

Can Parliamentary Committees Contribute to ‘Social Learning’?

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This paper assesses the potential of Parliamentary Committees to contribute to ‘social learning’. Social learning involves the contribution of political processes to the understanding of policy issues amongst relevant participants, including legislators, public servants, ministers, interest groups the media and the broader community. This paper focuses particularly on interest groups and social movements. It reports the findings of a survey of organisations that were invited to give evidence before Senate Committees in the parliamentary year 2000/01. The survey sought to establish the impacts of participation on the groups and their assessments of this mode of enquiry. Twenty-five inquiries were covered and together they took both oral and written evidence from 316 groups. Enquiries and groups are listed at Appendix 1. The inquiries fell into three broad categories: strategic or emerging issues (8 inquiries), scrutiny and oversight (6 inquiries) and legislative hearings (11 inquiries). A questionnaire was circulated by mail and responses were received from 142 groups or 45% of the total. The questionnaire is at Appendix 2. An identical questionnaire was used some years ago to groups participating in House of Commons Select Committee inquiries – so these present results can be contrasted with (albeit much earlier) British findings (reported in Marsh, 1986, p.151-181).

Three threshold issues concern the idea of social learning, present systemic capacities to promote this activity and the role of groups in the policy making system. These issues are explored in the first section of this paper. The second section discusses Committee outreach to interest groups. The third section discusses Committee impact on interest groups. The fourth section contrasts these present findings with those found in a parallel survey in the UK. A concluding section explores the capacities of Senate committees to contribute to social learning and interest aggregation.

Social Learning, Interest Aggregation and Parliamentary Committees.

This section sketches the case for considering the potential of Parliamentary committees to mediate social learning, particularly in the strategic phases of the policy cycle and particularly in relation to interest groups. The connexion between institutions and social learning has attracted increasing scholarly interest in recent years. This is for both theoretical and empirical reasons. The theoretical reasons include the renewal of institutional theory and with it, recognition that ideas mediate both continuity and change, albeit by different means. The empirical considerations derive from the decline of norms of authority associated with traditional hierarchies, office or expertise. Consent, which requires persuasion, is increasingly the ground for collective action. The following paragraphs summarise an argument developed at greater length elsewhere (Marsh 1995, 2005, 2007; Marsh and Yencken, 2005).

Social learning involves the impact of institutional processes on the way issues are understood by key protagonists. Its normative genesis is in the democratic ideals of consent and deliberation. Its empirical genesis lies in studies of processes that progressively seek to accomplish these outcomes. Initial attitudes held by many protagonists are assumed to be based mostly on relatively unreflective or narrowly based considerations. Exposure to a wider array of perspectives can induce the development of views and indicate ways in which apparently differing approaches can be accommodated. Further, all the parties to such a process can 'learn'. Elites, like legislators, ministers and bureaucrats have the opportunity to listen to a wide cross section of community views. Community organisations have an opportunity to hear the perspectives of ministers and departments as well as of other organisations that might hold different views.

Of course, in a process of political exchange agreement is only one means, and by no means the most important means, by which participants become reconciled to a proposed course of action. Accommodation can be based on a variety of grounds apart from agreement: for example, issue transformation, log-rolling, compensation, conditional acceptance subject to review of consequences within some specified period, acceptance of the procedure as fair even if particular parties disagree with the substantive outcome, and acceptance because there

is a chance to reverse the outcome another day. These are all the normal devices of democratic politics.

Parliamentary committee enquiries can represent a particularly valuable vehicle for advancing these processes. Committees draw on the prestige and power of parliament. Committees have the power to require evidence from departments and, if sufficiently funded, they can commission independent research and assessment. Parliament is the primary setting for 'government by discussion'. Committees allow members to investigate issues on their merits, free of immediate partisan preoccupations. This is particularly the case with issues that are relatively distanced from current partisan controversy.

The potential of committees to contribute in these ways deserves more attention. This is because of wider changes in the political system. As social class has declined as a predictor of political attitudes, attention has shifted to the 'learning' and 'teaching' potentials of other political institutions. This is emphasised in the current turn to institutional theory (e.g. North, 1992; March and Olsen, 2005; Campbell, 2004). Each variant - sociological, rational choice and historical - attributes causal significance to ideas (e.g. Blyth, 2002; Denzau and North, 1994). But these approaches can differ in three significant respects: first, in their treatment of preferences; second, in their categorisation of the ideas that have causal power; and third, in their assumptions about the calculus of choice that guides protagonists.

For example, sociological analysis includes the formation of citizen preferences amongst the outcomes that are to be explained and focuses on the causal power of ascriptive ideas (i.e. those concerning identity, roles etc). By contrast, rational choice theory takes preferences as given and focuses on the instrumental ideas that mediate exchange (March and Olsen, 1995; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993). For its part, historical institutionalism also makes preferences endogenous but emphasises the contingencies of path dependence and institutional structure in framing citizen choices. In this perspective, and as a result of historical experience, different patterns of ideas will have causal power in different institutional settings. Its explanations draw on sociological and rational choice conceptions as well as on more general narratives (e.g. Schon and Rein, 1994; Steinmo et al, 199 ; Campbell and Pedersen, 2001).

Meantime, Zaller (1992) offers a fourth perspective on how, in a political system, new ideas and values contest an established conventional wisdom and come to transfigure public opinion. His study of the formation of public opinion explores the processes through which the views of competing elites (sectional interests) come to frame and shape the formation of public opinion more generally (for a bottom-up approach see also McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1998; for a general empirical account, Yankelovitch, 1992).

How effectively does the present two party, adversarial structure facilitate social learning? First, at least in the case of the Australian political system and over recent years, systemic capabilities have weakened in several three areas, namely strategic policy capabilities, interest aggregation and broader public education. I have developed this point extensively elsewhere (e.g. Marsh, 2005b). As a consequence, the present policy development structure has very limited capacity to mediate social learning. Two developments have caused this outcome: first, changing roles of major political parties; and second, the differentiation of community attitudes.

The literatures on political parties and electoral trends speak to the key structural changes. The former is concerned with the changing roles of major parties. It is salutary to recall V O Keys (1964) enumeration of the contributions of the major political parties to general systemic capacities through their electoral and organisational roles:

‘Parties in the electorate:

Simplifying choices for voters

Educating citizens

Generating symbols of identification and loyalty

Mobilising people to participate

Parties as organisations

Recruiting political leadership and seeking government office.

Training political elites

Articulating political interests

Aggregating political interests' (cited Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, p.5)

The recent literature on political parties traces their evolution from mass to catch-all, 'electoral-professional' and most recently to cartel patterns (Mair, 1997). Unlike mass parties, cartel party organisations have no or very limited roles in two key policy-making areas: agenda setting (strategic policy development – what V O Keys included in articulating political interests) and interest aggregation. Unless functionally equivalent capabilities have developed elsewhere in the political system, this change in the role of the party organisations will have diminished overall systemic capacities. It is clear that the major party organisations have largely jettisoned their former roles in strategic policy development and interest aggregation. Further, there is no evidence of the development of functionally equivalent capabilities elsewhere in the system (e.g. Keating, 2003; Keating Wanna and Weller, 2000).

Meantime, the recent literature on voting draws attention to the increasing role of cognitive factors in citizen choice. Various studies trace the decline of expressive attachments amongst citizens and the increase of voter distrust of mainstream parties. Party labels or 'brands' are a much less powerful cue of voter decisions. Voter choices are increasingly influenced by cognitive considerations. These changes in electorates are reflected in the titles of recent studies: *Critical Citizens* (Norris, 1999), *Parties without Partisans* (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000), *Disaffected Democracies* (Pharr, Pharr, and Dalton 2000), and *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices* (Dalton, 2004). In Australia's case the number of citizens with weak or no party identification has increased from 25% in 1967 to nearly 60% in 2001. Inglehart's (1990) identification of post-materialism provides only a partial explanation for these trends. The turn away from the major parties is much more widely based.

The systemic implications of these changes in major party organisational roles and in the decision-calculus of citizens seem to have been insufficiently recognised. In the absence of functionally equivalent capabilities elsewhere in the formal political system, overall systemic capacities will have diminished. This brings us to the third step in the argument. A decline in systemic capacities would not be a problem if, as the neo-liberal program foreshadowed, the

role of the state had itself significantly contracted and citizen expectations of what the state ought to or can do had significantly declined.

Despite various changes over the past decade or so, the proposition that the role of the state has diminished either in substance or in the expectations of citizens cannot be sustained. Public expectations concerning the role of the state remain high (surveyed in Wilson et al 2005). Meantime, at a substantive level, the need for capacities to identify strategic issues, aggregate interest groups and seed the development of public opinion more broadly has, if anything increased (Keating, 2004). The foreshadowed agenda arising from the Productive Commission Review of National Competition Policy (2005) emphasises this. The areas cited for action include health, education, the environment, housing, nursing home funding, disability services etc. These all involve complex stakeholder networks, cut across federal-state relations and are likely to be a focus for political controversy.

These prospective developments focus attention on the state's capacities to set an agenda, mobilise stakeholders and, more generally, to perform a mobilisation, engagement and opinion-forming role in particular policy systems. The state also needs to lead broader community understanding and commitment on major international and domestic issues (e.g. Wesley, 2002). Diminished strategic and interest aggregating capabilities are hardly consistent with the effective performance of these tasks.

In addition, the expansion of the domestic social agenda in recent years (to include, for example, the environment, women's issues, indigenous issues etc) creates more complex interdependencies and spillovers between policy domains. Coordination capacities should have developed to match these more challenging requirements (e.g. Keating and Davis, 2000). Mega-departments represent an administrative response. But capacities to articulate and aggregate interests have barely developed. Outreach capabilities remain basically unchanged. Recent scholarly literature has introduced the image of a network state to capture the segmented and differentiated character of the contemporary polity (Rhodes, 1997). In this mutation, power is more diffused than in the former hierarchical model. Power asymmetries between protagonists can vary depending on the issue, the context, the relevant resource(s)

etc. The term governance has gained currency as a reflection of the more complex linkages between state, supra-state and non-state actors in processes of policy design and implementation (Edwards, 2002). But at its core, the network image reflects the erosion of overall steering and linkage capacities.

In assessing the contemporary context for policy making, the incidence and standing of interest groups and social movements is critical. These intermediary organisations have proliferated (Marsh, 2003; Whitely, 2007). Interest groups and social movements have become an increasingly significant focus for citizen attachments and, despite the efforts of some political leaders, their advocacy and policy-making roles remain substantial. Public choice theory offered a generally malign interpretation of their influence and this has been one basis for political campaigns to weaken the role of groups, particularly the trade unions and particularly in the Anglo-American world (e.g. Olson, 1982). However, if governments have been more effective as change agents than was predicted by the ‘capture’ notions of public choice theory, groups too have proved durable actors in policy processes and essential participants in them. The number of protagonists on any issue has multiplied. W J McKenzie’s assessment of their significance, now four decades old, remains as a classic statement of their systemic role:

I have suggested that any explanation of the democratic process which ignores the role of organised interests is grossly misleading. I would add that it is hopelessly inadequate and sterile in that it leaves out of the account the principal channels through which the mass of the citizenry brings influence to bear on the decision-makers whom they have elected. In practice, in every democratic society, the voters undertake to do far more than select their elected representatives; they also insist on their right to advise, cajole and warn them regarding the policies they should adopt. This they do, for the most part, through the pressure group system.(cited Richardson, 1999).

These varied considerations together suggest the timelines of investigating how capacities for strategic policy development and interest aggregation and for strengthening the broader public conversation about strategic issues might be refurbished. What forums might be appropriate? I have reviewed the array of potential candidates elsewhere (1995, p. 232-233). Summits represent one possibility. They may be effective as the capstone of a more extended process.

However in themselves, such events are too short to allow for the necessary development of views. Meantime, public inquiries are generally too distanced from decision processes to stimulate the development of public or interest group opinion. Other mechanisms such as task forces and interdepartmental committees are also too distanced from interest groups and from ultimate decision-making authority. The media are currently the most prominent conduit in many of these processes. But the media are too limited in their capacities and too aligned to commercial imperatives to be the predominate vehicles for public and interest group social learning (e.g. Katz, 1998). The media are important disseminators and gatekeepers of the public conversation but they cannot sustain attention to issues over protracted periods or stimulate active processes of social learning. Meantime, commercial imperatives often orient them to colour and controversy rather than to facts that are pertinent but sober and dull.

Committees of the parliament on the other hand are ideally positioned to fill gaps in these processes. They are the only bodies with (potentially) equivalent formal standing and legitimacy to that of ministers. They can attract media attention, call ministers and bureaucrats to account and generally mobilise the resources of the state in ways available to few other actors. They have direct access to the legislature and can, within a more plural or consensual regime structure, deploy the prestige and authority of parliament against the executive.

What would constitute evidence of the capacity of committees to contribute to overall systemic capabilities for strategic policy development, interest aggregation and broader opinion formation? An empirical study, based in the present adversarial structure of politics, is necessarily limited in scope. Evidence of committee potential could nevertheless be derived from their activities on two planes. One concerns the effectiveness of committees as actors in broader policy processes. Here evidence of their capacities to identify appropriate topics for inquiry, conduct effective inquiries, reach well-developed findings, explore the scope for at least partial cross-party agreement and engage the media would all be relevant. In particular, to demonstrate strategic capacity, there should be evidence of a focus on emerging issues, of capacities to assess and synthesise diverse evidence and of capacities to reach at least partially cross-party findings. This present paper does not attempt to gather this evidence. Rather, it focuses on the potential of committees to contribute to the aggregation of interest groups.

In particular, it probes the capacity of committees to identify and engage groups, to stimulate their internal enquiry and policy development processes, to stimulate linkages between groups and between groups and other actors in the political system (including coalition building and information exchange). It also explores the standing of Senate committees in the eyes of groups.

Senate Committee Outreach to Interest Groups.

For the purposes of analysis, the twenty-five inquiries were divided into three categories covering strategic issues, programme and agency oversight and assessment of legislation. Strategic inquiries covered issues at the frontier of public debate. Eight inquiries were of this kind. These included such matters as Australia's response to Greenhouse and Kyoto, appointments to the ABC Board, the radiation hazard posed by mobile phones and the administration of higher education. 193 interest groups gave oral or written evidence to these inquiries. This represented 53% of the total. Replies were received from 87 groups (response rate 45%). The scrutiny and oversight category involved six inquiries. These covered such issues as the enforcement of the superannuation guarantee charge, fees on electronic and telephone banking and the fate of the IT strategy in the Australian Public Service. Sixty-eight groups gave oral and written evidence to these inquiries (response rate 19%). Replies were received from 22 groups (response rate 33%). Finally, legislative hearings reviewed the provisions of bills. This involved eleven inquiries covering issues such as financial services reform, interactive gambling and regional forests agreements. 114 groups gave evidence to these inquiries. This represented 31% of the total of groups. Replies were received from 33 groups (a response rate of 29%). This means coverage extends reasonably across all types of inquiries and the response rate approximates this distribution.

The degree of engagement of groups has been influenced by parliamentarian's assessment of their role. Anecdotal evidence suggests most Senators do not see outreach to groups as an important dimension of inquiries. This latter consideration has influenced the way committees engage groups. Most committees prepared a circulation list for notification of individual inquiries. Unlike their House of Commons counterparts, they have not cultivated on-going

relationships with the groups who are stakeholders in the area of the each committee's remit. The pattern of inquiries is insufficiently consistent in relation to departments or subjects, to warrant the maintenance of routine lists. The approach of the Australian committees is much more ad hoc and much more subject to day-to-day political exigencies.

Outreach to groups is formally by advertisement in major metropolitan dailies. However, responses to the survey show this was a relatively less important source of engagement. On the contrary 40% of respondents (79 groups) responded to a direct contact from committee staff. Press advertisements were the second principal source of participants. 43 respondents (22%) learnt of the inquiry by this means. Two other categories were each the source of 9% of participants. These were 'general reports or gossip' (18 respondents) and industry/interest group newsletter or website (16 respondents). This finding suggests the very considerable importance of committee awareness of the relevant policy network or interest group community. It also draws attention to the capacity of committees to mobilise interests. This is potentially an important responsibility of committee staff.

The range of groups engaged covered a wide cross section (Appendix 1). It included well-resourced business umbrella organisations such as the Business Council of Australia, Australian Bankers Association, or the Australian Mining Industry Council and relatively smaller and more specialised sectional bodies such as the Lone Fathers Association. Groups representing environmental, welfare, trade union, women, indigenous, professional, scholarly, shareholder and a variety of other interests and concerns were all represented. Evidence was also taken from think tanks and from university research bodies. Most groups gave evidence to only one inquiry. However, some of the national organisations such as the Australian Council of Social Services, the Australian Conservation Foundation or the Businesses Council figured in several.

Finally, five groups indicated they had lobbied for establishment of the inquiry on which they subsequently gave evidence. These inquiries constitute a particularly interesting group since they highlight not only the agenda setting role of groups but also the 'gatekeeper' potential of committees. It would be particularly instructive to isolate both the effects of the experience on

their social learning and on their views concerning the ‘standing’ of committees. This present study lacked the resources to pursue this inquiry.

In general, committees have demonstrated a capacity to reach widely and deeply into interest group and stakeholder networks and, at least in some cases, to register and respond to interest group pressure.

Committee Impact on Interest Groups.

The survey of interest groups sought to establish their experience and attitudes in four areas: first, preparation for the inquiry; second, their experience of the inquiry itself; third, their reaction to the Senate Committee report; and finally, their overall evaluation of the process.

The survey first sought to establish whether preparing for the enquiry led the interest groups to engage in some special, non-routine action. Such activity is the starting point of social learning. 116 groups or 82% of respondents gathered information especially for the inquiry. Respondents were invited to indicate whether this concerned member attitudes and/or the issue itself. These involve quite separate assessments: in the case of attitudes to the issue itself, an analytic and deliberative process is required to develop opinions and arguments; in the case of member attitudes, an outreach process or evaluation to determine viewpoints is the necessary mechanism. In fact, a significant proportion of respondents (57 groups or 40% of respondents) said their special information gathering involved both dimensions. 36 groups or 25% of the respondents said their information gathering only related to the issue itself and 23 groups (16%) said it only related to member views (Fig. 1).

The questionnaire then sought to establish what interest groups did in preparing for the inquiry (Fig 2). 69% of respondents (91 groups) undertook fresh research. The questionnaire asked the groups to indicate which of 6 research approaches they adopted. Further, groups were asked to indicate whether they regarded the research approach as having played an important, very important or minor role in framing their organisation’s position. The results

reported sum 'very important' and 'important' responses. Two approaches do not indicate any significant extra research effort: these involved recycling existing material and drawing on general knowledge of the issue. The other four choices involved more intensive analytic and deliberative activity. These covered: drawing on 'expert' members; establishing a task force; soliciting member views; and discussing the issue with other organisations. This last is a particularly significant activity since other organisations typically represent different perspectives and concerns. Interaction and linkage can seed an expansion of perspective as alternative or additional values, viewpoints and evidence come into sight. By such means, approaches can develop and awareness of potential solutions can expand. The grounds for accommodation can amplify from the binary agree:disagree to include. log-rolling, compensation, issue transformation, issue expansion, procedural acceptance, tactical acceptance etc.

Research for the majority of groups involved both relatively passive and relatively more active approaches. At a passive pole, groups could undertake such activities as draw on existing or general knowledge; at the other more active pole they could take such steps as establish a task force, initiate discussions with other organisations or solicit member views. 91 interest groups (69%) of respondents took one or more of these actions. The single most commonly followed activity involved drawing on general knowledge of the issue. 119 or 84% of the groups in the overall sample said they used this approach. Further, 86 groups or 67% said they used existing material. These results are to be expected since parliamentary committee inquiries will typically only occur after protracted periods of advocacy and lobbying by groups and/or by the executive. In relation to more 'active' approaches, 108 groups (76%) drew on members with expert knowledge, 50 groups (35%) established an internal task force, and 66 groups (46%) solicited member views. These approaches all contribute to social learning since they involve focusing member attention on particular issues. Finally, 64 groups (45%) engaged in discussions of one kind or another with other organisations. For the reasons noted in the preceding paragraph, these linkages can be a particularly important source of social learning.

Another aspect of this process concerns the dissemination of new information to protagonists as a result of their participation in the inquiry. The questionnaire invited respondents to

indicate whether this had produced new information about the issue itself and/or about the attitudes of other groups. In relation to the latter, three choices were offered: the issue itself, attitudes of the executive and attitudes of departments. In relation to other groups, respondents were invited to indicate whether this concerned the attitudes and approaches of friendly and hostile groups and whether they formed new links with other groups. 117 interest groups (82%) experienced positive learning of some kind or another and/or formed new links to other groups (Fig. 3). Of the interest groups who obtained very significant or significant new information, 53 groups (37%) said this concerned the issue itself. 28 groups (20%) said the new information they obtained concerned government policy. 50 groups (35%) said it concerned departmental attitudes and judgements. Finally, three choices related to awareness of other groups. 71 groups responded they obtained new information about friendly groups, 61 groups said they obtained new information about hostile groups and 56 groups (40%) said they formed new links with other groups. This is another strong indicator of the potential contribution of Committees to social learning. It points to their capacity to intervene in networks and/or contribute to the formation of networks.

The survey then sought to establish how interest groups communicated the experience to their members thus contributing to the diffusion of social learning (Fig. 4). The narrowest dissemination involved a report to a committee meeting. More widespread dissemination would result from articles in the interest group's newsletter and/or reports to general meetings. In total, 110 groups or 77% reported the results to their members. Of these, 32% of groups undertook all three activities; 40% two activities and 28% all three. In relation to individual items, 84 groups (60%) reported to a committee meeting, 74 groups (52%) reported the results in interest groups newsletters and 78 groups (85%) reported to special meetings of members. Committees could themselves stimulate these processes by preparing special articles and offering them to interest groups for publication. No committees currently undertake such activity.

86% of groups took some action as a result of the committee report (Fig. 5). This reflects the iterative process that characterises social learning, particularly where strategic issues are concerned. The questionnaire offered five choices: contact committee members or staff, contact an MP, contact a minister, contact department. An open choice was also offered. 30%

of groups undertook four of these activities, 24% groups three, 26% groups two, and 20% of groups one only. In relation to individual items, 60 groups (42%) contacted committee members or staff, 51 (36%) contacted an MP, 47 (33%) contacted a minister and 41(29%) contacted departments.

The questionnaire then sought to gauge the impact of the inquiry on interest group attitudes (Fig. 7). It sought to establish whether the process had any impact on group views in relation to this or a related issue. It also sought to define the nature of this impact: with respondents asked to indicate whether their views had hardened, softened or been clarified. This is in a context in which the present Senate Committees have almost no formal standing in the policy process. Their ability to affect issues either formally or informally is very low. This would not of course be the case in a more plural or consensual policy making structure. But in the present context it is not surprising that the greatest impact is reported to be a ‘clarification’ of interest groups views (76 groups, 53%). Only 5 groups (3.5%) reported their attitudes had ‘softened’ whereas 56 groups (39%) reported their attitudes had hardened. 37 groups (26%) reported a development in their views on some related issue as a result of the experience. Finally, 37 groups (26%) said the experience had no impact on their views on this issue and 20 groups (14%) said it had no impact on any related issue.

Next, the survey sought to establish what attributes of Senate committees were especially valued by respondents by comparison with other modes of inquiry into public policy issues of which they had experience (Fig. 8). As already noted, committees have very little actual power in the current policy making structure but they have potentially very considerable latent powers. Further, the financial and staff resources available to committees are very limited, even by comparison with their House of Commons (UK), Canadian or New Zealand counterparts, much less those of the United States. Nevertheless, the views of respondents point to the potential of committees. The two most valued attributes were the open and public forum presented by committees (116 respondents or 77%) and the procedural fairness of inquiries (100 respondents or 70%). 74 (52%) groups welcomed the opportunity to learn provided by committee hearings and 78 groups (55%) indicated they believed members of parliament were the right people to make a judgement about the particular issue. Meantime, of the groups responding positively to this question, 52 groups (37%) agreed with all four

options, 38 groups (27%) with three, 36 groups with two (27%) and 14 groups ticked one box only (10%). These outcomes are particularly encouraging from the perspective of the potential of committees to play a more prominent role in strategic policy making processes.

Written comments covered a wide range of issues. Some affirmed the general points in the question (e.g. ‘Allows detailed exploration of complex issues; allows evidence from people directly involved in issues with specific experience and expertise. Some criticised the attendance and civility of Senators (‘Intimidation of witnesses a bad feature.’; ‘Only half the committee turned up; they clearly did not want to hear our views and had an outcome in mind long before hearings closed.’ w responses). Some noted the lack of follow-up. Some noted the politicisation of committees (‘Committees ahs become disturbingly predictable, with majority and minority reports now almost standard on any controversial issue. This reduces the policy making value of the process.’)

Finally, the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate if they would welcome an extension of Senate committee powers and role (Fig. 9). Groups were not given an indication what more extended powers might entail – and anecdotal evidence suggests it is hard for protagonists to imagine another structure of power. On the other hand, committees have themselves attracted more publicity in recent years (e.g. Estimates hearings, GST inquiries, Tampa inquiry). So interest groups have presumably become more aware of their activities. Indeed, as noted earlier, Senate Committees played a much enlarged role in an earlier mutation in Australia's political system and they currently play much stronger roles in a number of other political systems (New Zealand, the UK etc). 94 respondents (76%) indicated they would welcome more powers for the Senate committees. A further 57 respondents (40%) said the present powers were about right. 26 respondents judged the process to be waste of time.

Positive comments included:

- ‘Very, very strongly support the bipartisan parliamentary role. The Senate is fulfilling its role.’

- ‘Would like to see the recommendations of committees more binding on governments. Too often, reports are released and their recommendations ignored’
- ‘It was rewarding to see ‘the University’ in the media spotlight and openly discussed. The process provided an opportunity to shape public debate and ‘perhaps’ influence the agenda, if not the outcome, as there are so few opportunities to take part in the political process.’
- ‘Parliamentary committees often provide a safety valve for community debate/views.’
- ‘Something is needed to make departments toe the line.’

Others offered negative comments about process:

- ‘I found that the committee panel I addressed showed little respect for witnesses, their presentations or the time and effort on preparing them’
- ‘Presenting was pretty intimidating for many at the session I attended...less stupid questions from some committee members would help.’
- ‘I would not support greater influence for committees unless they have adequate time, resources and motivation.’

Comparison with UK Findings.

As mentioned earlier, a similar survey was undertaken in the UK in 1984. This covered all groups giving oral and written evidence to the Select Committees of the House of Commons over the preceding parliamentary year. Despite the time lapse, the broad circumstances surrounding the role of interest groups and of parliament in the two polities are sufficiently similar to permit comparison of the findings. Only the positive responses are included. Table 1 reports the number of groups responding positively to each question. It is immediately clear there is a very close parallel between the views of interest groups in the two systems both about the character of their experience in participating in parliamentary inquiries and about their views of the merits of this mode of advancing public policy issues.

Committees, Social Learning and Interest Aggregation.

In assessing the capacity of committees to contribute to interest aggregation, some qualifications are first in order. First, the Committees reviewed here have not sought to focus

their efforts on interest groups. Outreach, whilst extensive on certain inquiries, has mostly been ad hoc and unsystematic. All the committees have established procedures to notify at least some interest groups about their inquiries. But no committees have deliberately sought to cultivate interest groups. The committees have not seen impact on interest groups as a significant aspect of their activities, much less a primary aspect. Similarly, some committee chairs have met informally with groups, particularly on major inquiries. But chairs have not seen interest groups as an important target for their efforts. Further, interest groups themselves seem very uncertain about the role of committees. They welcome the access that the Committees provide. They generally hold the Parliament and its Committees in very high regard. But they realise committees are largely impotent in a predominantly adversarial system. Though they see Committees as a way of registering views in the political system, the precise role of Committees remains ambiguous.

Despite their relative impotence in the current scheme of things, the results of this survey point to the potential of committees to contribute significantly to interest aggregation. This process has normative, substantive and procedural dimensions (e.g. March and Olson, 1995). Interest groups need to believe the system is fair in an abstract sense, that relevant evidence on the issue under review has been adduced and fairly weighed and they need to build their awareness not only of what other members of the relevant policy network or community think but also of what they are likely to do. This is a serial and iterative process pursued through a variety of forums. But parliamentary committees are uniquely placed to make ‘catalytic’ contributions, particularly in relation to strategic issues and to interest aggregation and perhaps by these means, also to seeding the broader development of public opinion. Indeed, there is strong evidence of the ability of committees to contribute to the first two of these outcomes.

Recognition of the abstract fairness of this process is reflected in the characteristics most valued by participating groups. 77% of participating groups specially valued the ‘visibility’ or ‘transparency’ of committee processes and 70% their ‘fairness’. 60% specially valued at least three of the four suggested positive qualities of parliamentary inquiry processes. The attractiveness of committees to groups is further suggested by the number who favour

enlargement of their role, despite the recognition that it is a forlorn hope under the adversarial political and policy making system.

If social learning is to be a primary means of interest aggregation, the potential of committees to contribute to the development of interest groups attitudes also needs to be weighed. This process too is an iterative and serial one and the contribution of committees is clearly at an elemental stage. Despite the formal impotence of committees, 82% experienced positive learning and/or formed new linkages with other groups. 53% reported important or every important development of attitudes. Only 3.5% said their attitudes had been 'softened' as a result of participation in the inquiry. This result is hardly surprising, if for no other reason than the protracted character of the process of opinion formation and the need to provide bases other than agreement for accommodation amongst protagonists (e.g. re-expression of a sectional interest in terms of the public interest; more expansive definition of the issue; log-rolling; compensation; tactical acceptance; procedural fairness etc).

Meantime, 53% of groups said participation 'clarified' their attitudes to the issue and 40% said the process stimulated the formation of new links with other groups. 45% 'consulted' other groups in preparing their submissions. A further 80% said the inquiry process introduced them to new information – significantly, as might be expected, 45% said this involved departmental attitudes or executive positions; but 70% also said this information concerned the approach of other groups. 69% of the groups indicated the inquiry process initiated an exercise in fresh research. Finally, as already noted, 94 (66%) took some action as a result of the Committee report. These are exactly the stimuli that, reinforced by further interactions, might contribute to interest aggregation. These results point to the potential of committees to be catalysts in opinion formation within particular policy communities.

The 'vertical' reach of committees is also suggested in the number of interest groups reporting their activities to their members. 77% reported their evidence and 81% reported the committee's findings to their members. This suggests attention to committees amongst interest groups. It suggests that committees are capable of stimulating interest groups internally and in their relations with each other. What invites further testing is the capacity of

these structures to be conduit for the shaping of behaviour. The capacity to disseminate factual information both ways and to influence attitudes is clear. What needs to be further explored is their capacity to influence judgements about links between interest groups aspirations and definitions of the public interest and to alter government or interest group behaviour in ways that serve this outcome. The survey results suggest possibilities but further deliberate effort by committees and further effort aimed deliberately at interest groups is required for a forthright judgment about committee potential.

Recalling the causal ideas identified by sociological and rational choice institutional schools, it would also be instructive to learn what kind of social learning was stimulated by the inquiry process, in particular if this varied between the strategic and the other bands of inquiries (legislation and scrutiny). For example, following sociological perspectives, did it stimulate the relevant groups to consider the connection of the issue being explored to the group's identity and/or role? Did the social learning stimulate attention to, or even affect, the particular group's assessment of its preferences? Or, following rational choice approaches, did it rather introduce new instrumental considerations and perhaps broaden the potential repertoire of exchange strategies? The literature suggests considerations of identity and roles stimulate deeper cognitive engagement and are a stronger foundation for the development of solidaristic approaches (March and Olsen, 1995). One hypothesis might be that in the strategic phase of issue development questions of identity are more likely to come to the fore and preferences are thus more likely to be open to adaptation. By contrast, in later more 'operational' phases of the policy development cycle, instrumental ideas and possibilities of exchange play a more prominent role. These differences might arise because a core task of the strategic phase in the policy cycle is to deepen understanding of who has stakes in the issue, the nature of these stakes, the overlaps and intersections between stakeholders and the implications for their preferences (e.g. how the relevant issue might implicate citizens in their roles as Australians, business people, women, trade unionists, environmentalists etc.). Meantime, later 'operational' phases in the policy development cycle might be expected to involve closer attention to the instrumental factors that would make possible a wider or narrower repertoire of exchange strategies. Unfortunately, evidence gathered for this present survey did not gather this information.

Overall, there is virtually no conception amongst policy makers, ministers or parliamentarians of the potential of Committees as a medium for interest aggregation or strategic policy development. The notion that interest groups might represent a primary focus for committee work is not recognised. Further, the notion that the overall system has major gaps in its capacities to aggregate interests or manage strategic issues is not widely recognised.⁴ Nor are deficiencies in capabilities for more general public education about issues acknowledged, not least by political elites. Structures are well developed. Committee roles have developed in recent years, including contributions to budget deliberations in 1993 (Young, 1999) and, more recently, notable inquiries on the GST and Tampa episodes (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003). But committee resources are very limited, even by comparison with those available in comparable parliaments. The committee structure could as easily remain an ambiguous adjunct of the two party system as provide the infrastructure for introducing a strategic phase to the policy development cycle and creating new capacity for aggregating interest groups.

Earlier discussion pointed to the need to seed the development of public opinion more generally as a third important gap in present policy making capacities. Zaller (1992) has developed a powerful model of this process which focuses on the interchange between elite (sectional) opinion and more general public opinion. Committees of the legislature are the critical actors in his model. The general foundation for such a development of the role of Parliamentary Committees in Australia is clear. Survey data highlights the general standing of parliament in the broader community. According to the Australian Electoral Survey, 49% of respondents expressed some or a great deal of confidence in the institution of parliament, whereas only 36% expressed equivalent degrees of confidence in the major parties.

There are powerful grounds for believing the addition of a 'strong' committee structure could add significantly to the renewal of strategic policy making, interest aggregation and public education more generally. In the particular context of interest aggregation, the addition of a structure, independent of the executive, but based in parliament, offers four potential benefits.

⁴ Speaking in the House of Representatives in a debate on education strategy, Prime Minister Howard observed: 'We have got to have a capacity in this country to have a sensible discussion about long-term policy issues without everything being distorted and blown out of the water by misrepresentation' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16th October 1999, p. 49).

First, policy makers could learn about interest group views before they became publicly committed to a course of action and interest groups could develop a deeper understanding of official thinking. Second, processes of social learning could be stimulated amongst interest groups, departments, ministers and parliamentarians. Third, the scope for at least partial bi-partisanship between some or all of the parties might be explored. Fourth, ministers and/or groups could assess the deployment of interests on a particular issue and determine the potential for building coalitions in support of the course of action they favour. The survey has particularly explored aspects of the potential of committees to contribute to the iterative process of social learning amongst groups.

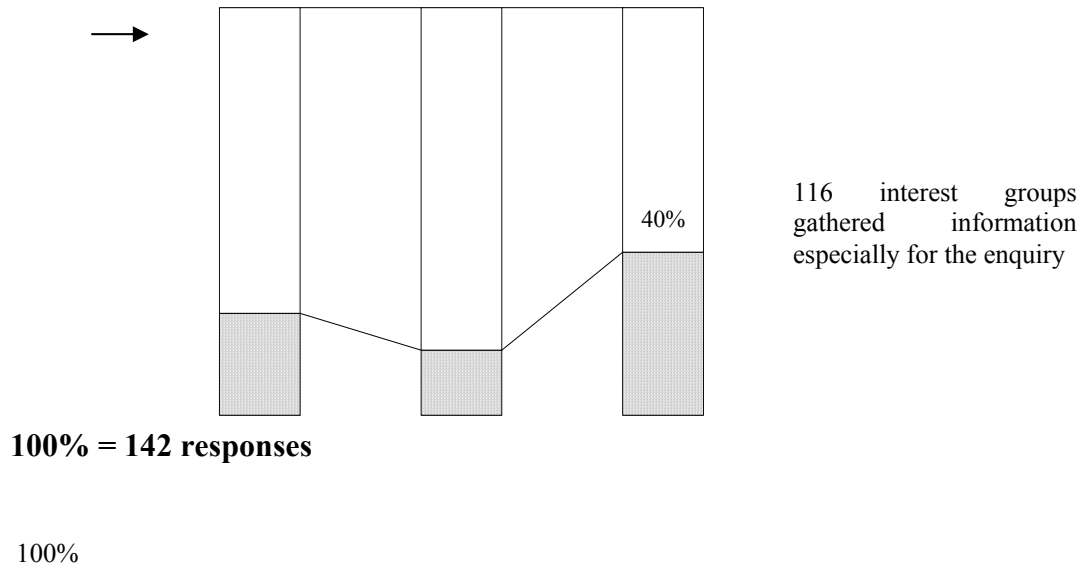
Because all these developments remain in embryo, the potential of committees remains to be more fully tested. The results of this survey provide strong grounds for future work. They give strong support for further development aimed specifically at building interest groups understanding of, and engagement in, this process. But an empirical judgement that the work of the committees affirms their theoretical potential to renew now atrophied policy-making capacities would be premature. Such a judgement must await further development of the parliamentary committee system.

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Figure 1 : Impact of inquiry on information gathering



Question: Was the information gathered concerned with :

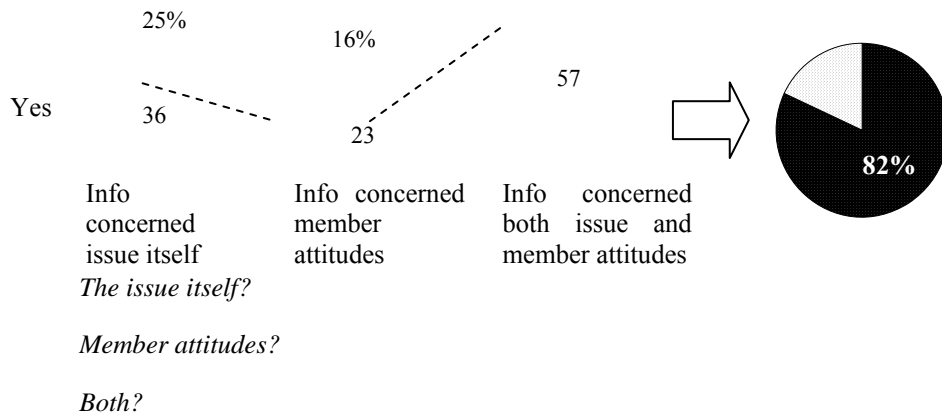
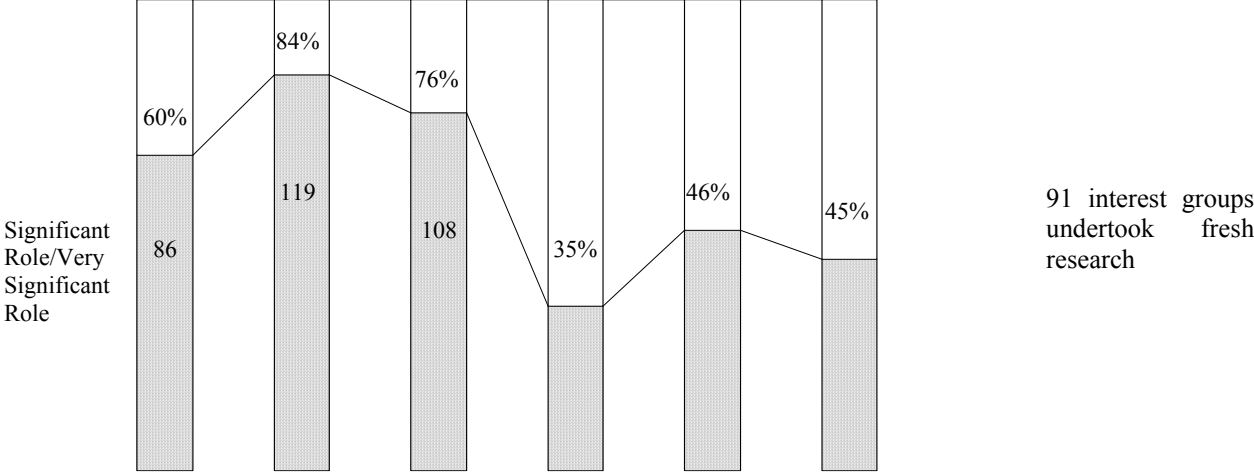


Figure 2 : Impact of inquiry on internal research



Question: Please indicate the role of the following actions in preparing for the inquiry. (The questionnaire offered six choices—establish internal task force; circularise members inviting views; consult informally with selected members with special knowledge; use material already prepared; draw on general knowledge of existing office bearers; discuss with other organisations. The questionnaire invited groups to indicate the relative importance of these actions.)

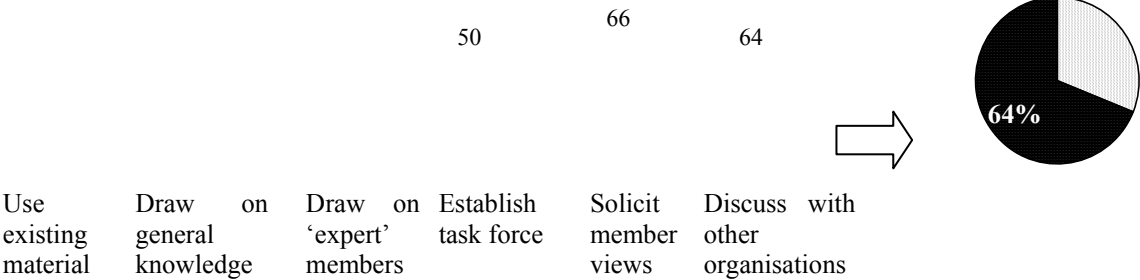
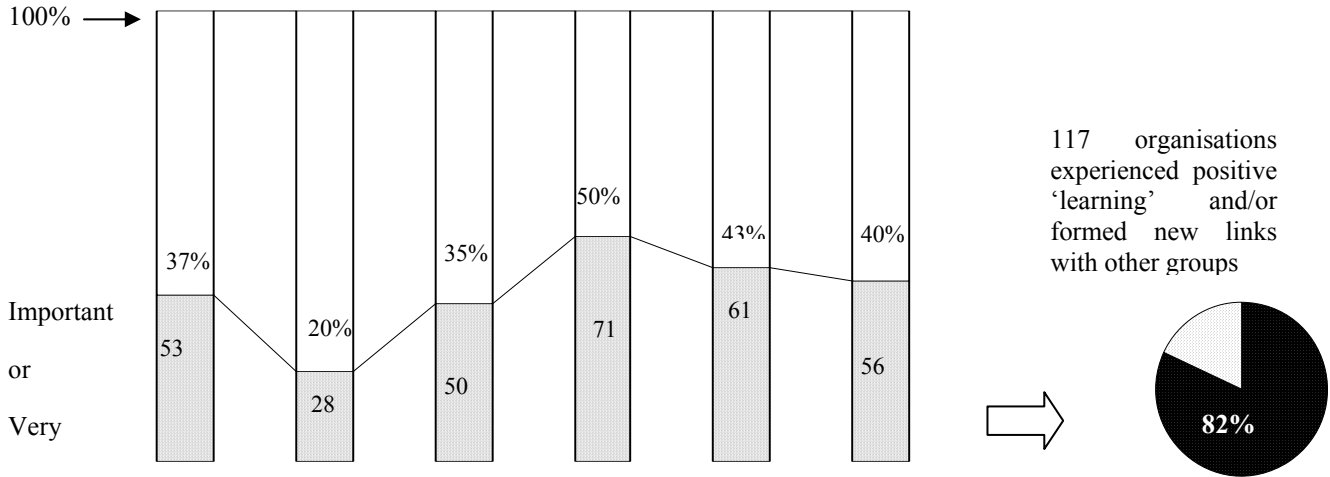


Figure 3 : Impact of inquiry on interest group learning and links to other groups



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Question: Please indicate which, if any, of the following outcomes occurred as a result of the inquiry:

We obtained new information re issue

We obtained new information re government policy

We obtained new information re department attitudes/judgements

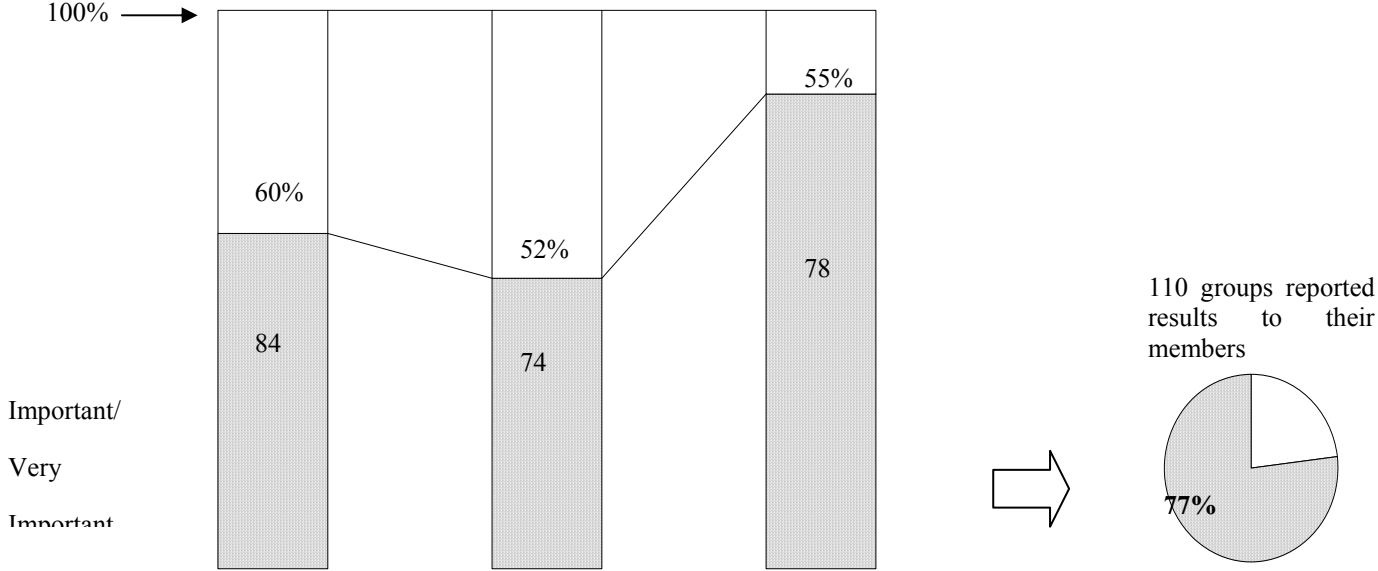
We obtained new information re friendly groups

We obtained new information re 'hostile' groups

New info re issue itself New info re govt policy New info re dept attitudes/judgements New info re friendly groups New info re hostile groups New links with other groups

We formed new or strengthened links with other groups

Figure 4 : Reporting participation to members



Question: Would you please indicate the role of the following actions in reporting back to members (indicating the relative importance):

Report to committee meeting

Article in journal/newsletter

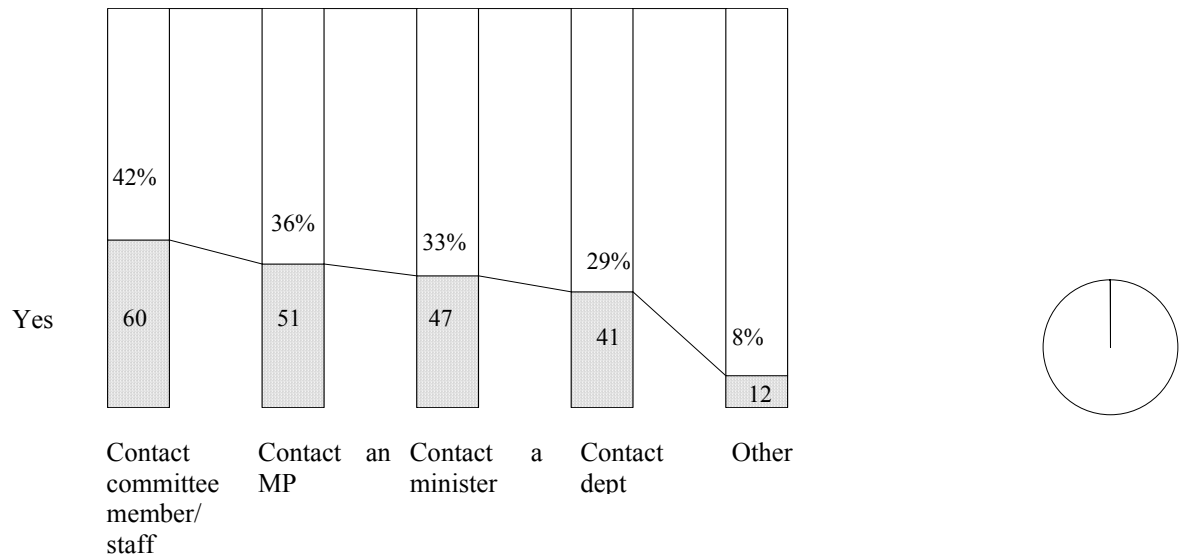
Report to general meeting

Report to committee meeting

Article in house journal/newsletter

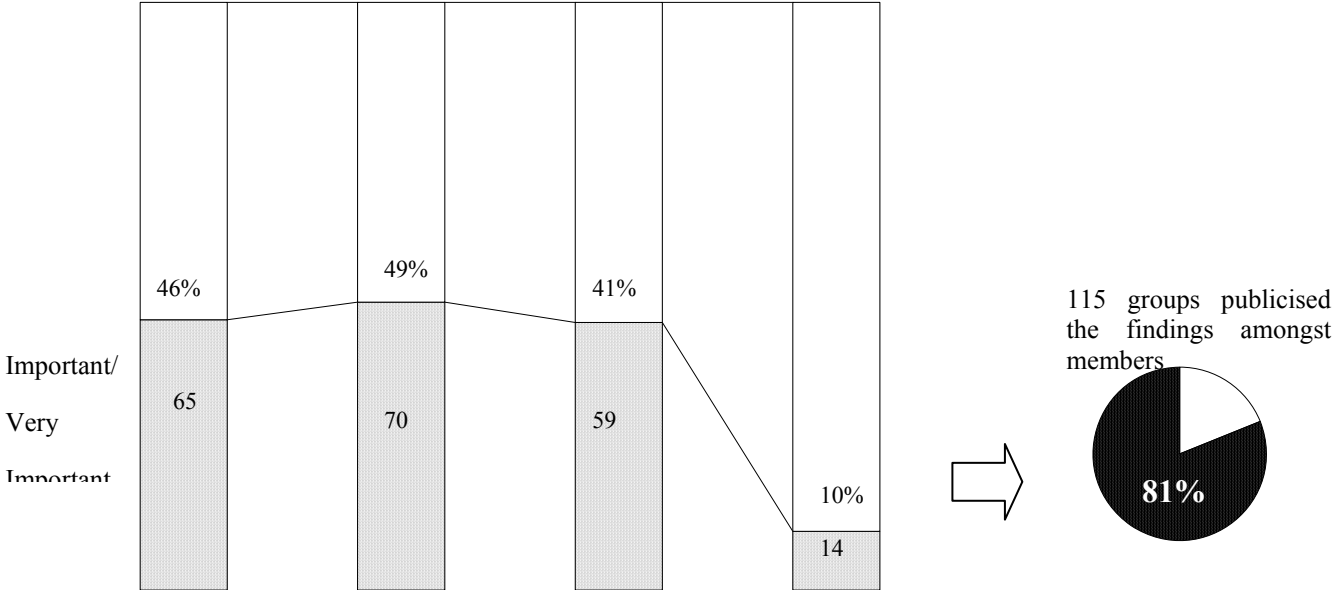
Report to meeting of members

Figure 5 : Interest group follow-up to committee report



Question: Did you take any action as a result of the committee report?

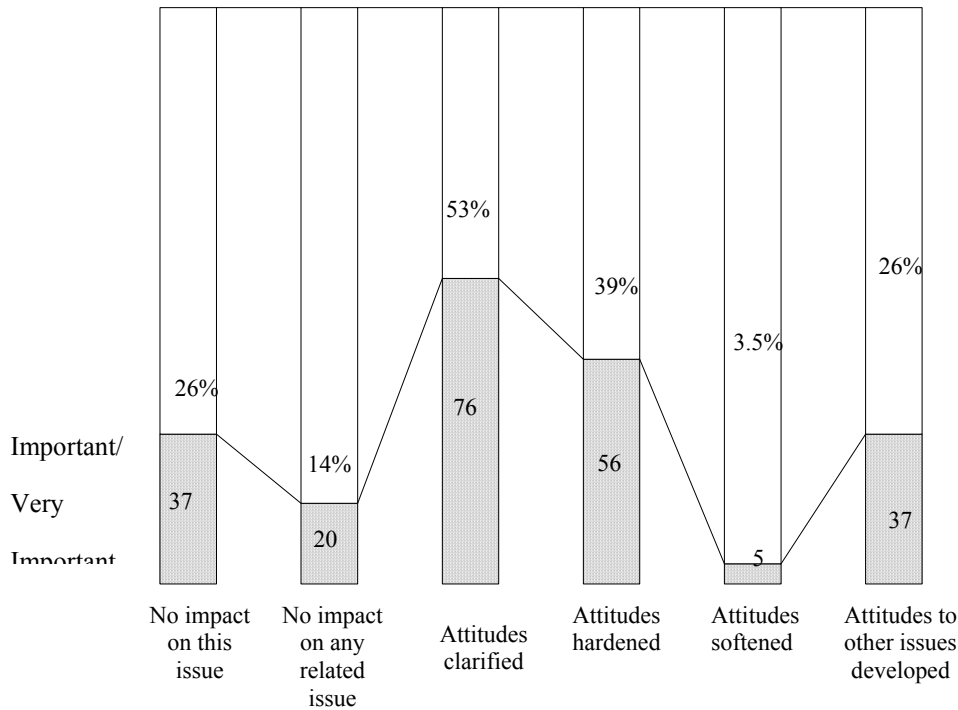
Figure 6 : Reporting committee findings to members



Question: Were the Select Committee findings publicised amongst your members? Please indicate method (from above choices).

Oral report to committee meeting Printed report in journal Other printed report Other approach

Figure 7 : Impact of inquiry on interest group attitudes



Question: Please indicate the impact of participation on your attitude:

Attitudes clarified

Attitudes hardened

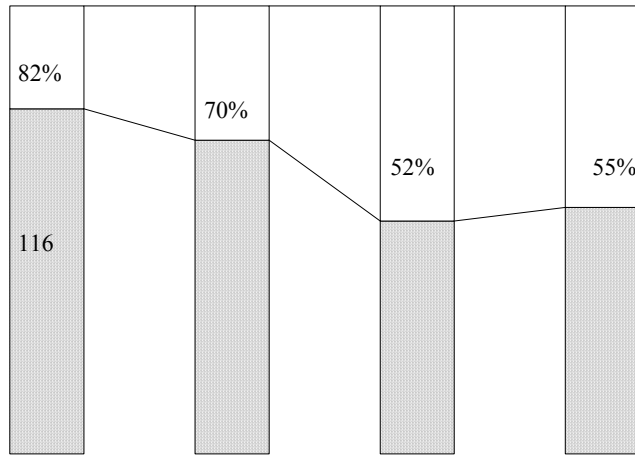
Attitudes softened

Attitudes to other issues developed

No impact on attitudes to this issue

No impact on attitudes to other issues

Figure 8 : Specially valued attributes of Parliamentary Committee inquiries

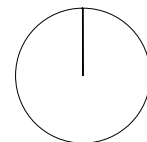


Question: How would you ¹⁰⁰

Agree/
Strongly
Agree

74

78



Open and
public
forum

Procedural
fairness

Opportunity
to learn

MPs right
people to
judge issues

describe worthwhile features of a Select Committee compared with other ways of determining public policy questions?

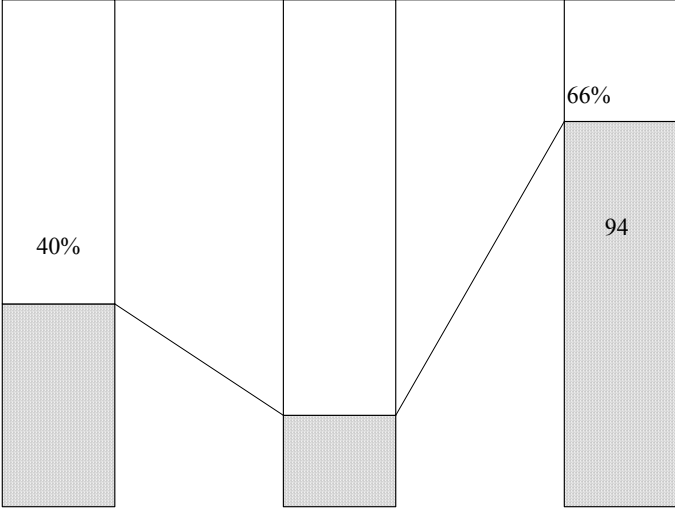
Open and public form makes it preferable to departmental or other private approach

Select Committees are fairer

We learnt more this way

MPs are better qualified than civil servants to decide issues

Figure 9 : Group attitudes to extension of committee powers/role



Question: Do you favour extension of the Select Committee powers (indicating strength with choices given)?

Agree/	57	18%	
Strongly		26	
Present role right		Committees waste of time	More power

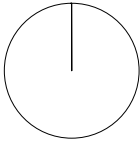


Table 1.

Comparison of Outcomes: U.K. and Australian Surveys.

	Participants in House of Commons Select Committee hearings	Participants in Senate Inquiries.
Proportion of eligible groups responding to the survey	30% (127)	142 (45%)
Groups gathering special information	64% (81 groups)	82% (116)
Groups undertaking fresh research	87% (109 groups)	69% (91)
Groups experiencing positive learning	55% (70 groups)	82% (117)
Number of groups reporting participation to members	90% (115 groups)	77% (110)
Groups following up committee reports	64% (81 groups)	66% (94)
Groups publicising committee findings amongst members	76% (96 groups)	
Proportion experiencing 'important or very important alterations of attitude	55% (70 groups)	
Proportion nominating a specially valued attribute	84% (107 groups)	
No. favouring extension of powers	63% (80 groups)	66% (94)