

**Evidence for the Liaison Sub-Committee  
Inquiry into the Scrutiny of Strategic Thinking in Government  
by Dr Duncan Robertson**

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- To scrutinise strategic thinking in Government, Parliament needs to have a clear understanding of what the Government's strategy actually *is*.
- Strategy can appear to change from government to government, or even within governments. This makes scrutinising strategy difficult. However, if the *underlying* strategy is codified, this will allow Parliament to scrutinise changing governments more effectively.
- A long-term Statement of National Values defined by Parliament could help Parliament to scrutinise government plans and strategies against a document that lasts longer than the cycle of individual governments.
- Systems thinking (scrutinising and understanding the complexities and trade-offs of the individual elements within the overall system) is starting to be used in government. Parliament should investigate whether this could be used within Parliament. The Liaison Committee would be a perfect place for this due to its unique position in bringing together Select Committee chairs.
- This can help to counter the resilience vs. efficiency cycles.
- By being part of the strategy-setting process, using the Statement of National Values as a guide and arbiter, Parliament will not only be in a better position to scrutinise government strategy, but would allow Parliament to be central to this fundamental part of the strategy-setting process.

**Parliament's potential role in setting the UK's Fundamental, Long-Term Values**

1. To scrutinise Government strategy and Government thinking, Parliament needs to know what that the national strategy *is*. This is very often implicit. The disadvantage of writing and codifying a strategy is that it can be validated as is being carried out, which present challenges for those responsible within Government.
2. Parliament's role has analogues (and of course important differences) to that of a board of non-executive directors of a public company, scrutinising the decisions of the executive.
3. Long term strategy evolves in business organizations, and can, for example in the case of strategic failure, be catalysed by the appointment of a new Chief Executive. However, to follow good governance, this change of strategy should always be communicated to and approved by the Board. While the intentions of a new government may be presented, this may not be a fully

coherent strategy. There should be a process where a government's strategy is communicated to and approved by Parliament, preferably being co-created by Parliament and the executive.

### **The Lack of a Defined Statement of National Values**

4. For long-term (defined as longer than the term of a typical Parliament) projects (which can include strategic investments), there needs to be an understanding that this is a task that transcends party political thinking, and is fundamental to the long-term success of the country. Strategy should not be something that is there for its own sake, but should be a driver of and a vehicle for change.
5. Determining the range of National Values will not be easy, and is an exercise for Parliament to undertake rather than Government. The risk is that the setting of a Statement of National Values becomes a party-political process, but this can be avoided if created using a systems-based approach.
6. By determining National Values, differences of opinion and priorities between different government departments and government ministers can be checked against the Statement of National Values.
7. Some of the most successful companies that invest for the long-term have such statements, which allow scrutiny of strategic thinking against that document which guides decision making.
8. If Parliament is to be in control of scrutiny of government strategy, it first has to be in control of setting of that Statement of National Values that in turn allows scrutiny of the government's strategy to determine whether government policy is consistent with those National Values.
9. While the Liaison Committee does a good job of bringing together the equivalent of departmental non-executive directors to question the analogue of a Chief Executive, there is still a difficulty when there are conflicts between the goals of individual departments. A Statement of National Values could help to arbitrate between the inevitable trade-offs between the objectives of individual government departments.

### **Resilience vs Efficiency Cycles**

10. The scrutiny of strategic thinking should be robust to changes in focus and changes in government, which can lead to non-optimal cycles developing. When 'slack' is in the system, there is a short-term incentive to remove it to gain efficiency savings. But when there is pressure on the system, and as a result the system may break down, there may be an over-reaction and resources may be committed that are sub-optimal.

11. To determine whether an objective is being carried out successfully, there is often no objective measure with which to compare the current situation. If there is no measurable objective function to compare against, there is a difficulty in scrutinising the performance of the strategy.
12. One way of reducing the effects of these changes in focus is to adopt systems thinking within government.

### **Systems Thinking**

13. Parliament's Liaison Committee works well in bringing together heads of Select Committees. In some way, this is an analogue to Non-Executive Directors questioning a Chief Executive Officer.
14. When Departments work to bring to account work in their own department, there is a risk that decisions are made that optimize the work of that department rather than optimizing the work of the system as a whole. This may have the strategy-weakening effect of optimizing the individual decisions within each department. That may not (and will probably not) optimize the work of the cross-government strategy, or strategic objective.
15. There have been initiatives within government to implement systems thinking, notably the work of the Analysis Function within government (Government Office for Science 2022). While this can be seen as a science-led and could be criticised as a technocratic approach, it is however a way of thinking that allows scrutiny of strategy, or, in the words of the Government Chief Scientific Adviser:

*“It is vital that Civil Servants are able to confidently and effectively engage with the complexity and uncertainty inherent in the problems we tackle in Government. Systems thinking approaches allow us to understand the full impact of interventions across department and policy area boundaries – ultimately leading to better solutions.”*

### **Parliament's Role in the Setting of and Scrutiny of Objectives**

16. For Parliament to truly be able to scrutinize strategic thinking within government, Parliament needs to be involved with the development of that strategy within government. This is not a trivial matter, and one that needs to be done over a significant time scale. Parliament should be central to this process.
17. A strategy for the UK needs to be defined that transcends the lifetime and whims of individual Parliaments.
18. Systems Thinking allows a whole-of-government policy to be decided, which may be of interest to the Liaison Committee which may want to bring together and help decide between the different objectives of Ministers (and indeed interests of Chairs of individual Select Committees).

19. While there is institutional memory within Parliament, the very fact that Parliament is reconstituted every five years or so means that much of the knowledge can be wasted. A systems document, codified in a Statement of National Values, can reduce the risk of knowledge being lost and can lead to more efficient and effective government.
20. By referring back to the National Values statement, strategies can be evaluated and scrutinised against agreed, long term, objectives, in order that time devoted to scrutiny is not wasted on deciding what those objectives and values are.