



Regional Accountability at Westminster

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In June 2007 the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, announced the appointment of nine regional ministers. In the July 2007 Green Paper, *The Governance of Britain*, the Government proposed that regional committees should be established. Soon after, the *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration* announced the abolition of the existing regional assemblies.

In October 2007 the Modernisation Select Committee announced an inquiry on *Regional Accountability*. Their report, published on 10 July 2008 recommended that eight regional select committees should be established, with membership reflecting the membership of the House but with fewer members than existing select committees. The Committee also recommended that there should be eight regional grand committees, to include all Members from each region. The grand committees would be places for debate on regional matters, and for questions to be asked of the regional ministers. The Committee recommended that no new structures should be established for London at present, due to the role of the Greater London Assembly, although the creation of a committee of some kind was not ruled out in the future.

The Government published their response to the Modernisation Committee on 21 July 2008, and broadly agreed with the Committee's recommendations.

The House debated the motions on 12 November 2008. The House of Commons agreed to establish eight regional select committees and grand committees. However, the House rejected the Government's proposal to pay the chairmen of regional select committees in the same way that other select committee chairmen are paid. They also rejected the proposal to allow local authority councillors from the region to take part in proceedings of the committee.

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1 The new Regional Committees

1.1 Introduction

On 12 November 2008 the House of Commons agreed to establish eight regional select committees and eight regional grand committees. The changes will come into effect on 1 January 2009 and will have effect until the end of the current Parliament.

As well as establishing the new regional committees, the House also agreed to suspend Standing Order No. 117 which allowed for a Regional Affairs Committee to consider matters relating to regional affairs in England (for more information see section 7 below).

1.2 Regional Select Committees

Remit

The Standing Orders agreed by the House of Commons on 12 November 2008 stated that the regional select committees shall be appointed “to examine regional strategies and the work of regional bodies” for the eight English regions, excluding London. The intention is that the committees would look at the “development or implementation of policies where there is a regional aspect to decision-taking and delivery, and would not be focused on the purely local impact of nationally set policies”.¹

Chair and Members

Each committee will have no more than nine members. The membership of the committees will be selected in the same way as for other select committees – i.e. on the basis of party proportions across the whole House. The explanatory memorandum which accompanied the Motions debated on 12 November stated that:

There would be an expectation that the Members nominated by the Committee of Selection would represent seats within the relevant region, but this would not be mandatory (to allow for cases where individual parties in particular regions wished or needed to propose Members from outside the region). This mirrors existing practice in relation to the Welsh Affairs, Scottish Affairs and Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committees.²

The Government had intended that the chairmen of regional select committees would be paid in the same way as the chairmen of other select committees of the House. However, during the debate on 12 November 2008 the House agreed to a Motion tabled by Andrew Mackinlay to indicate that the chairmen should not be paid.³

The regional select committee chairmen will choose one from amongst themselves to sit on the Liaison Committee. If the chairmen are able to agree on their nomination, the Question to appoint that Member could be put to the House without debate. If there is no agreement, then the Motion would be debateable.

Powers

Regional committees will have the same powers as other select committees of the House to send for persons, papers and records, to adjourn from place to place, report from time to

¹ Explanatory Memorandum on the Motions in the Name of the Leader of the House relating to (1) Regional Accountability (2) Regional Select Committees (3) Regional Grand Committees (4) Pay for Chairmen of Select Committees (2 Motions), para 3

² *Ibid*, para 4

³ HC Deb 12 November 2008 c847

time and appoint special advisers. They will not, however, be able to appoint sub-committees or to travel outside the UK. Regional committees will have an additional power to invite Members of the House who are not members of the committee but represent constituencies within the region in respect of which it is appointed to attend and participate in its proceedings at specified meetings, but not to move motions or amendments, vote, or be counted in the quorum.

The Government had proposed that local authority councillors from the region should be able to take part in its deliberations and in evidence taking. However, an amendment to remove this power tabled by Andrew Mackinlay was passed without a division.⁴

1.3 Regional Grand Committees

Chair and members

Each regional grand committee will consist of those Members who represent constituencies within the region and up to five other Members nominated by the Committee of Selection. The Committee of Selection will have the power to discharge the nominated members and appoint others in their place.

Meetings

Meetings of regional grand committees are to be triggered by a motion put by a Government Minister for a specific committee to sit on a specified day at a specified place either in the region to which it relates or at Westminster. The Motion will also specify the time and duration of such a sitting and the business to be conducted. The Explanatory Notes accompanying the Motions debated on 12 November 2008 said that it was envisaged that “such meetings would mostly take place in the relevant region and that there might be one or two such sittings each year”. The business of the committees may include questions to regional ministers, statements by a Minister of the Crown or general debates on specific matters. The Standing Orders also provide for details of oral questions to regional ministers to be tabled.

1.4 Implications for the House of Commons Service

The House of Commons Management Board provided an Explanatory Memorandum to the Motions debated on 12 November 2008 which set out the implications of establishing the two groups of committees for the House of Commons Service.⁵

The Memorandum was based on the following assumptions:

- eight regional select committees, each with up to ten Members, each meeting on a limited number of occasions – the paper assumes six meetings for each committee per year, five in the region and one at Westminster;
- eight regional grand committees, each meeting up to twice each year in the region.

The Memorandum explained that as the proposals are for an experimental period (up to the end of the Parliament) in the first instance, additional posts were therefore assumed to be fixed term in the first instance, and where possible resources for the committees would be pooled or drawn from existing offices. In the first instance eight existing clerks would be asked to absorb the clerking of a regional select committee into their current role. The

⁴ HC Deb 12 November 2008 c857

⁵ Proposals for Regional Select and Grand Committees: Implications for the House of Commons Service, Explanatory Memorandum from the Management Board

practicalities of this arrangement would be kept under review. However, additional staff would be required to take on a variety of roles including administrative and media work.

Given these assumptions, the Memorandum then gave details of costs. Examples of the additional costs incurred included:

- Extra pay for chairmen;
- Extra staff for the committees;
- IT and office accommodation for staff;
- Transcription and associated costs;
- Costs for hiring venues for meetings in the regions;
- Travel and accommodation costs;
- Printing costs.

The Management Board therefore set out the “estimated additional cost of 8 regional select committees meeting 6 times a year each and 8 regional grand committees meeting twice a year each” as £1,346,132. The cost of the regional select committees alone would be £1,034,052. The cost of the regional grand committees alone would be £312,080.

However, the House of Commons has decided not to pay the chairmen of regional committees an additional salary, hence removing £109,704 from the cost of the committees, reducing the estimated cost to £1,236,428.

2 Background

2.1 The appointment of regional ministers

On 29 June 2007 nine regional ministers were appointed by the Prime Minister. The *Governance of Britain Green Paper*, published in July 2007, set out the role that these regional ministers would have:

Regional Ministers are responsible for providing a clear sense of strategic direction for their region. Regional Ministers also give citizens a voice in central government, ensuring that government policy takes account of the differing needs of the nine English regions. Regional Ministers will make central government more visible in the regions, helping to raise its profile and generate awareness of the political system.

There are a range of functions that Regional Ministers will undertake. These are mostly clustered around the responsibilities of the Government Offices and the RDAs [Regional Development Agencies], particularly in relation to economic development. Regional Ministers will be able to take questions in Parliament on the work of regional bodies, and on regional strategies. Regional ministers will be a visible representative of their area – they will take a key role in bringing together local services and different arms of government at important times for the region, whether in bidding for or hosting major sporting occasions (e.g. the Commonwealth Games); or when a region faces difficult challenges (e.g. the severe flooding afflicting Yorkshire and the Humber, and the East and West Midlands in June 2007).

The role of Regional Ministers is to:

- advise the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform on the approval of regional strategies and appointment of RDA Chairs and Boards;
- represent regional interests in the formulation of central government policy relevant to economic growth and sustainable development in areas that have not been devolved to the RDAs;
- facilitate a joined up approach across government departments and agencies to enable the effective delivery of the single regional strategy;
- champion the region at high level events and with regard to high profile projects (including through a programme of regional visits); and
- represent the Government with regard to central government policy at regional select committee hearings and at parliamentary debates focused specifically on the region.⁶

2.2 Initial proposals for regional select committees

The Green Paper then went on to propose the establishment of a system of regional select committees:

The Government believes that Regional Ministers should be accountable to Parliament. Both they and the Government's regional policy should be subject to formal and consistent parliamentary scrutiny. In common with the Communities and Local Government Select Committee the Government believes that one means of achieving this scrutiny could be the establishment of nine regional select committees. The Committee highlighted the possible need for specific provisions governing how such committees might operate, such as limitations on the number of meetings. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee's report highlighted the potential benefits such arrangements could bring, including effective examination of the work of regional bodies and calling Ministers to account.

Consideration of changes to the way the House of Commons operates is ultimately a matter for the House itself, informed as appropriate by relevant committees including the Procedure and Modernisation Select Committees. The Government looks forward to consideration of these proposals within the House and believes that they would offer an important step forward in democratic accountability and scrutiny of the delivery of public services in the English regions.⁷

In Business Questions on 19 July 2007 Harriet Harman indicated that the motions on changes to select committees to be debated on 25 July would include proposals on regional select committees.⁸ However, no motion about the regional select committees appeared on the Order Paper on 25 July 2007. Ms Harman was asked again about regional select committees at Business Questions on 26 July but no further information was forthcoming.

On 11 October 2007 the Modernisation Select Committee, chaired by Ms Harman, announced its intention to conduct an inquiry into "Regional Accountability". Further details

⁶ Ministry of Justice, *The Governance of Britain*, Cm 7170, July 2007, paras 115-118

⁷ *Ibid*, paras 118-120

⁸ HC Deb 19 July 2007 c438

were announced on 24 October.⁹ The Committee reported in July 2008 and the Government published its response soon after (see below).

3 Modernisation Committee inquiry into Regional Accountability

3.1 Modernisation Committee proposals

The Modernisation Committee published its report *Regional Accountability* on 10 July 2008. In short, the Committee recommended the creation of eight regional select committees and eight regional grand committees (with no committees for London). The report summary stated that:

We recommend that the most effective way to strengthen regional accountability to Parliament would be to establish a system of regional select committees. The membership of these committees should be constituted in the same way as that of existing select committees and should therefore reflect the political composition of the House. There should be one select committee for each of the administrative regions in England, with the exception of London. As London already has a measure of devolved government and accountability to elected representatives, it is likely to require somewhat different arrangements, which should be considered in the light of experience with the other committees.

However, as select committees can offer only a minority of members in a given region the opportunity to exercise regular and detailed scrutiny, we also recommend that up to two regional grand committee meetings should take place in each session for each of the eight regions, taking place either in Westminster or in the relevant region. This will allow more members to engage in scrutiny. Regional grand committee meetings should take the form of a general debate (or a series of short debates) and questions to the relevant Regional Minister, to ensure his or her accountability to Parliament. Regional Ministers should also take questions on a regular rota basis in Westminster Hall. We expect that both regional grand and regional select committees will hold a large proportion of their meetings outside Westminster, within their regions.

We believe that regional select committees have the potential to bring about a significant improvement in regional accountability. Nevertheless, there are practical challenges in their creation, including the risk of disrupting existing departmental select committee business or distracting agencies working in the regions from their core activities and central lines of accountability. They will also place increased demands on House resources in terms of Members' time and workload, staffing, printing and publication costs, availability of rooms for meetings and office accommodation.

We consider that these risks can be mitigated by a number of sensible precautions. Regional select committees must meet far less frequently than departmental select committees. We recommend a relatively small membership of up to 10 members, to ensure that regional select committees are functional and do not have an adverse impact on Members' other commitments. Regional select committees should develop positive working relationships and regular liaison with existing departmental select committees as well as local authorities in their region in order to take advantage of local knowledge, to co-ordinate scrutiny activities and to reduce the prospect of clashing inquiries or duplication of effort. Finally, we do not consider it appropriate for all eight Chairmen of the new regional select committees to sit on the Liaison

⁹ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, Press Notice, *New Inquiries*, 24 October 2007, http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/select_committee_on_modernisation_of_the_house_of_commons/modcompn241007.cfm (last viewed 11 July 2008)

committee, which is already a large committee. Instead, we consider that one of their number should be chosen by the House to attend meetings.¹⁰

The Committee also recommended that Regional Ministers should answer oral Questions on their activities and the exercise of their responsibilities at sittings of the relevant regional grand committees and on a regular rota basis in Westminster Hall.¹¹ Written Questions about the work of Regional Ministers are answered on their behalf by other Ministers.

The Report included some estimates of the costs which would be incurred for their proposed system.¹² These costs have been updated in the explanatory memorandum provided by the House of Commons Management Board which were published with versions on the motion made available on 6 November 2008.

The Committee stated that its recommendations should be implemented at first on a temporary basis until the end of the Parliament. There should then be a review of their operation in order to decide their future.¹³

The Modernisation Committee divided a number of times during their consideration of the report. The Conservative Members of the Committee all supported an amendment that indicated support only for regional grand committees, not for regional select committees at all.¹⁴

A number of amendments split the Committee equally, with the Committee chairman having to use her casting vote. These included a motion to change the report to recommend that only Members representing the region in question could sit on regional grand committees which was defeated by the casting vote of the chair. Motions relating to the membership of regional select committees required the chair to use a casting vote. The motion to agree that the report, as amended, should be the Third Report to of the Committee to the House, also required the chairman to use her casting vote.

3.2 Government response

The Government published their response to the Modernisation Committee on 21 July 2008, less than a fortnight after the Modernisation Committee's report. The Government broadly agreed with the Modernisation Committee's recommendations. They stated:

The Government's objects in developing mechanisms for greater English regional accountability at parliamentary level include:

- establishing a significant, effective and visible vehicle for promoting regional democratic accountability;
- filling the gap in political regional accountability faced by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and other bodies at regional level;
- allowing some involvement from all Members of the relevant region, while respecting existing principles for the composition of committees;

¹⁰ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of commons, *Regional Accountability*, 10 July 2008, HC 282 2007-08, Summary

¹¹ *Ibid*, para 79

¹² *Ibid*, Annex

¹³ *Ibid*, para 84

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp 43-44

- giving powers to the committees which are consistent with effective conduct of business by the House and within the regional institutions;
- recognising the impact on the House (in terms both of resource implications and Members' time and priorities).

The Government agrees with the central proposals for regional select committees, that they should meet less frequently than other select committees in order to ensure proportionality of scrutiny and to ensure they are workable for the House of Commons. These new committees would be accompanied by occasional meetings of grand committees organised on a regional basis, which would provide the opportunity for all Members from each region to participate in regional scrutiny.

The Government intends to bring forward detailed proposals to the House in the autumn, including standing order changes to establish the select committees and to provide for the proposed regional grand committees.¹⁵

On the Committee's proposals for London, the Government stated:

As the Committee notes, London is different from the other regions because of the special governance arrangements already in place in the form of the Mayor of London and the London Assembly. The Government agrees that there is a case for leaving London out of the initial arrangements put in place for regional committees, subject to further consultation with the Mayor of London, London MPs and other interested parties and, more importantly, in the light of experience of operation of the committees for the other regions.¹⁶

The Government agreed with the Committee that the membership of the committees:

...should reflect the party balance in the House as a whole, as for other select committees (including those for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). It is also right that, while the House will expect almost all proposed nominations from the Committee of Selection to be from within the relevant region, there should be freedom to nominate from outside the region. It would be expected that the chairman of each committee would be from within the region, though this decision would – as for other committees – rest finally with the committees themselves.¹⁷

Later in the response, the Government agreed that the Committee chairmen should not be members of the Liaison Committee but they should, however, be remunerated.¹⁸

The Government also considered the relationship between local authorities and the regional committees. The Government stated that:

As the Committee's discussion (paragraph 67) suggests, provision could also be made in the Standing Orders for committees to hold formal meetings with local authorities or local authority scrutiny committees or, perhaps more appropriately, groups of councillors from across the region. This might be done by adapting the power currently given to the Welsh Affairs Committee to hold occasional meetings with committees of

¹⁵ Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, *Regional Accountability: The Government's response to the Modernisation Committee's Third Report of session 2007-08*, July 2008, Cm 7376, paras 2-4

¹⁶ *Ibid*, para 9

¹⁷ *Ibid*, para 12

¹⁸ *Ibid*, para 20

the National Assembly for Wales, to one where elected councillors from across the region could be invited to attend and participate in meetings.¹⁹

The Government did not agree with the Modernisation Committee that there should be oral question periods for regional ministers in Westminster Hall. The Government stated that “this would be disproportionate and would remove time available in Westminster Hall for other business”.²⁰

4 The debate held on 12 November 2008

4.1 Introduction

The Government’s motions to amend the House’s Standing Orders to establish the eight regional select committees and regional grand committees were broadly based on the recommendations of the Modernisation Select Committee and the Government’s response.

The Government tabled one motion entitled ‘Regional Accountability’ which stated:

That this House welcomes the Third Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on Regional Accountability (HC Paper No. 282); approves the proposals for regional select and grand committees for each of the English regions set out in the response from the Government set out in the White Paper *Regional Accountability* (Cm 7376); accordingly endorses the clear expectation that regional committees should meet significantly less frequently than departmental select committees; and considered that the combination of select committees providing opportunities for inquiries and reports into regional policy and administration together with opportunities for debate involving all honourable Members from the relevant region will provide a major step forward in the scrutiny of regional policy.²¹

This was followed by a motion to establish regional select committees, motions to allow for payment of regional select committee chairmen, and a motion to establish regional grand committees.

Two explanatory memoranda were published along with the Government’s motions: one from the Office of the Leader of the House explaining the meaning of the motions; the other from the Management Board of the House of Commons on the implications for the House of Commons Service.

A number of amendments were tabled to the motions. Three were passed:

- One amended the motion above to insert the words “except that Chairmen of regional select committees shall not be paid”. This amendment was passed by 239 votes to 237.
- Another removed the power of regional select committees to invite specified elected councillors from the region to attend and participate at specified meetings. This was agreed to without a division.
- The last to be agreed was a motion to suspend Standing Order No. 117 which provides for a Regional Affairs Committee.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, para 17

²⁰ *Ibid*, para 24

²¹ “Remaining Orders and Notices”, *Order Paper*, 6 November 2008

4.2 Key areas of discussion

The House had one and a half hours to debate the motions, and a five minute time-limit on backbench speeches was imposed.

Harriet Harman, Leader of the House of Commons, opened the debate with the following comments:

Today, I bring to the House the Government's proposals on regional accountability, to put in place an effective and visible improvement in the scrutiny of, and democratic accountability of, the public agencies and public policies that operate in the English regions. The reality is that in every region in England there are important public agencies, with budgets of billions of pounds. The decisions that they make, and how they put those decisions into practice, shape the future of the regions and profoundly affect those who live and work in them.

At regional level, those agencies are much bigger than—and are beyond the accountability of—any local authority in the region. The regional development agencies, the strategic health authorities, the Learning and Skills Council and the Highways Agency are big regional beasts. Their regional directors and chief executives are regional “masters of the universe”, with huge budgets. However, they are public bodies spending public money in the public interest, and it is right that they should be publicly accountable through this House to the region that they serve. Both in Parliament and within Government it has been recognised that there is the problem of an “accountability gap” in the regions; now we are seeking to do something about it.²²

Amendments had been tabled to establish a regional select committee and a regional grand committee for London. In her opening speech Harriet Harman stated that:

...I intend that following on from this resolution, we should turn our attention to London and get on with making arrangements for deepening the scrutiny of pan-London organisations, such as the strategic health authority. Following consultation, we will bring forward proposals to the House early in the new year.²³

Andrew Dismore, who had tabled the amendments, explained:

The case for a Select Committee for London has been strongly made. A London Committee does not have to follow exactly the same model as the other Committees, and it is, thus, right that we should consider it in the context of devolution to London. Special problems face London, and I hope that the Leader of the House's consultation on this matter will be short and sharp. I hope that she will be able to come back to the House in the early new year with concrete proposals to ensure that London gets the representation and the scrutiny of the Minister, of the Government office for London and of all the other bodies that we should be able to achieve for London Members in this House.²⁴

Theresa May, Shadow Leader of the House, spoke of the need to “aim for consensus among the parties, so that there is general acceptance of the proposals in this House”. She said:

As was referred to in the previous debate [on the Business Motion relating to this debate], the issue was discussed at considerable length in the Modernisation Committee, and as a member of that Committee, I sat through evidence from regional bodies, the House authorities and Chairmen of existing Select Committees. It was

²² HC Deb 12 November 2008 c813

²³ *Ibid*, c817

²⁴ *Ibid*, cc833-834

absolutely clear that no case was made for regional Select Committees as the answer to the problem of the need for increased regional accountability. There was no consensus on the move to regional Select Committees, and the Modernisation Committee, in its report, raised severe doubts about the impact of regional Select Committees. It referred to

“practical challenges in their creation, including: the risk of disrupting existing departmental select committee business; the potential to distract public bodies and agencies working in the regions from their core activities and central lines of accountability; the possibility of duplicating scrutiny work already being undertaken in the regions; the additional burden on Members’ time and workload; increased demands on House resources”.

Given the reservations of the Modernisation Committee, it is all the more important that the House knows that this proposal, which originated from a policy proposal of the Prime Minister and the Government, was pushed through the Committee on the Chairman’s casting vote—the Chairman being, of course, the Leader of the House. There was no consensus for change. You may call me old-fashioned, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I happen to think, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) said during the earlier debate, that when we are changing the structure of the House, Select Committees or other matters relating to the House, the Leader of the House should aim for consensus among the parties, so that there is general acceptance of the proposals in this House.²⁵

Theresa May had tabled an amendment which would have removed approval for regional select committees from the Government’s motion. She explained her view that:

What will these regional Select Committees actually do? Are they to scrutinise Government regional policy, such as what the Government are telling the regional development agencies to do? If so, that role is already being carried out by existing Select Committees. Regional development agencies are accountable to the Select Committee on Business and Enterprise, which is ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff). Moreover, the Select Committees hold a significant number of their meetings in the regions. If the regional Committees are not to scrutinise Government policy, which is already scrutinised by existing Select Committees, what will they do? Will they allow hon. Members to question decisions taken by regional bodies in their area? A better way of doing that would be in regional Grand Committees, where all Members can be present to discuss the issue, and not in a Select Committee, where a limited number of Members—not all of whom will be from that region—will be present.²⁶

She also stated that regional select committees would put the House under “strain”

...There is already difficulty in finding people to fill existing Committee posts, yet we propose the creation of 72 new posts. Problems with filling vacancies will not be helped by the proposal. Indeed, there is a danger that the committees could find themselves in the farcical position of not having enough members or being inquorate, and that would have an impact on witnesses and perceptions of the House.

That brings me to cost. We are told that the annual running costs of the committees could amount to just over £1 million. I suspect that it would be considerably higher. Together with the outlay on regional Grand Committees, which the Government also

²⁵ *Ibid*, c817-818

²⁶ *Ibid*, c819

propose, the bill will fast approach £1.5 million if not £2 million a year. That money could be rather better spent.

To plug the regional accountability gap, we need go no further than setting up regional Grand Committees, which would give every Member in a region the opportunity to make their views known about what was being done by bodies in their region. Every part of a region would be represented, and we would avoid the position that could arise with the regional Select Committees, whereby people from outside the region may be included to maintain the Government's majority. The Grand Committees would not need to meet so often, and their running costs would be significantly lower than those of the regional Select Committees.²⁷

Simon Hughes argued that the party balance of the regional select committee should reflect that of the region in question, and that the chairmen of these committees should be paid one eighth of the salary of a select committee chairman:

My party would argue that those representatives should reflect the votes in those regions, but in three regions the Government came second or third in share of the vote at the last general election. Even if we do not win that argument, the Government should at least propose Select Committees that reflect the balance of political representation in each region, which differ hugely from each other. The Committees should also reflect the differences between the regions, but the Leader of the House—as she confirmed earlier in an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath)—has failed to accept that.

We propose that the same principle should apply that—it could be argued—currently applies to the Scottish and Welsh Committees. Scotland and Wales have a majority of Labour Members, and so do the Committees. Northern Ireland has never had the benefit of a fair system: there are nine MPs from the Democratic Unionist party and nine others, but that balance is not reflected on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

It is now proposed that the Government should have a majority on the regional Committee for every one of the eight regions of England. At the last general election, the Government did not win the largest share of the vote in the east, south-east or south-west of England. Indeed, they came third in the south-east and the south-west—regions with millions of people. The Government are trying to impose their majority in all of England, when they do not have a majority in every region. Worse, they are trying to fiddle the system so that they can bus in colleagues from other regions to make up their majority. They are insisting that the Grand Committees, made up of all the Members from every party, should have up to five other nominated members. Not content with corrupting the balance on the Select Committees, the Government also want to pervert the balance of the Grand Committees. The Leader of the House must understand that that is causing the greatest offence and suggests great disrespect to the people in many of the regions, some of whom already think that their region is an artificial creation or difficult to accept. They are being told that not only do they have to accept those artificially created regions, but that they will have imposed on them a Government majority, no matter how they have voted in the past.

...we have also argued that the Chairmen of the new Committees should not be paid the same as the Chairmen of a UK-wide subject-based Committee. Eight new Committees are proposed, so we suggested that the Chairmen should be paid an eighth of what the other Chairmen are paid. If that is not accepted, we share the view of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) that, at least to start with, those

²⁷ *Ibid*, c820-821

posts should not be remunerated. Otherwise, we will just be accused of creating more jobs at public expense.²⁸

He also spoke about the increase in number of committee places which would be made available:

We have 41 Select Committees. If we agree to this proposal, there will be 49. There will then be a Speaker's Conference, with the same powers as a Select Committee, which makes 50. There will be 72 more members of Select Committees as a result of such a decision being taken today, and more as a result of there being a Speaker's Conference, which we are to appoint later.

At the moment, 159 colleagues serve on more than one Select Committee, eight serve on as many as four and I have to tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you are not aware of it, that many Committees struggle to achieve an adequate attendance. It does the credibility of the House no good to have a small and sometimes inqorate number of colleagues on Committees sitting to take evidence from whoever we call. That is not good for our reputation and it is why we ask the Leader of the House, before adding another range of Select Committees to our armoury, to defer all these debates until we can review the workings of Select Committees generally.²⁹

Andrew Mackinlay, stated that:

I have tabled three amendments. The first draws attention to the fact that there is an injunction, as it were, that the Committees should not meet very often. That is absurd. If I were serving on such a Committee, I would not be constrained by that request—or, rather, hope—but would want to stretch the envelope to the maximum to ensure that the Committee was at least of some value. The proposal is nonsense and shows that the idea has not been fully thought through. I will not divide the House on that amendment, but I mention it to highlight my other amendments. If I am right in my judgment that the envelope will not be stretched, why should we pay the Chairmen of those Committees the same as we pay the Chairmen of departmental Select Committees? The idea is simply bonkers.

In addition, there is the high payroll vote, which has already been referred to—I discovered in 2005 that 144 hon. Members were not on the basic MP's pay, and the figure must be a lot higher now. I urge hon. Members to reflect on that, because it is very unhealthy to say the least. There is also the paradox of the Deputy Leader of the House, who is not paid a bean, advocating that Chairmen should be paid. Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his salary for his friends. The growth of the payroll vote and the patronage that goes with it is very unhealthy.

I hope to divide the House on my amendment dealing with that issue, because, even if I am wrong in my judgment that those Chairmen should not be paid at all, if the House accepts my amendment, there can be a period of reflection. Perhaps they should be paid a per diem, but not on the same rate as the Chairs of the departmental Committees. I hope that I will take the House with me on that.

My second concern of substance is the provision in the proposed Standing Order that would allow a regional Committee to invite

"specified elected councillors from the region in respect of which it is appointed...to attend and participate".

²⁸ *Ibid*, c823-824

²⁹ *Ibid*, c825

Have we no pride? I fought hard to get elected to this place. It was five general elections before I got elected. I am proud to be a Member of Parliament and my duties as a Member of Parliament are indivisible. Councillors' jobs are very important, but we should not blur the issues by bringing the two together. I urge hon. Members to stand up for Parliament and be jealous of their rights and privileges.

...

Privileges are important, because what happens under parliamentary privilege? I can be admonished by the House if I abuse parliamentary privilege. We are self-regulating. How can you deal with someone who is not a Member of this House, but who abuses parliamentary privilege, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Will we have a separate register of interests for these people? The idea has not been thought through, which is why I hope we will reject it, if for no other reason than that.

When I was a young councillor, I would have been proud to serve on a parliamentary Committee—I would have given my right hand to do so—but I was very partisan and saw it as my mission to get elected to this place. We can imagine the councillors coming in, taking on the Minister here and the official there, but that will diminish what I hope we try to do, which is to leave our party allegiances at the Committee Room door. I do not know whether there are any Scottish or Welsh Members in the Chamber, but if having elected councillors is good for me in Essex, I shall similarly be proposing that some people from Scottish local authorities and assemblies should serve on the Scottish Select Committee, too. What is being proposed really is mad, so I ask hon. Members to join me in the Lobby against those two proposals.

My final point is about Members of Parliament who are not from the region concerned serving on, say, the south-west regional Committee. I have asked myself, "Could I possibly do this?" In my judgment, I would have to be stark staring bonkers to go and serve on a Committee covering a region of which my constituency formed no part. Surely we are all busy. I must say that those who sign up will do so with full knowledge and consent, and will be subject to criticism by their electors. Their electors will ask: "What the devil are you doing focusing on that region and not ours?"

Earlier, one of the Whips muttered to me, "What about Ireland?" That is a different situation, because the question of Northern Ireland is demonstrably, because of its history, a United Kingdom matter. However, when people go from one region to another, they will be subject to criticism. They must remember that they have to agree under Standing Orders to serve on a Committee, so they cannot blame the Whips or hide behind them, or excuse themselves. They will have signed up, so they can be subject to criticism.³⁰

Sir George Young spoke for his amendment to abolish the Regional Affairs Committee:

The amendment would abolish the Regional Affairs Committee. Colleagues could be excused for not knowing that there was one. Standing Orders require one to be established, but the Government have not done so in this Parliament. Week after week at meetings of the Committee of Selection, we wait for the Government to propose members of the Committee, yet nothing happens. The Government clearly must feel that the Committee serves no useful purpose, so I hope that they will accept the amendment.

The Regional Affairs Committee, to remind colleagues, was applauded when it was introduced. In 2000, the then Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett), said:

“We believe that such a forum will add usefully to the procedures of the House”.—[*Official Report*, 11 April 2000; Vol. 367, c. 295.]

The Committee has been so useful that it has not met since April 2003, which indicates that it is a wholly dispensable part of our constitution. The amendment would simply put it out of its misery.³¹

Members who spoke in favour of the Government’s proposals included James Plaskitt and Neil Turner. Mr Plaskitt said he supported the Government’s proposals:

...for two simple reasons: they will plug a clear gap in accountability and oversight, and they will help Members of Parliament in the regions serve our constituents more effectively.³²

Neil Turner said that:

The Leader of the House and my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt) made a very good case for having regional Select Committees on the grounds that they will scrutinise the work of Government regional bodies. The case was well made, but there is another important issue that is too easily forgotten. The agenda of bringing our regions closer together—for example, making it possible for the north-west and the west midlands to have the same “gross value added” as London and the south-east—is very important. To make that regional agenda happen means more than looking into regional bodies, quangos and other Government agencies, as it is also about looking into business, the voluntary sector and the whole community in the regions concerned. I believe that regional Select Committees have an important job to do in bringing all those elements together, ensuring that we have a coherent and cohesive tale to tell. That would help to bring the GVA of our region, currently below the national average, up to it.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) spoke about the £2 million cost. It is easy to look at the costs, but what about the benefits? With an increase of merely 0.1 per cent. in the GVA of the north-west, that £2 million would pale into insignificance. As we scrutinise these various bodies, we need to ensure that they become better and take better decisions. The likelihood is that, as a result of better scrutiny, the regional development agencies, the learning and skills councils and other local bodies that my colleagues have mentioned will actually perform better.³³

4.3 The decisions of the House

Regional Accountability

The House voted on whether to remove the sections from the Government’s motion which related to regional select committees, so that the motion would only indicate approval for regional grand committees. The House divided 233 in favour of the motion and 250 against. The amendment was therefore not carried.

The House then voted on an amendment to the Government’s motion to insert text to disagree with the Modernisation Committee’s recommendation that the chairmen of the new regional select committees should be remunerated. The House divided 239 in favour of the motion and 237 against. The House therefore agreed to indicate that Chairmen of the new

³⁰ *Ibid*, cc827-828

³¹ *Ibid*, c829

³² *Ibid*, c821

³³ *Ibid*, c830-831

regional select committee should not be paid. Consequently, the motions on chairman's pay were not put by the Deputy Speaker.³⁴

The Government's motion, as amended, was then voted on. The House divided 254 in favour and 224 against.

Regional Select Committees

The House voted on an amendment which would have required members of each regional select committee to represent constituencies within the relevant region. The House divided with 90 in favour of the amendment and 235 against.

The House also voted on an amendment which would have required the Committee of Selection to have regard to the proportion of Members of each party representing constituencies in the relevant region. It would have also required the Committee of Selection, to nominate at least one Member from each of the three largest parties despite the party balance in the relevant region. The House divided with 229 in favour and 231 against the amendment.

The House agreed an amendment which removed the ability of regional select committees to invite specified elected councillors from the region to attend and participate at specified meetings. This amendment was agreed without a division.

Regional Grand Committees

The House agreed to an amendment to suspend Standing Order No. 117 which allows for the Regional Affairs Committee. This was agreed without a division.

The House divided on an amendment which would have removed the Committee of Selection's ability to nominate up to five Members not from the region in question. The House divided with 107 in favour of the amendment and 219 against.

The main question, to establish the regional grand committees but suspend Standing Order No. 117, was agreed by the House without division.

5 Background to the Government's proposals

The creation of regional ministers had been proposed by the New Local Government Network in their report *Redesigning Regionalism* published in 2007. The report argued that:

...the appointment of a series of Ministerial portfolio holders to represent and act for Government as policy leaders in each of the English regional might provide a greater degree of focus for regional policy, encourage a more integrated approach across Whitehall, and offer superior opportunities for scrutiny and cross-examination of regional decisions in Parliament.³⁵

The Communities and Local Government Committee report, *Is there a future for regional government?* was also published in 2007. This recommended a system of regional select committees:

...we accept the argument that, given the existence and increasing importance of regional governance structures in determining policy, there should be more thorough

³⁴ *Ibid*, c857

³⁵ See NLGN Press Notice, *Gordon Brown adopts regional ministers plan advocated by NLGN as part of wider constitutional reform*, 29 June 2007

and consistent scrutiny of the regions at Westminster. We are pleased that Ministers also expressed their willingness for such scrutiny to take place. We should stress that we do not see this as a substitute for the scrutiny carried out by the Regional Assemblies, but as an adjunct to it, making use of the different powers which Westminster committees hold for examining central government activity and linking it to the realisation of policy at the regional level.

We believe that the most effective way of securing such scrutiny would be to appoint a select committee for each region, which might meet a limited number of times each year (perhaps in conjunction with the relevant Assembly) in order to examine the work of key regional bodies and to call Ministers to account for their performance. We can also see merit in the suggestion of additional regional debates or question times in Westminster Hall. Such options might be instituted on an experimental basis, with their effectiveness reviewed after one or two Parliamentary sessions.

Consideration of changes in the way the House of Commons operates is formally a matter for the select committees on Procedure and Modernisation of the House of Commons; and, ultimately, for the House itself. We shall write to these Committees upon publication of this Report, asking them if they will examine the effectiveness of the current Regional Affairs Committee and the detailed implications of improved Parliamentary scrutiny for the regions. We hope that Ministers will continue to support any proposals for scrutiny reform at Westminster which might arise as a consequence of such inquiries.³⁶

However, the Government proposals are not the same as the Communities and Local Government Committee's proposals. The Committee's proposals involved a continued role for regional assemblies. The Government has announced "that regional assemblies in their current form and function will not continue".³⁷

6 The proposed abolition of regional assemblies

6.1 Regional assemblies

Regional assemblies are voluntary associations of local authority members and other 'stakeholders' in the region. The assemblies vary in size but their membership generally comprises 70% local authority members and 30% drawn from other sectors including business and industry, further and higher education, voluntary organisations, trades unions and other stakeholder groups. Their constitutions also vary, some operating as limited companies, others as unincorporated associations. Further information can be found on the website of their representative body, the English Regions Network (ERN).³⁸

Regional assemblies are not statutory bodies but have been recognised by ministers as suitable regional bodies for the purposes of two pieces of legislation. Firstly, they have been designated as representative bodies of the region for the purposes of the *Regional Development Agencies Act 1998*, that is, they may undertake scrutiny of, and be consulted by, the development agency for their region. Secondly, they have been recognised as regional planning bodies as required by the *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*. Since regional assemblies are not statutory bodies, ministers have no powers to abolish them, but they may withdraw recognition of their status as representative bodies under these Acts.

³⁶ Communities and Local Government Select Committee, *Is there a future for regional government in England*, 14 March 2007, HC 352-I 2006-07, paras 112-114

³⁷ *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration*, July 2007, Foreword

³⁸ <http://ern.smartregion.org.uk/> (last viewed 11 July 2008)

The core functions of the assemblies are to:-

- **Scrutinise** the RDAs;
- Act as regional **planning** bodies, preparing regional spatial strategies including regional transport strategies;
- Act as regional **housing** boards, preparing regional housing strategies and making recommendations to Government over housing investment;
- Act as the **voice of the region** to Whitehall and European institutions.

6.2 Reform of regional economic policy

The Government's *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration*, published on 17 July 2007, contained a number of criticisms of the assemblies. It pointed to weakness in institutional structures, variable levels of scrutiny, and confusion over the accountability of both regional assemblies and RDAs to regional stakeholders. It said:

In the absence of a directly-elected regional tier of government, democratic accountability for regional bodies needs to be through either or both of local authorities and central government.³⁹

The Government's proposed reforms of regional economic policy, announced by the Local Government Minister, John Healey, on 17 July, included the following:-

- Combination of the regional economic strategy with the regional spatial strategy into a single regional strategy;
- RDAs to have executive responsibility for this new strategy;
- Local authority leaders to hold the RDA to account in the region and approve the regional strategy; new Commons select committees to hold RDAs and others to account in Parliament;
- The Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform to have lead responsibility for regional economic development;
- A minister to be appointed for each region "...to provide a sense of strategic direction to their region."⁴⁰

Other commitments included: (1) a proposed new duty for upper-tier local authorities to assess the economic circumstances and challenges to their local economy, and (2) the Government to work with interested city and sub-regions on the scope for statutory sub-regional arrangements which could allow greater devolution of national and regional economic functions. The accompanying press release indicated that regional assemblies would be phased out from 2010.⁴¹

³⁹ HM Treasury et al, *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration*, July 2007, p55, http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending_review/spend_csr07/reviews/subnational_econ_review.cfm (last viewed 11 July 2008)

⁴⁰ HC Deb 17 July 2007 c161-2

⁴¹ DCLG, "Government review empowers regions and localities to spread economic opportunity to all", *News release 2007/0133*, 17 July 2007

In March 2008 the DCLG and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform published a consultation paper, *Prosperous Places: Taking forward the Review of Sub National Economic Development and Regeneration*. This set out the Government's proposals in more detail.⁴² The period for consultation responses ended on 20 June 2008.

6.3 Regional Select Committees and RDAs

One of the proposed roles of the regional select committees is to provide a scrutiny function for the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). The Government has indicated that regional committees together with regional ministers will allow greater public accountability of RDAs. The Government's *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration* stated that:

...To develop the democratic accountability of the RDAs and other regional and local agencies further, the Government believes there is benefit in developing clear mechanisms for enhanced Parliamentary scrutiny of regional institutions. This would provide an opportunity for informed public debate, scrutiny and accountability on the regional tier of governance. While Members of Parliament can ask questions about each of the regions through questions to the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry or for Communities and Local Government, there is not currently a structured, systematic role for MPs to play in holding regional institutions to account. There is also scope to increase cross-party awareness and understanding of RDAs.

The Government will therefore work with Parliament to agree the best way of enhancing the Parliamentary scrutiny of regional institutions and regional economic policy. This could be committee-based, on either the select or standing committee model. However, in examining options for the most effective scrutiny arrangements, it is important to be clear on the key principles which should underpin such parliamentary accountability. This should include recognising the need for greater information and communication about regional working as well as the need for more opportunities for democratic scrutiny of activities of regional agencies. Any such Parliamentary scrutiny arrangements would be expected to take evidence from the regions, hold public hearings in the regions, and receive formal responses from both the Government and the regions to any reports which are published.⁴³

During his statement on local and regional economic reform in England on 17 July 2007, John Healey was pressed by Dr Phyllis Starkey (Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee) on the relationship between local government scrutiny of RDAs and the proposed scrutiny by regional select committees:

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): I welcome the general approach of the Minister's statement in bringing together economic planning with housing, employment and spatial strategies. I want to ask him a specific question, however, about the proposals for the accountability of RDAs. He appears to be proposing accountability of the regional Committees to Parliament, and also, separately, to council leaders through some other, unspecified, mechanism. Will he consider the introduction of a hybrid committee to bring together MPs from the region and local authority leaders to hold the RDA accountable?

John Healey: I applaud my hon. Friend's interest in this area and the work that she does as Chair of the departmental Select Committee. The principle that we are

⁴² Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, *Prosperous Places: taking forward the review of sub national economic development and regeneration*, 31 March 2008, p6

⁴³ *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration*, July 2007, paras 6.106-6.107

planning to put in place is that, at regional level, the performance of the RDA in preparing the single regional strategy and in delivering its part of the strategy, as well as the content of the strategy itself, should be subject to greater scrutiny in the region and in Parliament. In the region, that should be conducted by local authority leaders, who will be consulted and charged with scrutinising the preparation of the regional strategy. For the first time, they will also be charged with the role of approving the strategy. In that way, without an elected regional assembly, we shall be able to reinforce public accountability and the democratic oversight of this important work that must be carried out at regional level.⁴⁴

7 The Regional Affairs Committee

The Regional Affairs Committee was first established in 1975.⁴⁵ It operates in a similar way as a grand committee. The Regional Affairs Committee has no powers to organise its own business, and meets only at the initiative of the Government. It has no permanent secretariat. It had not met since 1978 when it was revived under new procedures in 2000. A motion to replace the earlier version of Standing Order No. 117 was agreed to by the House on 11 April 2000. The first meeting under these revised Standing Orders was on 10 May 2001 and it last met during the 2003-04 Session. The subjects of its debates during this time were:

- May 2001 Regional economic performance and imbalances
- Dec 2001 Governance in England
- March 2002 Regional Development Agencies
- July 2002 White Paper *Your region your choice: revitalising the English Regions*
- April 2003 Government Offices in the regions
- Dec 2003 The English regions and referendums on elected regional assemblies
- June 2004 Regional economic performance and the Northern Way⁴⁶

Standing Order No. 117 states that the Committee “shall consider any matter relating to regional affairs in England that may be referred to it”. The Committee has thirteen members, however, “any Member of the House representing an English constituency, though not nominated to the committee, may take part in its proceedings, but may not make any motion, vote or be counted in the quorum”. Ministers may make a statement to the committee on the matter or matters referred to it and take questions. After any such statements and questions, the Committee considers “each matter referred to it on a motion ‘That the committee has considered that matter’”.⁴⁷

On 12 November 2008 the House of Commons agreed to suspend Standing Order No. 117.

⁴⁴ HC Deb 17 July 2007 c165

⁴⁵ Library Standard Note SN/PC/867, *Regional Affairs Committee*

⁴⁶ All Regional Affairs Committee debates can be found from following links on this page:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/othstn.htm> (last viewed 11 July 2008)

⁴⁷ Standing Orders of the House of Commons (Public Business), 29 March 2007, HC 405 2006-07, No. 117