House of Commons
Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Revisiting *Rebuilding the House*: the impact of the Wright reforms: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2013–14

Third Special Report of Session 2013–14

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The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider political and constitutional reform.

Current membership

Mr Graham Allen MP (Labour, Nottingham North) (Chair)
Mr Jeremy Browne MP (Liberal Democrat, Taunton Deane)
Mr Christopher Chope MP (Conservative, Christchurch)
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Simon Hart MP (Conservative, Camarthen West and South Pembrokeshire)
Mr Andrew Turner MP (Conservative, Isle of Wight)

The following Members was also members of the Committee during the Parliament:

Andrew Griffiths MP (Conservative, Burton)
Tristram Hunt MP (Labour, Stoke on Trent Central)
Mrs Eleanor Laing MP (Conservative, Epping Forest)
Stephen Williams MP (Liberal Democrat, Bristol West)
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The Committee’s powers are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in Temporary Standing Order (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee). These are available on the Internet via http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmstords.htm.

Publication

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/pcrc.

The Reports of the Committee, the formal minutes relating to that report, oral evidence taken and some or all written evidence are available in a printed volume.

Additional written evidence may be published on the internet only.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Joanna Dodd (Clerk), Edward Faulkner (Committee Specialist), Ami Cochrane (Legal Assistant), Tony Catinella (Senior Committee Assistant), Jim Lawford, (Committee Assistant) and Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer).

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Special Report

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee published its Third Report of Session 2013-14, Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright reforms, on 18 July 2013, as House of Commons Paper HC 82. The Government Response to this Report was received on 4 December 2013 and is published below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

1. The Government welcomes the Committee’s review of the impact of recent reforms. The Committee acknowledges the progress that has been made under the present Government: notably the improved ability of backbenchers and select committees to secure debates on the floor of the House, on substantive motions, via the Backbench Business Committee and the introduction of a new opportunity to debate e-petitions in Westminster Hall. The increased profile of select committees under elected chairs has been a notable consequence of the changes. There have also been improvements in legislative scrutiny, with increased levels of pre-legislative scrutiny and more time devoted to debating amendments at report stage.

2. These reforms have been widely welcomed, inside and outside the House, and implement a substantial majority of the recommendations contained in the Wright Committee’s report. There are a small number of recommendations which have not been implemented and the Government welcomes the Committee’s constructive discussion of these issues.

3. For convenience, this Response groups together the Committee’s recommendations on a thematic basis. They are in bold type with a reference to the paragraph number in the Committee’s report.

Select Committees

4. One way to strengthen the links between select committees and the Chamber would be to encourage more Chamber statements by committee chairs on the publication of committee reports, and we welcome the discussions currently taking place between the Backbench Business Committee and the Liaison Committee, aimed at improving the procedure for such statements. (Paragraph 20)

5. The Government notes that select committees have been provided with increased access to the Chamber via the new procedure for the launching of reports and inquiries, and the opportunity to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for debates. As the Committee acknowledges, committees have been slow to take advantage of these opportunities: there have been 14 statements by select committee chairs on the floor of the House and very few applications to the Backbench Business Committee for debates on select committee reports in the Chamber.
6. The Government is pleased that the House has resolved to improve the procedures in respect of select committee statements and we look forward to committees making use of these new arrangements.

7. There have been clear advances in the effectiveness of Commons committees since 2010, but some issues remain and they must be addressed if the momentum for reform is to be maintained. There is no room for complacency about the success of select committees. (Paragraph 24)

8. For example, the demands on Members are now such that select committees sometimes find it hard to fill vacancies so that they can maintain their numbers and consequently their effectiveness. This could jeopardise the progress made by the committee system in recent years. (Paragraph 25)

9. The effectiveness of select committees is primarily a matter for the House and is in part dependent upon the commitment of their members and the subjects they choose to pursue. In respect of vacancies, it is up to committees themselves to remain an attractive option for backbenchers. In this context, we note the concerns previously expressed by the Liaison Committee about the need to restrict the size of committees, and the recommendation of the Reform of the House of Commons Committee that the House must also seek to reduce the numbers of committees, which had risen from 24 in 1979 to 39 at the time of their report. In time, it may be helpful to review whether the current balance of select committees can be properly supported by the number of available and willing backbenchers.

10. We believe that there is a case for some more representation for minority parties on select committees. This would involve either making committees larger or partly suspending the rules on party balance on select committees. In the spirit of the Wright Report, we prefer some loosening of the party balance rules to the unwieldy alternative of larger committees. (Paragraph 28)

11. We believe that a process could be put in place to fill vacancies on select committees with minority party Members. We therefore recommend that the House should consider again the Wright Committee proposal that the Speaker should be given the power to nominate a Member to a select committee so that minority parties or viewpoints can be fairly represented. This would also help to maintain the effectiveness of committees where vacancies have been left unfilled for considerable periods of time. An amendment to Standing Order No. 121 would be required. (Paragraph 29)

12. It is a well-established principle of most elected legislatures that finite amounts of time and opportunities to participate in activities are divided between political parties according to their relative numerical strength, as determined by the electorate. The Standing Orders and practices of the House of Commons reflect this principle, notably in the allocation of places on committees. The Government supports the maintenance of this clearly understood and democratic convention and does not agree that minority parties should, as a matter of principle, be given greater representation than their elected strength in the House warrants.

13. Any departure from strict adherence to party proportions in the House should be by agreement between the parties, as happens, for example, with the territorial select
committees. It is up to political parties, particularly if they cannot fill select committee places themselves, to offer opportunities to other parties if they choose, but it would be wrong, and undemocratic, to require parties to accept weaker representation than their numerical strength in the House merited. In addition, it would be difficult to envisage what criteria the Speaker would use in nominating Members to serve on select committees. Such a role could risk politicising the role of the Speaker. No evidence has been presented to suggest that minority party members are under-represented in the select committee system as a whole.

14. The Government agrees, given the difficulties in securing members to serve on some committees, that the size of committees should not be increased.

15. We believe that pre-legislative scrutiny must in future be an integral and mandatory part of the process of consideration for every public bill. The only exceptions should be cases in which there is an accepted and pressing need for immediate legislation. This principle should be reflected in an amended or new Standing Order which should contain words similar to these: "No public bill shall be presented unless a) a draft of the bill has received pre-legislative scrutiny by a committee of the House or a joint committee of both Houses, or b) it has been certified by the Speaker as a bill that requires immediate scrutiny and pre-legislative scrutiny would be inexpedient." (Paragraph 35)

16. The Government remains committed to pre-legislation scrutiny in principle, but also to retaining some flexibility in the legislative scrutiny process. The scrutiny of each bill should be considered on a case by case basis.

17. The Government does not agree with the recommendation that pre-legislative should be mandatory, unless exempted by a decision of the Speaker. Such a rule would make it extremely difficult for an incoming government to start implementing its programme in the first session of a new Parliament. More generally, there are some circumstances in which pre-legislative scrutiny is not possible, or appropriate, for a variety of reasons, including exhaustive prior consultation, or a requirement for urgent action due to legal, diplomatic or public demands. These can be matters of political rather than technical judgement, and are not suited to a certification process administered by the Speaker. It is the responsibility of Ministers to explain the timing and opportunity for scrutiny of bills in the House.

18. In its Report on Ensuring Legislative Standards, the Committee recognised that not all bills were suitable for pre-legislative scrutiny and did not call for it to be a mandatory part of the legislative process. No new evidence has been presented to justify a change from this position. Indeed, any tighter requirements would contradict one of the generally accepted tenets of the Wright Committee’s Report – the right of Governments to put their legislation before the House at a time of their choosing and concluded by a set date.

19. It is unacceptable that appointments to public bill committees and ad hoc committees on draft bills are not even approved by the House, and often ignore the claims of Members with specialised knowledge. As a minimum the House should be asked to endorse, and where it so wishes amend, the proposed membership of public bill committees. An amendment would be required to Standing Order No. 86. Ideally the membership should be elected for such committees on the same basis as for select committees. We welcome
some of the ideas recently put forward by the Hansard Society, and await with interest the results of the Procedure Committee’s current inquiry into public bill committees. (Paragraph 36)

20. The Government is not persuaded by the evidence presented that there is a systemic problem with regard to nominations to public bill committees. Only one example is cited. On some occasions, such as this one, demand for places may exceed supply, but this is rarely the case. A system of elections cannot work when there are insufficient candidates prepared to stand.

21. By convention, the nomination of Members to serve on public bill committees is primarily a party matter, and subject to the approval of the Committee of Selection. Direct nominations can ensure a proper balance in terms of gender, geography and interests in a way that elections could not guarantee. In addition, amendable motions nominating Members would allow any Member to seek to interfere with nominations from other parties.

22. There would also be significant practical difficulties, and corresponding delays, in nominating what amounted to 398 places on public bill committees in the 2012-13 Session. For example, any unexpected delays in the establishment of public bill committees by the proposing of amendments to the membership would be disruptive to witnesses agreeing to appear to give evidence on a particular date and, consequently, this could have a detrimental effect on the amount of time available for scrutiny.

23. As the Committee notes, the Procedure Committee is currently conducting an inquiry into the Committee of Selection and membership of general committees, which will no doubt consider all the practical consequences of any proposed changes. The Government will consider any resulting recommendations from that committee in due course.

24. Similar considerations apply to the Commons membership of joint committees on draft bills; we see no reason why elections should not be held for membership of these committees. (Paragraph 37)

25. The Government does not believe that elections are appropriate for joint committees due to reasons relating to balance cited above, difficulties that would be compounded by the need to take into account the balance of the Peers nominated to serve. The Government welcomes the fact that select committees have been both co-operative and effective in conducting pre-legislative scrutiny, whether alone or in conjunction with members of the other House. It is up to members of departmental select committees wishing to serve on joint committees to volunteer themselves and they frequently do so. The Government accommodates such requests wherever possible: for example, all six Commons members of the Joint Committee on the draft Deregulation Bill are members of relevant select committees.

26. The Backbench Business Committee has been a success and we welcome the good working relationships which it has established with the business managers, the Liaison Committee and other bodies. (Paragraph 45)
27. The Government agrees with this conclusion, which is discussed further in the Procedure Committee’s Report on the Review of the Backbench Business Committee in Session 2012-13 and subsequent Government Response.

28. **The number of days allotted for backbench, Opposition and Private Members’ business should be regularised, and made proportional to the length of a session. The Backbench Business Committee should have more say over the scheduling of backbench business, meaning both the determination of the day of the week and of the length of the slot on that day. This change would require an amendment to Standing Order No. 14. (Paragraph 51)**

29. The Government disagrees with this recommendation, for the reasons set out in our Response to the Procedure Committee’s Report on the Backbench Business Committee:

   “The Government believes that such an inflexible approach is unnecessary. Should any future session extend beyond a calendar year, the Government will continue to deliver a balanced programme of business for the House to consider. This will take into account the entire range of factors, including that consideration of Government legislation is likely to peak towards the very end of a session.”

30. Any extension to a session to provide more time for the House to consider legislation would be increased unnecessarily by a requirement to add on extra days for other categories of business. This would have an impact on the length of the subsequent session.

31. The Committee raises the issue of the regular scheduling of backbench business on a Thursday. In the first two sessions of this Parliament, one third of days scheduled for backbench business were days other than Thursdays. It should also be noted that in many of the debates that took place on Thursdays under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee, speeches were subject to time limits, suggesting that Members have attended these debates in high numbers when the topic chosen is of sufficient interest. The Government continues to negotiate days of the week for backbench business. In her evidence to the Committee, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee did not express any dissatisfacton with current arrangements.

32. The Government aims to provide the maximum notice possible in respect of Backbench business, and especially where there is a request to that end from the Backbench Business Committee for a specific date sensitive debate, or a debate where additional notice is particularly desirable (for example, there was over four weeks’ notice for the debate on assisted suicide in March 2012). However, it should be noted that Ministers usually only get two weeks’ notice in respect of their business in the House. Given the range of factors affecting the scheduling of business, it would be unrealistic to expect that the Backbench Business Committee, or any committee, could provide notice a long way in advance as a matter of routine.

33. **A representative of the minority parties should have full membership of the Backbench Business Committee. An amendment would be required to Standing Order No. 152J. (Paragraph 56)**
34. As set out earlier, the Government believes that party proportions in the House should be reflected in the membership of select committees. Any disproportionate representation by one party would need to be agreed by other political parties.

35. Under the Standing Orders agreed by the House, the Backbench Business Committee may invite members of minority parties to participate in proceedings. The fact that such members do not have a vote is academic, given the consensual manner in which the Backbench Business Committee operates in practice. Current procedures are sufficiently flexible to allow for the views of minority parties to be taken into account. It is notable that minority parties have been successful in the vast majority of attempts to secure debates via the Backbench Business Committee.

36. Despite all the recent advances, it was clear from our evidence that the Commons is as far away as ever from implementing the basic Wright principle that all time should be regarded as “the House’s time”. (Paragraph 65)

37. The division of time in the House reflects the different constituent parts and interests within it. There is no single “House” interest or “House time”. The Standing Orders provide for time to be divided between Government, Opposition and backbenchers. In any session, only around one half of available time is at the disposal of the Government. In determining the business for this time, the Government already takes into account the differing interests of parts of the House, whether that is in providing additional time at report stage following requests from backbenchers or time for European debates in response to select committee recommendations. To that extent, Government time is also “House” time. Of course, Government expects to exert no such influence over the content of Opposition and backbench days.

38. The present procedure for setting the agenda for most of the House's business is inadequate, remaining in clear violation of the principles set out in the Wright Report. The Business Statement consists of a series of questions usually restricted to one hour, based on a schedule which has only just been presented to the House. This is no longer an acceptable way for a modern legislature to arrive at its agenda. The need for reform is obvious and urgent. (Paragraph 66)

39. The Business Statement provides an opportunity for Members to hold the Business Managers to account by asking questions on the business announced or making representations regarding other future business. The Wright report observed that few interventions were directly related to the details of the business announced, but were instead used by backbenchers to raise “a range of issues of concern to them”. This observation also holds true in respect of the current Parliament, suggesting that current arrangements for the scheduling of business have generally proved satisfactory to the House. When Members raise specific points relating to the allocation of time for items of business, the Government tries to meet reasonable requests. For example, in response to such requests in this Session, additional time was provided in respect of the Financial Services (Banking Reform) Bill and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill. In addition, Members have the option of tabling amendments to any supplementary programme motions in order to allow the House to decide to provide more time for the consideration of legislation. Similarly, the parliamentary calendar for the session, now announced well in advance, rarely attracts criticism.
40. In this Parliament, the House has arrived at a consensus on its sitting patterns and working hours. In its report on sitting hours and the Parliamentary calendar in June 2012, the Procedure Committee recommended that: the “number of sitting days, and sitting weeks, should remain broadly the same as at present, that is, about 150 days, spread over about 34 weeks, per year”; that “the House should continue to follow the current overall sitting pattern” and that “the current pattern of 8 sitting hours in the chamber on each sitting day between Monday and Thursday should continue”. These recommendations were subsequently supported by the House in a series of votes on sitting hours. We believe that the current Standing Orders provide the right balance, under which the Government is usually left with control of around one half of the 150 or so days each session. There will never be a consensus on all scheduling decisions, but there is no evidence of a systemic or widespread problem with the overall allocation of business within the constraints which the House has agreed for itself.

41. It is disappointing that the Government has failed to honour a clear pledge, contained in the Coalition Agreement, to establish a House Business Committee by the third year of the Parliament. The reasons given for this failure are unconvincing—and there is clear evidence that the "usual channels culture" continues to infect both the front benches. (Paragraph 86)

42. We believe the Wright Committee’s particular proposal for a House Business Committee sharing its membership with the Backbench Business Committee could undermine the authority of that Committee. Professor Wright himself accepts that there could be various approaches to the introduction of the House Business Committee, but the spirit of the Wright proposals must be preserved. (Paragraph 87)

43. We accept that there may not be agreement on a House Business Committee at present, but the lessons drawn by the Leader, apparently from the single example of the Scottish Parliament—an example known to the Wright Committee and explicitly rejected as an option by that Committee—should not be used to close off discussion. (Paragraph 88)

44. The House should not give up its search for a House Business Committee that would enable it to implement Wright’s key principles. We set out below the arguments for and against a range of possible models for a House Business Committee. (Paragraph 89)

**House Business Committee**

45. We believe that it would be theoretically possible for any of the models considered above to form the basis of a House Business Committee; each of them has virtues as well as disadvantages.

46. However, we recognise that there is not at present the political will, on the front benches at least, to take forward many of the options.

47. We believe nevertheless that a consultative House Business Committee, along lines similar to Option D above, is an immediate practical option for the House. This would enable the Government to redeem its Coalition Agreement pledge to move forward on this
aspect of the Wright Reforms, while still ensuring that its programme is considered in a proper and timely way. Our proposal would also meet all the tests which the Leader of the House set for an effective House Business Committee

**House Business Committee - Function and procedure**

48. The House Business Committee should be established as a select committee of the House.

49. The House Business Committee should provide a forum in which the House’s business managers consult, in a timely fashion, representatives of opposition parties and backbenchers about all business except that controlled by the Backbench Business Committee.

50. We recognise that Ministers will continue to be decisive in drawing up the agenda for non-Backbench Business Committee business which is discussed at Business Questions each week.

51. The remit of the House Business Committee should be clearly separated from that of the Backbench Business Committee.

52. The Leader of the House should continue, as now, to be responsible for drawing up and presenting the Business Statement to the House on Thursday. The Leader would be at liberty to reject any suggestions or counter-proposals made at the meeting of the House Business Committee, but would be open to more informed questioning on his or her decisions at Business Questions.

53. The House Business Committee should publish summary minutes, but proceedings should be in private. It should have a joint secretariat, with elements from both the "usual channels" and the House service.

**House Business Committee - Composition**

54. The House Business Committee should have backbench representation which reflects the composition of the House, including minority parties.

55. There are strong arguments for election of House Business Committee backbench members on a whole-House or party group basis, but we do not believe that election is the only way for backbench representation to be decided. The chairs of the existing party backbench committees could instead be co-opted.

56. A suggested list of members of the House Business Committee, including co-opted party backbench representatives, is set out in Annex A as part of the draft Standing Order.

57. The Chair of the House Business Committee should be the Chairman of Ways and Means.

58. No member of the Backbench Business Committee should simultaneously also be a member of the House Business Committee.
59. The consultative nature of the House Business Committee will allow and encourage flexibility and responsiveness to urgent developments.

60. We believe that there must be a continuing conversation about the House Business Committee which recognises that Parliament and Government each have a strong interest in effective scrutiny. To initiate this process of engagement, we will seek time from the Backbench Business Committee for a debate in the autumn on the response to our report, with a particular emphasis on the House Business Committee. Recognising that there will inevitably be questions raised about how the House Business Committee would work, we see no reason why the Leader should not invite the chairs of backbench party committees to join a business managers’ meeting on an informal trial basis. This would enable any issues to be addressed, so that the proposed new Standing Order for the establishment of the Committee can be refined if necessary. (Paragraphs 91 – 105)

61. The Government believes that progress in reforming the House of Commons should be made on the basis of consensus and that any changes should add value to its proceedings and practices. On balance, the proposal put forward by the Committee does not appear to be one upon which a consensus can be built within the House.

62. The Government welcomes the attempt by the Committee to devise a realistic and workable proposal that meets the tests set out by the Leader of the House in his evidence. The Committee rightly identifies that there are advantages and disadvantages associated with various different models. The option that the Committee favours has some merits: the composition is sensible in size and party balance; the Committee is consultative and provides a forum for some backbench representation; it avoids undermining the role of the Backbench Business Committee.

63. But there are also weaknesses. As the Committee highlights, the proposed membership, with the Chairman of Ways and Means as Chair, would risk politicising a post which requires absolute neutrality. It is also not appropriate for a Committee which is concerned with Government business to be chaired by a member of the Opposition, even one serving in a politically neutral post.

64. The proposed membership and staffing of the Committee, added to the requirement for summary minutes of its proceedings to be published immediately, would prevent there being fully informed discussions. Much of the information that governs the scheduling of business is politically sensitive – for the Opposition, not just for Government – and cannot be shared widely. Consequently, the prospects for a “more informed” discussion, both in the Committee and subsequently at Business Questions, are limited. The Leader of the House could say little if anything more than he already can in response to Business Questions. A House Business Committee may find that it is not a profitable use of time to hold a Committee version of Business Questions in advance of that in the House, when all Members, rather than a select few, can contribute.

65. The Committee’s proposal makes no provision for accommodating the interests of the Backbench Business Committee, or for taking account of the progress of business in the House of Lords, both essential elements of current arrangements. These discussions would need to continue outside the forum of the proposed Committee, thus limiting the scope and therefore the value of its work.
66. The Committee’s Report does not explain how the need to accommodate sudden changes in business could be met by its proposed Committee. The formality of a select committee, with its requirements around quorum and summary minutes, is not conducive to the type of rapid negotiation and decision making that is sometimes necessary. In practice, the meaningful discussions would take place outside the Committee, as is the norm with business committees in other legislatures, according to the academic research presented to the Committee. This is unlikely to be a satisfactory outcome for backbenchers or for Government.

67. The Committee’s proposal would add little value to the existing mechanisms for backbenchers to make representations relating to business. It would create extra bureaucracy without a significant improvement in transparency or influence for backbenchers. Given that the Government’s right to put its legislation before the House at a time of its choosing is generally accepted, as are the rights of Opposition and the Backbench Business Committee to choose the business, there is only very limited scope for “the House”, via a House Business Committee, to enhance its control over the agenda or Government business in the way envisaged by the Committee.

68. In these circumstances, given the absence of consensus, the Government does not plan to pursue the establishment of a House Business Committee at the present time, while remaining open to the possibility of revisiting at a later date.

69. The Business Statement as it stands is not an adequate forum for discussion of the House’s agenda. It fails to provide a proper opportunity for Members to consider their future business, let alone for the House to endorse, and therefore genuinely control, its own agenda. We acknowledge the argument that, in certain circumstances, the House might welcome the opportunity to amend or vote down an agenda presented to it by the Leader of the House. However, we believe that a House Business Committee, constituted and operating effectively on the lines we propose, would remove the need for such a vote. (Paragraph 111)

70. As set out earlier, the low volume of complaints about the arrangement of business suggests that a new procedure is not necessary and would encourage time to be spent on internal management issues rather than the business itself. On the one occasion in the 2012-13 Session when amendments were tabled to a supplementary programme motion (to permit more time on the Crime and Courts Bill), the House voted by 508 votes to 40 in favour of the timetable proposed by the Government. As stated earlier, where reasonable representations have been made during the business statement, they have been responded to and the business has subsequently been amended.

71. The House needs to make much better use of electronic and especially social media. (Paragraph 118)

72. This is a matter for the House.

Petitions

73. The operation of the House’s petitions procedure, especially the e-petitions system, is clearly failing to meet public expectations. There is too much confusion between the
roles of Government and Parliament. This may already be leading to a growth in public
cynicism, which in the long term can only damage Parliament. Too little weight is also
given to the needs of the many people who do not have access to the internet but still
wish to engage with the House. (Paragraph 118)

74. We note the Leader of the House's comment that the expectation of most
petitioners is that their petition to Parliament, if it is supported by large numbers of
people, will result in action by the Government, or at least that it will receive a response
from Government. We also note the Leader's stated intention to work with the House
to produce a system that is clearer in its operation, and meets more effectively the
expectations of the public.

75. We believe that there must be a clear separation between petitions intended to prompt
action by Government and petitions aimed at Parliament. The Parliamentary petitions
system must in future belong unequivocally to Parliament. This means that all e-petitions
for consideration by Parliament must be hosted on the Parliamentary website. We also
believe that numbers thresholds should not be used to determine whether a petition
should be debated.

76. There is still a case for the establishment of a petitions committee, as considered by the
Wright Committee. We note with interest the Leader's recent comments about the issue. A
nuanced approach to petitions on the Scottish model, with, for example, routing of
certain petitions to local government and other bodies, could also help to increase public
satisfaction with petitions, though it would require considerable extra resources.

77. We recommend that the House should be invited to agree to a Resolution on public
petitions which would outline the principal features of a new system, and which would
invite the Clerk of the House to work up a detailed and costed proposition which could
then be put to the House for its endorsement. (Paragraphs 131 – 134)

78. The Government agrees that e-petitions are now an important and established part of
political process but questions the Committee's assertion that the system is clearly failing to
meet public expectations. The launch of the current system in August 2011, since when
over 7.2 million individuals have signed one or more of 23,000 petitions, has done a great
deal to promote public engagement in the parliamentary process, as part of the
Government's programme of political reform. All petitions with over 10,000 signatures
receive a response from Government. Those with more than 100,000 signatures may be
selected by the Backbench Business Committee for debate in the House: so far, a majority
have been, with 19 out of 23 such petitions being debated. Some, such as those on
Hillsborough, financial education in schools and fuel poverty, have had a direct impact on
Government policy. This can only enhance the reputation of Parliament and we should
aim to build upon these successes. In this context, we welcome the Committee's interest in
improving public understanding of and engagement with the e-petition system.

79. The Government agrees that there may be some confusion with the roles of
Government and Parliament under current arrangements (as is generally the case, not just
in relation to petitions) but is not persuaded that clarity would be improved by requiring
petitioners to choose between the two when submitting a petition. Our preference is for a
single, straightforward system, on which the House and the Government should
collaborate closely. Such a system should enshrine the rights of the public to petition Parliament, the right of the legislature to consider and debate the substance of petitions, and the responsibility of the Government to provide a response.

80. The issue of resources would need careful consideration, given the potentially high costs of development and subsequent running and in the context of the pursuit of savings within Parliament. The current site, developed and maintained at a comparatively low-cost by the Government Digital Service and resourced across each Ministerial department has provided an effective way to minimise the resource requirement while allowing access to a wide range of expertise.

81. We agree that there is a case for some form of petitions committee, which could provide support for petitioners, help the House determine which should be debated and help facilitate the provision of responses by Government, where appropriate.

82. The Government will consult further with relevant parties in the House with a view to bringing forward proposals for the House to consider.

Conclusion

83. We see this inquiry as simply the beginning of a process which should bring much-needed further advances towards the reformed House envisaged by Wright. We have already set out our recommendations for early progress towards the establishment of a House Business Committee. But if, as seems likely, there is still unfinished business from the Wright Committee by the date of the next General Election, all parties should agree that a new committee should be elected to see through the implementation of all remaining Wright reforms. Alternatively, we hope that our successor committee in the next Parliament will take this forward. (Paragraph 137)

84. The Government is proud of its record on promoting and implementing parliamentary reform, not least in terms of the many recommendations of the Wright Committee’s report. Under this Government the Backbench Business Committee has been established; select committee chairs are now elected by the whole House; for the first time backbenchers can secure debates and votes on the floor of the House, on substantive motions. We have provided a new opportunity for e-petitions to be debated, in Westminster Hall, and we are in the process of reforming the petitioning system, in consultation with the House. We have also improved the process of legislative scrutiny, by providing more time for consideration of amendments at report stage, a higher number of bills published in draft for pre-legislative scrutiny and by piloting new ways on engaging the public on legislative proposals.

85. As a result of these reforms Both backbench Members and select committees now enjoy high levels of access to the House’s agenda, at the discretion and control of a committee of backbenchers. It is no longer primarily the responsibility of Government to ensure that the House can debate matters of interest to its members and to the public. The vibrancy of the House rests, to a greater degree than ever before in the modern party system, within the gift of its members.
86. It is right that parliamentary reform should be kept under review in the light of
changing circumstances and there are select committees that are well placed to do this.
Such consideration need not be restricted to following up one particular report, much of
which has been implemented to the benefit of the House, but should take account of the
present Parliament, with its reformed procedures and lessons of operating with a coalition
government. It should also include the impact of the large numbers of new Members, who
bring to the House their own priorities and new ideas for reform. There may be an appetite
for looking outward at improving public engagement rather than inward at internal
decision making mechanisms. The Government will continue to support efforts to
improve the effectiveness of Parliament and contribute to the debate on how this can best
be achieved.