

Written evidence from the Better Government Initiative to the Liaison Committee's inquiry to follow up the recommendations made in its 2012 report into Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers

1. The Better Government Initiative is an informal body made up of people with practical experience in government at a very senior level who have no links to particular political parties (www.bettergovernmentinitiative.co.uk).
2. We greatly welcome the Liaison Committee's inquiry into action on its earlier recommendations on Select Committee effectiveness. Effective Parliamentary scrutiny is an essential component of good government, but too often constructive proposals are allowed to wither on the vine because of the unresponsiveness of Governments. It is encouraging that the Liaison Committee wants to see that its proposals are followed through.
3. We are not in a position to monitor all Select Committees, but our impression is that they have become more effective in carrying out their scrutiny role in recent years. We think there is still scope, however, for each Select Committee to look more closely at the inputs, outputs and value for money achieved across the whole of a relevant Department as well as at specific policy and delivery matters. For this purpose they should be able to call Permanent Secretaries to give evidence.
4. Since the Liaison Committee reported on Select Committee Effectiveness our main focus has been on the work of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (PCRC) on standards for legislation. We see this as a top priority issue for both the Executive and Parliament given the poor quality of some Bills presented to Parliament in recent years under successive Governments. The Lobbying Bill is just the latest example of Bills drawn up hastily, without proper consultation and not properly thought through before they reach Parliament.
5. We therefore strongly support the PCRC Report on Legislative Standards - in particular its recommendations for a Code of Legislative Standards, agreed between Government and Parliament, and a House Legislative Standards Committee to monitor their application – and were very disappointed when the Government summarily rejected both proposals: "It is the responsibility of government to bring forward legislation of a high standard" (Andrew Lansley).
6. The Government argued that improvements to Explanatory Notes would be sufficient to achieve improved standards of legislation, that a Code was not required, and that therefore a Legislative Standards Committee was not necessary. We reject these arguments. While improvements to Explanatory Notes would be welcome they are not a substitute for a clear and agreed statement of standards for all legislation. And Parliament, not just the Government, has an obvious interest in monitoring standards of legislation. The work of the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee demonstrates that such matters can be dealt with successfully on a non-partisan basis
7. We hope that the Liaison Committee and the PCRC will continue to press the Government hard both on agreeing a Code of Legislative Standards on the lines recommended by the PCRC and on the establishment of a Legislative Standards Committee. We see this as vital both for good government and for Parliament's constitutional duty to hold the Executive to account.