

An Examination of Committee Systems in Parliaments of Small States: A Study of Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica

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ABSTRACT

In democratic states the legislature has various functions. One of the key functions is to scrutinise the legislative proposals of the executive and keep an eye on government activities. The committee system is the central organ that allows legislators to concentrate in particular areas of activity. It is therefore the most significant legislative mechanism and is often referred to as “miniature legislatures” or “microcosms” of their parent bodies. The purpose of this paper is to carry out a comparative analysis of questionnaires administered to Members of Parliament (MPs) in relations to the role of parliamentary committees and their effort to exercise rigorous control over executives in two republics in the Commonwealth Caribbean namely, Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago.

Introduction

On the whole, parliaments in the Commonwealth Caribbean have not been the focus of much cross-national study and as a result provides the rationale and basis for this paper. Hence, result-oriented parliamentary research concentrating on parliamentary committees and their linkage to the executive on the one hand and to society on the other is essential for both understanding and promoting the process of good governance. Therefore, it has become worthwhile to examine parliamentary committees in the Commonwealth Caribbean by drawing on the data collected from two questionnaires administered to MPs

in Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago in 2009. The objective was to measure the perception of MPs regarding the role of parliamentary committees in securing executive accountability.

The Commonwealth Caribbean Context

Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica became independent states in 1962 and 1978 respectively, after British rule. Following independence the new constitutions of Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica which were enacted in 1962 and 1978 in that order, implemented parliamentary systems of government. The Trinidad and Tobago (constitution) (Order-In-Council 1962) consigned all legislative authority to a bicameral parliament whereas in the case of Dominica, its constitution transferred all legislative authority to a unicameral Parliament called the National Assembly. In 1976 Trinidad and Tobago became a Republic discarding the Constitutional Monarchy status since independence in 1962.

Under the 1976 Republican constitution in Trinidad and Tobago (Laws of Trinidad and Tobago, Act No. 4 1976) and the 1978 Independence constitution in Dominica (SI 1978/No 1027), the Presidents of both countries were made quasi-ceremonial Heads of State who exercised most of their powers on the advice of Ministers with limited exception for the personal exercise of powers after consultation or in their own discretion or deliberate judgement. The Prime Minister and the cabinet are collectively responsible to the legislatures. To ensure executive accountability to the parliament, the constitution makers in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica incorporated provisions for parliamentary committee systems thereby formally granting the parliaments the authority to appoint standing committees as necessary for discharging their functions. Even though many favourable pre-conditions of the parliamentary system were provided in the constitutions of Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, the power of the executive, the party machinery and the majority of the governing party in the parliament hindered the opportunities for the countries to balance relations between the executive and the legislature.

This restriction, however, is more noticeable in Westminster systems than in consensual democracies or congressional systems (King 1981, 77-78). Since the executive and the legislature remain independent of one another and cannot threaten each other's existence in presidential systems, their relationship is likely

to be balanced. However, although the executive owes its composition to, and remains formally responsible to, parliament in parliamentary systems, the former, in actual practice, dominates the latter. As a result, it is often argued that the responsibility of a parliament in a Westminster system remains restricted to approving policies proposed by the executive. But it is now widely recognised that one important way of strengthening parliament without weakening the executive is to make maximum use of committees. Committees allow the legislature to simultaneously perform numerous functions that otherwise might not be conducted at all. For example, they help parliament reduce its workload and perform different functions more efficiently.

Up until 1979, most of the parliaments patterned after the Westminster model did not make much use of committees. They historically resisted embracing the new roles of parliamentary committees pioneered elsewhere. In particular, department-related committees that shadow government departments were very often seen as a characteristic of the congressional system; an alien device inappropriate to parliamentary government. Initial attempts to set up department-related committees in different Westminster-type democracies were opposed on the grounds that they would detract attention from the chamber, elevate some members to new positions of influence, and reduce the party struggle to technical matters and coalitional politics.

However, many Westminster-derived parliaments have, in recent years, accepted this important congressional method as a means of strengthening the scrutiny capacity of parliament. Parliamentary scrutiny and criticism of the political executive and its bureaucracy are now fundamental aspects of Westminster-style governments. That is to say, those who exercise the power of government have to be publicly accountable for their action. Therefore, the exercise of governmental power is legitimized by the requirements of public accountability.

The requirement of public accountability can be viewed as a chain where, the Cabinet, or executive branch, is held collectively responsible and accountable to an elected legislature and must maintain the confidence of the legislature in order to remain in power. Therefore, if the government loses the

confidence of the legislature, it must either resign or request a new election. These practices theoretically provide the check on the power of the executive within the system. This essential aspect of the Westminster model is lacking in the Commonwealth Caribbean and for a long time its parliaments have been unable to perform the key parliamentary task of oversight of the executive.

On the whole, parliaments in the Commonwealth Caribbean have not been the focus of much cross-national study and as a result this provides the rationale and basis for this study. Likewise, for the consolidation of democratic governance, the necessity of good institutions cannot be denied. Hence, result-oriented parliamentary research concentrating on parliamentary committees and their linkage to the executive on the one hand and to society on the other is essential for both understanding and promoting the process of good governance.

The National Assembly and the Parliament, as the legislatures are called in the Republics of Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago, have traditionally made some use of committees. But, until recently, the committees did not experience balanced growth in both countries. Nor did their work arouse any serious public or political interest. They also remained a neglected field of academic inquiry. However, in recent years, in particular since the election of the Fifth Parliament in Trinidad and Tobago 1995, committees have received important, if not widespread, recognition. These are now more visible and much talked-about institutions, and have a better scope to assert themselves, although the extent to which they can live up to the expectations of their sponsors is yet to be ascertained properly.

An appreciative explanation of committee systems in the Commonwealth Caribbean is essential for a number of reasons. It is becoming more and more obvious that parliamentary systems are extremely much more complex and more varied at the institutional level than previously thought. Knowing when and under what circumstances parliaments are likely to be more or less effective is important but has received little attention in the region. If strong committees are associated with strong legislatures, then being able to explain the difference in committee structures involving comparable democracies is critical in

understanding when and under what conditions legislatures will be more or less important in the political system.

Parliamentary Committees

The idea of the committee, of which the parliamentary committee is but one example involves a concept which must be one of the most fundamental and widespread in human societies and organisations. In most cases, the usage of the committee is defined in terms such as ‘a body of persons appointed or elected for some special business or function’ or “a body of persons delegated to consider, investigate, or take action upon and usually to report concerning some matter or business” (Onions 1973, 377).

The first connection to note between committees and parliaments comes directly from the definition illustrated above; a parliament itself may be considered a committee in this case a sub-set of the electorate. Within Westminster-style parliaments the most important committee is the cabinet ‘a committee of the legislative body selected to be the executive body’ (Bagehot 1867, 66). The committee that is the cabinet is an essential feature of the Westminster form of responsible parliamentary government and although not mentioned clearly in the Constitution has been adopted by the Commonwealth Caribbean parliaments ever since their inception, together with many other practices from the British parliament such as standing orders.

The term committee is also used in the parliamentary context to describe any of several types of bodies of parliamentarians established by either (or both) houses, but of a numerical size very much smaller than the whole of the chamber. In the Westminster tradition this is a practice of long standing:

In both Houses of Parliament the practice of delegating to small bodies of members, regarded as representing the House itself, the consideration of questions, which, as involving points of detail or questions of a technical nature, are unsuited to the House as a whole, is as old as any part of their settled procedure (May 1971, 18th ed. 591).

The Significance of Parliamentary of Committees

Legislators on the whole have particular purposes in mind when they create committees and committee systems. These purposes can usually tell the difference in the rules that govern the operations of

committees. In this sense “purpose” is not the same as “function” in that there are committee functions that can be distinguished. On the other hand, some purposes that legislators associate with particular committees are also widely recognized as functional categories. It should be pointed out that purposes are not always linked on a one-for-one basis with particular committees. Some purposes may be associated with more than one type of committee in a given legislature.

Many observers see the development and growing use of parliamentary committees as a necessary response and solution to the joint problems of government domination of parliaments and the growing workload of parliamentarians because, in general terms:

1. Committees can be used to spread a Parliament's workload;
2. Committees have greater time available to them and can examine issues in-depth;
3. The use of committees permits members to develop knowledge and expertise in particular areas;
4. Committees can be used to perform functions which the Houses of Parliament are ill-suited to perform (e.g. finding-out facts, examining witnesses, sifting evidence, drawing up reasoned conclusions);
5. Committees, because of their composition and structure, can adopt a relatively informal procedure;
6. Committees can be used to develop bi-partisan policy and may operate across party lines in conducting inquiries; and
7. Committees operate as forums in which backbenchers (especially government back benchers) can exert influence, and where they are less unwilling to vote against the Government and, conversely, the Government is less embarrassed by a defeat.

The relations among committees tend to differ across countries. However, intrinsically the functions they perform can be quite alike from legislature to legislature. The main tasks of committees are grouped as follows, according to Shaw: (Lee and Shaw 1979, 370-377).

1. Legislative function: Committees are expected to deal with legislation. The referral of a bill to a committee means that the committee must give detailed consideration to it and to report it to the plenary.
2. Financial function: It is expected committees will deal with financial matters. In general, the various committees that operate in this area are concerned with the budget and

revenue aspects, and with the administration of spending programmes by the government.

3. Investigative function: Committees are often appointed for the purpose of conducting investigations in connection with legislation or executive oversight.
4. Administrative oversight function: Committees are the most useful instrument of legislatures to oversee the performance of the executive, control the implementation of policies and call to account the officials of the government.
5. Housekeeping function: Some committees are appointed to fulfil housekeeping activities as, for example, internal rules and procedure, internal administration and the setting of the agenda.

Acknowledgment of these tasks has led to a rise in the recognition of parliamentary committees throughout the world, especially in the last 30 years. Articles published in “The Parliamentarian”, the Journal of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, reveal a genuine stream of new purposes to which the parliamentary committee has been put.

Method

The nature of the questionnaires study was cross-sectional for Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica. The idea for cross-sectional testing was to measure some variables at a single time, as against longitudinal surveys which are conducted again and again to monitor changes. Extensive fieldwork was undertaken in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica during the period October 2006 to December 2009. Using information collected during the period on the current committee structures in both countries a questionnaire was designed with 34 questions divided into four sections i.e. Structure, Procedures, Functions and Resources.

The strategy behind these four sections is keeping in mind the dependent variable i.e. executive accountability, which becomes dependent on certain factors such as a strong legislature with an effective committee system. Institutional devices such as committees must be put in place to keep a watchful eye over the executive and hold them accountable for sins of omission and commission. As a result, the objective of the legislature is to extend its ability to oversee, or scrutinize the government and ministers is

a major- perhaps even the central-factor explaining the increasing use of committees in parliamentary democracies (Longley and Davidson 1998: 4).

While it is normal to refer to parliamentary committees as if they were well-defined organisations, in reality, they appear in specialised variations. Noting that the structure of committees varies in functions, size, composition, degree of the institutionalisation and along many other dimensions (Strøm 1998: 29). Eleven questions on the questionnaire are dedicated to this factor as a means of assessing the effectiveness of parliamentary committees. Another issue that affects the working of parliamentary committees is its procedure. Eight questions were devoted to this factor since procedures conveys a great deal about the managerial values of a parliament. Usually the Standing Orders of a House determine the ways in which committee conduct their business. The procedure of committees can be analysed in a number of ways:

1. Agenda Setting
2. Selection of Chair and membership
4. Committee Resources
5. Committee Openness
6. 7. Minority Reports

In today's environment legislature can no longer function without committees than a cabinet could operate without ministries (Shaw 1979:419). As a result, the function of a parliamentary committee is essential in fulfilling its role. As a result, nine questions are assigned to examine the investigatory function of parliamentary committees. The final segment of the questionnaire concentrated on the resources required for the effective functioning of a committee. It is very easy for the executive to make parliamentary committees ineffective by not allowing them to have sufficient staff for research and support (Martin, 1982: 237). Accordingly, six questions were assigned to this issue the.

The questionnaire was administered to 102 MPs (30 MPs of the National Assembly in Dominica, 72 MPs of the parliament in Trinidad and Tobago) in 2009. The surveys were designed to measure the perception

of MPs as regards the role of parliamentary committees in holding the executive accountable. The nature of the questionnaires administered in Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago were similar, in that they were semi-structured/ open-ended. This was so as to measure the many dimensions of parliament and parliamentary committee system as it attempts to hold the executive accountable.

To ascertain which preferences were prominent among the MPs in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, statistical analyses such as percentages and means were carried out. For each question there was a four-point answer scale ranging from “strongly agree”, “agree”, “disagree” to “strongly disagree completely”. The higher the mean score, the stronger is the preferences of MPs in favour of institutional revamping of the committee system. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 17.0 was used to analyse the data from the two questionnaires. The statistical analyses gathered from SPSS were to reduce errors and time from manual calculations.

The responses by the MPs in both countries were considered statistically significant if H_0 is true, the p -value (probability value) is the probability that the observed outcome (or a value more extreme than what we observe) would happen. The p -value is a value obtained after calculating a test statistic. The smaller the p -value, the stronger the evidence against the H_0 with alpha at .05, then the p -value must be smaller than this to be considered statistically significant. Bearing in mind, that the p -value notifies us about the probability to expect concerning the result given the null is true. If, however the p -value is less than alpha we must reject the null and say there appears to be a difference in the perception between MPs in Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago concerning committees and executive accountability.

1. Utilising SPSS allowed for the configuration of the null hypothesis and the alternative hypothesis using statistical notation. These hypotheses are mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

H_0 : There is not a significant difference in MPs perception of the role of parliamentary committees

H_1 : There is significant difference in MPs perception of the role of parliamentary committees

The null hypothesis is then assumed to be true unless we find evidence to the contrary. If we find that the evidence is just too unlikely given the null hypothesis, we assume the alternative hypothesis is more

likely to be correct. In "traditional statistics" a probability of something occurring of less than .05 i.e. 5% = 1 chance in 20 is conventionally considered "unlikely".

Comparative Analysis of the Results of the Questionnaires Administered in 2009

Table 1 portrays independent samples t-test information to ascertain whether there is a significant difference between the MPs in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica in relation to their perception of committees and their capability of holding the government accountable. The table shows a t-test for equality of variance and a t-test for equality of means which is found on the right half of the output table. The null and alternative hypotheses for the Levene's tests are the null hypothesis is the perception of MPs in Trinidad and Tobago (variance 1) = MPs perception in Dominica (variance 2) versus the alternative that variance 1 does not equal variance 2. This tests the assumption that the variance between Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica is the same. These results are based upon the F statistic. The Levene's test provides a *p*-value that is the probability of making a Type I error. If $p \leq .05$, then the variance of the countries are not equal; if $p > .05$, the variances are equal.

Table 1: Independent Samples Test for Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
q1 Structure	Equal variances assumed	3.536	.066	2.225	53	.030	.379	.170	.037	.720
	Equal variances not assumed			2.229	39.857	.032	.379	.170	.035	.722
q2 Structure	Equal variances assumed	.259	.613	.712	53	.479	.129	.180	-.233	.491
	Equal variances not assumed			.677	34.065	.503	.129	.190	-.257	.514
q3 Structure	Equal variances assumed	.099	.754	-.381	53	.705	-.079	.206	-.492	.335
	Equal variances not assumed			-.379	39.047	.707	-.079	.207	-.498	.341

q4	Equal	.107	.744	-.757	53	.453	-.136	.179	-.495	.224
Structure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-.704	31.947	.486	-.136	.193	-.528	.257
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q5	Equal	1.426	.238	-1.106	53	.274	-.214	.194	-.603	.174
Structure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-.999	29.336	.326	-.214	.215	-.653	.224
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q6	Equal	1.190	.280	-2.980	52	.004	-.609	.204	-1.019	-.199
Structure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-2.922	37.578	.006	-.609	.208	-1.031	-.187
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q7	Equal	.386	.537	2.140	53	.037	.443	.207	.028	.858
Structure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			2.147	40.069	.038	.443	.206	.026	.860
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q8	Equal	2.205	.143	.758	53	.452	.186	.245	-.306	.677
Structure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			.712	32.843	.482	.186	.261	-.345	.717
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q9	Equal	.761	.387	-2.584	53	.013	-.607	.235	-1.078	-.136
Structure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-2.710	45.501	.009	-.607	.224	-1.058	-.156
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q10	Equal	2.591	.113	-1.635	53	.108	-.257	.157	-.573	.058
Structure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-1.634	39.599	.110	-.257	.157	-.575	.061
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q11	Equal	.815	.371	-1.504	53	.139	-.271	.180	-.633	.091
Structure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-1.507	39.931	.140	-.271	.180	-.635	.093
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q12	Equal	9.321	.004	2.006	53	.050	.386	.192	.000	.771
Procedure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			1.791	28.364	.084	.386	.215	-.055	.827
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q13	Equal	1.210	.276	.802	53	.426	.136	.169	-.203	.475
Procedure	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			.782	36.728	.439	.136	.173	-.216	.487
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									

q14	Equal	.002	.962	-.210	53	.834	-.043	.204	-.452	.366
Procedures	variances assumed									
	Equal			-.209	39.342	.835	-.043	.205	-.457	.371
	variances not assumed									
q15	Equal	.301	.586	-.112	53	.911	-.021	.191	-.405	.363
Procedures	variances assumed									
	Equal			-.108	35.179	.915	-.021	.199	-.426	.383
	variances not assumed									
q16	Equal	.231	.633	.650	53	.518	.121	.187	-.253	.496
Procedures	variances assumed									
	Equal			.642	38.132	.525	.121	.189	-.262	.504
	variances not assumed									
q17	Equal	1.901	.174	-1.361	52	.179	-.192	.141	-.476	.091
Procedures	variances assumed									
	Equal			-1.347	35.984	.186	-.192	.143	-.482	.097
	variances not assumed									
q18	Equal	1.858	.179	-1.759	53	.084	-.314	.179	-.673	.044
Procedures	variances assumed									
	Equal			-1.806	42.919	.078	-.314	.174	-.665	.037
	variances not assumed									
q19	Equal	1.283	.262	1.228	53	.225	.279	.227	-.176	.734
Procedures	variances assumed									
	Equal			1.149	32.431	.259	.279	.243	-.215	.772
	variances not assumed									
q20	Equal	.070	.792	2.010	53	.050	.436	.217	.001	.870
Functions	variances assumed									
	Equal			1.966	37.098	.057	.436	.222	-.013	.885
	variances not assumed									
q21	Equal	1.941	.169	2.321	52	.024	.481	.207	.065	.897
Functions	variance assumed									
	Equal			2.355	38.607	.024	.481	.204	.068	.895
	variances not assumed									
q22	Equal	1.150	.288	-1.238	53	.221	-.257	.208	-.674	.159
Functions	variances assumed									
	Equal			-1.219	37.822	.230	-.257	.211	-.684	.170
	variances not assumed									
q23	Equal	1.583	.214	-1.572	52	.122	-.286	.182	-.650	.079
Functions	variances assumed									
	Equal			-1.540	34.892	.133	-.286	.186	-.662	.091
	variances not assumed									

q24	Equal	3.652	.061	1.130	53	.263	.193	.171	-.149	.535
Functions	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			1.106	37.183	.276	.193	.174	-.160	.546
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q25	Equal	1.641	.206	.766	52	.447	.164	.214	-.265	.593
Functions	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			.726	31.832	.473	.164	.226	-.296	.624
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q26	Equal	5.629	.021	1.097	52	.278	.179	.164	-.149	.508
Functions	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			.973	27.657	.339	.179	.184	-.198	.557
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q27	Equal	.006	.937	.500	53	.619	.093	.186	-.279	.465
Functions	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			.525	45.616	.602	.093	.177	-.263	.449
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q28	Equal	.279	.599	-.645	53	.522	-.121	.188	-.499	.256
Functions	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-.673	44.921	.504	-.121	.180	-.485	.242
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q29	Equal	5.160	.027	1.837	53	.072	.343	.187	-.031	.717
Resources	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			1.646	28.641	.111	.343	.208	-.083	.769
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q30	Equal	11.811	.001	2.429	53	.019	.371	.153	.065	.678
Resources	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			2.180	28.799	.038	.371	.170	.023	.720
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q31	Equal	2.972	.091	1.614	53	.113	.264	.164	-.064	.593
Resources	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			1.513	32.640	.140	.264	.175	-.091	.620
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q32	Equal	9.984	.003	-.562	53	.577	-.093	.165	-.424	.239
Resources	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-.477	24.806	.638	-.093	.195	-.494	.309
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									
q33	Equal	8.124	.006	-1.488	53	.143	-.264	.178	-.621	.092
Resources	variances									
	assumed									
	Equal			-1.378	31.504	.178	-.264	.192	-.655	.127
	variances									
	not									
	assumed									

q34	Equal	3.226	.078	.428	53	.670	.071	.167	-.263	.406
Resources variances assumed										
	Equal			.372	26.322	.713	.071	.192	-.323	.466
variances not assumed										

Source: Author's own calculations on his 2009 survey.

Based on the data in the table above there existed significant differences between MPs in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica in relation to questions 1, 6, 7, 9 21 and 30.

For question 1, MPs from both Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago were asked to consider whether the creation of committees promptly after the beginning of a new parliament is essential for the effective functioning of the committee system. Using the statistical notation for the data in table 1, the *p*-value (sig.) for the Levene's test (.066) is above .05, therefore the equal variance is assumed i.e. $p = .066 > .05$. As a result, focus shifts to the section t-Test for equality of means sig (2-tailed) column, which is the *p*-value. In this case, it is .03 or $p < .05$, which is lower than our cut-off point. This *p*-value is related to independent t-test and shows that there is a significant difference between the MPs perception in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica.

Table 2: Attitudes towards a prompt creation of Committees in a new parliament in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, 2009

<i>Question 1: "The creation of committees promptly after the beginning of a new parliament is essential for the effective functioning of the committee system."</i>				
Country		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
T&T	Disagree	2	5.7	5.7
	Agree	16	45.7	51.4
	Strongly Agree	17	48.6	100.0
	Total	35	100.0	
Dominica	Disagree	3	15.0	15.0
	Agree	13	65.0	80.0
	Strongly Agree	4	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	

Source: Author's own calculations on his 2009 survey. Note: All entries are for all valid responses

Table 2 displays the responses from the MPs relating to question 1. It is clear from the data that 49 percent of the MPs polled in Trinidad and Tobago strongly agreed compared to 20 percent in Dominica.

On the whole, 94 percent of the MPs from Trinidad and Tobago agree/strongly agree compared to 85 percent in Dominica. However, a greater percentage of the MPs in Dominica did not support the proposal compared to their counterparts in Trinidad and Tobago. The inconsistency between the MPs can be explained by referring to the Standing Orders of both countries.

The Standing Orders of both parliaments makes provision for the appointment of Sessional Select Committees and Special Joint Select Committees, however the major difference between the two parliaments was the period of time it takes for the appointment of members to serve on these committees. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago there is no set timeframe for the formation of these committees, instead Section 71 (2) of the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives and Section 64 of the Senate states that committees shall be chosen by the Speaker as soon as may be after the beginning of each Session. In the 8th Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago scrutiny committees were formed within 1 month of the first sitting of the parliament, i.e. October 17th 2002 (see table 151).

Table 3: Scrutiny Committees and date appointed in 2002

COMMITTEES	DATE APPOINTED
The Public Accounts Committee	November 15th 2002
The Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee	November 15th 2002
Joint Select Committee - Government Ministries, Statutory Authorities and State Enterprises - Part I	November 15th 2002
Joint Select Committee - Government Ministries, Statutory Authorities and Service Commissions - Part II	November 15th 2002
Joint Select Committee - Municipalities and Service Commissions	November 15th 2002

In the case of Dominica, Section 72 of the Standing Orders of the House of Assembly specify that the membership of Sessional Select Committees (i.e. the Public Accounts Committee) shall be chosen by the Speaker as soon as may be after the beginning of each Session, which is similar to Trinidad and Tobago because there is no set timeframe for the establishment of these committee. However, the Speaker in Dominica took a far longer period of time in announcing the members to the committee. The 6th House of Assembly was ceremoniously convened on April 17th 2000 after general elections on January 3rd 2000.

Nevertheless, the members of the PAC were not appointed until January 26th 2001, nine months after the parliament was convened. The sixth parliament was dissolved on April 6th 2005 and parliamentary elections were held on May 5th 2005. The 7th parliament was convened on July 27th 2005, yet, the PAC was not appointed until a year later, July 18th 2006.

The failure to appoint PAC members in Dominican in a timely manner gave rise to with the perception that the committee had failed in its responsibility to perform its key function i.e. oversight of the executive in a proficient manner. The mere fact the PAC convened four meetings over a period of seven years and appointed new members a year following parliamentary elections on April 6th 2005, establish the ineffectiveness of the committee system. This type of failure was addressed by Döring who argued that a committee ability to hold meetings is more effective in holding the executive accountability (Döring, 1995, 237-38). In addition, Mattson and Strøm similarly argued: “the less external actors can control the committee’s time tables, the greater is the committee autonomy” (Mattson and Strom 1995, 292).

For question 6, the MPs were asked to consider whether their selection to serve as members of a committee ought to be based on individual expertise and interest rather than party choice as the decisive factor. Table 1 clearly showed that the p -value (sig.) for the Levene’s test is (.280) which is above .05, therefore equal variance is assumed i.e. $p = .280 > .05$. As a result, focus shifted to the t-test for equality of means sig (2-tailed) column, which is the p -value. In this case it is .004 or $p < .05$, which is lower than our cut-off point. This p -value is related to independent t-Test and shows that there is a significant difference between the MPs perception in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica.

Table 4: Attitudes towards whether selection of committee member should be based on individual expertise and interest rather than party choice in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, 2009

<i>Question 6: "Selection to serve as a committee member should be based on individual expertise and interest rather than party choice."</i>				
Country		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
T&T	Strongly Disagree	2	5.7	5.9
	Disagree	17	48.6	55.9
	Agree	13	37.1	94.1
	Strongly Agree	2	5.7	100.0
	Total	34	97.1	
	Missing	1	2.9	
	Total	35	100.0	
Dominica	Strongly Disagree	1	5.0	5.0
	Disagree	2	10.0	15.0
	Agree	12	60.0	75.0
	Strongly Agree	5	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	

Source: Author's own calculations on his 2009 survey. **Note:** All entries are for all valid responses

The data displayed in the table 4 shows 85 percent of the Dominican MPs agreeing that their selection to serve on a committee should to be based on their individual expertise rather than as a member of the party. This confirms that the Dominican legislators supported the development of specialisation as a prerequisite for effectiveness of committee.

It is well documented that committees which have knowledgeable memberships are expected to have a stronger capacity for executive accountability than a committee that is composed of amateurs members. Committee members may constitute knowledgeable members by virtue of their pre-legislative background or because of a degree of knowledge on policy issues through specialization outside the legislature. Norton noted that an informed membership is better able than a non-specialist membership to subject bills and government proposals to sustained scrutiny; members with some degree of expertise are more likely to know what to look for and what questions to enquire than members lacking that expertise (Norton 1998: 10).

The majority of the MPs from Trinidad and Tobago differed with their Dominican colleagues. Instead, decided that nomination to serve on committees ought to be made by their political parties and not on individual expertise. This meant that seniority prevails over academic background and expertise in committee membership/chairmanship selection. Agh writing on Central Europe's new parliaments recollected that the gap between members' skills and committee jurisdiction can lead to either lack of attendance or willingness to follow party preferences. Agh noted that necessary attendance to meet quorum requirements for committee meetings was a problem not only of Central European parliaments (Agh 1998). Moreover, Norton writing on the selection of committee members in British House of Commons said that respect to the qualification of members is observed, however service on the committee is perceived as a task and most are nominated to make up members rather than because of an interest in or specialist knowledge of the subject covered by the bill (Norton 1994: 25). The position put forward by Norton and Agh weakens the position of the MPs from Trinidad and Tobago.

In question 7, the MPs were asked to consider whether membership of committees should to be based on the comparative strength of political parties in the parliament. The figures in table 1 relating to question 7 indicate that the p -value (sig.) for the Levene's test is (.537) which is above .05, therefore the equal variance is assumed i.e. $p = .537 > .05$. As a result, attention swings to the t-Test for equality of means sig (2-tailed) column, which is the p -value. In this case it is .037 or $p < .05$, which is lower than our cut-off point. This p -value is related to independent t-Test and shows that there is a significant difference between the MPs perception in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica.

Table 5: Attitudes towards whether ought to be based on the comparative strength of political parties in the parliament in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, 2009

<i>Question 7: “The membership of committees (together with the chairmanship) ought to be based on the comparative strength of political parties in the parliament.”</i>				
Country		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
T&T	Strongly Disagree	3	8.6	8.6
	Disagree	6	17.1	25.7
	Agree	23	65.7	91.4
	Strongly Agree	3	8.6	100.0
	Total	35	100.0	
Dominica	Strongly Disagree	3	15.0	15.0
	Disagree	8	40.0	55.0
	Agree	9	45.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	

Source: Author’s own calculations on his 2009 survey. Note: All entries are for all valid responses

The data in table 4 expose an inconsistency between the legislators polled in Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago as to whether the membership on committees ought to be based on the comparative strength of political parties in the parliament. Roughly 74 percent of the MPs polled from Trinidad and Tobago decided that the composition of the committee (including chairmanship) should be based on the proportional strength of the political parties in the Parliament. As a matter of fact, the MPs reinforced the view that a committee was a mini-parliament and in term of chair selection attention must be given to representative character of the parliament.

Herbert Döring pointed out that in the majoritarian system which encompassed Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, government tends to control parliamentary activities with a minimum share. In this system, the majority of members inclusive of the committee chairpersons are appointed from the members of the majority party. For example, in the American Congress, majority party holds all the committee chairs and in the British parliament all committee chairs except, the Public Accounts Committee, are appointed from the members of the majority party.

Undoubtedly, the majority of Dominica’s MPs polled were not in support of the pre-established Westminster convention of having membership of committees reflective of the representative makeup of the chamber. An alternative to the majoritarian system could be the consensual system which would provide for proportional representation of political parties in committees. In Germany and France configuration of committees replicates the strength of different parties represented in the parliament. In the consensual system parliamentary activities are carried out by a negotiation and compromise between government and opposition. Opposition parties are facilitated to work closely with the government party in the parliamentary committees (Döring 1995: 223-246)

Members of Parliament were asked to contemplate whether senior members of the Opposition should chair the financial committees in the parliament as a means of ensuring financial accountability and transparency of the executive in question 9. Using the data in table 1 the *p*-value (sig.) for the Levene’s test is (.387) which is above .05, therefore the equal variance is assumed i.e. $p = .387 > .05$. Therefore, looking at the t-Test for equality of means sig (2-tailed) column, which is the *p*-value it is .013 or $p < .05$, which is lower than our cut-off point. This *p*-value is related to independent t-Test and shows that there is a significant difference between the MPs perception in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica.

Table 6: Attitudes towards whether opposition should be appointed as chairs of financial committees in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, 2009

Question 9: “Senior members of the opposition should be appointed chairs of financial committees to secure the financial accountability and transparency of the government				
Country		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
T&T	Strongly Disagree	2	5.7	5.7
	Disagree	13	37.1	42.9
	Agree	12	34.3	77.1
	Strongly Agree	8	22.9	100.0
	Total	35	100.0	
Dominica	Disagree	3	15.0	15.0
	Agree	7	35.0	50.0
	Strongly Agree	10	50.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	

Source: Author’s own calculations on his 2009 survey. Note: All entries are for all valid responses

A closer look at the numbers in table 5 reveal that 43 percent of the MPs polled in Trinidad and Tobago opposed the idea that only senior member from the Opposition should be selected to chair financial committees compared to 15 percent of their colleagues in Dominica. To understand the inconsistency among the MPs it is worthwhile to elaborate on the process of appointing chairs to financial committees in both countries.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the practice since 1962 was the appointment of opposition members to chair the financial committees i.e. [PAC and the PA[E]C]. The Opposition Leader does not chair the financial committees instead he selects a senior MP from among the the opposition bench. Usually an Opposition MP from the Lower House is selected to chair the PAC, similarly an Opposition Senator is selected to chair the PA[E]C. The practice in Dominica is somewhat mixed, there were instances when the Leader of the Opposition assumed the chairmanship of the PAC and on other occasions the Chair was selected from among the senior MP on the opposition bench.

Conventionally, the PAC is headed by a senior opposition MP in other parliaments. The practice in UK is similar to that of Trinidad and Tobago. However, the parliament in India started a tradition in 1967 of having a Leader of Opposition appointed as the chair of PAC (Supakar 1973). The chairpersons of the financial committees were usually chosen keeping in view of their leadership qualities and position of pre-eminence and experience. Two of the former chairmen of the PAC namely Shri P.V. Narshima Rao and Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee rose to become the prime minister of India. One former chair of PAC Shri R. Venkataraman went on to become the president of India (Malhotra 2000).

In question 21, the MPs were given the opportunity to reflect on whether committees should have exclusive jurisdictional oversight of the executive. Using table 1, the p -value (sig.) for the Levene's test for question 21 is (.169) which is above .05, therefore the equal variance is assumed i.e. $p = .169 > .05$. Therefore, looking at the t-Test for equality of means sig (2-tailed) column, which is the p -value it is .024 or $p < .05$, which is lower than our cut-off point. This p -value is related to independent t-test and shows

that there is a significant difference between the MPs perception in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica for question 21.

Table 7: Attitudes towards whether committees should have exclusive jurisdictional oversight of the executive in Trinidad and Tobago Dominica, 2009

<i>Question 21: "Committees should have exclusive jurisdictional oversight of the executive."</i>				
Country		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Trinidad	Strongly Disagree	5	14.3	14.3
	Disagree	10	28.6	42.9
	Agree	20	57.1	100.0
	Total	35	100.0	
Dominica	Strongly Disagree	5	25.0	26.3
	Disagree	10	50.0	78.9
	Agree	4	20.0	100.0
	Total	19	95.0	
	Missing	1	5.0	
	Total	20	100.0	

Source: Author's own calculations on his 2009 survey. Note: All entries are for all valid responses

The information in in table 7 point toward a substantial difference between the MPs form both countries relating to whether committees should have exclusive jurisdictional oversight of the executive. Strangely 79 percent of the MPs polled in Dominica objected to the idea of giving committees exclusive jurisdictional oversight over the executive, compared to 43 percent in Trinidad and Tobago. The majority of the MPs from Trinidad and Tobago were amenable to the idea. Therefore, supporting the position offered by Norton that exclusive jurisdiction increases the power of a committee; as against the lack of exclusive jurisdiction limits the range of committee influence (Norton 1994: 25). Committee systems vary in the extent to which their structures parallel that of executive agencies. When committee systems are structured in such a way that each ministry has a particular committee that legislates in and oversees its policy area, committees are more likely to become a source of expertise for the legislature and the operations of ministries are expected to be subjected to more careful oversight. On the other hand when committee structures reveal no relationship to the structure of the executive agencies, policy expertise and

administrative oversight tend to decline and it follows, the capacity of the legislature to constrain/influence the government is likely to be less (Olsen and Mezey 1991: 15).

In addition, MPs from both countries were surveyed to consider whether the small turnover of committee membership can help in the development of a strong committee system in question 30. The statistical data in table 1 shows that the p -value (sig.) for the Levene's test is (.001) which is below .05, therefore an unequal variance is assumed i.e. $p = .001 < .05$. Therefore, to validate this assumption we need to examine the t-test for equality of means sig (2-tailed) column, which is the p -value and it is .019 or $p < .05$, which is lower than our cut-off point. This p -value is related to the independent t-Test and shows that there is a significant difference between the MPs perception in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica for this question.

Table 8: Attitudes towards whether low turnover of committee members can develop a strong committee system in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, 2009

<i>Question 30: "Small turnover of members in committee can help in the development of strong committee systems."</i>				
Country		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
T&T	Disagree	4	11.4	11.4
	Agree	28	80.0	91.4
	Strongly Agree	3	8.6	100.0
	Total	35	100.0	
Dominica	Strongly Disagree	1	5.0	5.0
	Disagree	7	35.0	40.0
	Agree	11	55.0	95.0
	Strongly Agree	1	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	

Source: Author's own calculations on his 2009 survey. Note: All entries are for all valid responses

The data in presented in table 8 point toward significant support among MPs in Trinidad and Tobago compared to 60 percent in Dominica. What is significant about the data is the higher percentage of disapproval among the Dominican MPs compared to their counterparts from Trinidad and Tobago. Essentially, the small turnover in the membership can have a positive impact on a committee ability to perform its functions successfully. The longer an MP stays on a committee the greater the chance to develop consensus that breaks down political division. Generally, committees may take on a life of their

own as a result of the permanency in the membership thereby achieving a large measure of integration (Shaw 1998a: 788). The low turnover in the membership of a committee can increase the chance of specialization. Specialization and expertise will be reinforced if the committee members concentrate their work in the committee (Mattson and Strom 1995: 271). The possibility of developing expertise in parliament increases as the turnover in the membership decreases (Strøm 1998: 35). Reasonable continuity of membership is required if small-group norms are to prevail. In some countries as with British committees on legislation, there is marked discontinuity which runs against the flourishing of committee identity, solidarity and differentiation from the external environment. Moreover, legislators' loyalties and preoccupations external to committees, (parties) can stand the way of integration which is supposed to occur in small group (Mezey 1998).

Conclusion

The paper carried out a comparative assessment of the perception of MPs regarding the role of committee systems in the parliament of Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago. Reporting on the findings from two questionnaires administered in 2009 illustrated the workings of the parliamentary committees as it attempt to secure executive accountability in Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago. Overall, the paper shows that the committee systems in Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago are not functioning at the same level with their parliamentary counterparts outside the Caribbean i.e. monitoring the executive and holding it to account. The simple fact that committee systems exist makes a difference. All the same, the role of their system in securing government accountability cannot be overlooked; they may be weak but not irrelevant.

Compared to Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago have a more institutionalized and aggressive committee system. The committees are created shortly after the convening of a new parliament. Committee memberships and chairs are distributed among the political parties based on their proportionally strengths in the Parliament. The PAC by convention is chaired an opposition MP. However, however Ministers are not excluded from committee membership. Committee meetings are held regularly and frequently and reports are produced and submitted to the House regularly.

Officially committees cannot select their chairs and members in Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago. Selection and appointment of committee chairs and members are done by the Speaker in conference with the whips of the political parties. Committees in Dominica cannot set their own agenda, however in Trinidad and Tobago, amendments to the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives and Senate allow its committees to set their own agenda, send for papers, persons and documents with the exception that the executive may decline to produce a document on the ground that its disclosure would be prejudicial to National Security.

There are shortcomings in the Trinidad and Tobago parliament. First, the high turnover of committee members has not encouraged committee members to develop specialized knowledge and expertise to make committees more effective. Secondly, despite the fact that the committee system has extensively been expanded over the last 10 years, the coordination mechanism to manage the committees is deficient resulting in a fragmented operation.

Dominica's committees are beleaguered with several problems right from committee formation to acceptance of committee recommendations. For example, the members of Public Accounts Committee were appointed several months after the start of new parliaments 2002 - 2006. The PAC in the 7th House of Assembly did not record having a single meeting because of a lack of participation by opposition MPs. The dominance of the ruling party is evident in the structural and functional arrangement of the National Assembly in Dominica. The prime minister has vast influence from the formation of committee to the implementation of committee recommendations. There is no role for committees in securing executive accountability and it is practically missing.

Overall, the respondents in Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago were of the view that a strong committee system is a precondition for a strong parliament system. They acknowledged that within the Westminster parliamentary system, parliaments are as expected weak in relation to the executive and by extension the parliamentary committee system. The Trinidad and Tobago parliament compared with the Dominican House of Assembly is a comparatively well-functioning institution with its committee system performing

well seeing that it is still in an evolutionary process. Therefore, the parliamentary committee system in Trinidad and Tobago has contributed to a large extent in transforming the parliament into an institution that can help check the power of the executive.

Likewise, the parliament in Dominica is very weak in relation to the executive and so too is the parliamentary committee system. The parliament could not fare well due to failure of the opposition to operationalise the PAC. Parliament in contemporary Dominica cannot be described as a prime political institution because it has for the most part failed to hold the executive accountable. Without an effective parliamentary committee system, the parliament has failed to contribute considerably to transform itself into a strong institution to check the power of the executive and hold it to account.

For the most part this comparative study makes a significant contribution to the study of legislatures and a useful reference for studying Commonwealth Caribbean legislatures especially. The paper contains valuable research for parliamentarians and researchers of legislative studies and public administration in the Commonwealth Caribbean who are concerned about the function of parliament in its essential responsibility of holding the executive accountable.

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