

**Armed with the necessary background of knowledge:
the evolution of MPs' capacity to scrutinise and understand science during the 20th century**

Emmeline Ledgerwood
University of Leicester and the British Library
egbl1@le.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper is the result of ongoing doctoral research into changes in UK science policy during the latter part of the twentieth century. One aspect of the research is understanding the role members of the House of Commons played in scrutinising government policies about the organisation and funding of scientific research.

Since the 1960s the range of mechanisms at Westminster which support MPs' capacity to consider scientific and technical affairs have been developed and consolidated. Current MPs are able to access sound, impartial evidence in a number of ways: through evidence sessions of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, through the research services of the House of Commons Library science section, and through material published by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST).

Using official papers, Hansard records and unpublished archival material, this paper reviews the process of change that embedded two of these bodies within Parliament, the select committee (a scrutiny and information-gathering body) and POST (a legislative science and technology advice body). It describes how the current activities of these bodies are evolving in response to expectations for Parliament to increase its engagement with the public and academic researchers, and how POST is acting as a model for similar units in other legislatures. By tracing the history of how these bodies were created, key factors emerge that influenced the process of change.

Keywords: House of Commons, select committee, legislative science advice, parliamentary reform, all-party parliamentary group,

Introduction

In an introduction to *The Government of Science in Britain* (1972), Bernard Crick wrote, 'those of us who wish to be relevant and topical (and this is not a bad wish) sometimes need reminding that the most usual explanation of why a thing is as it is, is that things happened in the past to make it so.'¹

One of the most relevant and topical issues facing legislatures and governments today is the goal of evidence-based policymaking. Elected representatives are expected to assess whether the executive proposals that come before them are based on sound data and objective analysis. It is often argued that the House of Commons would be better equipped to assess proposals dealing with scientific and technological issues if more MPs had some expertise in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM).² Currently 103 MPs out of 650 in the current Parliament (15.8%) have been

¹ J. B. Poole and K. Andrews (eds), *The Government of Science in Britain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p.vii.

² Recent examples include: 'Science in Parliament: Should There Be More Scientists in Parliament?' *Biologist: Journal of the Institute of Biology*, 60 (2013), pp.10–11; Chi Onwurah speech, 'Why are there so few engineers in parliament and public life - and does it really matter?', University of Leeds (23 Mar. 2017), <https://engineering.leeds.ac.uk/events/event/220/chi-onwurah-mp:-why-are-there-so-few-engineers-in-parliament-and-public-life---and-does-it-really-matter?>, accessed 26 Sept. 2018; Katja Bego, Jack Pilkington and

identified as having some expertise in these areas, which is about the same number of MPs with a legal background (14.2%) and half the number of those with a business background (30.7%).³ Historically the number of STEMM experts in the House of Commons has been much lower. An article in *The Times* in 1919 pointed out that there was only one MP out of 707 'whose life has been devoted to scientific research', going on to comment that 'the relative absence of scientific men from the House of Commons is both a cause and a symptom of the neglect of science in this country.'⁴ In 1975 Arthur Palmer, a Labour MP, went further, declaring that 'in matters of science and technology, all legislative assemblies are outstandingly amateur'.⁵

There is limited academic research into the behaviour of STEMM experts who become MPs. An analysis of parliamentary voting during the passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill (enacted in 2008) concluded that there was no strong evidence that MPs with scientific training were more likely to vote on scientific issues.⁶ When it comes to complex and possibly controversial issues such as this, even an MP with a STEMM background is unlikely to have the expert knowledge required to grasp the full range of implications surrounding those issues.

Consequently, the House has developed alternative mechanisms to help members navigate highly technical debates by strengthening their access to reliable, impartial information. There are currently two main ways in which this happens. One is through the work of the Select Committee on Science and Technology which has the power to conduct inquiries across a broad range of government activity to ensure that policy and decision-making is underpinned by robust scientific evidence.⁷ The committee consists of 11 backbench MPs who are supported by a team of parliamentary staff and external specialist advisers, and its reports—based on written submissions and oral evidence sessions—are an important source of information for all members of the House.

The second way is by making use of the services of two research units: the scientific research section within the Commons Library department and the bicameral unit of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), both of which publish impartial briefings on topical issues. Library researchers also respond to enquiries from individual MPs and their staff, while POST's work includes horizon scanning activities, bringing academic research into Parliament and supporting science advice units in other legislatures.⁸ MPs today therefore have access to information on a wide range of past, current and future scientific and technical issues gathered from published sources and interaction with experts in their field.

Charlotte Goujon, 'Only 9% of GE2017 contenders have a STEM degree: why this is a problem', <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/only-9-of-ge2017-contenders-have-a-stem-degree-why-this-is-a-problem/>, accessed 26 Sept. 2018.

³ Campaign for Science and Engineering 'MPs to Watch', website, <http://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/engaging-with-policy/science-in-westminster/mps-to-watch.html>, accessed 13 Jun. 2019; R. Cracknell and C. Barton, *Social background of MPs 1979-2017*, House of Commons Library Research Paper 7483, (12 Nov. 2018), p.13.

⁴ 'Science in the New House', *The Times* (21 Jan. 1919), p.6.

⁵ Address by Arthur Palmer to the Institute of Electrical Engineers, 10 Apr. 1975. Unpublished Select Committee papers, HC/CP/4428, Parliamentary Archives.

⁶ Mark Goodwin, 'Political Science? Does Scientific Training Predict UK MPs Voting Behaviour?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 68, no.2 (2015), pp.371–92.

⁷ Science and Technology Committee webpage, UK Parliament <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee/role/>. Accessed 25 June 2019.

⁸ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *Bridging research and policy* (2019).

However, for MPs in the House during the mid-twentieth century their ability to scrutinise scientific affairs was very different, and their concerns began to be couched in terms of the need for parliamentary reform:

I believe that the House is not sufficiently equipped to deal with technical and scientific matters. ... There are very few practical scientists in the House. Indeed, there are few hon. Members with any technical qualifications at all.⁹ (Sir Lionel Heald, Conservative)

For the sake of the record, I want to say that the staff in the Library of the House could not on this occasion [debate on Telecommunication Space Satellite] have been more helpful. ... But ... is it right that those who are by definition amateurs in scientific matters should be in the position of having to produce for some of us what is our main source of information? ... It is perhaps justifiable to put in a plea for some sort of scientific secretariat to be attached to the House of Commons—not people who will give us our opinions; we can form our own—but people who will explain the up-to-date information without which we cannot operate sensibly.¹⁰ (Tam Dalyell, Labour)

Do not the scientific, technical and administrative complexities of many of the questions that modern governments are called upon to decide make the general open debate, where Ministers are backed by the vast, expert resources of the civil service and innumerable fact-collecting agencies and individual Members have only their own reading and time-limited research, a contest of David and Goliath?¹¹ (Arthur Palmer, Labour)

How then did the situation change from the dissatisfaction of the 1960s to the current provision of resources for MPs? The following historical survey draws out some key factors that contributed to the creation, suspension and re-establishment of a Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology during 1965-1990 and the creation of POST in 1989.

The campaign for a specialist select committee

In 1939 the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee (P&SC), an all-party parliamentary group (APPG), was set up as a forum to bring together representatives from parliament, learned societies, academia and industry with the aim of ensuring Parliament was aware and took notice of the views of scientists.¹² A programme of meetings and visits to scientific research establishments stimulated dialogue among the members, while P&SC members with specialist knowledge contributed information to a limited 'Parliamentary Information Service' for parliamentarians.¹³ Some P&SC parliamentary members also belonged to specialist party groups on science and technology, such as the informal Labour Science Group set up by Richard Crossman in 1963 that comprised MPs, Peers and academics.¹⁴

⁹ HC Deb 15 Mar 1963 vol 673 c1761.

¹⁰ HC Deb 29 Mar 1963 vol 674 c1735.

¹¹ Arthur Palmer, 'The Select Committee on Science and Technology', in Alfred Morris (ed.), *The Growth of Parliamentary Scrutiny by Committee* (Pergamon, 1970), pp.15–30 (p.16).

¹² APPGs are informal, cross-party groups with no official status within Parliament. Current membership of the P&SC is approximately 120 parliamentarians and 210 external bodies.

¹³ Christopher Powell and Arthur Butler, *Parliamentary and Scientific Committee: The first forty years 1939-79* (Croom Helm, 1980).

¹⁴ N. J. Vig, *Science and technology in British politics* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1968), p.88.

By the 1960s science policy had moved up the agenda of party politics, yet contemporary observers saw, 'little evidence that Parliament is capable of intelligent and sustained consideration of this escalating budget [for scientific research] and its social and political ramifications'.¹⁵ Calls to address these inadequacies were part of the wider movement for Parliamentary reform that characterised the early 1960s, and specialist committees were seen as a way of addressing those deficiencies.¹⁶

For the P&SC two distinct goals emerged, articulated on June 1964 when the P&SC set up a sub-committee to consider:

- (i) If there is need for improved methods by which Members of Parliament can quickly get information from scientists about matters likely to be raised in Parliament.
- (ii) What can be done to improve the existing machinery to ensure that Parliament can establish more effective control over scientific and technological policy.¹⁷

Within a few months a P&SC report dealing with (ii) recommended that a select committee of the House of Commons should be appointed. This idea became a common element within proposals for wider reform and when a Select Committee on Procedure was appointed at the end of 1964, the P&SC submitted a written memorandum outlining the case for a specialist committee covering science; the argument was reiterated in another memorandum submitted by the newly-formed Study of Parliament Group.¹⁸

In July 1965 the Committee recommended that, 'a new Select Committee should be developed from the Estimates Committee, which would work through Sub-Committees each named according to its special subject.'¹⁹ Accordingly six sub-committees of the Estimates Committee were appointed at the end of 1965, including one on technological and scientific affairs which spent the next 18 months working on an inquiry into space research and development.²⁰ However this did not satisfy the P&SC members who continued to press for a 'Select Committee on Scientific Policy',²¹ and hope grew when a couple of months later Harold Wilson spoke positively about 'the suggestion of establishing one or two new Parliamentary Committees.'²² Crucially in the summer of 1966 Richard Crossman, an active proponent of parliamentary reform, was appointed Leader of the House and he pushed this suggestion through.²³ Perhaps his personal interest in science policy, having set up the Labour Science Group, influenced the decision announced in the House at the end of the year to, 'establish experimentally, for this Session, two new Committees—one, a subject Committee on Science and

¹⁵ Vig, *Science and technology*, p.92; David Edgerton, 'The 'White Heat' revisited: the British government and technology in the 1960s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7, no.1 (1996), pp.53–82 (p.79); S. A. Walkland and N. J. Vig, 'Parliament, science and technology', *Technology and Society*, 4, no.1 (1967), pp.43–45.

¹⁶ Peter Dorey and Victoria Honeyman, 'Ahead of his time: Richard Crossman and House of Commons reform in the 1960s', *British Politics*, 5, no.2 (2010), pp.149–178; Bernard Crick, *The Reform of Parliament* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964); Philip J. Aylett, *Thirty Years of Reform: House of Commons Select Committees, 1960-1990*, (unpublished PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2015).

¹⁷ Powell and Butler, *Parliamentary and Scientific Committee*, p. 37.

¹⁸ Select Committee on Procedure, *Fourth Report 1964-65* (29 Jul. 1965), p. 143 and p. 131.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.viii.

²⁰ Select Committee on Estimates, *First Special Report 1965-66* (8 Dec. 1965); Select Committee on Estimates, *Second Report: The European Space Vehicle Launcher Development Organisations (ELDO) 1966-67* (5 Aug. 1966); Select Committee on Estimates, *Thirteenth Report: Space Research and Development 1966-67* (27 Jul. 1967).

²¹ HC Deb 17 Feb 1966, vol 724 c1544; S.A. Walkland, 'Science and Parliament: The role of the Select Committees of the House of Commons', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 18, no.3 (1965), pp.266–278 (p.277).

²² HC Deb 21 April 1966 vol 727 c76.

²³ Dorey and Honeyman, 'Ahead of his time', p.151.

Technology; the other, the first Committee to study a Department, the Department of Agriculture.²⁴ In February 1968 another new 'Crossman committee'—the Education and Science departmental committee—was appointed but overlap on science was kept to a minimum by informal liaison between the committee chairmen.²⁵

The first members of the Select Committee on Science and Technology were appointed on 25 January 1967, and soon decided that 'their main object should be to examine national scientific and technological expenditure together with the skills and use of manpower and resources involved, in both the public and the private sectors'.²⁶ From 1967 the committee was given the power to appoint 'persons with technical or scientific knowledge for the purpose of particular inquiries, either to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the committee's order of reference.'²⁷

When the select committee was established, it benefited from a recent expansion of the Library research division. Two scientific graduates joined the Library staff in 1966 and worked on building up a *Scientific Index* of relevant material, publishing a fortnightly *Science Digest* of summarised articles from the scientific and technical press and issuing some background papers.²⁸

The committee's choice as its first witness, one of the most senior government scientists of the day, Sir William Penney, chairman of the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) and 'father' of the British atomic bomb, signalled its intent to exercise its power 'to send for persons'.²⁹ Strangers were admitted during the examination of witnesses, and the committee regularly held an evidence session beyond the confines of Westminster.³⁰

As soon as the 'Crossman committees' were set up, new recommendations from the Procedure Committee of 1968-69 suggested that science (along with education and the arts) should be considered by a sub-committee of the proposed new Expenditure Committee, but a change in the Government in 1970 meant that a separate Science and Technology committee was retained.³¹ When the members were appointed two weeks later they had nine years of uninterrupted committee activity ahead until the decision in 1979 to restructure the select committee system along departmental lines.³²

²⁴ HC Deb 14 Dec. 1966 vol 738 c486.

²⁵ *Select Committees of the House of Commons 1970* Cmnd 4507, pp.3-4; Paul Seaward and Paul Silk, 'The House of Commons', in V. Bogdanor (ed.), *The British Constitution in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.170; Select Committee on Education and Science, *First Special Report 1967-68* (27 Feb. 1968).

²⁶ Select Committee on Science and Technology, *First Special Report 1966-67* (1 Feb. 1967); Select Committee on Science and Technology, *Second Special Report 1966-67* (16 Feb. 1967), p.3.

²⁷ Select Committee on Science and Technology, *First Special Report 1967-68* (30 Nov. 1967), p.2; P. J. Laugharne, 'The Evolution of Specialist Advice to Select Committees of the House of Commons in the Twentieth Century', *Parliamentary History*, 18, no.2 (1999), pp.169-187 (p.180).

²⁸ M. Rush and M. Shaw (eds), *The House of Commons services and facilities* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp.149-155.

²⁹ Select Committee on Science and Technology, *Minutes of Evidence, Thursday, 2nd March, 1967, 1966-67* (9 Mar. 1967).

³⁰ Select Committee on Science and Technology Sub-Committee C, *Minutes of Evidence, Wednesday, 8th January, 1969, 1968-69* (20 Jan. 1969); Select Committee on Science and Technology Sub-Committee D, *Minutes of Evidence, Thursday, 12th June, 1969, 1968-69* (17 Jun. 1969).

³¹ Select Committee on Procedure, *First Report 1968-69* (23 Jul. 1969); HC Deb 12 Nov. 1970 vol 806 c620.

³² Select Committee on Science and Technology, *First Special Report 1970-71*, (9 Dec. 1970).

A casualty of reorganisation

The arrangements of committees that had developed as a result of Crossman's additions generated criticism for being unplanned and unstructured. Arguments emerged during the 1970s calling for the rationalisation of the select committee system to reflect the activities of government departments, which meant that the work of the Science and Technology committee would be transferred to a new departmental committee covering Education, Science and the Arts.³³ In the debate on these proposals to reorganise the system, P&SC members put down amendments for the retention of the specialist committee, or for the separation of science and arts from education but these were rejected and the reorganisation went ahead.³⁴

This was to have serious impact on Commons scrutiny of science as the new committee fell into a focus on education, lacking the power to appoint sub-committees that could concentrate on science.³⁵ During the 1980s the committee conducted only one major relevant inquiry into science, and was painfully aware of its own shortcomings, pleading in its 1985 report for the power to appoint sub-committees and more members:

In the long term however we feel that just as the absence of a central department or a central advisory body militates against strategic thinking about research and development in Government, so the absence of a committee with wide ranging terms of reference in science and technology hampers the House of Commons in giving proper consideration to this important area. ... we hope that the gap will be recognised by the re-appointment of a House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology.³⁶

The chairman of the Education, Science and Arts committee, Sir William van Straubenzee (Conservative), wrote to the P&SC chairman in early 1987, asking for help in lobbying for the re-instatement of the subject committee, an indication that the P&SC was seen as an effective campaigning force in such matters.³⁷ At the same time disgruntled politicians regularly complained about the lack of opportunity to debate science with Jack Straw (Labour) pointing out in 1988 that 'the last Government debate on science ... was on 14 June 1985'.³⁸

The 1979 demise of the Select Committee on Science and Technology coincided with a mood in Britain that drew on ideas that went back to the beginning of the 20th century. At that time the newly-formed British Science Guild constituted a sub-committee on the 'Neglect of Science' and Guild members were of the view that the British elite was far too indifferent to science and scientists. These lobbyists are labelled 'public scientists' by Frank Turner—those who attempt 'to persuade the public or influential sectors thereof that science ... is worthy of receiving public attention, encouragement,

³³ Select Committee on Procedure, *First Special Report 1977-78* (17 Jul. 1978), p.ix; Select Committee on Procedure, *First Special Report 1978-79* (12 Mar. 1979), p.iv.

³⁴ HC Deb 25 Jun. 1979 vol 969 c104.

³⁵ However this decision spurred P&SC members in the House of Lords to propose the appointment of a Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology. Members, many of whom were eminent scientists, were duly appointed in January 1980; HL Deb 11 Dec 1979 vol 403 c977.

³⁶ Select Committee on Education, Science and Arts, *First Report 1984-85* (9 Jul. 1985), p.xxx.

³⁷ Minutes of P&SC Steering Group meeting, 28 April 1987. Papers of Ernest Shackleton, S/573, Parliamentary Archives.

³⁸ HC Deb 29 Feb. 1988 vol 128 c716; M. Russell, 'Never Allow A Crisis To Go To Waste': The Wright Committee Reforms to Strengthen the House of Commons', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 64, no.4 (2011), pp.612–633 (p.630).

and financing'.³⁹ Eighty years later, as morale among the scientific community sank in the face of reduced funding, supporters of science were echoing those sentiments.⁴⁰ In a submission to an 1989-90 inquiry into the working of the select committee system, P&SC member Sir Ian Lloyd (Conservative) used the same terminology, referring to 'the appalling neglect of science in the Commons which followed the demise of Airey Neave's [Science and Technology] committee.'⁴¹

However at that point the prospects for committee scrutiny of science began to improve when the Government endorsed the Procedure Committee's recommendation to reconsider 'the request of the Education Committee made in 1988 for two additional Members and the power to appoint a Sub-committee'.⁴² Then the Conservative victory under John Major in the April 1992 election signalled a key change in government attitude to science policy. For the first time since the 1960s responsibility for science went to a minister of Cabinet rank, William Waldegrave, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and a new departmental body—the Office of Science and Technology—was set up within the Cabinet Office with responsibility for the science budget and the research councils.

Waldegrave soon voiced support for the idea for the reinstatement of a separate Science and Technology Committee to mirror the post-election changes in the machinery of government:

This is a matter for the House, for the usual channels and for those other mysterious and scientific bodies. I hope that the House will take some steps to reflect the change in departmental organisation. Anything that Parliament does to raise the profile of science must be welcomed by all hon. Members.⁴³

In a debate on 'Departmental Select Committees' a few weeks later, a motion to set up a committee to shadow the Office of Science and Technology was approved, and except for a short break in 2007 associated with changes in government departments, the Science and Technology Committee has continued to operate as such ever since.⁴⁴

The quest for legislative science advice

In the hiatus created by the loss of the Select Committee on Science and Technology in 1979, members of the P&SC put their energies into a parallel campaign designed to meet the first of the P&SC's 1964 goals: 'improved methods by which Members of Parliament can quickly get information from scientists about matters likely to be raised in Parliament.'⁴⁵ The aim was to establish a unit along the lines of the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) in Washington, set up in 1972 to supply members of the US Congress with detailed reports on technological issues of the day.

The OTA was the original legislative science and technology advisory body (LSTAB); in a recent article Tyler and Akerlof describe LSTABs as being among 'the most important public bodies you've never

³⁹ D. Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (2018), p.87; Frank Turner, 'Public Science in Britain, 1880–1919', *Isis*, 71 (1980), p.599.

⁴⁰ J. Agar, *Science Policy under Thatcher* (London: UCL Press, 2019), pp.1-2.

⁴¹ Select Committee on Procedure, *The working of the select committee system*, Memoranda (Vol 2) (14 Mar. 1990), p.cxxxv.

⁴² *The working of the select committee system. Government response to the Second Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, Session 1989-90* (1991), p.19.

⁴³ HC Deb 11 Jun. 1992 vol 209 c480.

⁴⁴ HC Deb 30 Jun. 1992 vol 210 c823.

⁴⁵ Select Committee on Procedure, *Fourth Report 1964-65* (29 Jul. 1965), p.143.

heard of'.⁴⁶ During the 1980s European politicians were inspired by the OTA model to pursue the establishment of similar LSTABs in their own legislatures.

'The suggestion that Britain should have an Office of Transfer Technology similar to the American one' was put to the Prime Minister in April 1985 by Lloyd, who raised the concept again in June 1985 during a debate on 'Government Policy for Science'.⁴⁷ Lloyd became the torch-bearer for the campaign, and after a fact-finding mission to the OTA with three other P&SC members in March 1986, they concluded that, 'the principles underlying this organisation [OTA] can be developed and applied without undue difficulty within the parliamentary system'.⁴⁸

The P&SC's conviction of the need for a technology assessment office was not shared by the then Leader of the House, John Biffen (Conservative). 'In my view, the debates in this place are conducted on the necessary information that is available, linked to the passion and the enthusiasm that must go with it. The debates will lose if they are drowned in a mass of technical gobbledegook'.⁴⁹

The process whereby POST became established follows closely the findings of a 1999 comparative study of European LSTABs which identified three stages in the institutionalisation of these bodies: their initial founding, an adaptation to the institutional and political environment to assure survival and gaining permanent status through performance evaluation and recognition.⁵⁰

In April 1987 a blueprint for the new unit was drafted and discussed at P&SC meetings. Sir Trevor Skeet (Conservative), the chairman, described the proposals as 'being able to utilise existing machinery and to adapt it in our pragmatic way for the service of Parliament'. Future links between the new unit, the library and the select committee were discussed, and Skeet made it clear that the new body was to be a 'creature of Parliament and that the objectives would be stated in clear legal language and adhered to'.⁵¹

The first challenge in securing this new creature's future was funding, illustrated by this account from P&SC member Michael Clark (Conservative):

We went to see the then Prime Minister, now Lady Thatcher, and told her of our plans. She thought that it was a very good idea to have such a body to increase scientific knowledge in Parliament, so we asked for Government funding for it. She replied, "Oh no, certainly not. If it is such a good idea, you will find money for it from industry, academia and institutions outside Parliament." She then reached for her famous handbag, took out her cheque book and wrote a cheque for £100. She said, 'Raise the money yourself, and let this be the first £100 to get it going'.⁵²

⁴⁶ C. Tyler and K. Akerlof, 'Three secrets of survival in science advice', *Nature*, 566, no. 7743 (14 Feb. 2019), p.175.

⁴⁷ 'Agenda for meeting on 7 November 1985 of the P&SC Science and Technology Group'. Papers of Sir David Phillips, 0.67, Special Collections, The Bodleian Library; HC Deb 25 Apr. 1985 vol 77 c986; HC Deb 14 Jun. 1985 vol 80 cc1154-55

⁴⁸ 'Technology Assessment – An Expanded Role for the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee at Westminster', (Jun. 1986). Papers of Sir David Phillips, 0.67, Special Collections, The Bodleian Library.

⁴⁹ HC Deb 20 Nov. 1986 vol 105 c697.

⁵⁰ N. J. Vig and H. Paschen (eds), *Parliaments and technology: the development of technology assessment in Europe* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999).

⁵¹ Papers of Lord Shackleton, S/445, Parliamentary Archives.

⁵² HC Deb 21 Nov. 2000 vol 357 c279

A charitable trust, the Parliamentary Science and Technology Information Foundation, was set up in early 1988, and sought donations from academia, science and technology bodies and associate members.⁵³ Next an advisory board was appointed under the chairmanship of Lloyd to discuss the appointment of a Director, a programme of work and secure accommodation for the newly-named Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST).⁵⁴

Finding a home for POST was a major challenge, with the team operating out of the offices of the Royal Academy of Engineering and then rented accommodation in its first few years. Its programme of work was decided by the advisory board, with the preparation of briefing notes and longer technology assessments relying heavily on written contributions made by P&SC members and extra staff supported by research council funding.

Once POST was up and running Lloyd then tackled the question of securing parliamentary funding by raising the issue with the House of Commons Services Committee in 1991.⁵⁵ Questionnaires about the value of POST were circulated to MPs and Peers to gauge parliamentarians' attitudes to its work. While the responses were mostly positive, one of the concerns raised was whether its activities duplicated those of the House of Commons Library research services. Nevertheless, the Commons Services Committee recommended parliamentary funding for POST from 1 April 1993, at which point responsibility for POST transferred to the House of Commons Commission and it moved into an office on the parliamentary estate in 1994.⁵⁶ However its financial status remained subject to review by the Information Committee until permanent funding was secured in 2001, ensuring POST's position alongside the Science and Technology Committee as part of the institution of Parliament.⁵⁷

The evolving activities of the select committee and POST

The purpose of the Science and Technology Committee remains the same as when it was first established, namely to influence government policy and to hold inquiries that matter to the public or are of national relevance. They make use of external specialist advisers who offer guidance on how to conduct their inquiry work which revolves around the gathering of information from experts via oral evidence sessions and the presentation of that information in published reports.⁵⁸

The committee is now testing innovative ways in which to makes its work more relevant and accessible to the wider public. It is putting emphasis on increasing its follow-up work through organising debates in the House of Commons chamber, maintaining correspondence with expert witnesses and tabling parliamentary questions. It is also experimenting with methods to extend its reach beyond Parliament, concentrating on public engagement by inviting the public to suggest

⁵³ 'Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) for the Westminster Parliament: Development Proposals, Appendix B'. Papers of Sir David Phillips, 0.67, Special Collections, Bodleian Library.

⁵⁴ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *Annual Report 1991-92*; M. Norton, 'Origins and Functions of the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology', in N. J. Vig and H. Paschen (eds), *Parliaments and Technology* (1999), pp.65–92.

⁵⁵ POST, *Annual Report 1991-92*.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ HC Deb 21 Nov. 2000 vol 357 cc276-283; Information Committee, *The Future of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, First Report 1999-2000* (17 Jul. 2000).

⁵⁸ SCS046 Written evidence submitted by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee to the Liaison Committee inquiry into 'The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system' (2019).

subjects for future inquiries, taking contributions from the public gallery and Twitter during an evidence session and holding evidence sessions outside Westminster.⁵⁹

For POST the mission has always been to provide independent, impartial advice on a wide range of public policy issues topics, and its horizon scanning activities enable staff to produce briefings in advance of issues becoming topical.⁶⁰ This complements the work of the Library researchers who tend to respond to individual members' enquiries and produce summary briefings based on published material; the staff of the Library, POST and the select committee liaise regularly over future programmes of work.⁶¹

POST's publications connect parliamentarians with the output of academic researchers through briefing notes written for the layperson. The preparation of these notes is achievable through a rolling fellowship scheme whereby funded PhD students spend three months at POST reviewing the research literature and conducting interviews with stakeholders from across academia, industry, government and the third sector; the resulting briefings are peer reviewed by external experts.⁶²

POST runs seminars for the public and parliamentarians and is building its role as a bridge between Parliament and academia through the recently established Knowledge Exchange Unit which aims to develop stronger relationships between researchers and policymakers.⁶³ It also collaborates with other LSTABs through the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment Network.

Increasingly POST is being seen as a model LSTAB, with staff members offering guidance and support to other legislatures that are considering strengthening their capacity in technology assessment. For example, POST contributed to discussions that led to the recent establishment of a LSTAB within the Spanish Parliament while a recent event in Rome discussed the options for establishing a LSTAB within the Italian Parliament.⁶⁴ Consequently POST is developing a set of resources for use by international collaborators seeking to set up similar units.⁶⁵

The factors that contributed to change

Existing analyses of institutional change at Westminster have been neatly summarised by Geddes and Meakin.⁶⁶ They begin with Norton's view that there are three common factors associated with change: a window of opportunity, usually at the beginning of a Parliament, a reform agenda with a coherent set of proposals and leadership, sometimes from the backbenches; they also point to Russell's observation that it is unusual for backbenchers to be actively interested in parliamentary procedure.⁶⁷ They refer to Flinders' assessment that the executive's control of its own party and the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ C. Kenny et al., 'Legislative science advice in Europe', *Palgrave Communications*, DOI: 10.1057/palcomms.2017.30, (10 May 2017).

⁶¹ SCS045 Written evidence submitted by the Participation and Research and Information teams to the Liaison Committee inquiry into 'The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system' (2019).

⁶² POST, *Bridging research and policy*.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Michele Catanzaro, 'Spain to establish parliamentary office of science', *Nature*, (18 Dec. 2018); Scienza in Parlamento, <http://www.scienzainparlamento.org/>, accessed 14 Jun. 2019.

⁶⁵ POST, *Bridging research and policy*.

⁶⁶ M. Geddes and A. Meakin, 'Explaining Change in Parliaments: Dilemmas of managerial reform in the UK House of Commons', Paper presented to the PSA Annual Conference, 26-28 Mar. 2018, p.26.

⁶⁷ Philip Norton, 'The Norton View', in D. Judge (ed.), *The politics of parliamentary reform* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1983), pp.54-69; Russell, 'Never Allow a Crisis', p.630.

parliamentary timetable can obstruct reform, and Wright's explanation that reform is a 'matter of exploiting cracks and getting wedges into doors, which is easier when governments do not offer too much resistance.'⁶⁸ They also highlight Kelso's evaluation that there are three ways to explain change: change resulting from crises or shocks, a confluence of circumstances that provoke change and a weakening of barriers to change.⁶⁹

By outlining the processes by which the Select Committee on Science and Technology and POST have become embedded in the institution of Parliament, key factors emerge that explain how their positions were secured. In both cases, backbenchers, especially members of the P&SC, took great interest in bringing the proposals to the attention of other members of the House. They tabled amendments and early day motions, asked questions of Ministers, mentioned the proposals while speaking in debates and submitted evidence to inquiries run by the Procedure, Services and Information Committees.⁷⁰ They also wrote articles and pamphlets that were circulated beyond Westminster.⁷¹ In the case of POST, P&SC parliamentary members made financial contributions in its early stages, while it was backbench committee members of the Education, Science and Arts Committee that led calls for the reinstatement of a separate Select Committee on Science and Technology.

However it was the attitudes of government Ministers that ultimately determined how the history of the specialist select committee played out. Crossman's commitment to reform, and indeed science, secured its creation in 1967, whereas Biffen's dismissal of 'technical gobbledygook' was just one example of how little weight the Conservative Government gave to supporting MPs' scrutiny of science during of the 1980s. When it came to the committee's demise in 1979 and eventual reinstatement in 1992, it was down to executive decisions over the departmental committee system and the place of science within the machinery of government that determined its fortunes. Once science was given its own department in the Office of Science and Technology, then ministerial support was forthcoming from Waldegrave for a matching committee.

In the case of POST, according to Clark's anecdote about Thatcher, she supported the concept of a LSTAB, but in keeping with her broader efforts to reduce state provision of services, believed that POST should be funded privately. By setting POST up as a demonstrator unit that parliamentarians came to value, it meant that when Lloyd moved to the next stage of seeking parliamentary funding, he had garnered support from across both Houses. Therefore POST owes its existence to the attitudes of parliamentarians, first through the conviction of Lloyd and fellow P&SC members that Westminster needed a LSTAB, and then through the support of a cohort of MPs and Peers for the work of POST once it was operational.

The progress of both cases was incremental, as science and technology moved back and forth from sub-committee to committee, and POST matured from an innovation to a product in development and then to market leader. Throughout the period 1960-2000, P&SC provided a focus for supporters of these campaigns, the minutes of its meetings recording how members from Parliament, industry and academia came together to lobby for mechanisms that would ensure science was not neglected in the House of Commons.

⁶⁸ T. Wright, 'Prospects for Parliamentary Reform', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 57, no.4 (2004), pp.867–876.

⁶⁹ A. Kelso, *Parliamentary Reform at Westminster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

⁷⁰ For example: HC Deb 15 Mar. 1963 vol 673 c1736; HC Deb 24 Feb. 1964 vol 690 c115; HC Deb 24 Jul. 1986 v102 c 599.

⁷¹ A. Albu, 'The Member of Parliament, the executive and scientific policy'. *Minerva*, 2, no.1 (1963), pp.1–20; Conservative Political Centre, *Change or decay: Parliament and government in our industrial society* (1963).