Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira – supplementary written evidence

I'm submitting this evidence to supplement the oral evidence I gave on the 10th of March 2020.

I'm Professor of Politics and Co-Director of the Centre for Democratic Engagement, at the University of Leeds, as well as the current Chair of the Study of Parliament Group and co-editor of the journal *Parliamentary Affairs*. My research focuses on parliament and public engagement, a topic on which I have written extensively, covering a wide range of legislatures, besides the UK Parliament; as public engagement often takes place online, a considerable part of my research has focused specifically on the use of digital by parliaments.[1]

1. Before considering how effective UK institutions, and Parliament in particular, have been in using technology to facilitate democracy, I want to break it down into four separate elements, which all contribute towards facilitating democracy: information, education, participation and actual contribution to democratic decisions. Thinking in terms of these four elements, I'd say that UK institutions have become much better using technology for the first two (information an education), but not as effective for the latter ones.

2. However, there is plenty of innovation taking place. This often takes place more at a local level, see for instance the Kirklees Council and its democracy programme, as an excellent example of using digital technologies to keep local communities informed and to involve them in Council decisions. Our devolved legislatures also have plenty of innovative practices, as has the UK Parliament.

3. Focusing on the UK parliament specifically, whilst there is considerable innovation and many examples of initiatives which aim to promote better participation and contribution towards democratic decisions, this is still very ad-hoc and dependent on specific Chairs, Representatives and/or Officials (Clerks), rather than the result of a systemic approach to using technology to facilitate better participation and contribution to democratic decisions.

4. Examples of innovative and good practice within the UK Parliament include:
   a. the new House of Commons e-petitions system which keeps regular communication with signatories and integrates the use of digital technologies with its own processes, making sure public engagement collated through digital have an impact onto parliamentary practice;
   b. the use of hashtags for a variety of purposes, such as by House of Commons select committees to set their own agenda, such as the #MyScience for the Science and Technology Select Committee, through which members of the public were able to suggest themes for the committee's inquiries (this approach was also used by the Scottish Affairs Select Committee);
   c. the use of a more deliberative type of platform, Discourse, to host discussions on three inquiries (on plastic packaging, on invasive species and on pavement parking) by three select

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[1] See, for example, my following publications, on which this evidence draws: 'The Impact of the Internet on Parliaments: a Legislative Studies Framework', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2007; 'Parliamentary Functions Portrayed on European Parliaments' Websites', *Revista de Sociologia e Política*, 2009; How Deeply are Parliaments Engaging on Social Media?', *Information Polit*y, 2013 (with D. Bender); 'Integrating the view of the public into the formal legislative process: public reading stage in the UK House of Commons', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 2017 (with L. Thompson); 'Do Parliamentary Debates of e-Petitions Enhance Public Engagement with Parliament? An Analysis of Twitter Conversations', *Policy & Internet*, 2019 (with M. Asher, V. Spaiser); 'Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions', *Policy & Politics*, 2019.

committees in the Commons, leading to useful public contributions through a deepening of issues and by bringing up new issues unknown to the committee;

    d. the use of web forums for a variety of purposes, namely to check on a government response to a report (Education Select Committee);

    e. the use of video to bring in the testimonies of vulnerable groups to MPs and Ministers, in the Universal Credit and Survival Sex inquiry of the Work and Pensions Select Committee.

5. What makes these examples "good practice" is the use of technology that is **specifically suitable to the problems and audiences at hand** and the fact that **it is integrated into the ongoing parliamentary business** (that is, it is not simply a gimmick, it leads somewhere).

6. There are plenty of examples of good technology out there, ready to be used to facilitate democracy. What often lacks from public institutions, and namely the UK Parliament, is:

    a. an understanding of how technology can be used,

    b. an approach that is flexible enough to suit technology to problem and audiences and

    c. a reflection on how the use of technology should be integrated with the ongoing parliamentary process (rather than being a gimmick or an add-on).

7. In order for the UK Parliament to become more effective in using technology to facilitate democracy it needs to:

    a. Encourage experimentation, with evaluation. Technology thrives on experimentation, but parliaments are not good at experimenting/trying new things (for lots of reasons). Innovation sometimes happens, but then disappears, because there is no evaluation and no tracking down of what happened and what were its effects;

    b. Integrate the use of technology into the ongoing parliamentary process, rather than see it as an add-on;

    c. Match technology to problem and to audience;

    d. Focus more on "listening" tools and processes rather than "broadcasting": this includes using technology to create opportunities for the public to have a say, but also using technology to assist officials and representatives to deal with the public's response. Technology can help considerably to cut through the noise created in social media, for instance, to identify genuine voices of different publics.

    e. Retain Information and Technology (IT) staff: public institutions are notoriously bad at attracting and retaining IT staff (again, for lots of reasons). This is particularly true of parliaments, which is why Parliament needs to be particularly pro-active in making sure it attracts and retains IT staff;

    f. Skill up: linked to the previous point, parliament needs to step-change its use and awareness of technology and how this can assist parliamentary work. This is about IT staff, but also about thinking through processes which integrate skilling up.

8. As an aside, there was some discussion about deliberative democracy in our oral evidence session. I would like to make the point that "deliberative methods" can be used, without being a full blown deliberative democracy exercise. Deliberative methods of engagement are about providing the space (online or face to face) for in-depth, reflective, and inclusive discussion. Digital spaces can be used to provide for this very effectively, as long as officials know what they are doing, namely how to facilitate a discussion online, which feels inclusive. Online deliberative methods of engagement can in fact sometimes suit better some groups, such as young people, or groups who wish to stay anonymous – for instance, years ago, one of the first online exercises done in the UK Parliament was with a group of women who were victims of domestic violence. Doing the discussion online, with careful facilitation from officials, was an excellent way to obtain the insight of this vulnerable group.