



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# The Liaison Committee: taking evidence from the Prime Minister

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## Box 1: House of Commons Academic Fellowship Scheme

The House of Commons Academic Fellowship Scheme is run in partnership with the Political Studies Association. It was launched at the end of 2016 and five Academic Fellows were appointed in the first round. The Fellowships are an opportunity for senior political and social scientists to study the work of Parliament, to provide expertise, to contribute to a number of events to help build public understanding of Parliament, and to inform and enhance the work of the House.

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## Summary

The [Liaison Committee](#) was formally established in 1980, following the creation of departmental select committees in 1979. However, since 1967 select committee chairs had met to co-ordinate administrative matters.

The Liaison Committee comprises all the chairs of select committees in the House of Commons and in the 2019 Parliament is chaired by an additional member, [appointed by the House](#). It considers matters relating to select committees and has administrative, advisory and co-ordinating roles. It advises House authorities on select committee matters; determines which select committee reports are debated; considers issues facing committees; reviews committee practice; and takes oral evidence from the Prime Minister.

In the 2017 Parliament, the Liaison Committee undertook an [inquiry](#) into the effectiveness and influence of the select committee system. The Committee's [report](#) was published on 10 September 2019.

### **Evidence sessions with the Prime Minister**

Although the Prime Minister answers parliamentary questions in the Commons chamber, the Prime Minister traditionally refused to appear before parliamentary committees.

Until around 2000, the Liaison Committee focused on administering the select committee system. Then it repositioned itself with a key report which sought to rebalance the relationship between Parliament and government, and staked a claim for its suitability as a forum through which the Prime Minister could be scrutinised.<sup>1</sup> The Liaison Committee's proposal to take evidence from the Prime Minister was rejected in 2000 and in 2001. However, in 2002, Tony Blair, himself, suggested that he appear before the Committee twice a year.

The Liaison Committee noted that the new format would "at last bring the Prime Minister himself within select committee scrutiny". It also considered that the format would provide a "calmer setting" for more "productive and informative" exchanges, which it contrasted with the "confrontational exchanges and theatrical style" of Prime Minister's Questions.<sup>2</sup>

The sessions have become a regular feature. This scrutiny mechanism has operated since 2002, and the Liaison Committee has questioned four Prime Ministers. Between 2002 and 2020, 39 sessions were held. Initially the Prime Minister appeared for 2½ hours, twice a year. In the 2010 Parliament this was increased to three appearances a year of 90 minutes apiece. The sessions have been described as "a significant advance in the scrutiny of the Prime Minister".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Liaison Committee, [Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive](#), 3 March 2000, HC 300 1999-2000; and Liaison Committee, [Shifting the Balance: Unfinished Business](#), March 2001, HC 321 2000-01

<sup>2</sup> Liaison Committee, [Evidence from the Prime Minister](#), 3 July 2002, HC 984 2001-02, para 3

<sup>3</sup> P Cowley, 'Parliament' in A Seldon (ed.) *Blair's Britain 1997-2007*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p23

# 1. The Liaison Committee

## 1.1 Creation

Departmental select committees were established in 1979, following recommendations from the Procedure Committee.<sup>4</sup> The Procedure Committee also recommended that a Liaison Committee should be established to “consider matters relating to select committees”.<sup>5</sup>

When the establishment of departmental select committees was debated and approved in June 1979, the Leader of the House of Commons, Norman St John Stevas, said that he had not made up his mind, and nor had the Government, “about points such as the Liaison Committee”. He said that he would listen to the debate and then take a view.<sup>6</sup>

In January 1980, after the departmental committees had been appointed and chosen their chairs, Norman St John Stevas brought forward a motion to establish the Liaison Committee. The House agreed, without a division; and then appointed the members of the Liaison Committee.<sup>7</sup>

In the Procedure Committee’s report and the two debates, Members noted that an informal Liaison Committee had operated since 1967 (before the departmental select committees were appointed the Estimates Committee expanded; ‘Crossman Committees’ were appointed in the 1966 Parliament; and the Expenditure Committee and its sub-committees operated between 1970 and 1979).<sup>8</sup> This informal committee had considered administrative matters, with ministers when necessary; authorised overseas travel by committees; and supervised the employment of special advisers.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 Functions

Whilst the Liaison Committee is a select committee of the House of Commons, its composition and role make it distinct and the Committee’s hearings with the Prime Minister are also unlike regular select committee inquiries.

The functions and powers of the Liaison Committee are set out in the House of Commons Standing Order No 145:

145.—(1) A select committee shall be appointed, to be called the Liaison Committee—

(a) to consider general matters relating to the work of select committees,

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<sup>4</sup> *First Report from the Select Committee on Procedure*, 17 July 1978, HC 588-I 1977-78

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, para 6.56

<sup>6</sup> HC Deb 25 June 1979 c55

<sup>7</sup> HC Deb 31 January 1980 cc1687-1718

<sup>8</sup> See Priscilla Baines, “History and Rationale of the 1979 Reforms” in Gavin Drewry (ed), *The New Select Committees*, Second Edition, 1989

<sup>9</sup> *First Report from the Select Committee on Procedure*, 17 July 1978, HC 588-I 1977-78, para 6.54

(b) to give such advice relating to the work of select committees as may be sought by the House of Commons Commission, and

(c) to report to the House its choice of select committee reports to be debated on such days as may be appointed by the Speaker in pursuance of paragraph (13) of Standing Order No. 10 (Sittings in Westminster hall).

(2) The committee may also hear evidence from the Prime Minister on matters of public policy.

In addition, Standing Order No 145 provides for the Committee to recommend which Government Departments' Estimates are allocated for debate in the House of Commons on Estimates Days; and to decide which committee is appropriate to scrutinise each proposal for a National Policy Statement under the *Planning Act 2008*.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.3 Composition

A motion to appoint 37 members to the Liaison Committee was agreed on 14 May 2020 (see Appendix 1 for the Committee's members).

The motion listed all the committees whose chairs will serve on the Liaison Committee. The majority of select committee chairs are subject to election by the whole House. The remainder are chosen by their committees.

The motion also proposed that the Chair of the Liaison Committee is not the Chair of another select committee. In the 2019 Parliament, Sir Bernard Jenkin was appointed by the House as the Chair of the Liaison Committee. An amendment, to remove his name and state that the Chair of the Liaison Committee "shall be" a select committee chair, was defeated following a short debate.<sup>11</sup> In recent Parliaments, the Chair was chosen by the members of the Liaison Committee from among their number. A list of MPs who have served as Chair of the Liaison Committee since 1980 is given in Appendix 2. Appendix 2 also includes some information on previous occasions when the Committee was chaired by a Member who did not chair one of the House's select committees.

The Hansard Society considered the issues surrounding the Government's motion, particularly the provision appointing Sir Bernard Jenkin as Chair in a briefing paper.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.4 Monitoring select committees: an overview of Liaison Committee work

Like other select committees, the Liaison Committee has the power to undertake inquiries of its own and produce reports.

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<sup>10</sup> House of Commons, *Standing Orders – Public Business, 2019*, November 2019, HC 314 2019

<sup>11</sup> [HC Deb 20 May 2020 cc667-680](#)

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Fox and Brigid Fowler, "[Who chooses the scrutineer? Why MPs should resist the government's attempt to determine the Liaison Committee chair](#)", Hansard Society briefing

## 6 The Liaison Committee: taking evidence from the Prime Minister

It marked the 20th anniversary of the departmental select committee system with a review of the system. In June 2000, in *Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive*, the Committee made proposals for further reform and modernisation of the select committee system, saying that its concern was the effectiveness of the system.<sup>13</sup> The Government rejected “virtually every recommendation” that the Liaison Committee had made.<sup>14</sup>

In the following year, towards the end of the 1997 Parliament, the Committee reviewed its proposals; reviewed select committee work in the Parliament; and noted that it and the Public Administration Select Committee had invited the Prime Minister to give evidence.<sup>15</sup> (An account of the background to the origins of the Liaison Committee’s oral evidence sessions with the Prime Minister is given in section 2.1.)

Many of its ideas fed into the Modernisation Committee’s proposals for select committee reform, which were published in February 2002 and debated in May 2002.<sup>16</sup> And following the Modernisation Committee’s report, the Liaison Committee agreed a set of 10 core tasks for select committees, which were reviewed and revised in 2012; and again in 2019.<sup>17</sup>

During the 2001 and 2005 Parliaments the Committee produced annual reports which reviewed the work of select committees in the previous year or session. It also undertook work on financial scrutiny in the House of Commons and in 2007-08 began work on pre-appointment hearings.<sup>18</sup>

Reform proposals made by the Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons following the MPs’ expenses scandal in 2009 – such as the election of select committee chairs and reducing the patronage of the whips – were considered by the Liaison Committee.<sup>19</sup>

During the 2010 Parliament, the Liaison Committee continued to press for a more defined role for select committees in pre-appointment hearings;<sup>20</sup> to consider financial scrutiny in the House of Commons; and

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<sup>13</sup> Liaison Committee, *Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive*, 3 March 2000, HC 300 1999-2000

<sup>14</sup> Liaison Committee, *Independence or Control? The Government’s Reply to the Committee’s First Report of Session 1999-2000 - Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive*, 25 July 2000, HC 841 1999-2000

<sup>15</sup> Liaison Committee, *Shifting the Balance: Unfinished Business*, March 2001, HC 321 2000-01

<sup>16</sup> Modernisation Committee, *Select Committees*, 12 February 2002, HC 224-I 2001-02; HC Deb 14 May 2002 cc648-730

<sup>17</sup> House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, *Select Committees – core tasks*, SN03161, 29 January 2013

<sup>18</sup> Liaison Committee, *Pre-appointment hearings by select committees*, 5 March 2008, HC 384 2007-08

<sup>19</sup> Select Committee on the Reform of the House, *Rebuilding the House*, 24 November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09; Liaison Committee, *Rebuilding the House: Select Committee Issues*, 27 January 2010, HC 272 2009-10

<sup>20</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select Committees and Public Appointments*, 4 September 2011, HC 830 2010-12

it considered the powers, resources and effectiveness of select committees.<sup>21</sup>

In the 2015 Parliament it reported on public engagement with select committees.<sup>22</sup>

In the 2017 Parliament, the House approved a Committee proposal that members of select committees should be able to participate in the proceedings of other select committees.<sup>23</sup> However, another proposal, that a nominated member of Chair's staff be allowed to attend private committee meetings, on a pilot basis, has not proceeded.<sup>24</sup> The Committee published guidance on the conduct of pre-appointment hearings.<sup>25</sup> The Committee has also reported on the monitoring and promotion of witness diversity.<sup>26</sup>

On 18 January 2019, the Liaison Committee launched an [inquiry](#) into the effectiveness and influence of the select committee system.<sup>27</sup>

On 13 February 2019, the Liaison Committee appointed a sub-committee to conduct its inquiry.<sup>28</sup> Although all members of the Liaison Committee are members of the sub-committee on the effectiveness and influence of the select committee system, it has a smaller quorum (of three) than the full committee. The first oral evidence was held on 29 April 2019.<sup>29</sup>

The Committee's report, *The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system*, was published on 10 September 2019.<sup>30</sup> The Committee commented on the full range of select committee work as well as its role, including taking evidence from the Prime Minister, which is considered below (section 2.5).

## Oral evidence sessions

Since 2002, the Liaison Committee has taken oral evidence from the Prime Minister. The hearings with the Prime Minister are standalone sessions which do not usually have a specific focus. Other than publishing the transcripts of evidence, these sessions have not led to reports in the way the majority of select committees' hearings do (see section 2).

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<sup>21</sup> Liaison Committee, [Select committee effectiveness, powers and resources](#), 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13

<sup>22</sup> Liaison Committee, [Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach](#), 30 November 2015, HC 470 2015-16

<sup>23</sup> [HC Deb 27 November 2018 c210](#)

<sup>24</sup> Both proposals were included in Liaison Committee, [Changing committee practice and procedure: enhancing effective working](#), 29 March 2018, HC 922 2017-19. Initially, a motion to implement both proposals was objected to on 27 June 2018 [[HC Deb 27 June 2018 c1000](#)]. On 27 November 2018, only one recommendation was approved, the question of the participation of a member of Chair's staff has not been pursued

<sup>25</sup> Liaison Committee, [Pre-Appointment Hearings](#), 19 June 2019, HC 2307 2017-19

<sup>26</sup> Liaison Committee, [Witness gender diversity](#), 7 June 2018, HC 1033 2017-19

<sup>27</sup> Liaison Committee, [The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system inquiry](#)

<sup>28</sup> Liaison Committee, [Formal Minutes 2017-19](#), p30

<sup>29</sup> All evidence can viewed on the Committee's [inquiry – publications](#) webpage

<sup>30</sup> Liaison Committee, [The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system](#), 10 September 2019, HC 1860 2017-19

## 8 The Liaison Committee: taking evidence from the Prime Minister

The Committee widened its interests when it took evidence from the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, on 5 February 2013, on the basis of his leadership of the Rio+20 summit in the Prime Minister's place.<sup>31</sup> The Environmental Audit Committee subsequently asked the Liaison Committee to take evidence on its behalf,<sup>32</sup> and it used that session to focus not just on the Rio summit, but also on other policy issues.

On 2 November 2016, the Liaison Committee took evidence from Sir John Chilcot on the Iraq War Inquiry. Sir John was told that it was "possible that other select committees may subsequently want to call you".<sup>33</sup> In the event, none did.

On 7 February 2018, the Liaison Committee took evidence from Sir Amyas Morse, Comptroller and Auditor General; and from David Lidington, Minister for the Cabinet Office, John Manzoni, Chief Executive of the Civil Service, and Gareth Rhys Williams, Government Chief Commercial Officer, on the cross-government response to the collapse of Carillion. A number of select committees were examining aspects of the collapse of Carillion.<sup>34</sup>

The Committee took evidence on 29 April, 8 May and 13 May 2019 as part of the [inquiry](#) into the effectiveness and influence of the select committee system.

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<sup>31</sup> Liaison Committee, [Evidence from the Deputy Prime Minister](#), 5 February 2013, HC 958 i and ii 2013-14

<sup>32</sup> Environmental Audit Select Committee, [Outcomes of the Rio+20 Earth Summit](#), 14 June 2013, HC 200 2013-14, para 6

<sup>33</sup> Liaison Committee, [Oral evidence: Follow-up to the Chilcot Report](#), 2 November 2016, HC 689 2016-17

<sup>34</sup> Liaison Committee, [Oral evidence: Cross-government response to collapse of Carillion](#), 7 February 2018



## 2. Evidence sessions with the Prime Minister

### 2.1 Origins of the Liaison Committee sessions

Secretaries of State and ministers have appeared regularly before departmental select committees since their creation in 1979, to give evidence about their policy responsibilities and departmental activities. However, despite the increasingly prominent role played by departmental select committees in the decades since their formation, the Prime Minister did not appear before them. The failure of the Prime Minister to be subject to select committee scrutiny was viewed by many MPs as a serious problem. In 2000, as part of its inquiry into the Ministerial Code, the Public Administration Select Committee wrote to the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, inviting him to give evidence, on the basis that the Code was the responsibility of the Prime Minister and underwent revisions at his or her behest, and so only the Prime Minister could be held accountable to Parliament for it. Blair rejected this view, citing the tradition of ministerial responsibility for providing select committee evidence, and noting that “Prime Ministers have not themselves, by long-standing convention, given evidence to Select Committees”.<sup>35</sup> The Liaison Committee pursued the matter in a report on executive scrutiny, which advocated the benefits of the Prime Minister discussing government policies in a non-partisan forum, and noted that if he accepted an annual invitation to appear before it, he would not be called before any other select committees. Downing Street declined this offer, again citing the convention that Prime Ministers do not give evidence to select committees, and arguing that to do so might jeopardise established lines of ministerial accountability.<sup>36</sup>

However, in December 2001, the then Leader of the House of Commons, the late Robin Cook, “pressed” the Prime Minister to appear before the Liaison Committee as part of a broader parliamentary modernisation programme, and Downing Street advisers also attempted to convince Blair of the merits of attending such sessions.<sup>37</sup> But Blair resisted, and in spring 2002, Cook asked the chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee, Tony Wright, to drop the matter, because there was “simply no way that the Prime Minister was ever going to agree to attend”.<sup>38</sup> It therefore came as a surprise when, in April 2002, the Prime Minister approached the Liaison Committee chair, Alan Williams, and offered to appear twice a year to discuss domestic and foreign affairs.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Public Administration Select Committee, *The Ministerial Code: Improving the Rulebook*, 14 February 2001, HC 235 2000-01, Appendix 4

<sup>36</sup> Liaison Committee, *Shifting the Balance: Unfinished Business*, March 2001, HC 321 2000-01

<sup>37</sup> R Cook, *The Point of Departure*, London: Pocket Books, 2003, p 141

<sup>38</sup> See A Kelso, M Bennister and P Larkin, ‘The Shifting Landscape of Prime Ministerial Accountability to Parliament’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2016, p5

<sup>39</sup> Liaison Committee, *Evidence from the Prime Minister*, 3 July 2002, HC 984 2001-02

The Liaison Committee was “glad to agree” to the Prime Minister’s proposal, commenting:

2. The Committee was glad to agree to the Prime Minister's proposal for twice-yearly sessions. Select committees have become the most effective parliamentary vehicle for holding the government to account. The appearance of the Prime Minister in public before a committee containing all the Chairs of select committees complements the investigative work of individual committees, notably those monitoring the work of government departments. It will at last bring the Prime Minister himself within select committee scrutiny. He needs to be accountable in detail both as Head of the Government, and in respect of the staff and advisers who answer directly to him and for whom no-one else can answer.

3. The format of the occasion offers a further advantage, as the Prime Minister implied in his Written Answer. Exchanges in the calmer setting of a committee room should prove more productive and informative. The current operation of Prime Minister's Questions in the Chamber, with its confrontational exchanges and theatrical style, provides an unsuitable setting for questioning in depth.<sup>40</sup>

The chairs then in situ reported that no reasons were given for the reversal, although several speculated that Blair was probably convinced by his advisers that such appearances could usefully demonstrate his engagement with Parliament, and that, given Blair’s political skills and communication abilities, he probably felt that he had “nothing to fear”, with one noting that “he was, after all, a trained barrister”.<sup>41</sup> The start of the new sessions with the Liaison Committee, in July 2002, also coincided with Blair’s new schedule of monthly televised press conferences. As Blair subsequently told the Liaison Committee, “politics comes under a great deal of attack ... and I think a session like this can help us show to the public, and to the media, that all of us in Parliament are trying to do our best to struggle with the issues that concern our constituents”.<sup>42</sup>

A little noticed further break with this convention occurred in 2014 when the Prime Minister appeared before the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy but it would seem that no precedent has been established.<sup>43</sup>

## 2.2 Frequency of Prime Ministerial Appearances

Since 2002, the Liaison Committee has held 39 standalone evidence sessions with the Prime Minister (see Table 1).

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<sup>40</sup> Liaison Committee, [Evidence from the Prime Minister](#), 3 July 2002, HC 984 2001-02, paras 2-3

<sup>41</sup> See A Kelso, M Bennister and P Larkin, ‘The Shifting Landscape of Prime Ministerial Accountability to Parliament’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2016, p 7.

<sup>42</sup> Liaison Committee, [Oral Evidence: Rt Hon Tony Blair, Prime Minister](#), 26 July 2002, HC 1095 2001-02, Q1

<sup>43</sup> See Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Evidence from the Prime Minister](#), 30 January 2014, HC 1040 2013-14

**Table 1: Liaison Committee 2002-2018**

<b>No. of Prime Ministers Questioned</b>	<b>5</b>
Tony Blair	11
Gordon Brown	5
David Cameron	15
Theresa May	6
Boris Johnson	2*
<b>No. of Committee sessions 2002-2019</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Number of questions asked</b>	
Tony Blair's first session - July 2002	123
David Cameron's last session - May 2016	80
<b>No. of MPs attending the session</b>	
July 2002	30
May 2016	14

\* Mr Johnson was invited to appear before the Liaison Committee in the autumn of 2019 but no evidence session took place (see below). His first appearance before the Committee was on 27 May 2020. He is scheduled to give evidence again 13 January 2021.

In 2000, when the Liaison Committee had first proposed that Tony Blair appear, they requested that he appear just once a session; the Prime Minister refused. After Blair's change of heart, he agreed to appear twice a session for two and half hours. In the 2010 Parliament this was increased to three appearances a year of 90 minutes apiece.<sup>44</sup> Typically, this meant that the Prime Minister appeared at the start of the year, between the Easter and the summer parliamentary recesses, and again in the autumn.

The Prime Minister cannot be compelled to attend the Liaison Committee (or any other select committee). This is reflected in the Standing Orders as above, which state that Liaison Committee may (rather than shall) take evidence from the Prime Minister. However, there were signs that the sessions are sufficiently well established that it would be increasingly hard to avoid a request from the committee to appear. In 2016, after initial reluctance by Prime Minister David Cameron to appear in advance of the EU referendum, the Liaison Committee Chair Andrew Tyrie was able to exert sufficient political pressure to ensure that a session was held.<sup>45</sup> Andrew Tyrie's successor Dr Sarah Wollaston was able to question Theresa May six times during her three-year tenure as Prime Minister.

<sup>44</sup> Liaison Committee, *Formal Minutes Session 2010-12*, see: 31 March 2011, Item 7

<sup>45</sup> The exchange of letters between Andrew Tyrie and the Prime Minister is available on the [Liaison Committee website](#)

Boris Johnson's first appearance before the Liaison Committee took place on 27 May 2020.<sup>46</sup> He had indicated that he would appear on 2 September and then was formally scheduled to appear on 11 September 2019, however the House was prorogued and the session could not take place. After the House returned, following the Supreme Court's ruling that the prorogation had been unlawful, Committee Chair Dr Wollaston invited the Prime Minister to "attend the committee within a week, before Wednesday 2nd Oct". The Prime Minister was formally scheduled to appear on 24 October, but again cancelled at short notice.<sup>47</sup>

### 2.3 Evidence Session Topics

In advance of its first session with the Tony Blair, the Liaison Committee considered how the session should be organised. It commented that:

For the new opportunity to be properly used, permitting more substantial exchanges of greater depth to take place, the questioning will be based on a limited number of themes selected in advance.<sup>48</sup>

Although four topics had been identified in advance of the first session in 2002, almost the entire membership of the Liaison Committee participated and it was ultimately left to each of them to decide their own questions. With the chairs of each of the policy-focussed departmental select committees there, as well as the members of the domestic committees (those that deal with the internal running of the Commons); the 123 questions asked of the Prime Minister have been described as "an unfocussed romp across a wide swathe of public policy".<sup>49</sup> With such a broad sweep of public policy covered in a limited time, there was arguably little opportunity to go into any depth. Each question became a "single hit" with no real chance to interrogate the Prime Minister's answers or to excavate the subject more deeply.

At the second hearing, questions focussed more narrowly on the selected topics, Iraq and the War on Terror. Subsequent sessions have maintained this focus on a handful of main issues or, occasionally, on just one.

In some instances, the Committee has responded to the Government's own agenda, such as in its questions on the 'Big Society' agenda or on reform of the civil service. But in others, the topics have focussed on issues that the Government has been forced to contend with—military action in the Middle East or the post-2008 recession, for instance—and which the Prime Minister might have preferred to avoid. Sessions

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<sup>46</sup> Liaison Committee, *Oral evidence from the Prime Minister*, 27 May 2020, HC 322 2019-21

<sup>47</sup> Liaison Committee, *Letter from Boris Johnson to the Committee*, July 2019; *Letter from the Chair to the Prime Minister*, 9 September 2019; *Letter from 10 Downing Street to the Chair*, 10 September 2019; *Letter from the Chair to the Prime Minister*, 24 September 2019; *Letter from the Chair to the Prime Minister*, 3 October 2019

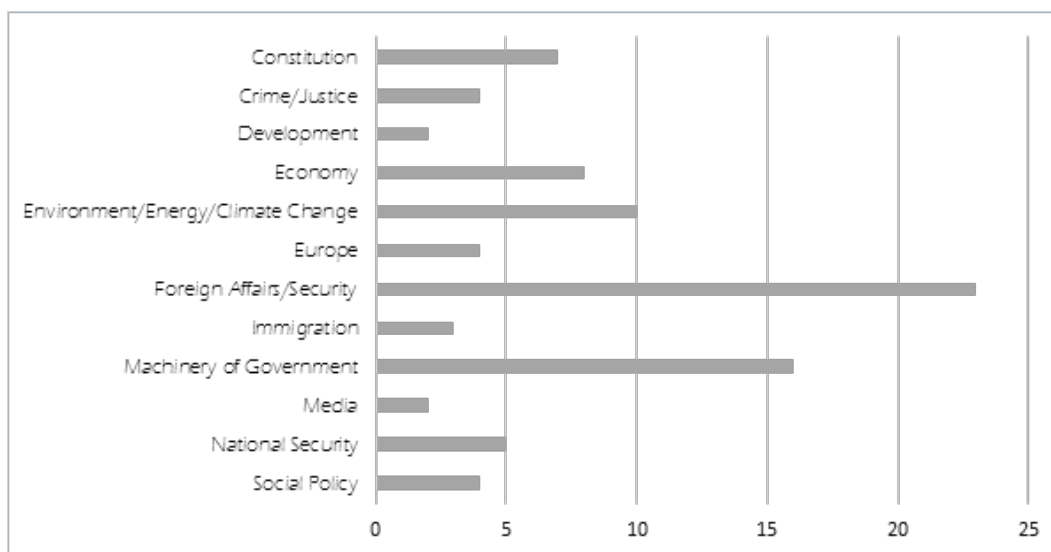
<sup>48</sup> Liaison Committee, *Evidence from the Prime Minister*, 3 July 2002, HC 984 2001-02, para 7

<sup>49</sup> A Kelso, M Bennister and P Larkin, 'The Shifting Landscape of Prime Ministerial Accountability to Parliament', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2016, p.746

focusing on a single topic with David Cameron included one on the EU Referendum (4 May 2016) and one on UK Governance after the Scottish Independence Referendum (20 November 2014).

Figure 1, below, shows the topics that were covered between 2002 and 2016. The Committee has throughout tried to focus on areas where the Prime Minister has “made a difference”, but the Prime Minister’s lack of a clear job description or policy competence whereby the incumbent can “make of it what he will”—is apparent as the sessions have ranged from foreign affairs and defence issues to social policy, constitutional affairs and machinery of government issues.

**Figure 1: Subjects covered in Liaison Committee hearings with Prime Minister 2002-2016**



The areas deemed as those in which Prime Ministers “have made a difference” are not only those with a cross-departmental or whole-of-government spread. In many instances, there is often nothing uniquely ‘prime ministerial’ about the areas. The contingent nature of the role of the Prime Minister presents challenges for the Liaison Committee in its own scrutiny endeavours: although Prime Ministers may dominate many, even all, aspects of government, they are formally accountable for relatively little. While there have been clear efforts, particularly since 2010, to focus the sessions on areas where the Prime Minister is pivotal, or has declared a keen interest, the tendency has been to focus on major topics in current affairs. Foreign affairs issues loom large. For example, while the Prime Minister was being quizzed by the Liaison Committee in 2002 and 2003 about the decision to go to war in Iraq, the Foreign Affairs Committee was pursuing exactly the same issue, yet was unable to take evidence from the Prime Minister.<sup>50</sup> The Prime Minister, as Head of Government, is expected to speak for the Government on any and all aspects of government policy, and the Prime Minister frequently takes a major, even dominant, role in specific policy areas at certain times. Bennister, Kelso and Larkin concluded that one of the major challenges faced by the Liaison Committee has been to

<sup>50</sup> Foreign Affairs Committee, [The Decision to go to War in Iraq](#), 7 July 2003, HC 813-I 2002-03

determine the topics that are appropriate and useful on which to question the Prime Minister.<sup>51</sup>

In its review of the role and powers of the Prime Minister in 2014, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee considered the Prime Minister's accountability to Parliament. It drew the following conclusion:

The Liaison Committee has the potential to be a very effective mechanism by which Parliament can hold the Prime Minister to account. We commend the attempts it has made to narrow the range of topics it discusses at any one session, and to limit the number of questioners to enable the questioning to be more thorough and detailed. We hope that these efforts continue. The fewer the topics, and the questioners, the more in-depth and serious the scrutiny will become—a welcome balance to the superficial nature of Prime Minister's Questions.<sup>52</sup>

At the beginning of the most recent session, on 1 May 2019, Dr Wollaston outlined the subjects that were to be covered with the Prime Minister:

... we thought we would break the discussions about Brexit into three broad groups. The first is taking stock of where we are now, the next stage of negotiations and preparations for no deal. Then we are going to move on to talk about some of the security and border issues. Finally, we will look at trade and the economy. We will then take a break from Brexit and talk about Huawei.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.4 Participation

Prior to the 2010 election, the hearings with the Prime Minister typically saw almost all of the Liaison Committee members participating. The first session involved the entire Liaison Committee membership. With 25 or more members taking part, they could not all be accommodated in one of the main committee rooms.

Early in the 2010 Parliament, the decision was taken to reduce the number of MPs participating in the sessions with the Prime Minister. The sessions would be limited to 15 or so members, making them more akin to a conventional select committee (though still larger than most). With the reduction in numbers and not all members attending, a process to select those participating in each session was instigated.

Attendance has been variable since 2010 and there is a different cast of MPs at each session reflecting the topics covered and interest from chairs managing their own committee responsibilities. Bennister, Kelso and Larkin reported on the attendance of Liaison Committee members at the 13 sessions with the Prime Minister in the 2010 Parliament.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Mark Bennister, Alexandra Kelso and Phil Larkin, *Questioning the Prime Minister: How Effective is the Liaison Committee?*, Project Report, November 2016, p17

<sup>52</sup> Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Role and powers of the Prime Minister*, 24 June 2014, HC 351 2014-15, para 62

<sup>53</sup> Liaison Committee, *Oral Evidence from the Prime Minister: Brexit*, 1 May 2019, HC 2135 2017-19, introduction

<sup>54</sup> Mark Bennister, Alexandra Kelso and Phil Larkin, *Questioning the Prime Minister: How Effective is the Liaison Committee?*, Project Report, November 2016, pp17-19

Liaison Committee attendance data, reporting on all meetings from the 2010-12 session onwards, is published on the Committee's website.<sup>55</sup>

The number of members attending the Liaison Committee's oral evidence sessions with Theresa May are reported in Table 2. The first two Liaison Committee sessions with Boris Johnson were held virtually and in hybrid form, respectively. As not all members who attended asked Question in these sessions, Table 3 reports the number of MPs who asked questions and notes the number that attended the meeting.

**Table 2: Attendance at Oral Evidence Sessions with Theresa May**

Date	Attendance
20 December 2016	19
20 December 2017	18
27 March 2018	14
18 July 2018	14
29 November 2018	13
1 May 2019	13

**Table 3: Number of MPs asking questions at Oral Evidence Sessions with Boris Johnson**

Date	Asked questions
27 May 2020	15 a
16 September 2020	18 b
(a) 26 members attended	
(b) 17 members attended	

## Role of the Chair

Like other select committees, the Chair of the Liaison Committee is important in setting the tone for the evidence sessions. The Chair has to control the Liaison Committee's meetings with the Prime Minister. However, unlike other select committees, all its members are also chairs of committees in their own right. All have to balance the requirements of his or her own committee with Liaison Committee work.

Bennister, Kelso and Larkin observed differences in the approach of successive chairs:

The Chair here has a significant role to play in directing and managing the content, tone and coherence of the exchanges. We noticed difference in organisation style and activism in chairing of the sessions between incumbents. For instance, Andrew Tyrie took a much more interventionist approach to the questioning as opposed to his predecessor's [Sir Alan Beith] more facilitating approach. Tyrie was keen to assert his authority as chair in the sessions.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Liaison Committee, [Formal minutes and attendance](#)

<sup>56</sup> Mark Bennister, Alexandra Kelso and Phil Larkin, [Questioning the Prime Minister: How Effective is the Liaison Committee?](#), Project Report, November 2016, p18

## 2.5 The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system – Liaison Committee evidence from the Prime Minister

In its September 2019 report, the Liaison Committee commented that “Our regular meetings with the Prime Minister are crucial to effective parliamentary scrutiny of the executive”. The Committee was told that its hearing were most effective when “the number of participants, and the number of topics, were limited in order to allow more detailed questioning and follow-up on initial responses”.<sup>57</sup>

It was suggested to the Committee that the number of sessions it holds with the Prime Minister should be set down in Standing Orders.<sup>58</sup> The Committee considered that this “would not be a proportionate step”. It relied on the presumption that the Prime Minister would make three dates a year available to the Committee. It suggested that the Prime Minister should accommodate requests from the Liaison Committee and that “In particular, any new Prime Minister should appear before the Liaison Committee at the earliest opportunity after they take up office”.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Liaison Committee, [The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system](#), 10 September 2019, HC 1860 2017-19, paras 275-276

<sup>58</sup> Liaison Committee, [The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system](#), 10 September 2019, HC 1860 2017-19, [Memorandum from Dr Mark Bennister](#), para 16

<sup>59</sup> Liaison Committee, [The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system](#), 10 September 2019, HC 1860 2017-19, paras 276-277



### 3. Experience in other jurisdictions

There are no obvious equivalent parliamentary committees that question the Prime Minister or relevant Head of Government in other countries. As Ruxandra Serban has reported, of 32 parliamentary democracies, the UK was the only one to question the Prime Minister in Committee.<sup>60</sup> The accountability mechanisms in committee with the Prime Ministers in other parliamentary systems include for example, Scandinavian legislatures which tend to scrutinise the Prime Minister at committee 'account' meetings. These mostly question the Prime Minister on foreign and European policy matters. In Denmark, the European Committee (formerly Market Relations Committee) approves the Prime Minister's stance before meetings of the European Council and in turn gets a personal report on proceedings afterwards. In the typical situation of minority government in Denmark, the Prime Minister may find his or her hands tied by a committee majority reluctant to sanction the Prime Minister's position. In Finland, the Prime Minister frequently accounts to the Grand Committee (dealing with EU matters) and the Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>61</sup> There is no equivalent of the Liaison Committee sessions in similar systems to Westminster such as in Australia, Canada or New Zealand, though the Prime Minister may appear at plenary questions more often (often deferring to cabinet colleagues). Looking closer to home, in the devolved administrations there are now similar mechanisms to question the First Minister in a committee setting.<sup>62</sup>

#### 3.1 Scotland

In the Scottish Parliament, the First Minister has appeared before the Conveners Group each session since 2013 (to date nine sessions have taken place).<sup>63</sup> The most recent session was on 13 November 2019. The Conveners Group comprises the Conveners of the Scottish Parliament's committees and is analogous to the Liaison Committee, though with some important differences. Firstly, it is chaired by the Presiding Officer rather than by a convener selected by the rest of the Group and, secondly, although the whole Parliament votes to ratify the committee membership, it is decided by party managers rather than election. The Conveners themselves are nominally selected by their fellow committee members, but are generally uncontested. In terms of the sessions with the First Minister, there are some notable differences. Firstly, the First Minister only appears annually. The Conveners Group sessions with the First Minister focus exclusively on the Scottish

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<sup>60</sup> R. Serban, '[Questioning Prime Ministers: A survey of procedures in 32 parliamentary democracies](#)', *PSA Parliaments Group blog*, 20 December 2017

<sup>61</sup> D. Arter, 'The Prime Minister in Scandinavia: 'Superstar' or Supervisor?', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol. 10(2-3), 2004, pp 109-127

<sup>62</sup> We have not included the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee on Executive Office here. Although it does take evidence from the First Minister as well as the Deputy First Minister, it ranges rather more widely in its scrutiny activity and is only partially analogous with the Liaison Committee

<sup>63</sup> Scottish Parliament Conveners Group, '[Meetings with the First Minister](#)' [last viewed 11 January 2021]

Government's Programme for Government, which sets out the legislative agenda and policy priorities for the session ahead. This effectively means that, to a large degree, it is the Government rather than Parliament that sets agenda for the sessions. All available Conveners participate, though to date they have been confined to asking questions relating to their own committees' remits: Bennister, Kelso and Larkin were told that the Presiding Officer emphasised that Conveners participate as representatives of their committees. Transcripts and video recordings of the sessions are added to the Conveners Group webpage, but no report is produced. Bennister, Kelso and Larkin drew the following tentative conclusions, after three sessions:

With only a few sessions having taken place to date, it is too early to draw firm conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the sessions. Furthermore, following the 2016 Scottish Elections there has been a significant turnover of Conveners and a new Presiding Officer. It remains to be seen whether the sessions will even continue or be modified. Reflecting on the process, the outgoing Conveners Group recommended that they should continue, but made no recommendations beyond that. The Scottish Parliament has encountered at least some of the same issues as the Liaison Committee in Westminster. For instance, though the Programme for Government gives the sessions with the First Minister a useful focus, it involves the Conveners Group trying to cover the entire range of policy in a short session. As a result, some consideration has been given to increasing the number of sessions with the First Minister and thematising them. Similarly, with all 16 members participating, there is little chance for any of them to question the First Minister in any detail. Unsurprisingly, some would like the numbers reduced, especially if the sessions are held more frequently.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.2 Wales

In the National Assembly for Wales (Senedd), the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister meets 2-3 times a year, and interviews conducted by Bennister, Kelso and Larkin indicated that it emerged as a conscious attempt to replicate the Liaison Committee practice. Naturally, as the Senedd contains just 60 Assembly Members (AMs), the Committee is considerably smaller than the Commons' Liaison Committee, with perhaps four to five AMs attending the evidence sessions with the First Minister. As with the Liaison Committee, the Scrutiny Committee specifies in advance the topic or topics on which it wishes to focus, in order for the First Minister and his team to prepare, and the session itself involves direct questioning of the First Minister by the Committee members. Similarly, the Senedd Committee publishes the transcript of the session, and any related correspondence with the First Minister, but does not produce inquiry reports of the sort published by other Senedd committees.<sup>65</sup>

However, there are key differences with the Westminster practice. First, the First Minister is frequently accompanied by officials, both from his

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<sup>64</sup> Mark Bennister, Alexandra Kelso and Phil Larkin, [Questioning the Prime Minister: How Effective is the Liaison Committee?](#), Project Report, November 2016, p11

<sup>65</sup> Mark Bennister, Alexandra Kelso and Phil Larkin, [Questioning the Prime Minister: How Effective is the Liaison Committee?](#), Project Report, November 2016, pp11-12

own office and from the policy departments on which the scrutiny focus will fall. Officials answer many of the questions asked by the Committee, particularly when they deal with policy detail, and indeed the AMs do often direct their questions to the officials rather than the First Minister. In contrast, although the Prime Minister is accompanied by officials who sit behind her during the Liaison Committee session, and perhaps pass notes, they do not answer directly to the Liaison Committee members. Second, the Senedd Committee has developed the practice of holding some of its sessions away from the National Assembly building at Cardiff Bay. For example, the session held in October 2015 took place at the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea, to correspond with Senedd Swansea Week, and to help facilitate the Committee's scrutiny focus on the promotion and marketing of Wales. Third, the Committee is far more open to members of the public and school pupils attending in the public gallery, and has even experimented with enabling the public to ask questions during the scrutiny session. Perhaps as a consequence of all these points, the Senedd Committee pursues a far less adversarial and confrontational questioning style in comparison to that adopted by the MPs on the Liaison Committee. The Committee last met on Friday 14 February 2020 at Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Dur (Bro Dur Campus), a Welsh-medium comprehensive school in Neath Port Talbot, where the discussion was focused on climate change and the Climate Emergency declaration.

### 3.3 London

The Greater London Assembly also performs committee style questioning of the London Mayor. In some respects, this is a hybrid of Prime Minister's Questions and the Liaison Committee. It has a partisan dimension as the political groups dominate; however, the exchanges take place in a committee setting. Question Time occurs 10 times a year, allowing regular and fixed examination of the Mayor. Members of the public can submit questions via Assembly Members although, in reality, these questions do not make the final cut as party groups dominate the agenda.

**Table 3: Comparative Scrutiny Bodies**

Head of Executive	Legislature	Scrutiny Body	Frequency of evidence sessions
Prime Minister	House of Commons	Liaison Committee	2-3 times per year
First Minister	Scottish Parliament	Conveners Committee	Once a year
First Minister	Welsh Assembly	Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister	2-3 times per year
Mayor	Greater London Assembly	Mayor's Question Time	10 times a year

## 4. Further reading

Mark Bennister, Alexandra Kelso, and Phil Larkin, '[Questioning the Prime Minister: How Effective is the Liaison Committee?](#)', Report, November 2016<sup>66</sup>

Mark Bennister and Ben Worthy, '[Questions to the Prime Minister at Liaison Committee](#)', Political Studies Association, Parliaments and Legislatures Specialist Group blog 18 January 2017

Mark Bennister, Alexandra Kelso, and Phil Larkin, (2016) 'The Shifting Landscape of Prime Ministerial Accountability to Parliament: An analysis of Liaison Committee scrutiny sessions', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18 (3) pp740-754

Brigid Fowler, '[New Liaison Committee chair will face Brexit role questions](#)', Hansard Society blog, 13 November 2017

Liaison Committee, '[Legacy Report](#)', March 2015, HC954 2014-15

Ruxandra Serban, '[Questioning Prime Ministers: A survey of procedures in 32 parliamentary democracies](#)', PSA Parliaments Group blog, 20 December 2017

Hannah White, '[The Prime Minister and the Liaison Committee](#)', Institute for Government blog 4 May 2016.

Hannah White, '[How the Liaison Committee can have greater impact](#)', Institute for Government blog, 15 December 2017

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<sup>66</sup> Funding for this research was provided by The Nuffield Foundation, <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/prime-ministerial-accountability-parliament>

## Appendix 1: Members of the Liaison Committee

Member	Party	Committee
Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair)	Conservative	appointed by the House to chair the Committee
Hilary Benn	Labour	Future Relationship with the EU*
Mr Clive Betts	Labour	Housing, Communities and Local Government
Karen Bradley	Conservative	Procedure
Chris Bryant	Labour	Privileges #
Sir William Cash	Conservative	European Scrutiny
Sarah Champion	Labour	International Development
Greg Clark	Conservative	Science and Technology
Yvette Cooper	Labour	Home Affairs
Stephen Crabb	Conservative	Welsh Affairs
Philip Dunne	Labour	Environmental Audit
Tobias Ellwood	Conservative	Defence
Lilian Greenwood	Labour	Finance
Robert Halfon	Conservative	Education
Ms Harriet Harman	Labour	Human Rights (Joint)
Meg Hillier	Labour (Co-op)	Public Accounts
Simon Hoare	Conservative	Northern Ireland Affairs
Jeremy Hunt	Conservative	Health and Social Care
Andrew Jones	Conservative	European Statutory Instruments
Darren Jones	Labour	Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Julian Knight	Conservative	Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Catherine McKinnell	Labour	Petitions
Angus Brendan MacNeil	SNP	International Trade
Stephen McPartland	Conservative	Regulatory Reform
Ian Mearns	Labour	Backbench Business
Huw Merriman	Conservative	Transport
Jessica Morden	Labour	Statutory Instruments
Caroline Nokes	Conservative	Women and Equalities
Sir Robert Neill	Conservative	Justice
Neil Parish	Conservative	Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Mel Stride	Conservative	Treasury
Stephen Timms	Labour	Work and Pensions
Tom Tugendhat	Conservative	Foreign Affairs Committee
Sir Charles Walker	Conservative	Administration
Bill Wiggin	Conservative	Selection
Pete Wishart	SNP	Scottish Affairs
William Wragg	Conservative	Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs

# also chair of the Committee on Standards

\* until 15 January 2021

## Appendix 2: Chairs of the Liaison Committee, since 1980

Parliament	Chair
1979	Edward du Cann
1983	Terence Higgins
1987	Terence Higgins
1992	Sir Terence Higgins
1997	Robert Sheldon
2001	Alan Williams
2005	Alan Williams
2010	Sir Alan Beith
2015	Andrew Tyrie
2017	Dr Sarah Wollaston
2019	Sir Bernard Jenkin

### Should the Chair be a committee chair?

Generally, if a committee chair is not directly elected by the House, they are chosen by their committee at its first meeting. This practice was followed by all committees before the introduction of direct elections in 2010.

The Chair of the Liaison Committee has never been directly elected by the House. In the 1997, 2001 and 2005 Parliaments, the Chair was chosen by all members of the Committee.

Robert Sheldon was chairman of the Liaison Committee in the 1997 Parliament. He was also Chairman of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The individuals who were serving as Committee chairmen were nominated to the Liaison Committee.<sup>67</sup>

In the 2001 and 2005 Parliaments, rather than appoint named individuals, committees were listed and their chairs appointed to the Liaison Committee. In addition, a named individual, Alan Williams, was appointed to the Committee in both Parliaments. For example, the 2001 motion stated:

That,

(1) With effect for the current Parliament, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 121 (Nomination of Select Committees), the Chairman for the time being of each of the Select Committees listed in paragraph (2) below shall be a member of the Liaison Committee;

(2) The Committees to which paragraph (1) above applies are:  
Accommodation and Works  
[...]  
Work and Pensions; and

<sup>67</sup> [HC Deb 25 July 1997 c1197](#)

(3) Mr. Alan Williams shall also be a Member of the Liaison Committee.<sup>68</sup>

In both the 2001 and 2005 Parliaments, Alan Williams was chosen to be its chair by the Liaison Committee.

## The appointment of an additional member to chair the Liaison Committee

In 2001, when Alan Williams was included in the motion to appoint the Liaison Committee, Robin Cook, then Leader of the House of Commons, commented that:

The motion proposes to include in the membership of the Liaison Committee my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams). There is a precedent for appointing a senior Member to the Liaison Committee. In 1992, the previous Administration appointed Sir Terence Higgins to the Liaison Committee. So successful was that precedent that, at the end of the Parliament, and before the 1997 general election, the Liaison Committee recommended that, in future, it should include a senior Member.<sup>69</sup>

Sir Terence Higgins chaired the Liaison Committee in the 1992 Parliament.

The Liaison Committee's comments that Robin Cook referred to were made in its report on *The Work of Select Committees* at the end of the 1992 Parliament:

### Chairmanship of the Liaison Committee

6. The Liaison Committee itself cannot be established until the individual select committees have been nominated and until they themselves have elected their Chairmen, who are then nominated for membership of the Liaison Committee. In the first three Parliaments in which the present committee system operated, the Chairman of the Liaison Committee was elected from among the individual committee Chairmen. Given that many of the discussions in the Committee are over allocation of resources or of time for debates, it is infinitely preferable that there should be a Chairman who has no specific interest of his or her own to defend in such discussions. As a result, in the current Parliament the Chairman of the previous Liaison Committee, who was no longer serving as Chairman of a select committee, was nevertheless nominated as a member of the Liaison Committee and was elected Chairman.

7. Although it will be for our successor committee to elect its Chairman, we are convinced that the precedent of electing an independent Chairman should be followed in the next Parliament. To achieve this, we suggest that soundings be taken among newly elected select committee Chairmen to identify a candidate who would command their support so that he or she could be added to the list of those nominated to the Liaison Committee. **We therefore recommend that the nominations for membership of the Liaison Committee should include a senior Member**

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<sup>68</sup> [HC Deb 5 November 2001 c64](#) ; see also [HC Deb 13 July 2005 cc918-919](#)

<sup>69</sup> [HC Deb 5 November 2001 c65](#)

**not currently a member of any other select committee who would be able to act as an independent Chairman.**<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Liaison Committee, *The Work of Select Committees*, 18 February 1997, HC 323 1996-97, paras 6-7



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