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# Designing a Parliamentary Briefing System: an OR Look at the Commons

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A recent project aimed to find ways of improving the effectiveness of the House of Commons in scrutinizing government policy, and hence holding Ministers to account. The study identified some interlocking obstacles to effective scrutiny, and made a set of proposals for overcoming them, involving both the provision of information and analysis to MPs and reform of procedures. It was influenced by lessons from within OR about the effective provision and use of analysis, and this paper reflects further on what an OR perspective can offer in this area, and on developments subsequent to the original study.

*Key words:* Government, information systems, public policy, cognitive mapping

## INTRODUCTION

This paper stems from a study for the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) concerning the role of the House of Commons as a scrutineer of Government policy<sup>1</sup>. One of the two authors of the study is Director of the International Security Information Group (ISIS), an independent group providing briefing material to parliamentarians on defence and security issues. The other—the writer of the present paper—is an OR academic without inside experience of the Westminster system, but with a general interest in decision-making systems and in the provision of analysis. To make our biases clear, the study started from the presumption that Parliamentary debate should provide a significant means of holding government (of whatever complexion) to account. It should be able to expose incompetent policy—and, by implication, incompetent Ministers. While it would be naive to suppose that exposure would necessarily lead to the elimination of either, sufficient political embarrassment can lead to change.

We therefore set out to explore ways of improving scrutiny, drawing on discussions with ‘insiders’ including MPs, research assistants, commons library staff, and clerks to committees, on comparisons with other legislatures, and on experience gained through ISIS. Gradually, a model emerged of how the system worked, what prevented it from working more effectively, and what might be done to improve it. We also took the view that OR might have a useful perspective to offer. ‘Lessons from OR practice’ thus became a further ingredient of the study, while also encouraging us to look beyond provision of information *per se*, toward analysis and its uses. Conversely, the study itself is relevant to OR, especially given the current interest in contributing to issues of policy and politics<sup>2</sup>. The next section outlines the main barriers to effective scrutiny identified, and summarizes our recommendations. As the argument unfolds, it is also illustrated by building up an influence diagram. The paper then touches briefly on some relevant subsequent events, before offering methodological reflections.

## BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE SCRUTINY

### *Information processing, not (just) information*

While it is true that MPs frequently lack the necessary information to hold Government to account, the immediate problem is usually not a shortage, but a deluge of material of highly

variable quality and relevance. Seldom able to commission work, and pressured by the immediacy of political debate, backbenchers must largely rely on received material and familiar sources. Government produces a plethora of official documents. All debates and written answers are made available in *Hansard*. Party headquarters provide briefings, while material produced by external information services (such as ISIS) and lobbying groups has mushroomed of late. Meanwhile much academic and 'expert' analysis, even if of high quality and even if directed into Parliament, is written in such an abstruse way that it has no hope of being considered.

Although to an extent common knowledge, the paucity of provision to help deal with this deluge still comes as a shock. Office space is a mundane, but telling, indicator. In 1992, despite recent construction, 650 MPs shared a total of 394 offices—many small and ill-equipped. Further planned construction should give each MP an office by the end of the century: that this should still be a goal is a telling reflection of MPs' current estate. Not surprisingly, 58% of MPs answering a recent survey described the Commons as a poor place to work and 69% as a poor place for their staff, frequently citing 'inadequate office accommodation and poor facilities and equipment'<sup>3</sup>. Lack of physical facilities is matched by paucity of staff. At the time of our study, each MP received an annual staff and office costs allowance of about £26 000. As of 1990, three-quarters employed two staff or less<sup>4</sup>, the need for a secretary implying that very few have more than one research assistant. Assistants are often young graduates with limited expertise, and the more able soon move on. The 'research' title is anyway somewhat misleading, as adequate research is virtually impossible. Assistants are in theory well placed to act as information filters—both by processing incoming material, and in seeking out relevant research. However, their transient employment makes it difficult to fulfil this vital role effectively.

The most significant source of *collective* assistance is the Commons library—universally praised but perpetually overloaded. The Research Division, dealing both with personal enquiries and with general briefing material, employs a grand total of 29 researchers. Some research support is also offered by party headquarters, but the parties themselves have very limited resources. Opposition parties receive some public funds—'Short money'—but most is used up in servicing the Front Bench, and is generally insufficient even for this. (The last Leader of the Opposition had less than a dozen staff in total). Although there is little space to pursue them here, comparisons with two other legislatures are telling.

- (1) In the US Congress, each representative has a staff budget of about £1/3 million. The Congressional Research Service has about 1000 professional staff, and is only one of several sources of analysis, including the Congressional Budget Office, the General Accounting Office, and the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA). This last is of particular interest as a conduit of technical and scientific knowledge. The lack of a similar body at Westminster led certain backbenchers to set up, in 1989, a Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). This has done effective work, but on a very small scale: at the time of our study, it had four long-term members of staff.
- (2) The *Bundestag* provides a model closer to home. Individual members' staff allowance is about twice that at Westminster. The numbers employed are not much greater, but assistants are usually more highly-qualified and somewhat older. There is greater continuity of engagement, and a career structure. A huge quantity of factual information is provided by the civil service on a non-partisan basis. Indeed, much (non-confidential) information is held in a central data bank, which can be accessed directly from each Member's office. Opposition members shadowing Ministers have the right of access even to confidential files. An even more striking contrast, perhaps, is in the public funding of political parties. As of 1991, for example, the SPD was receiving direct funding of around £23 million. Public funding also allows the maintenance of large policy research foundations. Pre-unification, public funding of national political institutions was running at over £300 million annually. In addition, the federal structure multiplies the available sources of analysis—particularly for parties out of office nationally—and the parties also have closer links with academia than in Britain.

Our arguments so far about the lack of resources can be summarized by the influence diagram of Figure 1. However, this is but one aspect of the problem. Even if MPs had the resources to produce well-researched analysis, the procedural opportunities to make effective use of it are rather few.

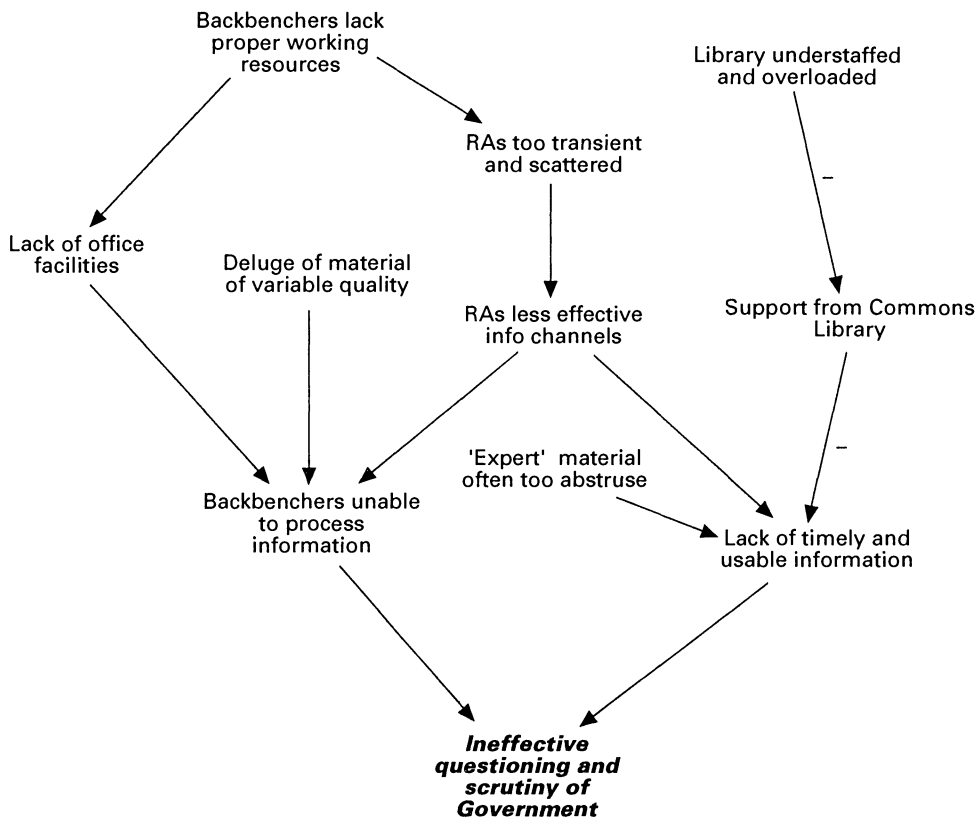


FIG. 1. Influence diagram showing how shortage of resources leads to ineffective questioning.\*

*Lack of opportunities to question*

On the Floor of the House, business usually remains firmly in the hands of the Government. MPs are given the precise date of even major debates only a few days in advance, while Ministers can announce a new policy initiative at only a few hours' notice. Opposition time has to be husbanded carefully—whatever issues an individual MP might wish to raise—while most Private Members' Bills that proceed are either non-partisan or coordinated with the Government to relieve pressure on its own programme. Where mechanisms for questioning exist, procedure often frustrates scrutiny in depth—notably the strict rules applied to Written Parliamentary Questions. A Question must not convey an opinion, nor seek to elicit one. Nor may it provide information itself, or be based on 'rumour or unauthenticated reports'. Further restrictions can be applied by the Table Office, which quite often seeks advice from the very department at whom the question is directed. Even then, an answer can be refused on grounds of cost, confidentiality, national security or simply because it is 'not policy to answer such questions'. There are other means of raising issues, for example via a Private Notice Question or by initiating an Adjournment Debate. But the odds are against a backbencher seeking to extract answers from a reluctant Minister. The would-be

\*Arrows express positive or negative influences. For example 'RAs less effective info channels' increases 'lack of timely and usable information'. This lack is decreased by 'support from Commons Library', but this in turn is diminished by the Library being 'understaffed and overloaded'. So understaffing acts to aggravate the lack of information: double negatives along a chain of argument cancel out.

scrutineer, overloaded with material of doubtful usefulness, can find it impossible to get the information he or she actually needs.

Turning briefly to the committee structure, legislation is processed primarily by Standing Committees, each created to examine a specific Bill and then dissolved. Names of prospective members are submitted by the Whips, who are also permanently present: good party discipline ensures that it is as rare for a Minister's amendments to be rejected as for the Opposition's to be accepted. Whereas one might expect a nucleus of members to serve on similar Committees, this is rare: there is thus little opportunity to build up *collective* experience. The *Select Committees* are a different matter, and are discussed separately below.

Adding these arguments to the previous ones leads us to an influence diagram as shown in Figure 2. However, this is still not the whole story. Even if the procedural opportunity arises, MPs often lack the specialist knowledge to frame and pursue penetrating questions.

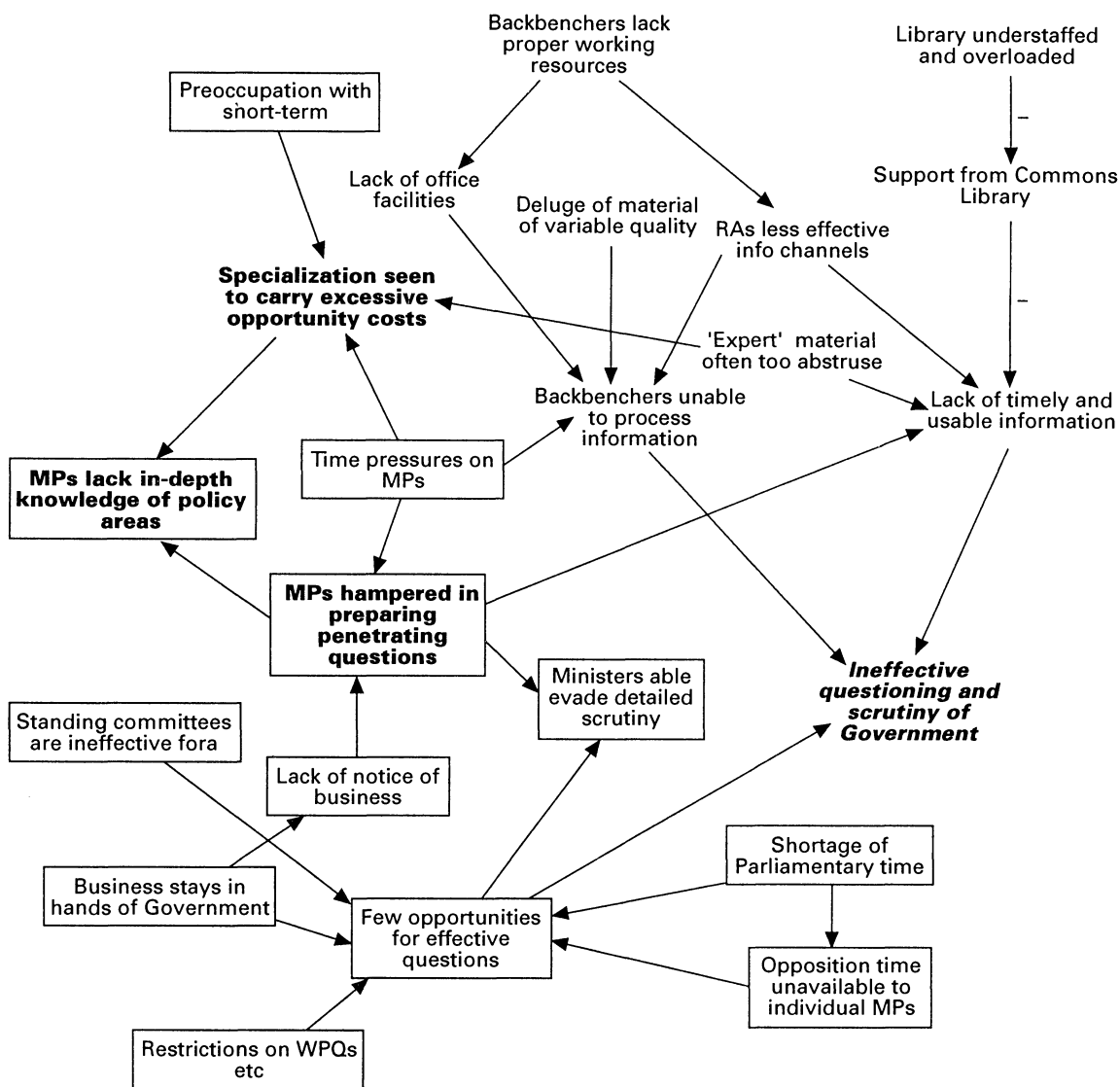


FIG. 2. Procedural factors added to previous model (new material shown boxed).

Barriers to specialization

Party because their influence on the legislative process is so small, there are few incentives for MPs to specialize in particular policy areas<sup>5</sup>. Other political pressures—for example, to react quickly to media headlines on almost any topic—increase the opportunity costs of

specialization. Meanwhile the need for party unity scarcely encourages original analysis. Clearly, some backbenchers do specialize, and may become active in their party's relevant backbench committee. However, the party committee structure is not well developed. Attendance is generally sporadic, and support facilities virtually non-existent. The committees are loose associations of Members with shared interests rather than fora in which to build collective expertise. The crucial point, however, is that the specialization required of an effective scrutineer seldom fits in with most MPs' (perfectly legitimate) career ambitions. Most of the able (at least) aspire to Ministerial office, a fact which in itself increases the power of the party managers. Specialization is seldom the key to advancement—in contrast to the US, where reputations are often made in Congressional Committees. A backbench reputation as an 'expert' in (say) foreign affairs has never been a prerequisite for ministerial office at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Once the front bench is reached, a good performance at the dispatch box may not require much expert knowledge *per se*, as distinct from an intelligent grasp of the briefing provided—precisely because one will be unlikely to face penetrating questions. Ministers can also expect to be re-shuffled frequently.

Given some plausible assumptions about the Parliamentary 'reward system' then, backbenchers' willingness to tolerate inadequate provision becomes less puzzling. This suggests that an interlocking set of vicious circles is at work. Figure 3 attempts to summarize the arguments so far. It builds on the model of Figure 2 by adding factors to do with (lack of) specialization and, at the top of the diagram, MPs' likely ambitions. Significantly, ineffective

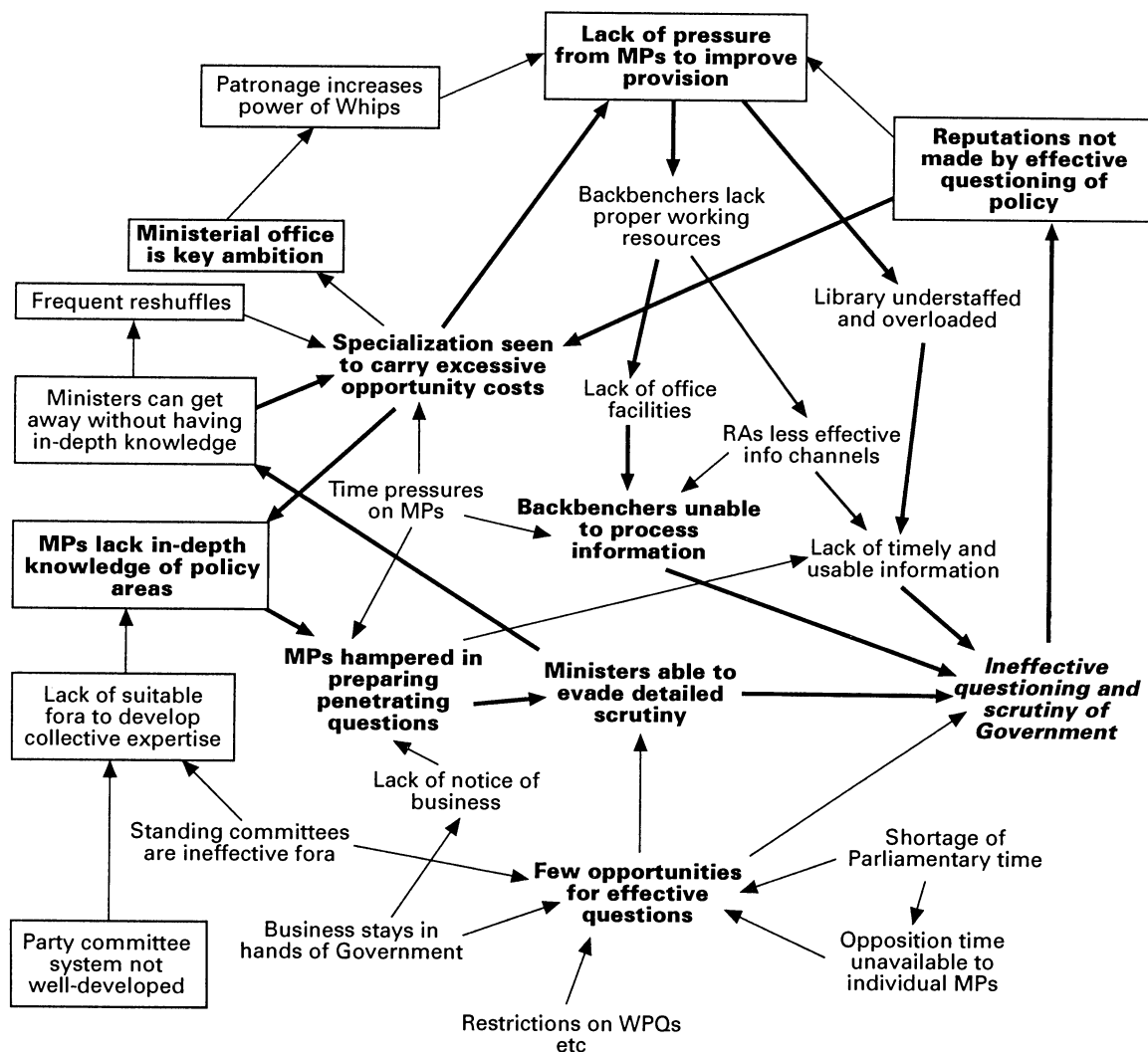


FIG. 3. Factors to do with specialization and career priorities added to previous model (new material boxed).

questioning now appears both as a consequence and a cause of many other factors. Some of the most important feedback loops are shown by bold arrows. For example, one runs from 'ineffective questioning' to 'reputations not made' to 'specialization seen to carry excessive opportunity costs' to 'MPs lack in-depth knowledge' to 'MPs hampered in preparing penetrating questions' to 'ministers able to evade scrutiny' and back to 'ineffective questioning'. Another set of loops is routed through the 'lack of pressure from MPs to improve the system'.

### *The select committees*

The Departmental Select Committees were created in 1979 with the explicit aim of improving scrutiny of executive policy. In principle, their membership is determined by the Committee of Selection. Although there is controversy about the influence of the Whips, 'maverick' MPs do succeed in joining (and indeed, chairing) committees, while their permanence allows an accumulation of expertise. Select Committee proceedings are notable for their largely bipartisan approach, aiming to produce a unanimous final report. They have the autonomy to examine any aspect of policy, at least in theory. In appearing before a Select Committee (although appearance cannot be compelled) Ministers are aware that members can 'pin them to the wall and keep them there'<sup>6</sup> to an unusual extent. Backbenchers thus have an opportunity to make use of specialist knowledge—often with media coverage. Nevertheless, the Committees meet on average only once a week (sometimes, thrice a fortnight), and members can typically devote only five or six hours a week to them. Three other limiting factors are important.

- (1) Very few reports are actually debated on the Floor of the House. Only three days are set aside for this in each Parliamentary year (as opposed to the eight originally recommended). Many are instead cited as relevant information, but this is a poor substitute.
- (2) Severe restrictions are placed on the information civil servants are allowed to provide. (These are set out in the Cabinet Office *Memorandum of Guidance for Officials*, commonly known as the 'Osmotherly Rules' and running to about 25 pages).
- (3) Select Committees are purely *post hoc* scrutineers of policy. Whilst their findings may result in changes in future departmental practice, direct influence on legislation is rare.

There are thus both positive and negative features to the Committees' present operations: Figure 4 shows the effect of adding the most significant to the previous picture. Clearly, the existence of effective Select Committees will not only have a direct effect on scrutiny of Government, but can also affect the overall dynamics of the situation. If the Committees can hold Ministers to account effectively, with media coverage, it may be that able backbenchers can, after all, make their reputations that way. The opportunity costs of acquiring in-depth knowledge might start to look worth paying. High-profile Committee involvement might even be seen as a respectable alternative to promotion to the front bench. Some new feedback loops can thus be seen in Figure 4 (shown in bold): this time, they are virtuous circles. If, furthermore, MPs are encouraged to press for better provision, the feedback loops previously identified become virtuous rather than vicious: for example, negating 'lack of pressure from MPs' can lead, via better resourcing, to less ineffective questioning, thence to reputations being made, and back to pressure being kept up. Those, however, are significant 'if's.

## IDENTIFYING WAYS FORWARD: THE RELEVANCE OF OR

In designing a set of recommendations, two types of argument proved to be mutually reinforcing. The first stemmed from the model just summarized. Although not then put into diagrammatic form, the logic of the nested loops suggested the need to tackle several vicious circles at once. For example, it would be no good improving the provision of analysis if MPs still lacked the opportunities or motives to make use of it. At the same time, it would make sense to reinforce existing virtuous circles—to work with the grain of the system where





in the hands of the provider. Another stresses the generation of demand-led work, done because it is wanted by a specific client rather than because the analyst thinks it 'ought' to be wanted. The purest demand-led system is one in which the client pays. At present, of course, the trend is for OR groups to operate in this way. If there is no general consensus that internal charging is a Good Thing, its advocates argue that groups learn to pay closer attention to their clients, while clients may also take research more seriously *because* they have paid for it. Whatever the mechanism, perceived relevance of analysis to decisions is crucial. MPs seldom have the direct power to 'decide' policy issues: rather, they are deciding what policies to argue for or criticize. Nevertheless, our contacts similarly stressed the need for 'policy-driven' analysis rather than provision of raw information. In ISIS's experience, the most helpful briefing material is analysis connecting (summarized and easily digested) 'facts' with policy positions. Sometimes information has led analysis (with the implicit underlying message being 'you'll want to know this because it's relevant to *this* controversy about policy, on which *these* positions can be taken'), while sometimes discussion of policy options has led. At the same time, the briefings stress that 'facts' may themselves be in dispute. By contrast, the German information system has been criticized for having sacrificed policy relevance to an exaggerated concern for 'objectivity'. Facts and figures are available in vast quantities, but it is difficult to work out their significance. Such dissatisfaction has led very recently to the setting up of an Office of Technology Assessment similar to (though much smaller than) that of Congress.

While demand-led systems may promote policy relevance, they risk reinforcing preoccupation with the short term. If clients are busy with urgent problems, the research system can in turn become entirely reactive. No time is left to take a longer view, or to anticipate problems. To avoid this, many groups intersperse commissioned analysis with 'home grown' studies—the credibility of the latter generally depending on the success of the former. This parallels the experience of many Parliamentary briefing groups, and also the work of the Cabinet Think Tank<sup>9</sup>, which explicitly set out to combine 'firefighting' and long-term analysis.

As for organizational pointers to success, one recurring theme is that of establishing effective working relationships with (potential) clients who are themselves 'well placed', and to try to become an accepted part of their world. The implied need for sustained contact underlies some of the more 'surface' skills of good OR. For example, customization of material is a matter not just of appropriate style and length, but also of coming to know particular clients well enough to relate to their individual values and beliefs. The presumption that there is an OR *group* is itself also significant, even if groups are not necessarily large, or purely OR. Rather than individuals working on related topics being widely scattered, there is the opportunity for teamwork and synergy. There are economies of scale in providing support staff. Above all, the group has a better chance of establishing a reputation for itself as 'the' place to go for advice. That the current climate for OR itself is one of dispersal does little to diminish the force of this argument. A final point is that the need for concentration should not be an excuse for an over-elaborate hierarchy. Practitioners invariably stress to potential recruits (and it even seems to be true) that OR flourishes in an informal culture, in which junior members are encouraged to come up with ideas and get responsibility early. Sometimes the group is an 'oasis' of informality within a bureaucratic system. But sometimes such a culture pervades the organization as a whole. It is no coincidence that these are often companies whose business is itself to do with the flow of information and ideas.

To summarize, the following criteria for effective provision of analysis seemed to be supported by OR practice, while also making sense in the Parliamentary context.

- (i) Continuity and concentration of effort to build up expertise in key policy areas.
- (ii) Continuity of contact with those (potential) clients most interested in each area, and in influential positions.
- (iii) An emphasis on policy-based analysis, rather than information-gathering for its own sake.
- (iv) A service that is demand-led most of the time, but allowing analysts to initiate studies encouraging attention to longer-term issues.
- (v) An organizational design allowing continuity without creating a rigid hierarchy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations, summarized in the Table 1, were influenced by the ‘commitment package’ format of Strategic Choice<sup>10</sup>. Three individual items merit brief further comment.

TABLE 1. *Summary of recommendations*

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### *Immediate actions*

Set up Policy Research and Information Units for each of the Departmental Select Committees, to carry out work exclusively for that committee and its members. There should be a clear commitment to finding both staffing and space for Units of seven staff.

Reform the ‘Osmotherly Rules’ for civil servants appearing before the Select Committees, and strengthen their powers to call Ministers before them.

Give each Select Committee the right to have at least one of its Reports debated on the floor of the House, per session.

Undertake to provide each Select Committee with its own office, a meeting room, and adequate administrative staff.

Reform the provision of MPs’ assistants, by

- (a) recognizing the role of the political (rather than research) assistant;
- (b) establishing a salary structure for full-time staff; and
- (c) subject to the above, increasing MPs’ allowance to about £40 000, so that each can employ one experienced assistant, as well as part-time and/or secretarial staff.

Support the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology by providing public funding at least to match that gained by POST’s own efforts.

Triple the ‘Short money’ available to the Opposition.

### *To be taken within three years*

Strengthen the Select Committees’ role by instituting pre-second reading scrutiny of Bills by the Committees, at their discretion.

Set up a Joint Select Committee on Science and Technology, supported by its own Research and Information Unit.

Introduce Freedom of Information legislation, placing the onus on Government to demonstrate ‘good cause’ for withholding information.

Introduce legislation to compel political parties to submit annual financial statements of income and expenditure.

### *To be taken within the next Parliament*

Implement Freedom of Information legislation.

Set up a fundamental review of party funding, so as to put specific measures forward at the following general election.

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### *Policy research and information units*

The need for concentration of effort pointed strongly toward collective provision, rather than multiplying individual MPs’ Research Assistants. Although a case can be made for making a new service available to all MPs, working directly with the Select Committees would both build on the best of the existing system and follow ‘good OR practice’ in seeking sustained contact with key potential clients. Allowing some studies to be commissioned by individual committee members would give members access to an exclusive resource, increasing the perceived value both of membership and of the analysis. We envisaged each Unit having considerable autonomy to establish a good working relationship with ‘its’ Select Committee, so that the division of commissioned work might vary considerably.

### *MPs personal staff*

In discussions of our proposals, it became clear that this was a contentious area. Personal staff are widely regarded as a key resource, yet simply providing MPs with more staff would be both ineffective and relatively expensive (the research allowance had already been raised from £4600 in 1979 to its then present £27 166). Our suggestions aimed not to increase

numbers greatly, but to allow each MP a full-time *political* assistant of some calibre, as well as a secretary and/or part-time constituency staff. To bring each MP's staff allowance to about the German figure—say to £40 000—would increase the total required from £17.5 million to about £26 million, if all MPs made full use of it. By comparison, the projected Research Units would have staff costs in the region of £3–4 million in total, a point emphasizing the economy of concentration. The gist of this case was accepted by those (admittedly self-selected) insiders to whom we spoke. However, we also argued that the *quid pro quo* for more generous funding was that MPs should accept scrutiny of their employment of staff. This provoked suggestions that MPs would find any interference in how they spent 'their' allowances quite unacceptable. We counter-argued that the public would find an increase without proper accountability unacceptable, but were persuaded to dilute our original proposal a little.

### *Pre-second reading scrutiny*

Although Select Committees have been understandably wary of being drawn into processing legislation, there would be advantages in bringing their skills to bear earlier on. Our proposal would allow the Committees to examine legislation in train, but without becoming part of the formal legislative process. Select Committees would have the right to scrutinize Bills at their discretion, to conduct hearings and consultations, and to have proceedings published, prior to a second reading. Not tying the Committees directly into the legislative process (and giving them discretion over which Bills to take on) should minimize the danger of their either being overwhelmed with work or falling victim to partisan division. This suggestion, and that of the PRIUs, were stressed as key proposals, through which provision of resources would go hand-in-hand with an expanding role. Together with the administrative improvements suggested, they would raise the profile of the Select Committees, reinforcing MPs' perception of them as valuable places to be. Although career priorities are unlikely to change quickly, these measures might provide an impetus. In the meantime, they would provide an enhanced role for able backbenchers.

## SOME SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

The IPPR report attracted a small flurry of media interest. It turned out to be quite timely, coinciding both with a general election campaign, and with a mild outbreak of public interest in the process of government. All three main party manifestos contained commitments to greater Parliamentary accountability—the Liberal Democrats favouring precisely our pre-second reading proposal. In Labour Party circles, public funding of parties has attracted increasing interest, despite its implications for union links. Other reform-minded bodies, such as the *Hansard Society*, also started to argue in this direction. This process was doubtless helped by some notable 'funding scandals', although public memory for such issues is short.

Within Westminster, the Select Committee on Procedure had already urged the Government to review its approach towards the giving of evidence 'with the aim of formulating a more constructive and open policy'<sup>11</sup>. However, the Government maintained its view that the present system needed no revision<sup>12</sup>. The issue of MPs' research allowances came to the fore too, through a report of the Top Salaries' Review Panel. This also recommended a substantial increase in the allowance coupled with greater control over how it was spent. The Government rejected the recommendation on cost grounds, but then lost a Commons vote. The upshot was thus increased funding without accountability: as predicted, the public reaction was less than enthusiastic. More positively, two special Select Committees were set up, one examining the organization of Parliamentary business, the other provision of information. These provided opportunities to follow up our suggestions on procedure and resources, though unfortunately not together. The former Committee has produced limited proposals for increasing notice of business. The Committee on Information led to the birth of the Office of Science and Technology, to take up and expand the work of POST. In general, provision of information and analysis seems to be taken more seriously.

While it is difficult to judge its wider impact, the study certainly influenced ISIS's own work. (At least we took our own conclusions seriously.) Reform of Parliament has become a second stream of research activity, while in its security-based work ISIS has adapted into something more like an unofficial PRIU, gearing its work more closely to Defence and Foreign Affairs Select Committee agendas and undertaking an increasing amount of demand-led work.

## REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has summarized the findings of our longer report, suggesting that paucity of resources, procedural inadequacies, and MPs' career priorities all act as barriers to effective Parliamentary scrutiny of the Executive. Furthermore, these factors appear to be mutually reinforcing, as modelled by feedback loops in the influence diagrams offered. To improve the effectiveness of the Commons, one needs therefore to address these factors in a systematic way, and the proposals given above are designed to do so. Our contention is that if adopted, these would permit Government to be much more effectively held to account. In addition, we have argued that OR experience in providing analysis in quite different settings is relevant here, especially in reinforcing the arguments for concentration of effort and for enabling analysts to establish sustained contact with key clients. Both lines of argument led us to concentrate many of our proposals on the Select Committee system. Some of the ideas proposed here have been taken up in various quarters, although there can be little doubt that reform will continue to be a long drawn-out process.

While drawing on OR, the study might or might not be regarded *as* OR. A key question is that of whether it had a client—rather than merely being unsolicited advice. Although in one sense the client was IPPR, the study was implicitly done 'for' (and in some contact with) reform-minded Parliamentarians. We attempted to supply them with a little extra ammunition and publicity. Perhaps the most important point is to recognize that analysis is for *someone*: sometimes—as here—the hope is that coherent analysis can help a coalition of interest to form. In that sense, analysis can (partly) create its own client. The study was unashamedly value-laden in its support for effective scrutiny: rather than pretending to neutrality on this, we aimed to stay within the bounds of 'honest advocacy'. However, we did try to avoid partisanship on party lines. Given a complex set of interlinked conflicts of interest and power, the analysis concentrated on just one—the relationship between Government and backbench MPs—to the virtual exclusion of all others. Not only did it ignore party divisions: we also considered the roles and ambitions of MPs solely as individuals, rather than as members of the shifting coalitions in which all are engaged. In that sense too, our model was a partial one.

Finally, we suggest cautious optimism regarding OR's potential contribution to public policy debates. In this case, its influence could have been made more distinctive by putting more emphasis on the 'modelling' aspects. The influence diagrams shown here did not appear in the original report. They could certainly have done so, as they approximate closely to the mental model we had built up and expressed in plain text. The question is whether they would have been seen merely as a gimmick. As OR models go, they are fairly transparent, but it may be asking too much to expect enthusiasm from readers used to plain text, and with no involvement in the modelling process. However, there could be room for experimentation on this (for the use of mapping in policy analysis see Ackermann *et al.*<sup>13</sup>). Meanwhile, bringing 'lessons from OR' explicitly into the report was generally well-received, and gave the arguments an added dimension. Despite their familiarity within the OR world, our 'professional platitudes' may bear repetition to other audiences.

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