



PRESS NOTICE

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Strengthening Powers of Scrutiny: major report on strengthening the powers of Parliament

Dominance by the whips should be reduced and backbench MPs' control increased in public bill committees to improve further the detailed scrutiny of legislation, according to a new report by the Constitution Unit just published. The move would make significant changes to the culture of Parliament, in tune with the current pressures for achievable reform.

For the past three years, public bill committees (PBCs) have replaced standing committees to provide much more detailed and transparent scrutiny during the committee stage of Bills, with the power to call new evidence from organisations outside Parliament. At present, while the quality of scrutiny has undoubtedly improved, the timetable for committee stages is still too tight and the criteria for selecting witnesses too opaque.

In the report *Strengthening Powers of Scrutiny*, the first major assessment of how public bill committees have been functioning, the Constitution Unit recommends further significant reforms:

- Membership of PBCs to reflect a wider range of opinion among MPs, with a priority given to their interest and expertise in the subject rather than their malleability with the whips.
- Witness selection and the timetable for hearings, at present exercised opaquely through the "usual channels" i.e. through the whips with government whips predominating, to be shared transparently with the whole committee membership.
- Greater publicity to be given well in advance to calls for witnesses.
- More time to be taken to consider their evidence.

In the longer term, the report encourages a move towards permanent legislative committees for all government Bills. It also recommends that the Committee of Selection which chooses MPs to serve on for committees, should become more independent of party control.

Report author, Jessica Levy, says: 'The introduction of PBCs is probably more significant than we realise. With encouragement and further modification, these new committees could contribute to a changed approach to scrutiny and to the role and status of Parliament, as part of a wider change in culture. The reform deserves to be exploited, and what better time to do so than now.'

Director of The Constitution Unit, Professor Robert Hazell, comments: 'Public bill committees have been described as "a step and a half in the right direction". If the recommendations of this report are accepted, these important new committees will be moving more strongly in the right direction and making a real contribution to the scrutiny of legislation.'

Note to Editors

- As a result of the 2006 reforms, public bill committees (PBCs) can call for 'persons, papers and records' during the course of their scrutiny of a bill, in addition to continuing to hold probing sessions to examine proposed legislation line-by-line. Members sitting on PBCs now have access to more and better quality information to aid their duties of scrutiny. The committee stage has become more engaging, with debate more fruitful. PBCs are also far more transparent than the standing committees which they replaced, with organisations and individuals outside Parliament given an official platform to influence legislation.

- The report draws on a series of almost 30 interviews with the key players in public bill committees to date – government and opposition spokespersons, backbenchers, clerks, and witnesses – and an examination of documents relating to all such committees in the 2006-07 and 2007-08 sessions.
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