



Liaison Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Review of Investigative and Scrutiny Committees

Tuesday 19 June 2018

10.35 am

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Members present: Lord McFall of Alcluith (Chairman); Earl of Courtown; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Low of Dalston; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Evidence Session No. 10

Heard in Public

Questions 74 - 79

Witnesses

I: Lord Patel; Baroness Taylor of Bolton; Lord Forsyth of Drumlean; Lord Gilbert of Panteg.

Examination of witnesses

Lord Patel, Baroness Taylor of Bolton, Lord Forsyth of Drumlean and Lord Gilbert of Panteg.

Q74 **The Chairman:** Good morning, everyone; welcome. You are all are familiar faces, but for the sake of the *Hansard* writers can you identify yourselves?

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I chair the Economic Affairs Committee.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: I chair the Communications Committee.

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: I chair the Constitution Committee.

Lord Patel: I chair the Science and Technology Committee.

The Chairman: How can the House of Lords best support you as chairs to become more effective? Lord Forsyth, I am grateful for the note you gave us last night on communications, so perhaps you and Lord Gilbert could focus on those points. First, Baroness Taylor, how can we best provide support?

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: We are served very well by the staff we have. It is important that committee members individually work hard and take their responsibilities seriously, and I think we do that on the Constitution Committee. Given that we have one clerk, one adviser and some outside expertise, the committee does very well to get through the amount of work it does. We do it and we keep the show on the road, but there is no slack, and if there is one hiccup—a clerk or adviser being ill, or something of that kind—we are stretched. We need a bit more by way of resources, maybe not all the time, but a pool that we can draw on when we have particular pressures.

There may be a question about how long a particular clerk or adviser stays with a committee. I do not think they can stay indefinitely, but we have to make sure that turnover is not so rapid that we do not get the full benefit of their expertise bedding into a committee.

Lord Patel: As you know, Lord Chairman, I took over last July. You and I had a conversation about support, because there was quite a lot of pressure on the then staff and the way they had to work. We have a new clerk and the same analyst, and it now functions better, but I make the same point as Baroness Taylor; we can only do so much. The amount of work we could cover is much greater, so it produces more stress on the staff available to do all the work we have to do. In later questions I think we will focus more on the kind of work that can be done that is not being done now. Extra support will produce better results.

The Chairman: There could be extra support for Chairs; you had wide engagement with your ad hoc committees, particularly on health.

Lord Patel: Yes. I regard the job of the Science and Technology Committee as addressing policy issues in science areas and sometimes in other areas, such as where science impinges on health. We do not do that very often, but in the past, when I was a member of the committee, there was better support and resources for that, and it produced better reports.

The other issue is about what more support would allow us to do for Members themselves. We are starting a science seminar for Members on important areas.

The Chairman: Lord Forsyth, your paper, which is very good, focused on communicating the work of committees and professionalising the role of committees. I think Lord Gilbert made those points as well, so do you want to speak to that?

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I do not know whether you want me to repeat the points in the paper, but I can give you the nub of it. I am new to this. Just after the election, I took over the Economic Affairs Committee from Lord Hollick, who did a brilliant job as Chairman. I had been on the committee for some years. Until I became Chairman, I did not realise how much work was involved in being Chairman of a committee. I Chair a bank that is quoted on the main market of the London Stock Exchange, and some weeks I think I do more work for the Economic Affairs Committee. It is very intense.

The Chairman: Does that say a lot for banks?

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: No, it says a lot for my weekends having disappeared. It is quite intense. Quite how our staff, which is limited to three people, manage, I do not know. To make a comparison, the Treasury Select Committee has a staff of 12, including people from the FCA and outside. Quite how they manage the conflicts, I do not know.

The Chairman: I think you are wrong about that.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: You would know.

The Chairman: I had 10 years' experience on that committee. It is not 12. However, we will put that aside.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I checked with my clerk this morning, and he showed me the names.

The Chairman: Maybe people get drafted in, but they are not full-time staff.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: The committee has access to far more resource. I do not think we can argue with that. I hope that the changes that will occur when we leave the European Union and lose our EU committees will enable resources to be freed to do the day-to-day stuff.

The Economic Affairs Committee could be doing far more. I personally favour longer in-depth reports. The House of Lords is much better and gets far more out of people. It is a kind of David Frost syndrome; if you do not attack your witnesses, they tend to tell you things that perhaps they would not have done, on reflection.

There is also the degree of expertise that we have in this House and on my committee. Sometimes I feel somewhat outgunned. I have two former Chancellors of the Exchequer and two former Permanent Secretaries at the Treasury. It is a really high-powered committee and we could be doing far more.

We produce excellent reports. The most recent one, on higher education, created quite a stir. The Prime Minister wanted to talk to me about it last week, and the Select Committee on Education wants to meet us to discuss it. Why has that happened? Because it got a degree of publicity and I sent it out to people in advance. I spent a large part of Sunday trying to send out the report. If you want to send an email to all Members of the House of Lords, you cannot; you are blocked from doing mass emails of that kind, so I did it in As and Bs. I thought I had better target it a bit, and when I went to the list I discovered that a number of Peers who are deceased are still on it. To me, that is a classic example of how poor our communications support is.

The press officers are meant to support all committees. They do not have expertise in a particular committee. Each of our committees should have its own press officer who attends the sessions and knows the lobby correspondents well. They should be able to see from the evidence coming in where there is a story. For example, my committee is meeting this afternoon; we are currently looking at RPI versus CPI as a measure of inflation. We have received some evidence that suggests that the two national statistical bodies are not complying with their legislative requirements by not forcing the issue on this matter. That is a newsworthy story. I can guarantee that it will be completely missed; no one will sit through two hours of our committee, or whatever it is.

I could go on all afternoon, but basically the message is that there is absolutely no point in asking busy people to devote their time to producing excellent reports if the result is that the report gets published about eight weeks later when the Government deign to provide a response and the Whips deign to provide an opportunity for a debate, usually late on a Thursday afternoon when everyone has gone home. Unless we can promote that work effectively, it will not be influential.

So that I do not sound as if I am just blowing my own trumpet, when Lord Hollick was chairman of the Economic Affairs Committee he got the then Housing Minister, the very able Gavin Barwell—now much accelerated—to come in for a private session with the committee to discuss our ideas. The Government's response was delayed because they said, "Would you mind if we delay the response, because we want to put many of your thoughts and ideas in our White Paper?"—which they did. We can be very influential, but we need the means to achieve that.

I have one final point on communications. I am not exactly not politically partisan, but there is a tendency on the part of the House authorities to feel that we must not say anything that looks a bit political, or might be seen to be attacking one particular party's view. Our reports have always been unanimous. We have had only one vote in the years we have been going, which was under my chairmanship, and even then the report was agreed. The benefit of the House of Lords is that we are not out to make party points and we can make points that would be very difficult for elected Members of the House of Commons to make.

As with boards of public companies, we should have some record of attendance by Members. They want to be on these committees, but the attendance of some people is not very good, and that should be noted. If they are not able to attend the committee, they should come off them and make way for people who are, because it is very difficult to maintain a long inquiry if people are not up to speed. I have probably said enough.

Q75 The Chairman: That is excellent. I well remember the report of the Economic Affairs Committee, which you and I were on, about the economic implications of Scottish independence. That was very influential because we adopted an embryonic communications strategy by going to Scotland in that interesting debate, so I accept 100% what you said.

Lord Gilbert, there is very poor communications support and we need the means to be influential. You have great experience in this area. Can you add to that?

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: I will not repeat much of what Lord Forsyth said. I agree almost entirely with it, and I will tell you why I think it is important. In step with all the work we are trying to do to improve the reputation of the House, we should be doing a much better job of drawing serious attention to the excellent work of the Select Committees, but we need to go out and earn that attention. A shift of resource and some focus on better communicating the work we do would be well rewarded.

As other noble Lords have said, we are well supported by our very small staff teams. They do an amazingly good job of handling each report. They are very expert. Our clerk has been there for a while. The staff give serious expert advice and are very knowledgeable on the subject. The committee is well supported, but that is what we do. We get through a report; we do it well, and we publish it.

An area where we would benefit from a little more help is in getting a focus on publicity for the work as we do it and on drawing attention to our evidence sessions, although members of the committee should do more, and I should certainly do more. As Lord Forsyth said, the nature of our evidence sessions is such that they are polite and very well informed, so we get a lot more out of witnesses than in some other forums. In every single one of our recent evidence sessions, a witness has said something noteworthy and worthy of serious press attention. If we had made a note of it and promoted that evidence session to the media proactively after the event, we would have got significant attention for

the evidence. We need to focus on the evidence and on the inquiry as it is proceeding, not just on getting attention for the report.

Apart from anything else, the report lands in a whole range of other news. Our last report, which I think was potentially quite newsworthy, landed at the same time as the Government were considering an intervention in Syria and Mark Zuckerberg was giving testimony in Congress. Consequently, a one-off hit of putting out a press release and trying to get attention for our report was simply not going to work.

Alongside working hard through the inquiry to get media attention on the evidence we are receiving and on our deliberations, another very important role for committees and for us as Members of the House of Lords is to engage with external organisations and take our work to civic society, professional organisations, charitable bodies and bodies that would be interested in a subject on which we are very expert, and position ourselves as people who can make a serious contribution to wider public debate, not just in Parliament and government. The combined effect of that sort of approach and a better understanding of the work of the House is why communication of Select Committee work is important.

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: Not all committees are looking for publicity in the widest sense. A lot of the work of the Constitution Committee, or even the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, is about communicating to other Members and Members of the other House. We have to take it as it comes.

Members of this House do not always have as clear an idea as they could about what will be happening. When I got Lord Forsyth's email 10 days ago, and looked through it on a Sunday, when I have a little time, I thought it was a very good way of making Members of this House understand what was coming up. That was a one-off as far as I was concerned. It was different and useful, and we could do more of that kind of thing in alerting Members before something comes out, not just reading in a press release that something has come out today.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: The thing we did was really done by our clerk, Luke Hussey. We did very short two-minute videos with committee members. The criticism of the Treasury was actually done by Lord Burns. We attached those as links to the press release. People are very busy; they do not have time to read a summary, but they will watch a video where the main points are put across. The videos were put on YouTube. Within 24 hours, 1,000 people had looked at videos with the main conclusions of a House of Lords report.

Luke did a brilliant job, but they were pretty amateur, and with some in-house facility they could be very professional. Perhaps we could have some kind of unit to do that and communicate to Members. We all get vast amounts of material. If you watched a couple of videos you might think, "That's quite interesting. I might have a look at that", whereas the usual thing, in my case, is that you put the report on your desk and

think, "I must read that". A month later the pile has got higher and you never get round to reading it.

The Chairman: Baroness Taylor, I think the point you make is that a communications strategy is essential. Who do we communicate with, and how? Last week, Michael Clancy from the Law Society of Scotland mentioned that a communication strategy should be embedded in a committee at the outset. I think Lord Gilbert feels that is the case. Given your expertise in that area, can you help us as we go along, because it is very important to have that communication strategy and to look at professionalising committees?

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: A number of Members of your Lordships' House are expert in communications in a variety of fields. It would do no harm at all to convene a small group of them to look at how we communicate and get the most impact for the work as we are doing it, and how we professionalise the way we dissect a report, find the story lines and proactively sell them to the media. I think we could have found eight or nine serious stories in our last report that would have been attractive to different elements of the specialist and national media. I would be very happy to sit down with other colleagues and have a look at how we might do that.

I echo Lord Forsyth's point. It is vital, certainly for the Communications Committee, clearly for Lord Forsyth's committee but maybe not so much for other committees, that there is a press officer in attendance at all the meetings who is able to take stuff from the meetings and produce the story lines.

The Chairman: We will take you up on that very good suggestion about a small group.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: That is really helpful and answers my question about communications strategies. Incidentally, I agree with everything that has been said.

I want to pick up something else Lord Forsyth said. He said he did not realise until he became chair of the committee how much work it involved. That is my understanding. I have not been chair, but I have been a member of committees and I have seen the chairs work extremely hard. We have seen it recently on the ad hoc Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media where the Chair, Lord Lipsey, has been working very hard. Peers do not always like to make comparisons with the other place, but for the past few years the Commons has paid chairs of Select Committees. Do any of you think there is an argument for an extra payment for being the chair of a Select Committee in the House of Lords?

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: No, and I do not think there should be in the House of the Commons either.

Lord Patel: No.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: No. I want people to love our committees. If we started paying, we would be attacked.

The Chairman: That is quite clear.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You all say no.

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: We all say no.

The Chairman: Lord Lipsey came to see me yesterday and left me a paper on communications. He is at one with what you are saying.

Lord Patel: The Science and Technology Committee communications strategy clearly differs depending on which inquiry we are doing. We try to be proactive at the beginning of an inquiry and have some kind of press communication, or wider communication, and to do the same at the launch of the report, including what Lord Forsyth mentioned about doing a video, which was highly successful.

The Chairman: It was very good.

Lord Patel: It produced tremendous press interest; we got coverage in virtually every dimension of the media. We also have a Twitter account that is quite overloaded and difficult for the staff to cope with, because we already have over 50,000 followers.

The Chairman: I think it is 60,000.

Lord Patel: It is increasing. That produces a problem of resource. Some people expect some kind of dialogue or response, which is not always possible for the staff to deal with when the volume gets bigger.

The last report we produced, which was much more technical and specialist, was on the life sciences industrial strategy launched by the Government. At the launch, we produced a cartoon-type video that was well received by the sector, because it highlighted the issues raised in the report. I have no doubt that the next one we are planning will receive much wider publicity because of that.

Q76 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** I hope that if I manage to curtail some of the more unhealthy aspects of my lifestyle I might still be in the House of Lords in 10 or 20 years' time. My question is twofold. What do you believe is the purpose of House of Lords committees and, importantly, where do you think House of Lords committees should be in 10 to 20 years' time?

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: Assuming we are not superseded by election. The role of the House of Lords is very much to hold the Government to account and give the House of Commons opportunities for second thought, but because we are not the prime Chamber we have the opportunity to take on wider issues that may cross departments, as we do with some of the ad hoc committees. We can have a more interdepartmental look at some issues. Some of the work we do on issues

is good and has been good in the past, and we have had ad hoc committees.

My main concern, which was touched on vaguely earlier, is that the House is too afraid of controversial issues. We almost equate controversy with party politics. There are a lot of issues that are very controversial but that totally cut across the political divide. We have had suggestions for committees on certain issues in the past. ID cards is one of them. I would very much like this House to take that on board because I think we could be very purposeful, productive and take the heat out of some of the party political arguments on issues such as prostitution and the present controversy about legalising drugs. The House of Lords could play a very purposeful role.

Politicians in the Commons are very wary about touching any of those issues because of the political consequences. I would like to see the House of Lords being a bit bolder in the issues it takes on. We could have a very significant role in moving public debate if we were to do so.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I agree with every word of that. To try to answer the question directly, when colleagues said to me, "What on earth were you doing advocating building more council houses? We didn't think you would be in favour of building more council houses", I said, "The evidence led us to that conclusion". The strength of House of Lords Select Committees is that they are evidence-based. We do not tolerate people who try to make partisan political points. That is not our role. The fact that it is evidence-based, that I do not really care if I upset anybody in my party and that there is no patronage involved, which is increasingly a feature in the House of Commons, gives us an edge.

Where will we be in 20 years? I hope that we will be in a position where we have a House of Lords with the kind of expertise that we draw on in our committees, but that we are not able to tap into because the committees are so constrained by resource. This is in a week when our sub-committee is considering trade and all sorts of things under our rules. Lord Gilbert made the point that we have to be able to demonstrate to the wider country the quality of the work being done here, and get away from the idea of half-asleep people in funny clothes claiming £300 a day for which they do nothing, which is the image we have in the country. We will not dispel that image by saying it is not true; we will dispel it by showing the depth and quality of the work we do.

The most egregious example is the fault not of this House but of the BBC. For a whole year, the BBC was following people around the House. It filmed committees but did not even show the work of the committees, which is a bit like turning up at Buckingham Palace and not showing the Queen. This is central to what the House does, but we are not getting that across. Whether we are here in 20 years' time doing what we are doing will depend on how effective we are at communicating that work and persuading the country that we are acting in the nation's interests.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: I agree. The work of committees looking across government departments produces very good reports. I am struck by the number of departments we take evidence from in some of our inquiries and the continued lack of joined-up government. Our reports can help with that.

In 10 years' time, we should have a set of Select Committees looking at the big, broad fundamental issues facing the country and the connection of policy, perhaps driving ad hoc committees that look at specific issues that arise from those. For example, recently a number of Select Committees have been looking at apprenticeships from different perspectives, not repeating one another's work. I know Lord Forsyth's has. Our committee produced a section on apprenticeships in its report on the theatre industry. A model for the future could be Select Committees looking at broad policy-making, but then, perhaps from the work of those Select Committees, ad hoc committees could be formed to look at immediate public policy issues that arise.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I am sorry to talk too much, Chairman, but I want to give one little anecdote, for which I will probably be told off, to show how people do not understand what we do. We want the Secretary of State for Education to come to our committee to discuss our latest report. We have been trying to get a date. We were offered dates on Thursdays and Wednesdays. I said to the clerk, "Go back to his office and explain that Ministers' first duty is to Parliament and we meet on Tuesday afternoons".

To be fair to the office, they sorted it out, but they did not realise that our committee met at a fixed time on Tuesday afternoons. There is a big gap for the House of Commons and the Executive about what we actually do. It is not just communicating to the public and to ourselves; it is also communicating to the Executive.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: I always find it odd that the media tend to measure what Members of the House of Lords do by the number of times they speak, or whether they have spoken in a debate. I agree that some noble Lords ought to speak a little more and others perhaps a little less. I am not encouraging anybody. I hope that, if communication can work and we can get a wider understanding of the work of Select Committees and ad hoc committees, it might also be a measure of the work Lords do. Having served on three ad hoc Select Committees, I know how much work goes into them.

Lord Patel: The Science and Technology Committee, in the House and sometimes outside, is regarded as a technical committee. In the House itself, a lot of people think that it is science-based and highly technical and those who are really interested will take part in it; the rest of the House does not. That can be changed by making the science that forms the basis of policy important, because all policies at the end of the day are based on some evidence; otherwise, it is not worth having them.

There was a point about communication to the wider public. We meet in Committee Room 4 and sometimes in other Committee Rooms. There is a facility to do broadcasts on the web, but not on television channels. Committee work is hardly ever recorded on the television channels. Many more people would follow it and watch it, particularly sessions on science-based areas, if it was possible for them to see the sessions.

We do not have facilities in all Committee Rooms to do that; only some Committee Rooms are equipped for it. I am starting seminars—the first is on 11 July—to better inform Members of the House on key areas of science. Numbers are limited because of the facilities. The first one will be on the threat of global infections, and we will move on to technical and other areas in due course.

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: One thing that has not been mentioned as a possible role for committees in the future is post-legislative scrutiny, to see how the legislation we pass is being implemented and what the difficulties are. We have a very significant role there.

The Chairman: Lord Norton has given us both a paper and evidence on that. We are very alive to that really important point.

Lord Low of Dalston: There is a question on the sheet that I have been invited to ask, but first I want to ask Lord Forsyth a little question about communication. Lord Patel suggested that there might be a bit of a burden on staff, particularly if people were interacting with the committee and responding. When you made those videos that 1,000 people looked at, did anybody come back to you in response?

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I think 1,000 people responded within 24 hours. I do not know what the latest number is, but today I have received two emails from people saying that they have problems with student loans and things of that kind and asking whether I can help. I will refer them to their Member of Parliament. I have been on and off the Economic Affairs Committee for quite a number of years. In all those years, I have never had that experience.

Someone made the point that there will be a resource issue arising from more exposure, which will need to be dealt with. I do not do Twitter; I do not tweet or whatever, so fortunately I miss most of the stuff people say about me, but I am beginning to think that perhaps one ought to succumb. The truth is that a lot of the people we need to reach do not read newspapers, and one thing we have not touched on is that our expertise and ability to communicate on social media is at about my level, which is not a very complimentary thing to say.

Q77 **Lord Low of Dalston:** That is very helpful. I will move on to my question. Can you tell us what you think are the key strengths and weaknesses of House of Lords committees and their current structure? Since that is quite a pro forma question, you might like to concentrate on the structure.

Lord Patel: First is the support the committee receives. I am speaking for my committee. A large inquiry, as Lord Forsyth says, takes longer, but we are able to do it well because we explore the depth and breadth of the subject. That takes a long time. At one time, Science and Technology did one short inquiry and one long inquiry. In that way, we could do three inquiries in a year. Now we tend to do shorter inquiries, but we do not cover the subject in depth, and the sector outside says, "You did not cover X, Y and Z, which are important". They are right. Support for committees is the first thing.

The second thing is support for the chairman. I do not know about the other chairmen, but, in my case, whenever we do an inquiry, lots of people want to see me. Whether we are going to ask them for evidence or not, they want to meet me. It is not possible for me to handle that. Most of the time I say I am sorry that I do not have time to respond. I do not want to place an extra burden on the clerk by arranging meetings with those people. If you have a meeting and there is a real purpose for it, you need somebody who will take a note of it and feed back to the work. Again, I cannot add that, but it is an important point if we are to develop and strengthen committees.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: I agree. We need support for chairmen. We all get lots of requests for meetings, and I try to see everybody who wants to see us. We get a lot of written evidence. Our latest inquiry will probably be for 12 months because it is an in-depth inquiry, and we will have a lot of written evidence. If members of the public take the trouble to write to you in response to an inquiry, you have a duty to read their evidence. There is a lot of work, probably three days a week of committee work.

One of the strengths and weaknesses is the way reports are produced. It is very formulaic. The strength of that is that the professional teams—the clerks who review each other's work—do a really thorough job. They know how the reports are produced; they do a very good job of analysing and checking each other's work, so our reports are always sound and they never go wrong. However, we look at a lot of different subjects and I wonder whether the formulaic approach to producing reports works well.

In our last inquiry, we wanted to explain the digital advertising market, which is incredibly opaque and different, and we would have liked to produce something really graphic in the report to demonstrate that. There was no opportunity in the way reports are produced to get into subjects using graphics and different ways of presenting evidence. The balance between accuracy, thoroughness, intellectual integrity and creativity in presenting our reports is something we should look at.

Lord Low of Dalston: Do you think we have the balance right between sessional and ad hoc committees?

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: On the whole, yes. There may be some merit in the Liaison Committee looking at some of the things coming out of a

number of sessional committees and spotting an issue that could lend itself to an ad hoc inquiry, but I think the balance is right.

The other thing I wonder about is giving notice of all the questions to our witnesses. A lot of our witnesses these days are professional witnesses. Our committees do a very good job of interrogating them, because they know where they are coming from. Members are polite and they are knowledgeable in their questioning, but, if we send out nine questions, witnesses come along with nine three-minute statements that they read to camera. We have experimented with one or two of our witnesses by sending them only three or four broad questions and allowing 20 minutes on each one for members of the committee to ask supplementaries and hold them to account. I wonder whether that practice works well now.

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: I agree with what has just been said about the formulaic nature of reports. It has strengths as regards checking, but there are some weaknesses. We have to be willing to be adaptable.

The balance of ad hoc committees is probably okay at the moment, but we have to reconsider that post Brexit. We may need to look at the structures again, and I know you want to take that opportunity.

The greatest strength is that members of committees do not grandstand, as you might see in other places. The importance of that cannot be underestimated. As to weaknesses, although committees try hard, I think we have to try even harder to ensure that the people who come to give evidence are not just the usual suspects.

The Chairman: Absolutely. There has to be a UK-wide approach.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I agree with all of that. This is going to get me into trouble, but I would like the powers of the usual channels to be somewhat diminished in this area. Committees should have power to co-opt and bring in expertise when they are pursuing particular areas of interest. The Economic Affairs Committee has a sub-committee that usually looks at the Finance Bill. At the moment, there is a whole load of things that are very topical and that we could be looking at.

Our committee—you may have been on it at the time, Chairman—looked at the role of the big four post the financial crisis, and we made a number of recommendations about the conflicts between auditors and people who were doing other work. Those were subsequently introduced at European level and were very influential. I am looking at what has been going on with the big four at the moment, and I would love our committee to be able to do something, but we simply do not have the resource. I look around the House and see lots of people who could make a contribution to an inquiry of that kind. I know this is all about resources, but it is also about being topical. We have not yet decided on our next long-term inquiry, but if our committees are seen to be relevant and influential people's whole perspective of the House of the Lords will change.

The Chairman: It would be good if you took up the issue of Beaufort

Securities.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: That is another one.

The Chairman: That is live at the moment and it is very important.

Q78 **Earl of Courtown:** How do you think that any future committee system we develop can cover gaps in scrutiny? Do you think that working more closely with Commons committees could help to cover that?

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: The latter point is really important.

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: It is.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I have asked our clerk to invite the Education Select Committee to a joint meeting to discuss some of the issues, and it may be able to follow up on them. It is really important. One of the things that is very irritating is that we do not always know what the House of Commons committees are going to do, or they do not know what we are doing, so people duplicate work. Quite frankly, if we are doing a long inquiry, we will cover it in much greater depth than the other place, where sometimes one has the impression that the staff drive it and members come along and read out their questions and do not always attend terribly well.

The Chairman: Sarah Wollaston, Chairman of the House of Commons Liaison Committee, has given evidence to our committee. She recommended that both Liaison Committees meet. To your point, Lord Forsyth, Frank Field had coffee with me and said that in his present inquiry on Carillion corporate governance he would value guests from the House of Lords, so we are opening up that conversation.

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: We need more flexibility.

Q79 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Lord Forsyth implied that he was not very happy about the way in which members and Chairs of committees are nominated and chosen because it is by patronage; it is by the Whips.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: It cannot be in my case.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I wondered about that. It seems very unusual. Would any of you favour changing the system, or are you all happy to leave it to the Whips to make that decision?

Baroness Taylor of Bolton: I am not in favour of changing the system. It is up to the party groups to create their own system, as we do in the Labour group. The Labour group approves the nominations. If other parties have their own ways, that is for them. There might be merit in what Lord Forsyth was saying about the possibility of co-opting people, but that is a separate issue. I would leave the existing system as it is, but perhaps with a bit more flexibility. I declare an interest.

Earl of Courtown: A number of you commented on attendance at committees. I assure you that the Conservative group looks at that very

carefully.

Lord Patel: I have no further comment, except to say that when party groups choose members, particularly on a technical committee such as Science and Technology, they should bear in mind what the committee does. It does not help either the member or the committee if it is not an area where they want to contribute.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: Looking at my committee, that certainly works. Members of the committee, from all parties and the Cross Benches, are expert and experienced in the area, but interestingly that has not made it an echo chamber. We have ended up with committees, certainly in my case, of really good and appropriate people, and our job now is to get what they do more valued.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: If the question is whether we should elect Chairmen and go to the House of Commons system, I do not think that would work terribly well. There might be a certain amount of game-playing, and as a Tory I might be somewhat disadvantaged. I agree with Baroness Taylor that it is for the party groups to sort out.

I hinted at reducing the power of the usual channels. I agree with Baroness Taylor that one of the absolutely screaming issues is whether we should have some form of national identification, through cards or some other system. For two years running, people have put that forward as a possible ad hoc committee, and for two years running it has not happened and there has been a row on the Floor of the House. That is what I am thinking about. Perhaps the system needs a bit of tweaking, because, if there was a vote in the House, there would be overwhelming support for the issue to be looked at.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You could have a word with your members on the Liaison Committee the next time we consider it.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: I thought I was getting into trouble.

The Chairman: That was a terrific session and really helpful. The points you have made to us about staffing, support and communications strategies are important. We have had submissions on structure on which we can engage with you, but I like to think that as we go on with the inquiry we will continue this discussion. It has been hugely helpful to us this morning. Thank you for your attendance.