

Select committees

A guide to select committees, including their composition, strengths and limitations

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The basics

Select committees scrutinise government departments by establishing inquiries, gathering evidence and producing reports.

- The House of Commons select committees focus on specific departments (e.g. the Education Committee).
- The House of Lords committees have a wider brief (e.g. the Constitution Committee).

Government ministers, opposition frontbenchers and party whips do not serve in select committees, meaning that such committees give voice to backbench concerns.

Strengths

- Select committees can:
 - interview government ministers in public hearings
 - respond to current controversies with their inquiries
 - appoint recognised experts to assist inquiries
- Chairs can be of high quality. MPs might select a departmental expert (e.g. Sarah Wollaston, Health Committee), an energetic newcomer (e.g. Tom Tugendhat, Foreign Affairs Select Committee), or an experienced politician (e.g. Yvette Cooper, Home Affairs Select Committee).
- The composition of members and chairs encourages cross-party cooperation.
- The influence from government, shadow cabinet or party whips on the selection of committee chairs/members is limited, allowing genuine scrutiny.
- Studies from 2015 estimated that 30–40% of committee recommendations end up as government policy.

Selection and composition

The Wright Reforms (2010) made important changes to select committees. Select committees normally have 11 members, one of whom will be the committee chair. The chair has an important role in directing the committee's inquiries. The composition of members and division of chairs reflects the party balance in the House of Commons. A typical composition currently is:

- 5 Conservative
- 4–5 Labour
- 1–2 smaller parties (e.g. SNP)

Committee members are selected by MPs from their party, while most chairs are elected by a secret ballot of all MPs. The Liaison Committee, whose membership is composed of all committee chairs, exists to coordinate select committee activity.

Limitations

- The government has 60 days to respond to reports, but is not compelled to take up any recommendations.
- Interviewing by ministers can become an interrogation in order to gain media coverage.
- The turnover of members damages committee effectiveness. The Defence Committee saw an 83% turnover during 2010–15. Replacements might not be fully informed or motivated.
- The Exiting the EU Committee chaired by Labour's Hilary Benn is testing cross-party cohesion. In May 2018 Conservative committee members John Whittingdale, Andrea Jenkyns and Jacob Rees-Mogg all publicly criticised it for being too pro-Remain. According to Jenkyns only 7 of the 21 committee members voted Leave.

Select committees in action



David Davis and the Exiting the EU Committee, December 2017

Backbenchers are keen to scrutinise the Brexit process, while the government does not want to release information that weakens its negotiating position. Tension between Davis and the committee has been clear. An example was when Davis admitted to the committee that his department had conducted no detailed economic-impact reports on Brexit, despite previously claiming 57 reports existed. Davis, although embarrassed, faced no further action for misleading Parliament.



Amber Rudd and the Home Affairs Committee, April 2018

The committee invited Rudd to give evidence for its enquiry into the Windrush scandal. In her interview she denied the Home Office had targets for deportation of illegal immigrants. Leaked e-mails subsequently suggested there were targets, and that Rudd was aware of them. She resigned from her post, taking full responsibility.



Carrie Gracie and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, January 2018

Gracie was BBC China editor until January 2018, when she resigned over gender pay equality. She accused the BBC of a 'secretive and illegal pay culture'. She was interviewed by the committee that month and the inquiry into BBC pay continues. This case acts as an example of the responsiveness of select committees to current issues.

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