

Administration Committee

Oral evidence: Communications and engagement services, HC 1392

Monday 5 June 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 June 2023.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sir Charles Walker (Chair); John Cryer; Michael Fabricant; Colleen Fletcher; Sir Greg Knight; Mrs Pauline Latham; Jessica Morden; Mark Tami; Giles Watling.

Questions 1-19

Witnesses

I: Mark D'Arcy, Parliamentary Correspondent, BBC News, Lord Norton of Louth and Professor Russell, Director, Constitution Unit, University College London.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mark D'Arcy, Lord Norton of Louth and Professor Russell.

Q1 Chair: Thank you to our distinguished panel for coming today. This is a sort of anorak session and, as you can see, I am totally overexcited about it. What we are really looking at is how the House of Commons administration—not the Administration Committee, but collectively the administration—can better promote, through its various avenues of communication, what this Parliament does, what the House of Commons does, and why we are still a body, a Chamber and a Parliament admired around the world for our practices and procedures. I do not feel that the essence of that is captured and communicated in the way it should be, and I think that that view is shared by the Committee.

I will ask our three panellists to introduce themselves very briefly, and then we will go straight into questioning.

Mark D'Arcy: I am Mark D'Arcy, parliamentary correspondent for BBC News for a disturbingly long time.

Lord Norton of Louth: I am Philip Norton, Lord Norton of Louth, professor of government at the University of Hull.

Professor Russell: I am Meg Russell, professor of British and comparative politics and director of the constitution unit at University College London.

Q2 Chair: Brilliant. Thank you for joining us.

I will throw in a very general question to get the conversation going, starting with Mark—answer it in the way you want. What does the House of Commons, or the UK Parliament, do really well, and how could we better communicate that? It's a tough one—it's so big.

Mark D'Arcy: It is a tough one, partly because I think one tends to think of the things that the House of Commons perhaps does not do as well as it might.

I think the House of Commons is very good at some things these days. It is much better than it used to be at reaching out and picking up subjects that the public are interested in—partly through the petitions mechanism and partly through the Backbench Business Committee mechanism—and then having really good debates that kind of prod the Government towards doing things. It is less good at actually making the Government do things, because of course it is controlled by a Government majority under almost all circumstances, and the brief chaotic interludes when that has not been the case have not necessarily been the best advertisement for the Commons.

I would say that it has become a lot better at addressing human issues. The Thursday afternoon Backbench Business debates that you often get



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about really difficult issues, where people talk about relatives of theirs who have taken their own lives or about their experience of disease, depression, or psychological ailments of one sort or another, have been very important in perhaps shifting focus. But if you are talking about the House of Commons as a genuine check on Government, I am not sure that it does always look like a great check on Government, to be honest.

Q3 Chair: Okay. Let me just widen that question out slightly. Mark says that we do not have a great check on Government, yet when I was Chair of the Procedure Committee I was visited by legislators from other parts of the world—developing Parliaments and established democracies—who were often impressed by the powers that MPs have to hold the Executive to account: urgent questions, statements, private Members' Bills to initiate legislation, and so on.

Lord Norton of Louth: There are some structures and procedures you have that work well, but the problem the Commons faces is that that is not what interests people outside. In terms of communication, if you are talking about your structures and processes, that does not relate to what people are interested in. If you look at the goals of this inquiry, there is a potential incompatibility between raising awareness of Parliament and calling attention to the mechanisms you have for scrutiny and influence, because that does not engage people. People are much more interested in issues, and in the individuals in the institutions, than in the institutions themselves.

We know from survey evidence that people are not that distrustful of the constitutional framework we have. They might not like bits of it, but what they are really distrustful of is the people who occupy it. That is a problem. We have a problem with electors, and increasingly we have a problem with the media in putting material out there. Social media and the emphasis on immediacy and soundbites are squeezing out what the mainstream media can do, because they are having to cut back on resources. You are missing out now because of the cutbacks on BBC Parliament.

There is a problem with MPs themselves, because they are interested in themselves individually, and not necessarily in the institution of which they are a member; they will promote themselves and their party above the interests of the institution. There is also a problem in communicating when there is a problem, because who speaks for Parliament? A few years back, I gave the Michael Ryle memorial lecture, and that was the title: "Who speaks for Parliament?"

Parliament is two discrete institutions. Each is the sum of its parts, and there is no one who can speak for the whole institution. Even within each House there is a problem: how quickly can you respond? Well, if you have to agree a line to take, by the time you have agreed it it's too late.

I think there needs to be a fundamental rethink, not so much about the structures and processes but about how you communicate them. How do you get people interested in what you are doing? The way in is not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

through describing those structures and processes; it is through finding another way of emphasising the issues or, indeed, focusing on individuals. That is what interests people.

The media will pick up on when individuals misbehave. What about when individuals achieve some success? What about promoting that? That is what interests people: when there is a human interest element. They are not interested in Standing Orders and how Select Committees go about their work. You have an Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. That is not necessarily going to engage people, but some of the issues it addresses may. The correspondence that you often get from constituents is on issues that come up through private Members' Bills, say, because that is what really gets them excited. It is about how you exploit that to show that Parliament is addressing issues that interest them, rather than Parliament pushing out information about the structures and the wonderful Committees that it has.

Professor Russell: That is really interesting. I agree with all of it, really—we may agree a dangerous amount on the panel—but I would say some other things.

I think that there are some obvious answers to your question about what the House of Commons does well and how well the administration does at publicising it. It is pretty uncontroversial to say that Select Committees are seen as a high point of what the House of Commons does, and I think that the administration does a lot of good work at communicating what Select Committees do. That is a good, on both sides of the ledger.

Getting beyond some of those obvious things and going back to what Mark was saying about how impactful Parliament really is on Government, my work, which includes detailed work on the legislative process in both Chambers—including the House of Lords, which we are not primarily talking about today—suggests that it is more influential than it is often given credit for. I would point to two things that are quite challenging for communication for the administration. One is something to which Philip has recently turned his attention in his writing, which is that a lot of influence goes on behind the scenes. There are lots of places in Parliament where things are transcribed and broadcast, but a lot of the real influence goes on in meetings between Members and Ministers—persuading people and so on, with the public record not entirely capturing that influence.

The other thing that is very subtle is that some of the things that Parliament does on the public record are not decision-making activities, but are enormously important for holding the Government to account. If you talk to any member of the public, or if I talk to my students about what they know about what goes on in Parliament, they will all say "Prime Minister's Question Time" and then they will all grumble about it. They do not know about departmental question times. At departmental question time, as well as when Ministers are presenting Bills and in Back-Bench debates, Opposition days and all sorts of stuff that goes on in the Chamber and Committees, the very fact that the Government are being held to account in a public place and having to explain themselves is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

enormously important. You will all be familiar with this, but when you talk to Ministers or people who have been Ministers, they talk about the amount of work they have to put into thinking things through before appearing in front of Parliament. Parliament therefore has a deterrent effect. We call this the power of exposure, or the power of anticipated reactions.

Parliament is really important in these ways, but they are not very visible and they are difficult to communicate. When you set that against the way many MPs talk about Parliament, I hate to say it but the Government and Opposition tend to be united in saying that Parliament does not matter. The Government want to pretend that Parliament has not won things from them; the Opposition want to pretend, or actually genuinely believe, that they have not won anything from Government. You have both sides of a natural political divide saying, "Oh, Parliament doesn't really matter very much," when actually I would argue that it does. As Philip said, who speaks for Parliament?

Beyond the administration, we need to think about how Members communicate the importance of what Parliament does collectively, because this is, by its nature, a divided place. It is not just Government-Opposition, but different parties. To what extent do Members concentrate on celebrating the achievements of Parliament as a collective institution? I think the Speakers of both Houses do that quite a lot, but I think Members could do it rather more.

Chair: As I say to my children, this wonderful country did not happen by accident; it is shaped by the laws that have come out of Parliament over centuries.

Q4 Giles Watling: What you are saying is very interesting, Philip. We do put it all out there. Here we are in a public meeting, and it will be available online, but I am also on the CMS Committee, which is meeting tomorrow morning to talk to ITV, and I will bet you we get more people watching that. It fascinates me, because it is all available, and I feel that we should somehow flag it. The media, as you quite rightly say, are only interested when we are having a go at each other and there is a bit of argy-bargy going on, because it is sexy and exciting and all that. Actually, a lot of the time in Committee rooms, we agree with each other—it is kind of boring, really, but it is really important.

Meg was just saying that Parliament is set upon by both sides of the House, but actually Parliament does work, and we should make sure that people see that it works. Every time there is an imbalance and something goes wrong, Parliament brings it back. It is an incredibly successful institution, and I think somehow we need to look at ways of highlighting what we in this Committee are doing. How do you think we could do that?

Chair: Can I put that question to you first, Mark? You have made your career—I say this to celebrate your work—by looking at the boring but important stuff: the engine room of Parliament. You have done it really well, and you have made it interesting.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mark D’Arcy: I think Mr Watling is right that an awful lot of stuff goes on, particularly in Committees. The Committees are one of the more attractive faces of Parliament, because they are not the bear garden of full-on Commons confrontation. A good Committee has members on different sides working together, and perhaps different people in the lead for different things. It is a much more co-operative image, and it looks a lot more like what people experience working together in the outside world than a lot of what goes on in the Chamber. To that extent, I think Committees give a more positive light. It may not have the excitement of a hammer-and-tongs battle, but when a Committee is addressing something that people really care about—interrogating the bankers after the financial crisis, interrogating the protagonists over the handling of covid, all those kinds of things—people do watch it, and they find it absolutely fascinating.

Another thing that people watch a lot—I am amazed that more Members have not cottoned on to this—is Petitions Committee debates: hashtag-driven social media campaigns leading to petitions and then leading to debates in Westminster Hall. It is what in the trade we call “news you can use”—stuff that people are interested in, being talked about by Members of Parliament. While it does not necessarily directly lead to stuff, doubtless it influences the Ministers who have to respond to the debates. That is another sphere that I could point to as being very useful indeed.

What could you do to promote it more? That is the difficult bit, really, because news is not all happening in conveniently dribbled-out pieces, where everything happens at a measured pace. You can have a fantastically important Select Committee report that is buried by other events—it is just the luck of the draw.

Giles Watling: “A good day to bury bad news.”

Mark D’Arcy: Yes. Incidentally, I should say that I think the Select Committees are pretty well served by the press operation around them, which tells people what is happening, promotes their output and gets the Chair or the lead member on a particular subject on the “Today” programme or whatever. They do a pretty good job at that.

I do not really have a silver bullet suggestion for how you can get much more attention than you get already. Maybe you could make the language a bit more accessible? Sometimes Committee reports are written in a very formal way, but there is a reason for that as well, and often the language is a heavily compromised and negotiated turn of phrase. I do not have a silver bullet, but I would say that those are the parts of Parliament’s activities that people can watch without their teeth aching.

Professor Russell: Obviously, with this whole inquiry, you are asking a huge question. It is very tempting, when you ask about how Parliament communicates, to look at the comms people—Mark is partly talking about the comms people, and that is entirely appropriate—but they are only part of it. You are not entirely dependent on them, and you are not entirely dependent on the media to tell your story. You have your press officers,

but you also have your website, your social media and so on, which are part of the direct comms side.

Going back to things you are doing well, there are things like the Committee reports that have been mentioned, House of Commons Library briefings and so on, which are not primarily about comms. Of course, they initially existed behind the scenes for Members only until everything went online, and now we have all got them. They are probably not part of the comms strategy, but they are a fantastic resource that helps people understand what is going on in Parliament. You have individual MPs communicating things as well.

One thing to throw in—I do not have a very clear example of what you can do to duplicate this, although I do have one idea—is that if you think about communications in the broadest sense, I am at one of the universities, as I think is Philip, that is part of the parliamentary universities programme where we deliver a course on parliamentary studies for undergraduate students. That gives them 10 or 20 weeks or something of in-depth learning about the way that Parliament works, which enables them to get to understand some of the more obscure things that you are talking about that are away from PMQs.

Hundreds of students pass through that programme every year. Some of them will go to work in the media, some of them will go to work in the civil service, some of them will be working in the voluntary sector, and some of them come and work in Parliament. I see that as a communication tool to help people to understand Parliament. That is a really strategic intervention that is not done by media officers, but is a really important thing that Parliament has done. Thinking about more things like that, not just what the media officers do, could be a really important part of this. My answer to that—which we could come back to—in terms of “What next?” might be to have more of an induction programme for MPs, and an encouraged outreach programme by MPs about how they can communicate what Parliament does more widely than in the universities.

Q5 Chair: That is fantastic. Lord Norton?

Lord Norton of Louth: Just to pick up on that last point, I would entirely endorse what Meg has just said. I think the education side of Parliament—what it does there—is successful, and we really need to build on that. It really reaches out to schools and so on: we have got a Peers in Schools programme that is very successful.

Coming back to the question itself, your first point reinforces what I was saying, because the reason the media will be there tomorrow is not because of some intrinsic interest in the DCMS Committee. It is because of the issue; it is because of personalities. That is what drives it, so how do you use that to promote? I think that is a key element. Now, you are quite right: most of the work that the House does is detail. If you think you’ve got problems, think about in the Lords, where most of our time is on the boring detail. We do not get any notice at all, so the way to think about it is not telling people what you are doing. Think about it from this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

perspective: when you are communicating, what is in it for them? Why should electors be interested?

I think what you need to focus on is not structures and processes, but what difference it makes. You might make some changes; in aggregate, it could be quite significant. That is what you need to be looking at: what difference does it make to people outside? That is really what the starting point should be. How does what you do help the public? How does it impact upon them? How do you frame the work that you do in that respect? Yes, you have got your communications team, but I would also point out that you have got you. This was my point about Members: you are part of the solution. To some extent, there would be the argument that Members are part of the problem, just because of the demands made on your time and trying to cope with everything, but you are also part of the solution. You are the best people to be out there beating the drum for the work that is being undertaken.

I think there are a number of routes that one can pursue, but I think resources are important for the purpose of doing that. There is the danger that even with increased resources, they are still very limited, and there is a danger of stressing economy to the disbenefit of the House and promoting what it is doing.

Q6 John Cryer: I have thought for a long time that power has tended to drain away from here into Whitehall. That is not a party political comment: it has happened under every Government. For instance, after 1997—I am talking about the Commons now, not the Lords—you had the introduction of programming. Before that, in 1994, you had the Jopling report, which introduced guillotining. All that reduces the ability of the Commons when it comes to holding the Executive to account. Do you think that has been a factor in what has happened over the past few decades?

If you listen to the privy councillor David Davis, he would tell you—well, he told me—that things have been going downhill since roughly 1882. Before that, the Government had no control over the timetabling of the House of Commons. The Back Benchers controlled it all. I am not advocating that we go back to that, but do you think the general drift of power going from here to over there that has been going on for about 40 years has been a factor?

Mark D'Arcy: I think—and I should emphasise that this is a personal opinion—that there is a bit of a weariness about when there is a lot of kerfuffle in Parliament and then nothing actually happens because Parliament does not seem to be able to get a grip on things, particularly the Commons. That changes when a Government does not have a majority. Power shifted dramatically back to the Floor of the House of Commons after the 2017 election, for example, and for quite a long time. It did not necessarily manage to establish a majority for anything else, but it certainly made the then Government's life extremely difficult for a couple of years.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In circumstances where you have a very tightly balanced House of Commons, there is genuine power in the Chamber, but when there is a nice big, comfortable Government majority to the extent where a Government can shrug off rebellions on its own side, then Governments pretty much get their way in the House of Commons, and then the House of Lords becomes the major check on what goes on in Parliament. The House of Lords, as Lord Norton has been observing, is not a heavily scrutinised Chamber a lot of the time. When they make quite substantial changes to legislation and the Commons bats them back with a flick of the wrist after a 45-minute debate, it strikes me that you are seeing the power imbalance made flesh. There is only a part of Parliament that seems to be both willing and able to do things that a Government does not want it to do, and it is quickly and swiftly overridden.

Lord Norton of Louth: Could I provide a slightly different perspective? Don't put yourselves down. Yes, since the Balfour reforms of 1902 the Commons has been very limited and the Government are in the driving seat. There is the view that over the past 40 years the position has exacerbated. I tend to hear that quite a bit from colleagues in the Lords who are ex-MPs. In fact, there is a counter-balancing aspect to it. Don't forget that you have had the introduction of departmental Select Committees, and Public Bill Committees are an improvement on Standing Committees. You now have a Petitions Committee, which links more with people outside. MPs themselves are more independent in their behaviour than ever before over the past 30 or 40 years. There is a significant increase in voting independence.

You are better informed in terms of material coming in, and you are better resourced compared with Members before. Sometimes you have been able to engage in pre-legislative scrutiny, which has made a difference. There is a case for expanding that significantly, and there is quite a significant case for post-legislative scrutiny. But there have been countervailing pressures that have actually strengthened the House. I think a lot depends on Members actually utilising the opportunities you have got. The other change that has been significant is the willingness of the Speaker to grant urgent questions and call Ministers in to face questioning. It is not a one-sided direction of travel. I think Members could do a lot to exploit what they already have. I would like to see it built on and more changes made that would enable you to really scrutinise more.

Q7 **Chair:** So the point is that we are not passive observers to this. Parliament has powers, and we utilise them. The public are probably not so well aware of those powers, because, as Mark and others have alluded to, they prefer the scandal and the excitement instead of the grind and the coal face work day in, day out.

Lord Norton of Louth: Don't forget that you can achieve change yourself in terms of structures and processes. It is not just affecting Government and decisions they take. Where did departmental Select Committees come from? It was not the Government. It was a report from a Procedure Committee pressuring the House itself. The Cabinet was not that well disposed, and Margaret Thatcher put in a memo against introducing them,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

but the Cabinet was not prepared to stand up to an assertive House. That is how you got departmental Select Committees.

- Q8 **Chair:** And the Petitions Committee was not how the Government envisaged it. It was meant to be a joint enterprise between No. 10 and the House, and actually the House entirely owns the Petitions Committee in every way.

Lord Norton of Louth: Yes.

Chair: Sorry, Meg, I am interrupting you. You were going to answer John's question as well. Then we will go to Michael.

Professor Russell: I was going to say some very similar things to Philip, so I will not repeat them, but I may throw in the words "Backbench Business Committee", which were not mentioned. It is a more complicated picture, and it is perhaps a bit more complicated than Mark points out as well. The power ebbs and flows between Government and Parliament, and is related to the size of the majority, but one of the things that we saw with the very large Blair majorities from 1997 through to 2005 was that initially it looked like the Government was all powerful. Then Parliament started putting more and more checks in place, and there was a kind of counter-reaction to that, which saw some of the changes that we have discussed.

In more recent years, we have seen tighter majorities, particularly under the minority Government of Theresa May, where the Government becomes very resistant to Parliament getting in its way because it has a difficult enough life already, thank you very much, without Parliament slowing things down. You begin to see things like the overuse of delegated legislation and so on. In this Parliament, even with a large majority, some of those things are hanging over now. We are seeing too much rushing through of primary legislation, for example, as sort of emergency measures when they really do not have to be rushed through in that way. There should be more proper scrutiny.

It goes in both directions. There are reactions and counter-reactions, but touching on something that Charles said, which was mentioned by other speakers before and which I did not comment on, although the ding-dong element of Parliament is what the media like to report, and is what the public very often see, of course it is not what the public like. Quite a lot goes on in Parliament that does not get reported that is the sort of thing that the public like, which is people working constructively across party differences on issues of importance, and so on. It is a real shame that the public do not see more of that because Parliament is about that an awful lot of the time, as you all know. How we can communicate that better would be an interesting question.

- Q9 **Chair:** How Parliament can communicate it?

Professor Russell: The Select Committees do it quite well. The culture of the Select Committees, which is cross-party, is communicated quite well,

but the Select Committees are not the only cross-party place in Parliament, and we do not hear about the rest of it.

Chair: I was on a Lords-Commons pre-legislative scrutiny Committee on the Mental Health Act and it was simply fantastic. It was amazing. We met for scores of hours, but it was worth while.

- Q10 **Michael Fabricant:** Lord Norton said that of course people are not interested in the procedure; they are interested in the ding-dong. The biggest ding-dong of all is Prime Minister's questions. I remember years ago, in a private visit to Washington, getting out of a thunderstorm, going into Congress and getting recognised by a congressman, despite the fact that I was just wearing a wet sweatshirt and a pair of shorts, because he had seen me on C-SPAN on PMQs. It must have been the hair, I guess. Do you think bad is driving out good in the sense that PMQs does more harm than good, not because it tells a bad story but because people are so interested in seeing the ding-dong they are not really interested in anything else?

Mark D'Arcy: I always think that Prime Minister's questions is a kind of hermetically sealed rumpus room in Parliament where people can run a bit amok for a little while, and it perhaps does not creep too much into the rest of business. Occasionally, when there is something really contentious, maybe you get a bit of PMQs-like behaviour. My main comment about Prime Minister's questions is that when it degenerates into a sort of fatuous exchange of not very good pre-scripted gags, what is the point? Sometimes you can feel your soul leaving your body when you are in the Gallery and it is just awful. You are just hoping that someone downstream, outside the main exchanges, will finally say something interesting to liven it up a bit.

It has become a piece of performative theatre now, and once it does that and stops having a direct parliamentary function, I do not think that it works very well, and it does not do Parliament any particular credit. When you get the occasions where there are serious questions to be asked about something serious and it is treated seriously by all the protagonists, it is a completely different atmosphere, but when it is just one of those pieces of performance art, I am not sure that anybody is very impressed anymore.

Lord Norton of Louth: It is televisual; that is why it gets the attention it does. If it wasn't covered, the cameras wouldn't be switching to something else to cover what is going on. I think it is a choice between PMQs or no PMQs, rather than PMQs or something else. People don't like it, but they watch it in enormous numbers, so at least it raises awareness of the House of Commons, and they do see MPs at work, and MPs do exploit it.

Many years ago, a former student of mine did his doctoral work on the difference that the introduction of cameras into the House of Commons made in 1989. The biggest difference to Prime Minister's Question Time was the use of the word "constituency".

Chair: There we go. Professor Russell?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Professor Russell: There is some interesting work on PMQs. In many ways it is problematic, but it is not as simple as it looks. There is some interesting academic work showing that PMQs does help to engage people with Parliament, as Philip has said, for good or ill. Then there is also work—I am sure you are familiar with this dynamic—showing that it actually has quite an important galvanising effect inside Government in terms of people being ready for the things that might come up. There are these stories about how Margaret Thatcher used it as a way of controlling her Departments by getting her briefings in advance and knowing what was going on in every Department in Whitehall with the excuse of being briefed for PMQs. It is a much more complicated institution than many people give it credit for.

But let me come back to a point that I made before: what are we doing to publicise departmental questions? Actually departmental questions are a much more sort of ostensibly sensible exchange and clearer form of accountability on details of policy. If you go to the home page of Parliament, which I've done a bit of in preparation for this hearing, there is nothing about departmental questions on the home page of Parliament. There is nothing in the newsfeed about what departmental questions are coming up. They are almost impossible to find. I think there are things that you could do to point—I mean, to be fair, you are not really publicising PMQs either, and perhaps that is less surprising, but there are some different forms of accountability going on in Question Time, which maybe the public could be pointed towards more actively, I think, and they would realise that PMQs is just one small part and not representative of the whole.

Q11 Michael Fabricant: In fact, you lead me on to the question I was going to ask directly of Mark, because you were talking about how we can push out. As academics, you two are sort of pulling in and you know what questions to ask, and Mark does too because he has been here a long time. I wonder whether the administration of this place does enough to actually give you information that perhaps you would not otherwise be able to glean, which would enable you to do wider programming. Also, I am going to ask you about what is happening to the BBC coverage of Parliament, but that is a second question.

Chair: Ask that question now. Let us put all those questions.

Michael Fabricant: I will do just that. I am slightly worried about where the Parliament channel is going. As was alluded to earlier on, there is less budget available. There is talk about the BBC going on to streaming-only. The Parliament channel mainly concentrates on what is happening in the Chamber and does not actually show what is going on in Westminster Hall—all those interesting debates you mentioned earlier—or indeed in Committee. You try, but you only have one channel. Whither goest, coverage of Parliament?

Mark D'Arcy: Let us start by nailing a couple of things that are not happening. There was a brief kerfuffle around the idea that BBC Parliament was going to cover fewer Select Committees. That is simply not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the case. The director general has written a letter—you can find it on the Liaison Committee's page—flatly denying that there is any such plan or, indeed, that BBC Parliament is going to be converted into a streaming service or anything like that. Those things are not happening, and it is pretty much as simple as that.

BBC Parliament has always operated, with very few exceptions when great events are happening perhaps in the Liaison Committee or something, like this: if the Chamber of the Commons is in session, that is what BBC Parliament will be pointing its cameras at. If there are Select Committee meetings, they are put in the sort of space around that. They show the House of Lords as soon as the Commons has stopped, and then they put the Select Committees in the remaining bits of space.

Q12 Michael Fabricant: As someone who covers Parliament and has deep insight, do you think that policy is the best?

Mark D'Arcy: I think it is very hard to construct an alternative policy that does not get you into more trouble. If there is a big Select Committee hearing on, it may run on the news channel, but there will be people who want to see what's going on in the Chamber of the Commons. Part of the point of BBC Parliament is simply that people can watch the Chamber of the Commons—whether you have a Prime Minister falling, or the Committee stage of the Government of Wales Bill, the BBC cameras will be pointing at whatever is going on in the Chamber. You have that as a basic democratic service, so that people can see that.

You could start making editorial choices and say, "We're not going to show this—we're going to show that", but as my former boss at BBC Parliament used to say, that way madness lies. You would never hear the end of it. As soon as you took something off in favour of something else, there would be eruptions and letters flying in all directions.

I cannot speak in great detail to BBC Parliament, because I do not actually work for it. It is in the same sort of operation as I am, but I am not there. What I do know about it is that it works on the very simple principle that they point their cameras at what you MPs are saying while you are saying it, and I think most of you would think that was a good idea.

Q13 Michael Fabricant: Coming back to my original question, is there more Parliament could do to help you? That is addressed to all three of you.

Mark D'Arcy: Parliament is doing an awful lot more now to help journalists both know what's going on and understand it. The Clerks do a weekly procedural briefing on a Monday, and there are emails that go out saying what is coming up in the Select Committees and in the Chamber. The Petitions Committee will send you an email saying, "This is what's going on in next week's debate." The Backbench Business Committee will do the same. There are great efforts to explain to us what is going on all the time—and, frankly, if you have a question, you can usually find a Clerk who will explain some arcane point of procedure in terms so simple that even I can understand it. Those things were not there to anything like the same extent when I started.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Robert Rogers, as he then was, started doing briefings on big procedure issues when he was Clerk Assistant or something, back in the Cretaceous period. They were incredibly helpful, and things began to grow a little bit from there, but there is a limit to how much the Clerks and Parliament can tell journalists without starting to stray into politics. You will start asking the Labour Whips, for example, about the cunning plans behind Labour's motion on the Opposition day. You will start asking people behind amendments what they are trying to achieve, because you have to go direct to those people to do that. There is a limit to how much the institution can do without getting bogged down in the politics of what is being done.

Lord Norton of Louth: Could I deal with the BBC Parliament point, and then come on to the wider question of what the House could do through its own resources? As I understand it, BBC Parliament does not generate its own content and does not cover events in the way that it used to. From an educational point of view, I thought that was extremely valuable and very worth while, and it generated quite good viewing figures on very limited resources. BBC Parliament used to be run basically by one man and his dog, and now they've shot the dog. There is a lot more that could be done there.

On your point about what Parliament could be doing, one thing one might want to focus on is the Parliament website. There is a lot of material there, and it is invaluable, but finding it and get getting down to it is another matter, because it is driven from a Parliament perspective, which is structures and processes. It is not driven by thinking about what matters to people outside and what drives them—the issues that are coming up. When people go on the Parliament website, rather than seeing immediately, "These are the issues that Parliament is discussing this week. This is what interests you," you see Committees, Bills, and *Hansard*.

People like us know how to use the website, because we have used it for ages, but for anybody out there just logging on to Parliament, where do they find out about the issue that really affects them? What is key to their interests? By the time they have started to find out, they have lost the will to live. You really need to think about what you highlight there, and sort of ping each week about what is affecting electors, what matters to them and the issues that Parliament is discussing that will engage their interests. Start from the perspective of, "What is in it for members of the public?", rather than looking at it from a parliamentary perspective, which is very much driven by structures and processes.

Professor Russell: I was going to say something about the website as well. The website has some fantastically good stuff on it. It is a huge undertaking to design a website for a place as complicated as Parliament, so credit to those who work on it—I do not want to undermine what they are doing—but I do agree with some of what Philip is saying.

I looked at the website in preparation for this, and I thought, "What would people be likely to look for?" I use the website all the time, as a specialist, and it is not always easy to find what you want. If I go to the homepage of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliament and I want to know what Government Bills are in front of the Commons now, I literally do not know how to find that, as a specialist. There is a list of all Bills, but they do not distinguish between Government Bills and private Members' Bills. You can just about filter for what Bills are in front of the Commons now, but it is an enormous list of 200-and-something Bills, most of which are private Members' Bills that do not have a hope of doing anything. Which Government Bills are at what stage is an obvious thing that you might want to know from the parliamentary website, as well as what private Members' Bills are at what stage. Which ones have the best chance? Where can I click to send people my views? Who is sitting on the Public Bill Committee? On those kinds of things, more could be done.

In some respects, when it comes to legislation, the House of Lords communications people are doing a rather better job than the House of Commons communications people. They seem to put a lot more focus on the legislative process, so it might be useful to get those teams talking to each other, or have the Lords people in here.

I come back to what I said before. You can get stuck on focusing on the comms, but an awful lot of this is not just about the comms people and what they are doing, because the question of how you communicate what Parliament is doing is much bigger than that. Let me read you some words that you will recognise. "This Parliament is a dead Parliament... It has no moral right to sit". That was a former Attorney General. "If Parliament were a school, Ofsted would be shutting it down." That was the last Prime Minister but one in his Conservative party conference speech in 2019. "We have been paralysed by a broken Parliament". That was the Conservative manifesto. I am not trying to make a party political point—I think it would be a bit hard, in this instance, to find voices on the other side—but those voices are very well heard, and if people are getting that message about Parliament from its most important Members, it is quite hard for the comms people to override it.

- Q14 **Chair:** I do not want to make a party political point to my Labour colleagues, but the Leader of the Opposition, who I have huge regard for, went to Davos and said, "You get stuff done here, and you don't get stuff done in Parliament."

Professor Russell: Okay—good example.

Chair: That really was an upsetting thing to hear any parliamentarian say.

Professor Russell: I did say earlier that both the Government side and the Opposition side diss Parliament.

- Q15 **Chair:** I am not making a party political point. We have a duty not to do this. Gerald Ratner did it to his company, didn't he?

Professor Russell: Yes. It is our central democratic institution, and we ought to be teaching people how to respect it, not teaching people to think it is broken, because it is not broken, actually.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Wow! Okay. I am going to bring Pauline in.

Mrs Latham: It is all right, because I know we have run out of time.

- Q16 **Chair:** That was really good; it exceeded my wildest expectations. I have a couple of ideas that I want to put to you. I have teenage children who have done their A-levels and are at university. They are very visual. They watch these lectures online that I think are called Ted talks. For youngsters and for anybody accessing our proceedings, it would be quite nice to have a video—I do not think it exists—of somebody engaging and enthusiastic describing what an urgent question is or, to go to Meg's point, what departmental questions are. Once you have found out what departmental questions are, there would then be a place on the House of Commons website where, if you are interested in, say, Business, or whatever BEIS is called now—I do not know; it changes monthly, and that does not help—you can scroll through Question Times, debates on the Floor of the House responded to by Business Department Ministers, their legislation and so on.

My final question is: do you think there is a role for enthusiastic and engaging people to talk through what an urgent question is, what a Select Committee is, what business questions are or what a petitions debate is? Is that something we should be doing?

Professor Russell: Are you looking at me?

Chair: I am looking at all of you—I do not have my glasses on.

Professor Russell: There is possibly more scope for that, but actually there is a lot of good material of this kind already on the parliamentary website. In the education area in particular, there is stuff for schools. It is just hard to find. As I say, organising a website like that is not my specialism. We cannot put everything at the top level and make everything visible, but it is hard to ensure that we have the right routes so that people can find what they want.

My parting shot—I have emphasised this lots of times—is that I think you need a programme to get MPs communicating what is important about Parliament in a way that the Speakers do. The authorities do quite a lot, and on the website you can find interviews with officials, individual Members and so on, but you could do with a programme to rebuild faith in and understanding of Parliament, coming from across the parties.

- Q17 **Chair:** Will you submit written evidence with some of your ideas, please?

Professor Russell: Sure.

- Q18 **Chair:** Excellent. Lord Norton?

Lord Norton of Louth: I agree very much with that. It is the very thing you were talking about, Charles, that used to be available on BBC Parliament. It used to have programmes explaining processes, how things worked and so on. As Meg was saying, that is also available through the education service here, which does fantastic work. I agree with her that those resources ought to be available for Members to go out and utilise as



HOUSE OF COMMONS

well. Those are the sorts of things that ought to be on the front of the website, so that people can access them.

The other thing you might want to pick up on, which Meg alluded to, is interviewing Members. She mentioned what the Lords are doing. The Lord Speaker is doing a podcast with Members, talking about them and their experiences, and showing the range of activities they do. That engages people; they are interested in what individuals do and where they come from. It is the human interest aspect. You could engage people far more by doing that, and by drawing in Members to do that. Generally, you should see Members as a resource, and provide them with the ability to go out and explain to electors what is happening here in a way that is engaging and interesting, and not "I'm going to talk to you about delegated legislation," which, to be honest, at the Commons end, turns off MPs, never mind electors.

Bring in what is in it for the electors. Why should they be interested? Think of it from the point of view of the electors, and start to craft the appropriate material to engage them, so that they understand what this institution is about, what the Commons can do for them, and the difference it makes to their life.

Mark D'Arcy: I completely agree with Philip. You need material that is issue-led, rather than process-led. There are, however, some questions that seem to keep coming up, and a Prime Minister's questions seldom goes by without them, such as, "Why doesn't the Speaker make him answer the question?" and "Why doesn't the Speaker order that person out of the Chamber?" Some explainers by Mr Speaker in person, on what powers Speakers do and do not have, might be quite useful. That could give people a taste of how the place works, so that they could understand at least those points about it—no one is talking about getting into the weeds of Standing Orders in any great detail—and that the Speaker does not necessarily have the powers of a football referee, for example. That could be quite useful.

Chair: Are there any final questions?

- Q19 **Jessica Morden:** In fact, Mr Speaker did do just that—order someone out of the Chamber—during the last Prime Minister's Question Time. I was going to ask a question about the website, but you covered it well. It is full of brilliant things, but it is hard to navigate from the outside. To leave on a positive note, we have events such as Parliament Week, when lots of Members try to get out and about and explain their role. One good initiative of the past few years has been parliamentary photography. It found a way to explain people's roles and has been very people-focused. It has been a brilliant thing in explaining how Parliament works.

Lord Norton of Louth: May I add a point that we have not touched on? The material from education is very good; it reaches out to schools and does a lot there, and to people more widely, but a lot could be done through citizenship education in schools, which is under-resourced. If you put in the proper resources and reach out to people, they will understand



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliament far better. Until we get there, citizenship will be taught by people who are not qualified to teach it. You need qualified citizenship teachers, so you need to put the resources in to ensure that it is taught effectively. In the long run, that is how you will raise more pervasive awareness of what Parliament is doing. That is the route in, and what I would stress.

Chair: Thank you very much. That was a fantastic session. If any of you would like to supply the Committee with further written correspondence or evidence that we can review and ruminate on, we will be happy to receive it. Thank you, all three of you, and have a good rest of the day and a successful week.