

**Political Leadership in Parliament:**  
**The Role of Select Committee Chairs in the UK House of Commons**

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**Abstract**

Concepts of political leadership have not been applied to the study of Westminster select (non-legislative) committees, where analysis has largely focused on their institutional capacity to scrutinise government and hold it to account. Yet examining committees through a political leadership lens helps illuminate the complex role of committee chairs, a role which was significantly reshaped in 2010 when procedures changed to enable chairs to be elected by the whole House. This paper explores the select committee chair role, drawing on a series of interviews with chairs and committee members. It examines whether the term 'leader' can be usefully applied, and argues that, as chairs are now far more important parliamentary and policy actors than ever before, a new understanding of parliamentary leadership capacity is required.

## **Introduction**

Political leadership is a seductive area of study, rich with opportunities to analyse some of the ‘great’ and ‘influential’ figures who are variously argued to have shaped our world and made the decisions which have changed the trajectories of contemporary societies. Parliament, by contrast, is an arguably less compelling field of study, largely because so much action and decision-making that is deemed consequential seems to take place outside of it, but also because, in Westminster style systems at least, the dynamics and interactions that determine parliamentary outcomes are rarely easily distilled into explanations focused around ‘key’ individuals. However, as the UK parliament has increasingly shifted towards committee-based scrutiny infrastructure, and sought to imbue that infrastructure with ever-growing capacity (at least potentially), particularly in terms of the role of the committee chair, ideas about political leadership can consequently provide a useful lens through which to study these committees and those who sit at their helms. This paper seeks to plot a new direction in the study of the Westminster parliament by exploring House of Commons departmental select committees in terms of political leadership, in order to understand the changing role of the committee chairs, who have, since 2010, been directly elected by the whole House, and who thus now possess an intriguing range of democratic resources which they did not previously enjoy. The analysis proceeds by exploring some of the relevant insights and debates from the political leadership literature, before sketching the institutional context in which select committees and their chairs operate, and what this means for conceptualisations of chair capacity in leadership terms. Finally, the paper analyses interview data gathered from select committee chairs and which directly probes the leadership dimension of their role. This paper is an early work in progress, which seeks to map the terrain in advance of definitively pitching the tent, and should be read as such.

## **Leadership: concepts and themes**

The field of leadership studies is crowded with a multitude of accounts which seek to answer two

key questions: what is leadership, and how do we know it when we see it? (Rhodes and 't Hart 2014, 3). These questions drive analyses into the nature of leadership as well as its consequences, and, in seeking to understand the positive role that leadership can play in society, scholars have devised many conceptualizations, and applied varied empirical strategies, in order to better understand it (Northouse 2010). Political leadership is a highly contested concept, both empirically and normatively, and a fundamental controversy concerns the compatibility of political leadership with democracy (Blondel 2014; Hendriks and Karsten 2014), because if the process of leadership involves someone influencing a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse 2010, 3), then this clearly raises questions both about the method of influence and the manner in which common goals are defined. Yet at the same time, democratic leadership springs from consent (Kane and Patapan 2012), which compels us to probe the nature of that consent and the way in which it both constrains and animates leadership across the many different democratic platforms through which it is exercised.

To this end, political and organizational cultures are crucial to understanding the operation and consequences of leadership. Burns (1978, 425) defines leadership as 'the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realise goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers.' This definition advances understanding in two key ways: first, by qualifying 'leader-centric' accounts which focus largely on the actions of individuals in leadership positions; and second, by drawing into the analysis those whom leaders seek to lead as well as the context in which such leadership would occur. The crucial point here is that, in seeking to understand political leadership, we need to understand not just the motivations of leaders, but the motivations of those who follow, which is highly significant for the specific questions explored in this paper. Consequently, political leaders derive their authority not just from the democratic procedural arrangements through which they ascend to the top of

various organizational structures, but also from the ‘processual’ mechanisms through which leaders engage in exchange relationships with other actors (Hartley and Benington 2011, 207). In this view, the extent of the trust placed in leaders by followers delimits the bounds of political leadership in democratic societies (Ruscio 2004).

### ***Leadership and followership***

While leader-centred accounts may make for intriguing biographies of individual leaders, they do not tell us much about *leadership* itself (Burns 1978, 1-2), and contemporary scholarship therefore explores leadership ‘as an interactive process between leaders and followers; institutions and the rules of the game; and the broader historical context’ (Rhodes and ‘t Hart 2014, 6). Leadership is not simply a matter of ‘a leader acting and a group of followers responding in a mechanical way’, but is instead a highly complex social process in which the organizational cultural context is fundamental in shaping interactions (Alvesson 2011, 152). It is impossible to understand leaders without also understanding those they seek to lead, alongside the environment in which such leadership will occur, and a follower-centric approach to leadership analysis has largely eschewed individualistic and ‘heroic’ approaches (Meindl 1990, 1995). If the term ‘followership’ is controversial, such controversy is itself emblematic of the need to understand leaders and followers in context and in conjunction with each other, and also in relation to their organizational and social environments. Successful leaders are those who ‘succeed in appealing to, embodying or modifying the social identities of their followers’ (Rhodes and ‘t Hart 2014, 6). Crucially, as leadership involves ‘leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations ... *of both leaders and followers*’, the ‘genius of leadership’ therefore involves drawing actors together ‘in pursuit of a common or at least joint purpose’ (Burns 1978, 19).

Yet, the very terms ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ will have different meanings in different contexts,

and organizational culture will significantly determine whether actors even acknowledge them as meaningful to their regular interactions. While in some organizations, the leader/follower distinction will be clear and accepted terminology to all concerned, in others these definitions and their applicability will be far more fluid and open to debate. In particular, the identity, motivations and values of so-called followers will significantly shape leader-follower relations, which is why it is crucial to analyse the 'proverbial 'other side' of the leadership coin' (Bligh 2011, 426) in order to truly understand political leadership. Context will at least in part determine whether actors within a given political organization are agreeable to the leader/follower terminology and distinction, not least because those who are already members of any given political elite (the focus of this paper) may balk at the very notion of contexts in which they are somehow defined as followers.

Yet although there is debate about the use of the term 'follower' (Rost 2008, Burns 2005), the term is not in itself necessarily derogatory. Baker's (2007) analysis, for example, demonstrates that both leaders and followers are roles rather than individual characteristics; that followers are active rather than passive; and that leaders and followers share common purposes rather than the former imposing purpose on the latter. Similarly, work on relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien 2006), leadership complexity theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey 2007), and distributed leadership (Gronn 2002) have in various ways sought to treat leadership as an 'interactive dynamic relationship between organizational actors from which adaptive outcomes emerge' and which similarly emphasize the importance of 'interdependence, coordination and ... reciprocal influence' (Bligh 2011, 427). Research into followership has demonstrated that it has multiple meanings, and that followers construct those meanings not just in relation to their own individual perceptions, but also in relation to their organizational context and to the leaders with whom they interact (Carsten et al 2010). If we can jettison conceptions of great leaders and slavish followers, along with all the unhelpful baggage those conceptions entail, then we can

embrace approaches which conceive of leadership and followership as necessarily imbued with ‘multiple, shifting, contradictory and ambiguous identities’ (Collinson 2005) which reflect the dynamics of the organizational terrain in which they operate. Finally, the idea of leadership as a distributed resource which is shared with followers is crucial to understanding its conceptual utility in the specific parliamentary context which forms the analytical focus of this paper.

### ***Contemporary leadership and governance***

Political leadership analyses focus largely on executives, with the study of US presidents and prime ministers in Westminster systems constituting particularly fertile fields for scholars to plough (for a sample see: Bennister 2014; Blick and Jones 2014; Foley 2000; Greenstein 1988, 2009; Heffernan 2005; Hennessy 2000, McKay 2014; Neustadt 1960, 1980; Weller 2014). However, leadership as a political function is not confined to executive politics, and necessarily permeates any system of democratic governance. Different leadership styles and modes are required at different locations within governance systems, and we can consequently observe ‘leadership constellations’ in which ‘several leaders provide counteracting checks and balances for each other’s positions and leadership roles’ (Hendriks and Karsten 2014, 52). To the extent that governance takes place through networks of interdependent actors (Rhodes 1997), effective political leadership consequently requires negotiation with stakeholders, and the capability to bind stakeholders together through various interaction process in the pursuit of common endeavours (Klijn 2014, 404). Goal alignments between leaders and followers only arise through complex interaction processes aimed at managing actors’ strategic behaviours (Klijn 2014, 406). Iterative collaboration is therefore fundamental for democratic governance (Ansell and Gash 2008), and successful political leaders facilitate collaboration between participants through processes of negotiation and, crucially, by securing agreement about the end goals of collaboration. Collaborative leadership thus involves relationship-building between actors who may otherwise have no obvious motivation to work together, and because leaders must mobilise

actors they must also understand ‘other actors’ perceptions and desires about the problems and the solutions’ which they are tackling (Klijn 2014, 408).

Therefore, if political leadership is necessarily dispersed in systems of democratic governance, it consequently makes good analytical sense to look beyond the usual suspects of presidents and prime ministers and party leaders when seeking to understand contemporary political leadership and its multiple iterations. This paper thus seeks to break new ground by analysing the UK parliament’s House of Commons scrutiny committees through the lens of political leadership. While studies of the US Congress often explore various aspects of legislative and committee political leadership (e.g. Caro 2002; Cooper and Brady 1981; Herrnson 1998; Smith 2007; Smith and Deering 1984), the UK parliament has not been subject to similar analyses. The United States’ system of federal and divided government clearly leaves congressional actors inhabiting fertile terrain for leadership analysts to plough, but the fusion of executive and legislature at Westminster, and its resulting power asymmetries in the context of majoritarian party government, does not automatically mean that political leadership is an empty category as far as parliament is concerned. There are arguably several different modes of analysis in relation to parliamentary political leadership, but this paper focuses on just one: leadership in the context of non-legislative executive scrutiny. The rest of this paper considers whether and how notions of political leadership can be analytically useful when examining this aspect of the Westminster parliament’s work, and what we can learn about parliamentary actors – specifically, House of Commons select committee chairs - when we conceive of them in leadership terms.

### **The leadership context: the House of Commons and select committees**

Before we can determine whether ideas about political leadership can be usefully applied to House of Commons select committee chairs, we must first understand the parliamentary landscape in which these committees and chairs exist. The UK is known for its asymmetrical

political system, in which the resources of the executive significantly outstrip those of parliament and the MPs tasked with holding government to account (Judge 1993, Norton 2013). Committee-based infrastructures in most parliamentary systems are designed as antidotes to these sorts of power asymmetries, and in order to imbue a designated group of MPs with the necessary capacity to pursue scrutiny tasks away from the floor of the chamber, by dampening partisan instincts amongst MPs while simultaneously enhancing their interrogatory abilities vis-a-vis executive actors. The House of Commons departmental select committee system was created in 1979 as a significant addition to parliament's accountability toolkit, and is now recognised as facilitating a notable increase in the quality and quantity of (largely) non-legislative scrutiny to which government departments are subjected. These select committees shadow government departments, choose the topics of their own inquiries, and investigate the policy, administration and expenditure of departments and the various agencies and public bodies associated with them. Their work over the last three decades has been subjected to much assessment by parliamentary scholars (e.g. Drewry 1985; Giddings 1985, 1994; Judge 1992; Hindmoor et al 2009; Russell and Benton 2011), who have sought to analyse the impact of select committees on the outcomes of parliamentary scrutiny and whether they have enhanced the quality of oversight to which government is subjected, with the overall view generally tending to indicate a positive contribution, albeit with constraints and qualifications. It is clear that these committees have significantly expanded the range of scrutiny work undertaken by the House of Commons, have inquired into more issues and in more detail than was previously possible, have produced volumes of evidence about the operation of public policy, and published significant recommendations for policy and operational improvement, many of which have been adopted by government (Russell and Benton 2011). Through their various inquiries, select committees provide a public arena, or 'theatre of action' (Uhr and Wanna 2000), through which various government actors may be interrogated, evidence presented and queried, and arguments articulated regarding the focus and impact of public policy and executive decision making. In

some respects, the House of Commons' committee scrutiny infrastructure arguably reflects Keane's (2009, 688) conception of a shift towards post-representative or 'monitory' democracy, which is imbued with a profusion of checks and balances both inside and outside the representative regime, and in which elected officials and governments are subject to extensive scrutiny by other actors (Hendriks and Karsten 2014, 43). Although Keane's is a post-parliamentary view of democracy (2009, 688-691), the shift towards a more vigorous scrutiny infrastructure at Westminster is emblematic of post-parliamentary trajectories and the obvious desire of elected representatives to reverse them, and to attempt to disperse political power away from its traditional concentration in Whitehall.

Quite obviously, however, the emergence and development of the Commons' select committee system has not instigated an entirely upward trajectory of enhanced parliamentary scrutiny of the executive. Crucially, the organization and institutional identity of these committees has had significant consequences for their oversight capacity. When originally established, the membership of the committees was determined by the party whips, thus embedding into the system the Catch-22 that those responsible for scrutinizing the government would themselves largely be chosen *by* the government (as the committees reflect the party balance in the House, and thus have an in-built government majority). This led, in 2001, to a key flash-point in the development of the select committees, when a prominent MP from the governing Labour Party side, Gwyneth Dunwoody, was not re-nominated by the government whips for membership of the Transport Select Committee she had chaired in the previous parliament, undoubtedly because she had constituted a significant thorn in the side of government due to her highly activist approach to the chair role and her regularly vocal criticism of government policy (Kelso 2003). This prompted a significant rebellion by MPs, who refused to authorize the government motion for the new committee memberships, thus sparking a period of intense reflection about the organization of the select committees and how they could be made more independent from

government. The following year, the parliamentary parties refreshed their internal processes for nominating MPs for select committee membership (Kelso 2009a), although nomination crucially remained a function of the parties rather than the House more broadly.

Yet the continued ability of the executive to choose and influence the committee members who would scrutinise it continued to irk many MPs, who seized the opportunity of the 2009 MPs expenses scandal to revisit the question of select committee membership. Although the two issues were entirely unrelated, the scandal fuelled significant debate about the organization of the political system and how it might be made more responsive, and politicians made more accountable (Kelso 2009b). Reform-minded MPs capitalised on the tumult by quickly organizing to secure government support for an overhaul of select committee membership processes, which were approved in the final months of the Labour government. Consequently, when the new parliament met after the 2010 general election, the Commons select committees were appointed under new rules which crucially involved the entire House electing MPs to chair the select committees. New standing orders facilitated a process whereby the parties agreed between themselves which committees would be chaired by which parties, with the number of chairs assigned to each party in rough proportion to seat share. MPs subsequently put themselves up for election for the chair positions available to their party, and had to attract support from across the parties to get onto the ballot, before proceeding to canvas for the support of MPs votes across the House. With the committee chairs no longer essentially in the gift of the party whips, and with MPs compelled to secure cross-party support in order to be elected to the chair, this key development in the organization of the select committees had clear consequences for the perceived legitimacy of chairs and thus also for their resulting agency and capacity for action.

It is in this context of the continued evolution of the select committees - in terms of their institutional identity, organizational structure, and scrutiny capacity – that questions about

parliamentary political leadership become relevant. The committee chairs are no longer viewed as creatures – indirect or otherwise – of the party whips, and their election by the whole House of Commons has had clear consequences for how the role is perceived (see below). To the extent that chairs can utilise the political capital derived from the legitimacy of election for particular political and/or organizational ends, and can use it in a way which advances the goals of the committees they chair and shapes the behaviour of the other committee members, it is clear that leadership of some form or other is in evidence. The select committee chairs are thus imbued with leadership potential because of their direct election by other MPs, and the key question is how that potential is actually used. If the purpose of elected committee chairs is to provide a parliamentary counterpoint to the executive’s monopoly of power on the one hand, and a parliamentary response to a shift in post-parliamentary scrutiny architecture on the other, then achieving either or both of these goals requires action to translate the political capital of chairship into the political currency of leadership. Doing this requires considerable sensitivity on the part of the chairs to the nature of select committees, their membership and their work, and considerable awareness on the part of the researcher to what parliamentary leadership entails in practice.

There has therefore been a significant strengthening of at least the *potential* capacity and institutional importance of select committee chairs as a result of their direct election by House of Commons MPs, and the individual role itself is now imbued with a democratic legitimacy which it did not possess before. So, in this respect, the characteristics associated with the chair role are clearly key factors in exploring whether that role can be usefully understood as one involving political leadership in some form. But as one of the key insights of leadership studies is that the operational context matters tremendously when analysing how leaders actually function, it is also essential to map the select committee environment in which chairs find themselves. At first glance, select committees appear relatively powerless in institutional terms. They have the formal

powers to call witnesses – such as government ministers - to give evidence, and to request information and documents from relevant stakeholders in order to run their inquiries. They publish all oral and written evidence received, and produce inquiry reports which detail what the committee discovered during any given inquiry, the conclusions it drew, and the recommendations it makes to specific policy actors in order to improve performance/outcomes etc. in the future. Government is not obliged to adopt these recommendations, although it is obliged to provide a written response to committee reports and to at least address the recommendations made. In this respect, the committees cannot compel governments to do anything, although research indicates a reasonably robust rate of adoption of committee recommendations, mostly at the specific operational level (Russell and Benton 2011). Although their cross-party membership means that select committee often steer clear of highly partisan inquiry topics, and stick to the operational detail of policy when they do look at divisive matters, the question of whether and how to criticise government policy and decision making will naturally present challenges for committee MPs. Those MPs on the government side may be hesitant about endorsing strenuous critiques, for obvious reasons, but neither will they wish to appear as ministerial lackeys. Similarly, opposition MPs on committees may seek to balance pressing any case they wish to make for including strong criticism in committee reports with the necessity of avoiding using the committee as an oppositional vehicle. In other words, the work of the select committee as a means of public policy inquiry and debate can only be maximized if committee MPs operate consensually. Clearly, whoever sits in the chair of such a committee has a key responsibility to ensure that consensual working is achieved, because otherwise the whole purpose of the select committee is defeated.

Thus, the parliamentary and political context in which select committees exist, and the nature of the work they undertake, demands the deployment of particular leadership skills from committee chairs. Chairs must navigate the party preferences of the MPs who comprise committee

memberships, and also avoid offending the highly independent and fiercely autonomous sensibilities of MPs. Clearly, collaborative leadership of the sort delineated earlier is required in this context in order to generate the consensual outputs which underpin committee contributions to democratic governance. Nye's (2008) distinctions between 'soft', 'hard' and 'smart' power can be of some use in delineating the potential leadership strategies which may be open to a chair at the helm of a parliamentary select committee. However, as Blondel (2014, 714) notes, a more robust understanding of 'smart power' and its utilisation would incorporate how a leader is prepared 'to examine the views of others and is prepared to rethink and assess what is being proposed as a result of objections raised by others'. In this view, smart leadership involves persuasion but also compromise. This is of crucial significance in understanding the extent to which political leadership is a meaningful category in the analysis of parliamentary select committees.

Consequently, another key issue which problematizes political leadership in the context of select committees concerns the particular nature of the committee organization itself. Fundamentally, a select committee is a 'team' that is 'composed of members who are interdependent, who share common goals, and who must coordinate their activities to accomplish these goals' (Kogler-Hill 2010, 241), and a leader is thus crucial to ensuring effective team working. Yet, the institutional position of select committees as consensual groups embedded in an inherently partisan organizational environment clearly presents unique challenges for committee chairs and their capacity to act as 'team' leaders. Committees comprise members whose loyalty to their party will always take precedence over the strategic goals of the committee, and chairs must therefore operate with a situational 'mental model' which is sensitive to the 'contingencies that define the larger context of team action' (Kogler-Hill 2010, 243). If 'organizational cultures provide actors with sets of beliefs about the nature and role of leadership' (Rhodes and 't Hart 2014, 6), then effective chairs are those who understand the constraints on, and limits to, a committee's

scrutiny capacity as defined both by the specific parliamentary context and the broader political environment in which the committee operates. Organizational culture is clearly paramount, and leadership therefore requires a willingness not only to acknowledge the limitations created by that culture but also to generate adaptive responses to it (Shein 1992, 2) in order to advance committee goals. In this respect, select committee chairs are the quintessential ‘interactive leaders’ (Burns 1978, 15), rather than hyperactive ones. Leadership will necessarily be shared, in line with our earlier discussion, because committee chairs operate in a context in which all committee members are MPs who share an elite status, and in which the cross-party organizational dynamic renders notions of ‘followership’ quite difficult to sustain.

### **Perceptions of leadership amongst committee chairs**

The previous sections explored how concepts of political leadership might offer interesting and useful insights into the role of House of Commons select committee chairs, and also sketched the select committee institutional environment in order to demonstrate the context within which these chairs operate. This all provides the necessary background through which to analyse a series of interviews conducted by the author between 2011-2013, with select committee chairs and members, which sought to examine their perceptions of the role of chair and the extent to which they understood that role in terms of ‘leadership’.

Given the nature and purpose of select committee work outlined above, it is not surprising that chairs placed considerable emphasis on the need to foster collegiality. One committee chair perfectly expressed this goal when, with a wide grin, she remarked to the author at the beginning of the interview, ‘So, you are looking to see how we turn a group of disparate, strong-willed individuals into a pack animal?’ Her view was that most ‘outsiders’ (as she called them) failed to understand this essential metamorphosis which had to happen for committees to work even at the most minimal level. It necessarily took time, and did not just magically occur at the start of a

new parliament, but she insisted that ‘they *do* start to hunt as a pack, despite the fact that they’re from different political perspectives – it *does* happen’ (interview, 6 July 2011). The extent to which this transformation occurs is due in no small part to the leadership capacity and activity of the chair, in her view, in deliberately ‘breaking down that resistance’. For this chair, one of the key steps towards achieving this involved the committee members going overseas together on an fact-finding trip as part of an inquiry launched early in the new parliament. ‘Those who went on that trip,’ this chair argued, ‘came back as a more coherent group’ (interview, 6 July 2011). And not all trips had to be comparatively exotic: this chair also noted the utility of UK-based fact-finding trips, and meetings with members of the public away from Westminster, as key to building a ‘team ethos’ around the particular policy focus of the committee and dampening partisan instincts. Several chairs reported the usefulness of away days and trips out of Westminster for building collegiality amongst committee members who might otherwise regard each other and their motivations somewhat warily. Being removed from the physical environment of Westminster, with its oppositional politics and spaces, and also traveling and eating together for sustained periods of time, enabled MPs to share their interests in terms of the policy focus of the committee, and to engage in discussions that were not easy in the Westminster setting. In this way, astute committee chairs used such opportunities as key leadership tools to help build the collegiality that was required for their committees to function effectively.

Obviously, fact-finding trips and away days can go only so far in building collegiate committees, and much rests on the chair’s capacity to foster and sustain collegiality throughout the parliamentary year. As one Labour party committee chair explained, ‘One of the skills that a chair needs is an ability to operate in a collegiate manner, because select committee reports are pretty useless if they are divided’ (interview 4 July 2011). This chair added that chairs needed to have the skills to understand ‘that there are some political boundaries you will not be able to

cross' when it comes to shifting the political positions of both government and opposition MPs on committees, and that chairs had to be able to handle the processes of compromise which imbued report drafting. Such compromise often involved the use of 'carefully chosen' language to ensure the resulting committee report did not 'simply provoke'. But it also involved key stages before the report writing itself, for example by ensuring that those MPs who 'have expressed doubts ... have the opportunity to explore those doubts as part of the investigatory process'. In this view, a key chair skill involved using leadership to create space for MPs to vocalise concerns as part of the inquiry itself, in order to enhance the chances of defusing disagreement at the point of writing the report itself. Advanced and sensitive management of dissent is therefore crucial to successful committee chairing.

Similarly, this chair was also emphatic that his role did not necessarily involve significant activism on his part. When asked how he approached his job of chairing an inquiry evidence session, this chair noted that the allocation of questions will already have been made in advance, and that the chair will often ask the first question or series of questions. Thereafter, however, he viewed his roles as:

'to try to keep us to time, which is sometimes difficult; to keep to the strategy; and when somebody has a smart idea, to make sure they catch my eye and they interject ... So once the system is rolling, the most successful session is, in a sense, the one where I am totally quiet, because it's all gone to plan and the right information has come out' (interview, 4 July 2011).

This view of the chair indicates a particular conception of leadership where the attention is not primarily focused on the chair at all, but one in which the chair acts as a facilitator and enabler for the other committee members. That does not mean the role is marginal, however. This chair

was clear that ‘the one thing you cannot do as chair is busk, and when you go the meetings, you’ve got to know what’s going on’ (interview, 4 July 2011), which is essential if the committee is to stick to its strategy and secure its broader inquiry goals in any given meeting.

The challenges associated with committee leadership are different depending on whether the chair is a member of the party of government or opposition. One opposition party chair explained that his role was different to that of a government party chair,

‘where it’s much easier [for the chair] to carry his own point of view, because he’s always got a majority. Again though, he’s got to handle dealing with the minority, and making sure that he gets buy-in from there. I’ve got a slightly different problem, in that the minority are more likely to share my view on a Political-with-a-capital-P issue, but I’ve got to get buy-in from the majority ...So there are different skills required in trying to maintain the momentum of the team.’  
(interview, 4 July 2011)

Another opposition party chair explained things similarly, stating that, as chair, it was important for her to spot clashes before committee meetings happened, and to work out ‘what the lines might be as to how far you can push, and who will accept what, in terms of getting the compromise’ (interview, 6 July 2011). Crucially, however, this chair did not seek to deal with conflict through private meetings:

‘I don’t want the committee to think that I’m setting up cabals ... because if I start to do that, they would start to do that. I’m trying to build a cohesive group of people who will come up with sensible suggestions that government might enact. And if I start playing one off against the other ...’ (interview, 6 July 2011).

Instead, compromise was engineered in full committee, and using the skills of the committee clerks to help produce report language that all members could live with. As such, chairs lead not by individual heroic efforts in brokering agreements, but by making the entire committee responsible for securing consensus and drawing on all skill sets available to maximise success. This approach was similarly described by other committee chairs, and reflects the collaborative leadership style noted earlier. Thus, while committee chairs may now be elected, this does not mean they necessarily have the authority to impose their own preferred solutions on divided committees. Democratic legitimacy may enhance their chances of securing cooperation, but chairs are still compelled to draw on a range of institutional resources to secure successful outcomes.

This leads to the clear differences expressed amongst committee chairs about whether they would characterise their role as one of leadership. One chair was clear that:

‘It is a leadership role. It’s similar to the skipper of any team. You’ve got to keep people focused on the job in hand, occasionally deal with details that prohibit them [being involved] ... and just make sure that all of them have got the opportunity to engage fully’ (interview, 4 July 2011).

Another chair agreed that ‘there is a leadership role’, and connected this not only to the broad programme of work undertaken by a committee, but also specifically to the chair role in terms of managing the inquiry report-writing process, media relationships, and interactions with external stakeholders, ‘where you do lead in those senses’ (interview, 4 December 2012). One chair explained his committee chair role in terms of ‘providing leadership in the committee, and to be the external face of the committee’, which clearly has implications for public visibility that he

believed committee members accepted as a fundamental aspect of the chair leadership role (interview, 12 July 2012). This chair agreed that he acted in a leadership capacity, and explained that this capacity 'has got nothing to do with my status, seniority, age or anything else ... I have been elected to do the job, I'm paid to do the job ... and I give more of my time and my commitment than any other committee member as a consequence' (interview, 12 July 2012).

Another very experienced chair reflected that:

'I wouldn't put a label around my neck saying 'I am the leader', because they [the committee members] might feel you need taking down a peg in that case. But it is a leadership role. And actually committee members do look at you in that way, and expect you to show leadership to them. They will come with different and often conflicting ideas, and as with any leader, although it might not have been my first thought, my sense is that we will go with that if there's enough support and interest. But at other times, you might need to make the committee realise that there's something they've got to do which shouldn't be neglected, and that's a leadership role. They [the committee members] also expect you to fight on their behalf.'

One chair gave a particularly insightful description of her chair role, and its dynamic dependence on the rest of the committee membership, when she explained that:

'I'm a leader, but I'm very conscious that I'm in the hands of the committee, and I have to keep their confidence, and have their agreement on what I'm doing, or we would have a very divided committee, and that would damage it's work' (interview, 20 June 2011).

It may seem obvious enough that leaders can only lead if they have the support of those with whom they work, but the political context in which select committees operate makes this especially salient. This particular chair explained, for example, that during the course of an inquiry she had been very vocally critical of the responsible government minister, and that ‘the committee has supported me in that criticism’ (interview, 20 June 2011). She called the committee together for the express purpose of securing their agreement in advance of issuing her highly critical comments, precisely because she needed the committee to maintain a position of consensus for her criticism as chair to have any value. She further noted that, as a member of the opposition party, it was even more important for her to ensure that the government-side MPs on her committee would be agreeable to this course of action. In this instance, as in so many others affecting select committee work, consensus is king.

One chair from the government side, explained that, when he had originally sought election to his committee chair, he had made it clear to MPs:

‘that I wasn’t interested in being a chair that simply sat on the sidelines and offered some kind of running commentary. What I wanted to do was to engage the select committee, real time, in the policy making process.’ (interview, 24 May 2011)

He believed that direct election had helped him fulfil his more expansive role for the chair, but he was nonetheless hesitant about describing himself as a ‘leader’, offering the word ‘catalyst’ instead (interview, 24 May 2011). When pressed on why ‘leader’ was an unsuitable term, he responded that, ‘it implies that others are followers, and that’s not necessarily how Members of Parliament like to see themselves!’ This insight accurately captures the dilemmas at the heart of

the leader-follower debate, and the unease that exists concerning the applicability of the notion of 'followership' as an essential component of 'leadership'. And this view was not isolated. Another chair similarly rejected the idea that she was a leader of her committee, saying she 'would rather be the facilitator ... rather than leader' (interview, 6 July 2011). Yet her description of her role echoed that of her chair colleague who did accept the leadership label, even down to the detail of explaining that good committee chairs tend not to be noticed as such by their members. Similarly, she argued that the extent to which the chair could 'set the tone' of a committee, and 'encourage everyone to contribute' was the determining factor 'in whether you've got a functioning select committee or a dysfunctional one' (interview, 6 July 2011). The fact that two senior committee chairs could both use very similar language to describe the role and importance of the chair, but then take differing views on whether that role constitutes leadership, reveals much about the nature of MP interactions inside select committee environments, the particular political context of committees, and hesitation over how MPs might conceptualise committee chair roles given that their primary leadership touchstones will be those at the top of their own parties.

*Note: time/space limitations have prevented me from exploring the views of non-chair select committee members regarding leadership – will appear in a later version.*

### **Conclusion: Committee leadership in perspective**

This paper offers only a brief flavour of some of the interesting perspectives collected during interviews with select committee chairs: this is an early draft of a work in progress, and much remains to be done, not only with the relevant literatures in the field of political leadership, but also with the rich collection of interview materials collected. A few very brief concluding comments may nevertheless be offered at this point.

First, the shift inside the House of Commons towards elected select committee chairs has facilitated their emergence as significant and potentially highly resourceful parliamentary actors. With their connective tissue to the party business managers largely severed – as far as their institutional positioning is concerned - chairs evidently now utilise their democratic legitimacy not just as a scrutiny tool, but also as a leadership resource. They are empowered in ways they never were before, and this makes their analysis all the richer.

Second, and linked to the above point, committee chairs are ultimately responsible for making their committees function as effective scrutiny vehicles, and this means they must work to foster collegiality amongst MPs who naturally bring different party perspectives to bear on the policy inquiries pursued, and may indeed be serving on the select committees for a range of different reasons not all of which will be concerned with some notion of advancing the public good through political inquiry. That committees comprise these disparate types of individuals, with different views and different motivations for involvement, consequently involves chairs deploying any number of crucial leadership skills and strategies in order to advance committee goals. Exploring how chairs perform these tasks and successfully (or unsuccessfully) deliver useful scrutiny outputs provides a compelling insight into how actors operate in complex institutional contexts where actors possess competing loyalties. Crucially, it also affords an insight into how those actors behave as leaders in an environment where all MPs on a committee are already members of the political elite, and already acknowledge leadership (party leadership) through other channels.

Third, this work seeks to map new terrain by analysing parliament from a fresh perspective. While questions about internal organization and processes, scrutiny and oversight capacity, executive-legislative relations, and so on, are all obviously important avenues for exploration, this paper seeks to provide a new lens on their analysis by employing ideas about political leadership

in the parliamentary context. Applying this perspective to the role of select committee chair, a crucially positioned institutional actor, not only helps us better understand how these committees are organized and function, but also begins the process of mapping what it means to be a parliamentary political leader outside the framework of parliamentary party leadership. Conceiving of select committee chairs as political leaders inside parliament can thus reposition our understanding of chairs – as begun through the interview material presented here – but also provide empirical insights that help flesh out some of the useful literatures on contemporary political leadership. In particular, the specific features of select committee membership offer superb opportunities to explore the contested and controversial idea of followership, which the discussion and interviews demonstrate is a slippery concept when applied to political elites such as MPs in cross-party committee environments. This work also provides evidence to support the useful advancement of leadership analyses that go beyond studies of presidents, prime ministers, and party leaders, by applying the perspective to somewhat more lowly political figures who may not automatically spring to mind in the context of political leadership, but who are performing important leadership roles nonetheless. Future development of this paper will therefore seek to expand our understanding of what political leadership is, the various institutional contexts in which we find it, and how leadership perspectives can enrich our understanding of parliamentary politics. It will also seek to develop a conceptual approach to this idea of parliamentary political leadership, an area which offers much opportunity for research and analysis.

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