Are select committees powerful watchdogs over government?

Abstract

There has been much research into government responses to select committee recommendations, and whether these were implemented into government policy. However, there is a significant gap in research regarding the use of references to select committees during parliamentary debates. This research project investigates the frequency, MP (Member of Parliament) and context of mentions of ‘committee(s)’ during general House of Commons debates regarding ‘home affairs’, to determine whether they were used to demonstrate the committees’ role as a ‘powerful watchdog over government’. The findings conclude that select committees are ‘powerful watchdogs over government’.

Introduction

Select committees are groups of parliamentarians, either from the House of Commons or Lords, appointed to examine and report upon the work of government departments or wider issues, and publish reports detailing their findings and recommendations for government to respond to (Parliament, 2017a). Their ability to evaluate the work of government means that they are often considered to be ‘watchdogs’, ensuring greater transparency of departments by holding government accountable for its policies (Judge, 1990). They are also ‘powerful’ in terms of wide recognition of their work and their ability to ensure government cooperation with their proceedings (Ryle, 1997, p. 65-66). However, they are limited in terms of formal powers as they cannot propose, amend or veto legislation (Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon, 2009). This research project investigates the ‘powerful watchdog’ role of select committees in House of Commons debates, by examining how frequently ‘committee(s)’ was mentioned, who spoke about committees and whether the context demonstrated their ‘powerful watchdog’ role. It focuses on five general debates concerning ‘home affairs’, some of which are tagged with committee reports. A combination of the analysis of frequency, speaker and context of
mentions of ‘committee(s)’ throughout these debates determines that select committees are indeed ‘powerful watchdogs over government’.

**Literature review**

It is generally agreed that select committees play a significant role in Parliament. It is contested that much actual parliamentary deliberation takes place in select committees (Mattson and Strom, 1995, p. 249). The Liaison Committee (2000) concur, declaring that the select committee system is successful as it ensures that ministers are questioned over their actions and thus held accountable. Ryle (1997) concurs, detailing how committees are confident with taking on controversial issues, often against the wishes of government whips. Moreover, since the Wright reforms in 2010, select committees have become “more powerful and independent-minded than ever before” (d’Arcy, 2011). They also provide MPs with detailed information on policy areas which would not be available to them otherwise, thus enabling them to make more informed decisions and scrutinise government (Jogerst, 1993, p. 128). Despite this, the formal powers of select committees are very limited compared to those in other legislatures, and therefore rely heavily on government acting upon its evaluations (Bates, Goodwin and McKay, 2017). This can prove difficult, as demonstrated by the Home Office’s response to the Home Affairs Committee’s Asylum Accommodation Report, which was released almost a year after the report was published (Parliament, 2017b). They also rely on government to cooperate with them during hearings, and minister are often reluctant to give committees the answers that they want (Norton, 2013, p. 141). Inefficiency within select committees impacts effectiveness, with much overlap between the work of committees and failure to follow up recommendations (Barclay, 2013; Russell and Benton, 2011).

It is extremely difficult to objectively measure the influence or effectiveness of select committees due to numerous pressures on government to change its policies (Rogers and Walters, 2004, p. 338-339). Yet much of the existing research around the influence and
effectiveness of select committees attempts to quantify policy recommendations and legislative impact. Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon (2009) focus their analysis on the Education and Skills Committee, and found that government rarely reject committee recommendations and often claim that they are already acting upon them. Yet when looking at actual policy put forward by the government, the impact was significantly less (Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon, 2009). It is considered that this may be due to a “delayed drop effect”, meaning that recommendations may take a significant amount of time to be upheld (Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon, 2009). However, Russell and Benton (2011) contend that only less significant policy changes are more likely to be implemented, with less than one in ten reports analysed considered to be agenda-setting. Tolley (2009) concurs, finding that only 3% of relevant government bills were amended due to the Joint Committee on Human Rights’ recommendations. In terms of other measures, Russell and Benton (2011) outline the value of “non-quantifiable committee influence” including spotlighting issues and exposing failures. Russell and Benton (2011) also point out that there is a gap in existing research regarding how select committees are used to scrutinise government during parliamentary debate. Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon (2009) and Tolley (2009) do look at the frequency of references made to committees and reports during parliamentary debates, but fail to analyse what the context of these references say about the role of committees. This gap in the research has influenced the focus of this research project.

The contributions that select committees make to policy debates is arguably its most important role (Russell and Benton, 2013, p. 789; Maer and Sandford, 2004, p. 7). Assisting the Houses of Parliament in debate and decision is one of the core objectives of select committees (Liaison Committee, 2002). Russell and Benton (2013, p. 789) illustrate this through the Health Committee’s influence on the smoking ban, as the committee’s work on the issue is recognised as the ‘tipping point’ for the policy. This influence is due to the cross-party nature of committees, meaning their work in acknowledge by both government and opposition
parties (Russell and Benton, 2013). Moreover, members of committees frequently contribute to parliamentary debates due to their expertise and the respect that they receive for their committee role (Russell and Benton, 2013). Research conducted by Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon (2009) found that most MPs who made references to the Education Committee were members of the Education Committee themselves. Furthermore, Maer and Sandford (2004) argue that committee reports are often mentioned in the appropriate debates, as a second reading debate regarding the Judicial Appointments and a Supreme Court for the UK mentioned the Constitutional Affairs Committee’s report on the matter four times. Select committees can ensure that they influence parliamentary debates by ‘tagging’ their report to the relevant debate, meaning their work is more likely to be acknowledged and utilised in the debate (Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon, 2009; Maer and Sandford, 2004, p. 37). Committees and their work are often cited during debates to scrutinise government, meaning government cannot afford to ignore opposing opinions (Ryle, 1997, p. 68). However, the ability of select committees to influence parliamentary debate is limited by its lack of formal powers, as they cannot require an issue to be debated on the floor of the House (Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon, 2009). Nor can they ensure that their reports are formally debated (Ryle, 1997, p. 73). Between 1997 – 2000, only 29 of 396 departmental select committee reports were debated in the chamber (Hansard, 2001). Those that are held are often poorly attended and those that do attend are mainly members of the committee thus questioning their ‘powerful’ nature (Ryle, 1997, p. 74). Their ‘watchdog’ role is undermined by ministers’ use of committees to pursue government’s agenda, as demonstrated by the Education Committee’s support for introducing tuition fees in 2003 which was utilised by ministers to sway opposing government backbenchers during parliamentary debates (Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon, 2009). More research is required to discern whether select committees are used as ‘powerful watchdogs over government’ during parliamentary debates.
Methodology

This research project used quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine the frequency, speaker and context of references to select committees. Whereas only quantitative content analysis was used by Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon (2009) and Tolley (2009) to count mentions of committees and reports, this project’s use of qualitative content analysis allows for such mentions to be evaluated to understand whether committees are used as ‘powerful watchdogs over government’. As Halperin and Heath (2012, p. 319) contend, qualitative content analysis is “better able to tell us about meanings, norms, values, motives and purposes”.

Frequency was calculated as the total number of times that the word ‘committee(s)’ is used, and which committees are mentioned. Each time ‘committee(s)’ is mentioned, it was noted who mentioned them, whether they are part of governing or opposition parties, and whether they are a member or chair of the committee that they have spoken about. Finally, based on the literature, the mentions of ‘committee(s)’ were initially coded into four categories:

1) ‘Committee(s) used to scrutinise government’
2) ‘Committee(s) used to praise government’
3) ‘Dismissive of the work of committee(s)’
4) ‘Acknowledges the work of committee(s)’

However, as coding was inductive, four more codes arose whilst the research was being carried out. These were:

5) ‘Government cooperating with committee(s)’
6) ‘Government not cooperating with committee(s)’
7) ‘Addresses member(s) as 'chair' or 'member' of their committee(s)’
8) ‘Mention of ‘committee(s)’ is irrelevant to debate’

Categories 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 evaluate how ‘powerful’ select committees are. This looks at power in terms of recognition, ability to ensure government cooperation in committee work, and the
prestige that comes with being a member or chair of a committee. Categories 1 and 2 evaluate whether they act as ‘watchdogs’. In this context, acting as a ‘watchdog’ is use of the committee and its work to monitor government, particularly in terms of scrutiny. To be able to categorise context effectively, passages of speech which mention of ‘committee(s)’ were categorised as one occurrence, rather than each individual mention of ‘committee(s)’. This is because each individual mention from the same passage of speech is difficult to categorise, as the wider context of the passage needs to be understood. One passage of speech is defined as when an MP begins speaking and speaks until interrupted or they have no more to say. If the same MP speaks later in the debate, even if it is to make that same point, it is considered a separate passage of speech. Passages of speech can fall into more than one category.

Rather than focusing on a single select committee as Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon (2009) and Tolley (2009) did, this research project will focus on a specific policy area which will be ‘Home Affairs’. This has been chosen as ‘Home Affairs’ comes under the jurisdiction of the Home Office which has its own departmental House of Commons select committee, the ‘Home Affairs Select Committee’. Therefore, it is likely that committees will be mentioned in ‘Home Affairs’ debates and thus it can be assessed how they are used. The debates were found by searching for ‘home affairs’ in House of Commons debate titles using Hansard Online (http://hansard.parliament.uk). From the eleven results that were shown, opposition day debates, debates on bills and oral questions were filtered out until five general debates were left. This approach was chosen as the focus of the research is to investigate how committees are used to inform debates on policy area rather than bills. Moreover, oral questions are too short to provide much analysis and opposition day debates are infrequent and thus unrepresentative of normal parliamentary business.

The five sources offer much material for analysis, as they are of reasonable length and happen over the span of two years and are months apart. The first debate, ‘European Justice
and Home Affairs Powers’ (HC Deb 15 October 2012, cc. 34-45), focuses on the Lisbon Treaty’s police and criminal justice measures and whether to UK will opt-in or out of them. This debate did not have any committee documents tagged to it, but is it a topic that is likely to be of interest to the Home Affairs Select Committee and amongst others. The second debate, ‘Justice and Home Affairs Opt-out’ (HC Deb 07 April 2014, cc. 24-93), also concentrates on the Lisbon Treaty opt-outs. This debate has four committee reports tagged to it, an example of committees using their limited powers to exert influence. It is therefore likely that this debate will mention committees more than those that do not have committee reports tagged to them, and this was noted when conducting the quantitative content analysis. Yet this debate is still valuable in terms of qualitative content analysis, as awareness of the committee reports should not influence how they, and committees in general, are used in the debate. The third debate, ‘Home Affairs’ (HC Deb 10 June 2014, cc. 414-516), considers the home affairs aspects of the Queen’s speech at the State Opening of Parliament in 2014. There are no committee documents tagged to this debate, but similar to the first debate it is likely to be of interest to the Home Affairs Select Committee and others. The fourth debate, ‘The UK’s Justice and Home Affairs Opt-outs’ (HC Deb 10 July 2014, cc. 485-549), again discusses the Lisbon Treaty opt-outs. This debate was tagged with five committee reports. Once more, the fact that committee reports are tagged to the debate was noted when conducting quantitative content analysis. The fifth debate, ‘EU Justice and Home Affairs Measures’ (HC Deb 19 November 2014, cc. 333-388), also focused around the Treaty of Lisbon opt-outs but more specifically, the decision to opt-in to the European Arrest Warrant. Like the other debates on this topic this debate has six committee reports tagged to it, so this was considered when conducting the quantitative content analysis.
Findings

Firstly, the frequency of mentions of ‘committee(s)’ was calculated. Across all five debates, the word appeared a total of 303 times (see Fig. 1). This is impressive considering the limited formal powers of select committees possess to influence parliamentary debate, and thus illustrates the ‘powerful’ nature of committees. Moreover, it begs the questions of whether the tagging of committee reports to three of the five debates had a notable impact. Looking at the frequency of mentions of ‘committee(s)’ in each debate, the three debates with committee reports tagged to them do have the highest frequency of mentions. Two of them, ‘Justice and Home Affairs Opt-out’ (HC Deb 07 April 2014, cc. 24-93) and ‘The UK’s Justice and Home Affairs Opt-outs’ (HC Deb 10 July 2014, cc. 485-549), had a significantly higher frequency of 111, yet ‘EU Justice and Home Affairs Measures’ (HC Deb 19 November 2014, cc. 333-388) had a much lower frequency of 36. This is only one more mention than the non-tagged debate ‘Home Affairs’ (HC Deb 10 June 2014, cc. 414-516). This demonstrates the inconsistent results of tagging reports to debates as a means of exerting committee influence, and means that their ‘powerful’ nature is subjective. Overall, the frequency of mentions of ‘committee(s)’ in each debate indicates that committees are ‘powerful’ as they do influence debates to an extent, with even the lowest frequency of 11 in ‘European Justice and Home Affairs Powers’ being a respectable amount for an untagged debate.
It is also important to consider which committees were mentioned and how frequently. Having focused this research on ‘home affairs’ debates, it was expected that the Home Affairs Committee would be mentioned the most. This was reflected in the debates, as across all five the Home Affairs Committee was mentioned the most frequently, totalling at 75 (see Fig. 2). This shows that the work of departmental committees is recognised and utilised within its policy areas, thus emphasising its power. The findings also display the magnitude of different committees that were also mentioned in debates concerning a policy area that may not seem to directly reflect the focus of their work. A total of 21 different committees were mentioned during the debates, ranging from the Draft Modern Slavery Bill Committee to the Public Administration Committee. Some committees, such as European Scrutiny Committee and Justice Committee, were unsurprising as they had worked on relevant joint reports with the Home Affairs Committee. This cooperation between committees serves to make their ‘watchdog’ role more ‘powerful’, as exhibited by the higher frequency of mentions of
‘committee(s)’ in the debate which the report was tagged to. Yet others, such as the Health Committee, seemed less relevant to the debate. These committees are mentioned much less frequently than those of more relevance, thus not contributing to the ‘powerful watchdog’ role of committees.

![Frequency of mentions of committees](image)

Figure 2: Frequency of mentions of committees across five debates

Next, the research focuses on who mentioned committees. It was found that MPs from the governing parties at the time, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, spoke about committees more than the opposition parties, and had a higher frequency of mentions of ‘committee(s)’ (see Fig. 3). This weakens the ‘watchdog’ role of committees as their work is not being used as frequently by opposition parties to hold government accountable. However, it does strengthen the power of committees as government is willing to contemplate their work and justify its actions in relation to this. This self-reflection of government does fulfil the committees’ ‘watchdog’ role to a lesser extent. When looking at the specific MPs who spoke about committees, Theresa May spoke the most with a total of 19 occasions (see Fig. 4). As
Home Secretary at the time of the debates, it demonstrates the influential role of committees that ministers show awareness of committees and address their work. Keith Vaz spoke about committees the second most frequently. As Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee at the time of the debates, it is expected that he would mention the work of his committee. This supports findings in the existing literature that MPs who are members or chairs of committees are more likely to attend these debates and speak about their committee. However, contributions concerning committees were not limited to them as out of the 35 MPs who spoke during these debate, the majority were not a member or chair of the committee that they mentioned. Such awareness of committees from MPs not directly involved in them presents them as ‘powerful watchdogs’, as they are able to influence the contributions made to debates by MPs who they are unlikely to have regular contact with.

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<tr>
<th>Parties</th>
<th>Frequency of occurrences in which MPs spoke about committees</th>
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<tr>
<td>Governing</td>
<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>53</td>
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Figure 3: Frequency of occurrences in which MPs spoke about committees (by party) across all debates
Finally, coding of the debates reveal how MPs used references to committees during the debates. The most common category was ‘committee(s) used to scrutinise government’, closely followed by ‘acknowledges the work of committee(s)’ (see Fig. 5). The predominant use of committees to scrutinise government and respect for the work of committees clearly indicates that they are ‘powerful watchdogs over government’. In addition, Conservative MPs also used committees to scrutinise government, such as European Scrutiny Committee member Jacob Rees-Mogg (see Fig. 6). This reflects the analysis in the existing literature that the cross-party nature of committees strengthens its ability to hold government accountable. Theresa May and Keith Vaz acknowledged the work of committees the most, which is unsurprising due to their involvement in the work of the Home Affairs Committee. Yet Theresa May’s willingness to speak about the work of committees during debates rather than simply ignore it does indicate that they are ‘powerful’. Moderately common was ‘addresses member(s) as 'chair' or 'member' of their committee(s)’, demonstrating the respect that comes with a position on a select committee and hence their ‘powerful’ nature. Also moderately common was ‘committee used
to praise government’, with Theresa May mentioning committees in this context the most. Her ability to use committees and their work in this way can be seen to undermine their scrutiny role. But combined with her frequent acknowledgement of the work of committees, it is more prominently used to show government’s acceptance of committee findings and recommendations. Therefore, committees are still holding government to account. Less frequent were ‘dismissive of the work of committee(s)’ and ‘government cooperating with committee(s)’. Both governing and opposition party MPs were dismissive of committees and although this undermines their role to a small extent, the significantly larger number of occurrences that acknowledged the work of committees dissipates its effects. Similarly, government cooperation with committees was not mentioned often, but when it was it largely ‘government cooperating with committee(s)’. Both findings emphasise the power that committees have over government, thus acting as a ‘powerful watchdog’. Lastly, it is worth noting that there were three ‘mention of ‘committee(s)’ is irrelevant to debate’ and these did not show committees to be ‘powerful watchdogs over government’ or contend otherwise.

**Figure 5: Frequency of categories across all debates**
Figure 6: Frequency of categories per MP across all debates
Conclusion

As the findings illustrates, select committees are ‘powerful watchdogs over government’. The analysis of mentions of ‘committee(s)’ in general House of Commons debates regarding ‘home affairs’ shows that although they may possess few formal powers, committees are able to hold government to account through MPs during debates. The high frequency of references to committees is assisted by their capacity to tag committee reports to debates, which prompts MPs to discuss the documents in debates and thus scrutinise government. Both governing and opposition parties spoke about committees, confirming the cross-party power that committees hold. Moreover, the use of committees to assess government decisions and cooperation with committees, acknowledge the work of committees, and pay respect to members and chairs of committees demonstrates both their power and ability to monitor government. The use of qualitative content analysis in the research addresses the gap in the literature, which has only used quantitative content analysis to investigate committee influence in parliamentary debates. However, it is limited as it only considers debates about ‘home affairs’. Further research could investigate other policy areas to see if committees are ‘powerful watchdogs over government’ in their parliamentary debates.
References


Appendix I – House of Commons Debates


