are working, and exposure of things that Governments are and are not doing. I think that is a fantastic mechanism



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for holding Governments to account, and for looking in a bit more detail at specific issues; otherwise, I'm not sure that any other part of the way the country works would actually be looking at that.

They perform a very valuable function for the wider public, which we as journalists pick up on. As I mentioned, as I search for various things, sometimes I might just randomly come across a Select Committee report and you just think, "Oh, that's fantastic. Oh, look, it's all there." It is actually there. If they didn't exist and they weren't doing this work, I don't think anybody else would be doing it. There might be some failings and some things that could be improved, but overall, I think they perform a fantastic function.

Chair: Thank you very much. That's a nice note to end on. Thank you very much, Carole and Esther.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP.

Q98 **Chair:** Thank you very much, Andrea Leadsom, for coming to speak with us today and share your thoughts. Chris is going to open the questioning.

Chris Bryant: I'm terribly sorry, because I have to leave before you finish—I've got a question in the Chamber. Welcome. What is the point of Select Committees?

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you; it is a great pleasure to be here. That is a very good question. They perform an incredibly valuable function. Obviously, as a number of us joined in 2010, I have never known anything other than them being elected, but what I have always thought is that elected Select Committees mean that you actually get people with some real knowledge. It seems to me that Select Committees perform an incredibly valuable role of scrutinising policies, but also improving draft legislation and holding Government to account, which is exactly what they should be doing.

I personally have found them very effective. I was four years on the Treasury Committee as a member of it, and then have answered questions before the Energy Committee, the EFRA Committee, and of course various Committees of the House now as Leader of the Commons. I have seen it from both sides, and I am a huge fan of Select Committees.

Q99 **Chris Bryant:** You said elected Select Committees. The Chair is elected, obviously. Are all Committee members elected? I did not think they were in the Conservative party.

Andrea Leadsom: Each party has their own internal election processes, and not every single Committee has even the Chair elected. My personal view is that more elections is better than fewer, but certainly most Select Committee membership is now internally elected through their parties.



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Q100 Chris Bryant: After a general election, it can take a while. To be fair, I think you tried your best to do it as quickly as possible in 2017, but it still ends up taking three or four months after a general election, which means quite a hiatus in that scrutiny process. Is there any means of getting that down to four weeks, as in most legislatures?

Andrea Leadsom: I suppose one of the key challenges—certainly in this instance—was getting those elections done, which is what slows it up. Obviously, that is a matter for all political parties to speed up the process of the elections themselves. It would certainly be a very valuable issue for perhaps the Procedure Committee to look into, to see how things could be speeded up. You are right to say it took several months, but as it was a late general election, we then got caught up with summer recess and so on. I think the number of sitting weeks was, as I recall, no different from previous establishment of Select Committees. It was just that, in calendar weeks, it took a long time because of various pre-planned recesses.

Q101 Chris Bryant: Yes. I am not having a go, but in relation to some of the other Committees, the House of Commons Commission—it is not a Select Committee but is none the less composed by the parties and so on—exists because it is a statutory body, whereas none of the Select Committees are, so you end up with a hiatus. Is there anything that you would like to review about the operation of the Commission and the House Committees?

Andrea Leadsom: As I say, my personal view is that I would support more elections. I think it is very healthy for competition and for individuals who are genuinely interested in a role on a House Committee, and I would extend that to the House Commission. I have personal views about how the House Commission could become more democratically accountable and how some of those who have a lot of responsibilities on the House Commission could actually take on some of the accountability as well, because we have a number of non-voting members of the House Commission. But generally speaking, I think elections would improve things, so thanks for giving me the chance to put that on the record.

Q102 Kate Green: You are well aware of the Dominic Cummings case: his refusal to engage with the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and the recent reprimand issued by the House for his refusal to come to these Committee hearings. At the time that the Privileges Committee investigated his conduct before the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, we were clear that there were very limited options at the House's disposal, other than a reprimand, effectively. A fine or imprisonment were not really usable, albeit that, formally, they still exist as possibilities. A reprimand does not really have much effect if the person who receives it does not feel any sense of shame.

The Privileges Committee is, as I think you know, now considering the wider issue of how we can enforce the House's powers more effectively. One option would be to legislate to empower the High Court to impose a sanction for contempt of Parliament, similar to what they would do for contempt of court. If such legislation were to be recommended and



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approved by the House, would the Government support it and find parliamentary time for it?

Andrea Leadsom: Obviously, any recommendation that is brought forward by the Privileges Committee inquiry will be taken very seriously by the Government. It is difficult to second guess what the Government's response to it would be at this point. I am certainly very well aware of the issue that DCMSC had—it is not the first time—but on the other hand, Committees are generally very successful at requiring individuals to turn up and appear before them, and at commanding papers and so on. There needs to be a balance. Of course, when the Privileges Committee concludes its inquiry, I will be looking very closely at its recommendations.

Q103 **Kate Green:** Do you have any concern that cases like the Cummings case actually expose a weakness in Parliament that allows certain individuals to treat it with contempt—certainly with disrespect?

Andrea Leadsom: As I say, that was not a good case. I certainly facilitated my part in enabling the Committee to undertake such action as was within its remit as a result of that. It is absolutely right that the Privileges Committee is considering whether more should be done. At this point, I would prefer to wait and see what it comes up with before saying anything further on it.

Q104 **Stephen Twigg:** Can I ask about gender balance in Committees? In 2015, the Committee I chair was six men and five women. Following the election two years ago, we changed to 10 men and just one woman. This is the International Development Committee, which addresses big challenges around leaving no one behind and equality in various forms. Do you think there is a case, particularly for the two big parties, to look at quotas for women on Committees?

Andrea Leadsom: You might recall that we accepted an amendment that required gender equality on the sifting Committee on the Brexit-related statutory instruments. It won't surprise you to know that I am a big fan of diversity, and I would certainly support the idea that parties give much more thought to gender balance. Of course, the fundamental problem that we have is that we have not achieved sufficient diversity in our Parliament. That will make it very difficult to fill roles on Committees, partly because you can't just force somebody to go on a Committee if they do not have an interest in it or the time to do so. We literally do not have enough women and diversity of all sorts right across Parliament. Until we resolve that issue, and until we have created diversity across our Parliament, it will be difficult to require equality of gender or racial or sexual characteristics on a particular Committee.

Q105 **Stephen Twigg:** I think you have a fair point in terms of achieving complete parity. Would you consider the case for a minimum of one or two from the big two parties on a Committee like mine, where it is five Conservative and five Labour? I don't think it would be unreasonable to say to both parties, "You must ensure that at least two of your five places are women."



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Andrea Leadsom: I think it would be very reasonable to suggest that there should be certain minimums required. I am not so sure whether that would be something that you might want to change the Standing Orders to reflect. I always look very carefully at Standing Order suggestions. Just recently, I was very pleased to table a motion to allow members of other Committees to attend a particular hearing and question witnesses, because that had cross-House support. Obviously, any changes to the Standing Orders of the sort that you are talking about would require evidence of cross-House support in order to be worth proceeding with, but I am perfectly open to the suggestion.

Q106 **Ms Harman:** One of the things that the House has changed recently, with your very considerable support, is enabling Members who have just had a baby—mothers and fathers—to vote by proxy in the early weeks and months after they have had a baby. In the Liaison Committee, we have been considering how the issue of members of Select Committees who have babies is dealt with. Would you support the idea of there being substitute, temporary maternity cover members to and from the House to cover Select Committee absences when the man or woman is on baby leave?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that would be a matter for the House. Those decisions are taken by the House. I would certainly play my part in enabling the facilitation of a motion. We have certainly seen a precedent in Ministers who have gone on baby leave and have therefore had their role filled for a certain period of time. Those sorts of decisions would properly be a matter for the House, rather than for me.

Q107 **Ms Harman:** But you would facilitate it if we came forward with a proposal to enable the House to make that decision?

Andrea Leadsom: I am certainly always open to proposals that carry enough support across the House. That needs to be the key point. As the Chair will know, there was another proposal from the Liaison Committee for a change to Standing Orders, which I was not able to accommodate on the grounds that it did not carry cross-House support. I would always be clear that with some of those issues, there is always the Procedure Committee, which did some excellent work in support of baby leave—it will review that on the anniversary of proxy voting this autumn. This might well be an issue that that Committee could consider, to seek cross-House support. As I said, I will always be very happy to try to facilitate a more family-friendly Parliament.

Q108 **Chris Bryant:** My question runs on from that. A lot of the work that a Select Committee does is done on the parliamentary estate—evidence sessions and so on—but sometimes a Select Committee tries to do outreach or go to see people in their workplaces to get a more informed view on things. That is quite difficult when we only get business a week in advance. When is this strange period, in which we get such minimal advanced notice, going to end?

Andrea Leadsom: You are tempting me to get out my crystal ball. I always try to give as much notice as possible, but the challenge at the



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moment is the whole issue of leaving the European Union and the timing and feasibility of introducing legislation on it. That ties in with the rest of the legislative programme and some of the decisions taken by the House in recent months on extending article 50 and so on. It means that decisions are being taken with quite short notice, so it has not been possible to give more notice of business, but I always try to give as much notice as possible and will continue to do that.

Q109 Chris Bryant: But you see the downside for Select Committees? It is actually quite difficult at the moment to make advance decisions. Travel, even within the UK, ends up being more expensive because you cannot book in advance. Members find it difficult to organise their own lives, let alone organise 11 Members going to see what is going on in accident and emergency, in detention centres or whatever.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely understand and get that. The problem is that if I said, "Right, here's two weeks of business," and then changed the business halfway through the first week, that would be much more frustrating for colleagues. It is really important to give people certainty, but as soon as possible. As you will recall, when I had to announce that we were not going to have a particular recess on the grounds that business needed to be brought forward, colleagues were extremely and rightly put out by that. I think it is much better to give people certainty, even though that is with shorter notice.

Q110 Chris Bryant: The slightly odd thing is that this is the longest period without a vote, while the House has been sitting, for 15 years. It feels as if we are doing business but not really doing business. I wonder whether there is a means of carving out space for Select Committees to do their business in that process. Everybody is saying that Select Committees are really important, but it is proving more difficult to do our work.

Andrea Leadsom: Very unusually, I have to disagree with you. You cannot judge whether the House is doing valuable work by whether or not there are votes. Divisions are where the different parties disagree about a particular way forward on a particular issue. The House is not here simply to divide; it is here to make progress. In the last couple of weeks we have introduced the Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill, which has been in the manifestos of many parties for several years. We are introducing a really important Bill on digitalisation of business rates, to give SMEs a much better means of paying their taxes as well as their business rates in a more fleet-of-foot way. We are introducing Government legislation that will really improve lives for people and, indeed, animals.

We are also facilitating Opposition days. The Opposition have had a couple of useful debates that really resonated with the public. The recent Opposition debate on climate change was certainly very important, and there was a debate on TV licences for the over-75s. It is not the case that simply dividing is what is important. We have had some really important Back-Bench debates, including yours on acquired brain injury just last week.

The House is getting on with important business. I absolutely do not agree that you can judge whether it is doing valuable work by how many votes there are.

Q111 Chris Bryant: Fair point, but—sorry to pursue this, Chair—all of that is pretty much consensual. Sometimes what is really happening is that the Whips on both sides are saying that it is fine for people to be away, because there is not going to be a vote. I just wonder whether there is a means of saying, “Right, we are going to have consensual business next week, which means that the Select Committees can do other stuff as well.”

Andrea Leadsom: Again, it is simply not the case that there is some sort of agreement to do consensual business. What is interesting is that the business managers always seek to give a day for Second Reading, but with the last couple of Bills there has been so much consensus that no one has even wanted to talk about them—and then, of course, I am accused of having finished business early. It is not me; it is just that people have not wanted to talk about it.

Where there is consensual business, it is not necessarily predictable. Likewise, we have had a lot of statutory instruments, some of which have been incredibly controversial and certainly unpredictable as to voting intentions. You could argue that we have been fortunate in that the House has chosen not to divide, but it is certainly not something that has been either deliberate or predictable.

Q112 Chair: We are in very strange times at the moment, obviously, but when normal business resumes, the fact is that there are occasions when there is great reputational damage to us as a Parliament from Select Committees having members pulled at the very last minute by their various Whips Offices because of certain votes. Would you be in support of having proxy voting for Select Committee members so that they can all attend important visits and so that we do not see those kinds of interruptions?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the issue around baby leave showed that there was a great deal of agreement across the House that being able to proxy vote when you have just had a baby was very, very important to all colleagues. We had a number of debates on proxy voting more generally, which I was determined to have. Harriet will recall that we discussed the fact that it was important to get enough opinions to stand up that vote, and also to look at the subject in the round. The Procedure Committee’s inquiry only looked at baby leave, but certainly the debates in the Chamber went much broader than that.

I do not recall the question of proxy voting for Select Committee members on trips coming up, but there was certainly great antipathy to the idea of proxy voting for Ministers who might be on important Government business. On the other hand, there was sympathy towards health-related issues such as long-term sickness or losing a close relative.



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The impression that I got, which obviously only takes into account those who participated in the debate, was that the House is more sympathetic to or interested in proxy voting for those who have a particular personal circumstance, rather than those who are going about their Government, parliamentary, Back-Bench or Select Committee business. But, as I said to Harriet, the Procedure Committee will be reviewing the whole issue of proxy voting and looking at it more broadly this autumn, so I think that would be the right time to raise the question.

Q113 Stephen Twigg: Can I ask about Government responses to Select Committee inquiry reports? You will be aware that concern is frequently expressed either about their quality and comprehensiveness or, more frequently, about their timeliness. Do you think that this is a real issue?

Andrea Leadsom: What I can say, in tribute to my team, is that in advance of this hearing they reached out to every Whitehall Department to hear their views on their own performance, their relationship with their Select Committee and so on.

By way of background, generally speaking all Departments value very highly the collaboration and co-operation that they have with their Select Committees. There are certainly some very good examples of excellent practice, where the Select Committee Clerk meets regularly with the Select Committee liaison member of the Department and so on. Let me highlight two good examples. The FCO really values the Foreign Affairs Committee's overseas trips; it feels it provides an enormous amount of evidence for its policy work. Likewise, the DFT felt that the Transport Committee's work on the airports national policy statement was incredibly valuable. Departments very much value the contributions of Select Committees.

In terms of the two-month turnaround, all Departments are aware that the two months is the agreed turnaround time. A number of Departments are aware that they have fallen short of that, but they would argue that often there are good reasons for that. Departments seek to stay in regular contact with their Select Committee when they are going to miss the two-month deadline. The reason for that will be because they are looking carefully at a particular recommendation.

Q114 Chair: Can I come on to the connection between Select Committees and the House? At the moment, there are only limited opportunities for a Select Committee report to be debated on the Floor of the House. Would you be sympathetic to having more opportunities? Let's say there is a rather negative Government response to a Select Committee report. If a Select Committee were to directly challenge that on the Floor of the House, do you see that as a potential way to increase the influence of Select Committees?

Andrea Leadsom: The Wright Committee report established the Backbench Business Committee, and it has existed only since I have been an MP. I do not know what life was like before then, but I cannot imagine life without the Backbench Business Committee. It has a huge ability to



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schedule very important debates, and it does with a number of Select Committee reports. I was pleased to support the pilot whereby the Procedure Committee recommended that the Select Committees be able to use some Back-Bench time specifically for Select Committee reports. That is incredibly helpful. Westminster Hall also holds a number of debates on Select Committee reports, so I feel there are good opportunities for debates on Select Committee reports.

The other time when it is appropriate is when there are general debates. Often, in business questions I will get demands for a general debate on a particular topic, whether that is transport, sport or whatever it might be. We will hold a debate in Government time, which is another good opportunity for a recent Select Committee report to be debated. My view is that there are good opportunities available to Select Committees.

Q115 Chair: On the impact of Select Committees, one of the things that we did as a joint Select Committee between the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee was to use a citizens' assembly. We found that an effective way of engaging wider public opinion about the issue of social care. Do you think there should be greater funding and opportunities for other Select Committees to work alongside citizens' assemblies or citizens' juries? Would you support that?

Andrea Leadsom: I couldn't comment on the funding—genuinely, I am not particularly au fait with the funding of Select Committee work. In terms of reaching out, I am pleased to have the opportunity first to commend the e-petitions Committee. When I go to schools and universities as Leader of the Commons to talk about democratic engagement, so many young people ask, "How can we engage with Parliament?" E-petitions have been one way that young people particularly have chosen to make their views known. I would support any alternative opportunities that Select Committees can identify that will engage more people. Citizens' assemblies is a good way of doing that.

This is a good opportunity to put forward that when I have appeared before Select Committees, I have observed that if I were not an MP I would be terrified, but that as parliamentarians we are used to that slightly formal, intimidating interaction. I wonder whether Select Committees could do more informal hearings—citizens' assemblies sort of lean into that. Perhaps they could sit in a room rather than in a horseshoe. Particularly for non-parliamentarians, it certainly seems to me that the fear of being there and being on the record can sometimes stop people being very frank.

Q116 Chair: That perhaps brings us on to another point, which was going to come up later on, around restoration and renewal. One of the things that we are very limited by at the moment is the format of these rooms. During the restoration and renewal project, are you going to be committed to making sure that we can create flexible spaces much more easily that would lend themselves to that informal format?



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Andrea Leadsom: Restoration and renewal is very much a parliamentary project. The R and R Bill, which I hope to bring forward very soon, literally just sets up a sponsor body and a delivery authority that provides the kind of professional level of expertise, project management and so on to ensure that we restore the Palace in a way that saves money. It is then for the sponsor body, which is made up of parliamentarians of both Houses and all parties, to work to decide what that looks like, and for Parliament to look at the outline business case, which should be brought forward in 2021. That will literally set out: "This is what we are going to do here, and this is how much it will cost." Parliament will have the opportunity to say, "Actually, we want to spend a bit of money on trying out different methods."

Certainly I am very aware that there are some in Parliament who would like to try electronic voting. Others would like to have a circular Chamber, not an opposition-style Chamber. Those are obviously all choices that Parliament will have the opportunity to make. Personally, my interest is in making sure that we restore the Palace of Westminster—a UNESCO World Heritage site, which we have an international obligation to restore as a Government. Everything else is for Parliament to decide. There will be appropriate opportunities for people to put forward their thoughts.

Q117 Chair: You touched on electronic voting. One of the things that witnesses to Select Committee inquiries, and certainly members of the public who come to sit on them in person, find enormously frustrating is the repeated disruption while we go and spend 20 minutes per vote trooping through the Lobbies. Would you be supportive of our having electronic voting posts in Committee rooms, so that at least the Committees themselves are not disrupted for extended periods during votes? Is that something that you have looked at, or thought about?

Andrea Leadsom: I will always be very interested to hear of new ideas. Probably a sizeable minority of Members would like to see electronic voting, but of course, if there were to be changes to the way the House manages its procedures, they would need to be brought forward in changes to Standing Orders, which would require cross-House support. As is often the case with changes of that nature, a helpful first step is for the Procedure Committee to look at it closely—that may well be during the R and R process.

A number of Select Committees have already expressed an interest in looking at different aspects of R and R. Some are very interested in accessibility for those with either physical challenges, or hearing problems and so on, so that they will be able to access their Parliament more easily. Others will want to look at the way Members of Parliament behave. Perhaps looking at electronic voting could be a part of that, but that would rightly be the job of Select Committees to look at and make proposals on. Should there be a consensus on something like that, I would of course be very happy to facilitate a debate in Parliament.

Q118 Chair: May I come to the impact of Select Committees during the Brexit process and beyond? The Prime Minister has spoken of wanting Select



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Committees to take on a greater role afterwards. Do you have any thoughts on how that should look?

Andrea Leadsom: It will be very much subject to what the final relationship is with the European Union. For example, on the discussion about a common rulebook on agrifoods, were that to come to pass I would imagine that the EFRA Select Committee would want to keep looking very closely at EU regulations around agrifoods. It would very much depend on the extent of the continued close following of EU rules in a particular area, and what the headline intergovernmental relationship between the UK and the EU is, but there is absolutely no doubt that the Select Committees here in Parliament will continue to play a really important role in that. I believe that the Exiting the European Union Committee and the House of Lords EU Committees are looking at the impact of leaving the EU on Select Committee roles. I will be interested to see the results of that.

Q119 **Chair:** Right. I just wondered what you would see as a particularly useful further role that we could develop.

Andrea Leadsom: During the implementation period, I think that it will be really important that Select Committees look at how it is going. There is a concern about the UK having to abide by certain rules and so on. I am sure that Select Committees will want to be on top of ensuring that the UK's voice is heard and its interests are protected. That would be a valid job for Select Committees to do.

When we have left the EU and the implementation period is finished, it will depend on what that future relationship looks like: whether Select Committees just undertake ad hoc inquiries and, in particular, what the European Scrutiny Committee's role might be, if it continues to exist. Those are questions for the future.

Q120 **Chair:** Could I just ask you a further question about the Liaison Committee itself, following on from Chris Bryant's question? The delay in setting up Select Committees in the last Parliament had a particular knock-on effect on the Liaison Committee, which was not able to meet to hold the Prime Minister to account for a particularly long time. I wondered whether you would support allowing the Liaison Committee to get started with the Committee Chairs that had been selected in order for that to take place.

Andrea Leadsom: I would have to defer to the House on that issue. I imagine that that could raise some controversy. The Liaison Committee, vitally, has the Chairs of all the Select Committees on it, so I am sure that there would be some who would be quite concerned if, in effect, a subset of the Committee had specific access to the Prime Minister. While the Liaison Committee performs a really valuable role in its questioning of the Prime Minister there is, nevertheless, plenty of opportunity for scrutiny of the Prime Minister every week, via individual Select Committee inquiries and so on. There are plenty of opportunities to scrutinise the Prime Minister. I will go back to my response to Chris Bryant about the need for Select Committee elections and therefore nominations to be put up earlier. That is a matter for each of the political parties.



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Q121 **Chair:** I think the trouble was that there were a tiny number of Select Committees that, as you may recall, were left outstanding, and some of them were not elected but appointed, or were Joint Committees of both Houses. As I say, it meant that it held up the entire system of being able to have that particular form of accountability with the Prime Minister, because, as you know, the trouble with PMQs is that you only get one question, whereas within the Liaison setting there is the opportunity to follow up those questions and pursue a point. I think that was the concern about it.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes. As I say, I am sympathetic to it, but I can see that it would not necessarily command cross-House support, and it would be the sort of thing that would need to command cross-House support.

Q122 **Chair:** Thank you. That was the end of the questions from me; were there any other points that we have not asked about that you wanted to put on record today?

Andrea Leadsom: Really, as your previous witnesses said, just a huge hands together for the Select Committees. It is a fantastic set of scrutiny Committees that do an incredibly valuable job, and I am a big fan of more elections. They are not all elected; some of them are still appointed, and in my personal view, not speaking on behalf of the Government, I would love to see them all elected. I certainly think that they do a superb job, which the UK can rightly be proud of, so thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you very much.