

Budget Module Self-Test

Unit 6: Opening up the Parliamentary Process

1. Given the context of your country, how would you describe the pros and cons of a parliamentary budget process that is open to the media and the public?
2. How does the media access to parliament in your country compare against the recommendations of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
3. Does parliament in your country hold hearings on the budget? Who participates in these?
4. In your opinion, what is the quality of media reporting on the budget in your country? What can be done to strengthen reporting on the budget?

As the Unit explains, “increased transparency can help to build trust in government [it will also build trust in Parliament] ... gives individual parliamentarians and parliamentary committees a channel for making their views heard ... By transforming into a platform for open discussion on the contents of the budget, legislatures can help to broaden and deepen public debate. The general public is likely to be better informed on the constraints facing budget matters, which can help to build greater consensus around difficult tradeoffs”.

In my view these are very powerful arguments. The parliamentary budget process *must* be open to the media and the public, thus contributing to transparency and scrutiny *and* the effectiveness of the budget process. Select committees do often sit in private when deliberating as this enables the necessary compromises to be made and helps produce a unanimous report. When proceedings impact on national security considerations, private meetings may also be necessary.

The Scottish Parliament has published a number of volumes of Guidance, each one covering a distinct area of Parliamentary proceedings. Below is the information the Parliament provides on public and private Committee meetings¹:

4.16. Rule 12.3.4 provides that committee meetings shall be held in public except where a committee decides, under Rule 12.3.5, to hold all or part of a meeting in private. That rule, however, goes on to provide that a committee cannot agree to meet in private when it is considering proposals for legislation (whether before the Scottish or UK Parliament) or EC legislation, international conventions or proposals for law reform – although committees can decide to take evidence in connection with these matters, if appropriate, in private. The Presiding Officer has also ruled (4 September 2002) that committees can consider draft Stage 1 reports on Bills in private.

4.17. It is good practice not to leave a decision to meet in private to the day on which the item is scheduled to be taken. Taking such a decision in advance allows proper notice to be given to all interested parties and avoids members of the public turning up to hear an item, only to find the committee agreeing to take it in private. If a decision has been taken at an earlier meeting, then

¹ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/parliamentaryProcedure/g-committee/cg-1.htm#416>

the agenda item for the business concerned will clearly indicate that the agenda item will be taken "in private".

4.18. When a committee is considering an item of business in private, the effect of Rule 12.2.2 is that only committee members (including substitutes), support staff and any witnesses from whom evidence is being taken in private can remain in the room. Everyone else, including other MSPs who are not members of the committee, will be asked to leave. However, Rule 12.2.3 provides an exception in relation to the situation where a committee is taking evidence in private on a Bill when, in addition to committee members, the member in charge of the Bill and, for non-Executive Bills, the relevant minister may attend and participate.

4.19. When a committee is meeting in private, its proceedings are not broadcast and, unless the Parliament has directed otherwise, there is no Official Report of its deliberations (Rule 16.5.2). However, the committee minutes record the business taken and any decisions reached during the private as well as the public items.

4.20. Where committee meetings are held in private, the papers considered and the detail of the committee discussions remain confidential and are covered by section 9.4 of the Code of Conduct for Members. Under that code it is a breach for any member to circulate, show or transmit any such material to any other person or body, including to other MSPs who are not members of the committee or to the Scottish Government.

4.21. Committees have taken items in private where they wish to discuss confidential material in connection with a third party (for example individual claims for witness expenses or shortlists of committee advisers). Committees have also met in private to take oral evidence or to consider written evidence of a particularly sensitive nature (for example evidence involving commercial confidentiality or evidence from vulnerable or intimidated people). Committees have also met in private to discuss draft reports when they have considered that this will facilitate the achievement of consensus and prevent media focus on preliminary conclusions which may not feature in the final report. Each decision to meet in private has, however, to be taken based on the facts and circumstances of the particular item of business.

The UK Parliament is open to the media and the general public and this includes the budget process. Yet public input and participation during the Budget process is minimal. The Treasury Select Committee consults policy experts and utilises their knowledge and receives oral and written evidence about the Budget from groups such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, National Institute for Economic and Social Research, the business community, Trade Unions and, of course, the Treasury itself. Civil Society organisations are not usually well represented, but they are free to submit evidence if they wish. Information regarding the budget is conveyed to the regions and districts of the country, including lower levels of government, by the media, political parties and individual Members rather than through the institution of Parliament itself (although information is accessible through parliament). Parliamentarians generally inform their constituents about the budget through speeches and press releases although this information will be based very much on party political positions.

Engagement with the public is not formally a core task of select committees in the United Kingdom. I think it should it should be a core task because, as the Treasury Committee itself acknowledges, this

“clearly underpins our work. If committees fail to make use of the evidence that the public can offer they miss out on a crucial source of evidence to them. Similarly, if the conclusions that a committee reaches are not clearly conveyed in such a way as to further a public debate the impact of committees' work is negated”². In its inquiry into the banking crisis, the Treasury Committee invited members of the public to email the questions they would like to have put to the authorities on the banking crisis. 5,000 individual questions were submitted, the vast majority of which came from people who had not hitherto had any direct contact with Parliament. The Committee followed-up this exercise by contacting those who provided questions, inviting them to go on the Committee's mailing list so as to receive the general call for evidence on the banking crisis inquiry.

Most citizens will rely on the media for information about the budget which leads to the thorny issue of the role of the media and its relationship with Parliament. I would describe the quality of media reporting on the budget in the United Kingdom as fairly good on the whole. The media provides full and informative coverage of the parliamentary budget debate, although emphasis is usually placed on the Chancellor's speech and the Leader of the Opposition's response. The media also reports fairly on opposition criticisms of the Budget. Media interest (and therefore coverage) declines in the period following the budget debates and the Finance Bill does not generally receive the same attention.

The PAC, unlike other Select Committees, does not normally invite written submissions for evidence, but it does receive correspondence from interested parties, especially following reports. Whilst there is no guarantee Members will use this information, the Clerk of the Committee will ensure they always see it. Increasingly NGOs, pressure groups, constituents and other departments are taking an interest in the work of the PAC. The Committee's meetings are open to the public and proceedings are often televised.

The PAC has been criticized for being too critical, thereby discouraging innovation and risk. Even PAC Members themselves have complained that the media only focuses on reports which are critical of departments and Permanent Secretaries. The committee does attempt to give praise when it is due: for example a 2006 report on the provision of support for humanitarian assistance described the government's response to the 2004 tsunami as “both rapid and impressive”.³ But the PAC does not pull its punches (nor should it) and the PAC is well placed to use the media to publicise its reports. As the current chair of the PAC, Edward Leigh, has argued, whilst the PAC must give examples of good practice, it is inevitable and right that its work should focus on things that have gone wrong. In this way it acts as a spur to better performance.

The current PAC chair is a regular on the *Today* Programme and PAC reports, compared with other select committee reports, receive impressive coverage in the media. For example, *The Independent* newspaper's leading article on 26 January 2006 was based on a PAC report on the NHS Cancer Plan. The

² House of Commons Treasury Select Committee - Third Report *Work of the Committee*, 2007-08

³ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, *Tsunami: Provision of support for humanitarian assistance*, First Report of Session 2006-2007, HC 25, 23 November 2006, p.3.

increasing scale of media coverage has been welcomed by the chair of the PAC as it “can only aid us in pressing for value for money”.⁴

Media access to the UK Parliament meets the recommendations of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association,⁵ although the disclosure of Members’ interests and how this is applied to their families remains particularly controversial. In 2005 a Commission established by the Hansard Society recommended a radical transformation of both the way that Parliament communicates its work to the public and also the way that the media covers Parliament. Yet problems remain and it is essentially a problem of mutual suspicion between parliamentarians and the media. One problem is the difficulties journalists from smaller newspapers (usually local and regional, but also some national) face in reporting debates within Parliament. On the other hand, journalists often engage in personal attacks and may be reluctant to correct mistakes. There also remains a tendency to sensationalise and focus on splits and disagreements rather than policy.

“There is now again a debate about why Parliament is not considered more important, and as ever the government is held to blame. But actually we haven't altered any of the lines of accountability between Parliament and the Executive. What has changed is the way Parliament is reported, or not reported.

Tell me how many Maiden Speeches are listened to? How many excellent second reading speeches or committee speeches are covered? Except when they generate controversy, they aren't. If you are a backbench MP today you learn to give a good press release first and a good parliamentary speech second.”⁶

Whilst Tony Blair’s assertion that his government did not alter the lines of accountability between the legislature and the executive is hotly debated, the media does appear to be less respectful of Members and ministers than ever before. A series of parliamentary scandals or “sleaze” in the 1990s may have exacerbated this trend. At the same time the growth of 24-hour news coverage has led to greater emphasis on the part of government to news management, a focus which has intensified post-1997. The results are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the media is more reliant on government information than ever before, and recent governments have gone out of their way to court them. On the other hand, the public relations strategies used by recent governments have created a backlash against “spin” and increased media hostility towards politicians generally. This has led to a double problem for Parliament: the media’s impact on perceptions of politics at Westminster and its concentration on government news and activities rather than parliamentary proceedings.

Parliament also needs to become more media-friendly. It has made a start by making some internal adjustments to accommodate the new media; the number of select committee media officers has also increased to try to obtain better coverage of committee reports. Parliament’s website was created in

⁴ HOC Debates, 26 January 2006, col.1590.

⁵ See http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance/journalism/pdf/perth_conclusions.pdf

⁶ Tony Blair, “Our Nation’s Future – Public Life”, A speech on the nature of public life and the changing relationship between politics and the media in the 21st Century, 12 June 2007.

1996 and there have been several experiments of online consultation by select committees and all-party groups. According to the House of Commons Board of Management, around 80 hours of proceedings are filmed for possible television broadcast each week in the two chambers, along with an average 10 Lords and Commons Select Committees. On average roughly 400 external users a day now visit www.parliamentlive.tv.

Ideally, the media should complement Parliament's ability to hold the government to account and of course the relationship between Parliament and the media needs to be properly understood by both sides. It is perhaps appropriate to end by saying the media will pay more attention to parliament when the legislature has established itself and is recognised as the principal institution of democracy in the country. Ensuring Parliament exercises effective financial scrutiny and plays a full role throughout the budget process is a necessary part of this process.