

The Speaker's Advisory Council on Public Engagement

Submission to the Digital Democracy Commission 14/11/2014

Introduction

The Speaker's Advisory Council on Public Engagement (SACPE) provides informal, independent advice from an external perspective to House of Commons Speaker, John Bercow MP.

Our advice focuses on how the House of Commons is perceived by the public and what should be done to restore the trust required between Parliament and the people it represents.

The formation of the Advisory Council was announced by Mr Speaker in a speech to the Hansard Society and Political Studies Association on 30 November 2009. The speech can be read [here](#). The remit of SACPE is drawn from that speech:

"Using the personal knowledge of its members to advise the Speaker with their views on:

- *How the House of Commons is seen now by the public*
- *What should be done to restore the trust required between Parliament and the public*

And to encourage parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in their endeavours and make constructive suggestions as to how the outreach challenge can be met."

The Council has considered a number of issues which we think will be of interest to the Digital Democracy Commission. It is clear that we are both grappling with similar issues, but from different perspectives. The summary of our work below is put to the Commission for its consideration in compiling its report. Our minutes and correspondence with the Speaker and others is available on our [webpages](#)

We would like to warmly thank Parliamentary staff for their support of the Advisory Council's work and of course for all that they do to help Parliament engage with the public.

Prof. Jonathan Drori CBE
Chairman, SACPE
November, 2014

SACPE's recommendations

1. Legislation

While the business of Select Committees is visible via some mainstream media, much of Parliament's other business is rather difficult to access. We believe that there are opportunities to make the passage of Bills exciting and visible to the public. For example:

- Succinct video introductions and updates could summarise the importance and highlights of a debate – or preview its relevance for the public. This might even involve members of the public in providing a synopsis.
- 'Public reading' of Bills could be encouraged in order to spark interest from the media and public, and encourage submission of evidence from the public, which would inform the debate.
- The way in which Parliament's business is surfaced on the website should be developed – in particular by further improving topic-based search, browsing and push notification / alerts. We believe that many people will search by topic or theme
- MPs could be given the opportunity around the time of voting on a Bill, to comment on why they voted a particular way. This could provide an important additional insight for the public.
- While the legislative process is becoming less obscure, there have been calls for more pre-legislative scrutiny, evidence sessions in Bill Committees that have more teeth and narrative accounts of Bills in plain English. There is an opportunity to join up the work of Select Committees with the work of legislation and we feel that Parliament could usefully take a more end-to-end view of legislation – from policy development to serious post-legislative review - rather than seeing it as a series of set-piece episodes. Digital techniques could help here
- We believe that there is an appetite for more public engagement in the process of legislation possibly linked to a perceived reluctance by the House of Commons to amend Government legislation, giving the impression that real questioning lies with the House of Lords.

2. Select Committees and the public

- We have seen many examples of how Select Committees have risen to the challenge of holding the government to account and about their potential to engage the public. The election of Chairs has had a strongly positive effect. Committees going out around the country to gather evidence have been well received. Clever uses of digital media to reach various communities online have shown a creativity and capacity to work in new ways that we applaud.
- The reviews conducted by the Liaison Committee have been welcomed and provide a real impetus for looking at the work of each Committee asking the questions the public wants to ask of those in power. One

example, of many, we have heard about where this worked well has been the recent use of Twitter to source questions to the Secretary of State for Education.

- We believe there is scope to expand a thematic approach to topics of importance to the public (eg. old age, transport) which may cut across the work of several of the present committees. The mechanisms for commissioning and managing such cross-cutting work need to be clarified for the public
- We encourage Committees to think about how they are seen by the public. Effective scrutiny is about a challenge which seeks to improve matters. It should be robust, sometimes even confrontational. However, if it is seen as grandstanding, or is insensitive to a witness unprepared for hostility, it loses public credibility and support.

3. Experimentation with openness

We recommend that Parliament should adopt a mind-set of experimentation, enabling a series of pilots. with subsequent rapid iteration based on what works and what doesn't. We emphasise the value of experimentation as a means to try out new ideas. Some will work and others will not but the process of testing something new and evaluating it against how the public reacts itself demonstrates the commitment of the House to being alive to the concerns of the world outside. This kind of change does not always require new procedure or lengthy deliberation. Some examples:

- Experiments to explore the benefits and risks of making changes to the ceremony, language and modes of address in the House. These should test whether such changes would lead to better debate and a more effective House that would be better understood and appreciated by the public.
- The House might adopt Creative Commons for the creation and reuse of material in and about Parliament. An inaugural event, "Open Parliament" might involve a weekend of capturing and sharing video, still images, written observations and even art. We realise that here are concerns about security, about intrusion on Members' work and their need for some privacy, and about the impact on the fabric of the buildings but believe that these issues are surmountable.
- We support new ways to welcome more people into the building, the production of more compelling broadcast content, and films about Parliament.
- There is a need to consider in a more creative way issues around architecture, layout and space planning. We recommend further development of the opportunities afforded by movement of Parliamentary business during upgrade work, and of Parliament Square

activities, in collaboration with the Local Authority and the other organisations in the vicinity.

- We recommend a more radical approach to transparency, for example in coverage of proceedings, the workings of Parliament, and media access

4. Cameras in the Chamber

- The Council believe strongly in the power of audio visual communication to improve accessibility and engagement with the House.
- SACPE has recommended significant enhancement of the live and recorded television coverage in the chamber, with new camera angles and the ability for the public to search and look back over material.
- We feel that these changes are important not only for increased transparency of the workings of the House but also as a driver of the kinds of behaviour that research tells us the public would favour.

5. Widening public engagement with representatives, including new formats for public engagement

- The impact of the digital revolution is clearly being felt. Many MPs are adept in technology and social media use. They can also see the potential of the website and its associated interactive services and data-feeds for transforming public engagement.
- The Commission on Digital Democracy has the potential to capitalise on the good practice and good will of existing MPs. The scope for innovation in this area is substantial. Training for MPs on making effective use (and not being overwhelmed by) technology and social media should be a priority. MPs who are already capitalising on the opportunities afforded by new technologies have a substantial advantage and could help support and train their colleagues.
- Experiments in greater public participation could be run, for example by allowing direct public questions to be put to committees and providing for public recorded comment on some areas of parliamentary business as it is being developed. This approach could also be a way of making progress on the idea of electronic petitions.
- A critical investment Parliament should make in its future is to ensure that the current generation of schoolchildren understand the role and importance of Parliament and democracy. The Youth Parliament is one effective means to this end.
- We have suggested national campaigns, for example, “Could you be an MP?” and “Take your MP to work for a day” - with the aims of encouraging more people to see themselves in the role and helping more people recognise what MPs do on their behalf.

6. Education

- We believe we were influential in ensuring, via the DfE's curriculum review, that the National Curriculum continues to include material on the workings of democracy.
- However, present provision of 'civics' in schools is under-resourced, rarely assessed and therefore patchy. We strongly feel that all young people should be aware of the key processes of democracy and the ways in which they might participate.
- SACPE is pleased to see the progress of Parliament's Education Centre on its Westminster site.

7. We have recommended consultation with MPs who have announced that they are standing down to consider how Parliament can be improved.

- We suggest that they might discuss the impression the public have of MPs and what MPs might do to improve it, and how can MPs be supported to be the best they can be.
- We also hope that sitting MPs would in future have more opportunities, informed by research, to reflect on present and potential working practices and culture, thereby providing a further catalyst for change. We hope that they might do this in a non-partisan and non-adversarial manner.
- If successful, the approach could be extended to become a regular series of events with different groups of MPs, perhaps including members of the public sharing their perceptions of MPs and the work of the House. We have suggested to the Speaker that SACPE could be involved in this process if it would be helpful.

8. Language and behaviour

- We feel that the differences between, for example, the ceremonial activity and the real business of the House can be reconciled. While the ceremony of Parliament is glorious, the opaque language and procedure are barriers to understanding and engagement. The fact that this topic was raised by MPs with us indicates a willingness for a fresh look at what we should retain and what needs amendment if the public is not to feel shut out or that their Parliament is mired in the past.
- If the House is genuinely concerned to alter its image it should systematically monitor the change in public perceptions using external research to audit attitudes to political engagement on an annual basis. This research should aim to identify cause and effect, so that future work can be planned most effectively.

9. We have supported the proposal that a Democracy Prize be instituted.

- Competitions are popular and could have a reach and impact that would be helpful in improving public understanding of what democracy is all about and why we should care about it.

10. Consistent communication of the values, purposes and work of Parliament

- Brand and marketing experts always advise that consistency in communication of values, purposes and operation are very important in making organisations appreciated by the public. However, at present there are very significant inconsistencies in the way that the public perceives aspects of Parliament, its processes and its architecture, as well as MPs and their behaviour.

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