



TRAINING

MEMO TO SELECT COMMITTEE WITNESSES: YOU CAN'T JUST WING IT

By Stewart Jackson, Dods Associate



Although they've been around for over forty years, since 1979 in fact, Select Committees have only very recently assumed the important and influential role as integral to the checks and balances of our unique uncoded British constitutional settlement. For many years, the media, the civil service, Ministers, business, commerce and the Third Sector were both disinterested in and largely ignorant of the work of select committees, which then had handpicked members (chosen by the party whips) and achieved little of note bar the occasional worthy if dull report, which was frequently ignored by the Government.

One major exception to this perhaps unfair caricature was the Select Committee on which I had the great good fortune to serve as a Member of Parliament from 2012 to 2016, the oldest and most prestigious oversight and scrutiny body in Parliament, the Public Accounts Committee, first established in 1861 where it oversaw £69 million of government spending (equivalent to £8 billion now), whereas today it oversees £800 billion worth! Similarly, the nineteenth century PAC reported once a year in the summer rather than twice a week during Parliamentary sittings, as is now the custom. In these ferociously partisan times, it's pretty astonishing too that there has never been a public vote in a PAC meeting in over 150 years - decisions are reached by debate, are evidence-led and also by consensus. The Committee prides itself on "leaving your party affiliation at the door" of the committee room.





Amazing but true. Still, unlike any other select committee, which are often clerked with a skeleton staff of maybe three or four officials, the PAC has the intellectual and repetitional muscle of the National Audit Office - around eight hundred accountants, auditors and lawyers - to fall back on.

The PAC is exceptional but the trend nevertheless in the last ten years has meant all select committees really count - for MPs, policy wonks, taxpayers and businesses, especially those seeking to safeguard and enhance their reputations and those who work to provide services for the government. Ever since the reforms in the 2010-15 Parliament, which meant Select Committee Chairmen were elected by all MPs and individual members by their Parliamentary party caucuses, the power of the whips has been broken and securing a seat on a high profile committee can be lucrative, rewarding and career-enhancing - and maybe all three.

In truth, if you do the job properly, serving diligently on a select committee is hard work and not a task for which your demanding constituents are often likely to thank you for. They often assume if you're not in the Chamber or the constituency, you must be skiving. It was ever thus.

The media also now understand in a way they never did before that select committee reports can be a rich mine of topical and interesting stories about waste, incompetence, corruption, risk-taking, arrogance and the like and a showcase for flamboyant and newsworthy witnesses and showboating and media-savvy Chairs, like my old boss Dame Margaret Hodge MP, who chaired the PAC between 2010 and 2015 and who almost singlehandedly relaunched the committee as a trailblazer after a quiet few years and put the massive issue of corporate tax avoidance front and centre of British polity as she slowly and methodically eviscerated business giants Google, Starbucks and Amazon in 2012.

Others followed in her wake, such as Andrew Tyrie at the Treasury Select Committee and Keith Vaz at the Home Affairs Select Committee. The drama and sense of occasion present at key hearings have been great box office on social media, broadcast media and broadsheet newspapers and to be candid, has occasionally led those committees to chase ratings rather than inquiring solely into the efficacy of government policy or taxpayer value for money. In short, it's not been unalloyed good news.



That said, select committees fulfil an important function in holding Ministers and in the case of the PAC, senior civil servants, to account. The reputation of a Permanent Secretary can be completely shredded by a poor committee performance, with ramifications within their department and for their Ministerial team.

They shine a harsh light on conspiracies and cock-ups, on ministerial failings and minor triumphs, on institutional and structural failings and it rights wrongs that “the system” too often misses in the hurly-burly of governing a complex, multi-faceted modern rich democracy.

They really can damage and maybe even break careers and there’s a reason Ministers hate appearing before them is not just because the evidence session is one of the few occasions that they are not in control and indeed adrift in front of a hostile committee and microphones and cameras but the preparation for the session will have meant many hours of homework and second-guessing potential gotcha moments, elephant traps, curveball questions and likely rabbit holes with their officials and special advisors.

In summary, even veteran performers like Michael Gove make sure that they’re ready for combat and it’s indicative of the fact that the government takes these grilling and the subsequent reports much more seriously than hitherto.



Business people particularly might very well be driven entrepreneurs, whip-smart and creative thinkers, but they often fail to comprehend how important it is to perform well before a select committee and why they need proper training and prep before they voluntarily get into the shark-infested tank which is a select committee session, especially one where their company or organisation is - or has - faced criticism.

They need to understand the prejudices, records, personalities and demeanours of each committee members, their political hobby horses and trigger points. They need to combine an impossible mix of encyclopaedic knowledge of their subject, charm not smarm, humility, ability to think on their feet, iron self-discipline, focus and good humour and maybe then they might escape alive. Grace under fire is the best way to describe it. Above all, never ever tell a lie and always answer the question and don't flannel. It will end badly if MPs think you think they're just a little bit dim.

And why does it matter? Well, share price, bonuses, corporate reputation and branding, career promotion and future government contracts and market share matter quite a bit and all can be impacted by a disastrous outing before cranky Members of Parliament, followed up by a painful mauling in the media and an awkward board meeting or CEO interview without coffee.

Invariably it works out. The MPs have a job to do, they understand you're a professional taking one for the team and the evidence taking goes without a hitch. Maybe the chairman even takes a shine to you but why take a chance?

If you're a risk-taker, you might try to wing it. Otherwise, you'd be wise to get inside the head of your interlocutors and invest in proper prior planning and training. It might save your blushes and your job!

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