



Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Minority party participation in the Backbench Business Committee, HC 1288

Wednesday 14 May 2014

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Members present: Mr Charles Walker (Chair); Nic Dakin; Thomas Docherty; John Hemming; Mr David Nuttall; Jacob Rees-Mogg; Martin Vickers

Questions 1-26

Witnesses: **Natascha Engel**, MP, Chair, Backbench Business Committee, and **Pete Wishart**, MP, minority party representative attending the Backbench Business Committee, gave evidence.

Mr Charles Walker (Chair): Thank you, Pete and Natascha, for coming to see us. We are looking at a vexed issue that remains an ongoing source of intellectual turmoil to this Committee. Do you want to make any opening statements before we crack on? I may have to leave for five minutes, and Jacob will take the Chair.

Natascha Engel: Yes. I don't think it will take us very long. This has been ongoing, and I personally have a certain position on it, which I have held since the Wright Committee. It is that the minority parties, seen from one perspective, are all Back Benchers and can never, or are very unlikely—although now that we have a coalition, it is less unlikely—ever to be at the Dispatch Box and to form part of the Executive. It therefore seems of paramount importance to have representation on the Backbench Business Committee by the minority parties.

In practice, what has also happened is that the Backbench Business Committee membership, by complete chance, is made up entirely of landlocked English people, and we don't have representation from Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales, which is where minority party representation comes from. This is my personal point of view, not the Committee's point of view, but I feel very strongly that the Committee

is better for minority party representation, and that has proven to be the case, having had someone on the Committee for this Session.

I appreciate that the knock-on effect would be that the Committee would have to grow in size. Its size at the moment—eight people—has worked really well, and I don't know what impact that would have on the Committee. I understand that we would have to grow to 11 or 13 to protect the Government majority. That happens on other Committees, so I don't see why it cannot happen on ours.

I fully appreciate that there are other points of view on this, but my very strong point of view is that the Backbench Business Committee and the House would be richer for having minority representation on the Committee.

Mr Charles Walker (Chair): Thank you. Pete.

Pete Wishart: Thank you, Chair. I think this is the third time I have been before this Committee to discuss this vexed issue. To show that we were willing and wanted to make this work, and to make a commitment to the Backbench Business Committee, I have served on it for the past Session in accordance with Standing Order 152J(7), which means I can attend the Committee without being a full member. It has never been an issue, I have to concede, because there are never any votes and I am allowed to play a full part in the Committee's proceedings. You do not get things such as a nameplate on the table and you are not part of the quorum when it comes to making up the Committee, which was an issue a few weeks ago when I did turn up.

For us, it is a sense of being second class in this place. I do not think any other political party would be prepared to endure that. We must be treated equally. We are all Back Benchers and Natascha is absolutely right that there is just no way that we are ever going to rise to the heady heights of the Executive in this House. We are Back Benchers. What you have now is a membership that is made up of the Government and the Labour party. That is not representative of this House, and it is absolutely right that the minority parties should play a full part in the workings and proceedings of the Backbench Business Committee.

I have enjoyed my time on the Backbench Business Committee. It is a good Committee, and we all work well together, but I do not think I would be able to persuade my minority party colleagues to continue in this role unless there was a genuine commitment to have us as full members. I think that at some point, if there was no progress, I would have to withdraw from the Committee again. Such is the feeling among minority party Members, we would have to look at how we engage with

some of the other arrangements throughout the House. It is not good enough. I have showed that I am prepared to make this work and to play a part, even in a diminished role, and I think the House now needs to give something back and to recognise that all Back Benchers in this House.

Q1 Mr Nuttall: Mr Wishart, I am broadly sympathetic with the interests of the minority parties and want to ensure that they are properly represented, not just on this Committee but in all House proceedings. As has been mentioned, we have looked at this before, so I am interested in seeing how it has worked since we looked at it last time, when we reached the position we are in now. How were you selected, or possibly elected, to represent the various minority parties and to attend, as you do? I am pleased to hear that you attend the Backbench Business Committee. Was it by election, or affirmation of a meeting, or did you just take it upon yourself to go? I don't know. Could you explain?

Pete Wishart: The minority parties have reserved places on a number of Committees and institutions of the House, particularly the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, so we occasionally come together for discussion. Sometimes a full meeting of the minority parties is not required and it is a matter of negotiation and discussion, particularly with the DUP and the SDLP. We are in a joint group with Plaid Cymru and the Greens anyway, so we can make that arrangement at our own meetings. We discuss and agree who will be the representative on any Committee or institution. I was asked to go on this because I have been dealing with some of the issues with Natascha and with the Committee.

In the next Session, a DUP representative would probably serve on the Committee. That is how we tend to work when it comes to representation, and it has worked pretty well so far. We try as much as possible to share these tasks and functions, and there is always room for arrangement and agreement.

Q2 Mr Nuttall: It is fair to say you speak on behalf of the Northern Ireland Members, Plaid Cymru, our Green Member—all of them.

Pete Wishart: I have the place just now. I cannot claim to speak for the DUP on issues—

Q3 Mr Nuttall: But in terms of authority to represent them on the Committee, you do represent them all.

Pete Wishart: I have the minority party place. I cannot claim to speak for the DUP, for example, but they will then get a shot, and then it will

go to the SDLP or whatever. But if there is a particular issue they feel is important and should be brought up in the Committee, or if there is a prevailing point of view among their Members, they know to come to me, and I would be able to express that. That happens more regularly at things like the Westminster Foundation and the CPA. I do not think there has been any occasion on the Backbench Business Committee when any of the other minority parties have felt the need to lobby me on something or to say that something has to be brought up.

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful. Thank you.

Natascha Engel: Can I add to that? The Committee has evolved to become representative of Back Benchers, as opposed to Front Benchers. Therefore, it is not really about whether we represent the Labour party, the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats' interests or even the minority parties' interests; this is much more about being Back Benchers as a whole. We would not really have an opinion on whether something that somebody brings us for debate is interesting or has anything to do with certain of our interest areas. The issue is whether it meets a certain set of criteria, which are transparent and openly set—they are about topicality and whether there is cross-party support. They are very general, but they are all about being Back Benchers, rather than specifically which political party somebody represents.

Q4 John Hemming: The original proposals had the Committee elected by the whole House, but with reserved places. What are your views about having the Committee elected by the whole House—say, with STV—but without reserved places? Would that be satisfactory from the minority parties' point of view? What is the Chair's view?

Natascha Engel: As long as we have some kind of minority party representation, I am not really that fussed about how we go about doing that. This may be something that we bring back to the House so that it can make a decision on how and why. When I was on the Wright Committee, one of the issues about minority party representation—there was a whole raft of issues, actually, but Select Committees were the really important one—there was definitely an understanding on the Committee that the reforms would benefit the minority parties, but they had exactly the opposite effect: the minority parties got cut out much more than they were in the last Parliament, where everything was agreed through the usual channels. Now that things are not agreed through the usual channels, the minority parties have actually lost out—certainly in terms of positions on Select Committees. I would be perfectly happy to take this issue back to the House to let it decide how it feels about this—that may be a solution.

Chair: I think that may be a solution. Thomas.

Q5 Thomas Docherty: I have a lot of sympathy with where the Wright reforms got to—their consequences. Peter, for example, was my predecessor on the Administration Committee in terms of doing the Travel Office and so on. There is absolutely an issue—and you and I have talked about this more than once, Peter—but I have two problems about some of the logic that has been mentioned today, which I would like to get your views on.

First, I have tried to do the sums, and maybe I have got this wrong, but technically there are 20 members of the minority parties. Technically, where there is just a single Member, they do not count. But even if we included George Galloway, Naomi, Sylvia and Caroline, my sums are that there are 24 Members—that is about right, isn't it?

Pete Wishart: I think it is 28.

Thomas Docherty: I am not including Sinn Féin, because they do not take their seats, so they cannot be counted. If you look at 24 out of 640, it is about 3.75%. But I take Natascha's point about taking the Government payroll and the shadow Cabinet away, because this Committee has previously ruled that Opposition Front Benchers who are not in the shadow Cabinet are Back Benchers for lots of other things; even then, by my sums, it's still about 5%, so to what extent is it really representative?

Secondly, at the risk of starting off again, between Labour and the SNP, the SNP has six out of 59 seats in Scotland. Leaving aside Northern Ireland, Plaid Cymru have three out of 40 seats—is that right? So, it is 7.5% in Wales and 10% in Scotland. Natascha, if your argument is that you want geographical representation, isn't it better to say that there should be a Scot or a couple of Celts on, rather than saying something that we'd find quite difficult—I'm sure Pete understands—namely that the SNP speak for Scotland and Plaid speak for Wales? We won't start on the merits of that—

Pete Wishart: You can if you want.

Q6 Thomas Docherty: But do you agree?

Natascha Engel: I will go first on that. I wasn't saying that we need to have minority parties in order to get that representation, but that by complete chance we have always had a Committee that has been English rather than having any representation of the other countries in the United Kingdom. That is really down to who the individual parties put forward. It just so happens that we have tended to be a very

English and pretty southern Committee—certainly at the beginning. We didn't even have anybody representing any coastal areas until David Amess. There are interests that are not represented, and not necessarily just countries. All I am saying is that by having someone from one of the minority parties, we have now got someone from one of the other nations. I am not saying that he—

Thomas Docherty: Or she.

Natascha Engel: Yes, or she—necessarily represents Scotland. That was just a matter of interest.

There is absolutely a very strong argument that the minority parties' representation in the House is so small in comparison with the other parties that, in those numbers you have done, it doesn't add up to a whole person. That is the problem. The way it was done through the usual channels previously meant that there were certain Committees where it was agreed that there would be somebody from a minority party. Elfyn was traditionally on the Justice Committee because he has a justice background, not because he's from Wales. Those Committee memberships were divided up, and they have diminished since the Wright reforms.

What has happened through the Wright reforms has meant that it is actually literally impossible for anybody from a minority party to put themselves forward because they have to have nominations from 10 Members of their political party, and there is no minority party that is 10 Members strong. It excludes them from even running for a position, so unless one of the big parties gives up one of their seats on one of the Committees willingly and says, "Right, we give up our seat," it is impossible for the minority parties to get any kind of representation. The Standing Orders got changed in order to allow minority parties to stand for the Chair, but not for just the membership of the Committee.

Pete Wishart: Thomas is absolutely right: according to the pure arithmetic of the House, we shouldn't be on anything. But I don't think that is a particularly wise way for this House to proceed. We do represent large-ish constituencies, and there are many voters throughout the United Kingdom who actually vote for our parties. If you were to apply the rigid arithmetic, of course we shouldn't get a place, but the only other parliamentary institution I can reflect on is the Scottish Parliament, where we over-employ people from minority and smaller parties.

The Wright reforms have been a disaster for us. I don't think we can get away from that. All of my group were actually on a Select Committee prior to the Wright reforms and now I think three SNP

Members are on Select Committees, and two from Plaid Cymru. We have definitely lost out when it's come to these things because of what's happened with the Wright reforms, but you are right, Thomas: if we wanted to apply the arithmetic of the House, then we probably wouldn't deserve a place on any Select Committee of the House. But I don't think that that is the way that this House would want to proceed.

In the absence of the Chair, Jacob Rees-Mogg was called to the Chair.

Q7 Thomas Docherty: Briefly, if I can, Chair—I'll keep it brief, because we have had a queue in the past couple of minutes, which is good—as you know, I have a lot of sympathy with this issue about minority parties across the board. Would it not be more appropriate for the Procedure Committee, or indeed the House as a whole, to look at this issue at the start of the next Parliament? You and I are aware that there is a referendum coming up somewhere in the United Kingdom in the next few months.

Pete Wishart: I think I am aware of that one.

Q8 Thomas Docherty: Yes. We should look at the overall numbers and whether it has worked out for a Parliament. On the business managers trying to divvy it up, I take your point. I think the Conservatives gave up a place on the Scottish Affairs Committee. I don't know how they did it on the Defence Committee, but they did some convoluted things to get some justice restored. Rather than doing one in isolation, is it not better to put our hands up and say, "You know what? The Wright report has not been great for minority parties. We need to look at it across the piece, rather than picking out one Committee to alter"? What are your thoughts on that?

Pete Wishart: You are right. When we first discovered we were on no Committees at the start of this Session of Parliament, we had to do some convoluted exercises to ensure we were on even the Scottish Affairs Committee. We were on nothing else. The parties had the good grace to give up their places and the Treasury Select Committee extended its numbers so Stewart Hosie could be accommodated, as did the Justice Committee for Elfyn, given that they are both senior Members with something to contribute to those Committees. Perhaps it is something that should be looked at—I don't know. We supported Wright, and Elfyn Llwyd served on the Wright Committee.

Natascha is right. I remember when Elfyn reported back to us on this. It was always in the frame that the minority party would be looked after—some accommodation would be reached and it would be all right; don't worry about it. Then, of course, we arrived on the first day of Parliament to find that we were on no Select Committees in the House

and that something dramatic therefore had to be done. It is up to the Procedure Committee, if it wants to look at this issue as a whole, to see whether a proper arrangement can be made. Right now, what we have to do is address this ad hoc, and we have to be accommodated on the Backbench Business Committee. The only way to do it is to increase the numbers so the Government majority can be preserved.

Q9 Martin Vickers: Like colleagues, I am broadly sympathetic to ensuring the minority parties are represented. I represent a coastal constituency, so I am sympathetic to the comments Natascha made a few minutes ago, but the pragmatist in me asks whether we are tampering with something that actually works. As Chair, you receive far more feedback than I do, but I get the impression from colleagues that the one thing they are satisfied with is the way your Committee operates. Are we in danger? Have you had considerable critical feedback or do you find that most colleagues find the Committee works well?

Natascha Engel: Most people find it works well. We also find that a disproportionate number of people make representations from the minority parties, because it is the only avenue they have to get anything, so having somebody on the Committee from the minority parties is really useful. They have a different experience in the House to the larger, organised parties. I definitely think the minority parties bring something completely different to it and give us a completely different view about their specialist interests. We as individual Back Benchers have specialist interests, but the minority parties tend to coalesce around a series of narrower interests, which are interesting as far as we Back Benchers are concerned.

I don't think it would be so terrible for us to expand the numbers on our Committee to accommodate the minority parties as full members. Our quorum is four, and I feel really uncomfortable when there are four of us in the room, including Pete, who is not a fully participating member, and we cannot open the doors because we are not quorate. That feels uncomfortable and wrong. That is not how we should be treating our colleagues.

Pete Wishart: As if I am not there.

Natascha Engel: It is like being in a meeting where you are not allowed to talk. It is ridiculous.

John Hemming is one of the Committee's senior members and we are generally very consensual. We come to scheduling decisions—scheduling is a power, but it is actually quite administrative, so it is not the world's most exciting thing. I just think that we should maybe have a go at expanding the size. The Backbench Business Committee was

first invented in 2010 and is going into its fifth year. It is very, very young. Right from the start, our whole ethos was to try everything and see how it works and to learn from our mistakes. Why don't we just try this and see what happens? If it doesn't work, we will reappraise it. I would much rather have that attitude than be overly cautious about it.

Q10 Martin Vickers: Pete, I can understand your feeling as an associate member—shall we say—rather than a full one, but do you have any feedback from your colleagues in the minority parties that they feel that they have been in any way disadvantaged when they have appeared before the Committee?

Pete Wishart: Most definitely not. In fact, it is quite the opposite. As Natascha said, when minority parties come forward, they are actually very favourably treated and do bring interesting and perhaps novel suggestions for debate that are considered in the same way as every other one. I would encourage minority parties to make representations to the Backbench Business Committee as much as possible. Possibly because I am on it, I can see how it works and see it as an opportunity for debates that we normally do not get through the usual channels, so it is being used well for that.

I had to persuade my colleagues that we should take this opportunity to participate in this Session. There was an awful lot of resistance and a sense that we were going to be treated as second-class citizens in the House. That is the prevailing mood and attitude that exists within minority parties. It is nothing to do with how we are treated when we're there, other than the fact that you are sometimes ignored for the quorum and stuff like that, which is annoying but not really something that gets in the way of being able to do business. Labour or Conservative party Members would not put up with turning up to a Committee and being told, "Sorry, sir, but you are not part of the quorum and you're an associate member." We are all Back Benchers and should all be equal, but it seems to us that some are more equal than others and that we are not equal because we are smaller than the rest.

Mr Charles Walker resumed the Chair.

Q11 Nic Dakin: May I pick up on where Martin was going? I am sympathetic to both your arguments, but it is about how we navigate the practicalities and when to do it. Apart from the issue around the quorum and the fact that it feels a bit wrong, you are a member of the Committee in all other ways. Is that right?

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. I even got an iPad, so I can assure you we're full members of the Committee! But other than that, there is just

a sense that we are second class when it comes to the arrangements. It is just about trying to get beyond that. When we do rearrange the conversation with the rest of the minority party Members, I would have great difficulty in trying to convince them that we should continue to take our place if we are still going to be in some form of second-class arrangement and an add-on to the Committee.

Q12 John Hemming: I would like Pete's response to the question I asked previously, which is twofold, really. The first Session had election by the whole House for all positions—some were uncontested. There was at least an electoral process, but would a system whereby the whole Committee was elected without any reserve places and anyone could stand—it could be done by STV, so that it would roughly balance out in terms of numbers—be something that you would find reasonable?

Pete Wishart: I have to say that I have not considered it. It does seem a reasonable suggestion for how this thing could be done. I do not have any great views on this. I think we all accept that the way that we elect Select Committees—we saw the exercise today for the Defence Committee Chair, for example—and I do not think that anybody has seriously suggested that that should be looked at or changed or improved. I am open to any of these suggestions. What is identified at the heart of your question is that this is not working for us, but it seems to work for the rest of the House. In any conversation, discussion or debate we have about Wright, it has always been described as a good thing, and it probably is for the bigger parties, but it is not a good thing for the smaller parties; in fact, it has been pretty disastrous for us, and that has been the basic problem.

I am grateful for the Committee's comments, and I do not see it as being an issue or a difficulty; it is the Government that we have never been able to persuade to do something. If the Committee is of the view that this is something it wants to resolve, it could perhaps play just a little bit harder with Government. The last time the Procedure Committee recommended that we be given full membership, the Government point-blank turned the proposal down.

Chair: Unfortunately, Peter, I have learned the hard way that not much happens unless Government puts its shoulder behind things. As Natascha said, this may well be taken through the Backbench Business Committee to the Floor of the House to see where things go.

Natascha Engel: I had not understood John's proposal. I do not think it could ever work—it will not work. If you have the whole Committee open for election by the whole House, you will get Whips involved, and there are no two ways around that. You may end up with a Committee

that is just of one-party membership. I think you are making it less likely to get minority parties.

Q13 John Hemming: No, I am saying by STV. In other words, the Whips would not be able to dominate it that way. Also, it would be a secret ballot.

Natascha Engel: I think it would be less likely for minority parties to get any representation then.

Q14 Chair: If this went to the Floor of the House and there was a vote on whether minority parties should have a full seat on the Backbench Business Committee, how likely is it that the House would vote for that? You are going to ask Labour MPs, Conservative MPs and Liberal Democrat MPs to vote for it. How realistic is it to expect a positive outcome?

Natascha Engel: Unrealistic.

Pete Wishart: Toast. No chance.

Natascha Engel: Yes, toast. I agree with that.

Chair: I am not sure how this happens without a vote in the House, but I might be wrong.

Q15 Jacob Rees-Mogg: I was just going to go back to something you said earlier, which concerns whether it is right to look at the Backbench Business Committee in isolation. There are 20 Select Committees, each of about 10 members, so there are roughly 200 posts. The minority parties are entitled to somewhere between six and 10 members. Wouldn't it be better to say that, across all Committees, there are 10 slots available for minority parties? There must be some agreement as to which Committees there are, and you may even draw that by lot. Then, the minority parties, in a way, can decide whether the thing they really wanted to be on was the Backbench Business Committee or the Treasury Committee. That needs to be fair across all Committees, otherwise you cannot get away from this problem that there is a group of about 25 Members, and you need 80 to demand a position on a Committee. Do you think minority parties would be happy with that?

Pete Wishart: I think that is a reasonable solution; it is certainly better than what we encountered when we first started this Session. I think we could look at that seriously, but I would like to make a distinction between the other Select Committees in the House and the Backbench Business Committee, because it is different and distinct from the rest. It is supposed to be a Committee for Back Benchers, but we are, effectively, excluded from it, which seems almost bizarre.

For other Select Committees, yes, I agree, but I remember the good old days on the Catering Committee, which I served on. The minority parties were given a list of Committees we could serve on, and one of them was the Catering Committee, which I made a good stab at trying to serve on—some of the trips to the vineyards were actually quite nice. That aside, if there were a number of Committees to choose from, it would be Treasury, Foreign Affairs and so on; it would not be Administration or the Backbench Business Committee, with due respect to its Chair.

Q16 Thomas Docherty: When we talk about Select Committees, it strikes me that there are perhaps two types of Select Committee—departmental Select Committees and what I tend to call the domestic Committees, which probably includes the Finance and Services Committee, Administration, this Committee, the Standards and Privileges Committee and so on. Thinking out loud here, I take your point, Peter, that if we said you could have 10, you would say, “Foreign, Defence, Home” and so on—that’s fair enough. As fun as Procedure is—we know it is the most august, Chair—

Chair: Absolutely.

Thomas Docherty: Chaired—briefly—very, very well, I have to say. But as fun as it is, you wouldn’t necessarily sit down as a caucus and said, “That’s our top. We will sacrifice our Treasury position for it.” Do you think that we need to look at it and say that if, for argument’s sake, there are 10, it should be seven scrutiny Select Committees, a domestic Committee and whatever else after that? Then—and perhaps this is a question for Natascha—where do you place the Backbench Business Committee? Is it a domestic Committee, or a departmental Committee, or something completely different—what is it?

Natascha Engel: We have never tried to define it. It is definitely not departmental. In that list it is much more like this Committee or the Privileges Committee—it is definitely much more domestic—but it has a very odd role. Its focus is incredibly narrow, and it is much more of an administrative forum than any of the other Committees. It is a Select Committee in name only.

I was thinking, though, Charles, that the Liaison Committee is looking at next steps in its review of the power and effectiveness of Select Committees. That might be an avenue through which we can push something, whether it is a pilot or opening up this whole debate about the minority parties and Select Committees—unless you wanted to do a full report on it yourself, of course. But it might be something that we could get the Liaison Committee to look at.

Q17 Chair: Again, I could be wrong, but I think that the issue we have got is that if we were to increase the size of your Committee—for example, to allow for minority parties to have representation on it—that would require changes to Standing Orders, which would require a vote on the Floor of the House of Commons. I think we have identified that that would be very difficult.

Natascha Engel: Unless it was pre-negotiated.

Q18 Chair: Yes, unless it was pre-negotiated. I don't mean to sound defeatist, but what we recommend or want to happen is almost irrelevant, because ultimately this will be taken on the Floor of the House.

Natascha Engel: I agree, but I think that if the Backbench Business Committee, the Procedure Committee and we as Chairs take that to the Liaison Committee, which would be far more open to these sorts of idea—and also, Graham Allen's Committee has recently done a review of the Wright reforms—we could at least start the conversation. If anybody tables a motion on this it will just be voted down—that is absolutely without doubt—but if we see this as a first step of opening negotiations, we may succeed in getting a new kind of Committee in the new Parliament, under the umbrella of looking at all representation.

Q19 Chair: Pete, I think you are realistic in your expectation that this isn't going to change in time for 4 June, when we return to the House—it just isn't, because we rise today—so this requires you or the DUP to continue on the Backbench Committee with a sort of observer status for the final Session.

Pete Wishart: Where it leaves us is that you have to review it. We have done it for this Session of Parliament and I have enjoyed the experience. It is a good Committee to serve on and it has worked quite well, other than the sense that you are not really a full member—that is always in the back of my head when I am sitting there, and I am sure that will be the same for any other colleague who is doing that. What we need to see are signs of progress. We have shown the grace to go on the Committee and have this diminished status as a member, but we need to see signs that this is going somewhere.

One of the more philosophical questions about all of this is what might happen in the next Parliament, after the next general election. If all the predictions of seismic changes in the third party of this House are borne out, there could be more minority party Members than there are third party Members currently. Are the Wright proposals robust enough to deal with that? I would have to question that—they probably aren't, so

what happens at that point? Wright was set up when there was always going to be a sizeable number of Liberals in the House and a constant change between a Labour Government and a Conservative Government. It barely deals with coalition.

Chair: Pete, who knows? If 18 September goes well for you guys, you will not have time to sit on Committees because you will be negotiating Scotland's departure from the Union. But I take your point. Collectively, you might be bigger than what is euphemistically referred to as the third party.

What do we do, colleagues? Do we now meet in private and discuss the useful evidence we have taken?

Q20 Jacob Rees-Mogg: Could I ask one question about what we were discussing at the beginning? Would it be acceptable for minority parties, now that we have fixed-term Parliaments, if they had votes for a portion but not the whole of a Parliament? If you are basically entitled to a vote for a third of the time, and if over a five-year period you had a vote for one and a half years and sat as an observer for the other three and a half years, would that be an acceptable compromise? It gets round the problem that, because the Committee is basically there for the whole Parliament—even if the Chairman currently isn't, the Committee is—

Natascha Engel: No, we are all re-elected every Session.

Chair: Every year.

Q21 Jacob Rees-Mogg: You could have it so that—

Chair: Two years out of five.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: You could have one extra member who shared a vote with one of the Opposition Members—it would have to be with an Opposition Member rather than a Government Member, to maintain the Government's majority—then for two thirds of the time that Opposition Member could have the vote, and for one third of the time you could have it. You could do it sessionally rather than meeting by meeting, otherwise it might get too complicated. Is that a compromise that is just too complicated and fiddly, or does it meet everyone's concerns?

Pete Wishart: I think I would have great difficulty persuading my colleagues that it would be a suitable compromise to be a full member for part of the Session, but then return to the semi-status of being an observer. I do not think that is an elegant solution to our difficulty.

If we go forward with this, we must leave aside all the other issues to do with Select Committees and deal with this one specifically. We have not made a fuss about any other Select Committee. We just accept what has been given to us and have just got on with it. The Backbench Business Committee is just so different, in that it is supposed to ensure that a Committee of colleagues can listen to representations from other colleagues to have business dictated directly by Back Benchers, and we are excluded from that, which is absurd. It should be totally inclusive of everyone in the House, to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to be part of it.

We are happy to accept the fate bequeathed on us in this Parliament for other Select Committees, but we have made a case for this one specifically. I have sat on it in this Session to try to make it work, but I think we must now start to resolve the matter by dealing with it distinctly and have it stand out from the rest.

Natascha Engel: Can say at the end that I think it is down to you as minority parties to decide whether you want to participate as observers up to the next Parliament. Had you not come as an observer, we would not be having this conversation now, so positive participation has worked really well. If you continue to participate positively, then that will give us more ammunition to be able to take that forwards, I think.

Q22 Mr Nuttall: Very briefly, Natascha mentioned—or perhaps Pete did—that there has been an occasion when the Committee was inquorate because you could not count the minority party representative as a member, obviously. Does that occur very often, or occasionally?

Natascha Engel: It is very infrequent. In fact it was the first time—the first meeting that he ever came to. It was just a bad coincidence.

Q23 Jacob Rees-Mogg: Is it possible to provide a nameplate in future?

Natascha Engel: You do have one now.

Pete Wishart: Everyone else's is put out; I have to take mine and put it there. I have never actually thought of asking the Clerks to do that.

Chair: That is ridiculous—you can have the use of the swivel chair on Fridays—

Q24 Mr Nuttall: Would there be any real problem if the Committee were extended in size? Would it make the discussions, for example, too complicated?

Natascha Engel: No. We have quite high participation levels for a Select Committee, but that is partly because we are small—eight is quite small. We have one long-term sick person, who has not been for a very long time, and in spite of that we have pretty high attendance.

Q25 Mr Nuttall: If you went to 11, it wouldn't be the end of the world.

Natascha Engel: It wouldn't be the end of the world, no.

Q26 Chair: Pete, the problem I have with you is that I actually quite like you—

Pete Wishart: I like you, too, Chair.

Chair: I was all ready to be the hard man of the Procedure Committee, but you are quite a compelling witness. Natascha, you know I like you a lot, so thanks very much.

Natascha Engel: The feeling's entirely mutual, Chair.

Chair: This is quite a big problem, though. It is quite a big issue, because of the whole essence that we cannot require the House to do anything; everything we recommend is voted on—or most things, unless they go through without a vote. Thanks very much.