



## **Evidence to the Digital Democracy Commission on the scrutiny theme**

**10 April 2014**

The Commissioners heard evidence from the following witnesses:

### **Evidence session (a)**

- i. Graham Allen, MP, Chair, Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (PCRC)
- ii. Adam Afriyie, MP, Chair, POST (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) board
- iii. Committee Office staff: Mark Hutton, Principal Clerk, and Kevin Maddison, Committee Specialist, Communities and Local Government Committee

### **Evidence session (b)**

- iv. Ruth Fox, Chief Executive, Hansard Society
- v. Lord Allan of Hallam, Director of Policy in Europe, Facebook

### **Evidence session (a) summary**

- i. **Graham Allen, MP, Chair, Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (PCRC)**

Graham Allen explained that the PCR Committee scrutinised the work of the Deputy Prime Minister's Department. That morning the Committee had taken oral evidence for its Voter Engagement in the UK inquiry. In another inquiry, the PCRC was considering whether to draft a written constitution for the UK which could then go out to public consultation. If the public appetite for contributing to such a consultation could be increased over the next five to 10 years, there could be a million founding fathers and mothers to a UK constitution.

In undertaking the Voter Engagement inquiry, the PCRC had been in contact with the campaigning organisation 38 Degrees. Its executive director David Babbs had recently given evidence to the Committee. Some MPs had reservations about 38 Degrees, but Mr Allen thought there could be constructive dialogue between the organisation and MPs. However, he had told Mr Babbs during the evidence session that 38 Degrees needed to refine some of its campaigning methods. For example, during the passage of the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill through Parliament recently, Mr Allen had spent six hours speaking against the Bill only to return to his office to find more than 100 emails from 38 Degrees members telling him to "change your mind" and protest against the gagging bill.

There had been a high number of contributions via email in response to the Voter Engagement inquiry. MPs could not respond individually to thousands of emails and so there was a need to work out how to distil responses and respond to people's concerns and comments. Change was needed to help ensure that the democratic process worked more effectively, but the current system did not need to be completely replaced. Mr Allen hoped that the Commission would seek to build digital muscle to help MPs fight back against unelected voices in the media and elsewhere that simply wanted to denigrate MPs and Parliament.



**ii. Adam Afriyie, MP, Chair, POST (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) board**

Mr Afriyie (AA) explained that POST was impartial and that he was speaking in a personal capacity as someone who was passionate about technology and the role it could play in politics, particularly in relation to Select Committee work.

At the heart of democracy was accountability, for which openness was needed. Select Committee work was vital to Parliament's role in holding government, public bodies and media to account. Things had come a long way since 1771 when one could be imprisoned for publishing the debates of Parliament. Freer access to data would give the public and the media a better chance to hold Parliament and government to account. Social media was more interactive than previous digital means so this was a new realm.

Mr Afriyie believed that information about Select Committee work should be presented to people in a way that suited their daily interactions with others. People currently spent an average of one hour a day online. Information needed to be provided in a standard format so that it could be used, passed on, "mashed up" and re-presented in a more effective way. Select Committees should continue to publish searchable information but in a format that could be used on tablets, PCs and social media. There should also be a focus on continuing to digitise parliamentary records, but this should be secondary to the focus on providing up-to-date information. There was a role for crowdsourcing which could be a useful tool for Select Committee evidence.

When considering how best to utilise technology there could be a temptation to be a digital fundamentalist but it was important to remember that digital solutions could not sort everything out. With any digital solutions it was important to retain Select Committee functions and be mindful of the resources required to deliver those functions – people were needed to analyse data. There would not be an easy fix.

There were benefits to using technology to engage with the public but such an approach could not replace the current system of representational democracy. It was not the function of Select Committees merely to parrot Twitter feeds. They needed to produce well-informed reports and recommendations. As Select Committees expanded their online presence, it was important that the public engagement agenda did not become the tail wagging the dog. Similarly, people should not be pressured into engaging in such a direct way, but should be able to choose whether to do so.

Parliament needed to retain its impartiality; information feeds could not become propaganda machines for Parliament. There was a role for third parties in presenting information coming from Parliament. TheyWorkForYou was a great example of this. It used a standard data model, but licensing for commercial reuse was a great driver. When the licensing rules had changed in relation to Hansard some years ago, it had increased jobs while still allowing free resources to be available. In conclusion, emerging technologies should be embraced, but cautiously and with cognisance of the resources that would be required as a result.

**iii. Committee Office staff: Mark Hutton, Principal Clerk, and Kevin Maddison, Committee Specialist, Communities and Local Government Committee**

Mark Hutton (MkH) spoke about the Committee Programme, which was increasing the emphasis on and use of digital media in Select Committee work. He explained that Select



Committees consisted of small groups of MPs working together—almost always consensually—across party divides. The fact that they worked with evidence allowed a collegiate approach to flourish and it was important that this strength should not be lost as the use of digital media in Select Committee work increased.

The Committee Programme’s “digital first” strategy meant that information should be provided to committee members and published in a digital format first and in a way that could be used digitally. Currently, Select Committee output was still published in html. It would be preferable to publish in xml, but this would require considerable development work.

Select Committees had appointed their first media officers more than 10 years ago. They were now able to secure substantial media coverage and reach. A move to digital communications could be another step change in their public recognition and engagement and consequent political impact. Select Committees had a particular strength in public engagement because their work involved the coming together of issues and politics. People were already interested in the diverse topics that Select Committees focused their inquiries on, and the work of Committees could be promoted as a source of information.

The Committee Programme had put in place the foundations of a digital strategy and it was hoped that there would be further progress by the next election. It was important that Members were engaged with the programme if it was to be a success.

Kevin Maddison (KM) outlined his involvement with #askPickles debate and was happy to take questions from Commissioners on that.

#### **Q&A**

**Q** Paul Kane (PK) asked how more people could be involved in the work of Parliament.

**A** Graham Allen (GA) said that the PCRC had also conducted inquiries regarding fixed-term Parliaments and the Cabinet manual. The current inquiry into voter engagement was looking not only at the nuts and bolts of voter registration but also at the role of Parliament and of the media, from which there was a constant drip of cynicism.

Not everyone was a technical whiz. GA represented one of the 10 poorest constituencies in the UK and his constituency sent the lowest number of young people to universities. Many young people in his area were into texting but may not use digital forms of communication. He hoped that the Commission’s work would not widen the gap between the information poor and rich.

**Q** Helen Milner (HM) talked about the work of the Tinder Foundation and explained that her role on the Commission was to ensure that the digitally excluded were not left out.

She said that all that the witnesses had described was laudable but that it felt as though digital was a bolt-on. She noted that if digital means were to be used more, MPs would have to change the way they worked because more people would be talking to them. Would this be palatable?

**A** Adam Afriyie (AA) replied that as a constituency MP, he thought it would and that it was happening already. For Select Committees, digital was another means of presenting easily accessible information for the public to use.

With any digital change, it should remain clear that MPs were voted for by the public to represent them and to use their own judgment. It was also important not to take a “digital solutionism” approach of thinking that digital solutions could solve everything. However, having a digital approach and standardising data meant that external organisations could

use and reuse data and do the work for the public. For example, they could help with scrutiny.

On key performance indicators (KPIs), it was easy to produce statistics to show that an MP had done a bad job—for example, that they had asked only three questions in a given period—but the use of KPIs could give the impression that what was being measured was the only thing that mattered. There was a temptation for MPs to look at their stats on They Work for You and ask more questions so that they had an above-average record on asking parliamentary questions (PQs), but this perhaps was not the best use of their time.

GA agreed that such a system was like Ofsted targeting and could be a gameplay. He noted that he now asked fewer PQs than he used to because he had found it was not always the best way of achieving a particular aim and that he often didn't go to Prime Minister's questions because he was too busy working. There had previously been an attempt to write a job description for MPs but it had not been possible.

It was important to remember that not all MPs were digital whizzes and that it was important not to make MPs information-poor. He had help from his staff with email and online work, but he had still managed to start a rebellion against the Iraq war via email.

Q Cristina Leston-Bandeira (CLB) noted that Select Committees had become more effective at publicising their calls for evidence and getting more evidence in. Had social media made a difference in that regard and how had #askGove and #askPickles worked?

A MkH replied that there was a variety of approaches among select committees. Some had been using individual twitter feeds for about a year, and most had changed the design of their website to make it more interactive. One Committee had been encouraging people to send in audio/visual contributions.

KM explained that #askPickles had been fairly resource intensive, with input from various teams in different parts of the House. The Communities and Local Government Committee had put out a tweet asking people what they would like the Committee to ask the Secretary of State in an oral evidence session. There had also been a six-second 'Vine' video clip about #askPickles on the Committee's website. They had received about 1,500-1,600 tweets, some of which had been part of an orchestrated campaign and many of which had been unusable. Staff had filtered the responses, categorised them into themes and picked the best four or five questions for each theme for Committee members to choose from. Members had engaged with the questions differently, with some following up the initial question with further questions. There was a need to be clear about what the desired outcome was from the process.

After the evidence session, those whose questions had been asked had been sent a YouTube clip of the question being asked and answered, and this had been well received, as had a Storify feed produced by Committee staff. One positive outcome from the session was that the Secretary of State had agreed to change the law so that councillors were no longer obliged to send out hard copies of their meeting agendas.

GA added that he had been involved in the first online consultation with Lord Puttnam, to which 140 people responded. They had been thrilled by the number of responses but none of them had been usable.

The PCRC had a rich flow of contributions coming in to its inquiries, the vast majority of which were thoughtful and well put together. However, good-quality people were needed to go through them and they cost money, so there was a resources issue.

When GA had sat on a Criminal Justice Bill Committee he had asked a group of police inspectors to go through the Bill clause by clause and make suggestions. As a result, he had got four common-sense amendments made to the Bill as a result. The fact that he, as a Member on the Government side, had initiated changes to the Bill meant that he had not been chosen to sit on another Bill Committee for the next five years.

AA highlighted the need to be conscious that it would be the active and vocal minority who most wanted to take advantage of any digital opportunities for democratic interaction.

Q Emma Mulqueeny (EM) noted the separation between scrutiny of Government and Parliament by the public and by Select Committees—two quite different groups. What digital changes would witnesses like to see for Select Committees and for the public?

A GA replied that his dream would be that people understand the difference between Parliament and Government. Gladstone had said that the role of Parliament was not to run the country but to hold to account those who did, but Parliament did not do that effectively. If people understood that, better digital technology might help with scrutiny. There was a feeling that the public had to hold to account the people who were responsible for holding the Government to account.

AA said that he would like people to cheer when they saw their MP because they were scrutinising the Government and asking for more Back-Bench time, but things were all blurred together. If MPs could talk directly to the electorate about issue of real concern to them, rather than responding to issues flagged up in media, they might find that people had different concerns.

One issue that might be of interest to the Commission was disintermediation, whereby people could sign up to have more direct access to Select Committees and other bodies rather than receiving information through the lens of the media.

MkH said that officials faced a challenge: they wanted to present Parliament in its best light, to be helpful and to provide access to information, but first they needed to understand what the public wanted to know about Parliament. Select Committees had started using Twitter but there was a question of how to respond to input. There was a desire to increase public involvement in committee deliberation, but more understanding was needed on how that might work.

Q Meg Hillier (MH) noted that intermediary platforms could help people who wanted to know about specific issues—for example, dog control—by providing additional information. Were there any in-house experiments with crowdsourcing platforms or with algorithms that could filter out swear words?

A KM replied that there were not but that that would be a positive development.

MkH said that the aim was to produce documents with added functionality (in terms of search, links, etc) that people found more useful than hard copy documents.

## **Evidence session (b) summary**

### **iv. Ruth Fox, Chief Executive, Hansard Society**

Ruth Fox (RF) outlined some of the Hansard Society's research into public attitudes to politics. The next audit of political engagement would be done later that month. Previous results had shown that fewer than four in 10 people wanted to be involved in decision-making. One issue to consider was Parliament's role in facilitating those who did want to be involved. However there was a need to remember that those people might not be



representative of wider society. Digital was a tool and not a solution—first the process and culture had to be right.

E-petitions had been considered a success, but the nature of the engagement that came with them showed the system to be fundamentally flawed because it was a bolt on.

The [#futurenews - The Communication of Parliamentary Democracy in a Digital World](#) report had looked at digital engagement trends that Parliament should be looking to for the future, including social media, and how these could be used to provide information and respond to trends. The report had recommended a number of potential quick wins which would not require huge resources. One suggestion was that broadcast feeds should be digitised so that local news broadcasters could use them.

US representatives were able to send clips to people who had contacted them about a particular issue.

In the UK, Select Committee use of Twitter for #askPickles and #askGove had been successful but also resource intensive. Select Committees could do as other institutions did and consider having community teams rather than individual committee teams.

The work of Select Committees provided opportunities to communicate with the public, but it had to be borne in mind that members of the public saw issues according to how they were directly affected and not necessarily through the same lens as a Select Committee.

Communication between Select Committees and particular groups could have multiple benefits. For example, it could help to address knowledge gaps such as people not knowing the difference between Government and Parliament.

Research into people's opinions and knowledge about Government and Parliament had revealed that: only 34% of people thought that Parliament held the Government to account effectively; many people did not realise that Members of the House of Lords were not elected; and that many people thought that the voting age was 16. Parliament could help to build up this basic knowledge by using the opportunities that arose when people came to it for other information.

## **Q&A**

**Q** Paul Kane raised the issue of Whips and suggested that MPs were sometimes asked to follow different party lines even when there was consensus among MPs on certain issues. Would a more consensual approach remove the need for Whips?

**A** RF replied that without Whips there was a risk that nothing would get done. However, there was a balance to be struck. If there was wide public consensus on a particular issue, the Whips would be likely to take note of that.

The use of language such as “Whip”, private Members’ Bill and Select Committee could be a barrier to public understanding of how Parliament worked. Most members of the public thought that Select Committees were convened for specific reasons such as getting Rupert Murdoch in to talk about the News of the World. Most people also thought that what happened in the Chamber all that happened in Parliament.

### **v. Lord Allan of Hallam, Director of Policy in Europe, Facebook**

Lord Allan of Hallam (LAH) said that the data produced by Parliament could be used by external organisations and sites such as They Work For You (TWFY) and presented in different formats for the public. There were often good reasons why Parliament did things the way it did, and it could be left to third parties to translate terminology into simpler language.



However, the quality of data produced by Parliament was a big issue. The costs of running a site such as TWFY would drop dramatically if the data that came out of Parliament was of a better quality.

Video was very important because it was, increasingly, the medium that people used to understand what was going on. The use of video could help people who lived far from Parliament—for example in the north of England—to have more interaction and involvement. This could be done through video conferencing and by making available video of all parliamentary processes—particularly of Committees. For example, a small number of people might come to watch a debate in Westminster Hall on flooding, but if it were available as a video on a local community forum or Facebook page, many more people might watch it. Licensing of video content did not need to be restrictive; people should be able to use it however they wanted, even if that was offensive.

Political parties needed to shift their perspective in terms of communicating with the public. From a citizen's point of view, the issue being debated or legislated on was the primary focus that might bring them to be interested in politics. For example, someone who had an interest in a particular disease might want to know about debates in Parliament or prospective legislation concerning that disease. Parliamentary Questions and freedom of information requests might also be of interest; information could be more integrated according to subject matter. By the time legislation reached Parliament it was too late: people needed to be able to track discussions from Government papers through to Parliament.

#### **Q&A**

Q Robert Halfon (RH) asked how people could be engaged after a report had been written. He noted that the range of social media was expanding with options including Facebook, Twitter and BuzzFeed. How was an MP to decide which one to use to communicate with constituents?

A LAH replied that it was important to be able to track activity on individual issues—for example, diabetes care management—because people who were interested in a particular issue would be interested in all phases of activity on it. They tended to form into interest groups and it was useful to tap into those communities.

On the different channels available, there was no alternative but to invest in support staff to do the channelling. However, it was possible to write a response on a particular issue once and use the different channels to disperse that information.

Q Emma Mulqueeny (EM) asked whether Lord Allan was saying that Parliament should be looking at how it worked with third parties. If so, how much responsibility should Parliament take on for enabling or managing that?

A LAH replied that, yes, Parliament should look at how it worked with third parties. Parliament had to take responsibility for getting information out, but when that was done it should not seek to control that information. Currently, Parliament was very controlling and very procedure- and rules-driven. That was the online challenge.

John Pullinger (JP) added that Parliament had an Outreach team that went out to various locations. It also had a digital outreach team that worked with third-party websites such as TWFY. Select Committees were working with such sites and on their terms.

LAH suggested that Parliament could learn a lot from others who dispersed information in this way very effectively.

Q Meg Hillier (MH) asked whether Hansard Society research was broken down according to ethnicity or MOSAIC groups. She also followed up on RH's point about which media to use when corresponding with constituents. She found that it was difficult to relate sufficient information over Twitter and asked people to email her if she needed more information. It was hard to keep up with the traffic.

A RF replied that the Hansard Society's [Audit of Political Engagement](#) results could be broken down according to age, gender and social group. There were differences in attitudes according to age group, with dismal scores for the 18-to-24 age group, particularly for attitudes towards MPs, but better scores for the over-55s. When responses were broken down according to gender, findings were similar for most issues, but women tended to underestimate their knowledge. There were also differences according to ethnicity: white respondents tended to say they had high levels of knowledge, but levels of satisfaction and willingness to get involved tended to be higher among ethnic minorities.

LAH commented that most MPs had multiple constituencies in the sense that they had their geographical constituency as well as certain issues that they had a particular interest in and perhaps involvement with all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs). There was a kind of legal relationship between MPs and constituent when MPs took on a specific cases, but they also had another role as leaders whom local constituents coalesced around. Members of the public formed "constituencies" around subjects of particular concern to them and it looked bad if an MP told them that they could not help someone who was not from their geographical constituency.

Helen Milner (HM) added that MPs could partly get around this issue by having great websites with answers to FAQs so that members of the public could find out what their views were on many different issues.