Hidden Servants: Parliamentary Staff in Select Committees of the UK House of Commons

Papers, articles and books on select committees pervade parliamentary studies. The vast majority of these focus exclusively on the role of MPs and the effectiveness of committee reports, while select committee staff are omitted. This is curious for at least three reasons. First, parliamentary staff act as the most immediate port of call for MPs for advice on matters of procedure and practice. Second, staff are devoted to select committees full-time and thus provide a permanent foundation for administration and implementation of committee work. Third, the sheer number of staff – twice as many as there are MPs – indicates that there are a substantial number of tasks that MPs do not fulfil. All three reasons suggest that the role, function and potential influence of select committee staff working for the House of Commons is significant. And yet, we know remarkably little about them. This raises some questions about these hidden servants of scrutiny: How is the Committee Office structured? What is the function of staff in select committee work? What influence do they have? What is their relationship to elected politicians? This paper uses an interpretive framework of analysis, making use of semi-structured interviews and an ethnographic field study of the Committee Office, to offer some answers to these questions. It argues that committees are not staff-driven but rather that staff provide a foundation for the development of scrutiny and maintain coherence in the face of frequently changing membership and priorities of Members of Parliament serving on select committees.

Key words: parliamentary studies, select committees, interpretive political studies, legislative staff, scrutiny

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I always say: never run away with the idea that the House of Commons is an organisation because it isn’t. It’s an organism and organisms are reactive, cussed, unpredictable – Sir Robert Rogers, Clerk of the House of Commons

Select committees have been a subject of attention amongst scholars for many years. Papers, articles and books pervade parliamentary studies in British politics, of which the vast majority focus almost exclusively on the output of committees – namely, select committee reports. This literature has made a significant contribution to the role of Parliament in British politics by focusing on the extent to which committee reports make a tangible policy impact on government in some way. Among other things, this research has shown us the critical role that parliamentary select committees play in the House of Commons to ensure sustained scrutiny of the executive; it has revealed the formal and informal ways in which committees affect ministerial departments and their policies; and that the influence of these committees has arguably grown over the past 40 years (and that this influence is expected to grow in the future). However, in doing so, research has seemingly neglected the input to select committee inquiries, specifically how committee reports actually come to be in the first place. In particular, research on select committees has omitted the hidden servants that support Members of Parliament in their scrutiny of government. The House of Commons Service has an estimated 2,000 members of staff that vastly outnumber the elected representatives they exist to serve. Yet, we seem to know remarkably little about them. This paper identifies a


possible research agenda on just a small section of this large group, specifically the 200 or so members of staff that provide the permanent foundation for select committee support. It seeks to answer (or, at this stage, partly answer) the following questions: What is the function of staff in select committee work? How do they perform their role? What influence do they have? What is their relationship to elected representatives? In order to offer some answers to these questions, this paper is split into three substantive sections. The first section gives a summary of the approach and method on which this research is based. The second section offers a brief summary of the structural support that MPs receive through the Committee Office. The third section is the most substantive in that it explores the way in which clerks of select committees interpret their role, how they enact it through everyday practices, and their relationship to MPs. It demonstrates that the role of clerks is often understated, yet foundational, to the committee system.

I. Theory and Method

This research is principally based on ethnographic fieldwork, which has been adopted as part of a broader interpretive analytical framework, something which is not common within legislative studies. Interpretive political studies (IPS) has a long and distinguished history with regards to political analysis, with deep roots in anti-foundationalist epistemology. However, a useful recent reference point, albeit part of the governance literature, is through the work of Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes. The core aim for them is to ‘decentre’ the British state, by which they seek to ‘unpack’ practices as disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals. IPS contests the idea that inexorable or impersonal forces, norms, or laws define patterns and regularities in politics and instead focuses on their social

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In order to analyse practices in this way, Bevir and Rhodes have developed a number of key concepts, including situated agency, beliefs, traditions, dilemmas and practices (which have been summarised in Table 1). Broadly, this paper takes those ideas on board, notwithstanding some criticisms of the approach. It aims, especially, to look at the beliefs of clerks and how this sustains parliamentary traditions, but also begins to point to some dilemmas where those beliefs and wider parliamentary traditions come into tension with new and challenging problems.

Table 2: Interpretive Political Studies – Key Concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decentredness</td>
<td>To decentre is to unpack or to disaggregate how governance practices, traditions and beliefs are sustained, modified or discarded through an analysis of said practices, traditions and beliefs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Situated Agency</td>
<td>An individual is ‘situated’ in wider webs of beliefs (traditions), which will largely shape the individuals’ beliefs. However, the individual has a capacity for ‘agency’ in that he or she may alter, modify or discard practices, traditions or beliefs (usually in response to dilemmas)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beliefs and Ideas</td>
<td>Ideas are the heuristic devices by which individuals and groups are able to identify and interpret the world around them. Situated agents act on these, which elevates ‘ideas’ into ‘beliefs’, which is how individuals and groups negotiate their social world around them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>For Bevir and Rhodes, a practice is a macro-level analysis of a set of actions that often exhibits a stable pattern across time. Practices are the ways in which beliefs are manifested, allowing us to situate beliefs in practices. Meanwhile, practices are usually embedded in traditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Traditions are the ideational background within which agents find themselves. Usually, agents will adopt beliefs from traditions as a starting point, but may amend them (usually in response to dilemmas). Traditions form an aggregate level of analysis of ideas, beliefs and practices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dilemma</td>
<td>A dilemma is an idea that manifests itself as a belief for an individual and/or group, which, if it stands in contradiction to any other belief, practice or tradition, poses a problem for the individual and/or group. This ‘dilemma’ may be resolved by either accommodating or discarding the new belief.</td>
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construction through different ideas and values. In order to analyse practices in this way, Bevir and Rhodes have developed a number of key concepts, including situated agency, beliefs, traditions, dilemmas and practices (which have been summarised in Table 1). Broadly, this paper takes those ideas on board, notwithstanding some criticisms of the approach. It aims, especially, to look at the beliefs of clerks and how this sustains parliamentary traditions, but also begins to point to some dilemmas where those beliefs and wider parliamentary traditions come into tension with new and challenging problems.

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9 Based on a range of publications by M. Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes – see bibliography.

10 For a summary of decentred theory, see: Bevir and Rhodes, *The State as Cultural Practice*, p.73.

As most interpretive research, this paper adopts ethnographic methods in order to operationalise the key analytical concepts mentioned above. This includes:

1. **Participant and non-participant observation.** I worked in the House of Commons as a research assistant to a select committee over a period of 14 weeks (approximately 600 hours) during the 2010 Parliament. I kept a personal and confidential fieldwork diary (FWD) throughout my time in the Committee Office. I was able to observe private and public meetings of select committees, attend and participate in team meetings, observe proceedings of parliamentary debates, and helped to write briefings and draft reports.

2. **Semi-structured interviews.** I draw on formal interviews with ten members of parliamentary staff, of which two were below clerk-of-committee-level, seven were clerks of committees, and one was above clerk-of-committee-level. Interviewees will be referred to as ‘clerks’, unless specified otherwise. I additionally interviewed 33 Members of Parliament (of which ten were current or former chairs of committees and two were former secretaries of state). I also had many informal and unquantifiable conversations with staff, MPs and other political actors over my time in Parliament (which inform my account). All interviews took place during my internship.

3. **Textual analysis.** In order to corroborate my observations or the claims made by interviewees, I have sought to look at a variety of documents, including: research papers, briefings, newspaper articles (both in print and online), internal guidance notes, committee briefings, committee reports, letters and correspondence, Hansard, order papers, magazines and more. This is difficult to quantify or make explicit as the organisation that I study produces hundreds of texts every single day.

Taken together, these three methods inform the following account.

**II. The House of Commons administration**

Each select committee is supported by a small team of parliamentary staff, including: a clerk of the committee, responsible for the committee overall; a second clerk, who will lead on

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12 This was done with the informed consent of the Scrutiny Unit, my main point of contact. A copy of my informed consent form is available on request. I have additionally signed a confidentiality agreement with the Committee Office. Strict ethics procedures issued by The University of Sheffield were followed.
some inquiries and provide support to the clerk of the committee; one or two committee specialists, who are usually subject-specific experts with one- to two-year contracts (sometimes committees employ inquiry managers as well as or instead of specialists); one or two committee assistants to provide predominantly administrative support; and finally, a media officer (shared between usually three or four committees). This is a typical structure that can be found across most committees, though there are some variations: for example, the Justice Committee has a legal specialist; the Treasury Committee has two senior economists; and the Communities and Local Government Committee has an inquiry manager. Additionally, committees can appoint specialist advisers from outside of the House of Commons to provide expertise and advice to committees on an ad hoc basis. Each committee team has the ability to draw on resources from elsewhere, too, particularly the Scrutiny Unit. Committee support is situated within a bigger department to serve Members of Parliament (the Department of Chamber and Committee Services (DCCS)), which is in turn part of an overarching governance framework.

Sir Robert Rogers, former Clerk of the House, notes that Parliament is a reactive, cussed and unpredictable organisation (or what he calls ‘organism’), which is borne out in Figure 1 (taken from the UK Parliament website). The House of Commons Commission is at the apex of the administration, responsible for the House’s finances and its principal employer. It has existed since 1978, following a review from the Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir Edmund Compton, and a report from a committee of MPs, under the chairmanship of Sir Arthur Bottomley. The Commission is governed by a cross-party committee of MPs (including the Speaker, Leader of the House, Leader of the Opposition,

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14 The relationship between the governance of the House and the MPs they exist to serve has recently come into the limelight over the controversies surrounding the appointment of a new Clerk of the House of Commons in autumn 2014. Though this is an important debate, it falls outside this paper’s remit, and will therefore focus more closely on current arrangements. For more information, see: HC 692 (2014) House of Commons Governance, Report of Session 2014-15, London: HMSO.


Figure 1: The Governance Framework of the House of Commons Administration
and three backbench MPs). Though they are formally in control of the House of Commons Service, its delivery has been delegated to a Management Board, which is made up of five heads of departments and three external advisers.\(^{17}\) These departments include the aforementioned DCCS, as well as: Information Services, Facilities, Human Resources and Change, and Finance. Within the DCCS lies the Committee Directorate, which ‘provides secretariat, advice, research and administrative services for each of the House’s Departmental Select Committees and most other Select Committees’, as well as support for the House’s governance bodies (including the House of Commons Commission).\(^{18}\) Staff within the Committee Office are divided into predominantly ‘colour’ groups or shared units. Each group is made up of the clerks of committees.

These layers of the Commons administration reveal the complexities within which most clerks and members of staff find themselves. Working in the Committee Office for a particular select committee can feel far removed from the overarching governance structures, however. Though colour group meetings offer an opportunity for feedback through regular meetings and monthly summary reports, they have not broken down an impression amongst staff that each committee is its own independent (and possibly remote) island. Consequently, each committee works in a perceptively siloed atmosphere. One interviewee lamented that committees ‘don’t really talk’.\(^{19}\) A new member of staff was disappointed that she had not been introduced to staff in neighbouring offices, something with which I could identify over my stay at the Committee Office.\(^{20}\) The consequences of this ‘silod mentality’, as one clerk put it, is that it prevents the sharing of ideas, resources and expertise. He noted that the House of Commons Library, staff at the Science and Technology Committee, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and a number of others all had expertise that he wanted to use to help inform the direction of an inquiry.\(^{21}\) Creating a network where these different elements work together has been difficult. There are a range of reasons for this. First, time scales are often too short. Committee Members will request an inquiry on Tuesday and expect briefings by the following week; but to allow Members to read these briefings in time,

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17 The Management Board was established in 2007 to replace the Board of Management.


19 Interview 29.7.13.

20 FWD 41.10.4.

21 Interview 59.13.22.
they must be completed well in advance of the next meeting. Consequently, clerks usually only have two to three days to research and write terms of reference or scoping notes (see Section III below).

Second, all committees are run by their Members (and particularly the chairing MP), which often means that there are 21 chairs with 21 different views on how to run their committee. A clerk argued that this diversity is a good thing because ‘you want a thousand flowers to bloom’, especially because the basic principles of the administrative system are the same for all committees.

Third, there is a cultural factor, which one clerk described in the following way: ‘there are people who are in senior management positions but they’re not your boss, they’re your colleague and you have a huge amount of autonomy to run your show the way that you want to run it’. He argued that this contributed to a leadership problem. This implies that there is a dilemma that the Committee Office faces: How can the Office offer leadership to staff and expertise and support to Members without damaging the autonomy of clerks or the principle that committees must be Member-driven, especially in the context of growing demands for resources from MPs at a time of budget restraints? This is, arguably, an unresolved tension exacerbated not only by austerity, but also the fact that the Palace of Westminster faces significant restoration needs. This tension is not merely intellectual or constitutional, but something that clerks have to negotiate in their daily working environment when advising chairs on procedure and allocating team resources.

It is, in other words, a tension experienced at a daily level. To explore this further, our discussion turns to the substantive section of this paper: the beliefs, values and practices of clerks.

III. What does it mean to be a clerk?

In a guide to MPs that serve on select committees, it is described that the clerk of a committee is ‘to make committees as effective as possible in doing the task given to them by

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22 Interview 59.13.22.
23 Interview 58.13.11.
24 Interview 59.13.22.
the House’. Their responsibilities are summarised in the following way: ‘parliamentary and committee procedure, management of the committee staff, helping the committee plan and carry out its programme of work, identifying witnesses, providing briefing and research and drafting reports’. This definition sounds coherent and well put-together, perhaps even calm and serene. It is also only the tip of the iceberg as to what it means to be a clerk. When asked, one clerk noted that the most important aspect of his role is ‘nebulous’, but broadly identified it with ‘meeting the requirements of the committee and balancing, keeping the Members happy, doing what they want’. With this in mind, it is worth exploring how clerks interpret and practice their role in a little more depth. To do so, I will look at four themes that have emerged from my fieldwork: first, the management of committee teams and the support they offer to inquiries; second, the advisory role of clerks; third, the need to manage relationships; and, fourth, a more ephemeral sense of ‘clerkliness’ associated with service to the House of Commons. These themes cover, but noticeably extend beyond, the formal job description outlined in the guide from the Department for Chamber and Committee Services.

**Committee teams and inquiry support**

In the previous section, I identified the typical make-up of a committee team. The clerk of the committee is at the apex of this team and acts as team leader. One clerk believed this was as important (if not more so) as the advisory role commonly associated with House of Commons staff (see below):

> I think it’s essentially manager of the staff team and it’s the primary, the official role is the primary procedural adviser to the committee but that, I think, understates it to a large extent. It’s the manager of the team and the sort of prime interface between the team and the committee so the prime mediator between [what] the committee wants and the team is able to provide.

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28 Interview 30.7.12.
29 Interviews that made explicit reference to this aspect of their role: Interview 31.8.11, Interview 59.13.22, Interview 60.13.9, Interview 34.8.27, Interview 32.8.8.
30 Interview 34.8.27.
He went on to say that this means managing the demands placed on the team, and the nature of their work. This is important in order to manage expectations as to what the committee can and can’t do.\textsuperscript{31} If things go wrong, responsibility would rest with the clerk:

\begin{quote}
I was the, you know, ultimately, on the staff side, the buck stops with the clerk. ... Nothing should happen in the committee that the clerk isn’t aware of, hasn’t authorised in some way or isn’t part of, even if you’re not directly responsible for it. There should be nothing happening which you haven’t had sight of or thought about or done yourself.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

The clerk of a committee is often playing a ‘quality assurance’ role.\textsuperscript{33} On a daily basis, members of the team would discuss their work with the clerk. Questions that began with, ‘Where are we with…?’, or comments that began with, ‘Going forward…’, were pervasive in my office.\textsuperscript{34} These were important and useful tools to make sure that the unpredictability of the team’s tasks were manageable, especially given the wide range of tasks that might be involved.

In general, the committee team is responsible for support in driving forward a committee’s inquiry. This involves a number of stages. The first step is deciding to hold an inquiry in the first place, and the second step is drafting the terms of reference and calling for written evidence. One clerk identified this as a particularly important stage, and linked it more widely to his role as team leader:

\begin{quote}
If we don’t get things right at the beginning, if we don’t identify what the key political choices that face the government are on any particular issue, we very often head off in the wrong direction and by the time you’ve taken the wrong oral evidence and asked the wrong questions, you can’t get it back. So I think that provision of leadership to the team and helping to shape and helping to draw out of them what the issues are and what the narrative around an inquiry is is really quite important.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Of course, responsibility for this should rest with the Members that populate committees, but they often do not have time to look at the terms of reference for a specific inquiry in detail given the plethora of other tasks MPs face. This means most Members place their trust with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Interview 34.8.27.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Interview 32.8.8. This was also echoed in Interview 30.7.12.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Interview 60.13.9. Examples in my diary of this: FWD 16.4.27, FWD 39.9.20.
\item \textsuperscript{34} FWD 18.5.6.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Interview 59.13.22.
\end{itemize}
the clerks and the chair of the committee.\textsuperscript{36} They can, of course, only do this given the high level of expertise found in staff, as indeed the quote above implies. But, as noted in the previous section, drawing on this expertise and bringing various elements of it together in a tight and responsive network is not necessarily an easy task, especially in the high-pressure environment in which clerks work.

The third stage is to identify and invite witnesses for oral evidence. It almost goes without saying that this process largely depends on the inquiry that a committee wishes to undertake. From this basis, and submitted written evidence, staff will identify potential witnesses, often with supporting ideas from MPs. Once identified, inviting potential witnesses is another matter. Persuading potential yet hesitant witnesses is a skill in itself that relies on informal powers of persuasion rather than the formal power to summon witnesses.\textsuperscript{37} Irrespective of one’s success, this does not mean that committees are able to receive evidence from whom they would ideally like. One member of staff noted:

\textit{Often we’ll give the chair a witness plan, but ... with the best will in the world you never get even half the people you want on your witness plan. Because they’re on holiday, they can’t do it, they don’t want to do [it], you know, that kind of thing. And then you’re trying to find replacements.}\textsuperscript{38}

She went on to say that ‘we’re often working within pretty short deadlines’, which makes this task even more difficult (this is a recurrent theme!).\textsuperscript{39} Consequently, clerks sometimes rely on ‘the usual suspects’ – individuals or groups that are often associated with the subject area.\textsuperscript{40} This has significant implications for the kind of evidence that committees receive, and opens a whole new research agenda about the types of evidence that committees predominantly receive, which goes beyond this paper’s remit.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{36} Interview 38.9.39.

\textsuperscript{37} Interview 59.13.22, Interview 60.13.9.

\textsuperscript{38} Interview 54.12.22.

\textsuperscript{39} Interview 54.12.22.

\textsuperscript{40} Interview 60.13.9, Interview 29.7.13, Interview 59.13.22. FWD 20.5.7.

Undertaking oral evidence is one of the more well-known parts of an inquiry process, particularly among the public. In advance of these sessions, staff are principally involved in writing briefing material. One clerk commented that an effective brief is, ‘a little bit magic’.\textsuperscript{42} Most agree that it is a difficult task because of the balancing act required: some MPs read all briefing material and are generally engaged and interested in the subject matter; other MPs walk into an evidence session rushed off their feet, grab a brief, and try to ask a relevant question as the meeting is underway. Despite these difficulties, MPs with whom I have spoken have been generally positive of clerkly efforts. One MP said that she felt ‘enabled when you go in there. You feel you have the sort of tools, really, to do the job’, a view which was echoed by a number of others.\textsuperscript{43} The briefing material, as one would hope, is often used as the basis to structure evidence sessions; a ‘crutch’ one MP called them.\textsuperscript{44} Members place a significant degree of trust in clerks to produce high quality briefing material, which plays a key role in reassuring Members and making them feel more confident in their questioning. Therefore, mistakes are ‘absolutely unforgivable’.\textsuperscript{45} In order to prevent this, clerks need to know not only the subject material, but also need to pick up the nuances and shades of opinion of the Members that they are serving.\textsuperscript{46} They need well-developed political antennae, otherwise themes for questioning could come at an issue ‘from absolutely the wrong angle’.\textsuperscript{47} Most MPs take the briefing material seriously, which is a testament to the high quality and general thoroughness of clerks. One MP said that he will always cover his section of the brief before ‘doing my own thing’ because ‘clearly the clerks put a lot of effort into figuring out how we’re going to get a report that covers the areas that are needed’.\textsuperscript{48}

This brings us to the fifth stage, namely drafting reports. On the whole, clerks will produce what is a called a ‘chair’s first draft’, which the chair of the committee will read and edit before placing it in front of the committee’s Members for consideration. Because reports are based exclusively on the evidence that committees have received over the course of an inquiry, clerks have a keen interest in the evidence gathering process. One clerk noted that it

\textsuperscript{42} Interview 59.13.22.
\textsuperscript{43} Interview 47.11.25. Interview 37.9.8, Interview 57.13.4, Interview 57.13.30.
\textsuperscript{44} Interview 57.13.30. See also: Interview 56.13.18. Others have similarly made this point in other interviews.
\textsuperscript{45} Interview 61.14.19.
\textsuperscript{46} Interview 46.11.9.
\textsuperscript{47} Interview 37.9.8.
\textsuperscript{48} Interview 51.12.21. Echoed in Interview 51.12.23.
is ‘one of the most frustrating bits of the job’ when Members ask good questions or get an interesting response from a witness, but do not follow it up.\textsuperscript{49} This makes the job of drafting a report more difficult, but it is also something clerks can do little about. Clerks are servants of their committee Members and the draft reports they produce can only ever be as good as the evidence brought before them.\textsuperscript{50} An additional factor that clerks have to consider in drafting is the political balance, or: ‘part of my work is to try to draft things in such a way that it gets consensus’.\textsuperscript{51} Another clerk:

> So, you know, when we’re drafting a report, we’re trying to find a form of wording which is going to be acceptable to all Members of the committee across sometimes quite a wide range of political views.\textsuperscript{52}

It requires well-developed and sensitive political antennae. One Member of Parliament noted:

> I mean a good committee clerk will also understand the politics in the team and will, in the drafting of reports need to know what the committee is likely to find acceptable in a way that it’s working and … not seek to introduce elements in there which might upset the chair or might be okay to the chair but upset Members and get them to turn on the chair. So a degree of political sensitivity is necessary.\textsuperscript{53}

That said, one chair of a committee remarked that he is occasionally in a better position to express political nuances, particularly in reports.\textsuperscript{54} Once reports have reached this stage, inquiries are no longer in the control of clerks. Though they may offer advice, consideration of reports (and the aftermath) rests with MPs, with only very limited involvement from clerks (usually on matters of procedure alone).

In describing these stages, it has become clear that clerks offer foundational support for select committees. They provide MPs with oral and written briefings to fulfil their work as scrutinisers, they act as access points for interest groups and witnesses, and act as team leaders for inquiries. This indicates that clerks act as an amplifier for the interests of MPs at

\textsuperscript{49} Interview 30.7.12. Echoed in Interview 59.13.22.

\textsuperscript{50} This is, arguably, not often appreciated when studying the ‘effectiveness’ of committee reports and their recommendations.

\textsuperscript{51} Interview 32.8.8.

\textsuperscript{52} Interview 31.8.11.

\textsuperscript{53} Interview 53.12.12.

\textsuperscript{54} Interview 43.10.13.
three levels: first, in identifying and inviting witnesses; second, in briefing MPs on key issues in advance of oral evidence sessions; and third, in collating the evidence that a committee has heard over the course of an inquiry. The role of clerk is, then, crucial to enable MPs to do their job effectively. Staff act as ‘amplifiers’ in that they continue to only serve the interests of MPs; a ‘filtering’ or ‘gate-keeping’ role would imply something far more influential. This is not something I found in my fieldwork observations or in interviews. In any case, because of these roles, the advice that clerks transmit is key.

**Advisory role of clerks**

The clerk of a committee acts as its principal adviser both on procedure and policy, something which most clerks mentioned in their interpretation of the role.\(^{55}\) Clerks are not subject specialists, but get appointed to committees for four to five years (though this ranges depending on role and committee). They are generalists.\(^{56}\) This means that their advice predominantly focuses on procedural matters, or ostensibly more general matters of concern for the committee. It can range from how to make a formal amendment in considering a draft report, to advice on whether a secretary of state has behaved unconstitutionally (and what the committee could do as a result), to discussing the central conclusion of an inquiry’s report, and to making a point of order in the main chamber regarding the committee’s work.\(^{57}\) This makes the advisory role quite broad and arguably difficult to pin down. As one clerk put it:

> I will be the committee’s chief adviser on what they could and couldn’t do and what they should and shouldn’t do. I was the chair’s chief, sort of, go to person for anything that she wanted done."\(^{58}\)

The relationship between clerks and elected representatives (especially the chair) is crucial. This will be covered in more detail below, but it is important to bear in mind at this stage because it affects the level and type of advice clerks give in practice. A key point, in particular, is that they can be very demanding, perhaps unreasonably so at times. One clerk noted that they are not ‘there just to facilitate any sort of conduct’, in the sense that there are

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\(^{55}\) Interviews that made explicit reference to it: Interview 60.13.9, Interview 31.8.11, Interview 34.8.27, Interview 32.8.8, Interview 59.13.22. All other interviewees alluded to it.

\(^{56}\) Interview 58.13.11.

\(^{57}\) See (respectively): FWD 53.12.5; FWD 52.12.3; FWD 49.11.11; FWD 19.5.30.

\(^{58}\) Interview 32.8.8.
rules of the House that should not be contravened. This can create a ‘tricky’ balancing act.\textsuperscript{59} Another clerk interpreted his role in the following way, which highlights both service to a specific committee, and to the House as a whole:

\begin{quote}
The job of the clerks of all select committees is essentially similar. It is to try to carry out the wishes of the committee in terms of the work that it wants to undertake within the committee’s terms of reference and in accordance with the procedures and practices of the House.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

I asked clerks if this consequently meant that they see themselves stewards of a committee, rather than servants. Some clerks did not think so.\textsuperscript{61} One accepted this distinction \textit{could} be made in the abstract, but did not believe it was applicable in practice:

\begin{quote}
We can think of ourselves, I suppose, as stewards of the continuing or Platonic ideal of each committee but in fact, in practice we are largely the servants of committees, of actual committees as they are operating on a day-to-day basis.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

Because of this, giving advice is far from easy, which is felt most acutely on an everyday level. It indicates that there may be a slight tension between everyday practices of clerks and the parliamentary tradition in which they find themselves. One clerk found it difficult to summarise her role effectively because often, ‘it feels like I am dealing with stuff as it happens’. She went on to say that, ‘there’s an awful lot of spontaneous stuff that you can’t plan for that seem to make up large chunks of your day’.\textsuperscript{63} The unpredictability of clerks’ everyday life was noticeable throughout my fieldwork observations. The chair could ask for advice at a moment’s notice, which consequently would require staff to drop everything else they had planned to get the advice to the chair in time.\textsuperscript{64} For example, the chair asked if the clerk could help with a statement he was due to give later that morning. Though this took up the clerk’s entire morning (despite a full schedule), it demonstrates the sheer commitment of staff to their role.\textsuperscript{65} They are there at committee sponsored debates, assiduously taking notes and helping the chair with their closing remarks; or they will watch ‘their’ Question Time to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[59] Interview 32.8.8.
\item[60] Interview 31.8.11.
\item[61] Interview 29.7.13.
\item[62] Interview 31.8.11.
\item[63] Interview 37.9.4.
\item[64] FWD 11.3.10.
\item[65] FWD 4.1.19.
\end{footnotes}
flag up any issues raised in the chamber that’s relevant for the committee. This indicates a close relationship between clerks and MPs, to which we now turn.

**Managing relationships**

By this point, it will have become clear that disentangling the role of clerks and their everyday practices from their relationship to and demands placed on them by MPs is a difficult one. Though there is a lot to be said about the relationships between clerks and ministerial departments, different sections of the House of Commons Service, and between clerks and ‘outside’ actors (witnesses, specialist advisers, and so on), this discussion will be limited to the relationship between clerks and MPs.

One clerk said, quite simply, ‘I think the single most important success factor of the committee is how good the chair is’. Most clerks, indeed MPs themselves, accept that the tone of a committee is set by the chair. This indicates that the relationship between clerks and chairs is crucial. Clerks usually meet with their chair once a week, though this depends on the chair. One clerk noted that he met with a chair every week without fail, irrespective of how long or short the agenda; but, when placed with another committee, the chair did not wish to meet with the clerk at all (the clerk guessed what should be on the committee agenda each week as a result). These meetings can serve important purposes for touching base and understanding the wishes of the chair. In the committee for which I worked, it was not uncommon for the chair to close the meeting by commenting things like, ‘you’ve got the gist’, or, ‘can you flesh out what we’ve discussed?’ The chair of the committee directed; the clerks are there to implement. Clerks will be able to ask the chair about the direction of a report, the central themes that they noticed in the evidence hearings, or other matters. Even if clerks and chairs did not meet formally, all clerks I spoke to mentioned that they were in

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66 FWD 49.11.33, FWD 49.11.18.
67 Interview 58.13.11.
68 Interview 59.13.22.
69 FWD 9.3.10, FWD 16.4.18.
70 For example: FWD 34.8.7; FWD 39.9.3-17.
contact with the chair – through email or telephone – most days a week.\textsuperscript{71} One chair commented:

\textit{The ability of the clerks to develop a strong personable relationship with the chairman is absolutely vital. The relationship is so much more productive if it’s enjoyable, open, trusting and, you know, a degree of full and free exchange of views and ideas about, without fear or favour.}\textsuperscript{72}

This indicates that staff, generally, work towards the chair. Clerks commented that this has arguably increased since the election of chairs in 2010 following the Wright Committee reforms because this has increased their confidence.\textsuperscript{73} One clerk noted: ‘increasingly chairs are seen as people who comment on issues around the committees remit, not just on current inquiries and are often in demand to talk at conferences and do media appearances and things’.\textsuperscript{74} This has increased demand on the Committee Office’s available resources, and meant that the advisory role of clerks has increased. More frequently, clerks need to be on hand to support their chair with writing speeches and giving briefings to Members on topics in advance of committee-related activity.\textsuperscript{75} Not only has this increased the demand of advice, but also affected the type of advice that they may, at times, be asked for. One clerk noted that his chair is keen on a panel of external advisers that he could turn to for policy advice.\textsuperscript{76} This was echoed by chairs that I spoke to: one mentioned the need for an adviser for writing and reflecting on reports; another that she needed a researcher to support her as chair but was ‘peeved’ that this was not possible.\textsuperscript{77}

Some clerks are worried about the consequent perception with their relationship to the committee as a whole. One clerk said that Members, ‘don’t quite appreciate the role of the clerk and they see the clerk as maybe being the chair’s creature’.\textsuperscript{78} Clerks see themselves, something made very clear throughout interviews and fieldwork observations, as servants of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} For example, see: Interview 34.8.24, Interview 32.8.8.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Interview 46.11.5.
\item \textsuperscript{73} FWD 6.2.19, FWD 36.9.9. For an overview, see: M. Russell (2011) ‘Never Allow a Crisis Go To Waste’: The Wright Committee reforms to strengthen the House of Commons’, \textit{Parliamentary Affairs} 64:4, pp.612-33.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Interview 58.13.11. Also mentioned in Interview 34.8.27.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Interview 30.7.12.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Interview 30.7.12.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Interview 46.11.5, Interview 52.12.14.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Interview 30.7.12.
\end{itemize}
the committee as a whole. However, one clerk acknowledged that this is difficult at times: ‘I’m working for them [Members] as much as for the chair, in theory, but in practice that’s not really how it works’. Clerks mentioned in interviews that they would like to work more closely with Members, but accepted that this was not possible due to the competing demands on an MP’s time. The level of contact and involvement between Members and chairs is so different on an everyday level that there are only limited opportunities for a closer relationship to develop with Members. A chair is involved in almost all aspects of their committee’s work; a Member is usually (though not always) interested in only specific inquiries or projects. Though this has perceived implications about the allocation of resources on committees, a tension or dilemma about this is easily exaggerated. Clerks are usually willing to offer support; it is MPs that rarely take this up (unless, of course, they seek support from elsewhere). Moreover, insofar as a tension does exist, it is rarely stress-tested. Most MPs accept that chairs and clerks are likely to have a close working relationship.

One way to prevent dissonance between staff and Members is being responsive to the needs of MPs before they themselves are aware of needing support. This was mentioned above in the form of ‘political antennae’. However, it goes deeper than this. One MP called it a ‘largely unspoken’ symbiotic relationship, in that she felt clerks picked up the norms, values, ways of working, approaches and nuances of Members without needing to be told about them. In that sense, the support that clerks offer goes beyond administrative or procedural advice. It is about, ‘making Members feel like they’re getting what they wanted and making them understand the services that are available to them and the value that we can add’. I encountered many examples of this in my fieldwork observations. One of the reasons that this relationship is often ‘unspoken’ has practical causes: there is simply a lack of contact

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79 Interview 37.9.4.
80 Interview 59.13.22, Interview 31.8.11.
81 Interview 37.9.4.
82 Interview 29.7.13.
83 This raises some interesting questions about from where MPs seek support, and from whom. For instance, the House of Commons Library is growing as a resource for MPs, and APPGs have also seemingly taken off in the last ten years in a way that may not be totally expected.
84 For example: Interview 51.12.21, Interview 52.12.4.
86 Interview 59.13.22.
87 FWD 16.4.27, FWD 51.12.13, FWD 58.13.18. It was also echoed in interviews. For instance, Interview 32.8.8.
with Members, often due to their competing diary pressures. This is additionally compounded by the fact that membership of committees, and attendance at meetings, can be sporadic. Even though the role of chair is pivotal to ensure that the committee maintains strategic and stable in the face of these challenges, the role of staff in providing an institutional memory (and the benefits in terms of stability that this provides) cannot be understated. In order to manage these relationships effectively, staff rely on an MP’s trust. In order to build this trust, clerks rely on something quite difficult to pin down, but which I tentatively call ‘clerkliness’.

**Clerkliness**

It is only at this stage that we can begin to understand what it actually means to be a clerk. This goes far beyond the formal job description, though of course it contains all of its elements. A central plank that underpins this sense of ‘clerkliness’ is the idea that clerks are inconspicuous or hidden. This manifests itself in a number of ways, but is pervasive in their everyday behaviour. The most visible sign of their invisibility is physically in committee meetings. The leading clerk associated with an inquiry will sit to the left of the chair in meetings in order to provide administrative support during a session. But other clerks will sit at the side of the room, out of view. They are, quite literally, at the edges of a select committee performance. Additionally, clerks do not have microphones in these large committee spaces. Though there are clear reasons for this when public sessions are underway, it is curious that in private meetings all Members can be heard through microphones but clerks face a greater difficulty.  

The most interesting facet of ‘being hidden’, however, is the idea of what some clerks in the Committee Office referred to as their ‘clerkly poker face’. It is noticeable whenever a clerk is in the presence of an MP. In meetings with the chair, for instance, jokes are not met with agreeing laughter, but with polite smiles or neutral looks. On one occasion, a clerk described to me how, after briefing a new Member of a committee, she had to sit through the MP giving their political opinions on a range of matters to which the clerk couldn’t do anything but nod politely. Clerks joked when they accidentally dropped their clerkly poker

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88 FWD 38.9.12.
89 FWD 49.11.11.
90 FWD 26.6.3.
face, which often made me feel slightly guilty as I failed to do so on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{91} It matters, of course, because even a minor point could question their impartial service to all Members on the committee, or the House more widely. This is ultimately why the clerkly poker face matters to them, and why they may be, consequently, careful to avoid giving advice on political matters.\textsuperscript{92}

Aside from the ‘clerkly poker face’, there is a wider culture of ‘being hidden’ amongst clerks. I commented to one clerk in an interview that I thought it was somewhat odd that no research on select committees mentioned the role played by clerks. He replied saying, ‘that’s as it should be. … we’re not the main show’. He went on:

\textit{Even if we do the heavy lifting behind the scenes, there is that sense that this is a Member-led endeavour, not one that is driven by the staff and so it’s only right that when you ask that question, the staff are not visible. There’d be something wrong if we were visible.}\textsuperscript{93}

Not only does this quotation demonstrate the desire among clerks to remain hidden, to remain the actors ‘behind the scenes’, but also that clerks’ service is unparalleled to letting MPs take the limelight, one of the principal causes and consequences of ‘being hidden’. Impartial service to Members of Parliament is a given – it is part of the job description. But this sense of impartiality is one characterised by passion for and loyalty to the House of Commons that goes a little further than a standard sense of ‘neutrality’. One clerk told me that:

\textit{There can be occasions when ... political inclinations of Members of the committee can conflict with principles of trying to give everybody a fair hearing. ... and that can apply to all Members of the committee across the political spectrum.}\textsuperscript{94}

This is an important point because it does not describe ‘neutrality’, but creating a level playing field to ensure that different political voices can be heard and those different views can be debated. A clerk at the Table Office joked that supporting backbench MPs is the ‘most entertaining bit’ of being clerk, especially if it causes a clash in the main chamber.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{91} An example of where I lost my poker face: FWD 38.9.10.
\textsuperscript{92} FWD 16.4.11, FWD 33.8.12, FWD 34.8.15.
\textsuperscript{93} Interview 59.13.22.
\textsuperscript{94} Interview 31.8.11.
\textsuperscript{95} FWD 1.1.18.
There is, of course, much more to be said about what it means to be a clerk. Arguably the best summary came from the response I received from a senior clerk after I asked him what makes a good clerk. He smiled, and said:

> Very interesting. Very interesting. Well, you’ve got to be able to turn complicated stuff into comprehensible English, whether in writing or orally. I think you’ve got to have a good sense of fairness between the different Members, so that the minority get their say as well as the majority. I think you’ve got to have a certain amount of enthusiasm on things for the subject area and the ability to pick it up quite quickly because it may well not be a subject you know anything about at all. ... Fair amount of resilience, working with politicians, possibly working long hours ... slight sense of humour helps, to get through. Judgement and balance. I mean you’ve got to be very, all fair to all sides and appear not to be too partisan.  

His description, though it clearly links to service to the House, reaches beyond it, too. It shows that there is a lot to be said for ‘clerkliness’. The sense of humour among staff (it is good natured, usually dry and often brought a smile to my face); the hard work and commitment by clerks under any circumstance; the constant desire to develop and sharpen their knowledge of parliamentary procedure (countless examples in my fieldwork observations); and much more.

IV. Concluding Remarks

This paper has limited itself largely to playing a descriptive role in that it has outlined the function of clerks and described their relationship to Members of Parliament. Clerks offer procedural (and occasionally political) advice to their political masters, they draft select committee reports, provide MPs with oral and written briefings to fulfil their work as scrutinisers, they act as access points for interest groups and witnesses, and facilitate relationships between a range of actors both inside and outside of the House of Commons. Clerks run committees on an everyday basis, which involves regularly taking part in meetings, reading and writing a range of papers, unscheduled encounters in corridors and staff rooms, undertaking long hours of desk research, chairing meetings, negotiating with witnesses, welcoming visitors, dealing with interns, preparing political discussions and meetings,
observing parliamentary debates, keeping a tab on the media, guarding against gaffes, and dealing with other administrative support. Some of these issues have been explored in this paper to demonstrate the important role that clerks play in select committee work. In order to do their job effectively, clerks rely on building a sense of trust with the elected representatives they exist to serve, a link sustained through an ephemeral sense of clerkliness that often includes a desire among staff to remain ‘hidden’, actively shunning the limelight.

This paper has only began to lift the lid on the role of clerks. There is much more research to be done on this topic: what background do clerks have? What social characteristics do they have and does this impact their work? What is their relationship to other departments in the House of Commons? What do MPs think of them? How important is their role in sustaining scrutiny of the executive? What dilemmas do clerks face in their everyday life?
Bibliography


Interviews: 29.7.13; 30.7.12; 31.8.11; 32.8.8; 34.8.24; 37.9.4; 37.9.8; 38.9.39; 43.10.13; 46.11.5; 46.11.9; 47.11.25; 51.12.21; 51.12.23; 52.12.14; 52.12.4; 53.12.12; 54.12.22; 56.13.18; 57.13.30; 57.13.4; 58.13.11; 59.13.22; 60.13.9; 61.14.19.


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