



Regional Accountability at Westminster

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In June 2007 the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, announced the appointment of nine regional ministers. In the July 2007 Green Paper, *The Governance of Britain*, the Labour Government proposed that regional committees should be established.

In October 2007 the Modernisation Select Committee announced an inquiry on *Regional Accountability*. Their report, published on 10 July 2008, recommended that eight regional select committees should be established, with membership reflecting the membership of the House but with fewer members than existing select committees. The Committee also recommended that there should be eight regional grand committees, to include all Members from each region. The Committee recommended that no new structures should be established for London at first, although the creation of a committee of some kind was not ruled out in the future. The Government published their response to the Modernisation Committee on 21 July 2008, and broadly agreed with the Committee's recommendations.

The House agreed to establish eight regional select committees, each with nine members, and eight grand committees on 12 November 2008. The House agreed Labour nominations to the Committees on 3 March 2009. No opposition party nominated members. On 29 October 2009 the independent MP, Dr Richard Taylor, was appointed to the West Midlands Regional Select Committee. On 25 June 2009 the House of Commons established a committee for London, and agreed motions for 7 regional grand committees to meet in the autumn. The East Midlands Regional Grand Committee was established by a deferred division on 15 July 2009. The Labour members of the London Committee were nominated on 14 December 2009, along with Andrew Pelling, an independent Member.

On 26 May 2010 the Leader of the House of Commons, Sir George Young, announced that the new Government would not establish the regional select committees. The following day, he further explained that the Government would explain their decision on regional grand committees in due course.

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1 Background

1.1 The *Governance of Britain Green Paper*

On 29 June 2007 nine regional ministers were appointed by the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. The *Governance of Britain Green Paper*, published in July 2007, set out the role that these regional ministers would have:

Regional Ministers are responsible for providing a clear sense of strategic direction for their region. Regional Ministers also give citizens a voice in central government,

ensuring that government policy takes account of the differing needs of the nine English regions. Regional Ministers will make central government more visible in the regions, helping to raise its profile and generate awareness of the political system.

There are a range of functions that Regional Ministers will undertake. These are mostly clustered around the responsibilities of the Government Offices and the RDAs [Regional Development Agencies], particularly in relation to economic development. Regional Ministers will be able to take questions in Parliament on the work of regional bodies, and on regional strategies. Regional ministers will be a visible representative of their area – they will take a key role in bringing together local services and different arms of government at important times for the region, whether in bidding for or hosting major sporting occasions (e.g. the Commonwealth Games); or when a region faces difficult challenges (e.g. the severe flooding afflicting Yorkshire and the Humber, and the East and West Midlands in June 2007).

The role of Regional Ministers is to:

- advise the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform on the approval of regional strategies and appointment of RDA Chairs and Boards;
- represent regional interests in the formulation of central government policy relevant to economic growth and sustainable development in areas that have not been devolved to the RDAs;
- facilitate a joined up approach across government departments and agencies to enable the effective delivery of the single regional strategy;
- champion the region at high level events and with regard to high profile projects (including through a programme of regional visits); and
- represent the Government with regard to central government policy at regional select committee hearings and at parliamentary debates focused specifically on the region.¹

The Green Paper then went on to propose the establishment of a system of regional select committees:

The Government believes that Regional Ministers should be accountable to Parliament. Both they and the Government's regional policy should be subject to formal and consistent parliamentary scrutiny. In common with the Communities and Local Government Select Committee the Government believes that one means of achieving this scrutiny could be the establishment of nine regional select committees. The Committee highlighted the possible need for specific provisions governing how such committees might operate, such as limitations on the number of meetings. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee's report highlighted the potential benefits such arrangements could bring, including effective examination of the work of regional bodies and calling Ministers to account.

Consideration of changes to the way the House of Commons operates is ultimately a matter for the House itself, informed as appropriate by relevant committees including the Procedure and Modernisation Select Committees. The Government looks forward to consideration of these proposals within the House and believes that they would offer

¹ Ministry of Justice, *The Governance of Britain*, Cm 7170, July 2007, paras 115-118

an important step forward in democratic accountability and scrutiny of the delivery of public services in the English regions.²

In Business Questions on 19 July 2007 Harriet Harman indicated that the motions on changes to select committees to be debated on 25 July would include proposals on regional select committees.³ However, no motion about the regional select committees appeared on the Order Paper on 25 July 2007. Ms Harman was asked again about regional select committees at Business Questions on 26 July but no further information was forthcoming.

On 11 October 2007 the Modernisation Select Committee, chaired by Ms Harman, announced its intention to conduct an inquiry into "Regional Accountability". Further details were announced on 24 October.⁴ The Committee reported in July 2008 and the Government published its response soon after (see below).

1.2 Other proposals for regional committees

The creation of regional ministers had been proposed by the New Local Government Network in their report *Redesigning Regionalism* published in 2007. The report argued that:

...the appointment of a series of Ministerial portfolio holders to represent and act for Government as policy leaders in each of the English regional might provide a greater degree of focus for regional policy, encourage a more integrated approach across Whitehall, and offer superior opportunities for scrutiny and cross-examination of regional decisions in Parliament.⁵

The Communities and Local Government Committee report, *Is there a future for regional government?* was also published in 2007. This recommended a system of regional select committees:

...we accept the argument that, given the existence and increasing importance of regional governance structures in determining policy, there should be more thorough and consistent scrutiny of the regions at Westminster. We are pleased that Ministers also expressed their willingness for such scrutiny to take place. We should stress that we do not see this as a substitute for the scrutiny carried out by the Regional Assemblies, but as an adjunct to it, making use of the different powers which Westminster committees hold for examining central government activity and linking it to the realisation of policy at the regional level.

We believe that the most effective way of securing such scrutiny would be to appoint a select committee for each region, which might meet a limited number of times each year (perhaps in conjunction with the relevant Assembly) in order to examine the work of key regional bodies and to call Ministers to account for their performance. We can also see merit in the suggestion of additional regional debates or question times in Westminster Hall. Such options might be instituted on an experimental basis, with their effectiveness reviewed after one or two Parliamentary sessions.

Consideration of changes in the way the House of Commons operates is formally a matter for the select committees on Procedure and Modernisation of the House of Commons; and, ultimately, for the House itself. We shall write to these Committees

² *Ibid*, paras 118-120

³ HC Deb 19 July 2007 c438

⁴ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, Press Notice, [New Inquiries](#), 24 October 2007

⁵ See NLGN Press Notice, *Gordon Brown adopts regional ministers plan advocated by NLGN as part of wider constitutional reform*, 29 June 2007

upon publication of this Report, asking them if they will examine the effectiveness of the current Regional Affairs Committee and the detailed implications of improved Parliamentary scrutiny for the regions. We hope that Ministers will continue to support any proposals for scrutiny reform at Westminster which might arise as a consequence of such inquiries.⁶

However, the Government proposals were not the same as the Communities and Local Government Committee's proposals. The Committee's proposals involved a continued role for regional assemblies. The Government has announced "that regional assemblies in their current form and function will not continue".⁷

2 Modernisation Committee inquiry into Regional Accountability

2.1 Modernisation Committee proposals

The Modernisation Committee published its report *Regional Accountability* on 10 July 2008. In short, the Committee recommended the creation of eight regional select committees and eight regional grand committees (with no committees for London). The report summary stated that:

We recommend that the most effective way to strengthen regional accountability to Parliament would be to establish a system of regional select committees. The membership of these committees should be constituted in the same way as that of existing select committees and should therefore reflect the political composition of the House. There should be one select committee for each of the administrative regions in England, with the exception of London. As London already has a measure of devolved government and accountability to elected representatives, it is likely to require somewhat different arrangements, which should be considered in the light of experience with the other committees.

However, as select committees can offer only a minority of members in a given region the opportunity to exercise regular and detailed scrutiny, we also recommend that up to two regional grand committee meetings should take place in each session for each of the eight regions, taking place either in Westminster or in the relevant region. This will allow more members to engage in scrutiny. Regional grand committee meetings should take the form of a general debate (or a series of short debates) and questions to the relevant Regional Minister, to ensure his or her accountability to Parliament. Regional Ministers should also take questions on a regular rota basis in Westminster Hall. We expect that both regional grand and regional select committees will hold a large proportion of their meetings outside Westminster, within their regions.

We believe that regional select committees have the potential to bring about a significant improvement in regional accountability. Nevertheless, there are practical challenges in their creation, including the risk of disrupting existing departmental select committee business or distracting agencies working in the regions from their core activities and central lines of accountability. They will also place increased demands on House resources in terms of Members' time and workload, staffing, printing and publication costs, availability of rooms for meetings and office accommodation.

We consider that these risks can be mitigated by a number of sensible precautions. Regional select committees must meet far less frequently than departmental select committees. We recommend a relatively small membership of up to 10 members, to

⁶ Communities and Local Government Select Committee, *Is there a future for regional government in England*, 14 March 2007, HC 352-I 2006-07, paras 112-114

⁷ *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration*, July 2007, Foreword

ensure that regional select committees are functional and do not have an adverse impact on Members' other commitments. Regional select committees should develop positive working relationships and regular liaison with existing departmental select committees as well as local authorities in their region in order to take advantage of local knowledge, to co-ordinate scrutiny activities and to reduce the prospect of clashing inquiries or duplication of effort. Finally, we do not consider it appropriate for all eight Chairmen of the new regional select committees to sit on the Liaison committee, which is already a large committee. Instead, we consider that one of their number should be chosen by the House to attend meetings.⁸

The Committee also recommended that Regional Ministers should answer oral Questions on their activities and the exercise of their responsibilities at sittings of the relevant regional grand committees and on a regular rota basis in Westminster Hall.⁹ Written Questions about the work of Regional Ministers are answered on their behalf by other Ministers.

The Report included some estimates of the costs which would be incurred for their proposed system.¹⁰ These costs have been updated in the explanatory memorandum provided by the House of Commons Management Board which were published with versions on the motion made available on 6 November 2008.

The Committee stated that its recommendations should be implemented at first on a temporary basis until the end of the Parliament. There should then be a review of their operation in order to decide their future.¹¹

The Modernisation Committee divided a number of times during their consideration of the report. The Conservative Members of the Committee all supported an amendment that indicated support only for regional grand committees, not for regional select committees at all.¹²

A number of amendments split the Committee equally, with the Committee chairman having to use her casting vote. These included a motion to change the report to recommend that only Members representing the region in question could sit on regional grand committees which was defeated by the casting vote of the chair. Motions relating to the membership of regional select committees required the chair to use a casting vote. The motion to agree that the report, as amended, should be the Third Report of the Committee to the House, also required the chairman to use her casting vote.

2.2 Government response

The Government published their response to the Modernisation Committee on 21 July 2008, less than a fortnight after the Modernisation Committee's report. The Government broadly agreed with the Modernisation Committee's recommendations. They stated:

The Government's objects in developing mechanisms for greater English regional accountability at parliamentary level include:

- establishing a significant, effective and visible vehicle for promoting regional democratic accountability;

⁸ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of commons, *Regional Accountability*, 10 July 2008, HC 282 2007-08, Summary

⁹ *Ibid*, para 79

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Annex

¹¹ *Ibid*, para 84

¹² *Ibid*, pp 43-44

- filling the gap in political regional accountability faced by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and other bodies at regional level;
- allowing some involvement from all Members of the relevant region, while respecting existing principles for the composition of committees;
- giving powers to the committees which are consistent with effective conduct of business by the House and within the regional institutions;
- recognising the impact on the House (in terms both of resource implications and Members' time and priorities).

The Government agrees with the central proposals for regional select committees, that they should meet less frequently than other select committees in order to ensure proportionality of scrutiny and to ensure they are workable for the House of Commons. These new committees would be accompanied by occasional meetings of grand committees organised on a regional basis, which would provide the opportunity for all Members from each region to participate in regional scrutiny.

The Government intends to bring forward detailed proposals to the House in the autumn, including standing order changes to establish the select committees and to provide for the proposed regional grand committees.¹³

On the Committee's proposals for London, the Government stated:

As the Committee notes, London is different from the other regions because of the special governance arrangements already in place in the form of the Mayor of London and the London Assembly. The Government agrees that there is a case for leaving London out of the initial arrangements put in place for regional committees, subject to further consultation with the Mayor of London, London MPs and other interested parties and, more importantly, in the light of experience of operation of the committees for the other regions.¹⁴

The Government agreed with the Committee that the membership of the committees:

...should reflect the party balance in the House as a whole, as for other select committees (including those for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). It is also right that, while the House will expect almost all proposed nominations from the Committee of Selection to be from within the relevant region, there should be freedom to nominate from outside the region. It would be expected that the chairman of each committee would be from within the region, though this decision would – as for other committees – rest finally with the committees themselves.¹⁵

Later in the response, the Government agreed that the Committee chairmen should not be members of the Liaison Committee but they should, however, be remunerated.¹⁶

The Government also considered the relationship between local authorities and the regional committees. The Government stated that:

As the Committee's discussion (paragraph 67) suggests, provision could also be made in the Standing Orders for committees to hold formal meetings with local authorities or

¹³ Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, *Regional Accountability: The Government's response to the Modernisation Committee's Third Report of session 2007-08*, July 2008, Cm 7376, paras 2-4

¹⁴ *Ibid*, para 9

¹⁵ *Ibid*, para 12

¹⁶ *Ibid*, para 20

local authority scrutiny committees or, perhaps more appropriately, groups of councillors from across the region. This might be done by adapting the power currently given to the Welsh Affairs Committee to hold occasional meetings with committees of the National Assembly for Wales, to one where elected councillors from across the region could be invited to attend and participate in meetings.¹⁷

The Government did not agree with the Modernisation Committee that there should be oral question periods for regional ministers in Westminster Hall. The Government stated that “this would be disproportionate and would remove time available in Westminster Hall for other business”.¹⁸

3 The debate held on 12 November 2008

3.1 Introduction

The Government’s motions to amend the House’s Standing Orders to establish the eight regional select committees and regional grand committees were broadly based on the recommendations of the Modernisation Select Committee and the Government’s response.

The Government tabled one motion entitled ‘Regional Accountability’ which stated:

That this House welcomes the Third Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on Regional Accountability (HC Paper No. 282); approves the proposals for regional select and grand committees for each of the English regions set out in the response from the Government set out in the White Paper *Regional Accountability* (Cm 7376); accordingly endorses the clear expectation that regional committees should meet significantly less frequently than departmental select committees; and considered that the combination of select committees providing opportunities for inquiries and reports into regional policy and administration together with opportunities for debate involving all honourable Members from the relevant region will provide a major step forward in the scrutiny of regional policy.¹⁹

This was followed by a motion to establish regional select committees, motions to allow for payment of regional select committee chairmen, and a motion to establish regional grand committees.

Two explanatory memoranda were published along with the Government’s motions: one from the Office of the Leader of the House explaining the meaning of the motions; the other from the Management Board of the House of Commons on the implications for the House of Commons Service.

A number of amendments were tabled to the motions. Three were passed:

- One amended the motion above to insert the words “except that Chairmen of regional select committees shall not be paid”. This amendment was passed by 239 votes to 237.
- Another removed the power of regional select committees to invite specified elected councillors from the region to attend and participate at specified meetings. This was agreed to without a division.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, para 17

¹⁸ *Ibid*, para 24

¹⁹ “Remaining Orders and Notices”, *Order Paper*, 6 November 2008

- The last to be agreed was a motion to suspend Standing Order No. 117 which provides for a Regional Affairs Committee.

3.2 Key areas of discussion

The House had one and a half hours to debate the motions, and a five minute time-limit on backbench speeches was imposed.

Harriet Harman, the then Leader of the House of Commons, opened the debate with the following comments:

Today, I bring to the House the Government's proposals on regional accountability, to put in place an effective and visible improvement in the scrutiny of, and democratic accountability of, the public agencies and public policies that operate in the English regions. The reality is that in every region in England there are important public agencies, with budgets of billions of pounds. The decisions that they make, and how they put those decisions into practice, shape the future of the regions and profoundly affect those who live and work in them.

At regional level, those agencies are much bigger than—and are beyond the accountability of—any local authority in the region. The regional development agencies, the strategic health authorities, the Learning and Skills Council and the Highways Agency are big regional beasts. Their regional directors and chief executives are regional “masters of the universe”, with huge budgets. However, they are public bodies spending public money in the public interest, and it is right that they should be publicly accountable through this House to the region that they serve. Both in Parliament and within Government it has been recognised that there is the problem of an “accountability gap” in the regions; now we are seeking to do something about it.²⁰

Amendments had been tabled to establish a regional select committee and a regional grand committee for London. In her opening speech Harriet Harman stated that:

...I intend that following on from this resolution, we should turn our attention to London and get on with making arrangements for deepening the scrutiny of pan-London organisations, such as the strategic health authority. Following consultation, we will bring forward proposals to the House early in the new year.²¹

Andrew Dismore, who had tabled the amendments, explained:

The case for a Select Committee for London has been strongly made. A London Committee does not have to follow exactly the same model as the other Committees, and it is, thus, right that we should consider it in the context of devolution to London. Special problems face London, and I hope that the Leader of the House's consultation on this matter will be short and sharp. I hope that she will be able to come back to the House in the early new year with concrete proposals to ensure that London gets the representation and the scrutiny of the Minister, of the Government office for London and of all the other bodies that we should be able to achieve for London Members in this House.²²

Theresa May, then Shadow Leader of the House, spoke of the need to “aim for consensus among the parties, so that there is general acceptance of the proposals in this House”. She said:

²⁰ HC Deb 12 November 2008 c813

²¹ *Ibid*, c817

²² *Ibid*, cc833-834

As was referred to in the previous debate [on the Business Motion relating to this debate], the issue was discussed at considerable length in the Modernisation Committee, and as a member of that Committee, I sat through evidence from regional bodies, the House authorities and Chairmen of existing Select Committees. It was absolutely clear that no case was made for regional Select Committees as the answer to the problem of the need for increased regional accountability. There was no consensus on the move to regional Select Committees, and the Modernisation Committee, in its report, raised severe doubts about the impact of regional Select Committees. It referred to

“practical challenges in their creation, including: the risk of disrupting existing departmental select committee business; the potential to distract public bodies and agencies working in the regions from their core activities and central lines of accountability; the possibility of duplicating scrutiny work already being undertaken in the regions; the additional burden on Members’ time and workload; increased demands on House resources”.

Given the reservations of the Modernisation Committee, it is all the more important that the House knows that this proposal, which originated from a policy proposal of the Prime Minister and the Government, was pushed through the Committee on the Chairman’s casting vote—the Chairman being, of course, the Leader of the House. There was no consensus for change. You may call me old-fashioned, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I happen to think, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) said during the earlier debate, that when we are changing the structure of the House, Select Committees or other matters relating to the House, the Leader of the House should aim for consensus among the parties, so that there is general acceptance of the proposals in this House.²³

Theresa May had tabled an amendment which would have removed approval for regional select committees from the Government’s motion. She explained her view that:

What will these regional Select Committees actually do? Are they to scrutinise Government regional policy, such as what the Government are telling the regional development agencies to do? If so, that role is already being carried out by existing Select Committees. Regional development agencies are accountable to the Select Committee on Business and Enterprise, which is ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff). Moreover, the Select Committees hold a significant number of their meetings in the regions. If the regional Committees are not to scrutinise Government policy, which is already scrutinised by existing Select Committees, what will they do? Will they allow hon. Members to question decisions taken by regional bodies in their area? A better way of doing that would be in regional Grand Committees, where all Members can be present to discuss the issue, and not in a Select Committee, where a limited number of Members—not all of whom will be from that region—will be present.²⁴

She also stated that regional select committees would put the House under “strain”

...There is already difficulty in finding people to fill existing Committee posts, yet we propose the creation of 72 new posts. Problems with filling vacancies will not be helped by the proposal. Indeed, there is a danger that the committees could find themselves in the farcical position of not having enough members or being inquorate, and that would have an impact on witnesses and perceptions of the House.

²³ *Ibid*, c817-818

²⁴ *Ibid*, c819

That brings me to cost. We are told that the annual running costs of the committees could amount to just over £1 million. I suspect that it would be considerably higher. Together with the outlay on regional Grand Committees, which the Government also propose, the bill will fast approach £1.5 million if not £2 million a year. That money could be rather better spent.

To plug the regional accountability gap, we need go no further than setting up regional Grand Committees, which would give every Member in a region the opportunity to make their views known about what was being done by bodies in their region. Every part of a region would be represented, and we would avoid the position that could arise with the regional Select Committees, whereby people from outside the region may be included to maintain the Government's majority. The Grand Committees would not need to meet so often, and their running costs would be significantly lower than those of the regional Select Committees.²⁵

Simon Hughes argued that the party balance of the regional select committee should reflect that of the region in question, and that the chairmen of these committees should be paid one eighth of the salary of a select committee chairman:

My party would argue that those representatives should reflect the votes in those regions, but in three regions the Government came second or third in share of the vote at the last general election. Even if we do not win that argument, the Government should at least propose Select Committees that reflect the balance of political representation in each region, which differ hugely from each other. The Committees should also reflect the differences between the regions, but the Leader of the House—as she confirmed earlier in an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath)—has failed to accept that.

We propose that the same principle should apply that—it could be argued—currently applies to the Scottish and Welsh Committees. Scotland and Wales have a majority of Labour Members, and so do the Committees. Northern Ireland has never had the benefit of a fair system: there are nine MPs from the Democratic Unionist party and nine others, but that balance is not reflected on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

It is now proposed that the Government should have a majority on the regional Committee for every one of the eight regions of England. At the last general election, the Government did not win the largest share of the vote in the east, south-east or south-west of England. Indeed, they came third in the south-east and the south-west—regions with millions of people. The Government are trying to impose their majority in all of England, when they do not have a majority in every region. Worse, they are trying to fiddle the system so that they can bus in colleagues from other regions to make up their majority. They are insisting that the Grand Committees, made up of all the Members from every party, should have up to five other nominated members. Not content with corrupting the balance on the Select Committees, the Government also want to pervert the balance of the Grand Committees. The Leader of the House must understand that that is causing the greatest offence and suggests great disrespect to the people in many of the regions, some of whom already think that their region is an artificial creation or difficult to accept. They are being told that not only do they have to accept those artificially created regions, but that they will have imposed on them a Government majority, no matter how they have voted in the past.

...we have also argued that the Chairmen of the new Committees should not be paid the same as the Chairmen of a UK-wide subject-based Committee. Eight new Committees are proposed, so we suggested that the Chairmen should be paid an

²⁵ *Ibid*, c820-821

eighth of what the other Chairmen are paid. If that is not accepted, we share the view of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) that, at least to start with, those posts should not be remunerated. Otherwise, we will just be accused of creating more jobs at public expense.²⁶

He also spoke about the increase in number of committee places which would be made available:

We have 41 Select Committees. If we agree to this proposal, there will be 49. There will then be a Speaker's Conference, with the same powers as a Select Committee, which makes 50. There will be 72 more members of Select Committees as a result of such a decision being taken today, and more as a result of there being a Speaker's Conference, which we are to appoint later.

At the moment, 159 colleagues serve on more than one Select Committee, eight serve on as many as four and I have to tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you are not aware of it, that many Committees struggle to achieve an adequate attendance. It does the credibility of the House no good to have a small and sometimes inordinate number of colleagues on Committees sitting to take evidence from whoever we call. That is not good for our reputation and it is why we ask the Leader of the House, before adding another range of Select Committees to our armoury, to defer all these debates until we can review the workings of Select Committees generally.²⁷

Andrew Mackinlay, stated that:

I have tabled three amendments. The first draws attention to the fact that there is an injunction, as it were, that the Committees should not meet very often. That is absurd. If I were serving on such a Committee, I would not be constrained by that request—or, rather, hope—but would want to stretch the envelope to the maximum to ensure that the Committee was at least of some value. The proposal is nonsense and shows that the idea has not been fully thought through. I will not divide the House on that amendment, but I mention it to highlight my other amendments. If I am right in my judgment that the envelope will not be stretched, why should we pay the Chairmen of those Committees the same as we pay the Chairmen of departmental Select Committees? The idea is simply bonkers.

In addition, there is the high payroll vote, which has already been referred to—discovered in 2005 that 144 hon. Members were not on the basic MP's pay, and the figure must be a lot higher now. I urge hon. Members to reflect on that, because it is very unhealthy to say the least. There is also the paradox of the Deputy Leader of the House, who is not paid a bean, advocating that Chairmen should be paid. Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his salary for his friends. The growth of the payroll vote and the patronage that goes with it is very unhealthy.

I hope to divide the House on my amendment dealing with that issue, because, even if I am wrong in my judgment that those Chairmen should not be paid at all, if the House accepts my amendment, there can be a period of reflection. Perhaps they should be paid a per diem, but not on the same rate as the Chairs of the departmental Committees. I hope that I will take the House with me on that.

My second concern of substance is the provision in the proposed Standing Order that would allow a regional Committee to invite

²⁶ *Ibid*, c823-824

²⁷ *Ibid*, c825

“specified elected councillors from the region in respect of which it is appointed...to attend and participate”.

Have we no pride? I fought hard to get elected to this place. It was five general elections before I got elected. I am proud to be a Member of Parliament and my duties as a Member of Parliament are indivisible. Councillors’ jobs are very important, but we should not blur the issues by bringing the two together. I urge hon. Members to stand up for Parliament and be jealous of their rights and privileges.

...

Privileges are important, because what happens under parliamentary privilege? I can be admonished by the House if I abuse parliamentary privilege. We are self-regulating. How can you deal with someone who is not a Member of this House, but who abuses parliamentary privilege, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Will we have a separate register of interests for these people? The idea has not been thought through, which is why I hope we will reject it, if for no other reason than that.

When I was a young councillor, I would have been proud to serve on a parliamentary Committee—I would have given my right hand to do so—but I was very partisan and saw it as my mission to get elected to this place. We can imagine the councillors coming in, taking on the Minister here and the official there, but that will diminish what I hope we try to do, which is to leave our party allegiances at the Committee Room door. I do not know whether there are any Scottish or Welsh Members in the Chamber, but if having elected councillors is good for me in Essex, I shall similarly be proposing that some people from Scottish local authorities and assemblies should serve on the Scottish Select Committee, too. What is being proposed really is mad, so I ask hon. Members to join me in the Lobby against those two proposals.

My final point is about Members of Parliament who are not from the region concerned serving on, say, the south-west regional Committee. I have asked myself, “Could I possibly do this?” In my judgment, I would have to be stark staring bonkers to go and serve on a Committee covering a region of which my constituency formed no part. Surely we are all busy. I must say that those who sign up will do so with full knowledge and consent, and will be subject to criticism by their electors. Their electors will ask: “What the devil are you doing focusing on that region and not ours?”

Earlier, one of the Whips muttered to me, “What about Ireland?” That is a different situation, because the question of Northern Ireland is demonstrably, because of its history, a United Kingdom matter. However, when people go from one region to another, they will be subject to criticism. They must remember that they have to agree under Standing Orders to serve on a Committee, so they cannot blame the Whips or hide behind them, or excuse themselves. They will have signed up, so they can be subject to criticism.²⁸

Sir George Young spoke for his amendment to suspend the Standing Order relating to the Regional Affairs Committee:

The amendment would abolish the Regional Affairs Committee. Colleagues could be excused for not knowing that there was one. Standing Orders require one to be established, but the Government have not done so in this Parliament. Week after week at meetings of the Committee of Selection, we wait for the Government to propose members of the Committee, yet nothing happens. The Government clearly must feel

²⁸ *Ibid*, cc827-828

that the Committee serves no useful purpose, so I hope that they will accept the amendment.

The Regional Affairs Committee, to remind colleagues, was applauded when it was introduced. In 2000, the then Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett), said:

“We believe that such a forum will add usefully to the procedures of the House”.—[*Official Report*, 11 April 2000; Vol. 367, c. 295.]

The Committee has been so useful that it has not met since April 2003, which indicates that it is a wholly dispensable part of our constitution. The amendment would simply put it out of its misery.²⁹

Members who spoke in favour of the Government's proposals included James Plaskitt and Neil Turner. Mr Plaskitt said he supported the Government's proposals:

...for two simple reasons: they will plug a clear gap in accountability and oversight, and they will help Members of Parliament in the regions serve our constituents more effectively.³⁰

Neil Turner said that:

The Leader of the House and my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt) made a very good case for having regional Select Committees on the grounds that they will scrutinise the work of Government regional bodies. The case was well made, but there is another important issue that is too easily forgotten. The agenda of bringing our regions closer together—for example, making it possible for the north-west and the west midlands to have the same “gross value added” as London and the south-east—is very important. To make that regional agenda happen means more than looking into regional bodies, quangos and other Government agencies, as it is also about looking into business, the voluntary sector and the whole community in the regions concerned. I believe that regional Select Committees have an important job to do in bringing all those elements together, ensuring that we have a coherent and cohesive tale to tell. That would help to bring the GVA of our region, currently below the national average, up to it.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) spoke about the £2 million cost. It is easy to look at the costs, but what about the benefits? With an increase of merely 0.1 per cent. in the GVA of the north-west, that £2 million would pale into insignificance. As we scrutinise these various bodies, we need to ensure that they become better and take better decisions. The likelihood is that, as a result of better scrutiny, the regional development agencies, the learning and skills councils and other local bodies that my colleagues have mentioned will actually perform better.³¹

3.3 The decisions of the House

Regional Accountability

The House voted on whether to remove the sections from the Government's motion which related to regional select committees, so that the motion would only indicate approval for regional grand committees. The House divided 233 in favour of the motion and 250 against. The amendment was therefore not carried.

²⁹ *Ibid*, c829

³⁰ *Ibid*, c821

³¹ *Ibid*, c830-831

The House then voted on an amendment to the Government's motion to insert text to disagree with the Modernisation Committee's recommendation that the chairmen of the new regional select committees should be remunerated. The House divided 239 in favour of the motion and 237 against. The House therefore agreed to indicate that Chairmen of the new regional select committee should not be paid. Consequently, the motions on chairman's pay were not put by the Deputy Speaker.³²

The Government's motion, as amended, was then voted on. The House divided 254 in favour and 224 against.

Regional Select Committees

The House voted on an amendment which would have required members of each regional select committee to represent constituencies within the relevant region. The House divided with 90 in favour of the amendment and 235 against.

The House also voted on an amendment which would have required the Committee of Selection to have regard to the proportion of Members of each party representing constituencies in the relevant region. It would have also required the Committee of Selection, to nominate at least one Member from each of the three largest parties despite the party balance in the relevant region. The House divided with 229 in favour and 231 against the amendment.

The House agreed an amendment which removed the ability of regional select committees to invite specified elected councillors from the region to attend and participate at specified meetings. This amendment was agreed without a division.

Regional Grand Committees

The House agreed to an amendment to suspend Standing Order No. 117 which allows for the Regional Affairs Committee. This was agreed without a division.

The House divided on an amendment which would have removed the Committee of Selection's ability to nominate up to five Members not from the region in question. The House divided with 107 in favour of the amendment and 219 against.

The main question, to establish the regional grand committees but suspend Standing Order No. 117, was agreed by the House without division.

4 Regional Select Committees

4.1 Remit

The Standing Orders agreed by the House of Commons on 12 November 2008 stated that the regional select committees would be appointed "to examine regional strategies and the work of regional bodies" for the eight English regions, excluding London. The intention was for the committees to look at the "development or implementation of policies where there is a regional aspect to decision-taking and delivery, and would not be focused on the purely local impact of nationally set policies".³³ In addition, the House of Commons agreed to establish a regional select committee for London on 25 June 2009. The terms of reference for the London committee were slightly different to those of the other committees, that is they were

³² *Ibid*, c857

³³ Explanatory Memorandum on the Motions in the Name of the Leader of the House relating to (1) Regional Accountability (2) Regional Select Committees (3) Regional Grand Committees (4) Pay for Chairmen of Select Committees (2 Motions), para 3

to “examine the Government’s regional policies for London and the Government’s relationship with the Greater London Authority and regional bodies”.³⁴

4.2 Chair and Members

Each committee was to have no more than nine members. The party balance of the members of these committees was supposed to reflect party proportions across the whole House. The explanatory memorandum which accompanied the Motions debated on 12 November 2008 stated that:

There would be an expectation that the Members nominated by the Committee of Selection would represent seats within the relevant region, but this would not be mandatory (to allow for cases where individual parties in particular regions wished or needed to propose Members from outside the region). This mirrors existing practice in relation to the Welsh Affairs, Scottish Affairs and Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committees.³⁵

Motions to appoint members of the select committees were agreed on 3 March 2009, however only Labour Members were put forward. The then shadow Leader of the House, Alan Duncan, stated that the Conservatives were:

...against supporting the nomination of Members to the Committees because we do not accept the structure to which they are being nominated.³⁶

During the debate, questions were also raised about the inclusion of the names of Parliamentary Private Secretaries on the lists of Labour members.³⁷ The members nominated to the Committees all represented seats within the region relevant to the Committee.

The House divided on the motion on the membership of the South West Regional Select Committee with 257 in favour and 190 against. The motions relating to the other regional committees were agreed without division.³⁸

On 29 October 2009 the Independent Member Dr Richard Taylor was nominated to the West Midlands Regional Select Committee.³⁹ On 14 December, Andrew Pelling, another independent Member, was nominated along with five Labour Members to the London Regional Select Committee.⁴⁰

The Labour Government had intended that the chairmen of regional select committees would be paid in the same way as the chairmen of other select committees of the House. However, during the debate on 12 November 2008 the House agreed to a Motion tabled by Andrew Mackinlay to indicate that the chairmen should not be paid.⁴¹

³⁴ Standing Order No. 152F as amended on 25 June 2009

³⁵ *Ibid*, para 4

³⁶ HC Deb 3 March 2009 c791

³⁷ See for example HC Deb 3 March 2009 c795-7. For more information see also SN/PC/4942, [Parliamentary Private Secretaries](#)

³⁸ HC Deb 3 March 2009 c802-806

³⁹ HC Deb 29 October 2009 c545

⁴⁰ HC Deb 14 December 2009 c767

⁴¹ HC Deb 12 November 2008 c847

4.3 Powers

Regional committees had the same powers as other select committees of the House to send for persons, papers and records, to adjourn from place to place, report from time to time and appoint special advisers. They did not, however, have the power to appoint sub-committees or to travel outside the UK. Regional committees had an additional power to invite Members of the House who were not members of the committee but represented constituencies within the region in respect of which it was appointed to attend and participate in its proceedings at specified meetings, but not to move motions or amendments, vote, or be counted in the quorum.

The Labour Government had proposed that local authority councillors from the region should be able to take part in its deliberations and in evidence taking. However, an amendment to remove this power tabled by Andrew Mackinlay was passed without a division.⁴²

4.4 London

When the regional select committees were established in November 2008, the motions did not include a committee for London. During the debate on 3 March 2009 Chris Bryant, then Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, explained:

We want to make progress on that [a regional Committee for London] but we have not been able to do so. We have consulted the London assembly, the Mayor's office and local authorities in London because we do not want to proceed in a way that does not work well with those organisations. We hope that a London committee will appear on the Order Paper soon...⁴³

The House considered a motion to establish a regional select committee for London on 25 June 2009. The then Leader of the House of Commons, Harriet Harman, explained that:

We propose that the London Select Committee should have the same powers and composition as those of the other Select Committees for the regions. As I said, there are different governance arrangements in London, such as an elected Mayor and the London assembly. Some of the regional bodies, such as Transport for London and the London Development Agency, are accountable to the Mayor and subject to scrutiny from the assembly. However, there are many important areas of national policy on public services that impact on London – including health, and crime reduction – and are the responsibility of Ministers as well as the London boroughs.

The Government retain considerable responsibility for delivery by many key agencies and non-departmental public bodies operating in London, including NHS London, the learning and skills council, Jobcentre Plus and Her Majesty's Courts Service and Prison Service. Although we acknowledge the differences between London and other regions, London should not be denied the opportunity afforded to other regions to hold such bodies to account, on Londoners' behalf, through their Members of Parliament.⁴⁴

The motion stated:

REGIONAL SELECT COMMITTEE (LONDON)

Ms Harriet Harman

⁴² HC Deb 12 November 2008 c857

⁴³ HC Deb 3 March 2009 c785

⁴⁴ HC Deb 25 June 2009 c971-2

That Standing Order No. 152F be amended by inserting after paragraph (1) the following new paragraph:

(1A) A select committee shall be appointed for London, to examine the Government's regional policies for London and the Government's relationship with the Greater London Authority and regional bodies.⁴⁵

The motion was agreed by the House of Commons by 224 to 132.⁴⁶

It was not until 14 December 2009 that Labour members of the Committee were nominated along with Andrew Pelling, an independent MP. The motion had been on the Order Paper for some days, but had been objected to a number of times before the Government made time for a debate. The motion nominating the Members was agreed by 212 to 124.⁴⁷

5 Regional Grand Committees

5.1 Chair and members

Each regional grand committee consisted of those Members who represented constituencies within the region and up to five other Members nominated by the Committee of Selection. The Committee of Selection had the power to discharge the nominated members and appoint others in their place.

5.2 Meetings

Meetings of regional grand committees were triggered by motions put by a Government Minister for a specific committee to sit on a specified day at a specified place either in the region to which it relates or at Westminster. The Motions also specified the time and duration of such a sitting and the business to be conducted. The Explanatory Notes accompanying the Motions debated on 12 November 2008 said that it was envisaged that "such meetings would mostly take place in the relevant region and that there might be one or two such sittings each year". The business of the committees may include questions to regional ministers, statements by a Minister of the Crown or general debates on specific matters. The Standing Orders also provide for details of oral questions to regional ministers to be tabled.

During the debate on 3 March 2009, the then Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, Chris Bryant, stated that the Grand Committees:

...should sit in tandem with the Select Committees. Once the Committees are in place, we want to start considering dates for regional Grand Committee meetings.⁴⁸

On 25 June 2009 the House of Commons divided on motions for eight regional grand committees to meet. The House agreed to the motions for seven of the eight regional grand committee meetings: they voted against the meeting of the East Midlands Regional Grand Committee by 104 to 98.⁴⁹ Each motion provided the details of when and where the committee will meet and the subject of their general debate. In addition, each Grand Committee would also have an oral question session.

⁴⁵ Vote Bundle 24 June 2009, Remaining Orders and Notices, No 63

⁴⁶ Ibid, c982

⁴⁷ HC Deb 14 December 2009 c767

⁴⁸ HC Deb 3 March 2009 c785

⁴⁹ HC Deb 25 June 2009 c1022

The details of each meeting agreed by the House on 25 June were as follows:

- South West Regional Grand Committee – to meet in Exeter on Thursday 3 September. General debate on “the response to the economic downturn: tackling unemployment”.
- South East Regional Grand Committee – to meet in Reading on Monday 14 September. General debate on “identifying the growth sectors of the South East Economy and ensuring that their growth is maximised”.
- Yorkshire and Humber Regional Grand Committee – to meet in Barnsley on Thursday 29 October. General debate on “responding to the downturn and planning the region’s future economy”.
- East of England Regional Grand Committee – to meet in Bedford on Tuesday 8 September. General debate on priorities for a future regional strategy.
- North West Regional Grand Committee – to meet in Liverpool on Thursday 22 October. General Debate on “Building Britain’s Future: the North West’s response to the economic downturn”.
- North East Regional Grand Committee – to meet in Middlesbrough on Friday 25 September. General debate on the “Regional Economy: tackling the recession”.
- West Midlands Regional Grand Committee – to meet in Sandwell on Thursday 8 October. General debate on “the economy: building the West Midlands’ future”.

On 15 July the results of a deferred division on the establishment of a regional grand committee for the East of Midlands were announced. The House agreed to the motion by 277 to 180.⁵⁰ The details of the meeting are as follows:

- East Midlands Regional Grand Committee – to meet in Nottingham on Wednesday 9 September. General debate on building Britain’s Future: how the region will make the most of the upturn.⁵¹

The records of proceedings for some of these meetings are available on the Parliamentary website.⁵² It would appear that the planned meeting of the East of England Regional Grand Committee proceeded on an informal basis because it was inquorate.⁵³ According to press reports, the second meeting of the East of England Regional Grand Committee on 23 February 2010 was also inquorate.⁵⁴ Under Standing Order 18, the quorum of general committees is seventeen or one third of the number of its members excluding the chairman, whichever is the less.

6 Cost of the regional committees

On 4 March 2010 a parliamentary answer was given on the cost of the regional committees:

Mr. Stewart Jackson: To ask the hon. Member for North Devon, representing the House of Commons Commission what the cost has been of the operation of each (a)

⁵⁰ HC Deb 15 July 2009 c365

⁵¹ HC Deb 15 July 2009 c422

⁵² House of Commons, *Regional Grand committee Debates*

⁵³ “MPs’ committee branded ‘crap’ over poor show” *Bedfordshire on Sunday*, 13 September 2009

⁵⁴ Mark D’Arcy’s Blog (BBC), *Caught Short*, 23 February 2010

regional grand committee and (b) regional select committee since its inception. [319655]

Nick Harvey: The information requested is as follows:

(a) An estimate of the costs for regional grand committees to the end of February 2010 is given in the following table. Costs include hire of accommodation, sound recording, police support, and travel and subsistence for staff. No additional staffing costs were incurred as no extra staff were engaged to work for regional grand committees.

	<i>Cost of regional grand committees (£)</i>
East of England	1,647
East Midlands	2,858
North East	4,238
North West	3,956
South East	4,196
South West	6,850
West Midlands	2,392
Yorkshire and Humber	749
Total	26,886

(b) An estimate of the costs of regional select committees is given in the following table. Costs include staffing, hire of accommodation, transcription of evidence, printing, specialist advisers' and witnesses' expenses, and travel and subsistence for staff. Expenditure on staffing cannot be broken down by region as these committees were supported from a pool of staff in the Department of Chamber and Committee Services.

	<i>Cost of regional select committees up to end of February 2010 (£)</i>
East of England	22
East Midlands	16,787
London	6
North East	24,053
North West	13,904

South East	13,125
South West	26,752
West Midlands	23,175
Yorkshire and Humber	3,640
Staffing costs for all regions	311,400
Total	432,865 ⁵⁵

The House of Commons Management Board had provided an Explanatory Memorandum to the Motions debated on 12 November 2008 which set out the implications of establishing the two groups of committees for the House of Commons Service.⁵⁶

7 The Regional Committees in the 2010 Parliament

On 26 May 2010 the Leader of the House of Commons, Sir George Young, announced that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government would not be establishing regional select committees in the 2010 Parliament.⁵⁷ The following day at Business Questions Sir George stated that the Government would announce their decision on Regional Grand Committees “in due course”.⁵⁸

8 The Regional Affairs Committee

The Regional Affairs Committee was first established in 1975.⁵⁹ It operates in a similar way as a grand committee. The Regional Affairs Committee has no powers to organise its own business, and meets only at the initiative of the Government. It has no permanent secretariat. It had not met since 1978 when it was revived under new procedures in 2000. A motion to replace the earlier version of Standing Order No. 117 was agreed to by the House on 11 April 2000. The first meeting under these revised Standing Orders was on 10 May 2001 and it last met during the 2003-04 Session. The subjects of its debates during this time were:

- May 2001 Regional economic performance and imbalances
- Dec 2001 Governance in England
- March 2002 Regional Development Agencies
- July 2002 White Paper *Your region your choice: revitalising the English Regions*
- April 2003 Government Offices in the regions

⁵⁵ HC Deb 4 March 2010 c1342W

⁵⁶ Proposals for Regional Select and Grand Committees: Implications for the House of Commons Service, Explanatory Memorandum from the Management Board

⁵⁷ HC Deb 26 May 2010 c173

⁵⁸ HC Deb 27 May 2010 c286

⁵⁹ Library Standard Note SN/PC/867, *Regional Affairs Committee*

- Dec 2003 The English regions and referendums on elected regional assemblies
- June 2004 Regional economic performance and the Northern Way ⁶⁰

Standing Order No. 117 states that the Committee “shall consider any matter relating to regional affairs in England that may be referred to it”. The Committee has thirteen members, however, “any Member of the House representing an English constituency, though not nominated to the committee, may take part in its proceedings, but may not make any motion, vote or be counted in the quorum”. Ministers may make a statement to the committee on the matter or matters referred to it and take questions. After any such statements and questions, the Committee considers “each matter referred to it on a motion ‘That the committee has considered that matter’”.⁶¹

On 12 November 2008 the House of Commons agreed to suspend Standing Order No. 117 until the end of the Parliament.

⁶⁰ All Regional Affairs Committee debates can be found from following links on this page:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/othstn.htm>

⁶¹ Standing Orders of the House of Commons (Public Business), 29 March 2007, HC 405 2006-07, No. 117