

House of Commons

Liaison Committee

**EVIDENCE FROM THE
PRIME MINISTER**

First Special Report of Session 2001–02

Reports from the Liaison Committee since 1 May 1997

1997 Parliament

Session 1996-97

First The Work of Select Committees, HC 323

Session 1999-2000

First Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive, HC 300

Second Independence or Control?, HC 748

Third Resource Accounting and Budgeting, HC 841

Session 2000-01

First Shifting the Balance: Unfinished Business, HC 321

2001 Parliament

Session 2001-02

First The Work of Select Committees in 2001, HC 590

Second Select Committees: Modernisation Proposals, HC 692

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PRIME MINISTER**

First Special Report of Session 2001–02

*Report, together with
Proceedings of the Committee,
Minutes of Evidence and Appendices*

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HC 984

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LIAISON COMMITTEE

The Liaison Committee is appointed to consider general matters relating to the work of select committees; to advise the House of Commons Commission on select committees; and to choose select committee reports for debate in the House.

Current Membership

Mr Alan Williams MP (*Labour, Swansea West*) (Chairman)

The Chairmen for the time being of the Select Committees listed below:

Accommodation and Works - Mr Derek Conway MP (*Conservative, Old Bexley and Sidcup*)
 Administration - Mrs Marion Roe MP (*Conservative, Broxbourne*)
 Broadcasting - Mr David Lepper MP (*Labour/Co-op, Brighton Pavilion*)
 Catering - Mr Dennis Turner MP (*Labour/Co-op, Wolverhampton South East*)
 Culture, Media and Sport - Mr Gerald Kaufman MP (*Labour, Manchester Gorton*)
 Defence - Mr Bruce George MP (*Labour, Walsall South*)
 Deregulation and Regulatory Reform - Mr Peter Pike MP (*Labour, Burnley*)
 Education and Skills - Mr Barry Sheerman MP (*Labour/Co-op, Huddersfield*)
 Environmental Audit - Mr John Horam MP (*Conservative, Orpington*)
 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs - Mr David Curry MP (*Conservative, Skipton and Ripon*)
 European Scrutiny - Mr Jimmy Hood MP (*Labour, Clydesdale*)
 Finance and Services - Mr Stuart Bell MP (*Labour, Middlesbrough*)
 Foreign Affairs - Mr Donald Anderson MP (*Labour, Swansea East*)
 Health - Mr David Hinchliffe MP (*Labour, Wakefield*)
 Home Affairs - Mr Chris Mullin MP (*Labour, Sunderland South*)
 Joint Committee on Human Rights - Jean Corston MP (*Labour, Bristol East*)
 Information - Mr Michael Fabricant MP (*Conservative, Lichfield*)
 International Development - Mr Tony Baldry MP (*Conservative, Banbury*)
 Northern Ireland Affairs - Mr Michael Mates MP (*Conservative, East Hampshire*)
 Procedure - Sir Nicholas Winterton MP (*Conservative, Macclesfield*)
 Public Accounts - Mr Edward Leigh MP (*Conservative, Gainsborough*)
 Public Administration - Dr Tony Wright (*Labour, Cannock Chase*)
 Science and Technology - Dr Ian Gibson MP (*Labour, Norwich North*)
 Scottish Affairs - Irene Adams MP (*Labour, Paisley North*)
 Selection - Mr John McWilliam MP (*Labour, Blaydon*)
 Standards and Privileges - Sir George Young, MP (*Conservative, North West Hampshire*)
 Statutory Instruments - Mr David Tredinnick MP (*Labour, Bosworth*)
 Trade and Industry - Mr Martin O'Neill MP (*Labour, Ochil*)
 Transport, Local Government and the Regions - Mr Andrew Bennett MP (*Labour, Denton and Reddish*) or Hon Gwyneth Dunwoody MP (*Labour, Crewe and Nantwich*)
 Treasury - Mr John McFall MP (*Labour/Co-op, Dumbarton*)
 Welsh Affairs - Mr Martyn Jones MP (*Labour, Clwyd South*)
 Work and Pensions - Mr Archy Kirkwood MP (*Liberal Democrat, Roxburgh and Berwickshire*)

and Mr Richard Allan MP (*Liberal Democrat, Sheffield Hallam*)

Powers

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Order No. 145. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/commons/selcom/liahome.htm. A list of Reports of the Committee since 1997 is on the inside front cover.

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to The Clerk of the Liaison Committee, Committee Office, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general inquiries is: 020 7219 6432; the Committee's e-mail address is: liaisoncommittee@parliament.uk.

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FIRST SPECIAL REPORT

The Liaison Committee has agreed to the following Special Report:

Evidence from the Prime Minister

Introduction

1. In late April, our Chairman received an approach from the Prime Minister offering to appear twice a year before the Liaison Committee “to discuss domestic and international affairs”.¹ At the end of the last Parliament, our predecessor Committee had sought to arrange an annual session with the Prime Minister to discuss the Government’s Annual Report, but this had been turned down by Mr Blair on the basis that he would be trespassing on the territory of individual ministers.² The Government no longer publishes an annual report.

2. The Committee was glad to agree to the Prime Minister’s proposal for twice-yearly sessions.³ Select committees have become the most effective parliamentary vehicle for holding the government to account. The appearance of the Prime Minister in public before a committee containing all the Chairs of select committees complements the investigative work of individual committees, notably those monitoring the work of government departments. It will at last bring the Prime Minister himself within select committee scrutiny. He needs to be accountable in detail both as Head of the Government, and in respect of the staff and advisers who answer directly to him and for whom no-one else can answer.

3. The format of the occasion offers a further advantage, as the Prime Minister implied in his Written Answer. Exchanges in the calmer setting of a committee room should prove more productive and informative. The current operation of Prime Minister’s Questions in the Chamber, with its confrontational exchanges and theatrical style, provides an unsuitable setting for questioning in depth.

4. We set out below the arrangements that have been made, in consultation with the Prime Minister, for the initial sessions of oral evidence. To some extent they remain experimental, and may need to be adjusted in the light of experience.

Timing

5. The first session of oral evidence will take place on **Tuesday 16th July at 10.30 am**. Subsequent sessions will take place in January and July at a similar time. Each session is expected to last for between two and two and a half hours.

Location

6. The meeting will be held in the **Boothroyd Room in Portcullis House**. This committee room contains some hundred seats for the press and public, and is equipped with television cameras for broadcasting, enabling the media to make use of the signal for live and recorded broadcasts. The session will also be available on Parliament’s internal television network and be webcast via www.parliament.uk. This should ensure

¹ HC Deb, 26 April 2002, col 538w

² Liaison Committee, First Report of Session 2000-0 *Shifting the Balance Unfinished Business*, HC 321, paras 143 to 151. The Public Administration Committee had earlier been refused in its request to take evidence from the Prime Minister on the Ministerial Code. See Public Administration Committee, Third Report of Session 2000-0 1, *Improving the Rule Book*, HC 235, Appendix 4.

³ As a result, the terms of reference of the Committee were amended to include the hearing of evidence from the Prime Minister on matters of public policy. See Votes and Proceedings, 14 May 2002, p 869.

that the Prime Minister's evidence is immediately accessible to those who are not able to be present in the committee room.

Organisation of Questions and Themes

7. We have already noted that this occasion provides a framework for questioning different from the rapid and often superficial exchanges at Prime Minister's Questions in the Chamber. For the new opportunity to be properly used, permitting more substantial exchanges of greater depth to take place, the questioning will be based on a limited number of themes selected in advance.

8. Each session will cover both domestic and international affairs. While committees may suggest possible subjects to their Chairs, it will be for the latter as members of the Liaison Committee to agree the final agenda for the session. Questioning on each topic will be led by a different member of the Committee.

Official Record of the Meeting

9. An uncorrected transcript of the Prime Minister's session transcribed by the House's official Shorthand Writer will be placed on the Internet and in the Library of the House as soon as possible. The corrected transcript will be published in due course.

Conclusion

10. In responding positively to the Liaison Committee's invitation, the Prime Minister has provided a welcome extra opportunity for parliamentary accountability of the Government's policy and actions. It marks further progress in strengthening the scrutiny role of select committees, taking advantage of the committee format which has long proved effective for the individual committees which we chair.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE RELATING TO THE REPORT

THURSDAY 20 JUNE 2002

Members present:

Mr Alan Williams (in the Chair)

Mr Richard Allan	Mr David Lepper
Mr Donald Anderson	Mr John McFall
Mr Andrew Bennett	Mr Chris Mullin
Mr Michael Fabricant	Mr Peter Pike
Dr Ian Gibson	Mr Barry Sheerman
Mr David Hinchliffe	Mr David Tredinnick
Mr John Horam	Sir Nicholas Winterton
Mr Martyn Jones	Sir George Young

The Committee deliberated.

* * * * *

Draft Special Report (Evidence from the Prime Minister), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraph 1 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 2 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 3 to 9 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 10 read, amended, and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Special Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

* * * * *

[Adjourned till Thursday 11 July at half-past Nine o'clock.]

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