

Chairing UK Select Committees: Walking Between Friends and Foes

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In this article, we aim to look at the political, social and emotional world created by the UK's House of Commons select committees and the part played by their chairs. Drawing upon the theoretical traditions of political anthropology (Spencer (2004, *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press)), group analytical theory (Foulkes (1948, *Group Analytic Psychotherapy: Method and Principles*, London, William Heinemann Medical Books)) and pragmatic philosophy (Dewey (1922, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, New York, NY, Henry Holt and Company)), we view the experience of individuals as relational, created in their interaction with other individuals and groups. The context is that select committees aspire to consider evidence impartially and work cohesively to hold government to account. Our focus is on the political work of the chairs of Commons' select committees. Committee chairs, members and staff are constrained by the architecture, rules and rituals in their bid to achieve plausibility, but at the same time find the room to express individuality in the ways that they manage emotions and communicate with others through words, silence, bodily movements or facial expressions. By embodying the committee, and mediating between those involved, the work of chair involves walking between friends and enemies—forming alliances, dealing with disagreements and disciplining the unruly—to create the impression that select committees are above party politics.

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1. Introduction: a collaborative ethnography of committee chairs

The UK House of Commons' departmental select committees appear to be islands of collaboration and rationality within the UK political world of bitter

conflict and division.¹ The case for taking select committees seriously has been made by political scientists; 40% of recommendations of committees to government were implemented during 1997–2010 (Benton and Russell, 2013) and their media profile has grown (Dunleavy and Muir, 2013). In contrast to the evaluative studies, we intend to inquire into the work of committees that will be inevitably influenced by value judgments, in the sense that any study of politics has to be, but does not have normative aims at its heart. There is a tendency among scholars of the UK select committees, and even Parliament more widely, to rush to judgments (Geddes, 2019, chapter 2). This has meant undertaking evaluations and looking at the success or failure of committees in relation to intentions, whether scrutinising government or shedding light on a forgotten policy area, with the aim of improvement. However, if all the scholarship on select committee work is normative, then we might miss the opportunity to ask other fundamental questions about what they are doing and why their work is politically significant in a broader sense.

What do we know so far about the work of Commons select committees? Most literature on parliaments, and their scrutiny committees, in particular, is informed by different forms of new institutionalism, emphasising both the stable or even stuck patterns and need for reform. There is a new turn in parliamentary studies towards anti-foundational theoretical approaches, influenced by a mix of those political scholars who question positivism (e.g. Geddes, Shirin Rai, Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes) and anthropologists of Parliament (e.g. Marc Abélès and Emma Crewe). We share in common, certain epistemological positions: a view of objectivity as a process of inquiry rather than a position; an interest in both people's social and individual experiences; and agreement that the trickiest intellectual task is to explain how and why individuals depart from norms or beliefs. We need to account for both cultural constraint and difference as expressed through the agency of individuals. Kelso, one of the few political scientists who has written about committee chairs in particular, does this by suggesting they are leaders, not in a heroic command-and-control style but more as *collaborative* political actors, that is, setting the tone to encourage a common approach, achieving compromises and preventing division (Kelso, 2016). However, she writes less about the culture, relationships and diversity of experience within and between select committees, which also merit our attention.

¹Although parliamentary committees, in general, have been working for centuries, department select committees were set up to scrutinise the expenditure, administration and policy of government in 1979. Each government is shadowed by a department, so there are currently 21, with the latest addition being the Exiting the European Union Committee (commonly known as Brexit). They have at least 11 MPs as members, but they can have more and in the case of Brexit SC they have as many as 21. The staff of committee normally consists of a first clerk, second clerk, committee specialist, press officer (shared with other committees) and administrative staff.

Chairs can only be understood if you watch how they *relate* to others—they are nothing on their own. It is in their relationship with staff, other members, and witnesses that they become both a generic group but also the leaders of committees in their idiosyncratic ways. We embarked on a form of collaborative ethnography to look into these relationships. Since our research duo was composed of an anthropologist and a group analyst, this study was inter-disciplinary before we even began to talk to informants together. The anthropologist (Crewe) has been studying MPs and clerks, including in their guises as members or staff of committees since 2011, whereas the group analyst (Sarrah) began researching in the House of Commons in 2018 with our joint study of constituencies (Crewe and Sarrah, forthcoming).

The ethnographic aspect of our methodology was influenced by both anthropology and group analytical theory. In the hands of anthropologists, ethnography developed in a certain way because we used to visit remote places to study unfamiliar people to observe, interpret and write about their culture to make them familiar. Since 1920s, anthropologists have been undertaking ‘fieldwork’—immersion in a particular place to conduct ‘participant-observation’, guided by the assumption that you have to take enough time to compile a bigger picture of what a whole group does without them necessarily noticing the wider pattern themselves. Anthropologists don’t study people—they aren’t *objects* of study—but they learn *with* people, it is a participatory form of research. Tim Ingold explains: ‘Anthropologists follow their noses, sniffing out promising sources and lines of inquiry. They are like hunters on the trail. To hunt, you have to dream the animal; get under its skin to perceive as it does; know it from the inside out’ (Ingold, 2018, p. 118). Similarly, group analysts learn with people about the emergent dynamics of groups, not only through the medium of group psychotherapy from which the method developed but also through organisational and wider sociological processes.

The collaborative element of the method here involved not only the participative quality of the observation (in this case of Commons select committees) but also the co-production of knowledge between the researchers and informants. Our aim was to expand our capacity for what it was possible to see, hear, feel and think about in the research situation in a dialectical process that continued before, during and often long after, the actual interviews and encounters. The rigour and objectivity of this kind of approach depends upon taking seriously the plurality and complexity of perspectives of researchers and informants. Thus, it becomes possible to reach beyond individual perspectives and grasp more effectively the social quality of the inquiry and the ways in which both our identities as researchers and those of the participants involved, were being mutually formed. To develop methods that can handle this level of complexity, we have drawn on ethnographic research methods for studying politicians developed by

Crewe (2017) and inspired by Spencer (2004), Group Analytic method (Foulkes, 1948), family therapy reflecting team technique (Brownlee *et al.*, 2009) and organisational inquiry methods developed through Sarra's (2005) work in the NHS. In this particular study since 2018, we have watched committees (on Parliament TV and live, from the audience in public and from the staff table in private sessions), revisited all the fieldnotes on Emma's earlier studies of committees (2015, 2018) studied inquiry documents, and interviewed chairs, members, clerks and other staff individually and in different groups, both formally and informally.

2. The constraints of chairing select committees

In this article, we will look into the work of chairing Commons committees, the claims and realities of their practice, the process of work involved in mediating between those involved in committees—members, staff, witnesses, stakeholders, government ministers and civil servants—and the relationships between all those involved. The Commons clerk of Committees, head of the vast majority of select committee staff in that House, writes about chairs:

Among the key elements of the role are:

- holding the committee together
- providing support and direction to the committee's staff between formal meetings
- ensuring that members may contribute to the choice of inquiry topics, to questioning sessions and to final reports, and
- providing the committee's public face.

Chairs may also spend a good deal of time working behind the scenes – for example, maintaining good relationships with ministers in the department the committee scrutinises, or meeting organisations eager to attract the committee's attention or promote a subject for inquiry. (Evans, 2017, p. 8)

These elements point to an idealised version of how chairs help committees meet their goals but reveal little about the complexity and changeability of what this entails emotionally, culturally and politically from the various perspectives of those involved. To understand the complex everyday work of select committees, you have to first consider the constraining influences: its hierarchies, powers, limitations and rituals.

The ranking of Commons scrutiny committees, in terms of influence and power, is not clear cut (not even the scope of the list of runners and riders—for instance, whether to include petitions, Public Accounts Committee, Liaison or the

Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments). If precedence reflects departmental status, then the Treasury Committee is at the top of anyone's version of the hierarchy (with Scottish and Welsh Affairs nearer at the bottom, just above technical scrutiny like 'JCSI', Regulatory Reform and most of the internal house committees). If size matters, then in spending terms, Treasury drops to second last (but still well above Brexit) and Work and Pensions and Health and Social Care—combined budget of £330 billion or so—rise up. If we are talking about budgets with choices, not just bulk, International Development might challenge; if sound and fury, then Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; if current preoccupations, then we must re-examine Brexit; if antiquity, reach and a vast supporting cast, then the Committee of Public Accounts (and National Audit Office) leads the field. Even if contested, it is clear that the perceptions of informal ranking potentially affect the perceived status of the chair in the wider political environment.

Within each committee mini-kingdom you find a flat formal hierarchy—chair and members, the clerk, a second clerk, committee specialist/s, and other staff—but a more pronounced one between the members versus staff, both expressed and sometimes subverted in the relationship between chair and clerk. All these relationships are affected by age, gender and ethnicity. It used to be the case that both chairs and clerks were white men of a certain age but in the last few years women have taken up chairing and clerking committees, in the latter case even relatively young women. In July 2017, all 21 elected chairs were white, while six were women and 15 men. White men from public school overwhelming dominated clerkdom until recently, but women are on the ascendant even if only 8/21 clerks of committees are women so far.

Secondly, departmental select committees have limited powers and are confined by specific spaces and allocations of time. They can call, but not compel, any witnesses to come before them and give evidence by answering their questions. Government ministers or officials rarely refuse but when Aaron Banks walked out of an evidence-giving session and Irene Rosenfeld, Mark Zuckerberg and Dominic Cummings refused to attend at all, the punishments supposedly available to committees, could misfire or backfire embarrassingly if any attempt to deploy them rather than merely assert them was made—there is no actual mechanism in the modern world for the House to impose a fine or imprisonment—or if they still relied on an element of participation such as appearing for a telling off by the Speaker ([Geddes, 2019](#), chapter 5).² They can lay their reports before the House and expect government to consider and respond to their recommendations, but they cannot demand that they are implemented (and they cannot freeze a contract, hold up a budget or stop a bill). Whether meeting to discuss matters

²In the event, in one case, the House agreed a written admonition (on 2 April fortunately), HC Debates, 2 April 2019, col. 941.

privately or take evidence in public, they will find the room arranged in a rigid fashion—with the members' chairs arranged around a horseshoe-shaped table, the witness table forming a line to close the horseshoe and chairs for the public behind the witnesses. Although committees can meet as often as they like, MPs' schedules are so packed that it is not usually realistic for them to have meetings more than once or twice a week during parliamentary sessions.

The third constraint on committees is the way they are ritualised, replete with rules and habits that set boundaries around how the participants can behave. Contrary to widespread assumption, ritual is as important in politics and law as it is in religion (Kertzer, 1988). Like any political event when a great deal is at stake, select committee sessions are ritualised in the sense that interaction between those involved is hierarchical, regulated by rules and charged with symbolic meaning. The more public they are, and the more that is at stake politically, the more ritualised they are and as is the case with most rituals, they are mediated by someone with high status. In a religious context, it is the priest, rabbi or imam who connects humans to god but in this case the chair is the ritual mediator, representing the focal point of the committee but also the committee to the media, to other committees and to Parliament. When representing, the chairs *embody* the committee but when facilitating evidence-taking during a session, they are more like shepherds disciplining sheep (or cats when less biddable). The select committee ritual of evidence giving is reminiscent of a court with its inquisitorial style, its language of inquiry, witnesses and evidence and the way the chair (and other members) appears to be sitting in judgment. Like a court, when information is not formally presented to the committee through its ritualised processes (e.g. academic research reports or journal articles sourced by other means) it is not categorised as 'evidence', it is merely background information. The ritual of private deliberation on reports can be, on the other hand, a little like a mini political debating chamber, with the chair acting like a Speaker, when a draft report being considered is almost treated like a bill, and the clerk on her/his left,³ advising on rules governing the taking of amendments and voting (although voting is rare for most committees).

Although these hierarchies, specified powers, norms about the use of time and space, and rituals all combine to constrain people, they do not do so in a deterministic way. The reason for this is that political rituals are both performative and communicative—they will have recognisable elements that must always stay the same (e.g. a chair presiding, rules about speaking), and variations that enable specific communication (e.g. different evidence given at each session of a select committee). It is in the variations that members have room for manoeuvre, and it is in this variability that we can understand the nature of this area of political work at a different level.

³With the exception of the clerk who sits on the right to hear better with his/her left ear.

3. Chairing as political work: mediating rituals

It is central to the ethos of committees that in holding government to account they are driven by evidence, consensus and rationality. As a consequence, in both their formal and informal exercise of authority, the chair, the clerk and committee specialists are working to establish the credibility and plausibility of the committee. They depend on the members, staff and witnesses of/to the committee to collaborate and their success depends critically on their relationships with these various groups. To explain the political work of chairing, it is only possible to do so by looking at how they relate to those around them.

The formal authority of the clerk and the chair is fixed in certain ways, both in relation to each other and in relation to the rest of the committee, but informally authority is expressed with huge variation. Formally, the chair presides over the meetings and represents the Committee to the outside world, embodying it so that one MP who has been chair for many years stated, ‘I am the committee.’ However, such an attitude fails to recognise the vital roles of the other members, the clerks, committee specialists and staff. The clerk is responsible for the all aspects of the administration of the committee, so clerk to the whole mini-organisation not just the chair, and is the manager of its staff. The rhythm of who is identified as the leader of the committee in practice is governed by the meetings. In the meetings of members, the chair is clearly in charge, but in between meetings the clerk symbolically holds the committee in a parliamentary outbuilding in Tothill Street, about 10 minutes walk away from the Palace of Westminster. The Committee might symbolically pop into the public domain in the guise of the chair giving an interview to journalists or talking to stakeholders, but mostly the intensive work is carried out by the clerks, committee specialists and other staff—speaking to the chair as and when necessary, so resides in Tothill Street. Just before every meeting of the committee, and after it has been concluded, the chair and the clerk confer—checking arrangements, discussing members or whatever is needed—as the committee is symbolically handed over from one to the other. When the clerk then takes it to or from Tothill Street, with the staff and often huge piles of paperwork, the Committee has a nomadic quality to it as it is moved around the parliamentary estate and even, very occasionally, on evidence-gathering trips to others parts of the UK or the world.

The rooms in which select committees convene to meet—whether in the Palace of Westminster or the newer outbuilding Portcullis House—communicate a seriousness of purpose through both their architectural gestures and the artefacts displayed within, such as paintings which confirm the historical association of powerful figures or displays of fine art. The arrangement of chairs into the horseshoe in this culturally referenced ‘theatric’, evoke a quasi-legal atmosphere which despite its imposing effects, can still be manipulated as theatre by less

scrupulous or compliant witnesses. This is because the select committee, although powerful in terms of the capacity to impute reputational shame, is less powerful in terms of legal process. The committee does not possess the clear unequivocal sanctionary powers of a legal court.

Within the informal relationships there is even greater scope to establish credibility, both of the individual chair, MP, staff or witness but also of the committee; of course, the standing of the individual participating, and even more critically chairing, and the reputation of the committee are intimately connected. The more that chairs have standing in Parliament, the more power that confers on the whole committee. When former Minister Gerald Kaufman (MP) insisted Secretary of State Tessa Jowell (MP) ‘come and ask me herself’ to defer an appearance before his committee, she went to find him in the Chamber in his customary gangway seat, leaning back ‘looking like an ancient tortoise in a muted tweed suit’. Half kneeling, to make her excuses, Kaufman acquiesced with an almost imperceptible nod. It is difficult to attribute accurately the contributions to this scenario of the (equally) famous graciousness of one participant, and the imperiousness of the other, but there is no doubt that chairs with party clout and ministerial credentials (true of a large proportion of chairs since 2010) are more likely to be treated carefully, and taken seriously, than others.

The performance of the chair reflects well or badly on the committee and vice versa. Like the Speaker of the House of Commons, the chair will be judged by how well they control time. To encourage members of the committees to attend, stay put for the whole meeting and engage, it is important to allow them to speak. As in all political work, this means tolerating their multiple purposes for speaking as MPs take part in committees for a range of reasons⁴: out of interest in a specialist topic, to scrutinise and influence (most often government), to represent issues that are important in their constituency, to feel busy and important, because the party expects them to, and/or to be visible in public to their constituents and other potential supporters (many committees sessions are filmed and all public sessions are transcribed and on the parliamentary website). The chair has to allow MPs the time to speak for any combination of these reasons and sometimes will not necessarily know which audience is uppermost in the MP’s mind. If one member gets too much air time, then others may become resentful. The amount of time consumed by the chair, for example, in asking questions, ranges hugely, from one chair reputedly taking up 45 min of an evidence session asking questions to another hardly posing any at all. The more the chair speaks, the more

⁴The reasons must be reasonably powerful as most MPs got involved in committee work during the 2010 Parliament (396/650) (Geddes, 2019, chapter 3). This is a significant proportion when you remember that those in government cannot sit on committees.

they may be noticed by the media and public but the more they may irritate their fellow committee members, particularly if they convey a party political view.

The chair, with the assistance of staff, selects witnesses. This once meant mainly choosing ‘experts’ whose specialist knowledge and experience would reflect well on the committee. You also have subtle hierarchies of knowledge that operate within Parliament as much as they do wider society affecting the assumed reputation of witnesses. Academic researchers specialising in the area concerned, and scientists and lawyers in general, are viewed as repositories of knowledge, even if in reality they have a tendency to bitterly disagree with each other and cannot all be equally wise, correct and conscientious. Within academic research, legal and scientific evidence is treated with reverence—these are the sacred bodies of knowledge of our time—while the arts and humanities are assumed to be subjective, even if this is merely an assumption and misunderstanding of subjectivity from some (including our) viewpoints.⁵ Government ministers are both treated with respect but also suspicion as the job of committees is to expose government omissions that they would rather conceal. They have a file in front of them, compiled by their department, and have to perform a complex job of pretending not to refer to it when they don’t know the answer to a question. If they wish to be evasive, then a common answer involves undermining the question, ‘that is a hypothetical question’ or ‘your premise is flawed’ or ‘I think you will find the issue is rather more nuanced than your question suggests’. Evidence is typically used as a weapon to shore up the government’s position, showcasing achievements and obscuring failures. The chair’s job is to outwit these tactics and help the committee to elicit honesty out of the minister.

In the area of choosing witnesses who are experts through experience, attitudes have changed since departmental select committees were established. The assumption that seniority necessarily brings wisdom, no longer holds as a recognition of the importance of taking account of plurality—including quieter voices—has grown. Chairs still call the heads of organisations (government departments, businesses, charities, etc.) but increasingly ask to hear from those further down and even those that government departments aim to serve, engage with in other ways or ignore. The Committees’ credibility increasingly depends on listening to new kinds of witnesses as well as innovating how they interact with people. To complement the quasi-legal evidence-taking sessions, they have roundtables, do outreach visits and even commission citizens’ assemblies.⁶

⁵We take a pragmatist view of objectivity, which asserts that moving from subjectivity to objectivity is not a position but a process of working with what Dewey called intelligent reflection (or reflective intelligence) partly by taking account of plural views, emotions and experiences but also by taking account of change (Mowles, 2015, pp. 61–65).

⁶They are even encouraged to do this by the clerk of Committees: ‘It is possible to get stuck in a rut in the approach to gathering evidence or the way of structuring a public session—members should share

The credibility of committees is also created by cross-party collaboration—a perceived contrast to what is called the party tribalism expressed in the debating chamber and political world more generally. The quality of relationships between members are central to the perceived successes of the committees’ performances through which cohesiveness should be expressed as if the committee ‘is of one mind’ in both process and outputs. Even though the membership of committees is always cross-party, and sometimes contains a range of opinion from extreme right to left ideologically, the aim is to produce reports unanimously approved by the whole committee. Chairs work closely with clerks and committee specialists to craft language in draft reports with incredible care to avoid antagonising those members who might struggle to compromise their red lines (Kelso, 2016, p. 121). When they hold public meetings, the members tend to give the appearance of agreement by keeping quiet about disagreements and working as a team to ask questions of the witness. In private they may argue, most often about the content of their reports, but this is invisible to outsiders and usually kept private by the members (unlike most supposedly private party political meetings, which are often tweeted live by discontented MPs). This *omertà* is ritually reinforced by the claim, more constitutional than practical, that disclosure of the private deliberations of a committee is a ‘contempt of the House’. This does not mean that members’ views are concealed; one told Geddes that it is through questioning that he/she was able to articulate their views, and thereby try and influence the report (Geddes, 2019, chapter 2). But conflict is reserved for the private domain.

The specific rules and conventions of rituals mean that MPs as a group appear to be in control, and can come and go without disruption to the process, while the chair and clerk must remain in position—attending to every move the committee makes, so that everything goes as smoothly if possible. However, occasional ruptures occur, such as witnesses playing into the ‘theatrical’ on their own terms, whether the questioning of Aaron Banks in which he left the ‘stage’ against the wishes of the committee, or the betrayal of antipathetic ideological differences between members that compromise the ‘of one mind’ appearance. The best example of this is the ‘Brexit’ Committee.⁷ This huge committee, with 21 members representing an extremely wide range of deeply held views about whether/how to exit the EU, were unable to reach agreements on their reports so adopted an unusual *modus operandi*. Their debates are cordial in private—their entrenched views are so well known to each other so rows are seen as pointless—but conflictual in

with staff of the committee any suggestions for innovation or change. Most committees will find it useful to reflect together from time to time on how they approach their task and how it might be done differently’ (Evans, 2017, p. 23).

⁷Its proper name, to mirror its department, is the Exiting the European Union Committee, set up in 2017 with 21 members and chaired by Hilary Benn.

public. Those advocating for Brexit without compromising on the UK sovereignty, including members of the Conservative's European Research Group, are in a minority of seven. It is important that they communicate their opposition to what they see as a clearly remain-supporting committee, which they do by putting amendments, insisting on votes and even on one occasion reportedly walking out. But this is instructive in its atypicality; it has been called the most divided committee in history, appropriately reflecting splits in the country on this most divisive issue. Since the hard Brexiteers do not feel represented by the committee (so two key ones told us), it is the credibility and plausibility of their minority group that they are interested in promoting while undermining that of the whole committee. But this committee is unusual if not exceptional. The usual pattern means that clerks' choreography can ensure that the Committees appear to agree in public even if they disagree in private. When they disagree, members use 'evidence' as a rhetorical device as they try to persuade each other of the merit of their view, making claims that the incontrovertible evidence leads to their conclusion as if 'evidence' could ever be beyond contestation. Or if that fails, then in their private discussions they get into horse trading of points in the report—'I'm not keen on x but if you could agree to y then I will be able to agree to yours'—and it is the clerk's job to remind MPs of such agreements and decisions in future meetings.

Clearly credibility is linked to status and the status of the chairs and members, and therefore the Committees, changed dramatically as soon as the rules of composition were changed 10 years ago (White, 2015; Kelso, 2016; Geddes, 2019, chapter 4). In 2009, the expenses scandal severely damaged the reputation of MPs, so in a bid to restore Parliament's credibility MPs introduced a series of measures to reform working practices (Crewe and Walker 2019). One of these was to elect select committee chairs and members, the former by the whole House and the latter by party. Bearing in mind that elections are viewed in democracies as the most important pseudo-magical process for conferring legitimacy on representatives and leaders, so the new committees in 2010 were established with an enlarged sense of legitimacy.

The committee may have greater legitimacy, but the standing of individual chairs is variable and debated through endless gossip. Margaret Hodge, as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, sets a new path of assertiveness; whether she was heroically robust in holding government to account or inappropriately aggressive in attacking senior civil servants, depends on your viewpoint. When chairs gain prominence for themselves and their committee, they may be grandstanding or influencing public debate and government policy, or all of the above. Whether they take the rest of their committee with them is revealed by levels of attendance,⁸ participation and discretion by the members. Presence or absence,

⁸Geddes reports that the average attendance rate for committee members in the 2010 Parliament was 65.9% (Geddes, 2019, chapter 3).

co-operation or resistance in response to a chair's leadership are all expressed through the live bodies of the participants and we will argue that the activity of the select committee is always imbued with emotion although this may remain unrecognised. The following section explores the significance of the embodied emotional world of select committees and the centrality of conflict management.

4. Managing emotion and bodies in political work

In political work, protagonists react both as emotional individual actors but also within social webs of interdependency (Elias, 1991). Herein lies the movement of political life:

... we are not just located in the world symbolically; nor do we experience reality purely through the text: instead, we are located in relations that transform the natural and social worlds in which we live. (Burkitt, 1999, p. 2)

If we understand emotion as essentially a relational response to others and the natural world, we can then move away from individualistic notions of emotion as purely private internal states, where cognition is seen as separate and rational. Emotion disconnected from cognition can be seen as somehow irrational, at best to be treated suspiciously and at worst unwanted or irrelevant. When one of us asked whether emotion features in the life of select committees a former chair replied, 'It doesn't. Not relevant.' But how could political work be possible without emotion? We suggest that nuanced and complex emotional experiences are always present and an integral (rather than independent) quality of our ongoing cognitive appraisal of the relational worlds we inhabit. If the latest research on emotions in organisations is taken seriously, then our understanding of committees, and committees' own conceptualisations of the work they are doing, need updating.

Emotion can be thought of as a voluntary compulsion, both unavoidable but potentially and necessarily performative. Staff experienced a tiring relentless pressure to perform required emotions ('If you don't smile when everybody's smiling, there's a problem.'—clerk) or not ('When to speak, when to not to. When to stop admiring.'—clerk). These types of comments showed a quality of emotional labour involved in select committee work. Following Hochschild (2012), emotional labour constitutes the required emotional performance in the employment situation. Emotional work is the ongoing management of one's own and others affectual states. Both are under pressure in committee work. In particular, feelings of potential shame and humiliation frequently arise through the vigilance around mistakes, blunders and various faux pas which through the emergent politics may also be constructed to advantage, disadvantage, scapegoat or displace various

positionings. There is, therefore, a perpetual excited feeling of insecurity which evokes a hyper vigilance about one's own and others status movements within the wider community. There is a 'fear of looking like a dick', as one participant put it, while another explained how this is a normative pattern: 'Anyone that's comfortable here? There's something wrong with them.' To survive the emotional intensity of these public dilemmas, people look outside of the limelight to private trusted relationships to affirm their identities and process difficult experiences in the 'backroom' ('you have to make sense of what's going on to survive emotionally').

The chair along with the other members are also under continual psychological pressure to perform a politically representative competency which given the plurality and complexity of interests in their domain, places them potentially in numerous ongoing double binds. As stated previously, the work requires a continual vigilance around ever shifting political positions and the vigilance required means that during a session the chair is the only person who cannot do anything other than focus on their job—looking and listening to the witnesses, deciding when to move on, telling off those who misbehave, etc. Everyone else can look down (at iPhone/iPad) or read and in the case of committee members, even leave the room. But the chair has to remain completely focused on the interaction that is going on. To her or his left is the clerk (and possibly committee specialist), who has to remain silent during the session—only communicating with gestures or notes. As one clerk told Mark Geddes, while other members dip in and out 'it's only the chair who is interested in everything we do' (Geddes, 2019, chapter 4).

Emotions require bodies to experience and 'perform' them. It is extremely rare in the literature for scholars to take bodily communication seriously. Schonhardt-Bailey is a rare exception in arguing that facial expressions showing anger and contempt are more common in exchanges between politicians than between politicians (acting as committee members) and others in society (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2017). We found that all participants were able to describe diverse ways in which they used bodily communication to affect the committee situation *in vivo*. The late Quentin Hogg reputedly held back a proposal by St. John Stevas (that the Lord Chancellor's Department should be scrutinised by a departmental select committee) with a single and pointed cough.

There is an emergent quality of what may be required in the committee situation in which participants signal to each other their expectations or attitude to the process. This might be generalisable to all meeting situations, particularly those which express formal hierarchy such as boards and committees. However, with its plurality of audiences and quasi-legal quality, the select committee evokes a particularly heightened sense of the above. It is not only through policy and procedure that the committee disciplines itself but also through the display of bodily communication which conveys affect. ('The clerk's got that face on so I

think I'll shut up now because I'm wrong.')

The impression management required of the team appears to operate in a variety of complex ways but a central theme of communicative bodily cooperation emerges in a disciplinary way.

So, the select committee in action amounts to an embodied affectual display of impression management in which the poker face, the smirk, the 'look', the frown, the appearance of engagement or disengagement, all play their part in which the chair is under particular pressure to be constantly monitoring the emergent situation. Here, we find affect is not simply felt but performed for political purposes as part of the repertoire of impression management. This politics of affect communicates itself both consciously as performative and disciplinary as well as unconsciously in the sense that members and staff may betray a plurality of motivations and attitudinal responses without meaning to. This impression management of select committees is not only an individual affair but also a collective, emotionally responsive achievement; an achievement gained in response to a plurality of audiences. The plurality of these audiences is evoked in a number of ways. There are the cameras which record and evoke the imaginary audience (imaginary in the sense that they are not physically present). Then there is the audience of the various political parties, professional alliances, constituents, journalists and even posterity as well as the internal audience of one's self to one's self.

The multiplicity of goals, motives and pressures means that conflict management is an inevitable aspect of the work of the select committee which both has to achieve cross party cohesiveness but also to robustly engage with pressing social issues in a productive way. The chair has to be a consummate manager of conflict and be continually vigilant as to the emergence of problematic differences, disciplining members during and between meetings as required. When members behave badly—grandstanding, speaking for too long, giving speeches rather than asking questions, leaking reports to the press, turning up late or leaving early without giving notice, demanding to ask a question without notice, asking someone else's question, claiming attention at the cost of other members and so on—then they risk being reprimanded by the chair or, more unusually, the clerk. Conversely if they feel badly treated or ignored, then they might withdraw in some way or drift off and stop attending the committee. If it is their own party, the chair tends to discipline directly and if another party then they might ask one of their allies to do it, e.g. you might have asked Jeremy Corbyn (Leader of the UK's Labour Party) to have a quiet word with his close colleague John McDonnell in the days when they were both backbench MPs. So, these differences may be managed through the alliances of the individuals involved. 'If I want to influence John, then I'll persuade Mary because she's close to John.' As chief consigliere, the clerk also has the burden of chivvying lazy, cowardly or inattentive chairs to shoulder the burden of these responsibilities. And occasionally clerks will join the disciplining process, passing notes to MPs who have been talking for

too long, for example; one had pieces of paper with the word 'TIME' written on them ready to pass to members who were talking at length.

Tensions around difference may emerge in the power relations between clerks and chairs where power may shift from, 'You do what they tell you' (clerk about chair) to 'you can't travel Business Class because the rules don't allow it' (clerk to chair). In practice, whether about disputing PQs, amendments or committee business, MPs rarely have time to do more than either insist or trust, and the key for staff is earning the latter. Politicians lead pressured lives and take it out on those who are both close to them and are expected to be discreet, especially when officials seek to constrain them. Although it is the job of clerks to police the rules, and the committee specialists to make sure findings are substantiated by evidence, some MPs resent this. This has come out into the open with various reports into bullying in the House of Commons (Cox, 2018; White, 2019) and media reports alleging abuse by committee chair and members, respectively, Keith Vaz, Paul Farrelly and Mark Pritchard.⁹

The chair has to remember that the clerk is not a personal 'servant' but works for the whole committee. Sometimes this distinction can become lost and high handed and hubristic behaviours emerge particularly when chairs may be new to their role or in a well-established habit of self-importance. We heard a story regarding one autocratic chair hurling a plate of sandwiches over his solicitous clerk in the mistaken belief that they contained ingredients it was well known he could not eat. There were also many stories, historical and more recent, of chairs' sense of entitlement trumping sensitivity to the work/life balances of their staff, keeping them late, calling them at all hours, over weekends and during holidays. It is easy to see how allegations of bullying might arise through the complex and pressing adrenaline-charged prerogatives of political life not simply between chairs and their clerks, but between all members of staff. Many chairs and officials enjoy extremely cordial relationships most of the time; one clerk's favourite feedback remains Sir Gerald Kaufman's 'you're not my least favourite official' and another chair referred to his clerk as 'my spare brain'.¹⁰ However, MPs can rarely be classed as 'friends' and clerks generally remain cautious: 'politicians seem to see the world differently from normal people' said one, 'they will throw you under the bus' if their priorities require shifting blame onto officials when something goes wrong or fails to hit the mark.

The above constitutes the basis of a psycho-sociological account of the interactive work of the select committee. It draws attention to issues prevalent in the

⁹Accessed at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45031609> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43338305> on 19 July 2019.

¹⁰See the House of Commons Twitter account, 2 July 2019, "@CharlesWalkerMP, who chairs @CommonsProcCom, and clerk, Martyn Atkins sat down with us to explain why #ErskineMay is so important. It's now freely available online for the first time.'

conversations with the researchers but glossed over or masked in much of the available literature, which emphasises the apparent neutrality of the staff and idealises the tasks of members and chairs without exploration of how these are in practice achieved.

5. Reflections on managing committees

Our focus is on how chairs work and what they do—the political work of committees—rather than an evaluation of results or impact, on the grounds that value is found in the means as much as the ends (Dewey, 1921, pp. 223–237). This article offers an interdisciplinary, psycho-sociological and anthropological account of the interactive work of the chairs of select committee through what we have called collaborative ethnography. Chairs have been of particular interest in this study, partly because they have been neglected in the literature, but can only be researched through their relationships with others if you take a psycho-social approach to understanding political work. We have argued that the chair embodies the Committee in public and mediates between all those involved; like anthropologists, their job is to walk between friends and enemies, reforming alliances, healing divisions and negotiating the tensions between difference and contradiction. This performance of cohesiveness is achieved *in vivo*, therefore, through an intensity of bodily communication within the ‘theatrical context’ of specific settings which exude an historical and cultural gravitas. In effect, the committee disciplines itself in complex ways to achieve the appearance of a cross party working cohesiveness and to produce reports and question witnesses while managing the differences, needs and conflicts of the participants involved.

We have suggested that committees are constrained by the architecture of the rooms in which they meet and by the rules and procedure governing the ritualised choreography of meetings. Breaches will be punished by the chair under the scholarly guidance of the clerk and her/his team. All those involved in the work of the committee, experience a pressure to establish credibility for themselves as individuals but also for the wider group. It is the chair, whose reputation is most closely and visibly bound up with that of the committee so this pressure entails hyper-vigilance both of him/her and of others. The credibility and plausibility of the committee is constructed through a variety of performative rituals, artefacts and settings with the aim that they will be taken seriously by the wider parliamentary community and the general public. The rare explicit ruptures to this process—with witnesses refusing to give evidence, members or witnesses walking out, or expressing excessive aggression—can cause ripples of anxiety expressed through gossip for years.

Constraints are only part of the process of interaction between chairs and others involved in committee work. The room for manoeuvre is revealed by variability—

different chairs, clerks, committee specialists and others create different possibilities, varying the way they establish credibility, manage emotions and communicate with others through words, silence, bodily movements or facial expressions. The personality of the chair contributes to this performance of plausibility and the unique personal attributes showcased by the chair may become somewhat amplified. This extends to members too. The amplification of members' personality is the performatory vehicle through which others may identify and ultimately support and vote for their respective causes and interests. This amplification of persona as political tool is double edged. Committee members must be memorable and convincingly 'authentic' in their public gestures as if their personalities have the quality of being amplified through a loud speaker. As one member put it: 'You can be treated as both the most important person in the room and absolutely nobody at the same time.' There thus arises a potential inherent tension between the needs of the member for their own particular status and political requirements and the needs of the committee embodied through the chair. If the former remain too paramount, then the much-dreaded collapse into hubris may occur. Tensions may arise if the chair's party political persuasions or political positioning needs conflict with the tasks of the committee. It is in both the chair's interests and the interests of the committee that both endeavour to make the other 'look good'.

The challenge remains as to how more reflexive and explorative conversations might be established in committees. Generally, people working in organisations struggle with how to attend the ongoing co-creation of the futures of their projects, plans, policies and relationships in the context of their wider picture, pressures and constraints. The House of Commons select committees are no exception. People prefer instead to focus upon ideal behaviours or the achievement of idealised futures. In effect, this creates a shift of focus from the 'is' of life to the 'ought'. We ought to be doing this or that distracts us from what we are actually doing. So, ongoing reflexivity concerning the relationship between chair, members, clerks, committee specialists and other staff is required for effective committee functioning.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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