



CPPS Fact Sheet: Parliament Select Committees (PSC)

The CPPS is pleased to bring you its 'CPPS Policy Fact Sheet' on Parliament Select Committees (PSCs). In this fact sheet we will review the idea, the membership and functionality of these committees, as well as their independence, and best practices from around the world.

DEFINITION

A Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) is a committee made up of a small number of parliamentary members that are appointed to deal with a particular issue or area of issues. PSCs originate in the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy. Thus PSCs exist in the British parliament, but also in other parliaments based on the Westminster model, such as the parliaments of Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia. In the UK for example, PSCs have been in place since 1980 and they cover all the main departments of state, ensuring a check and balance measure in place for the practices of these departments. PSCs determine their own subjects of inquiry, and have the power to request and demand written evidence or call people to testify at hearings in Parliament. Their findings are published and may be debated in Parliament.

Members

Committees can be appointed from the Lower House of the parliament or the higher one; they can be drawn from the same House, or have members from both the Houses, making them a Joint Committee. These Parliament Select Committees report back to the Parliament, and not the Prime Minister. They are made of members from all major parties represented in parliament. Members are chosen for each select committee based not on their party, but on their expertise on the area that the committee is looking into.

Functions

The PSCs formed from the Lower House usually are responsible for issues pertaining the overseeing of the work of government departments and agencies, whereas PSCs formed from the Higher House usually look at more general issues, for example the constitution, or the economy. The reason PSCs are in place is to investigate various aspects of public policy and society. Thus part of their work is to call and question witnesses with a certain expertise on the issue of an inquiry, and produce their findings in reports. Select Committees are an important check on the government and their investigations can trigger major reform. Select committees are formed in order to look at one specific issue, thus making them very specific to one area of public policy.

Independence

In the Malaysian parliament, there is one selection committee, which consists of the President of the Senate/Speaker as the Chairman of the committee, and six council members that are elected by the Council. The Selection committee chooses the members of all PSCs, and does not have the power to summon anyone to be present before it or to request for the issuing of letters except if given the power to do so by the Council. Thus, the Council controls the Select Committee, limiting its powers. In addition to this selection committee, there are four more select committees in the Malaysian Parliament. The *Committee of Public Accounts*, responsible for reviewing the government's spending, the *Rules Committee Meeting*, which is responsible for considering regulations and reporting back to the Council on issues that the Council asked the committee to consider, the *House Committee*, which is an 'advisor' to the head of the Parliament on matters relating to the comfort, facilities, services and pleasure of the Council's members, and the *Committee of Privileges*, which considers any matters given to them and then issues a statement to the Council. On 15th August 2011 the Prime Minister announced the setting up of a PSC to investigate the possibility of free and fair elections. However, he then commented that the next general elections could be held at any time, thus dissolving parliament and the PSC.

With the exception of the Committee of Privileges and the Public Accounts Committee, the rest of PSCs are limited in terms of calling people to be questioned in front of them, or issuing reports, letters and statements to the Council. The power of these committees is therefore limited, and there is not a channel in place for them to express and establish their findings. Furthermore, these committees do not have the liberty to choose the issues they want to investigate within the area they should be covering. Instead, the issues are given to them by the Council. And finally, the members of these committees are appointed by the selection committee, and their chairmen are appointed and not elected within, thus limiting further their impact.

Best Practices from Around the World

- Select Committees are allowed to scrutinize the departments of state and their work. They are allowed to call people in to stand before the committee, and question various things that are going on. In fact, the major advantage of a select committee is its power to compel anyone to stand in front of it and be questioned.
- The committee itself chooses its chair. Some committees have chairs from opposition parties and there is a principle that committees should work in a non-party political manner.
- There are many committees within one parliament, with very distinct and specific tasks –one for shadowing and scrutinizing each department of state, and many others for various miscellaneous matters.

Recommendations

- Select committees need to be made a norm in Malaysian Parliament, and established to oversee various issues.
- More independence should be given in order to make them effective –they need to be able to scrutinize and call anyone in for questioning
- Members in these committees should be elected/appointed from various parties, and according to their expertise. The appointment of members in PSCs should be made by the Committee of Selection, which should listen to the recommendations of the various parties in order to make informed appointments.
- The chairs of such committees should be decided from the committee members and not appointed from outside. Their appointments should depend on their expertise in the area that the committee is looking in, and not on their position in Parliament as a whole.