TellParliament.net
Interim Evaluation Report
2003 - 2005
Edited by Ross Ferguson

Contents

Executive Summary

1. Preface
   Professor the Lord Norton of Louth

2. Legislative Scrutiny, Accountability and Public Engagement
   Alex Brazier

3. TellParliament.net – Site Profile
   Barry Griffiths & Milica Howell

4. Measuring the Effects of Online Parliamentary Consultations
   Professor Stephen Coleman

5. TellParliament - Next Phase
   Ross Ferguson

Appendix 1 – Forum List
Appendix 2 – Forum Overviews
Appendix 3 – Survey Questions

About the Hansard Society

--------------------------------------------------
Executive Summary

Credibility for consultation
After almost a decade of research and evaluation of the use of information and communication technology for the purposes of parliamentary consultation, the Hansard Society is confident that online consultation should be regarded as a credible complement to conventional oral and written consultation methods available to parliamentary bodies.

Evaluation
The Hansard Society has evaluated over 20 forum-based online consultations. Citizen participants came away with an enhanced perception of their efficacy and the responsiveness of Parliament; on the parliamentary side, there was recognition of the value in online consultation’s aggregative, asynchronous and innovative functions.

Evaluation revealed that conducting consultation online was not just a route to engage the ‘hard-to-reach’, it also appealed to those who are comfortable and experienced in participating through conventional structures.

Development Phases
The Hansard Society’s development of online consultation platforms on behalf of the UK Parliament has taken two distinct phases - the first assessed feasibility (1999 - 2003), the second piloted a default template for the technology used to support consultation via deliberative forums (2003 – 2005);

Consolidation
A third phase is required during which Parliament must take a more active role in running each online consultation. Those consulting must engage in deliberation, the marketing of the consultations must be refined and Parliament must better incorporate submissions from online consultations with those gathered via conventional methods;

Benefits
Following successful completion and evaluation of this ‘third phase’, Parliament’s use of online consultations will be more effective, manageable and sustainable. Parliament will broaden and deepen its consultation base and its scrutiny role will be enhanced. For the public, another viable route to engage with the parliamentary process will be presented helping to improve political awareness and participation.
Preface

Much of the traditional literature on the British Parliament has focused on the relationship of Parliament to the executive. That relationship is crucial but it is not the only relationship that is fundamental to the health of the British polity.

Parliament is the essential link between the people and government. Parliament has been characterised as the body through which the people speak to government and the government speaks to the people. However, the relationship of the people to Parliament - and of Parliament to the people - has been subject to relatively little attention.

Fortunately, that is now changing. There is a greater realisation of the importance of this relationship, both among those who study Parliament as well as among parliamentarians themselves. A number of bodies have recently drawn attention to the need for a greater engagement of Parliament with the public and have identified ways in which this can be achieved.

Among recent reports have been those from the Modernisation Committee of the House of Commons, the Constitution Committee of the House of Lords, and the Hansard Society Commission on Parliament in the Public Eye, chaired by Lord Puttnam. All have recognised the value of new technology in strengthening the link and enabling parliamentarians to engage more with members of the public and interested groups.

One structured way of engaging with the public is through online consultations. The Hansard Society has been at the forefront in developing such consultation. This report is a timely contribution. It provides both an evaluation and best practice guidance on utilising a tool of communication that is likely to become even more prominent in the near future. Online consultation will not necessarily supplant existing means of communication but rather act as a valuable complement to them, helping ensure that parliamentarians hear what people have to say.

Professor the Lord Norton of Louth
Professor of Government, University of Hull
Legislative Scrutiny, Accountability and Public Engagement

Evidence from the public and organisations that represent them can make an important contribution to many of Parliament’s key functions, including the way that it makes the law, the methods it uses to hold government to account and to the mechanisms that exist for debating and reflecting the concerns of the population. It is within this context, of linking Parliament to the public, that TellParliament.net plays an important role.

This report takes a detailed look at the experience of on-line consultations through TellParliament.net, describing how they work in practice, assessing the effect they have had on the legislative process and looking ahead to their future development. First, however, this opening chapter puts TellParliament.net in context by providing a general overview of the parliamentary legislative process, highlighting areas where the use of online consultation can and has been used to enhance Parliament’s legislative and scrutiny functions.

The legislative process
Making the law is arguably Parliament’s most important function. There are a number of ways in which consultation processes, whether online or using more conventional methods, can make a difference to the laws that shape and bind society.

Legislators can canvass a sense of public opinion around an issue, utilise the expertise and experience of members of the public and the groups that represent them, and speak to those who are likely to be affected by a bill in order to assess its potential consequences. In recent years, a number of new developments have increased the opportunities for canvassing views from outside Westminster.

Before a bill is considered by Parliament (either in draft or formally), there are usually avenues for public consultation on the policy that will underpin the proposed law. The traditional way of canvassing opinion has been through the issuing of a Green or White Paper, in which the government’s intentions are published. The public are invited to give their opinions on the proposals and the feedback received, whether positive or otherwise, can be important in deciding the final shape of the government’s plans.

Additionally, government departments also undertake their own consultation exercises on new policy developments to canvass opinion. Sometimes parliamentary committees hold their own inquiries at this consultation stage, either focusing on the specific proposals in the Green or White Paper, or instead broadening their inquiry to look more generally at the issues concerned. This early stage of policy and legislative development is often critical as the government may be more genuinely open to incorporating new ideas or proposals if a good case can be made.

Pre-legislative scrutiny
The same principle of making an impact early in the process applies in the case of pre-legislative scrutiny. Since 1997 there has been a marked, and very welcome, increase in the use of pre-legislative scrutiny which allows bills in draft to be considered by parliamentary committees. Between 1997-98 and 2003-04, a total of 42 draft bills were published. Such scrutiny can allow for consideration of a bill’s principles, questioning of new policy initiatives contained within it and consideration of any practical and technical issues which might arise from the proposed provisions. Pre-legislative scrutiny can also utilise expert evidence and provide an important mechanism for collaboration between the executive, legislature and electorate.
When considering legislation in draft form, select committees are able to call witnesses for oral evidence and take written evidence from external sources. Select committees are then able to report their findings in detail and explain why they either support or oppose the proposed bill and explain the amendments that they would deem to be appropriate.

This evidence taking can include the use of online consultations. One example where outside evidence proved crucial was during the consideration of the Draft Communications Bill in 2002. Pre-legislative scrutiny of the bill was enhanced by the use of an online forum moderated by the Hansard Society that created a two-way channel of communication between citizens and the parliamentary committee that was scrutinising the bill. The success of this pilot can be seen by the fact that two of the committee’s key policy recommendations came directly from suggestions made on the forum.¹

The formal legislative process
Once the government has considered the views and recommendations made at pre-legislative stage, a formal bill will be issued. Following its publication at First Reading and the debate on its principles at Second Reading, a bill is submitted to a Standing Committee (STC), during which time government and opposition MPs scrutinise a bill, line by line.

In theory, STCs should allow MPs to have considerable impact over the final content of legislation but in reality, the government’s majority and the tight control of the whips ensures that the government gets the bill through committee in the form that it wishes. Therefore, although pressure groups and lobby organisations make considerable effort to influence STCs, such effort is often wasted as usually only amendments that are acceptable to the government are passed.

It is partly to address the widespread criticisms of the quality of scrutiny in STCs that alternative forms of legislative scrutiny, such as pre-legislative scrutiny, were introduced.

Special Standing Committees
An alternative method of using external views to strengthen Parliament’s scrutinising functions is through the use of a Special Standing Committee (SSC), which is a form of STC which can take oral and written evidence. Greater use of SSCs has been frequently proposed to address the failings of STCs to enable expert witnesses to be called and provide an additional forum for consideration and scrutiny. Prime candidates for consideration by SSCs might be bills which involve particular technical or administrative issues, such as Child Support and Tax and Pension Credits where the legislation’s success relies as much, and possibly more so, on the detail in the bill as on the policy intentions underpinning it.

Despite the regular calls for greater use of SSCs, they are, however, very rarely used. This is unfortunate as SSCs would provide an ideal opportunity to provide evidence direct to the legislators, who are able to change the bill in question. The use of online consultation would provide a direct input to this forum and could canvass the views

¹ Joint Committee on Draft Communications Bill - Report available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt/jtcom.htm
likely to be directly affected by the law’s provisions. One potential problem if SSCs were to be used more regularly, however, is that the short time-frame during which SSCs can take evidence might make it difficult to organise, publicise and conduct an online consultation.

**The role of the Lords**

In order to become law, a bill also must pass through all its legislative stages in the House of Lords and the two Houses must agree on the final version of the bill. The main difference to the procedures used in the Commons is that there are no STCs in the Lords and, instead, bills are considered by a Committee of the whole House. Therefore, all peers are able, in theory, to have some input into the detailed scrutiny of a bill. Indeed, in the view of some commentators, the Lords provides more rigorous scrutiny of legislation than the Commons and important amendments and improvements are often achieved. It is important, therefore, that the role of the Upper House is not neglected and avenues to provide external evidence are pursued.

**The work of select committees**

In addition to law making, Parliament’s other main duty is to hold the government to account for its actions. There are many different aspects to this function, the highest profile of which is Prime Minister’s Questions, but it also includes Oral Questions to Ministers, Written Parliamentary Questions, Urgent Questions and Questions following Ministerial Statements. There is, however, general acceptance that the most effective form of scrutiny and accountability is delivered by select committees. Select committees operate in both the Commons and the Lords, and consist of MPs or Peers of all parties, reflecting party balance. Select committees are charged with examining the policy, administration and finance of government departments.

The Hansard Society has identified select committees as an important vehicle for both improving parliamentary efficiency and Parliament’s engagement with the public. For example, when government policy or administration is being examined, the public can provide direct and relevant evidence of their own experience.

There has traditionally been a tendency for select committees to take evidence from the ‘usual suspects’, for example, pressure and consumer groups, academic experts and lawyers. Although their evidence is valuable, they do not always speak on behalf of the public or accurately reflect its views. It is on this point that online consultation can bring a qualitative, and indeed quantitative, difference to external consultation. Rather than mediation through professional or representative organisations, more direct channels of communication can help link select committees with the wider public.

In 2001, the report of the Hansard Society Commission on Parliamentary Scrutiny, *The Challenge for Parliament*, analysed the methods that select committees used to hold the government to account. One of its conclusions was that select committees should actively seek the views of the public. The report stated that 'Parliament is at its strongest when it articulates and mobilises public opinion; both Houses need to improve their communications with, and responsiveness to, the public.' It also advocated greater use of new technology to increase dialogue with the public.

*The Challenge for Parliament* proved influential and was an important catalyst for changes made in May 2002, when the Commons adopted a number of important reforms. These included the adoption of guidelines for core functions and duties to be
carried out by select committees. One of these duties was ‘to conduct scrutiny of any published draft bill within the committee’s responsibilities’.

The entire range of select committee activity, whether inquiries on government activity or looking at draft bills, has been made more effective by the use of evidence provided directly from the public. The establishment of a Scrutiny Unit in November 2002 to provide extra support for select committees has allowed them to consider different ways in which evidence can be collected, including increasing the use of online consultation.

Further endorsement of the strategy of soliciting outside views came with the Modernisation Committee’s report, Connecting Parliament with the Public, which noted that ‘the greater use of online consultation is a good way for Parliament to take account of the views of the wider public ... We urge select committees and joint committees considering draft legislation to make online consultation a more regular aspect of their work.’

**Petitions Committee**

Petitions are another method to enable public participation in the policy process. At present, petitions are governed by strict rules about wording and there is little sense that petitions to Parliament result in any concrete action on the part of MPs.

Many petitions are submitted to Parliament each year but they rarely, if ever, translate into parliamentary action. This is in contrast to the Scottish Parliament where the Public Petitions Committee plays a pivotal role in connecting the public and the Executive. All petitions go to the Committee which then assesses the merits of each submission by consulting with the Executive, MSPs and, if necessary, taking evidence from individuals and organisations. Where the Committee thinks there is a case to be answered, it refers petitions on for further consideration by the relevant committee or department. Such an innovation would provide a direct channel for public concerns and would be well suited for convergence with online consultations.

**The importance of consulting the public**

The Hansard Society has undertaken a number of projects, and commissioned research, both to gauge public attitudes towards Parliament and the political process, and also to test potential solutions to the problem of political disengagement.

The various examples identified in this chapter would help facilitate a closer relationship between Parliament and citizens. This aspect is frequently marginalised, especially when compared to the strong emphasis placed on the relationship between the legislature and the executive.

Making sure that the views of the public are heard will help to engage the public and stimulate participation while, at the same time, such consultation will strengthen Parliament and the political system more broadly. This is a time of concern about lower levels of voter turnout in elections and diminishing trust in the political process. The Hansard Society’s programme of work aims to address public concerns and provide solutions. Online methods of consultation, such as www.tellparliament.net fit squarely into that strategy.

**Alex Brazier**  
Senior Research Fellow, Hansard Society
**TellParliament.net – Site Profile**

The Hansard Society has been instrumental in developing and evaluating the contribution that ICT can make to parliamentary processes and stakeholders. The Society’s research has been at its most intensive where web-based technology has been examined in the context of parliamentary consultations and inquiries. On the basis of our own investigations - and through comparison with experiences and research carried out by others - the Society is satisfied that Parliament should regard ICT-enabled consultation as a viable option alongside that of oral and written methods.

**Feasibility of Consultation Online**

The Hansard Society has accumulated a great deal of experience in the use of asynchronous deliberative online forums. We first began working with Parliament on online consultations in 1999 when the Public Administration Committee held an inquiry into new media technologies and their potential impact on democratic engagement.

The commissioning of an online forum was a wholly new development for House of Commons Select Committees. The Committee viewed the experience positively and its report on the exercise concluded that:

> ‘new technologies, carefully used, are tools which offer the possibility of greatly improving the accessibility and use made by citizens of public participation opportunities’.3

A breakthrough consultation was the ‘closed’ online forum for survivors of domestic violence, WomenSpeak, commissioned by the All-Party Group for Domestic Violence in 2000. This was an exemplary exercise in how online forums can enrich conventional parliamentary evidence-gathering. Where consultations are usually confined to academics, lobbyists and large representative bodies, WomenSpeak demonstrated how ICT has the potential to be used to reach communities that traditional methods could not, or at least in new ways.

Six further pilot forums were commissioned by parliamentary committees and government departments between 1999 and 2003 to support consultation on a wide range of issues and areas of public policy, for example, constitutional reform, flooding, stem cell research and tax credits.

Each of these online forums allowed us to test different dynamics, such as pre- and post-moderation, closed and open viewing, as well as online and multi-channel marketing. Crucially, we saw instances of deliberation involving only the ‘usual suspects’, ‘closed’ forums limited to specific stakeholder groups, and other consultations where lay-people joined with experts, lobbyists and parliamentarians to share their views and be exposed to their peers. Each forum resulted in a richer seam of inquiry

---

2 ‘Asynchronous’ in the context of online consultations means that users are not required to be in a particular location at a set time to participate, and can contribute on more than one occasion. The consultations have a broad timeframe, set objectives, are moderated and seek conclusions toward their close.

3 Public Administration Select Committee – Sixth Report available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmpubadm/373/37303.htm
evidence than had previously been available to Parliament, and this suggested a value in conducting further evaluation. 

**Piloting TellParliament**

The consultation exercises run between 1999 and 2003 represented a feasibility-assessment phase for online parliamentary forums. A second pilot phase was marked by the launch of TellParliament.net in 2003 - a website and project which sought to build on the good practice observed in the first phase and to address the shortfalls raised in stakeholder surveys and focus groups.

In the feasibility phase each of the forums were uniquely built and branded; whereas the aim with TellParliament was to create a template and dedicated platform to host parliamentary consultations. Although there was no core funding or guarantee that select committees and other parliamentary bodies would further engage in online deliberation, we wanted to try to establish a model for the forums in order to bring greater integrity to our data comparisons, reduce costs and move closer to a point where Parliament could be more involved in the administration of the consultations (a role performed conventionally by the Hansard Society’s eDemocracy Programme).

These ‘default’ forums branched off from a central TellParliament homepage (tellparliament.net). A set navigation structure was agreed with the deliberation spaces at its core. Although each forum had its own unique visual content, the general template introduced uniformity to the forums’ design. Each forum had a clear explanation of what the inquiry was about, who was doing the consulting and why. Background information and suggestions for further reading were provided to help inform participants’ deliberation. At registration a set of basic terms and conditions was made available, as well as a clear explanation of the forums’ moderation policy.

---

5 The Hansard Society would like to express its appreciation to Alun Roberts (Specialist for the Science and Technology Committee) for his assistance in developing TellParliament, particularly in relation to the name.
By bringing a greater consistency to the user interface and content, it was possible to establish a more robust back-end administrative system. It was now easier to manage participants’ accounts, aggregate data, archive forums, and distribute transcripts. The moderation functionality was also made simpler and more responsive, an element crucial to ensuring free-flowing but constructive deliberation. Overall, the site was more intuitive to use, more conducive to consultation and simpler to reconfigure.

Forums lasted between three to eight weeks. At the close of each forum the Hansard Society archived every post and provided these in transcript-form alongside a summary report. This package was presented to the committee conducting the consultation and distributed to participants via the website. The website was also used as the source for inquiry updates and to host feedback from the committee.6

Moderation

Most interactive online platforms, such as mailing lists and chatrooms which solicit user-generated content, have some form of ‘moderation’ in place (perhaps more recognisable as ‘administration’, ‘management’ or ‘editing’). Moderation also proved an integral feature of the TellParliament forums.

The Hansard Society recommends that all public online consultations conducted by Parliament, government, political parties or elected representatives should be moderated. The necessity of moderation in deliberative online consultations is what distinguishes these exercises from chat-rooms, bulletin boards or email groups. Stephen Coleman and John Gotze (2001) described discussions that took place on the latter platforms as ‘free-for-alls’ requiring:

‘no rules or regulation, no attempt to reach a conclusion, no summary of what is said and no feedback. In free-for-all discussions anyone can say anything, but no one can have much expectation of being heard or influencing policy outcomes.’7

Moderation, then, is integral to making deliberative online consultations worth running in relation to the cost, time and quality-concerns of those designing or scrutinising policy. From the perspective of citizens, at a time when trust in representatives and institutions is significantly low, the presence of moderators also provides reassurance about the credibility of the exercise. Moderators are also there to ensure that everyone participating has an equal footing and opportunity to contribute.

The roles that are carried out by moderators are best understood as strategies adopted to achieve different objectives depending on the participants involved, the subject matter, the time-frame and available resources. During the TellParliament forums, moderator roles included:

- Host;
- Facilitator;
- Project manager;
- Umpire;
- Arbitrator;
- Caretaker;

6 An entire set of reports, transcripts and any committee responses to the ‘TellParliament consultations’ can be found at TellParliament.net.
Not every role was adopted in the course of a consultation; some required different degrees of intervention. Indeed, in some consultations there was no moderator activity in the actual consultation space; instead moderators carried out ‘off-stage’ administrative duties, predominantly ‘pre-’ or ‘post-moderating’. With ‘pre-moderation’ all participant contributions were checked against a forum’s terms and conditions before they are published; whereas with ‘post-moderation’, participant contributions were published and then checked against the terms and conditions.

Whichever form it took and whichever strategy was employed, TellParliament moderation was non-partisan, transparent and rigorously applied. Moderators worked independently for both those consulting and those being consulted, and they were trusted in equal measure by both groups. The result was a robust and revealing consultation process.

**Usage by the public**

Much has been written on Parliament’s need to strengthen its communications and standing in the public eye. Consultations are traditionally publicised via the committee webpages and supplemented by press releases emailed to a database of contacts, consisting mainly of academics, practitioners and the media. This approach results in only a select number of people being informed about inquiries, with only a small proportion of those ultimately contributing.

While online consultation may present a means of overcoming many of the obstacles that hinder conventional inquiry methods, it is not wholly removed from the milieu of messages and requests targeted at the citizen-consumer everyday. Therefore, it is vital that an achievable and creative communications strategy is planned and implemented to bring out the best in an online consultation.

There is no doubt that consultation requires adequate preparation and implementation time, and the importance of publicity and recruitment stages of an online consultation cannot be over-stated. Publicity and recruitment are closely related. Well-considered and targeted publicity results in good levels of traffic, registration and quality/quantity of contributions. Participants in turn can encourage others to get involved. These are important considerations from the perspective of broadening and deepening the consultation base, but in addition, the media value of creative consultation is important to Parliament as it works to improve its standing in the public eye.

During the TellParliament pilots, the Hansard Society was responsible for publicising the consultations. Marketing budgets were often miniscule, predictably putting cinema campaigns and billboards out of reach. Instead the Hansard Society had to be creative and resourceful, relying predominantly on targeted marketing campaigns to raise the profile of the parliamentary consultations and the opportunity to participate online. These included the following:

---

8 More information on the development of moderator functions can be found in ‘Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation’, S. Coleman and J. Gotze (Hansard Society, 2001)
- issuing press releases (broad and targeted);
- responding to requests from broadcasters (radio and TV) and press (local and national);
- giving interviews;
- placing articles;
- partnering with representative organisations and engaging their networks;
- distributing via existing online networks;
- distribution of publicity material (such as leaflets and posters);
- holding community-based pre-consultation workshops;
- staging launch events;
- asking MPs to advocate the consultation amongst relevant groups in their constituencies.

This following table shows the overall usage statistics for each of the five forums run via the TellParliament website. This data was gathered by pre-consultation surveys at registration and through post-consultations surveys conducted with registered participants once the consultation had closed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commissioning body</th>
<th>Inquiry</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th># of registered users</th>
<th># of messages posted</th>
<th>% of registered participants who had never contacted their MP before</th>
<th>% of registered participants who had not previously given evidence to Parliament before</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology Select Committee</td>
<td>Human Reproductive Technologies and the Law</td>
<td>8 weeks from 22 January 2004</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernisation Committee</td>
<td>Reconnecting Parliament with the Public</td>
<td>4 weeks from 1 March 2004</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee on Constitutional Reform Bill</td>
<td>Constitutional Reform Bill</td>
<td>4 weeks from 4 May 2004</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland Affairs Committee</td>
<td>Hate Crime in Northern Ireland</td>
<td>6 weeks from 1 September 2004</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All-Party Group for Diabetes</td>
<td>Diabetes care in the UK</td>
<td>6 weeks from 8 December 2004</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What this table reveals is that going online is seen by many as a viable first-step into the parliamentary process; though further research and tracking of participants is required to determine whether this action leads to other forms of participation. The consultation around the Constitutional Reform Bill is also important, because it shows that online consultation is not just a route through which to engage the ‘hard-to-reach’, it also appeals to those who are comfortable and experienced in conventional forms of participation (in this case senior legal practitioners).

The methods the Hansard Society employed in publicising the consultations were basic, low-cost and often did not benefit from adequate preparation time to prepare or implement. Consequently, the numbers of participants in the TellParliament forums were modest. However, putting a consultation online does not mean that thousands of people will come forward to get involved. The point of running deliberative online forums is to go deeper than surveys and the quick-fire ‘yes/no’ answers they produce; they are about good qualitative data rather than quantitative results.

The impact of these forums was measurable. The participants came away with an enhanced perception of their efficacy and the responsiveness of Parliament; on the parliamentary side there was recognition of the value in online consultation's aggregative, asynchronous and innovative functions.9

Summary

Undertaking feasibility studies between 1999 and 2003 allowed us to study benefits and risks of conducting public consultation using a web-based ICT application. The research and development work at this stage informed the construction of a basic template for subsequent online deliberative forums. It was also important in understanding the streams of work into which the forums slot, for example Parliament's wider communications and consultation activity.

Following evaluation of the feasibility phase, the launch of TellParliament.net in 2003 marked the start of a second, 18-month development period. The TellParliament research has contributed to a better understanding of the attitudes, requirements and skills of the different stakeholders engaged in consultation online – those leading the inquiry in Parliament, those participating and those organisations providing support to the consultation. Working from a default template gave us a clearer insight into the resource-commitment required by each forum, where experience and skills existed, and where capacity needed to be built. It also revealed much about the standing of evidence gathered online compared with that collected via conventional methods.

Missing in both phases has been a link with conventional, ‘offline’ methods of consulting. So far, in only two instances did the online and offline approaches converge, when the online forums were used to supplement conventional methods rather than to run in parallel with them.10 This has led to confusion about whether the participative mechanisms enabled by ICT will lead to the enhancement or replacement of conventional methods of consultation.

---

9 See ‘Measuring the Effects of Online Parliamentary Consultations’ chapter in this publication.
10 During the consultation on the Draft Communications Bill, the online forum manager provided weekly summaries at the Committee weekly hearing; the Science and Technology Committee invited oral evidence from some of the participants in the online forum during the inquiry into Human Reproductive Technologies and the Law.
Using technology in a parliamentary context does not represent a slippery slope to direct democracy. Nevertheless, these concerns do raise crucial procedural questions and their exploration is vital to the long term credibility and sustainability of consultation whether conducted on- or offline.

**Barry Griffiths & Milica Howell**  
Hansard Society eDemocracy Programme
Measuring the Effects of Online Parliamentary Consultations
External Evaluation (June 2004 – June 2005)

In normative terms, a strong case can be made for online parliamentary consultations as a means of broadening the range of evidence to committees, contributing experientially-based information to the legislative process and strengthening the democratic legitimacy of Parliament as a democratically representative body. The problem of measuring empirically the effects of evidence-gathering consultations is much more problematic. In order to explore such effects, a three-part research exercise was conducted. Firstly, interviews were conducted with committee clerks and specialist advisers who were closely involved in four recent online parliamentary consultations. Secondly, in each of the four consultations, surveys were designed which participants were urged to complete online before and after taking part. Thirdly, respondents to the surveys were contacted by email and invited to reflect upon their participation in the online consultations, in response to two open-ended questions.

Brief accounts of the main findings from the three research stages are presented in the following three sections. These are far from exhaustive accounts and will be supplemented by further data and analysis in a later study.

Before turning to the findings, let us consider four effects that advocates of online parliamentary consultations often claim will emerge from them. Firstly, there is an expectation that these consultations will attract new and different voices to the evidence-gathering process. Secondly, there is a hope that the deliberative nature of these online consultations will enable participants to learn from one another. Thirdly, and most ambitiously, there is a claim that by encouraging citizens to interact more directly with MPs, they will come to have greater trust in Parliament as a representative institution. Fourthly, there is an instrumentalist claim that such consultative exercises will have a positive influence upon the deliberations and conclusions of parliamentary committees.

The committee officials
Clerks and specialist advisers were asked whether the online consultations succeeded in their aim of exposing parliamentary committees to a broader range of evidence. Responses were generally quite positive:

We undoubtedly got some views that we wouldn’t otherwise have heard, some of which were worth hearing and some of which missed the point … (clerk)

… It did prove to be an avenue in which people could contribute who otherwise might not have done so … All I can say is that the nature and experiences mediated through the contributions were quite often of a different nature from the, sort of, institutional contributions we would normally expect to get. (clerk)

I think with the online consultation you lower the threshold of effort that’s required to participate in the inquiry, so the people that you bring are the people who

---

11 The four consultations were on: Human Reproductive Technologies, Connecting Parliament with the Public, Constitutional Reform Bill, Hate Crime.
12 The questions were: i) How do you think that future online consultations could be improved for you? ii) How could the UK Parliament become better at hearing the voice of the public?
wouldn’t go to the trouble of drafting a memorandum and editing it and printing it out and posting it in and so on, but might just post a few sentences on a message board. (clerk)

But one interviewee took the view that there was a need for more outreach:

If it was really to accede to the aspiration of genuinely reaching out to a wider public audience than we might otherwise reach, I think it would have to have been publicised through the media: TV discussion programmes could link to it, radio phone-ins could end and say that there was a website out there for people to continue the debate, something like that. There wasn’t that kind of strategic planning, partly because of time, I think. All of that publicity was left in the hands of the Hansard Society. (specialist adviser)

A second key question concerned the impact of the consultations upon the committees’ deliberations and final reports. Did they make any difference? In one case, the online consultation was used to help shape the agenda for a committee inquiry and an interviewee stated that

I think it was a useful exercise, primarily, in giving myself, managing the inquiry, and to a lesser extent, I think, the members, a good grounding in the issues and some of the sensitivities that were involved. (specialist adviser)

Generally speaking, the view was that these particular online consultations had very limited impact. In one case, a committee was unsure about how to regard the status of this kind of evidence:

…it turned out that one of the members objected quite strongly to what were essentially anonymous comments … And, therefore, it became difficult to actually directly draw upon that evidence, so in a sense its contribution to the report was indirect rather than direct … (specialist adviser)

Some interviewees took the view that the consultations were limited by the absence of interaction between consultees and MPs:

I think you could have had quite a vibrant community of people discussing these issues, with the Members putting their view across, and with Members being challenged by other participants and being asked to defend their views, and perhaps vice versa, perhaps some of the Members could come along and challenge some of the less well-informed comments from members of the public. But none of that happened, and it just turned into a rather dry and dead succession of comments. (clerk)

I think for it to have more effect, for it to impact on them and on the way they [Members] conduct the inquiry, and the conclusions they come up with, I think they need to be exposed to it directly. And it’s a difficult thing. Engaging members at all is difficult. You are actually asking them to do something that’s beyond what they would normally be prepared to do. So I think you would have to… maybe identify a small number of individuals who would be prepared to take on a more active role. (specialist adviser)
The degree of impact of evidence from the online consultations depended on context. In the case of one committee inquiry, an interviewee was of the view that

…the impact on the final document was substantial, because there was an immediacy about some of the speech that was used in the examples in people’s contributions which was probably more accessible than having to dig through the large volumes of evidence. So there is a starkness and immediacy. There was also a sense in which this was an interesting appendix to a report that you don’t often see; so a number of people who read the report said that they flicked immediately to the report on the e-consultation. (clerk)

Pre and post-consultation surveys
A total of 438 people completed the pre-consultation surveys and 212 (33%) also completed the post-consultation survey. Since the analysis sought to explore impact and participants’ perception of the consultation process, it focuses primarily on those 212 respondents who completed both pre- and post-consultation surveys, in order to track correlated trends. The table below gives a breakdown of respondents for each consultation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultation subject</th>
<th>Total number of respondents</th>
<th># of respondents who only completed pre-consultation survey</th>
<th># who completed both pre- and post-consultation surveys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; Technology</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>214 (64 %)</td>
<td>109 (33 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernisation</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>104 (54 %)</td>
<td>60 (31 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate crime</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>65 (80 %)</td>
<td>16 (20 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional reform</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>55 (67 %)</td>
<td>27 (33 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>438 (64 %)</td>
<td>212 (31 %)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

66% of respondents who completed both surveys were male and 34% were female. 3% of respondents were members of political parties. 58% posted messages in the consultation forums; the others were registered, but did not post.

The participants in these consultations had personal or professional interests in the subjects being discussed, but this did not necessarily mean that they were interested in politics broadly or the work of Parliament in particular. When asked in the pre-consultation survey, 44% of participants felt that Parliament was ‘out of touch’ with people like them and only 20% thought that MPs were ‘interested in listening’ to them. These statistics provide a backdrop against which to measure the effect of participation in the consultations. If, after participating, citizens felt less out of touch and more listened to, this would be a significant finding.

In order to recognise trends from the responses, we correlated sets of answers from the pre-consultation surveys and matched them with meaningful counterparts in the post-
consultation ones, with a view to discerning a ‘before and after’ effect among participants. Despite a limited data set, several noteworthy findings emerged.

72% of all respondents said that they found the consultation in which they participated ‘worthwhile,’ of whom 79% said that they had learned something new from reading other messages that were posted. Interestingly, 43% of those who found the consultation ‘worthwhile’ posted no messages at all, suggesting that the value of these exercises is not purely expressive.

Over half (52%) of respondents who regarded the consultation as ‘worthwhile’ had indicated in the pre-consultation survey that ‘Parliament was out of touch’ with them. And over half (60%) of those who had regarded Parliament as out of touch in the pre-consultation survey disagreed in the post-consultation survey with the statements that ‘There is not much I can do change the way the country is run’.

The online consultations appear to have met a key requirement of deliberative debate, with 73% of participants reporting that they had ‘learned from other posters’. Almost one in 10 participants (8%) reported that they made new contacts with other people as a result of participating.

Speaking of learning experiences, we draw particular attention to a small but noteworthy group of respondents (17%) who not only stated that they had learned from others, but that participating in the consultation had ‘changed their mind or opinion’ in some way. Half of these people had previously expressed (in the pre-consultation survey) that Parliament was ‘out of touch,’ which was reversed after participation, with 75% of them taking the view that that MPs were ‘listening to them’ and 40% believing that the consultation process would ‘make a difference’. The attitudinal changes of this group serve as anecdotal evidence that learning and meaningful exchanges can occur in the setting of political discussion via online consultations.

Open-ended questions to participants
Each of the 438 participants whose survey responses had been analysed was contacted by email and asked two open-ended questions about their personal reflections on taking part in the online consultations. (See Appendix 2)

While 60 of the emails were returned due to outdated email addresses, 117 full replies were received over the course of three weeks, providing a response rate of 20%. Only a small minority showed discontent with the overall effort; most were positive and at times enthusiastic about their participation.

Three major points for improvement appeared consistently, of which the most prominent was the need for greater publicity and an expansion of the participant pool. Many noted that they had found out about the online consultation in which they participated only incidentally and recommended that there should be more coordinated publicity and outreach in the future. This suggests that participants saw significant value in their involvement, as they felt that it should be extended to others. (Indeed, 86% of respondents to the post-consultation survey stated that they would like to take part in future online parliamentary consultations.)

The key to any internet consultation to hear people’s views is publicising the web site or e-mail address better. The red button function could be deployed on the
BBC more often to advertise web site and e-mail. Political programmes like Newsnight, Question Time, Newsround and the Politics Show should equally advertise how people can contact their MP or parliament again using the red button technology. Suggest that soap operas include occasional story lines that include writing to or involving MPs/Select Committees e.g. the Queen Vic in Eastenders during the alcohol licensing law reforms. Equally public information outlets e.g. Post Offices and Government communications e.g. electoral registration forms, car tax reminders, council tax reminders, inland revenue forms, public sector employees pay slips etc., etc., could advertise parliament web site and channel as well as a poster campaign in public buildings like doctors’ surgeries, hospitals, libraries, blood donor centres, cinema adverts, pub beer mats etc.

Forums on each select committee’s website would be a possibility, but these would have to be publicised.

Secondly, a significant number of respondents pointed to the need for better feedback mechanisms to assure them that their contributions had not been a waste of time. Suggestions made included direct responses from committee members, briefings on the decisions being taken and how the consultations had affected them, and taking care to respond to participants who personally sent follow-up inquiries after a consultation.

I think it is important at the start to declare openly how exactly the online consultation will feed into the final conclusions of those who have asked for it to be conducted. At no time was it clear whether the participants’ contribution would have any real significance in the final outcome …

There should be a clear response from parliamentarians to those who took part in the consultation, otherwise after spending hours on an online consultation there is a feeling that it has been a waste of time. Parliamentarians should follow up online consultations by meeting members of the public who have given a great deal of time to the consultation. Specific suggestions that are put forward for reform of the law should be responded to by MPs involved in the consultation.

Thirdly, several respondents criticised the usability of the consultation forums, having experienced technical difficulties which prevented them from engaging as actively as they wished. Although this was a technical issue, it should be addressed in a concentrated effort for future consultations, as technical difficulties or poor design should not stand in the way of participation or render it frustrating.

Access to the … site and information was clumsy and difficult. In the end I had to give up because I could not get through the fluff, not because I did not want to participate. I am afraid the mechanics of such consultations have to be extremely user friendly.

It would be great to streamline the processes to go through before you can post messages such as registering etc which can seem time consuming and rather off putting when most ordinary respondents simply want to fire off a point of view as part of a discussion rather than spend a lot of time beforehand getting in a position where their details have been accepted and they can gain access to the message board.
Conclusions

The online consultations examined here should be regarded as part of an ongoing experiment in using the internet to connect the public with the work of Parliament. Experiments call for critical and systematic evaluation from which lessons should be learned. The findings reported here are a small part of such an evaluation.

There is strong evidence to suggest that these consultations attracted participants who would not usually give evidence to Parliament and that many of them learned from one another during the process. As exercises designed to broaden political inclusion and promote a degree of public deliberation, the consultations would appear to have succeeded. There is also evidence to suggest that participants were more inclined after having experienced the consultations to feel that Parliament was in touch with them and prepared to listen to them. There is much more to be reported about this effect, but, if it is indeed a valid and sustainable finding, it is a very important one.

Evidence regarding the impact of these consultations on the deliberations and decisions of parliamentary committees is rather less positive. At least two of the consultations considered seem to have had a negligible impact upon the committees which sponsored them; a third consultation was used to shape the agenda for the committee inquiry and a fourth one seems to have had a meaningful impact upon the inquiry for which it was run. As with non-parliamentary and non-online consultations, the danger of asking people for their views and then ignoring them is that they will lose confidence in both the process and the sponsoring institution. Given that participants in our sample came out of the consultations with a higher view of Parliament, it would be a pity to squander such goodwill.

The Hansard Society, which has been running these consultations, and Parliament, which seems to have benefited from them, need to think carefully about ways of publicising these consultations more effectively, ensuring that there is more tangible feedback to participants and making the process technically simpler and more user friendly.

Professor Stephen Coleman
Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds
**TellParliament.net - Next Phase**

The Hansard Society’s research and development work with Parliament on deliberative online forums has completed three distinct phases. The scoping phase explored the demands and dynamics of the applications at their earliest stages of development. The next, pilot phase was intended to establish a basic forum template and consultation procedure.

Over the course of 2006 – 2008, the Hansard Society will work with parliamentary officials and Members on the third phase. TellParliament will undergo further development with the aim of establishing both a model platform and process that will enable Parliament to run constructive and efficient deliberative consultations online.

Over the course of the forums held during this third phase, the site’s accessibility, design, navigation and security will all be refined and updated. The processes of marketing, recruitment and registration will also be evaluated and improved upon. However, the greatest impetus during this phase will be to develop Parliament’s capacity and confidence around online consultation.

It is not enough for Parliament to fund innovation on an ad hoc basis and interact with it only on irregular occasions, and it should not approach IT or those who use it for political engagement with trepidation. Instead it should view these exercises as a means of broadening and deepening its consultation base hand-in-hand with benefits that include reduction in costs per consultation and quicker aggregation of data.

In short, Parliament must actively interact with the consultations it stages from beginning to end. In the third phase of development, this will mean that Parliament will be invited to contribute to the marketing, moderation, reporting and other administrative tasks involved in online consultation. It will be encouraged to develop procedures to allow Members and committee staff to engage in deliberation with consultation participants. Opportunity will also be presented for forums to be run at various points along the policy cycle.

The project outlined above will be important in terms of updating existing practice and research into the use of ICT in representative democracy. It will also be significant because it will help to ensure that Parliament does not falter on the progress it has achieved so far, and is not left behind as society moves forward into its digital age.

**Ross Ferguson**  
Director, Hansard Society eDemocracy Programme
Appendix 1- Forum List

Deliberative online consultations run by the Hansard Society on behalf of Government and Parliament:

- e-Democracy as part of the Public Administration Committee inquiry in 1999;
- Women and Science, in conjunction with the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, POST and the CVCP (Higher Education Register) in 1999;
- Domestic Violence, in conjunction with the All-Party Group on Domestic Violence in 2000;
- Working Families Tax Credit for the Social Security Select Committee in 2001;
- Stem Cell Research for the House of Lords Committee on Stem Cell Research in 2001;
- Inform pre-legislative scrutiny of the Draft Communications Bill for the Joint Committee on the Draft Communications Bill in 2002;
- Long-term Care and related issues that was fed into the work of the All-Party Group on Ageing in Westminster and the Cross-Party Group on Older People in the Scottish Parliament in 2002;
- Flooding for the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology in 2002;
- Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act on behalf of the Science and Technology Select Committee in 2004;
- Reconnecting Parliament with the Public on behalf of the Modernisation Committee in 2004;
- The Constitutional Reform Bill on behalf of the Constitutional Reform Bill Committee in 2004;
- Hate Crime in Northern Ireland on behalf of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee in 2004;
- Diabetes care in the UK on behalf of the All-Party Group for Diabetes in 2004;
- Diabetes Dialogue ‘follow up’ consultation with APPG for Diabetes in 2005;
- The Hansard Society’s deliberation site for young people, HeadsUp (www.headsup.org.uk), has also been commissioned to run consultations, for example, on the Children Bill for the APPG on Children and Young People, and on the age of electoral majority for the Electoral Commission. A full list of the consultations can be found on the HeadsUp site;
Appendix 2 – Forum Overviews

1. Human reproductive technologies and the law

Background
- Commissioned by the Science and Technology Select Committee
- Ran for eight weeks from 22 January 2004

Registrant details
- 333 people registered to take part in this consultation
- 111 registrants contributed to the forum
- 554 messages were posted (average of 5 per contributor)

Demographics
- 51% of registrants were female compared to 49% male
- The largest group of registrants were aged between 30 and 50 years old (47.8%). The other age ranges of registrants were under-30s (26.8%), and over-50s (25.4%)
- 89% said they used the internet regularly
- 59% said that they had never contacted their MP before
- 71% had not given evidence to Parliament before
- 57% said that they strongly believed that ‘everyone has a duty to vote in elections.
- 11% of registrants said they were political party members
- 181 registrants were members of organisations, including academic institutions. 152 were private individuals

Outcome
The Committee drew up terms of reference for its inquiry into Human Reproductive Technologies and the Law, based on the forum summary report produced at the end of the consultation. The committee also invited some of the online consultation participants to give oral evidence in their inquiry.

2. Connecting Parliament with the Public

Background
- Commissioned by the Modernisation Select Committee
- Ran for four weeks from 1 March 2004

Registrant details
- 191 people registered to take part in the consultation
- 61 registrants contributed to the forum
- 144 messages were posted (average of 2 per contributor)

Demographics
- 20% of registrants were female compared to 80% male
- 33.3% of registrants were aged under 30. The other age ranges of registrants were between 30 and 50 years old (33.3%) and over-50s (33.3%)
- 81% said they used the internet regularly
- 44% said they had never contacted their MP before
- 76% said they had not given evidence to Parliament before
- 53% said that they strongly believed that 'everyone has a duty to vote in elections
- 18% said they were political party members
- 48% were members of academic institutions. 52% were private individuals

Outcome
Participant contributions made in the online consultation were fed directly into the Committee's inquiry -'Connecting Parliament with the Public'.

3. Constitutional Reform Bill

Background
- Commissioned by the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitutional Reform Bill
- Ran for four weeks from 4 May 2004

Registrant details
- 82 people registered to take part in the consultation
- 21 registrants contributed to the forum
- 53 messages were posted (average of 3 per contributor)

Demographics
- 70% of registrants were male. 17% were female; 13% did not specify.
- The largest group of registrants were those over-50s (41.7%). The other age ranges of registrants were between 30 and 50 years old (39.7%), and under-30s (18.6%).
- 86% said they used the internet regularly
- 66% said they had never contacted their MP before
- 73% said they had not given evidence to Parliament before
- 43% said that they strongly believed that 'everyone has a duty to vote in elections
- 22% said they were political party members
- All participants were from the legal profession and academia

Outcome
Participant contributions made in the online consultation were used to inform the Committee's inquiry. Summary report and transcripts were disseminated to stakeholders and media.

4. Hate Crime in Northern Ireland

Background
- Commissioned by the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee
- Ran for six weeks from 1 September 2004

Registrant details
- 81 people registered to take part in this consultation
- 27 registrants contributed to the forum
- 42 messages were posted (average of 2 per contributor)

Demographics
- 54.3% of registrants were male; 45.7% were female
The largest group of registrants were those aged between 26 and 35 (27%). The other age ranges of registrants were between 36 and 45 years old (25%), 46 and 55 years old (22%), 16 and 25 years old (9%), and over-55s (2%); 15% did not specify.

- 84% said they used the internet regularly
- 81% said they had never contacted their MP before
- 75% said that they had not given evidence to Parliament before
- 56% said that they strongly believed that 'everyone has a duty to vote in elections
- 19% said that they were political party members

Outcome
First use of an online consultation in Northern Ireland on hate crime by Westminster Parliament. Summary report was disseminated to stakeholders and media.

5. Diabetes care in the UK

Background
- Commissioned the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Diabetes (supported by Sanofi Aventis)
- Ran for six weeks from 8 December 2004

Registrant details
- 335 people registered to take part in this consultation
- 158 registrants contributed to the forum
- 300 messages were posted (average of 2 per contributor)

Demographics
- 56% of registrants were female; 44% were male
- 60% of the messages were posted by people living with diabetes
- The largest age group of registrants were those aged between 46 and 55 (29.7%). The other age ranges were between 36 and 45 years old (21.7%), 56 and 64 years old (17.6%), 26 and 35 years old (15.5%), over-65s (9.6%), 16 and 25 years old (3.4%) and under-16s (0.6%); 1.9% did not specify age.
- 93% said they did use the internet regularly
- 78% said they had never previously contacted their MP before
- 92% said they had not given evidence to Parliament before
- 10% said that they were political party members
- 62% said that they strongly believed that 'everyone has a duty to vote in elections

Outcome
All contributions were summarised and reported back to the All-Party Group. Summary report and transcripts were disseminated to stakeholders and media. Created an online constituency willing to be consulted by the APPG
Appendix 3 – Survey Questions

Survey Questions

PRE-CONSULTATION SURVEY

Yes / No

Political Party member?
Did you contact your local MP during the last year?

Agree / Disagree (1 - Strongly Disagree to 10 - Strongly Agree):

- Parliament is out of touch with people like me.
- Political policy-making is too difficult to follow.
- MPs are not interested in listening.
- Everyone has a duty to vote in elections.
- Politics changes nothing.
- Politics is interesting.
- Parliament should use the Internet to consult people more often.

POST-CONSULTATION SURVEY

Yes / No / Don’t Know

- Do you think this was a worthwhile consultation?
- How did you find out about this consultation?
- Are you a frequent user of the Internet?
- Have you participated in other online discussions/consultations?
- Did the fact that this consultation was linked to the [particular Select Committee] make a difference to your participation?
- Would you have liked the moderators to have steered the discussion more?
- Were you satisfied with the inputs from the Committee’s Secretariat to this discussion?
- Did you find discussions easy to follow?
- Did you learn anything from other contributors?
- Did you make any new contacts as a result of the consultation?
- Is there an example of where you have changed your mind or opinion as a result of this consultation?
- Do you think this internet consultation tackled all the issues you thought were relevant?
- Do you think that this consultation will make a difference to policy [on consultation’s legislative topic]?
- Would you participate in another online parliamentary inquiry?

Agree / Disagree (single choice)

“Nobody in government ever listens to people like me”
“There is not much I can do to change the way the country is run”

Other

- How did you find using the website? 1 (easy) to 5 (hard)
- Which section of the site did you find most interesting/useful?
- Do you have any other comments to make?
About the Hansard Society

The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan charity that operates across the political spectrum to support the democratic process and improve the relationship between the public, elected representatives and political institutions.

We carry out an intensive programme of work aimed at enhancing engagement in civic and political life. The value of our resources, action research, on- and offline projects and events is recognised by representatives of all political parties, the business community, the voluntary sector, and communities across the UK and overseas.

The Hansard Society’s five core programmes of work are:

Parliament & Government - undertakes high-level research to stimulate discussion about modernisation of political institutions and the law-making process;

Citizenship Education - carries out practical, ground-level work with citizens of all ages and backgrounds (but especially young people) with the aim of broadening understanding, knowledge and participation in the political system;

eDemocracy - carries out research into how digital technologies could enhance the democratic process and political engagement;

Study & Scholars - runs one of the most prestigious educational courses on British politics. Primarily for overseas students, the course is accredited by the London School of Economics and Political Science, and provides an ideal opportunity for those who wish to experience the British political process through both academic and practical exposure.

Hansard Society Scotland - based in Edinburgh, looks at ways to inform and educate Scottish citizens of all ages about the Scottish Parliament and wider political institutions (including EU and Westminster) and provides an independent platform for debate regarding development of devolution.

eDemocracy Programme: a brief profile

The Hansard Society has a distinguished reputation in the field of eDemocracy, spearheading the use of interactive technology to engage people from all sectors of society in the political process.

Our eDemocracy Programme has explored online participation with an aim to establish effective, manageable dialogue between representatives and the represented. This has involved working with a range of constituents, including children of school age, senior citizens and more vulnerable groups within society, as well as with MPs, Peers and government.

The Hansard Society eDemocracy Programme was established to examine how democratic institutions can adapt to an age defined by digital technology and a knowledge-based economy. At the outset we rejected exaggerated claims that the internet was about to make representations obsolete and introduce ‘push-button democracy’. Our interest has been in strengthening representation through better communication and enhancing opportunities for engagement.

In the last few years, the Hansard Society e-Democracy Programme has delivered a series of seminal research reports and think-pieces which helped establish e-democracy on the political agenda. In 2006 the eDemocracy Programme will undertake an ambitious and significant schedule of work with the aim of moving on the debate about the contribution technology can make to democratic engagement, and promote the conversion of experimentation and rhetoric into practice and policy.

Our activity will be structured into four work streams:

- Research and Development
- Evaluation
- Support and Services
- Comment and Analysis

www.hansardsociety.org.uk