



EVIDENCE TO THE HOUSE OF LORDS INFORMATION COMMITTEE: PUBLIC AND PARLIAMENT INQUIRY

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The Hansard Society is the UK's leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity.

We aim to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics.

For further information contact:

Dr Ruth Fox, Director, Parliament & Government Programme
T: 0207 438 1211 / E: r.fox@hansard.lse.ac.uk

Michael Raftery, Director, Citizenship Programme
T: 0207 438 1217 / E: m.raftery@hansard.lse.ac.uk

Dr Andy Williamson, Director, eDemocracy Programme
T: 0207 438 1224 / E: a.williamson@hansard.lse.ac.uk

Summary of Recommendations

Outreach

- Provide for greater investment in internal communications to ensure MPs and Peers are aware of what is being done / what is offered in terms of outreach.
- Implement a post-general election outreach induction plan for members and their staff, as well as parliamentary officials.
- Establish a robust knowledge and information strategy for regional outreach teams, with co-ordination between the House of Commons and House of Lords officers.
- Commission a rigorous evaluation of the outreach programme's two pilot regional projects as it transitions to a national programme.
- Expand existing mentoring and workshadowing schemes, inviting people from a wide range of other walks of work (e.g. education, health, business, industry etc) to spend time in Parliament.
- Encourage House of Lords committees to make greater use of outreach resources for their inquiries.
- Do more to badge the work of the Parliamentary Outreach Service – internally and externally – as an integrated bicameral service in the future.

Online communication and engagement

- Promote open data standards for all parliamentary content.
- Make digital content free and easy to virally circulate and re-post elsewhere.
- Adopt a system of e-petitioning with a clear focus on the need for well-developed and transparent processes and outcomes.
- Develop an active digital engagement strategy including real engagement and consultation with committees through the use of social media tools, websites and internet video for evidence giving.
- Establish a digital innovation budget to fund small, rapid deployment of Web 2.0 projects.

Press, webcasting & broadcasting

- Invest in more press/media officers to proactively promote the work of the House of Lords including the appointment of a new post to focus on features and factual programming.
- Establish a regional / local press strategy for the House of Lords.
- Provide greater support for specialist journalists, including the provision of temporary media passes to facilitate access to particular debates / committees.

- Provide formal induction for all journalists joining the press gallery.
- Explore what support the House of Lords might provide to accredited journalism training providers across the country.
- Encourage members of both Houses to provide links to the parliamentlive.tv site from their own websites and blogs.
- Treat the video archive as a distributed dataset that can be embedded on third party websites.
- Provide greater contextualisation of coverage on the website.

Introduction

In 2005 the Hansard Society established the Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, chaired by Lord Puttnam, which looked at the issue of how Parliament communicates with the public. The Commission report, *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye*, made 39 recommendations detailing how Parliament might improve its communications. A subsequent follow-up report was published in 2006, *Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming Into Focus*, detailing the response to these recommendations and what measures, if any, were being taken to implement them.

The Hansard Society report, *Parliament and the Public: Knowledge, interest and perceptions*, published last year, shows that:

- Just 32% of people agree that they 'have a good understanding of the way Parliament works';
- Only one in two members of the public are confident that Parliament is not the same thing as government;
- Only 19% of people agree that Parliament is 'working for them';
- Only 26% of the public feel that they have at least a fair amount of knowledge about the House of Lords, whilst just 42% say the same about the House of Commons.¹

Although a lot of progress on the Puttnam agenda and the subsequent report by the Modernisation Committee has been made, there remains a huge challenge to engage the public with the workings of Parliament and the House of Lords.

Outreach

1. Greater investment in internal communications is required to ensure MPs and Peers are sufficiently aware of what is being done by / on offer from the outreach team.
2. A post-general election induction programme for new MPs, Peers and their staff as well as parliamentary officials needs to be put in place in order to ensure they are all made aware of the outreach work and know how to get involved. Preparations for a new Parliament

¹ S. Kalitowski (2008), *Parliament and the Public: Knowledge, Interests and Perceptions* (London: Hansard Society).

and a new group of MPs and staff has traditionally been poor.² Much of the outreach work that is now being done by Parliament did not exist in 2005. A fresh and comprehensive approach to induction and the provision of information to new members and staff is therefore required.

3. Parliament's outreach officers attend some of the Hansard Society's Citizenship Programme Teacher Conferences. We therefore see solid evidence of their work and effective relationship building. However, each regional team needs to ensure that a robust knowledge and information strategy is adopted to ensure that the contacts and relationships that are developed are not lost in the event of, for example, staff turnover. This knowledge and information strategy then needs to be constantly reviewed and updated in order to maintain its relevance – this is particularly important for the outreach programme as it expands from a three region pilot to cover the whole country.
4. There is currently no evaluation data on the impact of the work of the outreach officers so far, but anecdotally our impression is that they have had a positive impact. However, to ensure an effective transition from a two region pilot to a national programme we believe an independent evaluation of their effectiveness is now required.
5. MPs and Peers are encouraged to join external mentoring / workshadowing schemes to learn about the 'real world', for example, with the military, business and industry etc. Operation Black Vote currently runs a Member of Parliament Shadowing Scheme and the Royal Society has an MP-Scientists Pairing Scheme. Both schemes enable people from the outside world to learn more about the work of MPs. We believe there is a case, as part of the outreach agenda, to extend these schemes, through the establishment of a bicameral Parliamentary mentoring scheme to encourage a range of people – from, for example, the education and health fields, business, third sector civil society groups – to spend some time in Westminster, shadowing MPs, Peers and parliamentary officials. The scheme would enable the participants to learn more about Parliament and its work and to be a 'goodwill ambassador' for Parliament in the future.³
6. There are currently insufficient opportunities for the public to make their views known to Members of the House. The lack of a constituency is a serious hindrance for Peers. There is a lack of awareness in the public domain about what the House of Lords is and does, and whether and how Peers can be contacted.
7. The House of Lords could make much greater use of its committees to engage with the public and seek their views. The Public and Parliament Inquiry has, appropriately, been perhaps the most innovative undertaken by a House of Lords Committee in terms of outreach and consultation with the public. We would encourage the other committees to adopt this pro-active approach more regularly.
8. If the public are to be engaged and asked to make their views known, the House of Lords must ensure that the public is aware of the consultations, provide proper means to facilitate dialogue with them and make their involvement efficacious. The Hansard Society pilot project, *Citizen Calling*, conducted with the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2006, demonstrated that members of the public are unlikely to be aware that an inquiry is taking place unless it is proactively promoted; that the sort of people a parliamentary

² G. Rosenblatt (2006), *A Year in the Life: from member of public to Member of Parliament* (London: Hansard Society).

³ The Royal Society's MP-Scientist Pairing Scheme may be a good starting point for examination. See <http://royalsociety.org/page.asp?id=6998>

committee might wish to hear from may not be politically aware and know of the inquiry or how to respond; that the target group may be less willing or able to express their ideas on paper; and that potential witnesses are often unsure about what Parliament can do about a particular issue. These same concerns apply as much to the House of Lords as to the House of Commons and should be taken into account when organising outreach activities.⁴

9. Linked to this, the Hansard Society has general concerns about the organisation of committee inquiries within Parliament and the efficacy of them as a result of the limited planning and organisation that often takes place. Inquiries are established very quickly, and the timetable for submission of evidence is often very tight. This is a problem for members of the public or for small organisations that may want to give evidence but are ill-equipped and resourced to do so on such a tight timetable.
10. The House of Lords should invest in more media officers to promote the work of its committees. If the House of Lords wants to engage more widely with the public then it needs better resourcing in this area of work.
11. Parliamentary outreach currently operates through the bicameral Parliamentary Outreach Service. We welcome this development but would suggest that further work is still needed to more clearly badge the work – internally and externally – as part of an integrated bicameral service in the future.

Online communication and engagement

12. The Hansard Society has co-developed with the House of Lords the *Lords of the Blog* pilot project. More than ten Peers blog on a public website which is designed to increase public understanding of the workings of the House of Lords. A recent evaluation of the pilot conducted by the Hansard Society shows that the site is valued by visitors both as an information resource and also as a way of engaging in discussion with Peers. The interactive and educational nature of the site has seen it receive excellent reviews in the press and it has proven popular amongst members. Lords of the Blog is important because it creates a two-way conversation between members of the House and the public.
13. The Hansard Society's recently published *MPs Online* research identifies how MPs are using digital media to connect and communicate with constituents. While it shows that 92% of MPs use email, 83% have a website and 23% use social networking tools, it also highlights that MPs are largely in 'send' mode.⁵ They do not take advantage of the bi-directional opportunities available to engage directly with the public online but are instead more inclined to treat the internet as a 'digital newsletter'. This is not entirely the fault of MPs. The sheer volume of communication they face and the need to adhere to parliamentary protocols and ensure that a correspondent is a constituent present significant challenges for MPs when using digital media.
14. Digital media has yet to become established as 'business as usual' right across Parliament. It is important that digital media is viewed as a tool to enhance communication and

⁴ R. Ferguson & L. Miller (2006), *Citizen Calling: Using mobile phones to promote engagement in select committee inquiries* (London: Hansard Society).

⁵ A. Williamson (2009), *MPs Online: Connecting with Constituents* (London: Hansard Society).

engagement, rather than simply viewed in a technology-context. To engage online it is important to act and think like the target audience. This requires a cultural shift in the way that Parliament communicates.

15. Parliament must get better at making digital content available ranging from the provision of transcripts of Hansard to digital video. This requires a shift to a culture of open information, distributed and re-packaged through a variety of formal and informal channels.
16. Parliament.uk has undergone a number of significant overhauls and redesigns, not only in terms of the quantity and quality of content but also – and as importantly – with regard to usability. Parliament must commit to continuously review and improve its website navigation by considering further usability enhancement and, particularly through a wider range of visitor scenarios. The site is now more user-friendly and provides additional resources for visitors as well as aggregating links to a range of formal content on external sites. The recently re-designed site has delivered a number of improvements. For example, the previous site provided an interface to online consultations with parliamentary committees but these were poorly sign-posted and ongoing consultations were not mentioned on the ‘home page’ or the site map. This has been partially rectified on the new site. The re-design has rightly reflected a broader range of assumptions about how users might navigate the site.
17. However, the website assumes a rather proprietary nature, providing information as either HTML (standard web-page) or Adobe Acrobat Portable Document Format (PDF). It would be beneficial if metadata standards were developed and a supporting sub-layer of eXtensible Markup Language (XML) data was available across the whole site. This is particularly important in the following key areas: Hansard; bills before the House; submissions to committees and inquiries; and committee reports. The importance of this is already emphasised through the provision of Hansard searches on third-party websites such as TheyWorkForYou (theyworkforyou.com) and Parliament Parser (ukparse.kforge.net). The Irish Dáil also publishes its parliamentary Hansard in XML.
18. Parliament should therefore promote open data standards for all parliamentary content. It should ensure that Hansard is available in XML format with schemas and a suitable application programming interface (API) so that third-party developers can integrate searches of Hansard into their own web applications. It could be possible to adopt work already undertaken by a third-party. For example, MySociety, creators of TheyWorkForYou.com, have received funding to undertake an independent version of this project and significant work in this area has already been undertaken by PICT.
19. Parliament.uk is also, to a large degree, a traditional information delivery website. New web technologies have created a raft of interactive websites which are not simply publishers and distributors but places where user-generated content can be created. Examples of this include YouTube (video), Flickr (photographs), Facebook (social networking) and Twitter (a cross between micro-blogging and social networking). Whilst the functionality of such websites is usually defined in terms of the ability of users to create content, the other key feature is that they are all in effect embedded technologies. This means that content from these sites can be distributed and displayed elsewhere through a range of APIs. The value of YouTube video is not so much that it sits on the YouTube website but that it can be virally distributed and embedded (linking directly to one original source) on many other sites.

20. Parliament, including the House of Lords, has been successful in using YouTube to produce and distribute outreach videos and other information videos. However, it should commit to make digital content free and easy to virally circulate and re-post. This requires that procedural issues for streaming digital video be resolved, including making more video footage available more easily and cost-effectively to third-parties (including Members). This is sensible in light of advances in the use and reach of streaming video and the potential benefits of being able to widely disseminate video content through a range of sources ranging from the formal (Parliament's website), to informal (independent third-party websites).
21. The Procedure Committee has recommended that the House of Commons adopts a system of electronic petitioning (e-petitioning). Petitions are an important part of the historical and contemporary democratic process. The Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement* shows that the public are more likely to sign a petition than they are to engage in any other form of democratic activity.⁶
22. E-petitioning will supplement rather than replace traditional paper petitions and it has several benefits in a parliamentary context: it reasserts the primacy of Parliament as the place to which the public can petition; it provides greater access and transparency to the public; and the overall value of petitioning as a tool for democratic engagement can be enhanced through improvements in the management and transparency of the petitioning process.
23. The term 'e-consultation' by committees is somewhat misleading as these fora tend to be simply places to post comments, questions or observations. There is no clear process or structure for Parliament to respond to them or to include content from posts made in select committee deliberations.
24. A negative aspect of e-petitions is that they can appear inconsequential and achieve little. To some degree this can be mitigated by ensuring that systems and processes are well developed, clear and transparent and that e-petitions achieve some response and outcome and that this is communicated to the petitioners. Experience in Scotland and Wales suggests that petitioners still see the system favourably even when their petition does not achieve the original aims so long as processes are clear, reasons are given and there is good communication between Parliament and the petitioners.
25. Parliament should therefore adopt a system of e-petitioning with a clear focus on the need for well-developed and transparent processes.
26. As joint-pilot projects between Parliament and the Hansard Society, such as *Tell Parliament*, have shown, significant potential exists to use digital media to engage more widely around the work of select committees.⁷ This can be through the more active use of e-consultation, the use of mobile technologies or the provision of two-way streaming video. The potential to submit evidence to a committee from a remote location via internet video, for example, has the potential to overcome some barriers to access for members of the public as well as offering potential cost savings.

⁶ Hansard Society (2009), *Audit of Political Engagement 6* (London: Hansard Society), p.27.

⁷ R. Ferguson (2005), *TellParliament.net* (London: Hansard Society).

27. Parliament should therefore develop an active digital engagement strategy. This should include the use of real engagement and consultation with committees through the use of social media tools, websites and internet-video for evidence giving. The processes for engagement should also be clarified and publicised through e-consultation tools and better promotion of the availability of such facilities through the parliament.uk website.
28. Web 2.0 means fast, viral and iterative. Ideas rise, thrive and fall away, meaning that products stay in beta and new ideas emerge quickly. To work in this space, Parliament must adopt a Web 2.0 culture when it comes to engagement and information distribution, which allows users to generate original content and provides a programmatic interface to that content. The use of Web 2.0 must support a broader communications and engagement strategy, not simply be the use of technology for the sake of it. The evolutionary and rapidly emergent nature of the web means that it is important to take a more innovative and entrepreneurial approach to digital content. The timescales and nature of Web 2.0 are better suited to fast response and rapid prototyping than they are to traditional systems development life cycles.
29. A Web 2.0 culture needs to accept some basic risks: that the tool won't work; that the tool doesn't enhance communication or engagement as was expected; or that users fail to adopt a tool. Rather than planning to avoid such risk, the low cost and rapid nature of Web 2.0 means it is better to try something and then reject it than spend time and money investigating the theory. Web 2.0 is about light-weight and ultra-rapid development and deployment.
30. Given the above, it is difficult and perhaps counterproductive to suggest which Web 2.0 technologies should be tried next. Rather, the Parliamentary web-team and others should continue to watch for emergent trends and to trial new tools as and when they appear to offer benefits within the wider context of Parliament's communications and outreach strategies.
31. A digital innovation budget should therefore be established to fund small, rapid deployment Web 2.0 projects across Parliament. This should adopt the lessons of commercial venture capital funding, assuming a reasonably high attrition rate (8/10 projects will fail) and an acceptance that learning from failure bolsters successful projects and generates new ideas.
32. Parliament should continue to work with and adopt innovative external web-tools that can enhance engagement and outreach. Examples of this include TheyWorkForYou.com and TweetMinster.co.uk (aggregation of MPs' Twitter feeds).

Press

33. The House of Lords needs to be more proactive and less risk-averse when engaging with the media. It should focus on promoting the best work of the House of Lords in all areas, giving staff the freedom to develop relationships with the press so that they can promote stories proactively. Stories that most engage the media are those where there is human interest or easily demonstrable public interest. The work in the Chamber and committees is important but there is scope for covering the interests and work of Peers more widely as well. The House of Commons media and communications service has recently established a new post to focus on features and factual programming. The House of Lords should consider doing the same.

34. MPs generally have a personal staff of between one and four people, at least one of whom is likely to have responsibility for acting in a press/media role, responding to inquiries and proactively seeking to gain press coverage of their Members views and work. In addition, the parliamentary work of MPs in select committees is also supported through the Commons Media and Communications Service. In contrast, most peers do not have personal staff to help them respond to media inquiries or to proactively develop media engagement strategies. That is why there is scope and need for improved staffing in the press/media field in the House of Lords to support the work of all members. Two press officers simply do not provide sufficient resource capacity to convey the full scope and nature of the work of the House of Lords, the depth of its scrutiny of legislation, and the changes it secures through debate and committee work. More often than not, a limited staff such as this is going to be working on a reactive rather than a proactive basis.
35. The House of Lords' engagement with local and regional media is limited, largely because of the lack of a constituency link around which to organise. However, each peer has some local/regional roots. A regional press system should therefore be established with each Member invited to sign up, indicating their willingness to actively engage with local/regional media in a specified region. Each region should have an assigned press officer who co-ordinates the press/media work with the Peers. The regional press officer(s) should also co-ordinate with the House of Lords outreach officers in order to secure improved coverage of their work.
36. Attendance by journalists at House of Lords debates and committees is often sparse. But what efforts are made to facilitate them? Peers should routinely make themselves available before and after debates and committee sessions to talk to journalists. They should consider proactively holding open press sessions and invite the press to come in and talk to a particular committee's members, or a group of members with a particular policy interest. Committee chairs, for example, might consider holding a press briefing at the start of each parliamentary session / or each committee inquiry. This approach should become the norm rather than the exception.
37. In order to secure improved coverage of the House of Lords the media strategy should play to the strengths of the second chamber: the experience, skills and knowledge of the members and the detailed scrutiny of policy and legislation that is undertaken. However, most press gallery journalists are general political correspondents – they do not have specialist understanding of policy issues and are not there to cover the specialist angle. Greater access should therefore be provided for specialist journalists, for example through the provision of temporary media passes to facilitate access for particular debates and committees, and through the provision of specialist briefing sessions.
38. The Hansard Society's Puttnam Commission recommended that Parliament provide a formal induction for journalists joining the press gallery. There has been no progress in implementing this recommendation. If any induction does take place it is entirely informal. There seems to be an assumption that in most cases journalists joining the press gallery are joining an established team of colleagues from their paper and that this team will provide the induction. This is ad hoc, and relies on others to convey information about Parliament and the work of both Chambers – information that may not be provided in a positive and objective fashion. The Committee should be concerned not with whether there is 'demand' for a formal induction but rather that such induction would be beneficial for the House and should therefore be established as the norm. This will require systems and protocols to be developed to ensure that such induction is enforced perhaps, for

example, by linking the taking of an induction course to the provision of a parliamentary pass.

39. The House of Lords should also explore how it can ensure that journalism training schemes across the country are offered support in covering the House of Lords effectively as part of their training programme. Accredited courses include components on Parliament and Government and some students do visit Parliament and the press gallery during their training. The House should contact the head of each Journalism school and offer support / visit opportunities / speakers to support their work during the year. This will have long-term benefits in educating the next generation of journalists about the role and work of the House of Lords.
40. parliamentlive.tv provides complete coverage of all proceedings in the Chambers and Committees, with up to 18 live simultaneous streams per day, providing coverage to anyone who wants it, free, round the clock and all year round. Although it also provides for virtual tours of Parliament there is considerable scope for improvements in this area, linked to enhanced educational provision.
41. Securing clips of feeds by MPs / Peers via the Parliamentary Broadcast Unit is difficult, time-consuming and costly, so members should be encouraged to provide links to the parliamentlive.tv site from their own websites and blogs. Consider the development of the ability to offer members and officials the opportunity to 'embed' content from parliamentlive.tv in the way that they can at present with YouTube.
42. The video archive should be treated as a distributed dataset that can be embedded on third party websites (as per YouTube). This also requires consideration of copyright of material and whether the existing formal copyright mechanisms are appropriate; our recommendation would be to consider the use of appropriate Creative Commons licensing for the digital content as this both reflects the reality of the internet and acknowledges that information is there to be shared and distributed.
43. We understand that there are plans to undertake work to make archived footage available as an academic research tool. We support this objective and urge the authorities to engage on an ongoing basis with the academic and media communities to discuss how they are likely to want to use this archive in the future for research purposes. We also urge Parliament to undertake research to determine how the archive can be used for wider mainstream education purposes, particularly in the context of the citizenship curriculum.
44. Broadcasting rules were relaxed by the House of Commons Broadcasting Committee (now the Administration Committee) to provide for some contextualisation of coverage: for example, the provision of audio feed during voting divisions to give a sense of the atmosphere of the Chamber and this has been helpful.
45. However, on the web there is more scope for contextualisation through links to Order Papers, Bills, biographical information about speakers etc. At present contextualisation is limited due to a technical problem: the metadata collection for the audio/visual feeds is not sufficient to do much more than the captioning. There needs to be a richer search environment. We understand that the WebCentre team and the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit are currently procuring a new web content search system. We hope that this new system will address the technical barriers.