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**The Committee System of  
the U.K. House of Commons:  
Recent Developments and their  
Implications for Australia**

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## Note

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## The Committee System of the U.K. House of Commons: Recent Developments and Their Implications for Australia<sup>1</sup>

*Ian Marsh*

Next year is the 100th anniversary of the first constitutional convention. This anniversary might stimulate a fresh look at our political institutions and the norms and processes by which they operate. If we returned to these constitutional debates, we would immediately encounter a discrepancy between the conception of the role of parliament held by our founding fathers and the reality of the institution that we have today. Australia's founders had been nurtured in a liberal-radical political tradition. They took for granted the merit of parliamentary discussion of policy matters and of parliamentary participation in their resolution. They adhered to liberal and radical norms concerning the role and independence of members of parliament. They envisaged a parliamentary structure based on an extensive system of checks and balances, including a bicameral legislature. Australia, a federation with bicameral legislatures, thus acquired a different formal system of government from that of New Zealand and the United Kingdom, both of which are unitary states.

Despite these structural differences, the policy-making systems which have evolved in all these countries exhibit similar patterns. The emergence of strong parties, and the modern social democratic state which strong parties have created, overwhelmed older, liberal norms governing the role of parliament in policy-making. Bagehot

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<sup>1</sup>. This paper is based primarily on my study of the House of Commons Select Committees, *Policy Making in A Three Party System*, Methuen, London, 1986.

summarised the liberal conception of parliament in 1867 when he credited it with at least four roles. First, he conceived parliament to have a *scrutiny and review* role. This involved 'watching and checking' ministers of the Crown. Second, he held parliament to have an *expressive* role, by which he meant that all opinions widely held in the community were entitled to be aired publicly before this forum. Third, he credited it with a *teaching* role, parliament should contribute to public learning. Last, he envisaged parliament as a *source of intelligence about public opinion*, it should be the authoritative forum for the registration of political claims.<sup>2</sup>

These older notions of the role of parliament have few contemporary champions in Australia. Yet they have been powerful in stimulating the movement for parliamentary reform in the United Kingdom. In this paper I will focus on reform of the House of Commons committee system. A major development occurred in 1979 when Mrs Thatcher's Tory Government established fourteen select committees to shadow each major department of state. These committees were created for the life of parliament. They had extensive powers to initiate enquiries, call witnesses, hire staff and hold hearings beyond Westminster. I propose to trace the background to this development, describe the structure and approach of the committees that have emerged, review their work and impact, outline subsequent proposals for committee and procedural reform and, finally, review the implications for Australia.

## Ideas of Parliamentary Reform

The climate of opinion which contributed to the contemporary movement for parliamentary reform first emerged in the 1960s. In 1964 two influential books on parliamentary reform were published. The first, *Reform of Parliament*, by Bernard Crick, reflected the views of some Labour members and their academic supporters.<sup>3</sup> Crick advocated a system of pre-legislation committees. He envisaged parliamentary committees as the bridge between informed opinion, interest groups and the executive. But he did not envisage a challenge to the Government: 'Control means influence, not direct power; advice not command; criticism not obstruction; scrutiny not initiation; and publicity not secrecy.'

Tory interest, stimulated by a somewhat different set of concerns, was reflected in a second book published in the same year by Hill and Whichelow.<sup>4</sup> They concentrated on the decline of Parliament's traditional responsibility for public expenditure.

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<sup>2</sup>. Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, Dolphin Books edn. Doubleday, New York pp. 172, 173, 174.

<sup>3</sup>. Bernard Crick, *Reform of Parliament*, Anchor Books, New York, 1965.

<sup>4</sup>. Andrew Hill and Anthony Whichelow, *What's Wrong with Parliament?*, Penguin Books, London, 1964.

Parliamentary control of expenditure had been the central issue in the development of the Commons authority. This culminated in the dispute over the 1911 Budget which resulted in victory for the Commons. But this victory was overtaken by the emergence of the two-party system. Hill and Whichelow pointed out there had been only two occasions since World War I in which the House had rejected an estimate, one in 1919 concerned the second bedroom in the Lord Chancellor's residence; and the other in 1921 concerned Members' travelling allowances.

In the seventies, Britain's crisis-prone economy stimulated fresh attention to her governing institutions. For example, *The Economist* editorialised about the decline of the scrutiny and review role of parliament in a lengthy article in 1977. Its attitude was clear in the caption: 'Blowing up a Tyranny'. The issues then raised remain relevant to current debates:

These pages are concerned ... with the undignified, inefficient, undemocratic and above all, unparliamentary government that is Britain's lot today. Britain's very stability, the beguiling flummery attending its institutions hold most of its citizens in a trance of acceptance. As Britain's executive has done more, as its involvement in economic life has grown and its impact on citizens' powers and freedoms has widened, the capacity of the House of Commons to investigate its activities has diminished. Students of parliamentary institutions all over the world accept that this kind of scrutiny for keeping officials alert and accountable is as effective as its system of regular committees...<sup>5</sup>

After reviewing various executive devices for maintaining its dominance, and their deficiencies and consequences, *The Economist* turned to proposals for reform:

The blue print for a new British democracy on the day after the bang is not hard to sketch, though much harder to design in complementary detail. The central parliament in that British state would ... distance itself from the executive. Such a legislative parliament would take on much of the power over the executive enjoyed by America's Congress ... That such a parliament's deliberation would be respected, its speakers admired, its investigative committees heard, would be ensured by the ancient weapon of the power of the purse and the modern one of televising, in full or edited versions, its sessions both on the floor and in committee ...

The debate beyond Parliament was reflected amongst members themselves. Influential members such as Richard Crossman, Roy Jenkins and Lord Hailsham were

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<sup>5</sup> *The Economist*, 5 November 1977, p. 11-16.



united by concern about the excessive growth of executive power. In 1976 Lord Hailsham minted the phrase 'elective dictatorship' to describe contemporary British Government.

I think the time has come ... to recognise how this nation ... has moved towards totalitarianism which can only be altered by a systematic and radical overhaul of our Constitution. ... Of the two pillars of our Constitution, the rule of law and the sovereignty of Parliament, it is the sovereignty of Parliament which is paramount in every case... We live under an elective dictatorship, absolute in theory, if hitherto thought tolerable in practice.<sup>6</sup>

Lord Hailsham reviewed in detail how power had become progressively more concentrated in the executive:

There has been a continuous enlargement of the scale and range of Government itself. The checks and balances, which in practice used to prevent abuse, have now disappeared. ... Until comparatively recently Parliament consisted of two effective Chambers. Now for most practical purposes, it consists of one. Until recently, the power of the Government within Parliament was largely controlled either by the Opposition or by its own Back-benchers. It is now largely in the hands of the Government machine. Until recently, debate and argument dominated the Parliamentary scene. Now, it is the whips and the Party Caucus ... Debate is becoming a ritual dance, sometimes interspersed with catcalls.

He concluded not with a specific agenda, but with a call to reform that continues to inspire many Tories:

I have reached the conclusion that our constitution is wearing out. Its central defects are gradually coming to outweigh its merits and its central defect consists in the absolute powers we confer on our Sovereign Body, and the concentration of those powers in an executive Government formed out of one Party which does not always fairly represent the popular will.

Lord Hailsham's criticism of executive power has proved influential within the Tory party. Amongst centrists in the Labour party, Roy Jenkins has been an important intellectual influence. In a lecture to the Royal Institution in 1977, Jenkins expressed concern about the impact of the two-party system. He pointed to the dominance of the struggle for office over the management of issues, the lack of bureaucratic accountability, and the way unions and employers are integrated in policy making,

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<sup>6</sup> The Listener, 21 October 1976.

as root deficiencies in present policy-making arrangements:

I do not believe that we can make our way in the rough world of the late twentieth century unless we can make our society more adaptable, and I do not believe that we can make our society more adaptable unless we can change the political habits which at present hinder adaptation ... the capacity to scrutinise and control the civil service and to influence policy at the formative stage, is inadequate ... Parliamentary sovereignty really means Party sovereignty: and a Party that wins a bare majority of seats in the House of Commons enjoys the full fruits of sovereignty, even if it has won the votes of well under half the electorate ...

The great bureaucracies of Whitehall are unadventurous, inflexible and ill-adapted to the task of managing a society with little but its wits to live on... The net result is that British Governments find it all too easy to carry through harmful changes, and extraordinarily difficult to carry through beneficial ones ...

This is buttressed by far from satisfactory relationships between Government and the great producer groups, organised labour on one hand and the organised employers on the other ... By definition the great producer groups are highly conservative. They derive their power from their weight in the economy as it is, and they therefore have a natural tendency to want the economy to stay as it is ... They do not want the disturbance without which growth is impossible ...<sup>7</sup>

In the Parliament itself, the catalyst for reform has been a series of procedures enquiries. The Crossman reforms of select committees in 1967, which led to the establishment of issue-focussed committees, followed the recommendations of a report published in 1965.<sup>8</sup> In 1968-69 a report on the parliamentary control of public expenditure recommended the creation of an expenditure committee in place of the longer established estimates committees.<sup>9</sup> The Heath Government implemented this proposal after its election in 1971.

In the wake of the economic vicissitudes which beset Britain in the 1970s, the Callaghan administration agreed to establish a further review of select committee

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<sup>7</sup>. *British Government and Politics: Some Reflections*, The Royal Institution, London, 24 November 1977.

<sup>8</sup>. See, for example, Fourth Report of the Select Committee on Procedure, H.C. 303 of 1964-5.

<sup>9</sup>. Scrutiny of Public Expenditure and Administration, H.C. 410 of 1968-9. For a review of the work of this committee see Hugh Hecla and Aaron Wildowsky, *The Private Government of Public Money*, 2nd Edition, Macmillan, London, 1981.

arrangements. The Study of Parliament Groups' submission to that enquiry reflects the contrary currents abroad amongst its members at the time:

There are now two main schools of thought. The one that has been dominant this century perhaps even since 1868, accepts that the power of government, derived from the authority it gains from the sanction of a popular franchise and exercised through the party majority in the House, has effectively deprived the House of any direct power of decision making it may ever have had. The government (ministers plus civil service) governs, and the government controls the house not visa versa in any meaningful sense...

There is now emerging a second school of thought which ... argues that without some measure of power the House of Commons can have no authority. Whatever influence the House has possessed has been so sapped and eroded by government that it is now meaningless to talk of parliamentary government in Britain. There are ... still doubts among some members of the Study of Parliament Group as to whether the largely adversary party situation in the present House of Commons is not basically hostile to an expansion of Select Committee work and whether a different political structure is not needed to allow Select Committees to realise the potential they undoubtedly have.<sup>10</sup>

This procedures enquiry reported in 1978-79.<sup>11</sup> It recommended the creation of select committees to shadow each major department. It recommended these committees be empowered to review policy and expenditure. It also suggested a further more comprehensive review of financial procedures. This report represented the first parliamentary acknowledgment that effective reform might ultimately need to be linked to diminution of executive prerogatives. It concluded:

The essence of the problem is that the balance of advantage between parliament and government in the day to day working of the constitution is now weighted in favour of the government to a degree which arouses widespread anxiety and is inimical to the proper working of our parliamentary democracy.

The Tory Manifesto committed Mrs Thatcher to an early Commons debate of these proposals. It proclaimed that party's concern for the erosion of the role of parliament and seemed to foreshadow radical remedial action:

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<sup>10</sup>. First Report from the Select Committee on Procedure, H.C. 588 of 1977-8, III.

<sup>11</sup>. First Report from the Select Committee on Procedure, H.C. 588 of 1977-8, I.

The traditional role of the legislature has suffered badly from the growth of government over the last quarter of a century ... We will see that Parliament and no other body stands at the centre of the nation's life and decisions...We will seek to make it effective in its job of controlling the executive...<sup>12</sup>

The leader of the house, Mr Norman St.John Stevas, introduced the ensuing Commons debate in the following terms:

Today is ...a crucial day in the House of Commons. After years of discussion and debate we are embarking upon a series of changes that constitute the most important parliamentary reform of the century...The proposals that the Government are placing before the House are intended to address the balance of power between Parliament and the Executive, to enable the House of Commons to do more effectively the job it has been elected to do.<sup>13</sup>

This debate was followed by implementation of many of the 1979 procedure committee proposals. It is to an assessment of their impact that I now turn.

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<sup>12</sup>. The Conservative Manifesto (Conservative Central Office, April 1979). For Norman St John Stevas account of this development see N. St John Stevas, *Government by Discussion*, in J.R. Nethercote (ed), *Parliament and Bureaucracy*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982.

<sup>13</sup>. H.C. Debates, 25 June 1979, col. 35.

## Committee Structure, Scope and Working Methods

The most significant feature of the committee system established in 1979 was its structure. In place of the old subject matter and expenditure committees, Parliament acquired a committee system that 'shadowed' each major department of state. Further, in covering the activity of these departments, committees were not constrained in any way. Thus, Parliament acquired the potential to shadow policy-making within government in all its phases. In addition, committees were established for the life of Parliament. This continuity allowed organisational solidarity to develop, collective committee learning about departments and policy areas to accumulate, and coherent enquiry patterns to be crafted. As we shall see, the committees generally exploited all these opportunities. In addition, a chairmans' group was established. This group has published periodic reports which provide an overview of committee enquiries. It also allocates use of estimate days for debate of reports and approves travel.

The scope of committee enquiries has been extensive. My own assessment analyses committee enquiries up until the 1983-84 parliamentary session. I review committee efforts not in the context of the performance of individual committees, Treasury, Defence, Health and Social Security, etc., but rather in the context of the phases of policy-making that are affected. As a first step, the three major cycles of policy-making were distinguished: budget strategy and estimates reviews; current government policies and proposals; and strategic assessments of existing or proposed programs. I then sought to establish how effectively the various phases of policy-making within each cycle had been covered and to assess the approach and working methods of committees.

Ninety-four committee reports were reviewed. From the inception of the committees in 1979 until the end of the second Thatcher term in 1987, the committees completed 315 substantive reports. Thus my survey covers just under a third of total enquiries. Another study of the new select committees, edited by Gavin Drewry and sponsored by the Study of Parliament group, reviews the work of individual committees over these eight years.<sup>14</sup> In what follows, I shall draw on my own research. The factual findings of the contributors to the Drewry study generally agree with my own.

The broad coverage of the policy process is set out in Table 1. This table shows committees have achieved balanced coverage of each of the three major dimensions of policy-making. The pattern of enquiries between committees is also noteworthy. Table 3 shows that the Education Committee with twelve enquiries contributed a

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<sup>14</sup> Gavin Drewry (ed), *The New Select Committees*, 2nd edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989.

disproportionate number to the total. Other active committees were Employment (six enquiries), Home Affairs (five enquiries), and Foreign Affairs (five enquiries). The Education and Employment Committees were chaired by Labour members, and Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs Committees by Tories. Within each of these dimensions, the coverage of the various phases of policy-making then needs to be assessed. Tables 2, 3 and 5 review this data. Table 2 concerns economic strategy and the budget cycle. Table 3 reviews enquiries reacting to current government initiatives and Table 5 documents strategic enquiries.

So far as economic policy-making and the budget cycle is concerned (Table 2), the phases of policy-making covered by enquiries included medium term strategy, the annual cycle of budget announcements, review of departmental estimates, review of nationalised industry plans and quango budgets. The Treasury Committee has sole responsibility for review of the medium term strategy and the budget itself. This committee conducted at least one major enquiry each year into some aspect of the government strategy. This involved subjects like monetary control, financing nationalised industries, international financial arrangements, income security, the tax system and the 'poverty trap'.

Table 1  
Summary of Selected Select Committee Enquiries  
1979 - 1983

Committee	Economic Policy & Budget Cycle	Current Issues	Strategic Program Review	Assessments Emerging Issues	Total	%
Agriculture			1	1	2	2
Defence	1	1	3		5	5
Education	1	12	1	2	16	17
Employment	1	6	1	1	9	9
Environment				3	3	3
Energy	1	4	1	4	10	11
Foreign Affairs	1	5	1		7	7
Home Affairs		5	2		7	7
Industry & Trade	5	3	2		10	11
Scottish Affairs	1			3	4	4
Social Services	1	2		2	5	5
Transport	1	1	2	1	5	5
Treasury	8		1	(2)*	9	9
Welsh Affairs		2			2	2
			15	17		

**Table 2**  
**Coverage of Budget Cycle**

Committee	Medium Term Strategy	Budget Announcements	Department Estimates	Nationalised Industries	Advisory Commissions
Agriculture			1		
Defence			1		
Education					1
Employment					
Environment					
Energy			1		
Foreign Affairs			1		
Home Affairs					
Industry & Trade				5	
Scottish Affairs			1		
Social Services			1		
Transport			1		
Treasury	4	4			
Welsh Affairs					
	4	4	7	5	1

In addition, the Treasury Committee developed a standardised procedure based on short enquiries to review the Government's budgetary announcements in the course of a financial year. Thus it held enquiries coinciding with the Treasurer's autumn statement, the Budget, and publication of supplementary estimate details. Departmental estimates were assessed by departmental committees in short enquiries usually of two or three days' duration. In the 1981-82 session three committees tabled reports questioning particular estimates (Energy, Treasury and Foreign Affairs). The Social Services Committee sought to refer one expenditure item to the Public Accounts Committee. The Manpower Services Commission had its budget routinely reviewed by the Employment Committee.

Table 3 reviews enquiries responding directly or indirectly to Government initiatives. All except two committees undertook such enquiries. This area of activity tests partisanship more than any other. Proposals usually have been endorsed by ministers and Cabinet before being introduced. Table 3 classifies these enquiries in accordance with the policy-making activity that is involved. Of the 28 enquiries that ended with substantive recommendations, five involved review of proposed legislation or

regulations (that is, committees at work in the pre-legislative mode). Seven enquiries involved review of specific Government policy proposals before being implemented and four reviewed decisions after their announcement. The committees themselves initiated review of three programs and instituted nine enquiries that ended in specific proposals on current policy matters. This pattern of enquiries represents full coverage of the range of activities conducted by the executive. It also shows committees responding on their own initiative to current issues.

The first category of 'current' enquiries involves legislative review. Of the five pre-legislation enquiries, three took place in the 1981-82 session and two in earlier sessions. The three examples from the 1981-82 session all involved the Employment Committee. Two of its hearings concerned proposals for additional regulations. These originated beyond the executive in the Manpower Services Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality. Examples from earlier years involved the Home Affairs and the Foreign Affairs Committees. Their enquiries concerned the proposed 'sus' (suspected person) laws and patriation of the Canadian Constitution.

Table 3  
'Current' Enquiries

Committee	Legislation/ Regulations	Gov. Policy Proposal	Implications Government Decisions	Committee Initiated Review of Programs	Committee Initiated Proposals	Inform- ation	
Employment	3	2				1	6
Home Affairs	1	1			2	1	5
Foreign Affairs	1			1		3	5
Energy		1		1	1	1	4
Transport		1					1
Welsh Affairs		1				1	2
Social Services		1	1				2
Education			3		6	3	12
Industry & Trade				1		2	3
Defence Com.						1	1
Liaison Com.						1	1
	5	7	4	3	9	14	42



The second category of 'current' enquiries involved Government policy proposals. These covered a wide range of Government activity, for example: a charge on a group who previously received free health service (Home Affairs); transfer of vehicle testing to private sector control (Transport); sale of the British Gas Corporation stake in the Wytch Farm field (Energy); a new youth training program (Employment); a proposal to shift the burden of sickness benefits from Government to employers in the initial stages of illness (Social Services). The economic significance of these issues varied considerably. For example: the Wytch Farm Field was valued at up to £450 million; the Youth Training Program was estimated to cost £1 billion in a full year; the vehicle testing stations involved annual revenues of around £10 million; the National Health Service charge to overseas visitors was estimated to realise £6 million.

A further group of 'current' committee reviews involved enquiries after the announcement of particular decisions. In one case, school meals, this involved review by the Education Committee of the impact of a decision implemented in 1980. The subjects covered included the impact of expenditure cuts on higher education and medical services (Education). The Social Services Committee calculated the effects of education spending cuts on the availability of medical services.

Four 'current' enquiries involved the review of specific programs. With the exception of the Public Accounts Committee enquiry, all followed up the findings of earlier, longer committee investigations. They thus show committees returning briefly to a subject as a result of new developments or to check that promised action has been carried out. Three of these occurred in the 1981-82 session and one early in the 1982-83 session (Pit Closures, Energy). The select committees can reconsider the objectives of programs and review them before completion, as in the case of the Foreign Affairs Committee enquiry on airport development at Turks and Caicos Island, and the Industry and Trade Committee enquiry on Concorde.

A fifth group of 'current' enquiries, the largest single category, involved committees taking the initiative in proposing policies to the executive. These enquiries suggest novel possibilities for committee activity. Ten reports are reviewed. The Energy Committee report on the Isle of Grain Power Station expressed concern about the extent to which spending on power station construction had passed beyond Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) control. One report proposed reduced taxes (VAT and the Arts, Education). Two involved proposals for increases in expenditure (Theatre Museum and a grant to the National Film Archive to preserve film stocks, Education). In total, these proposals would have increased current expenditure by £2.1 million. Two other enquiries involved the committees proposing new or modified procedures to Government on police complaints procedure and

miscarriages of justice (Home Affairs). The Social Services Committee drew on evidence gathered in an earlier major committee review to argue against an anticipated policy change (redistribution of maternity benefits). Finally, two enquiries illustrate committee intervention in developments that were judged to be of public concern (*Times* takeover by Mr Rupert Murdoch and a threatened disruption of Promenade Concerts because of industrial action , Education Committee).

The final group of 15 'current' enquiries did not end with specific recommendations. The published reports seek to place information before the House. Two survey current issues (Education and Foreign Affairs). Six involve committees bringing information about government into the parliamentary and public arena. Four involve enquiries that were commenced but not completed , one was overtaken by events, one was absorbed in other enquiries, and two were not finally resolved. Three enquiries involved committees giving information about their own activities to Parliament (Industry and Trade, Defence, Liaison). This represents one of the few devices available to committees to follow up earlier hearings.

Table 4 analyses these 'current' enquiries in the context of the broad objectives that the Thatcher Government was pursuing. This table suggests the extent to which committees have responded to proposals arising from Government initiatives. Seventeen of the 28 enquiries (approximately 60 per cent), that terminated with specific recommendations, originated in the themes used in Table Four. Two enquiries concerned privatisation, eleven arose from expenditure control measures, one considered means to reduce union power and two to reduce regulation.

Table 4

Select Committee	Privatisation	Expenditure Control	Reduction of Union Power	Reduced Regulation	Total Government Initiated	Other
Employment			1	3	4	
Transport	1				1	
Home Affairs		1			1	2 (Leg.Proc)
Foreign Affairs		1			1	1 Can. Const
Energy	1	2			3	
Welsh Affairs						
Social Services		2			2	
Education		3			3	
Industry & Trade		1			1	
Public Accounts		1			1	
	2	11	1	3	17	11

Total enquiries 28 (including 1 PAC Enquiry)  
(Excluding information only enquiries)

Table 5 covers strategic assessments. Only one committee (Welsh Affairs) failed to conduct an enquiry of this kind in the 1981-82 session. The committees conducted on average at least one enquiry in this category each parliamentary year. The Energy Committee (Tory led) is listed as initiating, completing or debating six enquiries.

Table 5  
Strategic Assessments

	Review of Master Programs			Strategic Evaluations		
	Major Proposed Programs	Adequacy Programs Policy	Adequacy Administration Management	System Wide Reviews	Role of Central Government	Emerging Issues
Transport (3)	2			1		
Energy (5)	1				2	2
Defence (3)	1	1	1			
Education (3)		1		1	1	
Social Services (2)				1		1
Scottish Affairs (3)				1	1	1
Employment (2)			1		1	
Environment (3)					1	2
Agriculture (2)		1			1	
Industry & Trade (2)		2				
Home Affairs (2)		1	1			
Foreign Affairs (1)		1				
Treasury (1)			1			
	4	7	4	4	7	6
(32)			(15)			(17)

Strategic assessments are broadly of two kinds: first, review of major programs; and second, strategic evaluation. When the polity was relatively homogeneous and when parties were the primary vehicle for citizen representation, mechanisms to identify widely shared values were not required. This task was carried out within political parties supplemented, if necessary, by private negotiations between ministers and interest groups. The various protagonists accepted the fairness of elections as the procedure for determining which party elite would occupy the Government benches. Electoral victory clothed that party elite with sufficient authority to make its will prevail. Now, however, groups other than political parties, interest groups and issue movements, champion new issues for the political agenda. Interest group co-operation is frequently required in the implementation of new policy frameworks. Might committees play a key role in forging links between interest groups, issue movements and other actors in the policy-making process? For the purpose of

analysis, select committee reviews of major programs can be classified into three groups: first, review of proposed programs; second, review of on-going programs or policies; third, evaluation of particular public sector agencies.

The committees' review of four proposed programs all involved projects with large expenditures over a protracted period. Two of these enquiries were begun in earlier sessions. The Transport Committee conducted its major review of the proposed Channel link in the 1980-81 session. This project was estimated to cost between £1.3 billion and £4.5 billion in 1981 prices. The Transport Committee's 1980-81 report concluded the most promising proposal appeared to be a single track rail link. The Committee report in 1981-82 placed the most recent analysis on the public record. This comprehensive study, by Sir Alex Cairncross, questioned the viability of a fixed link.

The Defence Committee's full review of strategic nuclear weapons policy also occurred in 1980-81. The Trident project was estimated to involve expenditure of £7,500 billion over ten years in 1981 prices and exchange rates. This was a major enquiry with extensive outreach, independent expert evidence, and witnesses from the defence planning and the intelligence communities. R.L. Borthwick, in his appraisal of the Committee's work, comments:

The topic is one that the Government would probably have preferred the Committee not to have dealt with ... Attempts were made at the outset to limit the Committee's terms of reference by excluding consideration of alternative forms of replacement and the costs involved ... A further attempt to limit the enquiry was made towards the end of the Committee's investigation, when Parliament had approved the choice of Trident to replace Polaris, by trying to have the Committee's final report confined to implementation of that decision.<sup>15</sup>

The third enquiry also involved the Transport Committee. The Committee conducted an extensive enquiry into mainline railway electrification. This built on an electrification review conducted by the Nationalised Industries Committee in 1976-77. The fourth enquiry, on the Nuclear Power Program, began in the 1979-80 session and ended in the 1980-81 session. The Committee's report was debated in the 1981-82 session. The Secretary of State had foreshadowed a ten year program of power station construction at a cost of £15 billion.

Seven enquiries reviewed the adequacy of existing programs and policies. All these

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<sup>15</sup>. R. L. Borthwick, *The Defence Committee: Can it Hope to Affect Policy?*, in Dilys M. Hill (ed), *Parliamentary Select Committees in Action: A Symposium*, Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics, 24, p. 145.

enquiries involved broad ranging evaluations of the adequacy of on-going programs. These reviews provide the opportunity for a bipartisan committee to reappraise the grounding principles on which programs or policies are based. The ability to challenge the political foundations of programs if they so choose distinguishes these enquiries from those conducted by the Public Accounts Committee. In fact, two of these seven enquiries were critical of the basic framework within which current programs were conceived, immigration from the Indian subcontinent (Home Affairs) and protection of the research base in bio-technology (Education). The other five enquiries criticised the details of present arrangements but not the basic foundations of policy.

The last group of four enquiries assessed the adequacy of established administrative arrangements or approaches. This is a form of scrutiny which has only recently been attempted by departments themselves. Ministers who ultimately carry responsibility for such matters are often too preoccupied by current issues or policy development or Cabinet or other commitments to undertake this kind of work. The enquiry on the Commission for Racial Equality involved the appraisal of an organisation with high political visibility. The Home Affairs Committee was very critical of current management and policies. Similarly, the Defence Committee reviewed procurement organisation: an activity which cost around £5 billion in a total defence vote in 1981-82 of £12 billion. The Government used its response to the Treasury and Civil Service Committee report on the Civil service, to announce what it described as the Financial Management Initiative.

The second major dimension of strategic assessments involved strategic evaluations. Enquiries that concerned policy strategy in one or another of its aspects can also be classified into three phases. The first phase involved system-wide reviews. These arise where responsibility for an outcome is shared between independent interests and levels of government. The second phase covers enquiries concerning the role of central government, where this is in dispute. A third phase involves enquiries which assess emerging issues in their 'purest' form. These arise when protagonists urge the inclusion of a new issue on the political agenda.

The enquiries that involved system-wide reviews engaged a variety of public and private sector organisations. These could be different agencies in central government or different levels of government (for example, Transport in London) or central government, local government and independent private interests (for example, Medical Education, Secondary Schools Curriculum). Under present arrangements, central government would formulate its own views about how the matter should be handled. It would do so through information assembled by departments and perhaps after private consultation with interest groups. Counsel between departments is private. Official enquiries might have to be held to gather facts and judgements. But

the key political decisions are typically taken in private by ministers on the advice of senior departmental officers, endorsed by Cabinet and then announced. The select committee enquiries reviewed here supplement these internal private enquiries and make public departmental considerations and judgements.

All these enquiries had, in fact, been preceded by lengthy departmental and official investigation. What was not agreed was how responsibility for action was to be shared amongst participants. The issues spanned the life of both Tory and Labour Governments. They had proved intractable to both. For example, the medical education enquiry (Social Services) was preceded by two major Government sponsored reviews. The most recent large scale review had been conducted by the Merrison Royal Commission in 1979. The Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) had reviewed medical man-power issues in a report in 1980. The secondary school's curriculum review (Education) was initiated by former Prime Minister Callaghan with a speech on educational standards in 1976. Thereafter several working parties were established. This culminated in March 1981 in a Department of Education and Science publication, 'The School Curriculum', which stimulated the present enquiry.

The second phase in strategic reviews involves enquiries that explore the role of central government. Of the seven enquiries in this category, four considered whether a government role should be created, home working (Employment), private rented housing sector (Environment), animal welfare in poultry, pig and veal calf production (Agriculture), and energy conservation in building (Energy); and three whether its existing role should be varied, public and private funding of the arts (Education), youth unemployment and training (Employment) and North Sea oil depletion policy (Energy).

The third phase in strategic policy involved enquiries that reviewed issues being proposed for the political agenda. Six enquiries of this kind were conducted in the 1981-82 session. In all cases, these issues involved matters of great potential significance for policy makers. For example, the age of retirement (Social Services) or the method of funding local government (Environment) affected all levels of government and a wide range of interests. An enquiry such as Prestwick Airport (Scottish Affairs) affected a number of authorities and interests in a particular region. The combined heat and power enquiry (Energy) explored the political, economic and managerial issues associated with this method of energy conservation. The Treasury Committee enquiry on the relation between the poverty trap, tax levels and income support arrangements explored the feasibility of integrating the tax and welfare systems and of abolishing the existing married man's allowance. Three of these enquiries were not completed in the 1981-82 session. Two of these involved the Energy Committee and one the Environment Committee. These three enquiries were completed before the election in June 1983, although in two cases the published reports were still partially in draft.

The foregoing evidence suggests committee coverage of the policy process has been adequate and balanced. In addition, twelve of the fourteen committees conducted enquiries in two of the three major dimensions of policy making, and nine committees conducted enquiries in all three dimensions. I want now to consider the adequacy of the approach of the committees, the quality of their findings and their impact.

## Approach and Findings

It is not feasible in the scope of this paper to provide comprehensive evidence of the approach of the select committees and of the outcomes. What I shall attempt in the following paragraphs is to summarise some of the main features, noting where appropriate the characteristics which are associated with a particular committee or a particular band of enquiries.

The Treasury Committee provides a model of how committees approached major strategic enquiries. Take, for example, its approach to its first major enquiry, Monetary Control. Several leading economists were recruited as part-time advisers. These included individuals with access to economic models other than that of the Treasury and academic economists with outstanding reputations in their particular area of expertise. These advisers were selected by the Committee on the advice of the Chairman and Clerk. In identifying potential candidates, Treasury and past Expenditure Committee advisers were consulted. Once selected, the advisers were invited to suggest issues that the Committee might investigate and the approach it might take. Their work was co-ordinated by the Clerk.

At the outset, the Committee decided to gather expert evidence through a questionnaire to leading economists and central bankers. A detailed questionnaire was formulated jointly by the Clerk and advisers, endorsed by the Committee and widely circulated. Detailed replies were received over the ensuing ten months from fourteen economists of international repute, such as Milton Friedman, James Tobin, Sir Alex Cairncross, and Patrick Minford. These replies were published separately while the enquiry was still in progress. Replies were also received from nine central banks; for example, the United States Federal Reserve, the Bank of France, Deutsche Bundesbank. The Committee's outreach to other interest groups was less extensive. It sought evidence from the peak employer and employee groups, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Confederation of British Industry (CBI). It did not, however, seek to engage major groups involved with other areas of policy (for example, peak welfare or education groups) to weigh the implications of the proposed monetary



strategy from their perspective. The Committee conceived its task primarily in technical terms, an assessment of the theoretical and empirical evidence bearing upon the Government's announced approach.

Oral evidence was taken from a number of individual experts, senior Treasury officers, the Bank of England and the Chancellor. All this evidence was published as taken. It amounts to 380 pages. Oral evidence was taken over twelve sessions between 30th June and 1st December, 1981. Altogether, the Committee heard thirty-one witnesses. The enquiry occupied the Committee over eleven months.

The Treasury Committee's approach to review of the annual budget cycle is also now well established. It has recruited a panel of specialist advisers to help it with this task. As with the major enquiries, the specialist advisers take responsibility for assessing particular aspects of the Government's public pronouncements. They suggest questions to the Committee and seek additional information on its behalf. The advisers meet with the Clerk and the Chairman immediately after publication of the Government's statements, and with the full Committee prior to public sessions. They usually attend these sessions to suggest follow up questions to Committee members.

In its 1981-82 analysis, the Treasury Committee undertook an independent assessment of the cash figures for public expenditure to highlight the extent to which public investment was carrying the burden of budgetary contraction. A capacity to probe the implementations of Government proposals is essential if a plural policy making structure is to develop. In this situation, the Treasury Committee might counsel individual departmental select committees about aspects of their own estimates that they may wish to re-assess on larger macro-economic grounds. A formal structure (the Liaison Committee) already exists to facilitate communication between chairmen. This structure is matched at the staff level by informal contact co-ordinated by the Clerk of Committees.

The expert evidence published with the report includes papers from the Committee's specialist advisers who were drawn from the Department of Applied Economics at Cambridge, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the stockbrokers, Phillips and Drew. Their memoranda offered detailed explanations or critiques of particular aspects of the Government's policy and Treasury's supplementary argument. For example, in the 1981-82 session, Terry Ward's memorandum drew attention to the difficulties of comprehending the overall effect of budgetary policy when tax and expenditure decisions were made and presented separately. He also analysed the reasons for change in the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement and suggested a different set of causal factors to those implied by Government. Mr Paul Ormerod explained why the cash planning totals for 1983-84 and beyond 'should be treated with scepticism'. Dr Paul Neild examined the problems for policy caused by the number of variables the Government now recognised to be significant in interpreting economic

developments. He argued:

Since there now appear to be several targeted variables, it is going to be extremely difficult to decide when policy should be changed. If one variable is outside the range and the other within it, will this be a sufficient condition for a change of policy? If one variable is above the range and another below it, will this constitute sufficient conditions for a change of policy?

He also redressed the Chancellor's omission of a forecast of the effects of budget measures on GDP and employment. There are also detailed papers from the major economic interest groups, the TUC and the CBI.

The seven departmental committees approached their estimates reviews in different ways. For example, the Defence Committee took extensive evidence from the Secretary of State about the Government's re-equipment plans soon after the Falklands conflict. The Secretary of State's evidence provided the most detailed public account of the Government's intentions. He provided tentative indications of the budgetary implications of this program. The Committee formed no judgement about this evidence. However, it subsequently undertook a series of enquiries into the lessons of the Falklands exercise, including publicity and equipment procurement and performance. The Education Committee used its Estimates hearing to gain an overview of policy developments. Committee questions related to other enquiries it was pursuing concurrently on specific issues (for example, school meals). They also covered issues on which it was contemplating enquiries or which were of current public concern (for example, closure of village schools). Similarly, the full Foreign Affairs Committee took extensive evidence from the Secretary of State but reached no conclusions. Estimates enquiries typically involved two or three evidence sessions. Reports were tabled within approximately two to three weeks of the hearings.

In their approach to current and strategic enquiries, other committees followed a broadly similar approach. Special advisers were appointed by all committees, some for the entire session, others for particular enquiries. The former practice was followed by the Social Services and Education Committees. The latter approach was adopted, for example, by the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees. These individuals were usually academics or people associated with 'think tanks' recruited on a part-time basis to assist full-time committee staff.

Most enquiries involved extensive interest group evidence, although the degree of outreach to interest groups varied both between strategic and current enquiries and between committees. In the case of 'current' enquiries, outreach was typically to those groups immediately affected by the proposed policy. For example, the Employment Committee, in its assessment of the proposed Discrimination Code, took evidence

from six interest groups. Evidence from the Association of Independent Business concerned the difficulties in compliance for small business. Evidence from the West Indian Standing Conference and the Conference of Afro-Caribbean and Asian Counsellors revealed disagreement between members of the ethnic communities about the merit of the proposed code. The enquiry served to bring to public attention the reservations of the official Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service, which had pressed its concerns without effect through private official channels. The select committee hearing placed these reservations on the public record. The review of the Disabled Code was also based on interest group evidence. The Employment Committee took oral evidence from five groups and written evidence from seven. Groups giving evidence included the proposing agency, the Manpower Services Commission, and representatives of the disabled, employers and unions. In reviewing the Government's proposed Youth Training Initiative, the Employment Committee took evidence from the Secretary of State, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress, the Institute of Careers Officers, two private companies and officers from two MSC program areas. This enquiry was stimulated by the Government's response to an MSC proposed 'Young Workers' Scheme'. The enquiry on proposed National Health Service (NHS) charges took evidence from fifteen interest groups including ethnic and student groups who opposed the charge, the Commission for Racial Equality and seven Regional Health Authorities. This latter evidence covered the feasibility of proposed procedures to check patient eligibility and to levy charges.

The most extensive outreach to interest groups was associated with strategic enquiries. This is illustrated in the outreach of the seven enquiries concerned with the role of central government (Table 6).

The Home Working and North Sea Oil enquiries, both engaged the least number of interest groups, twenty and eighteen respectively. The private rented sector and the arts funding enquiries attracted most, with 156 and 110 respectively. The arts enquiry heard oral evidence from forty-five groups. The animal welfare enquiry took oral evidence from twenty-three groups. In total, these enquiries attracted oral evidence from 144 groups and written evidence from 309 groups. The range of groups is illustrated in Table 7 which lists some of the groups giving evidence to the Agriculture Committee's Animal Welfare enquiry.

The duration of enquiries varied considerably. Broadly speaking, current and estimates reviews varied from a few days to three months and strategic assessments typically lasted from three to twelve months. The Employment Committee's investigation of Government proposals for a new youth training scheme involved some three months from commencement of evidence sessions to tabling of the report. The enquiry on NHS charges also involved some three months from initiation to report. Nine 'current' enquiries were completed in around one week or less. For

example, the enquiry concerned with vehicle testing (Transport Committee) took evidence one day and reported to the House two days later. The Committee had already conducted an extensive enquiry on this issue during the 1980-81 session. Similarly, the Social Services Committee report on maternity benefits was produced in reaction to a Government Green Paper and without evidence sessions. The Committee relied on an analysis of public submissions prepared by its special adviser. The report was published before the Government's draft regulations appeared.

By contrast, all the strategic assessments were lengthy. The Transport in London enquiry was of some eighteen months' duration (Transport). The Medical Education enquiry lasted eight months (Social Services). The Rural Road Transport enquiry lasted five months (Scottish Affairs). The Secondary Schools enquiry lasted seventeen months (Education). The Homeworking Enquiry lasted some three months (Employment). The Arts Enquiry lasted twenty-one months (Education). The Nuclear Power Enquiry lasted twelve months (Energy) and the Youth Unemployment Enquiry lasted five months (Scottish Affairs).

The origin of the enquiries varied. Some developed from earlier hearings. For example, the Energy Committee decided to investigate pit closures as a result of its earlier enquiry on departmental estimates; the Foreign Affairs Committee enquiry on Turks and Caicos Islands originated in the same source; the Industry and Trade Committee had conducted an enquiry into continuing Concorde costs in the 1980-81 session. In this 1981-82 enquiry, the Committee checked developments since its initial report. The enquiry on civil service effectiveness followed an earlier major enquiry of similar scope conducted by the Expenditure Committee in 1976-77.

**Table 6**  
**Interest Group Engagement - Role of Central Government**

Enquiry	Committee	Central Government		Functional Group				Political Groups				Other	Total
		Ministers	Department	Other Levels Of Gov.	Advisory Bodies	Economic Product Groups	Services Groups	Rights Advocacy	Environment Advocacy	Service Advocacy	Think Tank Experts		
Homeworking	Employment		1 2*	2 1*	2	7 3*		1*			1		
North Sea Oil Depletion Policy	Energy	1	2 1*			6 3*					5		14 4*
Private Rented Housing Sector	Environment		1 2*	3 45*		3 24*	8*	2 25*		12*	1 24*	5*	10 146*
Animal Welfare in Poultry, Pig and Veal Calf Productions	Agriculture		1		5	7		6			4		23 61*
Youth Unemployment and Training	Scottish Affairs	1	2	3 9*	6	6 3*	4 3*	4*			1	1*	22 19*
Public & Private Funding of the Arts	Education		3 8*	6 11*	3	14* 15*	12* 28*			5	1 3*		45 65*
Energy Conservation in Buildings	Energy		2 5*	2 4*	3	7 11*		3		2*	7*		17 27*
* Written Evidence		2	30	86	19	109	55	41	2	17	47	6	453

Table 7

INTEREST GROUPS ENGAGED BY ANIMAL WELFARE ENQUIRY

Enquiry	Committee	Departments	Advisory Groups	Economic Groups	Rights Groups	Experts	Other
Animal Welfare Enquiry	Agriculture	Agriculture Departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Farm Animal Welfare Council</li> <li>- National Consumer Council</li> <li>- Agriculture Research Councils</li> <li>- Agriculture Training Board</li> <li>- Meat &amp; Livestock Commission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- National Farmers Union</li> <li>- N.U.F. of Scotland</li> <li>- Ulster Farmers Union</li> <li>- National Association of Veal Producers</li> <li>- British Poultry Federation</li> <li>- National Pig Breeders Assoc.</li> <li>- Volac Ltd.</li> <li>- Farming Union of Wales*</li> <li>- British Society of Aviary Production*</li> <li>- National Federation of Meat Traders*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Uni. Fed. for Animal Welfare</li> <li>- R.S.P.C.A</li> <li>- Central Council for Scotland S.P.C.A</li> <li>- Farm Animal Welfare Co-ordinating Executive</li> <li>- Nat. Fed. of Consumer Groups</li> <li>- National Federation of Womens Inst.</li> <li>- Compassion in World Farming*</li> <li>- Farm Animal Welfare Co-ord. Executive*</li> <li>- Animal Health Trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Royal Group of Vet. Surgeons</li> <li>- British Vet. Associations</li> <li>- Prof. P. Wilson</li> <li>- Prof. D. Coleman</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Farm and Food Society</li> <li>- National Council of Women</li> <li>- The Vegetarian Society</li> </ul>
			* Written Evidence	Not a Complete List			

Some enquiries responded to external developments. For example, the enquiry on Association of South East Asian Nations trade arose from the Malaysian Government's curtailment of British imports. Some enquiries responded to developments within government. For example, the Defence Committee enquiry on organisation and procurement followed revision of the ministerial structure in June 1981. The Ministry of Defence had been criticised for procurement management in the Public Accounts Committee report on the Chevaline project. In addition, the Defence Department had failed to adhere to its cash limits for the past three years. These enquiries took place on the initiative of individual committee members, the Chairman or committee staff. All committees stage at least one meeting each session to formally review the enquiry program.

The responsiveness of the select committees to direct or indirect representations from interest groups was evident. Select committees provide a public forum in which interest groups' claims can be appraised. Some enquiries arose as members or the Chairman noted concerns by particular interests voiced in the national or specialist press. This was the origin of the bio-technology enquiry by the Education Committee. The scientific community had voiced disappointment at the blandness of the Government's reaction to the Merrison Report. Some committees became aware of the particular interest group concerns in the course of other enquiries. This was the origin of the Education Committee's review of the Government proposal to stop funding the Theatre Museum. Those sponsoring the Theatre Museum claimed the Government was improperly repudiating its commitment. They also claimed the Rayner scrutiny, which the Government used to justify its decision, was inadequately prepared. Similarly, the National Film Theatre had pressed its case for a special grant to save its film stocks without success through regular channels. Some interest groups approached committees directly. For example, in reviewing miscarriages of justice, the Home Affairs Committee responded to the initiative of public interest advocacy groups, Justice and the Criminal Bar Association.

Another feature of enquiries was travel beyond Westminster to gather evidence. All committees travelled abroad or within the United Kingdom on at least one enquiry to gather evidence. The Education Committee, in its enquiry on education spending cuts, travelled to the University of Aston, Birmingham, and to Loughborough. It took evidence from administrators and staff. These enquiries became the vehicle for exploring relations between the University Grants Commission, the universities and government, and between the university sector and the National Advisory Board for Local Authority Higher Education. The Education Committee also travelled to Lincolnshire to see the effects of the 1980 Act on provision of meals by the Local Education Authority. The Social Service Committee travelled widely throughout

Britain in its Medical Education enquiry. It visited teaching hospitals and universities to take evidence on site.

International travel was principally associated with strategic assessments. The Education Committee visited Italy, Germany, Denmark and the United States of America in the course of its enquiry on Arts funding. The Transport Committee travelled to the United States, Canada, Germany, France and Denmark to study the co-ordination of transport planning in other large urban centres. The Scottish Affairs Committee visited West Germany to gather information on apprenticeships and training. The Energy Committee visited the United States in the course of its enquiry on energy conservation and held discussions with the Department of Energy in Washington, the American Institute of Architects, the Pacific Gas and Electric Company and the California Public Utility Company. The Energy Committee also visited Oslo in its enquiry on the North Sea Oil depletion policy to review the tax regime applied by 'a country at roughly the same stage of the development of its oil reserves'. The Committee met the Minister for Energy, the Director General of the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate and the President of Statoil. The Defence Committee met with counterpart committees in Bonn and Washington when visiting those countries in the course of other enquiries.

Even where committees did not travel abroad, international experience was thoroughly documented. For example, the Treasury Committee report on budgetary reform documents the budgetary and expenditure practices of nine other countries to support its recommendation of at least a period of three months for public discussion of government revenue and expenditure proposals. The Education Committee documents international practice in its report on the secondary school curriculum and exams. The enquiry on private rented housing draws on the Committee's analysis of how other countries handle this sector.

Committees generally reached positive conclusions although not all enquiries proposed specific remedies. The precision of conclusions and recommendations varied markedly. In some cases, this was due to partisan disagreement. This was the case, for example, with the enquiry initially conducted by a Treasury Committee sub-committee on the Structure of Income Tax and Income Support. The 1983 election aborted consideration of the draft report by the full Committee. But there was already clear evidence of dissension. As might be expected, the precision of findings also varied between categories of enquiries. On strategic enquiries committees were often judging issues that were still unfolding. Here committee findings need to be judged as a contribution to the climate of opinion within the relevant policy community and within government (for example, Treasury Committee inquiries on medium term financial strategy, Industry and Trade



Committee enquiry on the Association of South East Asian Nations, Social Services Committee on Age of Retirement). This said, 21 of the 32 strategic assessments might be judged to have finished with precise reports. Of the remainder, some enquiries involved placing information before the House (The Channel Tunnel, Strategic National Weapons Policy). Others were judged by some observers to have reached flaccid conclusions (Ministry of Defence Organisation and Procurement, Caribbean and Central America, Private Rented Housing Sector).

'Current' issues, by contrast, usually involved committees reviewing specific Government proposals. All Treasury Committee enquiries in this category produced precise findings. Of other enquiries on the estimates, three indicated precise concerns and a further referred an item of expenditure for consideration by the Public Accounts Committee. Two of the five nationalised industry reviews reached precise conclusions about particular issues (British Shipbuilders and Rolls Royce, Industry and Trade), as did the Employment Committee in its review of the proposed Manpower Services Commission corporate plan. Some 16 of the 28 current enquiries that ended with reports involved appropriately precise recommendations. For example, the Concorde and Chevaline reports included strong criticisms of departmental accounting procedures. These allowed program costs to be spread around a number of estimates and votes and thus prevented them coming to the direct attention of Parliament. Both these cases provided evidence which has been used subsequently by Parliamentarians arguing for additional financial information for the House. These two cases also caused their committees to argue for explicit powers of scrutiny over long term capital projects. Other reports on current issues drew the attention of the House to the implications of developments without proposing action (for example, University Funding enquiry).

Some findings were congenial to the Government. This was the case, for example, in the enquiry into the Commission for Racial Equality. The Home Affairs Committee's bipartisan report was strongly critical of the management and programs of the Commission. It suggested that Commission management should be reconstructed. The Committee commented:

The Commission's gravest defect is incoherence. The Commission operates without any obvious sense of priorities or any clearly defined objectives. There are a few subjects on which they prove unwillingly to embark. Where specific policy objectives have been established, they are rarely translated into concrete activity. Commission staff respond to this policy vacuum by setting their own objectives and taking independent initiatives, which not surprisingly peter out or go off at half-cock. A distressing amount of energy which should be channelled into a coherent and integrated program leading to clearly-defined objectives is thus frittered away.

Some committees proposed action more radical than that subsequently adopted by Government. This was the case in the Treasury Committee's report on civil service effectiveness. The Committee analysed the approach of the departments to the management of resources. The report criticised departments for concentrating cost reduction effort on administrative costs, covering only twelve per cent of total program costs. The report included extensive evidence on the workings of the MINIS (Management Information for Ministers) system in the Department of the Environment and its applicability throughout Government. The Committee reviewed staff development practices and compared the United Kingdom situation with that of other countries. The report and associated evidence filled 1400 pages in three volumes.

Some reports, although not formally accepted by Government, proposed action which paralleled that subsequently adopted by Government. The Energy Committee's final report on Nuclear Power questioned Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) planning assumptions. Evidence challenged the accuracy of CEGB estimates of forward demand. The Committee judged these estimates to be over optimistic. The report emphasised the contentious character of nuclear power and the need for public discussion and consultation. An interim report on the Isle of Grain Power Station was critical of CEGB management of power station construction costs. The Energy Committee also criticised the Energy Department's lack of attention to conservation. Conservation interests credited the Committee with stimulating increased attention to conservation opportunities within the bureaucracy.

## Partisanship

A review of the topics chosen for enquiry suggests the committees have mostly avoided issues that were the subject of *current* intense partisan controversy. For example, the Trade Union Immunities review reflected the difficulty of reaching agreement within committees on an intensely partisan issue. The Committee split in its 1980-81 report exactly on party lines. In responding to earlier elements of the Government's reform of trade union law (the draft codes on picketing and the closed shop tabled in the 1979-80 session), the Committee produced a bipartisan report. This was on a procedural issue. The Committee united in criticising the amount of time the Government allowed for public debate. The Committee was fortified in this view by the varying evidence received from the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress and the Association of Chief Police Officers. This judgement is itself an indicator of committee capacity to find common ground despite

disagreement on substantive questions. It could not find similar grounds for bipartisanship in later enquiries on proposed trade union measures. The Home Affairs Committee report on National Health Service charges also split on party lines. The Energy Committee too failed to achieve bipartisanship in its recommendations on pit closures. The Social Democratic Party member joined the conservative majority in opposing a National Union of Mineworkers veto of pit closures which was proposed by the Labour member.

The foregoing represents 'current' enquiries which did not achieve bipartisan findings. All other current enquiries that produced definite findings were generally bipartisan. This covers 21 reports on a wide range of issues.

The potential for bipartisanship is also evident in committee appraisals of Government policy proposals. Three of these enquiries reached strong bipartisan conclusions proposing variation of policies. After taking public evidence on the position of school leavers, the Employment Committee recommended that the Government continue to pay supplementary benefits to school leavers who failed to join its proposed training scheme. The Committee recommended this after hearing evidence from the Trades Union Council. It concluded that withdrawal of supplementary benefit would mar the launch of the scheme. This recommendation was accepted by the Government. The Social Services Committee used an analysis by its special adviser to point to the impact the Government's proposals to vary sickness benefit payments would have on particular employer groups. Its bipartisan report against the Government's proposals was adopted. The Transport Committee opposed transfer of vehicle testing to the private sector on the basis proposed by the Government. It concluded there seemed little merit in this proposed privatisation exercise. At the least, it recommended the Government not proceed until industry objections had been resolved. Its evidence sessions in the 1981-82 session allowed it to appraise the extent to which this had occurred. Government legislation was then before the House. Industry reservations continued to delay implementation of the Government's proposals which were finally abandoned in 1983.

The degree of bipartisanship amongst committees on strategic assessments was also striking. This was evident in each category of enquiry. All the enquiries involving system-wide reviews tabled essentially bipartisan reports with clear policy recommendations that could be voted. The Transport in London report was essentially bipartisan. It proposed a new co-ordinating authority independent of the Greater London Council. It proposed substantial representation from local government. The Secondary School Curriculum report ends with 64 individual recommendations covering curricula, role of central government, consultation and so forth. There were a number of divisions in the Committee in approving the report, but none on strictly party lines. The approach subsequently announced by the

Government followed some Committee proposals, particularly concerning the curriculum and exams. But the Government program so far announced is less comprehensive. It contemplates more central direction than the Committee envisaged.

Five of the seven reports on the role of central government were substantially bipartisan. This includes the report on energy conservation, which was critical of the current regulatory, tax and assistance regime, and that on oil depletion policy which recommended a reduced role for government. There were a number of divisions in the Environment Committee in settling its report on Private Rented Housing. These divisions concern the balance between tenant rights and landlord rights. The report was otherwise substantially bipartisan. The Committee subsequently responded on a wholly bipartisan basis to the Government's rejection of its central recommendations. Similarly, the Agriculture Committee report involved divisions between Conservative members on some recommendations, but none on strictly party lines.

The reports on emerging issues were bipartisan except for the Income Support sub-committee report. The Chairman's draft recommended abolition of the married man's tax allowance and reassignment of these funds to other purposes. This approach was strongly opposed by the Tory member of the sub-committee. On other issues like the age of retirement and method of funding local government, Tory and Labour members found common ground.

In the period reviewed here, very high levels of bipartisanship are evident in all categories of enquiry. The committees avoided matters of *current* controversy, they did not avoid difficult or politically contested issues. If only one or two reports were involved, or if the committees had pursued anodyne topics, one could argue special factors were involved. But the number of reports on vexed issues suggests possibilities for bipartisanship perhaps larger than has been recognised.

### Contribution to Policy-making

Evaluation of the contribution of committees to policy-making is not straight forward. One complication arises from the differing perspectives of observers. Should you evaluate committee performance from the perspective of the formal role of Parliament in a strong two-party system, or from the perspective of their potential role, but still within the two-party system.

Those who believe a strong two-party system is the essential condition for effective

policy-making generally view committees as undesirable. They see their activity, at best, as an irritant and, at worst, a positive hindrance to effective government. Proponents of this view uphold the familiar norms of ministerial and collective cabinet responsibility. They see Parliament as part of the dignified ritual of government. They see no need for enhanced scrutiny of the executive or for development of Parliament's 'teaching', 'learning' or 'intelligence' potential. On this view, elections alone should determine who governs and once elected governments should be free to pursue their programs. Scrutiny and review are already adequate. Bipartisanship in any form would not advance policy-making. New structures are not required to better manage relations with interest groups. Parliament is the arena for the opposition to demonstrate its capacity to succeed the Government, in Bernard Crick's felicitous phrase, Parliament is the proper setting for a 'continuing election campaign'.<sup>16</sup>

Another perspective arises amongst those who recognise the limits on the work of committees within the two-party system but who see potential for developing the scrutiny and review role of Parliament. The contributors to the study of committees edited by Gavin Drewry and sponsored by the Study of Parliament Group generally see potential for extended scrutiny and review of the executive through committees. They share the view that Parliament's scrutiny and review role should be developed to better match the expanded scope of the executive. But they recognise that the contribution of committees can only be modest while the norms of the two-party system remain strong. Apart from any other factor, committees have only limited access to the floor of the House. Three estimates days have been assigned for debate of committee reports. Such debates generally do not terminate in a specific vote. Even on the rare occasions this occurs, norms of party discipline have prevailed when the report has been uncongenial to the Government. The Drewry study acknowledges the achievements of committees, for example, coverage of the policy process, bipartisanship, continuity of enquiries - but it argues that within the two-party system achievements can only be modest. As Gavin Drewry observes:

Select committees are doomed to a position of marginality so long as Parliament itself, while formally sovereign, remains subordinate to the Government of the day. ... The new committees are an important evolutionary step in the modernisation of a House of Commons that has been slow to adapt to the realities of a complex and highly diversified polity. Apart from sharpening the edge of backbench and opposition scrutiny of the executive, committees, whose minutes of evidence are often goldmines of valuable

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<sup>16</sup>. *The Reform of Parliament*, *ibid.* For an uncompromising statement against a role for select committees see evidence by Prof. George Jones to the Select Committee on Procedure reviewing the select committee system, reported in *Constitutional Reform*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 1990, p. 4.

information, make a significant contribution to the cause of open government. However, the fact remains that the recent evolutionary development of the select committees has been a matter of slight constitutional significance.<sup>17</sup>

My own research has been in the context of the likely decomposition of the strong two-party system, based in part on the emergence of interest groups and issue movements and in part on the possible emergence of a 'hung' House of Commons.<sup>18</sup> Other political formations now share the task of political representation with the major parties. They have demonstrated the power to advance new issues to the political agenda and to thwart unwanted executive decisions. The experience of the Thatcher, Hawke and Lange Governments suggests that, under some conditions, governments can at least set the agenda of political debate. They can also vary the aggregates of economic policy. But the ultimate success of this effort at government by macro-management is unclear and the problems of a fragmented polity and of the power of interests remains the fundamental issue for policy making.

Meantime, the social base of the major parties continues to erode. If we are to move towards a quasi multi-party system, which, in Australia's case, would probably mean continued success for Democrats and Independents and a chronically 'hung' Senate, a strong parliamentary committee system will, I believe, be an essential element. In this perspective, I believe the House of Commons committees demonstrate the potential to provide the infrastructure for a new arena of policy making, they have demonstrated the potential to 'anchor' processes through which minor parties and interest groups might be more effectively integrated in policy-making. In Stuart Walkland's phrase, the committees have demonstrated there is a 'new House of Commons in waiting'.<sup>19</sup>

One complication in weighing the impact of committees arises from disagreement about the actual and potential role of Parliament. A second complication arises from the ambiguous character of the public policy process. In Hugh Hecl's image:

(the policy process resembles) a maze where the outlet is shifting and the walls are being constantly repatterned; where the subject is not one individual

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<sup>17</sup>. Gavin Drewry, Select Committees Symposium, *Contemporary Record*, Spring 1987, p. 18; See also Drewry's comment reported in *Constitutional Reform*, *ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>18</sup>. *Policy Making in a Three Party System*, *op.cit.*

<sup>19</sup>. Foreword, in Drewry, (ed), *The New Select Committees*, *op.cit.* p. 14; on the potential contribution of committees to the effectiveness of minor parties in a coalition see my, the Lib-Lab Pact and Policy Influence, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 3, July 1990.

but a group bound together; where this group disagrees not only on how to get out but on whether getting out constitutes a satisfactory solution; where, finally, there is not one but a large number of such groups which keep getting in each other's way. Such is the setting for social learning. Yet, the fact is, there is learning and non-learning rather than random bumping.<sup>20</sup>

How, in such a context, is the impact of a particular report to be definitively assessed. For example, the House of Lords Industry and Trade Committee in 1987 reviewed the outlook for the United Kingdom balance of trade in the context of the declining contribution of United Kingdom manufacturing.<sup>21</sup> This report has played a role in the United Kingdom analogous to that played here by the Australian Manufacturing Council-Pappas Carter Evans and Koop report on the outlook for Australian industry policy. The report became the touchstone for renewed debate in the United Kingdom about the role of government in industry policy. The Thatcher Government has set itself determinedly against such a course. Mr Michael Heseltine and the Labour party on the other hand have been more sympathetic. Should one or other come to power, this report might be judged far more influential than its present impact would indicate.

Not surprisingly, given the norms of the two-party system, there are very few examples of committees changing executive decisions. Variation of the 'sus' laws and Patriation of the Canadian Constitution would be notable examples. Committees have challenged Government decisions, for example, the Employment Committee challenged the Government on the banning of trade unions at the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), but they lacked any capacity to follow through. So their impact on decision making has been slight.

A second potential political impact is on the legitimacy of public policy. The extensive engagement of interest groups in particular committee enquiries has been noted. There has been little systematic work in this area. I have twice surveyed interest groups in the United Kingdom. In the first survey in 1983, I found committees held in very high regard by interest groups. Last year, in the course of a larger survey of British trade unions, I found strong evidence that select committees have become important sources of information about government decisions.<sup>22</sup> The process of establishing legitimate public policy is clearly considerably more complex than the standing of an institution in the regard of participants. But a strong positive standing is a necessary, although far from sufficient, condition in establishing the

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<sup>20</sup>. *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1974, p. 308.

<sup>21</sup>. HL 238, 1984-85.

<sup>22</sup>. *Mobilising Consent for Income Norms in the UK: The Promise of a Parliamentary Framework*, AGSM Working Paper, 90-042.

potential of that institution to contribute to legitimacy. I believe the evidence, to the extent it is available under the current regime, is positive. A third potential impact of committees is on political learning. Political learning can arise from at least three sources, all of which depend on the unique formal standing of Parliament as an institution. First, there is the volume of information placed in the public arena from ministers and departments. There is universal agreement amongst scholars that committees have contributed notably in this respect. No other body has equivalent 'standing' with ministers and officials or routine powers of cross examination. Second, there is the information gleaned in the course of public enquiries from interest groups. Committees can act as a 'forcing device' directing the attention of interest groups (both 'winners' and 'losers') to issues which they would otherwise ignore. Public evidence obliges interest groups to think through a response to current or emerging issues. Departments and ministers might gain better information thereby about attitudes in the policy community they seek to manage. Third, through the enquiry process, committees oblige interest groups to take account of each other. This covers both allies and antagonists. This would be an essential step if coalition building was to be recognised as a key element in policy-making. There is general agreement amongst scholars who have evaluated the committees that the volume of information in the public domain is vastly increased as a result of their work. There is less systematic evidence about their impact on the mobilisation or learning of interest groups.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>. Stephen Breyer in *Analysing Regulatory Failure: Mismatches, Less Restrictive Alternatives, and Reform*, *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 92, No. 3, pp. 605-609, points to the key role of congressional committee hearings in achieving airline deregulation. He cites three benefits from such hearings:

"First they acted as a catalyst in forcing other agencies of government to focus upon the problem and develop a policy position...."

The hearings provided the opportunity for those urging reform to contact a wide range of executive and administrative officials; the hearings helped develop a network of persons throughout the government who would influence policy and help each other in the movement for reform. The hearings also acted a catalyst with respect to the regulated industry. The threat of hearings forced each airline to reassess its position, to develop new information, and to put its own bureaucracy to work to develop and assess alternatives....

Second, the hearings served to gather the detailed factual information used to write a comprehensive report. The report did not need to produce empirical information that would definitively resolve every issue, but it had to be comprehensive....

The empirical effort had to determine who is actually being helped or hurt by the program in order to evaluate the arguments made in its favour....

Each of the many major objections to reform had to be treated in a similar manner. While the



In assessing the impact of committees on political learning, we need to see evidence of their capacities not merely to fertilise the exchange of information amongst particular policy communities, but also to provide a setting for political drama. Here, the committees need to demonstrate a capacity to satisfy the 'expressive' needs of politics. In fact, committees have provided an additional arena for the airing of controversies. For example, enquiries into the Westland affair which culminated in Mr Heseltine's resignation were conducted by three committees, Trade and Industry, Foreign Affairs and Defence. The Defence Committee also enquired into the sinking of the 'Belgrano'. The Agriculture Committee staged an enquiry into the alleged incidence of salmonella in eggs following the resignation of Mrs Currie. There was a notable clash between a strong-willed minister, Norman Tebbit, and the Trade and Industry Committee about the rights of that Committee to require evidence from the chief executive of British Shipbuilders. Another controversial enquiry concerned the banning of trade unions at Government Communications Headquarters.<sup>24</sup>

A mark of the impact of the select committee on government can perhaps be derived from the so-called 'Osmotherly rules' promulgated by the Cabinet Office. These guide civil servants in their appearances before select committees. Gavin Drewry summarises their implications in the following terms:

The Osmotherly Rules are designed principally to conceal. They begin by exhorting officials to 'be as helpful to committees as possible' and by affirming that information should be withheld only in the interests of 'good government' or of (shades of Ponting) 'national security'. But they then go on at great length to tell civil servants that they must on no account disregard the imperatives of collective and individual ministerial responsibility by telling committees about the advice they gave to ministers, about interdepartmental discussion of policy issues, about the level at which decisions are taken, or about the minister's consultations with his colleagues. As far as possible official witnesses should confine their evidence to matters of fact relating to

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hearings could not definitively answer all the questions raised, they could investigate them in detail, marshal the relevant information, and base policy recommendations on that work.

The third function served by the hearings was a drama, which helped mobilise public and political support for regulatory reform. To analogise a legislative hearing to a judicial or fact-finding hearing is to miss an essential difference: the legislative hearing has an educational objective and a political purpose. A congressional hearing, moves on a more dramatic or educational oral level which should illustrate the issues in a way that is both comprehensible and interesting to the general public...

<sup>24</sup>. These enquiries are reviewed in Gavin Drewry, *Select Committees, Progress Report, 1988/89, Contemporary Record*, November 1989, p. 19-20.

existing government policies and actions. With respect to current policies, they should tell the committee to go and ask the Minister.<sup>25</sup>

## Proposals for Development of Committee Roles since 1979

The Thatcher Government has focussed attention on economic outcomes. Mrs Thatcher is a strong proponent of executive prerogatives and has opposed development of the role of committees. The Labour party has, until recently, been preoccupied by internal divisions. The Liberal-Democrats have been similarly preoccupied and have devoted most energy to reform of the voting system and devolution. There is now some renewed academic interest in policy-making structures, I think, for example, of the work of Paul Hirst<sup>26</sup> and David Marquand<sup>27</sup>, but no detailed attention outside my own work to the potential role of Parliament in policy making. The Study of Parliament group, an active proponent of the 1979 reforms, has not advanced new proposals.

The centre of initiative since 1979 has lain with Parliament itself. Here, a number of Tories, particularly Edward du Cann and Terrence Higgins, have been at the forefront. The 1979 Committee on Procedural Reform recommended a further enquiry into the financial procedures of the House. This was followed up in four reports covering the availability of financial information, control of the Auditor-General and the Budget process.<sup>28</sup> The most radical set of proposals concerned the structure of the Budget process. Building on a report authored by Lord Armstrong and commissioned by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, a non-partisan think tank, the Treasury Select Committee enquired into Budget procedures in the 1981-82 session.<sup>29</sup> Its report recommended a two-stage Budget process. It proposed for the

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<sup>25</sup> Drewry, Symposium, op.cit.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Hirst, *After Thatcher*, Collins, London, 1989; also Paul Hirst (ed.) *The Pluralist Theory of the State*, Routledge, London; also *Representative Democracy and its Limits*, Polity Press, London, 1990.

<sup>27</sup> David Marquand, *The Unprincipled Society*, Cape, London, 1988.

<sup>28</sup> Control of Auditor General H.C. 115, Session 1980/81, see also Gavin Drewry, The National Audit Act, Half a Loaf?, *Public Law*, Winter 1983, Rt. Hon. Robert W. Sheldon M.P. Public Sector Auditing and the UK Committee of Public Accounts in 1984, *The Parliamentarian*, Spring, 1984, pp. 91-98; The Structure and Form of Financial Documents presented to Parliament, Second Report of Treasury Select Committee, H.C. 110 of 1984-85, Budgetary Reform, Sixth Report of the Treasury Select Committee, H.C. 137 of 1981-82; First Report from the Select Committee on Procedure (Finance), H.C. 24 of 1982-83; see also Leo Pliatzky, *The Treasury Under Mrs Thatcher*, Basil Blackwell, London, 1989.

<sup>29</sup> Report of a Committee chaired by Lord Armstrong of Sanderstead, *Budgetary Reform in the U.K.*, Oxford University Press for the Institute for Financial Studies, 1980.

United Kingdom an approach somewhat analogous to that which occurs in the American Congress. As Sir Leo Pliatsky remarked in his evidence to the Treasury Select Committee, an open and participatory budget process on the lines proposed would represent not reform but a revolution in relations between committees and the executive.<sup>30</sup> Needless to say, this report was not accepted by the Government.

Nevertheless, it remains as a blueprint for a 'strong' committee system in the Westminster context. Evidence from departments is extensive. Departmental objections to this radical approach are recognised and answered. The Treasury Select Committee was composed of a majority of Tory Members of Parliament. It nevertheless found in favour of this radical step. A subsequent procedures enquiry was more moderate in its recommendations.<sup>31</sup> However, its approach too, proved too radical for the Government. Nevertheless, these reports remain setting out the architecture of a transfigured policy-making system, one which would be much more open, accessible and participatory, which would include a significant role for Parliament and which would involve major modification of the norms of collective Cabinet and ministerial responsibility.

Another procedures enquiry has involved a review of the legislative process. It has recommended a much enhanced role for committees in the pre-legislative and committee stages.<sup>32</sup> At the moment, witnesses representing departmental, expert or interest group points of view are rarely, if ever, heard whilst legislation is being processed through the House. The 1979 procedures report envisaged an experiment with special standing committees to enable public evidence to be taken on proposed bills. Several bills were handled in this way in the 1980-81 session. No others were handled in this way in Mrs Thatcher's first Parliament. Only one was thus treated in her second Parliament. The Government has not chosen to repeat the experiment. It has rejected the report of the committee that reviewed legislation. The most recent procedures enquiry involves an evaluation of the system established in 1979 and proposals for future development. At time of writing, this committee was due to report.

## Implications for Australia

There would, I imagine, be the same range of views in Australia about the potential role of committees and of Parliament. Protagonists of a strong two-party system

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<sup>30</sup>. H.C. 137 of 1981-82, Vol. II.

<sup>31</sup>. H.C. 24 of 1982-83.

<sup>32</sup>. Select Committee on Procedure, Public Bill Procedure, H.C. 49 of 1984-85.

would see them as an irritant. Australia has experienced the same degree of political fragmentation as the United Kingdom. Interest groups and issue movements are as prominent in proposing new issues for the political agenda and in obstructing the Government's ability to implement its policy proposals. My own view is that this represents the most important line of argument for development of a role for select committees. I cannot, however, claim widespread support for this approach.

The most widely accepted basis for an extended role of committees arises from those who believe Parliaments capacity for scrutiny and review of administrative activity needs to be refurbished. In the United Kingdom, a broad coalition of Tory and Labour Members of Parliament united behind the notion that Parliament's scrutiny and review powers needed to be extended.<sup>33</sup> It is not impossible to imagine a similar coalition emerging in Australia.

Assuming, however, intellectual support for the notion of further parliamentary reform, a fundamental issue arises because of the relative sizes of the Houses in Australia's federal Parliament. Whereas the House of Commons has in excess of 600 members, Australia's House of Representatives has just over 100 members. With a ministry of some thirty members, the numbers available for service on committees in the House of Representatives is extremely limited. This suggests the Senate as the location for more extended committee activity. Indeed, some Senators have themselves proposed conversion of the Senate to a committee house. This is, of course, very close to the vision of our founders. If necessary, additional committees might be constituted on a joint basis to achieve the requisite coverage.

The distinctive features of the new British committee system, indeed what makes it a 'strong' system in embryo, arise from the structure established in 1979. This permits continuous and systematic 'shadowing' of the major activities of government. The British committees cover all major departments of state. Their purview parallels that of ministers and departments. The committees are clothed with independent powers to initiate enquiries and to summon witnesses. In addition, they have reasonable budgets, although minuscule by comparison with those of United States or German committees, to recruit staff, specialist assistance, and travel to take evidence on site. These are all essential elements of a strong system of committees. The 1978-79 report on the structure of committees and the subsequent procedures reports on the budget and legislative processes suggest avenues for enquiry by committees in Australia. The essential first step would be a procedures enquiry, preferably based in the Senate,

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<sup>33</sup>. See for example the debates on procedure: H.C. Debates, 25 June 1979, cols 33-257; H.C. Debates, 16 January 1981, cols 1262-1323; H.C. Debates, 15 February 1982, cols 67-118; H.C. Debates, 19 July 1982, cols 117-80; H.C. Debates, 6 December 1983, cols 245-91.

reviewing the structure and role of committees in Australia.

Parliament has been a quiescent arena since the emergence of two-party politics, in Australia's case in 1909. In the critical period from the inception of the Commonwealth in 1901 until the establishment of the two-party system in 1909, committees played a key role, particularly on strategic policy-making. Indeed, the policy frameworks at the centre of the modern Australian state, conciliation and arbitration, the tariff system, the welfare role of government, the system of state enterprises, were all the subject of committee enquiries in the 1901 to 1909 period. I have argued elsewhere these committee enquiries contributed crucially to the development of these policy frameworks.<sup>34</sup> I believe more flexible and adaptable policy-making is the ultimate promise of a renewal of Parliament's role through the establishment of a strong committee structure. But, even if you do not share this anticipation, there is a substantial potential for contribution in extended powers for scrutiny and review. The development of the role of Parliament has advanced significantly in the United Kingdom in recent years. Lesser developments have also occurred in New Zealand and, I understand, in Canada.<sup>35</sup> There has been relatively much less attention to the role of Parliament in Australia. This seems a subject long overdue for attention. As we enter the decade that commemorates the idea of our national institutions, there would seem to be no more fitting subject.

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<sup>34</sup>. Green Politics, Two Party Politics and the Promise of a Multi-Party System, in Ian Marsh (ed) *The Environment Challenge*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991.

<sup>35</sup>. Geoff Skene, *New Zealand Parliamentary Committees*, Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, April, 1990.



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