

# **What Have We Learnt About Prime Ministerial Accountability From House of Commons Liaison Committee Sessions?**

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## **Abstract**

Prime ministerial power is always contingent, based on the utilisation of personal and institutional resources, subject to various formal and informal constraints. Parliament is both a political resource to be utilised, but also a veto-player. In the absence of formal mechanisms, setting out the requirements for the British Prime Minister to be accountable, a fluid and essentially personalised relationship has developed. The prime minister is largely outside parliament's most prominent accountability structures. However, with the advent of the regular appearances before the Liaison Committee in 2002, parliament has added to the core mechanisms of prime ministerial accountability analysed by Dunleavy, Jones and O'Leary in 1990 (questions; statements; speeches; interventions). This paper considers the accountability of the prime minister to parliament focusing on Liaison Committee hearings. The paper draws on extensive qualitative and quantitative data to analyse the hearings themselves, placing them within the broader framework of prime ministerial-legislative relations.

## **Introduction**

Analysis of the British prime minister has largely focused on the power and role of the office and the utilisation of the position by incumbents. Debates about the nature and style of prime ministerial power and predominance have been extensively debated in the recent literature (Heffernan 2013; Dowding 2013). Scholars have debated the waxing and waning of the PM's central role and importance and nature of prime ministerial leadership to British governance. The impact on governance structures and policymaking, flowing from such crucial debates, has gained much prominence in executive study (Diamond 2014; Barber 2007). The altered landscape of the core executive with its contextual constraints under the coalition government have added a new layer to the understanding of the blend between personal and structural resource utilisation (Bennister and Heffernan 2012, 2014; Hazell and Yong 2012).

This concentration of analyses on the centre of government has rather overshadowed any development of scholarly material on the accountability relationship between the prime minister and the legislature. A lot is known about policy making, organisation at the centre, executive arrangements, advisory structure and internal cabinet relations and a lot less about prime ministerial accountability to the legislature. This may be because prime ministers do not have formal responsibility to the legislature and remain largely subject to convention. The formal legal powers and financial resources in the British system are vested in the Secretaries of State. Ministers are accountable to the 'Crown in Parliament'. In the absence of the legal, formal relationship that binds ministers to the legislature the prime minister is able to make up the rules as he or she sees fit. In this context Tony Blair was able to reduce Prime Minister's Question Time from 15 minutes twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays to 30 minutes once a week on Wednesdays. The change was agreed in Blair's post 1997 honeymoon period without any debate (Blair later admitted in his biography any debate would probably have scuppered this reform (Blair 2010: 108)).

To understand the nature of the relationship between the PM and the legislature, we should consider the basic elements of parliamentary accountability. 'Accountability' has its etymological roots in Norman English bookkeeping (Bovens, 2010) and in Westminster-derived democracies in particular, many of the accountability measures are either focussed on, or have their roots in, the close monitoring of government expenditure. The select committees, for example, had their origins in parliament's attempts to 'ensur[e] efficiency and 'value for money' ' (Jogerst, 1993:39). This focus on financial matters is evident in other aspects of accountability too. Without a department, the prime minister is, as many argued, subject to less systematic parliamentary scrutiny than the members of his own cabinet. The departmental structure of the select committee system has meant that the prime minister has been able to refuse to appear before them. The prime minister does appear for parliamentary questions (and the ministers also have regular question sessions scheduled). But if accountability is finding out what has been done and why, then PMQs as it is currently constituted can be swiftly dismissed as an effective means of holding the prime minister to account for it does neither.

There is, as this state of affairs suggests, an obvious dislocation between theory and practice in much of British politics. Theory has always stressed the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty and championed the theoretical balance between the legislature and the executive. As Kumarasingham (2013) points out 'The reality is that parliament with its tight party control in the Westminster system does not provide the horizontal accountability that it theoretically could'. The 'mismatch' as others (notably Rhodes 1997, 2005; Shepherd 2010) conclude erodes the legitimacy of parliament. Furthermore (see Strom 2003 and Schumpeter 1974) there is a paradox between the delegatory functions of parliamentary democracy in theory and the accountability functions in practice (Thomas 2004). The status of the prime minister within the chain of delegation and accountability is somewhat problematic. At one level, the prime minister is delegated by parliament in the same way as other government ministers. Whilst there is no Westminster equivalent of the Scottish ratification

of the leader and cabinet, the prime minister remains in place only for as long as he or she maintains the confidence of parliament.

The mismatch is exacerbated by a succession of prime ministers seemingly uninterested in parliament and able to pay only scant attention to it when political capital can be generated elsewhere. Patrick Dunleavy et al. (1990) established some years ago that prime ministers have engaged less and less with Parliament. The study analysed four key functions of prime ministerial engagement from 1868 up to 1990: PMQs; making statements; making speeches and intervening in debates. The premise taken by Dunleavy et al is that ‘the prime minister’s active participation in parliamentary proceedings is a key mechanism for ensuring the accountability of the executive’ (Dunleavy et al 1990; Thomas 2004). The study assumes that the Prime Minister was required to be present in the chamber to be ‘active’. In the period surveyed there proved to be a long-term decline in prime ministers’ speeches in the Commons, a stepped decline in debating interventions and a significant decrease in question answering from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s. The prime minister ceased to be Leader of the House after World War II, removing the formal requirement for attendance and PMQs was only introduced in 1961 coinciding with the start of the televised era (though PMQs was not actually televised until 1989). Prime ministerial statement-making increased after 1940 and then declined in the 1980s. The downward drift in answering questions was reversed with the introduction of Prime Minister’s Question Time (Dunleavy et al 1990; Thomas 2004). Beyond 1990, after Dunleavy’s study, prime ministers have become held to account via many different formal and informal mechanisms. Dunleavy’s study was updated and extended somewhat by Rush (2013) to include other parliamentary activity and other party leaders. The evidence supports the conclusion that prime ministers now engage less with parliament and this decline has been sharpest since the advent of television and exacerbated by alternative avenues of prime ministerial communication (such as press conferences – initiated by Tony Blair, but dropped by David Cameron) as a response to the newer media environment.

The focus on formalised accountability mechanisms though is only part of the story. Parliamentary pressure and constraints on prime ministers can take other forms (see Shepherd 2010). Context may dictate that informal mechanisms exert pressure on prime ministers over time. For instance Tony Blair was pressured into effectively limiting prerogative powers (in particular regarding war making over Iraq), fixed term parliament's legislation was only introduced following the formation of the coalition government and David Cameron could not win parliamentary support for military action in Syria in 2013. The complex direct and indirect accountability function of the prime minister and in return scrutiny function of parliament is a grey and often fluid area. Context may dictate, but also the style and approach of the individual prime minister matters too within the particular parliamentary setting as Harold Wilson demonstrated.

Behaviour can change as a result of circumstances, as Harold Wilson relates of his role as Prime Minister in 1964, after Labour had been in opposition for 13 years, and again in 1974, after Labour experienced government between 1964 and 1970: 'In the 1964 government ... I had to occupy almost every position on the field, goalkeeper, defence attack—I had to take corner-kicks and penalties, administer to the wounded and bring on the lemons at half-time. Now ... I would be no more than what used to be called a deep-lying centre-half ... concentrating on defence, initiating attacks, distributing the ball and moving up-field only for set piece occasions.' (in Rush 2013)

Within the contemporary context of declining engagement with parliament, increased centralised power, stronger party cohesion and mediatised/personalised leadership, one accountability reform has seemed to buck the trend. In 2002 Tony Blair, after resisting for a long time finally agreed to appear before the Liaison Committee (the committee comprising the chairs of the Select Committees) twice a year to answer questions on policy matters for at least around two hours. This formal scrutiny function has now operated for over 10 years, questioning three prime ministers. After generating some initial attention from the media, it has settled into an established part of the parliamentary mechanism. The appearance of the prime minister in front of the heads of the Select Committees has not proved a particularly challenging environment for a well prepared and erudite individual. Cumbersome, with now 33 members, the topics are known in advance and the twice

yearly appearances are fixed in advance in the prime ministers diary. It is not an arduous task for the prime minister. It is however an important source of engagement between the legislature and the prime minister, one that need not function as PMQs does.

Some journalists have mocked them as “bore-a-thons” that do not leave “blood on the carpet”, but that is almost the point and it makes for productive and informative exchanges (Heppell and Theakston 2014).

Analysis of the Liaison Committee is timely. Though referred to in passing by much of the material on executive-legislative reform there is an absence of any systematic study. As ever prime ministers Question Time generates much criticism and comment, bolstered by reaching the milestone of 50 years in 2011 (see Bercow 2012; Bates et al 2014). Commentary has continued (see Cowley and Stuart 2014; Hansard Society 2014) accepting that PMQs as a spectacle now trumps any semblance of formal prime ministerial accountability. Within this context it is appropriate to assess the effectiveness of a less well publicised mechanism in the functioning of the Liaison Committee. The Committee is much cited by parliamentarians as an important means of holding the prime minister to account, the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee for instance in a recent report into the role and power of the prime minister recommended strengthening the Committee.

The Liaison Committee has the potential to be a very effective mechanism by which Parliament can hold the Prime Minister to account. We commend the attempts it has made to narrow the range of topics it discusses at any one session, and to limit the number of questioners to enable the questioning to be more thorough and detailed. We hope that these efforts continue. The fewer the topics, and the questioners, the more in depth and serious the scrutiny will become—a welcome balance to the superficial nature of Prime Minister’s Questions (HC 351 2014).

The following presents analysis of the Committee hearings since 2002 to understand the functioning of the Committee and present an assessment of the style and techniques utilised by the prime ministers who have appeared before the Committee. We explore the origins of the Liaison Committee – how it became an established means to question the PM. We look at the scrutiny impact and then the linkage function with the Commons, exploring how the content of the sessions has been utilised by members and the PM in the chamber. We conclude by offering some

commentary on the effectiveness of the Committee in comparison with other accountability mechanisms.

### **Origins of the Liaison Committee sessions**

Although the prime minister appears before the House of Commons on a weekly basis to be questioned by MPs, there has long been a sense that PMQs are richer in political drama than in incisive scrutiny, and that they by and large generate more heat than light. Secretaries of State and departmental ministers have, since the creation of the departmental select committee system, appeared regularly before such committees to give evidence about their specific briefs. However, despite being the head of government, and despite the increasingly pre-eminent role played by select committees in the two decades following their creation, the prime minister did not appear before them.<sup>i</sup>

The failure of the prime minister to be subject to select committee scrutiny was viewed by some as a serious oversight. In 2000, as part of its inquiry into the Ministerial Code, the Public Administration Committee wrote to the prime minister, Tony Blair, and invited him to give evidence, on the basis that the Code is the responsibility of the PM and undergoes revisions at his or her behest, and so only the prime minister could be held accountable to parliament for it (HC 235, 2001, Appendix 4). This view was rejected by the PM, who cited the tradition that it is departments which are responsible for providing select committee evidence, and that 'Prime Ministers have not, themselves, by long-standing convention, given evidence to Select Committees' (ibid). Following discussions amongst select committee chairmen about this refusal to appear, the Liaison Committee pursued the matter as part of a broad report on the subject of executive scrutiny (HC 321, 2000). The Committee argued that it would be beneficial for the prime minister to discuss government policies in a 'non-partisan forum', linked specifically to the publication of the government's annual report, and so invited Tony Blair to appear before them. The Liaison Committee indicated that, if

the prime minister were to accept an invitation to appear annually, he would not be asked to appear before any other select committees, and that the Liaison Committee would also ensure that the broad themes it wished to explore would be made known to him in advance. Downing Street declined this offer, and again cited the convention that prime ministers do not give evidence to select committees, and also argued that such an appearance would pose a risk to the accepted lines of accountability through departments and ministers (HC 321, 2000).

Behind the scenes however, developments were afoot despite these public pronouncements from Downing Street. In December 2001, the then Leader of the House of Commons, the late Robin Cook MP, had 'pressed' the prime minister to appear before the Liaison Committee as part of a broader parliamentary modernisation programme, albeit unsuccessfully at the time (Cook 2003: 141). No.10 advisers were also attempting to convince Blair of the merits of attending such sessions (ibid). Nonetheless, in spring 2002, the finality of the situation seemed clear, when Cook approached the chairman of the Public Administration Committee, Dr Tony Wright MP, and asked him to drop the matter, because there was 'simply no way that the prime minister was ever going to agree to attend' (interview, June 2007). It therefore came as a considerable surprise to all the select committee chairs when, in April 2002, the prime minister approached the chair of the Liaison Committee, Alan Williams MP, and offered to appear before that committee twice a year to discuss domestic and foreign affairs (HC 984, 2002). The chairs in situ at the time reported that no specific reasons were given as to why this decision had been reversed, although several speculated that Blair had most likely been convinced by Robin Cook and by his advisers in No.10 that such appearances would helpfully demonstrate the prime minister's serious engagement with parliament (interviews, June/July 2007). Several committee chairs also commented that, given Blair's tremendous political skills and communication abilities, he probably felt that he had nothing to fear from such sessions anyway. The commencement of the new sessions with the Liaison Committee coincided with Blair's new schedule of monthly televised press conferences, which began in June 2002. Both

events were no doubt linked to a desire to make the PM appear more accessible and open, to ward off criticism that he was dismissive of parliamentary accountability. It is also not outside the realms of possibility that it was, in part, an attempt to address concerns about popular disillusionment with politics and distrust of political figures, underscored by the drop in turnout rate in the 2001 general election to just 59%.

A crucial aspect of the way in which these evidence sessions came about concerns the context in which they were agreed. The prime minister refused several requests to appear before select committees. When he then made the subsequent offer to attend, the political terrain on which the process was negotiated was dramatically changed. Rather than Blair acquiescing to a select committee request for his time, he was instead offering himself to them voluntarily. This substantially changed the political story behind these sessions, and enabled Blair to remind the Liaison Committee on several occasions that he was appearing before them voluntarily and under his own initiative, and that he was the first premier ever to do so. The prime minister also offered more of himself and his time than had been originally requested. In 2000, the Liaison Committee requested that he appear before them once a year, yet in 2002, Blair offered to appear twice a year. An optimistic interpretation might portray the prime minister as simply anxious to contribute to deepened executive accountability and engagement, but a more realistic one might instead point out that, by not only offering to appear before the committee, but also to appear more often than had originally been requested, No.10 was able to reorder the rules of this particular political game.

One of the key justifications for the creation of the Liaison Committee evidence sessions with the Prime Minister was that they would enhance parliamentary scrutiny of the PM by facilitating deeper and more searching questioning to that obtained on the floor of the House during PMQs. There are a number of ways to investigate empirically the extent to which this in fact happened. We undertook analyses of the parliamentary records in order to examine the questioning which occurred in terms

of its scrutiny value. Naturally, we accept that it is not necessarily easy to put a 'value' on an activity which is as complex as that of parliamentary scrutiny. Nonetheless, empirical investigation still illuminates some interesting issues which are of direct relevance to any conclusions we seek to make about the utility of the evidence sessions in general.

### **Scrutiny impact of the Liaison Committee sessions: The evolving scrutiny format**

Few of those involved in promoting and championing the creation of these sessions imagined that they would be an immediate panacea for parliament's scrutiny shortcomings, and the innovation received mixed reviews in the press. While a Guardian leader described the occasion as 'much more informative and interesting' than PMQs, and one that 'showed parliament looking good too,' (Guardian, 17 July 2002), the same newspaper's sketch-writer, Simon Hoggart, likened it to being 'savaged by a feather duster'. Noting that the committee chair's 'long-winded introduction' had 'caused the prime minister to slump and to stare through glazed eyes at the desk in front of him', Hoggart concluded that 'this lot are just not very good at asking questions' (Hoggart, 17 July 2002). Similarly, The Independent (17 July 2002) described it as 'bloodless' and 'low-key' and at some remove from the 'fierce cross-examination' that had been anticipated. Indeed, the questioning to which Blair was subjected was described by the Daily Telegraph as 'respectful', while The Times observed that 'something had gone horribly wrong' because 'Tony Blair was evidently enjoying himself, which really wasn't the point of the exercise at all,' further noting that although some of the committee's most skilled inquisitors 'threatened thunder', the 'storm never broke.' The broadsheet press in general noted Blair's relaxed style, amiable grin, and his appearance in shirt-sleeves, all indicative, in their estimation, of the absence of any real testing of the premier.

Indeed, several of the broadsheets commented on the vast terrain that MPs sought to cover during that first evidence session as a fundamental flaw in the process. As all MPs on the Liaison Committee represented a committee with its own particular policy orientation (and some with none

at all, given the bizarre inclusion of the domestic committees), it made for a somewhat unfocused romp across a wide swath of public policy. Although four themes had been identified by the chair to focus the session, on the grounds that ‘the wider we cast our net the shallower out questioning inevitably becomes’ (HC1095, 2001-02, Q.1), the spread of questioning was such that the evidence session largely failed to generate the depth it had promised. Indeed, there was much press merriment at the questions posed about EU rules on herbal medicine and the lack of homeopathy provision on the NHS (Hoggart, 2002), and the overall impression was of a scrutiny session characterised first and foremost by amateurishness and incoherence. The session was supposed to generate depth, but with so many chairs participating – around 27 in total were eligible to take part - across so many varied policy areas, that depth remained elusive.

A key problem with that first evidence session was that the questions asked by committee members were over-long, sprawling, and were too often more like speeches. The chair’s ponderous introduction weighed in at a staggering 511 words, which hardly set the tone for snappy, incisive scrutiny, and even he had to intervene at one point to prompt a member to ask a question of the PM rather than make a statement to him (e.g. at Q.55, to which the member responded by asking *two* questions!).

Committee chairs themselves reported dissatisfaction with how the first session had gone (interviews, June 2007). The sheer size of the Liaison Committee – it comprised 27 members – had made it extremely difficult for them to coordinate action and strategy in advance of the session, and to organise themselves during it to deliver meaningful and detailed scrutiny. Although they had identified some key topics in advance for exploration, the chairs were in agreement that the questioning had ranged too widely, and failed to ‘drill down to the specifics’ as one chair put it (interview, June 2007). Some of the chairs reacted by engaging in what they described as a ‘post match analysis’, where they watched the session again and examined the transcripts in order to

pinpoint exactly what had gone wrong (interviews, June 2007). This post-match analysis had a positive impact on later sessions, and it is clear that institutional learning did begin to take place inside the committee. Transcript analysis demonstrates that chairs began asking more succinct questions in the sessions that followed and which were subject to analysis (see Table 1). Reading the transcripts themselves, it is also possible to see that the spread of questions across topics became less diverse, and that chairs are increasingly given more leeway to follow particular lines of questioning in some detail.

It is clear that the Liaison Committee members got better at managing the format and organising to increase the likelihood that it could deliver the incisive scrutiny they had hoped it would. The Committee has ‘raised its game’ (White, 2014). Only 12 MPs ask questions now on two predetermined topics. MPs can pursue a line of questioning with supplementaries adding a discursive element to the proceedings. But the format still has its critics, chiding it as a ‘dull, but worthy’ committee (White 2014). Andrew Tyrie called for monthly sessions and Jack Straw described it as a ‘farce’ and called for a cut in membership to only five MPs (Institute for Government 2011). Even as late as 2007, some chairs remained downbeat about the impact they had secured across six years of questioning with Tony Blair. One chair explained that ‘we never laid a glove him’ (interview, June 2007), an intriguing phrase which speaks directly to the adversarial nature of Westminster politics, but which also perhaps reveals the underlying goals of these sessions – to deliver a knock-out blow to the prime minister by asking a question which he either could not answer, or answered in such a way as to reveal serious problems with some aspect of government policy. Another chair noted that, ‘Blair never felt under any pressure from us whatsoever ... through all those hours of questions, we never came close to making him sweat’ (June 2007). One chair explained that Blair’s supreme communication skills made it hard for them to ‘find a crack in that polished exterior’, and another laughed to recall the way that Blair ‘would just come into the room, smiling, nodding to people, take off his jacket and roll up his sleeves like he was ready for anything’

(interviews, June/July 2007). ‘He just talked at you,’ one chair said, ‘and it was incredibly difficult to get a way in’ (interview, June 2007). In this respect, of course, the perceived constraints of these sessions was as much about the lack of abilities amongst the chairs as it was about the skills of the PM. However, although chairs acknowledged their lack of forensic questioning skills, they were not necessarily sure about what, if anything, could be done about that, other than chairs themselves consciously working on those skills, and putting them into practice during the sessions.

### **Scrutiny linkage between Liaison Committee sessions and the chamber**

PMQs are criticised on many grounds, but a key problem concerns the resource asymmetries which exist between individual MPs who ask questions and the prime minister who answers them. Not only are MPs hamstrung by the confines of the rules and norms which dictate question construction, but they do not have access to the information support systems enjoyed by the PM. MPs may have staff and researchers, and may be assisted by external stakeholders depending on the question pursued, but none of this is a serious match to the vast machine underpinning the PM at No.10 Downing Street and throughout Whitehall. These resource asymmetries are not new, but the crucial point is that the Liaison Committee sessions offered a unique opportunity to at least attempt to rebalance them. The prolonged and sustained questioning would enable committee MPs to drill down into the detail in a way that rarely happens in PMQs. This presents an intriguing question: would MPs seek to (at least partially) redress the resource asymmetries that they face by utilising the evidence given by the PM to the Liaison Committee as a basis for their own questions during PMQs? This is an important question because it speaks directly to the extent to which the House of Commons functions as an ‘integrated whole’ when it comes to parliamentary scrutiny, and the extent to which it is maximising its scrutiny capacity. Are MPs acting reflexively as scrutiny actors, and generating connective tissue between what happens inside committees and what happens on the floor of the House?

To explore this, we undertook analysis of PMQs between 2001 and 2012, and conducted a content analysis of the PMQs directly following each Liaison Committee evidence session with the PM, in order to establish how often MPs referenced the PM's evidence as part of PMQs. This encompassed 22 Liaison Committee sessions, and 141 PMQs in total. We examined between 6-8 PMQs after each evidence session, with the number varying depending on whether the set coincided with recesses. During those 141 PMQs, there were only 16 references made to the Liaison Committee evidence sessions, and, crucially, 12 of these were made by the PM himself. These references generally occurred in the first or second PMQs immediately following the LC session, and involved the PM responding to an MP's question by reminding them of what he'd just said at that session. For example, the PM answered a question in 2002 on the role of parliament in authorising any military action in Iraq, by saying, 'As I said when I appeared before the Liaison Committee yesterday, at present we have no proposals to put before the House' (HC Debs., 17 July 2002, col.280). Notably, all of the PM references we identified came from Tony Blair, with neither Gordon Brown nor David Cameron making any references to the LC sessions in which they participated during the PMQs analysed. Blair's specific referencing of the LC sessions is interesting, as was his strategic use of them during PMQs to point out that he was the first PM to appear before the Liaison Committee, and to rebuff accusations that he was an insufficiently active parliamentarian (HC Debs. 8 February 2006, col.876).

This reinforcement of previously stated policy positions by the PM is of course partly a function of the relative temporal proximity of those PMQs to the LC session, and it is also a useful prime ministerial device in rhetorically emphasising the multi-faceted nature of his parliamentary accountability. However, the discovery that MPs, by contrast, made almost no use of the LC sessions during PMQs prompts a number of possible conclusions. First, MPs may not pay much attention to the LC sessions with the PM. Second, MPs may pay attention, but feel there was nothing of sufficient interest unearthed there to merit reference during PMQs. Third, there may have

been sufficiently interesting evidence discovered there, but as MPs have a range of purposes in asking PMQs, they are unlikely to prioritise inclusion of such evidence if it does not assist them in these purposes. All three of these possibilities clearly raise questions about the value of the LC sessions with the PM. A great deal of evidence is generated during those sessions, and much time is invested in obtaining it. PMQs prevent detailed questioning, but the detailed questioning pursued via the LC sessions arguably has limited parliamentary impact beyond those LC sessions. This raises a key question about institutional efficacy. Are the LC sessions sufficient on their own as tools of prime ministerial scrutiny, and should we be satisfied that they exist in the first place and provide a forum in which the PM is compelled to answer sustained questions and demonstrate his command of policy and decision making? Or is the House of Commons failing to capitalise on the statements made by the PM during these sessions by following up on them via the much more high profile PMQ sessions? In this respect, we wonder if the currently atomised LC sessions is a sufficiently robust exploitation of institutional capacity, or whether MPs collectively ought to coordinate to maximise these resources through other parliamentary forums.

## **Conclusion**

The Liaison Committee has evolved the way in which it handles the prime ministerial hearings in response to perceived failings. The unmanageably broad scope of the early hearings has been narrowed, first to four topics and subsequently to two (the session from November 2011 only had one topic, though 'The Big Society or the Broken Society?' is so wide that it could be argued to include several). And rather than all the members of the committee trying to be accommodated, only a subset now participate in any given hearing. Clearly the LC has tried to address the shortcomings of the early sessions. Yet it is not clear that there has been a huge effect from this. Whilst the hearings might be more coherent, they have yet to generate the sort of headline-grabbing prime ministerial admission of guilt, negligence or failure that many seem to regard as their primary objective. But even if the uncovering of a smoking gun is not the only measure of success, the

evidence generated by the hearings has not evidently impacted significantly on legislative-executive relations. It has not been followed up in the more focused and very much more public PMQs, for example. Whilst this might be a shortcoming of the MPs who have failed to utilise the evidence from the hearings, it is clearly also an effect of the nature of the evidence itself and the capacity of successive PMs to avoid making the sort of admissions that would invite that sort of further inquiry.

The nature of the Liaison Committee might go some way to explaining this. In some respects it is ideally suited to conduct the scrutiny of the PM. It comprises the chairs of the departmental select committees who have, since 2010, been elected by the whole parliament giving them considerable legitimacy and autonomy. Even before this, when they were appointed, the chairs were generally established parliamentarians who the whips found it difficult to shift (highlighted by the unsuccessful attempt to replace the 'independent-minded' Gwyneth Dunwoody as chair of the Transport Select Committee following the 2001 General Election). And, given the way the PM's remit can involve any or all policy areas, being able to draw on the prior knowledge of the chair of any of the relevant select committees as the subject under consideration requires can go a small way to redressing the resource asymmetry between parliament and the executive highlighted above. Yet the Liaison Committee is unlike a departmental select committee in significant respects and most of its functions are not directly focused on scrutiny. House of Commons Standing Orders include in its remit consideration and advice on general matters relating to the work of select committees, the selection of select committee reports for debate in Westminster Hall, and making recommendations on the allocation for the consideration of Estimates. It does share the ability to 'send for persons, papers and records' with the departmental select committees. But, in terms of government scrutiny and oversight, Standing Order 145(2) merely says that 'The committee may also hear evidence from the prime minister on matters of public policy' (*italics added*). Nowhere is 'accountability', 'scrutiny' or 'oversight' mentioned. Clearly the prime ministerial hearings are only one part of the committee's remit, which is otherwise more focused on organisation. Moreover, that the committee 'may hear

evidence from the prime minister on matters of public policy' is a very much weaker statement of it scrutiny activity than that of the departmental standing committees which are charged with the examination of the 'expenditure, administration and policy' of the departments they shadow and of any associated government bodies. Neither does the Liaison Committee conduct full inquiries into the prime minister in the way that the Select Committees do into the departments and agencies within their jurisdiction. The hearings with the prime minister are each 'stand-alone' sessions and are not part of broader investigations into particular policy areas, with open calls for written evidence and a number of oral evidence hearings with a range of witnesses. Only the transcript of the hearings is published: the committee produces no report after the hearings and draws no conclusions.

Of course, the accusation that it fails to land 'knock out punches' is a shortcoming that the Liaison Committee has shared with the other Select Committees. For example, in wake of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's inquiry into phone hacking there were complaints that high profile witnesses such as Rupert and James Murdoch were able to evade its questions too easily. Unfavourable contrasts were drawn with the Leveson Inquiry process where witnesses were interrogated by counsel rather than MPs and were perceived to have had a rather more uncomfortable experience as a consequence. In part then, the limitations of the Liaison Committee as an accountability vehicle are ones that it shares with the departmental select committees and an part of the parliamentary scrutiny process. But, as we have seen, only in part. In short, the clear remit of the Departmental Select Committees is the ongoing oversight of the work of a specific government department. In contrast, Liaison Committee has no such simple scrutiny mission.

When analysing accountability relationships, the questions of accountable to whom, how and for what need to be considered (Mulgan 2003, p.47). The Liaison Committee hearings have been an attempt to address the issues of 'to whom' and 'how'. But the issue of 'for what' remains outstanding.

In its review of select committee scrutiny, amongst other things, the the Liaison Committee recommended that committees 'identify what are the most important functions of their department's responsibilities and design a programme of scrutiny to assess whether the department's objectives have been fulfilled' (HC 697, para. 64). The contingent nature of the role of prime minister means that this presents certain challenges as whilst they may dominate almost all aspects of government, the prime minister is formally responsible for relatively little. The tendency has been for the hearings to focus on the major topics in current affairs, topics which could, in most instances, have been covered by the relevant Departmental Select Committee (foreign affairs issues loom particularly large, for instance). The prime minister, as head of government, has been expected to speak for government on any and all aspects of government policy. Certainly the prime minister frequently takes a major or even dominant role in specific policy areas at certain times. But, even where this is the case there is a proper chain of accountability: there is a minister to speak for government on the matter and a Select Committee with oversight responsibility. What parliament continues to lack is a means of scrutinising the prime minister qua prime minister: the decisions the prime minister takes, their repercussions, and the actions of the staff who work directly to the prime minister, all on an ongoing basis.

Ultimately, it is not clear that the Liaison Committee hearings with the prime minister have contributed greatly to the substance of prime ministerial accountability to parliament. But they could be said to have some symbolic significance. They appear to have entrenched the principle that the prime minister should be held directly accountable to a parliamentary committee and it would be hard for future prime ministers to refuse to appear in future. And with the principle now established, the process can be made more robust.

Table 1: Word Count Analysis

Average length of questions and answers during selected sessions.

Session	Questions from MP	Answers from PM
16 July 2002	68	148
21 January 2003	62	99
8 July 2003	53	125
4 July 2006	54	94
12 February 2009	61	109
6 September 2011	58	116

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<sup>i</sup> It is a misconception to claim that prime ministers have never appeared before select committees, as there are historical instances of such appearances. For example, Ramsay MacDonald appeared before the Procedure Committee in 1931, and there are other examples too. However, when PMs appeared in this way, they did so primarily in their capacity as Leader of the House, which was in the past a post often held by the prime minister. None of the prime ministers who appeared before select committees did so to answer questions about their role as prime minister, or about the policies and administration of government.