

Parliamentary engagement and participation in the current era

Analysing the Westminster Parliamentary system and its approach to public engagement at the select committee stage

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Public engagement with parliament is currently riding the crest of a wave, but how and why is this so? This research paper aims to answer this question by analysing the field of parliamentary engagement in the Westminster Parliamentary system. Despite being one of the most understudied areas of legislative studies, the relationship between the institution that is parliament and its citizens is becoming closer. Increased access to the day-to-day events of parliament through new technology and social media, means the events of parliament are now able to reach a larger audience. This paper explores Parliamentary engagement in the Westminster parliamentary system, and will argue that the parliamentary select committee stage of proposed legislation is the most advanced area in engagement, and is essential in improving and building on existing engagement strategies. By directing the research towards one part of the bill process, the paper will have a clear focus. Analysing the engagement strategies of different legislatures will help find themes in the area of engagement, and conclusions will be formed as to how Parliamentary engagement at the committee stage has developed over time and will need to evolve going into the future.

The rise in prominence of Parliamentary engagement

Generally, “levels of public knowledge about what MPs actually do, how parliament works or how to engage with committees are very low, and this calls for a quite radical shift in how MPs and parliamentary staff undertake their various roles.”¹ Parliamentary engagement

¹ House of Commons Liaison Committee, ‘HC 470 – Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach.’ Pg. 60.

allows those people represented by elected Members of Parliament (MPs), to contribute to an open democracy by participating in Parliament's practices, processes and laws. The representation of the people is one of the key components of a democracy, but rather than simply voting at the ballot box every three, four, or even five years, parliamentary engagement aims to give the public a voice during that period. By allowing the public to engage with the likes of select committees, the trust in parliament has the potential to improve.

Engagement with the select committee stage has previously been swept aside because, instead of focussing on the people and Parliament relationship, "debates about the reform and modernisation of select committees have generally focussed on internal issues rather than on external relationships."² In general, public engagement has been neglected, but with increased access to Parliament this has started to change. The work of committees is one area where legislatures are targeting to improve engagement. This is because, the committee stage is a core function of parliament and the bill process, and one of the very few arenas where the public can have a conversation with elected decision-makers on a proposed law change.

The emphasis on public engagement can be summed up by Cristina Leston-Bandeira who says that,

"All in all, the reinforced discourse of political disengagement, together with the visibility brought in by tools such as new media, has caused a transformation of the parliament-citizen relationship into a key priority, putting parliaments under the spotlight to develop mechanisms for more effective linkages with the public."³

Importantly, Parliament can be accessible but not necessarily open to engagement.

Although different factors contribute to levels of engagement, an accessible parliament

² Ibid. Pg. 24.

³ Bandeira, 'Studying the Relationship between Parliament and Citizens.' Pg .5.

inevitably improves the chances for citizens to engage. In the 2016/17 annual report of the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives in New Zealand, the first sentence of Clerk of the House David Wilson's overview said that "ensuring that the work of Parliament and its members is accessible to the general public continued to be a priority for the office."⁴ In the last decade, Parliaments as a whole have adopted this approach, emphasising inclusivity with more intuitive, easy, and relevant ways of engaging.

Implementing this approach requires MPs to be enthusiastic about engaging with the public. Upon his election to the position of Speaker of the House of Representatives in New Zealand in 2017, the Rt Hon, Trevor Mallard said that "it's very important for the public and Parliament to engage with each other, and I want to make Parliament interactive."⁵ Mallard continued by saying, "the public should feel like they can not only make an input, but also have it heard."⁶ These words encapsulate how Westminster Parliamentary Systems are treating Parliamentary engagement in the modern era. Mallard placed particular emphasis on the importance of social media and also questioned "whether the institution really has kept up with the way wider society has changed"⁷ suggesting that Parliament has not yet adjusted to the constant information sharing and technologically-savvy society. Therefore, identifying what constitutes Parliamentary engagement in the modern day is important when developing engagement strategies.

Parliamentary committees or select committees

According to recent academic studies, "parliamentary committees are uniquely placed to address increasing public dissatisfaction and disengagement with the political process."⁸ The reason for this, in most cases, is because committees give the public and groups the opportunity to have a direct say on the political process, or on a potential law change. In

⁴ Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives. 'Annual report for the year ended 30 June 2017.' Pg. 7.

⁵ The Rt Hon Trevor Mallard. 'Parliament's new referee wants to get spectators involved'.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Forkert. 'Parliamentary Committees: Improving public engagement.' Pg.1.

New Zealand, select committees are involved in the bill process between the first and second reading of proposed law change. The Select Committee process across the Westminster Parliamentary system allows a small group of MPs to discuss a singular topic and to scrutinise bills or consider inquiries related to the relevant subject area. There are 12 subject Select Committees in New Zealand, although there are often more in larger legislatures such as Australia and the United Kingdom. Members of the public can submit their opinions on proposed legislation through a written submission. Submitters can also appear in person at a meeting before the committee if they wish to do so. At the heart of engaging with a committee is an important influence at play. This influence is the “redress offered by allowing an individual or group to register their disagreement with the position or view of the Government of the day on an issue.”⁹ This is a critical point as policy formulation takes place and involves those who are directly affected. Compared to the chamber, where members of the government and opposition often engage in heated debates with no lack of interjection or political taunting, the atmosphere of select committees is very different. MPs will frequently engage in cross-party discussions and agreements in a manner that is rarely captured in media coverage. It could be said that committees are “doing politics differently”¹⁰ and “have been attempting to do this for some time – not always successfully – but certainly far more than many observers seem to realise.”¹¹

One of the purposes of a Select Committee in New Zealand is to scrutinise the Executive by holding it to account. Public engagement in the bill review process has altered significantly since 1928 when “it was still regarded as irregular for select committees to receive written submissions. Giving evidence to committees was regarded as properly an oral process transacted in person.”¹² This is different to common practice today as only a minority of those who will submit in the written format will deliver an oral submission before a

⁹ ‘HC 470 – Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach.’ Pg. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid. Pg. 15.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand, ‘Chapter 22 Select Committee Proceedings.’

committee. In recent times, there have been examples of significant amounts of people submitting on Items of Business, including over 20,000 people making written submissions on the Petition of Hon Maryan Street, presented to the House of Representatives in New Zealand in 2015. Approximately 1000 of these appeared in person before the committee. As a result of large items of business, the demands of select committees are sometimes also quite high. Even so, “select committees must encourage the public to engage, while at the same time managing the public’s expectations about the nature of that engagement and the likely outcome that engagement is likely to have.”¹³ Effective public engagement can improve the chances of achieving effective scrutiny and good governance, however parliaments have to be able to strike a balance between public expectation and not over-inflating “public expectations to the extent that public confidence in the responsiveness of the system is further eroded.”¹⁴

Public engagement with parliamentary committees today

Whilst it is difficult to say that public engagement can single-handedly be responsible for a law change due to the increasing power of the executive and political parties, there are many ways in which parliamentary committees can engage in a productive way with the public. In recent years an appetite has emerged amongst the public for greater engagement in political affairs. The active promotion of Select Committees, developing educational resources about Parliament, and “introducing out-facing programmes actively seeking to engage communities with the work of parliament,”¹⁵ are some of the means for engaging the public. In some legislatures, there are specific committees that have been established, including the Community Engagement Committee in the United Kingdom, which has a broad subject area of encouraging people to engage with parliament. Whilst engagement with committees has increased over time, research has also demonstrated that “the level of public engagement in

¹³ ‘HC 470 – Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach.’ Pg. 11.

¹⁴ Ibid. Pg. 25.

¹⁵ Davies and Leston-Bandeira. ‘What makes for effective parliamentary public engagement? Reflections from the National Assembly.’

particular inquiries ultimately depends on the subject matter of the inquiry itself.”¹⁶ Existing research suggests that if there is a large amount of people impacted upon by a proposed law change, the more a committee’s work will be engaged with. Parliaments already use calls for submissions as a way to target those who will have a vested interest in a bill. For example, in New Zealand when a bill is open for submissions on telecommunications, all telecommunications companies are contacted and in turn all of their affected customers are informed that submissions are open. On more technical bills like telecommunications which don’t attract as much public interest, it is important for select committees to target submitters to achieve good quality feedback through submissions. Furthermore, “public policies tend to ‘work’ best where those individuals and communities that are most likely to be directly affected by that policy have been involved in its design.”¹⁷ This is a reciprocal process. Good governance is a result of good policy and administration which is achievable through targeted engagement, something the select committee process can offer. This, in turn, sustains public confidence in parliament and its processes.

In the UK, the introduction of a formal expectation that all select committees should assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public “inserted ‘a crack or a wedge’ into the traditional way of viewing the role of select committees.”¹⁸ This confirms the view that in recent years, informing and involving the public on parliamentary events has become more of an expectation than a request. The National Assembly of Wales looked into what makes effective parliamentary engagement today, with a particular focus on committee engagement. The assembly decided on three key principles for effective engagement. These were, “to publicise information to inform, to involve people in its work, and to empower people to help shape and set the agenda.”¹⁹ Engagement strategies have led to the idea that

¹⁶ Forkert, Pg. 10.

¹⁷ ‘HC 470 – Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach.’ Pg. 14.

¹⁸ Ibid. Pg. 17.

¹⁹ Davies and Leston-Bandeira, ‘What makes for effective parliamentary public engagement? Reflections from the Welsh National Assembly.’

“Public engagement can underpin and deepen all elements of committee activity (from agenda setting to scrutiny and oversight) and is particularly important in terms of strengthening the position of committees vis-à-vis the government of the day.”²⁰ In practice, involving the public in committee business is giving them the opportunity to potentially shape future law. Going forward, committees should use the three key principles to enhance their public image and strengthen their relationship with its key stakeholders, the public.

One clear advantage that select committees have over other stages of the bill process, is that they can bring parliament to the people through their ability to travel to different places in to hear the views of the public, which is particularly the case in New Zealand. Reaching out to the public is the opposite of how parliaments have operated previously, “which has been mainly within a political bubble with an insiders’ focus.”²¹ Often, when items of business have a large number of submitters from one particular place in the country, the committee will travel to those submitters. In the UK, parliament has an Outreach and Engagement Service that works in partnership with committees to identify ways in which the public can become more involved with select committees, again approaching the public. These methods often remove the formal and intimidating experience that submitters may experience when they come to Parliament. Discussing issues with subject matter experts is understandably daunting for some members of the public, so amongst other engagement ideas, holding committee meetings at a place other than parliament has the effect of making the average person more comfortable in talking to a committee. Through these methods, Parliament and its committees retain its standing as being a formal institution but also being open and accessible to the public.

Committees, being able to bridge the gap between the people and parliament, are well placed to “renew the link between civil society and the formal political system, in a discursive

²⁰ The UK Parliament. ‘Chapter 5: Strategies to Consolidate and Extend Public Engagement.’

²¹ Cristina Leston-Bandeira, ‘How public engagement amplifies parliamentary representation.’ Pg. 3.

or deliberative setting...²² Committee proceedings also have the potential to ignite political competition, something which no other agent in the political system can offer. In part, this is because in recent times, elections have become less trustworthy in assessing the public's policy preferences. The true value of Select Committees is seen on singular policy areas as they represent "an important yet undervalued site of participatory innovation, particularly their capacity to promote inclusive public consideration."²³ Although committees can choose to accept or dismiss the views of people, submissions can be made by anyone in the appropriate jurisdiction. Taking a broad view of democratic representation, being able to incorporate the perspectives of those affected by potential law change means a wider range of inputs are able to be captured, and policy decisions can be considered publicly legitimate once the bill is passed. The challenge for committee members is to represent their constituents as well as their parties, which have become larger and more powerful. Members are asked to suspend specific interests of their own electorate and deliberate with the general interests of the party in mind.

Parliamentary Decline and managing expectations over the influence of the public

The relationship between the executive and legislature has evolved, and subsequently, as some argue, this relationship has come to shape and constrain the role of select committees. Some suggest that political parties are the primary site controlling the parliamentary timetable and are becoming more focussed on controlling Parliament and winning elections. As a result, the linkage between the governors and the governed has diminished. To some, select committee business represents an opportunity to build relationships and to promote conversations that revolve around increasing both democratic voice and democratic listening, and thus to counter citizen disaffection. However, the Hansard Society's latest Audit of Political Engagement 2015 in the United Kingdom, found

²² Marsh and Miller, 'Democratic Decline and Democratic Renewal: Political Change in Britain, Australia and New Zealand.' Pg. 33.

²³ Carolyn M. Hendriks, 'From 'opening up' to democratic renewal: Deepening public engagement in legislative committees.' Pg. 27.

that although “two-thirds of the public believe that Parliament ‘is essential to our democracy’, just 34% (the lowest figure for five years) agreed that it ‘holds government to account’”²⁴.

Survey evidence suggests high levels of confidence are retained amongst those who have actively engaged with select committees, however this is the opposite for those who haven’t, contributing to the idea of parliamentary decline.

The parliamentary decline thesis (PDT) refers to the “long-standing, though contested, argument that in Westminster-style systems, parliament is in decline”²⁵. The dominant view in the literature suggests that the executive is increasingly a more powerful entity than the legislature in parliamentary systems, a trend which gives rise to criticism on such grounds as a parliamentary deficit in representation and legitimacy. The simple point being made is that building public engagement grates against the logic and principles of traditional majoritarian politics. Indeed, the long-term tension between the executive and legislature in the UK over concerns about the parliamentary decline thesis, and perceived need to ‘shift the balance’ of power back from the executive to the legislature, may well play itself out in similar ways in relation to building public engagement. This is because increasing public engagement on the part of select committees is likely to increase their media profile, increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the public and therefore potentially augment their leverage over departments and ministers. The government may therefore be reluctant to encourage select committees to build public engagement.

Public participation in the Westminster Parliamentary system is a reflection on how much the public are engaged in political processes, but is also reveals how much influence the public has on proposed law changes. The discussion on whether the general public can be influential is centred on the fact that “public disaffection threatens the underlying legitimacy and effectiveness of any government whereas meaningful public engagement can increase

²⁴ ‘HC 470 – Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach.’ Pg. 6.

²⁵ Jack P. Corbett and Shannon Sweeney, ‘Legislatures in Decline? The Parliamentary Decline Thesis as Observed in Scandinavia.’ Pg. 1.

the efficiency and effectiveness of both public policy and scrutiny.”²⁶ The PDT suggests that Parliament’s ability to hold the government of the day to account has declined with the primary reason given being, “the rise of organised and disciplined parties.”²⁷ The thesis has an impact on how the public perceive their role in a representative democracy. If the executive and the government of the day has power, so that “executive accountability is achieved only through the ballot box at election time,”²⁸ the influence public opinion have during the select committee process may be reduced. The accountability of parliament, at the present state, can only go so far. Standing in the way of the accessibility of committees are the fact that committees are often closed to the public and media during the consideration of items of business.

Aspects of the parliamentary process where engagement isn’t accessible and not as transparent includes when committees consider International Treaty Examinations. After completing the Inquiry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Australian Parliament released a report with one section outlining the process of ‘Public Engagement’ during the inquiry. Of importance to the joint standing committee on treaties was the aspect of transparency. Currently, the content of trade negotiations is held in secret, which is also the case in New Zealand. Therefore, the committee’s report outlined that “the Government can improve public engagement to make the process of negotiating for, and outcomes from, free trade agreements more transparent.”²⁹ The Standing Committee on Treaties in Australia believe that a more inclusive approach to consultation during the negotiation process, like the one in Canada, “will give the community a greater degree of reassurance that free trade agreements are in Australia’s interests.”³⁰ Often the particular legislatures have their hands tied when considering International Treaties, as there is more than one party involved, therefore all negotiations have to be held in secret before releasing the details of the treaty

²⁶ ‘HC 470 – Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach.’ Pg. 60.

²⁷ Phil Larkin, ‘Ministerial Accountability to Parliament.’ Pg. 95.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Parliament of Australia. ‘Joint Standing Committee on Treaties. Report 165.’ Pg. 39.

³⁰ Ibid. Pg. 43.

to the public. This issue is something parliaments have a minimal say on, but still contributes to the lack of transparency and accessibility to the parliamentary process. As illustrated committees face different challenges including a potential lack of influence compared with the executive, and because not all committee business is open to the public, causing transparency to take a back seat.

The future of public engagement at the committee stage and deepening the links with the public

The use of new technologies and media

Committees can ensure that their, “the profiles or ‘brands’,”³¹ are cultivated which will in turn, increase the number of influential followers they have and increase committees’ own recognition and standing. Many legislative scholars have emphasised the need for Parliament’s to deepen and broaden the way they engage with the public. This involves moving away from one-way information flows and actively recruiting under-represented or marginalised voices. As mentioned previously, political legitimacy in the bill process is increased as more voices are considered by committees. To do this the Australian and the UK Parliaments researched how they could make select committees more inclusive. Among the recommendations from the UK research, was a suggestion that Parliament become “fully interactive and digital”³² by 2020. This takes into account the way the majority of people are communicating or able to communicate in the modern era. The rationale for this type of engagement is that young people have grown up with technologies which allow them to communicate their thoughts using online platforms, so are therefore more comfortable in sharing their views in this way. The other main reason is logistical. More people would be able to contribute to committee business, because they have a computer at home or at work, compared to being available to appear before a committee at an official meeting at another location. The often-daunting task of appearing before a committee of experts and having a

³¹ UK Parliament. ‘Chapter 5: Strategies to Consolidate and Extend Public Engagement.’

³² Digital Democracy Commission, ‘Open Up! Report of the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy.’

submission published to the website for everybody to see, are just two of the barriers for potential submitters. Social media, “whilst in no way a substitute for public hearings and face-to-face encounter, can buttress, augment and enrich this activity.”³³ Some could argue that political engagement goes further than leaving a comment on a Facebook post or watching a video, engagement involves serial and reciprocal connection, something the formal arena of select committees provides.

The role of social media in Parliamentary engagement is something which has gained traction in recent years. Whether it be advertising that a bill is open for submissions on Facebook, holding a web forum for users to ask questions of a committee, or even live streaming some parts of committee meetings. Importantly, the public can engage with Parliament through a few clicks of their computer mouse, but Members of Parliament also have more options to engage with their constituents when they are away from their constituency, or at Parliament. Many people find commenting on a Facebook post by Parliament, or one of its members, significantly easier than submitting on a bill before a Select Committee. Both Australia and the United Kingdom have explored the use of web forums on particular items of business. On an inquiry into the services for young people, conducted by the Education Committee in the UK, the committee used the online platform the Student room “to gather the views and experiences of young people about which services they want and would prioritise.”³⁴ Particular concerns were then published in the report presented by the committee. In the future, more parliaments will use these types of methods to engage people, as it shrinks the issues of time and space.

Online platforms, discussion boards and surveys could be used to capture a broader range of people’s views and community concerns, and social media offers the opportunity for committees to conduct opinion polls and advertise items of business. Further research into

³³ ‘HC 470 - Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach, House of Commons Liaison Committee.’ Pg. 73

³⁴ Forkert. Pg. 6.

the potential of social media building the public profile of select committees has been carried out in the UK where the House of Commons Liaison Committee researched how to build public engagement with committees. The Committee's report commented on social media by saying that "it multiplies opportunities both for direct engagement and for seeding interest and understanding of committee activity amongst much wider publics."³⁵ In the UK, the Education Committee used "the hashtag #AskGove to encourage people across the country to suggest questions which could be put to the then Secretary of State for Education in an oral evidence session before the committee."³⁶ Direct involvement in a Select Committee without being in attendance or through a teleconferencing situation, is something select committees will be introducing as more online platforms and media have the ability to achieve such communication.

Growing the public profile of committees

For Select Committees to become more attractive for the public to engage with, their public profile needs to grow first. This brings with it the risk of losing quality engagement, and it being replaced by a larger number of people engaging. However, "several committees have demonstrated that engaging with large and public audiences is not the same as 'dumbing down', but arguably demands a quite different skill-set to the one that has traditionally been acceptable within committees."³⁷ Achieving a greater public profile is partially the committee's responsibility but is also influenced by the media coverage given to the committee. Strengthening the relationship between a parliamentary committee and the mass media is one way to grow the committees public profile. To aid the work of the parliament and their important role in a democracy and facilitating community involvement, "it is traditional for parliaments to provide media with access to the institution and to parliamentary

³⁵ 'HC 470 - Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach, House of Commons Liaison Committee.' Pg. 33.

³⁶ Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 'House of Commons Liaison Committee, Legacy Report.' Pg. 16.

³⁷ Ibid.

processes, and to report on them,”³⁸ including select committees. A well-informed populous on the events of parliament has many benefits including transparency by pursuing fact-based, fully substantiated reporting, and economic development. Without the media, the division of power between elected officials or MPs and their constituents is greater. The greater this division, the more disengaged constituents become. A variety of media outlets ensures that there isn't reliance “on government information or party-run information sources, which do not have the independence required to fulfil the media's accountability function.”³⁹ The mass media is there not only to provide reports on parliamentary events, but also to uphold the integrity of the decision-making institution which is parliament.

Currently, in New Zealand, the six 'O'clock news prioritises what happens in the chamber during question time, often covering the verbal exchanges between opposing members of parliament. This appeals to the media because this type of coverage provokes a response and 'draws in' the public. As such, the parliamentary knowledge of the public corresponds to what they see on the TV or the front page of the newspaper, which is often limited to MPs shouting at each other or the latest scandal where parties aim to score political points over each other. Rarely covered in such a way is the arena where the policy affecting the lives of the public is scrutinised, and the stage often referred to as the engine room of parliament, the select committee. As this paper has already mentioned, committees are cooperative and often work well as a group of MPs, and if the media covered the work of committees as much as the chamber, then the public could form a different view on the work of parliament. If the general populous knew more about the collegiality of a Select Committee, this would increase the chances of them engaging with committee business. More coverage of open sessions in the media would at least improve the understanding of select committees for the general public. To understand how committees and parliament in general can make the best use of the media, it is important to understand the media landscape at present.

³⁸ Parliamentary Strengthening. 'Unit 2: The Relationship Between Parliament and the Media.' Pg. 4.

³⁹ Ibid. Pg. 5.

The media today has moved away from being a pyramid influence with the big media outlets at the top feeding information to those below. Now the media is, “a flat networked sea in which are interspersed a series of ‘hubs’ which represent a particular brand or community around which a specific audience interest can be built.”⁴⁰ The introduction of new media technology has meant ‘audience reach’ is now based on inter-connectedness and networks rather than sales or viewing figures. For a committee, “the more connective capacity they possess, the greater their ‘amplifying; power and influence.”⁴¹ This represents a communicative challenge for parliament and specifically committees, but something which is also being undertaken today through outreach and social media. According to research undertaken in the UK, “the committees that featured most prominently in the national media achieved reach partly through their attention to topical issues and partly through the media skill of their chairs.”⁴² Obviously committees get business allocated to them according to their portfolios, however what can be affected is the chairpersons’ engagement with the public. As the independently allocated member, chairs are in a special position to build their committee profiles and to build the profile of committees further, the influence of the chairperson should be used to a greater extent.

Emphasising inclusivity and engaging with Parliament

Receiving and hearing the views of a wide-range of people from different cultures and backgrounds is another important aspect of parliamentary engagement.

“One critical insight from the broader literature on public engagement is that it is problematic to regard ‘the public’ as a large homogenous mass, when in fact the public is best conceived as a collection of different individuals, groups and communities that are likely to have quite different desires, demands and interests.”⁴³

⁴⁰ The UK Parliament, ‘Chapter 5: Strategies to Consolidate and Extend Public Engagement.’

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ ‘Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach, House of Commons Liaison Committee.’ Pg. 13.

One task of legislatures in the Westminster Parliamentary System has been to bring those people out of disengagement into engagement. One of the Welsh Assembly's key concerns has been "to broaden the range of people who contribute to committee scrutiny."⁴⁴

Parliament, and society as a whole, has been confronted with this issue in recent years. The issue for Parliament, is not forcing Parliamentary processes on a group of people who don't necessarily want to take part in scrutinising committee business. When those who are less likely to engage in committee scrutiny do so, their opinions often confirm "the viewpoints of those interest groups who regularly connect with committees. On the other hand, when committees do hear from those who are less likely to engage, it adds validity to a committee's case to make recommendations to government."⁴⁵ A more inclusive approach to scrutiny means committee recommendations carry more weight in the bill formulation process. On other occasions, those audiences that committees don't tend to hear from often express different sets of issues and ideas, which open new avenues for the committee to explore.

Further ideas such as captioning, to involve those who are hard of hearing or deaf, have been incorporated into Parliamentary proceedings. In most legislatures, committee videos, as a result of new technology, are all captioned and placed onto several media forums. Westminster Parliaments could go further by incorporating some of Sweden's ideas for making parliament accessible for all. Often committee language is confusing for the public, so the Swedish parliament has introduced an 'Easy Swedish' section on the website which is a "simplified, more informal style of presenting information."⁴⁶ This would prove useful in the Westminster system, as new submitters on a bill are often intimidated by the language used in select committees, making engaging with a committee all the more challenging. Also important in current and future engagement strategies is involving the youth in the events of

⁴⁴ Davies and Leston-Bandeira. 'What makes for effective parliamentary public engagement? Reflections from the Welsh National Assembly.'

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Hansard Society. 'Parliaments and Public Engagement – Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World.' Pg. 14.

parliament. This ensures that future generations are invested in the future of a country. In New Zealand, Youth Parliament is held every three years and provides young people, selected by a current MP, with the opportunity to learn and share information about New Zealand's democracy. This includes being involved in the Select Committee process and producing a report on a subject significant to New Zealand at the time. These two examples illustrate that as public engagement has become more of a priority for parliaments, so has including people from different backgrounds and different stages of their life. In the future, parliaments should be, at the very least, accessible for all people, with the goal of engaging as many people as possible.

Conclusion

This research has explored public engagement at one of the key stages of the parliamentary process, the select committee stage. The select committee stage is the most developed stage of parliamentary engagement, primarily because the general public are invited to have a direct say on proposed law change. The parliamentary decline thesis provides opposition to the idea that parliamentary engagement has an effect on the decision-making of the executive. However, with targeted calls for submissions for particular items of business, research has proved that value and public legitimacy is added when input from those a law will directly impact is included in the formulation of a new law. Using social media is one medium parliaments are using to target particular sets of people to contribute to parliament, and, legislatures will continue to use this format resulting in effective and relevant engagement. This research has discovered that knowledge of the select committee process within the general public is low. To increase public engagement with select committees, parliaments and committee chairpersons need to raise the profile of select committees, through social media, outreach programmes, and bringing parliament to the people. One of the key roles for select committees which will continue into the future will exist in relation to promoting democratic listening in addition to democratic voice. This puts committees at the

centre not just of a specific inquiry or hearing but at the heart of a broader process of social learning that complements all the other core tasks.

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