



Liaison Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Special inquiry committee proposal—The evolving role of horticulture

Monday 28 November 2022

3.55 pm

Members present: Lord Gardiner of Kimble (The Chair); Lord Bradley; The Earl of Courtown; Baroness Coussins; Lord Judge; Lord Kennedy of Southwark; Baroness Scott of Needham Market; Lord Taylor of Holbeach; Baroness Walmsley.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Private

Questions 1 - 4

Witness

[I](#): Baroness Fookes.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence.

Examination of witness

Baroness Fookes.

Q1 The Chair: Thank you very much for attending this meeting of the Liaison Committee. We would very much welcome two to three minutes on your proposal for a Select Committee inquiry, and then we would like to have about five minutes of questions. Over to you.

Baroness Fookes: I have based this on the four sections given. In the first place, there is an embarrassment of choice when it comes to selecting members of the committee. If one looks at the environmental side of horticulture—climate change and biodiversity—we have ample numbers of Members with that kind of experience. If we are looking at research, we again have people who are notable for the amount of work they have personally put into a variety of subjects. If it is education, and there is a great concern about how we train horticulturalists, we have Peers at every level who are able to talk about technical education, higher education and so forth.

As to whether the inquiry would complement the Select Committees of the other place, I suggest that it would not complement them so much as fill a gaping hole, because as far as I know horticulture in its broadest sense has never been the star performer. The most it has ever been is a minor player. I believe that there is real merit in having something on its own.

As to whether it is containable within one year, for a subject that has never had any attention paid to it, one year would be manna from heaven. I am quite sure that it would fit into a very workmanlike inquiry in one Session. I would hope that thereafter, having caught the attention of other Select Committees, they might pick it up for further, more detailed research or work. That is the way I would see it, because I do not want a committee that meets for one year and then disappears into the ether and is never heard of again.

The Chair: Thank you for that succinct and distinct introduction.

Q2 Baroness Walmsley: Which departments other than Defra do you think the inquiry might make recommendations to?

Baroness Fookes: Certainly education, because of the inquiry into qualifications and so forth. I did not mention this because I was trying to be brief, but health and its impact on people is another one. You would certainly want to bring in local government, or whatever it is now called—I think the levelling-up committee covers it—and to look at green spaces and their impact on the environment and people's health. I would even add the DWP, because it has responsibility for coaching and encouraging people into different careers. One of the difficult things for horticulture is that it is spread over a number of different departments, which tend not to work with one another and certainly not across one another. I hope this would be useful.

Baroness Walmsley: The department of business?

Baroness Fookes: Yes, indeed.

Q3 **The Chair:** I was thinking about innovation in this area. Do you have any thoughts about technological advances in terms of upskilling and so forth? Do you see that as an element of this consideration? Obviously we know that there are labour shortages, but at the same time the message I am receiving is that, in the medium to longer term, we will need to have more innovation and technological advances.

Baroness Fookes: That is covered by what I called research, for example into developing new strains of plants that are resistant to climate change. That is one aspect of it. The other is certainly technological in getting rid of seasonal jobs that cannot be done now except by hand but with technological innovation could probably be done using machinery. It is pretty tricky, but it is well worth looking at. I think some countries are ahead of us on this.

It also links up with agriculture, where, again, various innovations are taking place. Instead of horticulture being the Cinderella and always at the tag end, I would hope for it to have a much more prominent role in conjunction with agricultural interests. After all, they both share in common the soil and plants.

The Chair: Perhaps at this juncture I should declare a farming interest, but not a precisely horticultural one.¹

Q4 **Lord Taylor of Holbeach:** I am not in such a position. I have to declare a profound horticultural interest², but I hope the committee is happy that I talk to Lady Fookes about this. She and I were both present at a very interesting presentation about extension. This work is being done by Lord Curry of Kirkharle, who I believe is a member of our committee; his interests have certainly been mentioned, but he is not here today. He chaired a group that focused on the way research tied up with practitioners and how links were formed—or not, as the case may be. I wonder whether Lady Fookes had considered whether this was actually quite an interesting notion that might be worth focusing on.

Baroness Fookes: It is more than an interesting notion; it has real importance. I raised a question at the breakfast meeting that we both attended on that very subject. That is why I referred to the tie-up, if you like, with agriculture in this special way. I did not mention any Peers' names. I could have mentioned Lord Curry, but I did not like to; I was not sure whether it was my place to suggest people, but since it has been raised, yes.

The Chair: Any other questions? No? Thank you very much for a very

¹ Lord Gardiner of Kimble's relevant interests can be found on the Liaison Committee website here:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/30353/documents/178618/default/>

² Lord Taylor of Holbeach's relevant interests can be found on the Liaison Committee website here:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/30353/documents/178618/default/>

strong proposal and for your time.

Baroness Fookes: I am grateful to the committee for letting me get this far.