House of Commons
Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

The role and powers of the Prime Minister: The impact of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 on Government

Fourth Report of Session 2013–14

Volume II

Written evidence

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The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

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Additional written evidence may be published on the internet only.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Joanna Dodd (Clerk), Adele Brown (Senior Committee Specialist), Emma Fitzsimons (Legal Specialist), Tony Catinella (Senior Committee Assistant), Jim Lawford, (Committee Assistant) and Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer).

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Written evidence

Letter from the Chair to all Permanent Secretaries

Fixed-term Parliaments Act

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee is continuing its inquiry into the Role and Powers of the Prime Minister, and, as part of this inquiry, is looking at the impact of moving the prerogative power to dissolve Parliament to a statutory footing. At first sight this would seem to reduce uncertainty and instability, and open up prospects for more effective five-year forecasting for activity and expenditure.

In this context, I am writing to all Permanent Secretaries to ask them what opportunities the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has created for their department’s planning and strategy, and for enabling a longer-term stable view to be taken. I would be keen to come and see you early in the New Year to discuss this.

I would be grateful if I could receive your written response by Monday 28 January 2013. Should you wish to provide additional evidence responding to the wider issues of our inquiry, further information is available on our website.

18 December 2012

Written evidence submitted by Philip Rutnam, Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport (DFT)

Thank you for your letter of 18th December 2012 about the impact of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act on the work of the Department for Transport.

I have considered the questions you raised, and my judgement is that the greater certainty in the length of Parliaments that the Act brings will overall be of significant benefit to this Department. This is particularly true of the passage of primary legislation. The best example I can give is a counter factual one.

A Road Safety Bill was introduced into the Commons in November 2004, before moving to the Lords in March 2005. The consequence of the dissolution of Parliament ahead of the June 2005 election was that the Bill was lost in its entirety. It was reintroduced after the election but at the time of dissolution there was no certainty that this would happen (whatever the complexion of the new administration) and, of course, the implementation of the Bill’s measures was delayed. Additionally, having to take forward the Bill twice was not an efficient use of Departmental resources.

If the 2011 Act had been in force at the time, it would have been more likely that there would have been sufficient time for the Road Safety Bill to have become law first time around.

The passage of Hybrid Bills will also benefit from the greater certainty of five year Parliaments. It is now less likely that the Commons select committee phase will be under way at the time an Election is called. The risk to the timing of a Hybrid Bill is of course that members might lose their seats and a differently constituted committee would need to be set up after the election.

The main benefit of the 2011 Act for the passage of primary legislation, therefore, is expected to be that planning for, and introducing, bills will have less uncertainty attaching to it.

More generally, it is possible that fixed term parliaments will create greater certainty and consistency for overall Departmental strategy because the political complexion of Governments may change less often and it will be clearer in advance when a change may come. However, in the context of the Department for Transport, which is responsible for major transport infrastructure projects spanning Parliaments, this benefit may not be so marked.

I hope this reply is of some assistance to you in assessing the effects of the 2011 Act.

21 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Jon Thompson, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence (MOD)

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2012, asking what opportunities the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has created for the department’s planning and strategy, and for enabling a longer-term stable view to be taken. Your letter was timely as cross-government work to lay the foundations for both the 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) gathers momentum.

From an MOD perspective, perhaps the most important consequence of the Act is the government’s commitment to review the NSS and SDSR every five years, or within each parliamentary term. This offers the opportunity to regularly update our strategic thinking and analysis, and introduce a rhythm and predictability to our business that we have not had before. Regular reviews will also ensure that fundamental NSS and SDSR judgements remain relevant against an evolving global strategic context, and affordable in light of developments in the wider economic situation. Moreover, it enables us to orientate our long term research, analysis and
horizon-scanning in consultation with academia, allies and partners, not just to define the future strategic context, but to generate, test and adjust force structures and capability developments as a response to them. In doing this, we will need to ensure that the contributions from this and other departments are not diluted by short term issues or threats, and which could dominate the SDSR agenda to the exclusion of long-term evidence-based assessments.

Whilst the department welcomes these aspects of the Act, we may need to guard against frequent NSS and SDSRs being tied too closely to the electoral cycle, which could result in a rushed process. In addition, the important interactions and dependences between the NSS, SDSR, and Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) are acknowledged, but the choreography required to align the over-arching strategy and resource needs may not always be straightforward.

In welcoming the positive aspects of the Act, you will recall that the Defence Secretary wrote to the Prime Minister in August 2012 welcoming moves to develop a more integrated and strategic approach across Whitehall in order to prepare the ground for the 2015 SDSR. The department continues to support efforts to raise public awareness of the breadth of strategic thinking and analysis that is already underway across Whitehall, and for wide-ranging Parliamentary and public consultation and engagement to ensure that the 2015 NSS and SDSR will best meet the UK’s national security needs.

22 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Una O’Brien CB, Permanent Secretary, Department of Health (DH)

Thank you for your letter of 18 December about the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

There is no doubt that, from a DH perspective, the advanced certainty provided by the Act supports better planning:

— It provides additional clarity when planning for consultation and engagement in policy making, particularly in terms of developing policy with specific legislative requirements.
— It clearly defines the period of opportunity for introducing legislation within a session, as well as allowing for large and/or detailed legislation to be introduced in a phased way across sessions, in line with an effective policy-making process.
— In addition, the timetable provided by the Act will, I believe, allow for more effective planning and deployment of resources, especially people, to support the election process, both prior to the election and afterwards. It should enable us to plan the establishment of a team to coordinate election briefing within a more specific timeframe. This kind of certainty will be particularly important in a department such as health, which has a wide and complex remit and set of relationships with other bodies.

Fixed-term Parliaments would not change some of the key fundamental elements of administrative uncertainty, however. For example, reshuffling of key ministerial positions, and the introduction of individuals to new roles, perhaps with different emphases and priorities within the Government’s overall programme, can lead to significant changes in policy development and implementation. In some cases a reshuffle may have more of an effect on a department than an election. The provisions of the Act do not make arrangements for changes to this internal reorganising (such as fixed-term contracts for ministers) and so reshuffles will continue to have the potential for impact on business within the cycle.

Furthermore, the current experience of Coalition Government may add to uncertainty at the end of a parliamentary cycle. Although in health policy the coalition partners are closely aligned, in other areas there may be divergence in policy well before the normal general election campaigning period, as partners seek to establish separate positions. This will clearly have an impact on departments working in those policy areas.

Finally, as the Committee will recognise and appreciate, many of the issues and challenges facing the health and care system are broader and longer-term in nature than any individual parliamentary cycle. The Department is fully committed to ensuring we continue to retain and improve our approach towards understanding longer-term challenges to improve the health and wellbeing of the people in England.

24 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Simon Fraser CMG, Permanent Under-Secretary of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO)

Thank you for your letter of 18 December asking for my comments on the impact of the Fixed-Term Parliament Act on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The certainty brought by the Act on the length of each Parliament is useful for planning in many areas. However, I think it’s fair to say that this impacts less on the FCO than it does on other Whitehall departments because of the slightly different nature of our work.
The FCO leads on less primary legislation than most other major Government departments. Unlike a domestic policy department which needs legislation to implement the Government’s priorities, the nature of diplomatic work means that the FCO is usually able to make changes to its objectives without the need for changes in statute. This does not mean that we want to avoid Parliamentary scrutiny but Ministers can react quickly to world events and use different means to inform Parliament about our work.

The FCO’s public Departmental Business Plan covers the period of the fixed-term Parliament, 2010 to 2015, and is updated annually. Within that, since 2012 the FCO Management Board has set specific priority outcomes for each financial year under our three priorities of security, prosperity and consular work. These drive the updating of internal directorate and overseas post business plans, which are written to cover a rolling four year period. In addition, we are coordinating our internal Financial Planning frameworks to ensure that our resources are clearly aligned to our policy priorities.

The Fixed-Term Parliament Act has no immediate impact on these external or internal business and financial planning processes. However, it is my view that the Fixed-Term Parliament Act does give greater clarity and predictability to the running of the Department, for example in decisions on when to make senior staff appointments and in linking policy projects to the political cycle.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

24 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Bronwyn Hill CBE, Permanent Secretary, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

Thank you for your letter of 18 December asking what opportunities the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has created for Defra.

The Act has ensured that we know how long this Parliament is expected to last. Clarity for planning and strategy was provided through the articulation of Government priorities for this period in the Coalition Agreement and its Mid-Term Review. This has facilitated the inclusion of longer-term activities (such as improving resilience in the face of flooding and coastal change risks) in our Departmental Business Plan (http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/business-plan).

Greater certainty on the length of the term also potentially allows us to plan our parliamentary work more effectively. However, we have no specific examples where this has been the case so far. The Spending Review cycle is the other key driver for enabling longer term, stable planning to be undertaken.

24 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Sir Nicholas Macpherson, Permanent Secretary, H M Treasury

Thank you for your letter of 18 December.

The Treasury is committed to rigorous planning. Its strategy for delivering the Government’s priorities over the course of this Parliament is set out in a publicly available business plan, and the department reports regularly on its implementation progress. Within the Treasury, resources for delivering departmental priorities are allocated annually through a business planning process, and business units report quarterly to senior management on delivery progress and emerging pressures. The Chancellor-chaired Ministerial Board, supported by the department’s Non-Executive Board Members, oversees this process. I ensure that near-term priorities are communicated to staff via regular blog postings and a weekly cascade, and through regular engagement with the senior management team.

The Treasury’s annual Finance Bill and Supplementary Estimates processes have been altered to take account of the move to fixed-term Parliaments, giving the department further certainty around the Budget and spending rounds. More generally, we already factor in the new parliamentary timetable as part of our general and legislative planning, and will continue to build on that in future years.

I would, of course, be happy to meet to discuss this further if it would be helpful.

25 January 2013
Written evidence submitted by Martin Donnelly CMG, Permanent Secretary, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

Thank you for your letter of 18 December concerning the impact of fixed-term parliaments on departments’ planning and strategy.

My view is that the passage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act has a potentially beneficial impact on the Department’s ability to plan over a five-year term.

There are three areas of departmental work that can be affected by greater certainty in the parliamentary term: business, legislative and financial planning.

A fixed-term Parliament has already helped contribute to longer term business planning across all Departments. A number of departmental commitments use the “lifetime of the Parliament” as a reference point; for example our Growth Reviews and Employment Law Reviews will last for the lifetime of the Parliament, and we are committed to publish a full assessment of the Government’s record in reducing costs to business at the end of the Parliament. Knowing how long the Parliament will last allows us to work with greater certainty and make more effective judgements about the deployment of resources.

The Departmental Business Plans, which set out the Department’s programme of work to deliver the Coalition Government’s objectives, now cover the same five-year period as the fixed-term Parliament. The Structural Reform Plan section of the Plan shows the key actions the Department will take to implement its Coalition priorities up until 2015 and is updated annually. The latest version, the 2012–15 BIS Business Plan, was published in May 2012.

On legislation, the parallel move to one year sessions, starting in the Spring, allows the Department to plan its legislative bids over a five year period, with an expectation that bills in the final session are less likely to be amended, or lost, during the wash-up. This means that our Ministers can bid for legislative slots at the most appropriate time and avoid the uncertainties of a short final session.

On finance, the fixed parliamentary term has given a greater sense of confidence around the dates for a Spending Review (SR). This has aided financial planning, as we have been able to focus on the full SR period for our Structural Reform Plan and internal planning activities. More generally, knowing when Parliament is expected to be dissolved provides greater clarity for our stakeholders and partner organisations in their planning, making it easier for us to deliver our objectives efficiently.

25 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Dame Ursula Brennan DCB, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Justice (MOJ)

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2012, in which you invited me to share the impact that the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011 has had on the Ministry of Justice’s approach to strategy and planning.

The move to fixed-term parliaments has reduced the uncertainty about the timing of general elections, providing a more stable platform from which departments are able to look forward and plan resources over the medium term. In MoJ the new legislation, in conjunction with related initiatives such as the Coalition Programme for Government and the introduction of 2011–15 Business Plans, has supported work to develop a strategic vision for the department. This added stability has been of benefit to our forward looking delivery plans, such as the Transforming Justice programme.

Given that the planned date of the next election remains over two years away, it is arguable that the full impact of this new legislation is yet to be felt. It may be that the benefits of the new approach will be felt most acutely as the current administration enters the final stage of this Parliament, as it should reduce the customary speculation about the timing of the election, and therefore allow departments to continue their work unaffected.

28 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Richard Heaton CB, Permanent Secretary and First Parliamentary Counsel, Cabinet Office

Thank you for your letter of 18 December, asking about the impact of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act on Cabinet Office planning.

I think it is right to say that we are currently operating within a context of greater than usual planning certainty. This is partly a result of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act; but it is also because the 2010 Spending Review established the expected parameters for the department’s work right up to March 2015.

Having said that, not all of the Cabinet Office’s work can be planned in full from the outset. Our role and position at the centre of Government requires us to react quickly and effectively to new priorities and responsibilities, alongside planned activities.
In my role as First Parliamentary Counsel, I might add that the certainty of a five year Parliament means that we are able to plan, with reasonable confidence, a legislative programme for the fifth year of the Parliament. In previous Parliaments, this has been less possible.

You mention the possibility of meeting to discuss this further. I would be more than happy to do so. We might also catch up on ‘good law’ and standards of legislation.

28 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Helen Kilpatrick, Acting Permanent Secretary, Home Office

Thank you for the opportunity to comment as part of your inquiry on the Role and Powers of the Prime Minister, in particular focusing on the opportunities the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has created for the Home Office’s planning and strategy.

It has enabled better planning of legislation, with the certainty of a fourth parliamentary session. However, the impact of the Act on the Home Office cannot be fully evaluated at this stage, as we are only at the halfway point of the first fixed term parliament. I hope this information is helpful for your inquiry.

28 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Mark Lowcock CB, Permanent Secretary, Department for International Development (DFID)

Thank you for your letter seeking my views about the opportunities the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has created for DFID’s planning and strategy, and for enabling a longer-term stable view to be taken.

A number of factors affect the Department’s ability to plan. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act has certainly had some impact on this, particularly in the first years of the current Government. It provides a higher degree of policy stability for longer than the previous system, and on the whole that is likely to improve the effectiveness of policy and success in delivering outcomes. The Coalition Government Business Plan has also provided helpful clarity over the Government’s priorities on international development, and the four year spending review settlement provided greater certainty over resources available. Together, these factors meant that that we were able to focus our staff on developing a strong pipeline of programmes to deliver the Government’s priorities over a longer period than previously.

Clearly, the impact diminishes as the five year fixed term progresses and the spending review settlement nears its end. We have to manage the inevitable uncertainty around policy priorities which builds towards a general election to ensure the programming pipeline does not dip. Similarly as the spending review period comes to an end we need to manage carefully the Department’s plans to ensure we have sufficient flexibility to adapt to whatever a new spending round brings.

But overall, you are right: a longer planning horizon should promote more effective management of expenditure and delivery, and that has been our experience so far.

28 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness QC, Advocate General for Scotland

Thank you for your letter of 20 December 2012 seeking my views as part of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee’s inquiry into the Role and Powers of the Prime Minister. I welcomed the opportunity to discuss this with you in person earlier this week.

In relation to the comments I made during passage of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act, you asked whether I felt that this important legislative change had allowed for improved departmental and parliamentary planning. I very much believe that this will be the case in future, but because the Act came into force part way through this current Parliament, it is too early to judge.

As I explained when we met, my Ministerial responsibility is for the Office of the Advocate General, a small department which does not have responsibility for a policy portfolio. I expect the changes brought about by the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act to apply to larger departments with wider policy responsibilities.

I hope that this note is of assistance to your inquiry and if you have any further queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

28 January 2013
Written evidence submitted by Chris Wormald, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education

Thank you for your letter of 18 December regarding your Committee's inquiry into the Role and Powers of the Prime Minister. You asked in particular about the implications of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act for departmental planning and strategy. I apologise for the delay in responding; it would seem our original reply went astray.

I would start by noting that it is of course probably too early at this stage to properly assess the definitive impact, and we will need to wait and see how the implications play out through a full five-year cycle. I offer here some brief, early thoughts on the potential impact, from the perspective of this department.

I agree with you that the introduction of fixed-term parliaments seems at this stage to have been helpful in reducing uncertainty around strategic planning. Following the Ministerial reshuffle in September we found that the existence of an agreed end date for the current parliament was one factor which helped the Secretary of State to discuss and agree with new Ministers their priorities for the rest of the parliament and what would need to be achieved by 2015. This, in turn, is helping to inform our approach to planning for the whole department for the next two years, to ensure that all of our resources, both human and financial, are focused on achieving those priorities.

Putting the term of the parliament on a statutory footing also lends a helpful degree of neutrality to planning on this basis and enables straightforward assumptions to be made for planning purposes about the length of the parliament. It means that we can all confidently work on the basis of planning towards May 2015.

I would suggest that having a single Ministerial reshuffle at the mid-term point of the parliament also seems to have brought some benefits from the perspective of departmental planning. This provided a natural point to review plans and focused efforts as described above on aligning plans behind priorities for the remainder of the parliament. It is not clear, though, whether this single mid-term reshuffle is a feature that should be attributed to the fixed term or to the context of a coalition government.

Of course, financial planning plays a central role in departmental planning, and our current sense is that the fixed term has been helpful in decisions about committing money and entering into contracts, for example. For the planning benefits of a fixed-term parliament to be realised more fully, however, the spending cycle might need to be aligned to a similar timetable, With the current spending review plans ending in 2014–15 this has necessitated a one-year “mini” spending review to agree budgets for the financial year beginning just before the end of the current term.

It is difficult to predict at this stage what the implications of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act might be for the period closer to the end of the parliament. It could, for example, increase the potential for “cliff-edge planning” with all plans focused on the same date, and nothing beyond, but equally could help the Department to anticipate and manage the implications of this better. We will certainly seek to take advantage of the opportunities it offers to do so. It is also not yet clear whether there are any implications for the pre-election period if the date of a general election is known further in advance.

I hope that these early thoughts are useful to your inquiry, and would be very happy to meet you to discuss this further if time allows. Please do not hesitate to contact my office to arrange this.

13 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Stephen Lovegrove, Permanent Secretary, Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC)

Thank you for your letter inviting me to provide a view on the Fixed-term Parliament Act 2011. You asked whether moving the prerogative power to dissolve parliament to a statutory footing had created opportunities for more effective strategy and planning in our Department.

My answer is that it does enable more effective planning and forecasting, especially around the suite of policies we will be pursing over a given five year term. To make the most of this opportunity we are currently considering how to link our strategy cycle with the fixed term parliament. There are of course, other uncertainties that arise from new external pressures and political circumstances, which it is not possible to remove. Similarly public spending rounds are not always linked to the election cycle and this can create planning uncertainties.

I would be happy to meet you to discuss this. Please get in touch with my office at your convenience.

19 February 2013
Further written evidence submitted by Stephen Lovegrove, Permanent Secretary, Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC)

Following our discussion on the Fixed-term Parliaments Act you asked some more detailed questions. Please find answers as follows:

Are there any specific examples of how Department of Energy & Climate Change resources have been refocused on the highest priorities or the extent to which they were refocused because of the fixed-term?

DECC’s agenda is naturally long term. Much of DECC’s work is focussed on delivering long term legally binding targets, including the Climate Change Act’s requirement to reduce emissions by 80% by 2050, and the requirement of the Renewable Energy Directive to source 15% of our energy from renewables by 2020. Delivery of these goals, as well as other core aims around energy security and economic growth, is dependent on large scale energy projects with long planning and delivery horizons, and our planning is conducted on that basis. Therefore there has not been a significant refocusing of resources due to the fixed-term as many of our objectives and programmes are inherently long term and stretch well beyond the current Parliament.

For example the energy agreement set out by the government in November 2012 included a Levy Control Framework (LCF) which set an envelope for low carbon electricity spending as far ahead as 2020–21, and is an example of the sort of long term approach needed in order to give confidence to investors in large scale energy projects. As well as this we have a target of 15% renewable energy consumption by 2020.

That said, although we haven’t significantly realigned our priorities because of the fixed-term, the nature of our work relies heavily on policy certainty for our investors and transparency about the length of a Parliament helps to provide that.

Now that Spending Review 2013 has been announced, how does this affect concerns about the need for alignment of the election cycle with the spending cycle?

My view is that the timing of the Spending Round to set budgets for 2015–16 is sensible and pragmatic. Having a spending review that sets departmental budgets for the year following the next general election is helpful as it sets the budget envelope for the first year of the next Parliament and helps ensure continuity of business.

Some other departments in response to our survey mentioned that it would help with legislative planning. Is this also likely to be that case for DECC? / How likely is that “cliff edge planning” might occur, in which there are no plans made for the period after an election?

I don’t anticipate any particular risk of “cliff edge” planning. As I have said already, DECC’s agenda and the views of our stakeholders naturally leans towards long term planning and policy horizons. I expect we will continue to plan for periods well into the future, as we are in fact legally required to do by some of our binding targets, and will plan in the usual way for periods beyond elections, taking into account the wishes of Ministers as well as the normal planning to enable the Department to respond efficiently to whatever is the outcome of an election.

13 May 2013

Written evidence submitted by Sir Bob Kerslake, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2012 asking what opportunities the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has created for my Department’s planning and strategy.

A number of factors have combined to create greater certainty which has helped not just my own Department to plan ahead more effectively but has also influenced those on whom we depend to get things done. The Fixed Term Parliaments Act has been part of this mix, but so too has the Coalition Agreement, which provided a clear sense of direction from the outset of the Government, combined with the way in which the Business Planning process worked to ensure these commitments were implemented effectively. The fact that this Department has had the same Secretary of State throughout this Government has also provided clarity and consistency.

Several of the reforms on which my Department is leading create incentives for local government to encourage growth. This is true of the New Homes Bonus and, more recently, business rate retention. The certainty that local areas have had around incentives such as the New Homes Bonus have helped them plan and adapt accordingly.

As with all Departments, the 2010 Spending Review also gave certainty regarding the financial envelope and enabled more effective forward planning and management of funding.

In considering the impact of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act on strategy and planning, I am also mindful of the fact that this Department adapted very quickly to the changes that the Government was seeking to make.
The Localism Act was introduced in the first Session. Regional Development Agencies were closed down quickly and replaced by Local Enterprise Partnerships. The fact that these changes were in place quickly has meant that Government, and local areas, have been able to plan ahead for a more devolutionary and localist approach.

25 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Jonathan Stephens, Permanent Secretary, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)

On 18 December you wrote asking all Permanent Secretaries what opportunities the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 had created for their departments to put in place more effective five-year forecasting for their activities and expenditure.

As you rightly stated in your letter, the impact of moving the prerogative power to dissolve Parliament to a statutory footing does have the potential to reduce uncertainty and instability, because, unlike in the past, where it has never be known whether there would be a final term and whether it would equate to a full or just a six-month legislative session, we will be clear on the date of the next General Election.

However, outside of the clarity provided for Whitehall Departments bidding for Bills in future legislative sessions, I believe it is too early to say how much more effectively we have been able plan in the medium to longer term, particularly when issues such as the continuing economic uncertainty can make strategic planning more difficult.

I would be happy to return to this question again, once we have had more time to consider the implications of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

28 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Robert Devereux, Permanent Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

Thank you for your letter of 18 December on Fixed Term Parliaments.

The Department welcomes the stability that fixed term Parliaments offer. Clarity on the length of a particular administration means that future planning and strategic decision making can be framed in the fixed period. In particular it provides the opportunity to align financial plans and forecasts more closely to a five year term through commitments in our Structural Reform Plan and ensuring that our annual Business Delivery Plan is derived from this wider framework.

Although detailed operational planning is carried out on an annual basis, the Department has also developed a longer term strategy. Whilst our current strategy has been extended to 2017 to enable us to focus strategically on safely landing the wholly unprecedented welfare reform of Universal Credit, we currently envisage that following the next election we shall establish a strategy covering the years 2015–20, which would fully align with the electoral cycle.

15 March 2013