

UNIT 2: Effectiveness of Committees

Learning Objectives

What makes an effective parliamentary committee?

After studying this unit you should:

- Be able to recognize the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of parliamentary committees;
- Be able to appreciate the multiparty nature of committees and the importance of consensus building;
- Know the role of Parliamentary staff and their contribution to the effectiveness of committees;
- Understand the importance of meeting the basic information needs of committees for effectiveness.

Introduction

Unit 2 examines factors that contribute to the effectiveness of parliamentary committees. This unit highlights the need for consensus building and non-partisanship in committee work, the importance of diversity in representation, and how basic information needs of committees can be met. The unit also looks at the role of committee staff and the competencies required for core staff.

The effectiveness of a parliamentary committee depends on a number of factors, these include:

- A clear mandate, clear roles and responsibilities of the committee (see example in unit 1 box 1.5);
- The size of the committee – if a committee is too large or too small it renders it ineffective; large committees become unwieldy and small numbers limit the quality of ideas needed for effective work. Ogle (2004) cites the French National Assembly as an example of a Parliament with large committees 72 to 144

- members making it comparatively ineffective among European parliamentary committees;
- The skills of the chairperson of the committee in managing activities and meetings of the committee. – This can have a tremendous impact on committee output; Again according to Ogle (2004) the following are qualities of an effective committee leader: Competence; flexibility and adaptability; Firmness and Decisiveness; Honesty and Dependability; Openness; Fairness; Tolerance; Patience; Humility and Stamina;
 - The quality of support staff and resources available to the committee.– When well resourced with the requisite skilled personnel, with access to relevant and accurate analysis and information, and with adequate logistical support, committees can perform very well;
 - Consensus building – the multiparty nature of parliaments often translates into multiparty committees, effective consensus building techniques and a non-partisan approach to committee work therefore becomes critical in promoting committee effectiveness.

Committee mandate and rules of operation

The rules and procedures that govern the operation of parliamentary committees are often similar to those used for the entire house. However, committees often have the advantage of setting up some rules and regulations that improve debates and increase the opportunity for deliberative activities.

The real power of a parliamentary committee can vary from period to period. In the 1950s and 1960s for example, according to Ownes and Loomis (2006), the real power in the US House of Representatives did not rest with the Chamber as a whole or with the majority party but with standing committees and their chairpersons. This is because power was decentralized, individual committees had formal power over specific subject matter, committees developed their own norms and orientation, legislative resources grew in that period and seniority became entrenched in appointing committee

chairpersons. This, however, they believe has changed today; parliamentary committees in Congress do not have as much influence as before though they remain strong, they indicate that since the 1980's, the Congress has relied increasingly on stronger parties to organize its activities.

Number of committees, Size and Composition

The number, the size and the composition of parliamentary committees vary from country to country. Guidelines for setting up committees are often well documented in the standing orders or rules that govern that parliament. The size of the entire parliament often has little bearing on the number of committees that will be set up. For example, Grenada, an island in the Caribbean with a population of 89,703, has a House of Representatives made up of only 15 members with several committees including a Committee of Selection, Standing Orders Committee, House Committee, Committee on Privileges and Public Accounts Committee among others.

The sizes of parliamentary committees also vary greatly. For example, the British House of Commons is a 646 Member-Parliament and has parliamentary committees with varying membership sizes. The Public Accounts Committee is made up of 16 Members, while the Finance and Service Committee has only eleven members. Also the current 16th electoral term of the German Bundestag has 614 Members of Parliament and its budget committee is made up of 41 members.

While there are no strict rules on how parliamentary committees are composed, the common practice is to have representation on committees similar to the party representation in the parliament itself. In Ghana's parliament this strictly follows a formula based on the proportions of majority and minority representation in the House, is the formula is developed at the beginning of every Parliament. This is then used in determining the proportion of party representation and the composition of committees.

The Chairperson of a Committee

The Committee Chairperson plays a key role in the effectiveness of the Committee. The most important personality in the committee is said to be the chairperson who is usually responsible for convening and managing the committee. The chairperson:

- Presides over committee meetings, ruling on procedural and relevance issues, such as the relevance of questions or amendments to that committee's mandate;
- Deals with disorder among members or by the public where the latter are admitted to hearings;
- Answers oral questions in the House on behalf of the committee;
- Signs committee reports and requests the appearance of witnesses or the production of papers on behalf of the committee;
- Controls the hearing of evidence and directs the proceedings;
- Works behind the scenes with the government and other members of the committee on the progress of important legislation; and
- Maintains open communication channels with all committee members.

The role of the committee chairperson as described by the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, for example, is as follows:

- maintaining order and decorum during meetings
- deciding questions of procedure, and
- generally ensuring that the committee work proceeds smoothly in conjunction with the committee's business plan. See Box 2.1 for more information.

As indicated earlier, committee chairperson must have qualities that will enhance their effectiveness: Ogle's qualities of good leadership include:

1. **Competence** – Demonstrate understanding of parliamentary process, have a solid working relationship with members and key staff and know the content of key matters assigned to the committee;

Flexibility and Adaptability – Learn to adapt to new conditions when circumstances change;

Firmness and Decisiveness – Stand firm when decisions are made;

Honesty and Dependability – Be honest and forthright with committee members, staff and the media;

Openness – Build strong communication links;

Fairness – Treat committee members fairly;

Tolerance – Understand and accept that members will not support committee leadership all the time;

Patience – Recognize times when it is necessary to be patient;

Humility – Accept responsibility for mistakes; and

Stamina – Project high energy level however long it may take to address matters assigned to the committee.

Box 2.1
British Columbia Legislative Assembly

“Committee Chair is responsible for maintaining order and decorum during meetings, deciding questions of procedure, and generally ensuring that the committee work proceeds smoothly in conjunction with the committee's business plan. The key responsibilities of the chairperson include:

- To rule on all procedural matters;
- To call committee meetings, subject to authorization of the committee;
- To sign committee reports and present them to the House;
- To direct the administration of the committee by the Clerk to the Committee.

Source: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/cmt/5-2.htm>

Appointment of Committee Chairpersons

Parliamentary systems differ in the way they appoint their committee chairpersons. Either the committee of selection appoints, or the speaker appoints, or members of the committee themselves elect their own chairperson. For example in the 1812 *Manual of Parliamentary Practice* by Thomas Jefferson, it is mentioned that parliamentary committees had the right to elect the chairperson or to allow the first person on the committee list to be the chairperson of the committee, in Finland each committee elects its own chairperson, Members of the European parliament elect their chairpersons. See Box 2.2

Box 2.2
The Chairperson and the European Parliament

A Chairperson is elected by the Members of European Parliament (MEPs) on their Committee for a two and half year term. A good Chair of a committee must play several roles. They must draw up the agenda, preside over meetings and help prepare reports of the committee. They also speak for the committee in the monthly Strasbourg Plenary session and in regular meetings with other Committee Chairs. They also have frequent contact with the Council presidency and the Commission services.

Source: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/public/story_page/008-2780-036-02-06-901-20070206STO02779-2007-05-02-2007/default_en.htm

Staff Support for Effective Parliamentary Committees

Parliamentary committees are supported by officers who are often assigned by the Clerk of the parliament to serve the committee. Their core function is related to procedural issues, but in practice and depending on the part of the globe the clerk works, their role may extend well beyond this. Committee staff ensure that committees perform their role taking evidence from witnesses, scrutinizing legislation and conducting inquiries.

In addition to basic administrative and clerical support that committees require, there is also the need for skills of specialized officers. Ideally these officers should be graduates of tertiary institutions and should include professional librarians, researchers and subject specialist who will carry out research and analysis and provide information to Members to meet the information needs of the committees.

Subject specialists who work closely with the staff of committees provide information and briefing material for members of the committee. These are often part of a pool of experts in the research and information provision department. The specialist knowledge makes it possible for in-depth analysis and provision of information on a specific subject matter to meet the needs of the committee. They liaise with committee clerks in responding to requests from Members of Parliament and committees, and help prepare briefing papers on subjects of public and parliamentary concern.

Meeting committees' information needs

By the very nature of the work of parliamentary committees, access to up-to-date, relevant, factual and non-partisan information is essential. Since committees are often expected to look in-depth at issues, their demand for the requisite information is very high. The standing orders often give parliamentary committees the opportunity to call witnesses and to have access to documents from routine information on procedures and processes to in-depth analysis on very technical matters with which members may not

necessarily be very familiar. The support staff of committees play a very critical role in ensuring that these objectives are met.

In providing information to meet the needs of MPs, committee support staff should place emphasis on presenting unbiased factual, accurate, up-to-date information. The information must also be provided at the right time and in a format that is easy to understand and use. It is also important to promote the core values of quality, and integrity when providing research support to parliaments. It is absolutely necessary to communicate clearly the institutional mandate and services to all as often as necessary.

- Support to parliament must be non-partisan. A perception of the institution leaning towards any political group can gravely affect the credibility of research work. .
- Formal communication channels must be complemented with continued dialogue, and informal face-to-face discussions. This is necessary to avoid ambiguity and prevent misconception on roles and mandate.

Summary

A clear mandate, the composition, skills of the chairperson, qualification of staff, access to information and the non-partisan nature of a committee work are critical factors in promoting committee effectiveness. The number, size and composition of committees vary from Parliament to Parliament but the mandate of each of these committees is clearly defined in the standing orders of the Parliament. While parliament may differ in the way they appoint chairpersons for committees, it is undeniable that committee chairpersons play a key role in the effectiveness of the committee; chairpersons must therefore have good leadership skills. Subject specialist, librarians and committee clerks must support procedural and administrative needs of a committee as well as provide factual up-to-date analysis on technical matters to promote committee effectiveness.

Unit 2 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. What accounts for the effectiveness of parliamentary committees?
2. How important is consensus building to a parliamentary committee's work?
3. What are the independent sources of information for effective committee functioning?
4. Why do most parliamentary committees reflect the multi-party make-up of a parliament?

Relevant Internet Resources

UNDP, Legislative Committee System [Online] Available at:

<http://www.undp.org/governance/docs/Parl-Pub-legiscomm.pdf> Legislative Accessed February 2007

Legislative Assembly of British Columbia (2007) About the Committee System [Online]

Available at: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/cmt/5-2.htm>. Accessed February 2007

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Jefferson T. (1812) *A Manual Of Parliamentary Practice: For The Use Of The Senate Of The United States*. [Online]. [Available at: <http://www.constitution.org/tj/tj-mpp.htm> [Accessed January 2007]

Ogle, D. B. (2004) *National Parliament-Republic of Timor-Leste: Manual for Parliamentary Committee*. The United Nations Development Programmed. New York.

Owens, J E. and Loomis B. A. (2006) Qualified Exceptionalism: The US congress in comparative perspective. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*. Vol., 12. No 3 & 4 pp. 258 – 290.

Additional Reading

The Way Forward - Lessons from Ghana's Parliamentary Committees Available at:

<http://www.parlcent.ca/africa/papers/Publication%20Elmina%20Wkshp%202004.pdf> Accessed January 2007

Pak-Kwan, Chua (2003) Chairmanship of parliamentary committees in selected areas

[Online] Available at

<http://www.bibliotheque.assnat.qc.ca/01/mono/2004/04/768683.pdf>

Accessed March 2007.