

HEARING DIFFERENT VOICES: THE DIVERSITY OF COMMITTEE WITNESSES

Research at the University of Lincoln has changed the way that committee witnesses in the Scottish Parliament are selected, helping to address the underrepresentation of women giving evidence at Holyrood, as well as providing insights for improving witness diversity for legislatures worldwide.

University of Lincoln research has:

- Identified the characteristics of 8,000 witnesses who provided oral evidence to the Scottish Parliament and demonstrated the potential benefits for parliaments in accessing a greater diversity of witnesses for committees.
- Led the Scottish Parliament to develop an action plan for increasing witness diversity, produce 'Witness Diversity Committee Clerk Guidance', and to collate diversity figures on an annual basis.
- Contributed to an increase of the proportion of Scottish Parliament witnesses who were women from 38% in 2016-17 to 43% in 2019-20.



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For legislatures to be—and appear to be—effective, democratic, legitimate, and representative, they must hear from people from all parts of society. But despite improvements in recent years, male witnesses remain overrepresented in evidence to parliamentary committees.

Research from the University of Lincoln has helped legislatures improve the diversity of their witnesses. Professor Hugh Bochel worked with the Scottish Parliament to analyse the demographic characteristics of committee witnesses, interview key decision-makers, and advise on benefits of greater diversity of witnesses and proposing ways to achieve and monitor this diversity. Through this work he helped Holyrood change the way it operates and steadily increase the proportion of female witnesses.

At a time of decreasing trust in institutions of representative democracy, it is vital for legislatures to ensure they represent citizens across all parts of society, Lincoln research is showing the way to improve the diversity of committee witnesses in parliaments across the globe.

WITNESS DIVERSITY

In the **Scottish Parliament** improving witness diversity reflects the institution's founding principles of power-sharing, accountability, openness, participation and equal opportunities. Despite this, men made up three-fifths of total witnesses to Holyrood committees. While the Bochel recommendations are still being implemented, there has already been a steady increase in the proportion of women giving evidence, from 38% to 43%.

This research has broad relevance for legislatures across the world, demonstrating that listening to a wide range of voices can provide additional benefits for democracy: improving scrutiny through a variety of perspectives; enhancing participation and potentially reducing socio-economic exclusion in the process.

IMPACT ON POLICY

Lincoln researchers have directly advised the Scottish Parliament, through Professor Bochel's appointment as an Academic Fellow of the Scottish Parliament in 2017, during which he co-authored the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefing paper *Committee Witnesses: Gender and Representation* (2018). This led to new guidance on witness diversity produced for committee clerks and external organisations, directly leading to an increase in the proportion of women giving evidence to Holyrood committees. Lincoln research has also been cited in the House of Commons Liaison Committee report *Witness Gender Diversity* (2018) in which the Committee stressed the importance of "ensuring the expertise, experience and diversity of our witnesses". In addition, the Lincoln research has been cited in the OECD report *Gender Equality in Canada* (2018) which identified its recommendations as something from which the Parliament of Canada could learn.

EXAMPLES OF IMPACT

The impact of Professor Bochel's research can be seen beyond Holyrood, most notably in the UK Parliament and US House of Representatives.

In Westminster, Professor Bochel's work has been cited by the **House of Commons Liaison Committee**—the 'super committee' comprising all select committee chairs—which has agreed an aim that at least 40 per cent of 'discretionary' witnesses (not ministers or heads of key organisations) should be female, with the latest figures showing an increase from 32% to 39%. The House of Commons has also published gender data on public bill committee witnesses in the 2017-19 Sessional Returns for the first time, which showed that only 28% of witnesses were female.

In the US, Professor Bochel's research and his work with the **Congressional Hispanic Caucus** (leading a Tri-Caucus initiative also involving the Congressional Black Caucus and Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus) has led to a change of House rules to track (and improve) witness diversity from July 2021.