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CONTRIBUTION

by

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to the General Debate on

“The relationship between the academic world and parliaments”

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Study of Parliament Group

We recently welcomed our colleague Mr Remco Nehmelman, the Secretary General of the Senate of the Netherlands, as a member of the Study of Parliament Group (SPG). I should declare an interest as a now honorary member for life of this group, having paid my small annual subscription for many years.

The SPG had its origin in the publication of a book by Professor Bernard Crick on The Reform of Parliament. Michael Ryle, who was then a reform-minded Clerk in the House of Commons, contacted Professor Crick to point out the practical flaws in his proposals. Finding that they shared a positive attitude to reform of Parliament, they founded the SPG in 1964 to bring together academics, who had an interest in Parliament but lacked practical understanding of how it worked, with practitioners working inside Parliament, who had no outlet for their opinions on how Parliament should be reformed.

The Study of Parliament Group holds a short annual conference in Oxford every January, and hosts an annual lecture, normally in London, in the summer. In addition to occasional evening meetings at Westminster during the year, the Group convenes small study groups to prepare evidence for select committees, to write articles for academic peer-reviewed journals or to contribute to edited volumes of essays for the general reader on the themes of modernising Parliament.

The original academic membership was largely drawn from specialists in the study of political institutions, but later expanded to include constitutional lawyers, feminist scholars with an interest in the political representation of women, and even an anthropologist or two. On the practitioner side, Clerks of both Houses at Westminster have been joined by staff of the House of Commons Library, and staff of the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

With one exception, no members of either House are invited to be members of the Group though they may be invited to give a lecture, or attend and speak at the annual conference or other meetings. [The exception is a Professor of Politics at the University of Hull who was a leading member of the SPG long before he was elevated to the House of Lords.]

Similar Study of Parliament Groups have been established in Canada and in Australia, where the author of this paper was a guest speaker at the 2024 Australian Study of Parliament Group (ASPG) conference held in Perth, Western Australia, on the theme of freedom of speech.

Parliamentary Studies module

The Parliamentary Studies module is a higher education module which is co-taught by university tutors and officials from the Houses of Parliament. It is the only higher education module formally approved by the Houses of Parliament.

The module provides students with a detailed knowledge of how Parliament works in both theory and practice. It is delivered through a collaboration between the Houses of Parliament and a UK higher education institution. The institution provides academic and theoretical content, and Parliament provides practical teaching about the work, processes and business of Parliament. In the past year the author of this paper has delivered seminars on Friday afternoons at the universities of Hull, Keele, Royal Holloway London, Sheffield and Strathclyde and also addressed students from the university of Essex on their visit to Westminster, which normally forms part of the Parliamentary Studies module.

Parliamentary Thematic Research Leads

Parliamentary Thematic Research Leads (TRLs) are mid-career researchers embedded three days a week in Parliament, whilst retaining their substantive academic post for the remaining time.

The purpose of the TRL is to facilitate and enhance the use of research evidence and expertise in Parliament (in both the House of Commons and House of Lords) through effective knowledge exchange, collaboration and processes. Each TRL leads on a specific policy area.

To achieve this, TRLs conduct three primary activities:

- strategic support for the production and delivery of research evidence for Parliament, within a broad policy area
- activities to support the development of a research and innovation landscape that facilitates and encourages knowledge exchange between Parliament and the research community
- participation in a network of Thematic Research Leads to share intelligence and insights across policy areas.

Evidence to select committees

In 2019 the House of Commons Liaison Committee, which comprises all the Chairs of the different subject select committees, reviewed the effectiveness of select committees.

The Liaison Committee concluded that committee recommendations and conclusions are often at their strongest when they use cutting-edge and expert academic research. Connecting select committees to research communities, and synthesising academic study for non-specialist audiences is vital.

Among the several successful approaches taken to this work which the Liaison Committee commended is UK in a Changing Europe: a research hub, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, to provide an authoritative, non-partisan and impartial reference point for those looking for information and analysis about UK-EU relations. The Centre's affiliated researchers have submitted oral and written evidence over 100 times since its inception in 2015.

The work of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) includes conducting rapid evidence reviews for select committees.

The Liaison Committee called for more systematic and better understood structures within which co-operation between select committees and the wider research community can be more effectively enabled and enhanced.

The House's Knowledge Exchange Team, based in POST provides training events with universities on how to engage with Parliament, helping connect select committees with academics in a wider range of institutions and different levels of seniority.

POST runs internships and placements which enhance researchers' understanding of parliamentary processes, as well as providing access to research expertise for select committees.

Public funding for universities is affected by assessment of their performance against several criteria including the Research Excellence Frameworks (REF).

The “impact agenda” in REF has incentivised higher education institutions to think much harder about the real-world effect of their research.

Partly as a result of work from within Parliament, the REF 2021 acknowledged influencing public debate and scrutiny as a key indicator of impact.

The Liaison Committee admitted that parliamentary committees needed to make their own contribution. Consultation on topics for inquiries, and the publication of Areas of Research Interest would make it much easier for research communities to engage with select committee scrutiny. So too would setting realistic deadlines for providing evidence and having a strategic long-term plan for their inquiries. Lastly, committees should also do more to demonstrate when expert advice has been vital in their work.

Acknowledgement of how evidence is used in an inquiry helps encourage re-engagement in the future. Committee acknowledgement helps academics to be recognised by their own Institution for the work they put into submissions to parliamentary committees. A survey conducted by POST found that a lack of recognition was seen as a barrier to greater academic engagement with parliamentary committees.