

The Democratic Audit of the UK: Origins, Approach, Findings and Impact

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Paper for presentation at the workshop 'Democratic Audits in Comparative Perspective: Approaches, Results, Impact', University of Leiden, 18-19 January 2013.



Origins, development and outputs of the UK Audit

Origins

The UK Democratic Audit was established in 1991 following the decision of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) to commission a major study of the state of UK democracy. JRCT's initiative arose from its concern about the impact of the Thatcher governments on core democratic institutions in the UK, particularly in light of the absence of a written constitution. A novel idea emerged from this commissioning process about how to enhance the scope for a study of democracy to impact on UK political debate. Public sector reform under the Conservatives, with its emphasis on free-market principles, private sector models and customer-responsiveness, had given rise to a culture of auditing public services, particularly in relation to the '3es' of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Widespread concerns had already been voiced from opposition parties, trade unions, academics and others about the impact of this policy agenda on notions of citizenship and democratic accountability, but to little avail. It was recognised, therefore, that a conventional academic study of 'democracy' was unlikely to make any impact on a policy agenda dominated by a quite different discourse. During this process, the possibility was raised of adopting some of the language and approaches associated with the government's approach to public policy, but embedding these within an academically robust and defensible conception of representative democracy. Thus, the notion of a 'democratic audit' was born.

Development

In the period since 1991, the Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom (DA-UK) has developed, applied and refined a sophisticated framework for assessing the quality of democracy. As a result of this process, DA-UK produced four major studies of the state of British democracy, most recently in 2012, and worked closely with International IDEA to re-work the auditing framework so that it can be applied to any country in the world. JRCT has remained the primary funder of DA-UK's work throughout, although funding levels have fluctuated and other funding sources have been accessed, usually for projects on specific aspects of UK democracy rather than to support the completion of full audits of the democratic system. Despite the volume of its output, the organisation has always been very small, often comprising of just the Director and one or two part-time employees. To date, the organisation has had two Directors: Stuart Weir (1992-2008) and Stuart Wilks-Heeg (2009-12). Although never conceived as a purely academic project, DA-UK has always had a university base, initially at the University of Essex (1992-2008), then the University of Liverpool (2009-12) and will shortly move to the London School of Economics.

Principal research outputs

There have been four main categories of DA-UK research output over the past 20 years and it will be helpful to consider the distinctions between these later on when evaluating the impact of the organisation's work. First, there are the four periodic Audits, each of which has been quite different in character. The first two DA-UK Audits, which in combination cover the areas now contained in the IDEA framework, were both published as relatively mainstream academic texts. The third 'big book' Audit was released by a specialist politics publisher and was consciously aimed at a less academic

audience. The most recent Audit has been published exclusively on-line. A second, and closely related, set of outputs, comprising mainly academic books and journal articles, has reported on the derivation of the Audit framework, summarised Audit findings or provided overviews of developments in UK democracy. A third strand of work comprises the 60 plus research reports produced by DA-UK to date on issues ranging from Quangos to electoral reform and corporate power. These are very much stand-alone pieces of work and the extent to which they make direct reference to the Audit framework varies enormously. In the main, the topics addressed by these reports concern key contemporary debates about democracy in UK. The final category of outputs consists of a large number of written evidence submissions to parliamentary select committees and other official inquiries. These submissions draw on DA-UK's research for the periodic audits, other academic outputs and stand-alone research reports, but also involve additional research in many cases. While we do not have full records of such work prior to 2009, there were 15 such DA-UK evidence submissions from 2009-12 alone.

Audit framework and methods

As noted above, the Democratic Audit of the UK was conceived as a kind of 'health check' on the state of the country's democracy. In contrast to the work of Freedom House and other organisations which assess the health of democracy globally using a relatively minimal definition of democratic requirements, DA-UK sought to develop a framework which enabled a comprehensive and systematic assessment of the UK's political life against key democratic principles. In doing so, a conscious choice was made to go beyond the dominant forms of democracy assessment which were based on criteria which demanded simple 'yes/no' answers. In rejecting such binary approaches, DA-UK took the view that democratic values and principles are realised to varying degrees by the contrasting institutional arrangement which exist in different countries or in the same countries at different points in times. A key purpose was to ask whether the UK was becoming more or less democratic and to identify what needed to be done to broaden and deepen democratic governance. A view was also taken that audits should be carried out by citizens of the country being audited, not by outsiders (although the provision of external advice on the methodology may often be appropriate),

Core principles

From this starting position, the DA-UK assessment methodology was developed by David Beetham (1994a), beginning from his identification of two basic principles at the core of representative democracy. The first is the notion that democracy is characterised by popular control over decision-making. The second is the notion of political equality, namely that all "citizens ought to be treated as political equals when they participate in governing" (Dahl, 1998, p.62). While these principles are perhaps most readily understood, and most frequently realised, at the level of small self-governing associations, it remains perfectly possible to envisage how they can be retained as democracy is 'scaled-up' to the level of the nation-state. As Beetham (1994a) explains, in large-scale representative democracy popular control and political equality are realised through indirect, rather than direct, means, so that

"Popular control usually takes the form of control over decision-makers, rather than decision-making itself; and typically requires a complex set of institutions and practices to make the principle effective. Similarly, political equality, rather than being realised in an equal say in decision-making directly, is realised to the extent that there exists an equality of votes between electors, an equal right to stand for office, an equality of conditions for making one's voice heard and in treatment at the hands of the legislators, and so on" (Beetham, 1994a, p. 28).

Inevitably, this is an 'ideal type' conception of democracy. There are powerful political, economic and social forces which militate against popular control and political equality being fully realised in practice. Nonetheless, the case for providing a 'maximal' definition of democracy as a benchmark against which we can assess actual democratic performance is a well established one (Dahl, 1971, 1998). Even if we accept that full popular control and complete political equality are likely to be unattainable in practice, we can nonetheless assume that all supporters of democracy would want to work towards these goals. Likewise, if a political system were to show signs of reduced popular control and growing political inequality, we would expect this to be an issue of concern among democrats. Indeed, the risk inherent in rejecting the ideal type as a standard is that we simply revert to defining democracy in relation to how it operates in practice, as Schumpeter (1943) sought to do when he proposed that democracy was essentially limited to the hosting of periodic elections through which "individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter, 1943, p. 269)

Derivation of the framework

Starting from the principles of popular control and political equality, David Beetham worked closely with Democratic Audit for more than a decade to construct, apply and revise a comprehensive framework for the assessment of democracy. This was very much an evolutionary process, and a good sense of it can be ascertained from the three 'big book' studies of UK democracy produced by the UK Audit from 1996-2002 under the leadership of Stuart Weir (Klug et al, 1996; Weir and Beetham, 1999; Beetham et al, 2002a). In addition, while DA-UK first developed the framework specifically for use in the UK, Beetham's pioneering work was also taken up via the inter-governmental body, International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) in Stockholm. With IDEA's support, the framework was re-designed and expanded to create a universal tool for assessing the condition of democracy in any country in the world. An international panel of experts agreed the framework after extensive discussion (Beetham et al, 2002b) and a team drawn from DA-UK and the Centre for Democratisation Studies, University of Leeds, worked with International IDEA to pilot the framework in eight countries around the world. These countries were: Bangladesh, El Salvador, Italy, Kenya, South Korea, Malawi, New Zealand and Peru (see Beetham et al, 2002c). The international panel of experts was re-convened several years later and agreed to make a number of revisions to the framework (Beetham et al, 2008). DA-UK used the first International IDEA iteration of the framework for the 2002 Audit of the UK (Beetham et al, 2002a) and the second, and current, iteration for the 2012 Audit of the UK (Wilks-Heeg et al, 2012). In addition, the IDEA framework has been applied in at least 15 democracies, including Australia, Austria, Ireland, Latvia, the Philippines and South Africa (see, among others, Beck and Robert, 2003; Rozenvalds, 2005; Hughes et al., 2007; Sawyer et al., 2009).

In its current form this framework comprises 75 'search questions' which are used as prompts to gather and organise evidence, both qualitative and quantitative. There are four steps involved in moving from the two core democratic principles to the 75 search questions. First, seven 'mediating values' are identified as the means through which the two principles are translated into institutional design and practice in a democracy. These mediating values are clearly identifiable from academic analysis of democracy, and would also be recognised in much everyday discussion of democratic arrangements. They comprise: participation, authorisation, representation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness and solidarity. Second, it is established what the requirements are for these values to be realised in practice, in terms of both democratic process and institutional forms and arrangements. Third, having identified these requirements in full, they are presented as a conceptual framework of democracy consisting of four main pillars: 'citizenship, law and rights'; 'representative and accountable government'; 'civil society and popular participation'; and 'democracy beyond the state'. These pillars are themselves sub-divided into between two and six areas, 15 in total, each of which poses a specific question about the operation of democracy as follows:

- Nationhood and citizenship;
- Rule of law and access to justice;
- Civil and political rights;
- Economic and social rights;
- Free and fair elections;
- The democratic role of political parties;
- Effective and responsive government;
- The democratic effectiveness of parliament;
- Civilian control of the military and police;
- Integrity in public life;
- The media in a democratic society;
- Political participation;
- Decentralisation;
- External influences on UK democracy;
- The UK's democratic impact abroad.

Finally, within each of these 15 sub-sections, the individual search questions are specified which guide the work of the research team. There are between three and eight search questions contained in each sub-section, 75 in total, covering issues as diverse as the inclusivity and accessibility of voter registration procedures, the extent to which the media are independent from government, and the degree to which there is public accountability of the police and security services. In defining these questions, close attention is paid to the identification of a variety of international standards, such as human rights instruments, which could be used as benchmarks for evaluating the quality of democracy. Answering these questions does not result in the production of a 'scorecard' for UK democracy using numerical indices. Instead, a range of qualitative and quantitative sources are used to evaluate the relative degrees to which democratic principles are being promoted, as well as being realised in practice.

International comparisons

Our 2012 Audit also seeks to compare the UK against a range of other democracies by using available statistical data to benchmark the UK's democratic performance against the average for western Europe (represented by the EU-15) and the average for established democracies globally (represented by the OECD-34). In addition, wherever possible, we use three groups of comparator democracies within the OECD, each of which represents a specific 'type' of western democracy. These are the English-speaking 'Westminster democracies', the 'consensual democracies' of western Europe, and the Nordic countries.

Table 1: Comparator countries used in DA-UK 2012 Audit

Democracy type	Westminster – OECD (5)	Consensual – OECD (6)	Nordics (5)
Welfare regime type	Liberal	Corporatist	Social Democratic
Countries	Australia Canada New Zealand United Kingdom Ireland	Austria Belgium Germany Luxembourg Netherlands Switzerland	Sweden Denmark Finland Iceland Norway

The distinction between Westminster and consensual democracies is taken from Arend Lijphart's (1999) classic study of democracies. In Lijphart's characterisation, the Westminster model comprises a centralised political system, in which a majoritarian electoral system, limited party competition, a weak separation of powers and constitutional flexibility concentrate power in the hands of single-party governments. By contrast, consensual democracies are characterised by greater fragmentation of power, including a decentralised state; a stronger, formal constitutional separation between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary; and proportional electoral systems and multi-party systems which make coalition government the norm.

We have added the Nordic countries as a separate category for two key reasons. First, the Nordics do not fit fully into the two-fold Lijphart classification. While Nordic democratic systems and traditions have much in common with the consensual democracies, the long-standing influence of social democracy had resulted in a particularly strong commitment to political equality, as typified by measures promoting the participation of women in public life. Second, by giving due recognition to the particularly social democratic characteristics of Nordic democracy, our Audit works with three categories of democracy which are broadly consistent with the clusters of welfare states identified in Esping-Andersen's (1990) book, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Given the broad reach of the Audit framework, long-running debates about the relationships between democracy and capitalism, and the core concerns we express in our 2012 Audit about growing inequality and rising corporate power, this threefold classification proves to be highly revealing.

We have also selected a specific country from each group of comparators to offer scope for more detailed comparison in some areas. Thus, some of our datasets compare the UK directly against Australia (Westminster democracy), the Netherlands (consensual democracy) and Sweden (Nordic),

all of which are broadly typical of their democracy 'type'. In addition, we have also added two further comparators, one from the EU-15 (Ireland) and one from the EU-34 (USA), both of which sit somewhat uneasily with the Lijphart model. Ireland retains sufficient legacy of the British democratic system to still be viewed as a Westminster democracy, although it now has several features which are atypical of the model, most notably the use of a proportional electoral system. The USA, meanwhile, cannot be easily placed in either category, being a highly decentralised state with a strong separation of powers, but operating perhaps the purest majoritarian electoral and party systems to be found in any established democracy.

Key findings

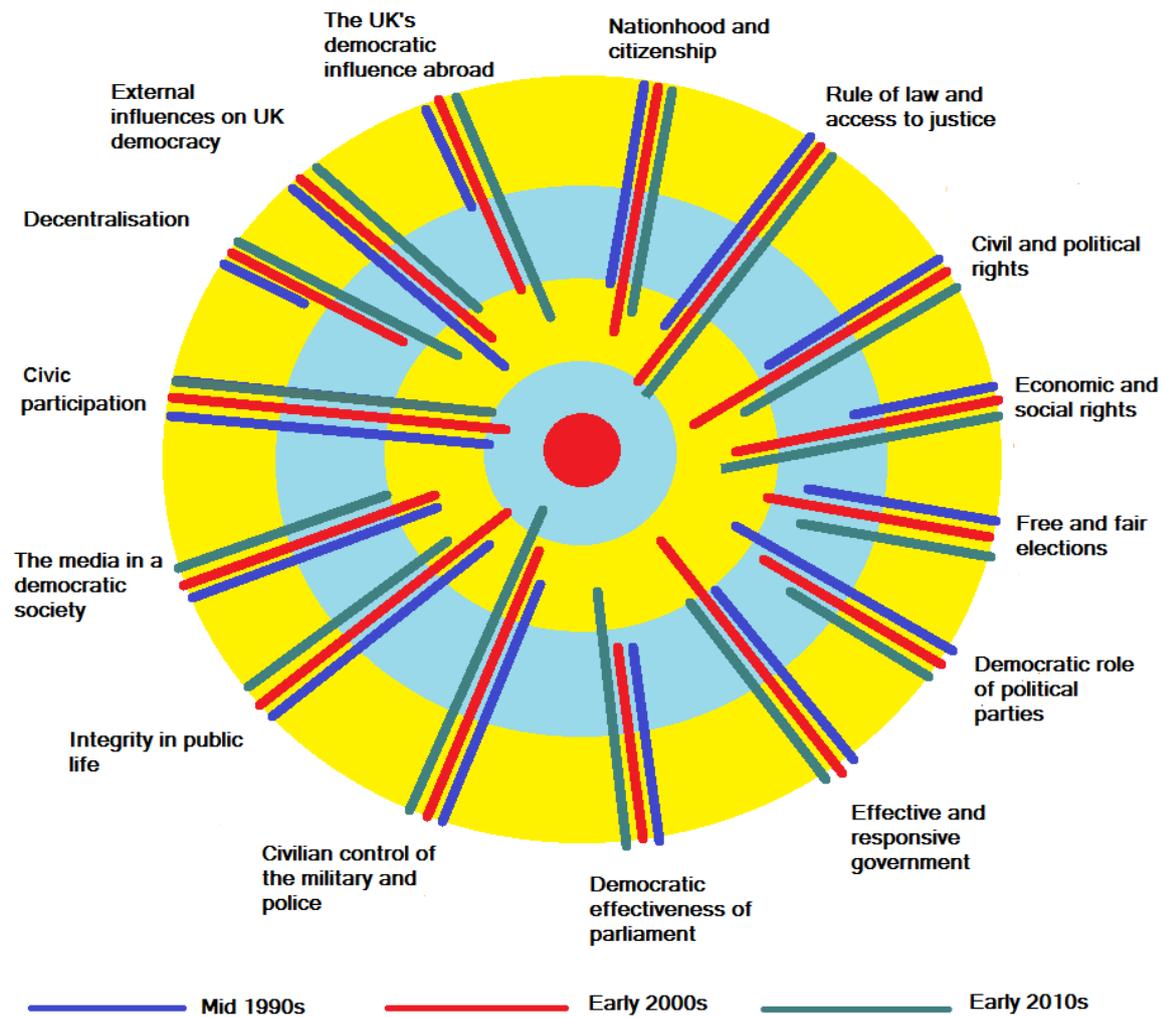
It would not be feasible to summarise the findings of all four DA-UK democracy assessments in a short paper. Instead, I focus here on highlighting the key findings of the most recent Audit (Wilks-Heeg et al, 2012) with respect to the most significant areas of change since the last comprehensive assessment was published 10 years ago. I also provide a very brief summary with respect to the comparative international statistics which were used for the first time in 2012.

Is UK democracy getting better or worse?

Throughout our Audit of UK democracy in 2012, we seek to assess what has changed since we published our last comprehensive assessment in 2002. In each of the 15 sub-sections which make up the Audit, we identify areas which have improved compared to a decade ago, those which we regard as continuing concerns, and issues which represent new or previously unidentified concerns. A total of 74 areas of democratic improvement are identified across the Audit as a whole, although these must be set alongside 92 continuing concerns and 62 new and emerging concerns. It would be highly misleading to read these outcomes as a 'democracy scorecard', however, for at least four reasons. First, not every change identified, whether positive or negative, carries equal weight. Second, many of the concerns identified are serious and long-standing ones, while many recent improvements are modest and must be considered alongside the persistence of these weighty concerns. Third, it is by no means clear that all the improvements documented have become fully embedded features of UK democracy. Finally, many reforms have proved double-edged, resulting in identifiable improvements while simultaneously giving rise to new sets of concerns.

Ultimately, our assessment of whether the complex, and often conflicting, dynamics of UK democracy represent improvement or deterioration against our core criteria must be a subjective one. Moreover, due to the multi-faceted nature of the Audit framework, there is a mixture of improvement and deterioration observed in each of the 15 sub-sections. Nonetheless, the sheer volume of qualitative and quantitative evidence we have collated, not just for our current Audit but also for our previous ones, enables us to make informed judgements about the extent to which each aspect of the democracy in the UK is improving or deteriorating. In all of the 15 sub-sections, we identify at least some steps forward, but also a number of steps back, and the relative size of these steps varies enormously. Overall, we find that while UK democracy has moved forward four of the 15 aspects since our last Audit in 2002, is broadly static in three further areas, and has slipped back, mostly very moderately, in the remaining eight. The specific mixture of improvements and concerns identified in each of the 15 sections are summarised in Appendix 1.

Figure 1: Closer to the target? Change across 15 core features of UK democracy



In our 2002 Audit, we represented our assessment of how UK democracy had changed using a target graphic, showing whether each of the areas of democracy we evaluated was moving towards, or away from, the highest democratic standards observed in practice internationally (represented by the bull's-eye at the centre of the target). With some adaptations, owing to small changes in the assessment framework, we have updated this graphic using our 2012 results, as shown in Figure 1. There are large numbers of instances where our assessment repeats the most serious concerns we have expressed in previous Audits. It is the weight of these 'continuing concerns' which are generally the most significant factor in shaping our assessment of how close each aspect of UK democracy is to the centre of the target. The graphic therefore highlights that there are some obvious 'weak links' in the UK's democratic system, namely those which are furthest from the centre of the target or which evidence the greatest movement away from it. Significantly, these weaknesses cluster around particular sets of issues associated with elections, political parties, the media, integrity in public life, and the responsiveness and effectiveness of government. Indeed, as I note below the tendencies which we see as most concerning tend to cross-cut several individual sections of the Audit framework.

International comparisons

In total, our Audit includes over 40 comparative datasets, although not all compare the UK to the full range of comparators listed above. In virtually every case, the UK ranks below the EU-15 and OECD-34 average. The contrasts between the UK and the Nordic countries are particularly stark. Indeed, the Nordic countries out-perform the UK on just about every quantifiable measure of democracy used for cross-national comparison. The sample of indicators listed below, drawn from eight different sections of the Audit clearly illustrates this pattern.

Table 2: Ten key measures of democracy in the United Kingdom and the Nordic Countries



	United Kingdom	Nordic Average
Turnout in parliamentary elections (average, 2000s)	60%	79%
Proportion of the electorate who are members of political parties (late 2000s)#	1%	5%
Proportion of MPs who are women (2010)	22%	41%
Global ranking for levels of press freedom (2011; Freedom House index)	26 th	2 nd
Global ranking for absence of corruption (2010; Transparency International index)	20 th	4 th
Compliance with human rights (2010; score out of 22 on CIRI Human Rights Index)	19	21
Full-time employees earning $\leq 3/5$ of median gross annual earnings (2006)#	21.6%	7.9%
Proportion of the labour force who are members of trade unions (2010)	26.5%	69.2%
Proportion of tax revenue raised by sub-national government (2009)	5.3%	25.4%
Overseas aid as a proportion of national income (average, 2000s)	0.4%	0.8%

Note: # - in these cases, the Nordic average is for Denmark, Finland and Sweden only

While the Nordic countries are by no means perfect democracies, they are certainly a valuable yardstick against which other countries can be measured. That the UK trails the Nordic countries across so many statistical measures of democracy offers further evidence of the areas in which it falls short, not of an abstract ideal of democracy, but of what has been demonstrated to be possible elsewhere in northern Europe.

Five overarching thematic concerns

There are some obvious 'weak links' in the UK's democratic system which can be identified from the above. Significantly, these weaknesses cluster around particular sets of issues associated with

elections, political parties, the media, integrity in public life, and the responsiveness and effectiveness of government. Indeed, the tendencies which we see as most concerning tend to cross-cut several individual sections of the Audit framework, leading us to identify five overarching thematic concerns. Several of these themes are common to all established democracies, although we have found them to be especially pronounced in the UK.

1. **The UK's constitutional arrangements are increasingly unstable and it is by no means clear what a reformed Westminster model would look like.** While significant constitutional reforms have been introduced since 1997, some changes have proved less effective than expected and several facets of the UK political system have proved stubbornly resistant to reform. Moreover, some areas of reform have had clearly unintended or unanticipated consequences, most notably devolution to Scotland. Meanwhile, changes in the operation of the UK party and electoral systems have undermined some of the most fundamental planks of the Westminster model, particularly the principle of single-party majority government, but there is, as yet, little indication of UK politicians recognising these new realities.
2. **Public faith in democratic institutions is decaying, and reforms aimed at restoring public confidence in democratic arrangements have tended to prove, at best, ineffectual and, in several cases, counter-productive.** Long-term survey evidence suggests that the public trust politicians and political parties less and less, and that they regard democratic institutions such as Parliament as increasingly irrelevant. Measures such as the transfer of functions to independent bodies, the increased regulation of political activity and the promotion of greater transparency and access to information have done nothing to reverse these trends. If anything, they have made it worse.
3. **Political inequality is widening rapidly and even provisions intended to guarantee basic human rights are increasingly being brought into question.** While representative democracy is notionally built on principles of political equality (such as one person, one vote), there have always been wide variations in the extent of political participation, and degree of political power exercised, by different social groups. However, political inequalities in the UK have widened over the past four decades, in tandem with the widening of economic and social divisions. While the Human Rights Act has provided for some protection for those most at risk, even this principle of a 'minimal' guaranteeing of key civil and political rights has been called into question in recent years.
4. **Corporate power is growing, partly as a result of wider patterns of globalisation and deregulation, and threatens to undermine some of the most basic principles of democratic decision-making.** There are very firm grounds to suggest that the influence large corporations and wealthy individuals now wield on the UK political system is unprecedented. Bolstered by pro-market policy agendas and deregulatory measures, corporate power has expanded as a variety of countervailing forces have declined in significance. Policy-making has shifted from the democratic arena to a far less transparent set of arrangements in which politics and business interests have become increasingly interwoven.

5. **Almost all available indicators suggest that representative democracy is in long-term, terminal decline, but no viable alternative model of democracy currently exists.** All measures of popular engagement with, and attitudes towards, representative democracy show a clear decline over time. While the same basic trends are found in all established democracies, the UK compares especially poorly on just about every conceivable measure. While there is some evidence to suggest growing interest in forms of direct and participatory democracy, it is by no means clear how these alternative models can co-exist with the assumptions and practices which have traditionally underpinned representative democracy in the UK.

Impact of DA-UK's work

In addition to the general difficulties of evaluating policy impact (see below), DA-UK's most recent Audit of UK democracy was published only six months ago, making its impact additionally difficult to gauge other than with reference to web metrics and media citations. Some basic information relating to the launch and dissemination of the most recent Audit is nonetheless included below. At the same time, in considering DA-UK's overall impact, it is useful to return to the distinctions between the various strands of the organisation's activity over the past 20 years outlined in the first section of this paper. In particular, it is important to try to separate out the direct impact of the full Audits from those of the wider work of DA-UK. I therefore also consider what impact the different categories of DA-UK publication have had in three distinct spheres of influence: the academy, the media and public policy.

Launch and dissemination of the 2012 Audit

The first three 'big book' Audits of UK democracy were well received, but did not garner much attention among journalists or policy-makers. As is documented below, one of the periodic Audits (Weir and Beetham, 1999) is particularly well-cited in academic work, but there is little or no evidence that this translated into media or parliamentary citations. The objective of reaching a wider audience was therefore instrumental to the decision to publish our fourth periodic Audit of UK democracy (Wilks-Heeg et al, 2012) entirely on-line rather than as a book. The early indications are that this strategy has been successful with respect to its launch and early dissemination. The extent to which the Audit impacts on policy remains to be seen, although I would anticipate that any such impact will remain relatively indirect.

Our 2012 Audit was launched via exclusive coverage in *The Guardian* newspaper, which has one of the most-visited media websites globally. To coincide with this coverage, we sent printed copies of the executive summary of the assessment to 100 key politicians, journalists and bloggers, think-tanks and academics, and circulated electronic copies (PDF) of the summary to 100 further individuals from these groups. We also approached leading blogs and bloggers to write about our assessment, wrote blog posts of our own for a number of leading UK politics/media sites, and ran a sustained social media campaign. The results have been encouraging. The main article about our Audit was ranked as the most-read on *The Guardian* website for a period of 24 hours. The article generated 1013 comments, 780 tweets and 1302 Facebook shares. Three days later, *The Guardian* also published four letters to the editor which made direct reference to our study. In the days after the launch, a number of overseas media outlets also covered the launch of our Audit on the back of

the coverage in *The Guardian*. Over the next few months, reference to our Audit subsequently appeared in a lead article in the European edition of Time Magazine, in El País (Spain), The Toronto Star (Canada), El Mundo (Spain). The Audit has also been cited, albeit briefly and on single occasions, in debates in the UK House of Commons and the House of Lords. In addition, the Audit was cited on a very large number of media and politics blogs in the UK and elsewhere.

The Audit has clearly found a readership. In the six months following its release, the 2012 Audit has been accessed on-line 9,783 times by a total of 7,242 unique visitors, resulting in 28,545 page views. While the audience is predominately found in the UK (72 per cent of all visits), the site has been visited to date from 124 countries or territories worldwide. After the UK, the highest numbers of visits originate from the USA (3.9 per cent of the total), Spain (3.4 per cent), Germany (1.5 per cent), France (1.3 per cent) and Canada (1.2 per cent). While it is a somewhat disingenuous comparison, these figures clearly indicate a much wider readership than could have been obtained via the publication of a printed book with a print-run of perhaps 1,000 copies.

Academic impact

Unsurprisingly, the primarily academic publications, including the first two Audit books, show greatest evidence of impact within the scholarly community. Table 3 shows that seven of the ten DA-UK outputs with the most Google scholar citations are academic publications, and 5 of them were authored, co-authored or edited by David Beetham. However, since these are academic citation scores, it is notable that three DA-UK research reports (Weir, 1994; John et al, 2006; Blick et al, 2006) have more than 30 Google scholar citations.

Table 3: Democratic Audit outputs with most Google scholar citations

Author(s) and year	Title	Output type	No. of citations
Beetham (ed.), 1994b	Defining and Measuring Democracy	Academic book (Sage)	352
Weir and Beetham, 1999	Political power and democratic control in Britain	Periodic Audit (book - academic publisher)	181
Weir, 1994	Ego trip: Extra-governmental organisations in the United Kingdom and their accountability	Research report	94
Beetham, 2004	Towards a universal framework for democracy assessment	Academic journal article (Democratization)	67
Beetham et al, 2002	Democracy under Blair: A Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom	Periodic Audit (book - non-academic publisher)	64
Klug et al, 1996	The Three Pillars of Liberty	Periodic Audit (book - academic publisher)	54
John et al, 2006	The BNP: the roots of its appeal	Research report	47
Beetham, 1999	The idea of Democratic Audit in Comparative Perspective	Academic journal article (Parliamentary Affairs)	45
Blick et al, 2006	The Rules of the Game	Research report	33
Weir, 1995	Quangos - questions of democratic accountability	Academic journal article (Parliamentary Affairs)	32

Media impact

DA-UK's research and analysis is widely reported in the media. In the period since 2009 alone, there have been approximately 250 media items (press, radio, television) either making reference to DA-UK or in which a representative from DA-UK has appeared. The vast bulk of such references and appearances concern either specific DA research reports or, more commonly, involve DA-UK offering expert commentary on a particular issue. A very small proportion of DA-UK media coverage (less than one per cent) arises from direct references to our periodic Audits.

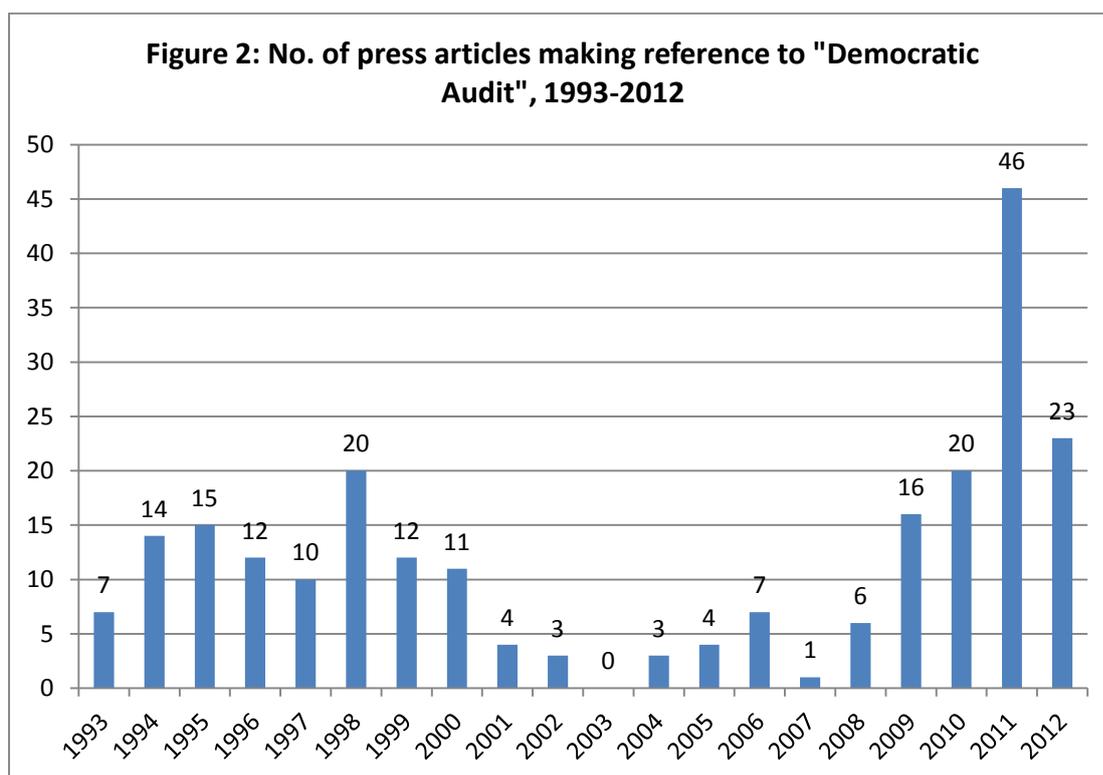


Figure 2 (above) documents the number of newspaper articles held in the Proquest International press database which use the term "Democratic Audit" annually from 1993-2012. We have removed instances where the reference is to one of the Democratic Audits in another English-speaking country (Ireland, Canada and Australia) or to the notion of a 'democratic audit' generally. The graph records a total of 234 press citations since 1993. We estimate that this represents only about half of all media coverage – since the single search term used does not pick up all references to our work, and all broadcast media appearances are excluded. However, the fluctuations in the level of press citations which the graph documents are clear, and also easily explicable with reference to three overlapping factors. The periods when press citations have been highest, notably 1994-98 and 2009-12, were also those when (i) political and constitutional reform were highest on the political agenda; (ii) DA-UK was relatively well resourced; and (iii) DA-UK was able to make sustained research interventions relating to specific democratic issues which were then on the agenda. I elaborate on the significance of these points below.

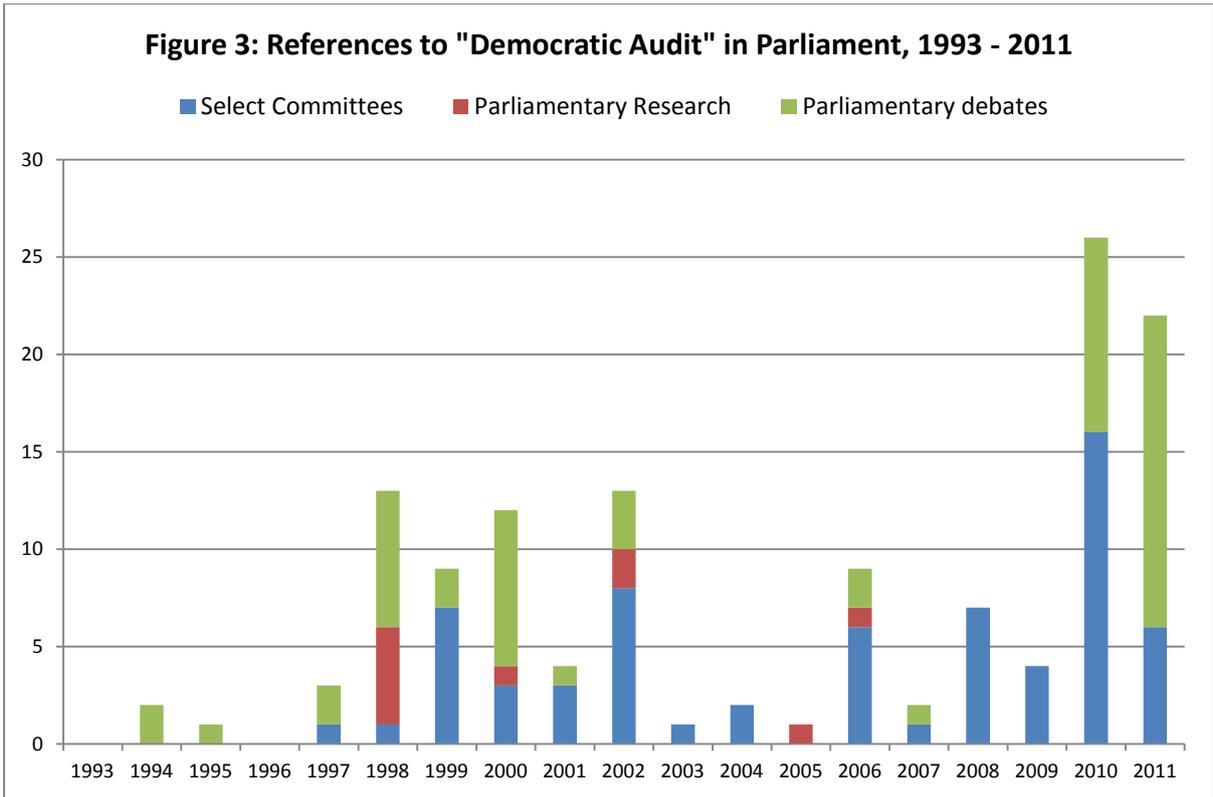
Policy impact

It is, of course, difficult to assess the policy impact of a project like a democracy audit. Firstly, there is the issue of the relationship between the research outputs and the extent to which democratic

reforms are prioritised on the political agenda. At the time when DA-UK was established in the early 1990s, a range of other organisations had begun to campaign for political and constitutional reform, often with support from the same funding bodies as DA. There was a great deal of cooperation between these groups and it seems clear that, collectively, they were instrumental in bringing reform issues onto the agenda. This dynamic was an important factor in persuading the Labour Party to embrace a fairly wide-ranging set of constitutional reform proposals after 1994, most of which it enacted after winning the 1997 General Election. The extent of DA-UK's influence within all this is immensely difficult to estimate, and much of it is likely to have been indirect (other than with respect to Quangos, where it was clearly agenda-setting – see below). But it also seems clear that without a change in government in 1997, DA-UK's impact would have been restricted. Secondly, there are questions of timescales. There can be long time-lags between an issue being raised in a research context and it being highlighted on the political agenda. Conversely, if a particular issue is already 'live', a timely research report may have a remarkable and almost immediate impact. Thirdly, it is important to try to distinguish between, on one hand, impacts which translate into positive proposals for democratic reforms and, on the other, impacts which take the form of amending or preventing actions which would be likely to have a negative democratic outcome.

These caveats notwithstanding, it is clear that DA-UK's stand-alone reports have had a greater impact on policy debates than the 'big book' Audits. This is almost certainly because our research reports are issue-focussed and therefore seen by journalists and politicians as more relevant and more readily digestible than the full Audit studies. The impact has been most apparent where DA-UK has engaged in a programme of research on a particular topic of contemporary relevance, resulting in the publication of multiple research outputs. Three examples exemplify this pattern. First, a series of DA-UK reports on the role and membership of Quangos in the British state were central to establishing the reputation of the organisation in the early-mid 1990s and had a clear and demonstrable impact on policy during a period when concerns about 'sleaze' became a major issue in UK politics. Second, a series of DA-UK reports from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s projecting the outcomes of UK general elections under different voting systems were widely cited in debates about electoral reform and continue to provide a model for similar studies by others. Third, a recent DA-UK strand of work on the UK government's proposals to reduce the number of MPs and introduce new rules for the redrawing of constituency boundaries resulted in a large body of work – six reports and associated outputs – which were cited over 50 times in the parliamentary debate on the legislation (largely by those seeking to amend the Bill!). These observations are backed up by the data on press citations referred to above. In 2011, 78 per cent of the 46 press stories citing DA-UK related to boundary changes; in 1998-99, 27 per cent (of 30 stories) concerned electoral reform; and in 1994, 86 per cent (of 14 press citations) arose from the work on Quangos.

In this regard, it is telling that references to "Democratic Audit" in the UK Parliament since 1993 show a similar pattern to that evidenced in press coverage. Figure 3 shows that there have been two main peaks in parliamentary references to DA-UK's work, from 1998-2002 and from 2010-11. These periods align closely with those in which governments introduced significant proposals for constitutional reform (although in the 2010-11 period, most of them failed to reach the statute book). Again, the fluctuations evident in the graph are also a reflection of DA-UK's changing resource base and its capacity to influence specific issues being debated, notably Quangos, electoral reform and boundary changes. More detailed evidence relating to DA-UK's impact via evidence submissions to parliamentary select committees is included as an appendix.



Conclusions

DA-UK has played a pivotal role in developing both the concept of democratic auditing and devising a framework suitable for undertaking such assessments in any national context. Its periodic Audits of the UK have enabled a detailed, longitudinal analysis of how UK democracy is changing and the identification of key areas of weakness. The concerns which these Audits raise about the state of British democracy are profound. The inclusion of international comparative data in the 2012 Audit underlines that, while many of the trends identified in the UK are common to all established democracies, the UK does appear to represent a particularly advanced case of democratic decline within western Europe.

While there is evidence that DA-UK's work has impacted across the academic, media and policy spheres, it is only in the first of these three categories that the periodic full Audits appear to have been the primary source of this impact. The organisation's wider work, particularly the publication of issue-centred reports detached from the Audit framework, has played a significant role in building the reputation of DA-UK and in facilitating its media and parliamentary positioning. The decision to move from a book-based to a web-based format for the most recent full Audit appears to have greatly enlarged the audience for DA-UK's work, as was hoped. The imminent re-location of DA-UK at the London School of Economics will provide the opportunity to build on this success. The aim is to further extend the audience for the Audit through a revised web-publishing approach and consolidated use of social media. This will see the Audit's contents updated on a continuous, rolling basis, as well as enable further development of comparative statistical measures of UK democracy.

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Appendix 1: Key findings of the 2012 Audit, by sub-section

The primary findings from the most recent DA-UK Audit (Wilks-Heeg et al, 2012) are summarised below with reference to each of the 15 sub-sections of the Audit framework, beginning with those in which we adjudged there to be improvement overall and moving to those where we find greatest overall deterioration.

Overall improvement

- *Democratic effectiveness of parliament*: the strengthening of parliament, particularly the House of Commons, is an encouraging development. Recent changes include: the introduction of pre- and post-legislative scrutiny; public bill committees; greater transparency for public accounts; elections for select committees members and Chairs; measures to give the Commons more control over its own timetable. All these are likely to enhance parliament's contribution to the democratic processes. However, deficiencies remain, not least continued dependency upon the executive, a lack of powers in key areas still covered by the royal prerogative, and weaknesses in financial scrutiny.
- *Civilian control of military and police*: The military in the UK is under formal civilian control, and military involvement in civilian affairs, normally confined to emergencies, has not tended to be politically controversial. There have been some improvements in the social representativeness of the military and police. However, a number of concerns remain evident with respect to police accountability and we have very little confidence that the introduction of elected Police and Crime Commissioners will address these concerns. Likewise, the accountability of the intelligence and security services to parliament remains very weak, despite widespread recognition of the need for change in this area.
- *Decentralisation*: devolution provides a clear counter-trend to decades of centralisation of the UK state. The success of the devolved institutions is highly apparent and, while turnouts in devolved elections remain low, there is clear evidence that devolution has spearheaded a process of democratic renewal in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the continued absence of devolution to England poses serious questions given the weak autonomy of English local government. The new government's emphasis on localism has seen new freedoms and flexibilities granted to local councils but in the context of large-scale cuts in their revenue base.
- *The UK's democratic influence abroad*: the UK has a relatively good record of promoting democracy and human rights and supporting institutions and international agreements designed for this purpose. More recently, the UK has participated in a treaty banning cluster munitions, while progress has been made in the reaching of international aid targets, in the institutional commitment to development aid, and wider acceptance of its value as a policy goal. However, the UK remains reluctant to ratify certain international human rights treaties. Moreover, there are long-standing concerns about UK participation in US-led military interventions, recently exemplified by the 'war on terror', and about UK arms exports to regimes which might deploy them in the perpetration of human rights abuses.

No or minor change overall

- *Political participation:* while election turnouts and party membership have declined, levels of engagement in other forms of political activity, such as signing petition or taking part in demonstrations, are either stable or have increased. Moreover, there is no evidence of a decline in levels of civic participation: levels of volunteering are high and the voluntary sector has grown in size and significance, although there are ongoing threats to the independence of civil society organisations, particularly where they have become directly engaged in the delivery of public services. Despite some evidence of progress, women and ethnic minorities remain under-represented in all forms of public office, where there is also a clear class divide.
- *Rule of law and access to justice:* the rule of law is well established in the UK. The last decade has seen a welcome strengthening of judicial independence although this has provoked growing tensions between notions of parliamentary sovereignty and the rule of law. There is evidence of growing confidence in the legal system, although it has yet to return to the levels found in the 1980s and remains fairly poor measured against the comparator democracies. Finally, growing restrictions on legal aid will further reduce access to the law and there is evidence of continued discrimination in the criminal justice system.
- *Economic and social rights:* while the UK has a relatively strong track record in meeting basic economic and social rights, on a great number of other measures levels of poverty and inequality in the UK remain very high by European standards. The combined impact of the economic downturn from 2008 onwards and the policies being implemented by the coalition since 2010 have prompted an intensification of a number of social problems.

Overall deterioration

- *Nationhood and citizenship:* aspects of the legislation governing citizenship have improved, such as the legal framework for promoting equality and combating discrimination, but the treatment of asylum seekers and the extent of executive immigration powers remain concerning. Democratic improvements associated with devolution are evident, particularly in Northern Ireland, where it has been central to the peace process. However, the asymmetric devolution in the UK is creating major constitutional tensions, especially with regard to Scotland, highlighting a lack of consensus about some fundamental aspects of the UK's governance arrangements.
- *Civil and political rights:* the Human Rights Act 1998 has transformed the protection of civil and political rights and strengthened judicial independence. However, the legislation did not prevent the introduction of a range of measures under Labour, amid heightened concern about international terrorism which served to erode civil and political rights
- *Free and fair elections:* UK elections are free and fair, as defined by widely accepted international standards. However, when assessed against other established democracies, a number of significant concerns emerge. Turnouts in all types of UK election are comparatively low, and the simple plurality system used for general elections produces highly disproportional

outcomes. We also highlight growing concerns about the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers and a rise in the number of electoral fraud accusations reported to police.

- *The democratic role of political parties:* political parties emerge as one of the weakest aspects of UK democracy. The UK's electoral system helps sustain the dominance of the two main parties, despite their diminishing levels of popular support. Membership of, and electoral support for, the two largest parties continues to fall. The reliance of political parties on large donations is more pronounced and concerns about the integrity of party funding persist. While these are common problems in established democracies, the loss of engagement with, and faith in, UK policies parties seems especially pronounced .
- *Effective and responsive government:* despite a variety of measures intended to render government more effective and responsive, a series of concerns remain. A capability review has not alleviated doubts about skills and organisation in the civil service, there are clear inequalities of access to government , particularly owing to the role of lobbyists, and high-profile examples of regulatory failure have impacted negatively on public attitudes towards government effectiveness.
- *Integrity in public life:* major political scandals have continued to occur despite the growth of bodies and rules intended to promote integrity in the conduct of public officials and restore public confidence. These include the police investigation into 'cash-for-peerages' allegations in 2006, the MPs' expenses scandal of 2009 and credible evidence of police corruption uncovered during investigations into the 'phone-hacking' affair. There is, without doubt, a very strong perception, shared by experts and the general public alike, that standards in public life in the UK have declined further in recent years, both in absolute terms and relative to other established democracies.
- *The media in a democratic society:* by international standards, the UK media is relatively free and, on some measures, relatively pluralistic. However, concerns remain about the impact of libel law, and the granting of court injunctions, on journalistic freedom. and also with respect to levels of concentration in media ownership. Meanwhile, intensifying market competition and technological change have prompted both declining newspaper circulation and falling television news consumption and raised concern about the resources available for investigative journalism. There are also significant regulatory challenges arising from the blurring of the boundaries between print, digital and broadcast media. Finally, illegal practices in the media, including phone-hacking, email-hacking, as well as numerous forms of journalistic intrusion and harassment, may well have become commonplace.
- *External influences on UK democracy:* there is a risk of exaggerating the implications of external influences, such as international organisations and economic globalisation, on UK democracy. In international affairs, the UK enjoys far greater influence than its population alone would entitle it to, although without sufficient oversight of this power from both parliament and the public. However, globalisation dynamics have been used to portray certain policy choices in the UK as 'inevitable, when other European countries have not always followed suit. Meanwhile, the UK's approach to the appears to be driven by simplistic, and at times misguided, argument about the need to preserve national sovereignty.

Appendix 2: Democratic Audit evidence to select committees and other official inquiries, 2009-2012

Year	Subject of Inquiry	Lead body	DA Written Evidence	DA Oral Evidence	DA citations in inquiry report
2009	Openness and accountability in local government	Committee on Standards in Public Life	Yes	n/a (*)	n/a (*)
2009	The Cabinet Office and the centre of government	House of Lords Constitution Committee	Yes	No	5
2009	Reform of the House of Commons	Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons	Yes	n/a	3
2010	Referendums in the UK	House of Lords Constitution Committee	Yes	Yes	7
2010	Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill	Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee	Yes (x3)	Yes	13
2010	Implications of government's constitutional reform proposals for Wales	Welsh Affairs Select Committee	Yes	Yes	4
2010	Fixed-term Parliaments	House of Lords Constitution Committee	Yes	No	8
2010	Reform of party political funding	Committee on Standards in Public Life	Yes	Yes	0
2011	Constitutional implications of the Cabinet Manual	Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee	Yes	Yes	7
2011	Constitutional implications of proposals to withdraw from ECHR	Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee	n/a	Yes	n/a (**)
2011	The constitutional reform process	House of Lords Constitution Committee	Yes	No	(**)
2011	Introduction of individual electoral registration	Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee	Yes	Yes	1
2012	The recall of MPs	Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee	Yes	Yes	6
2012	Role of special advisers	Public Administration Select Committee	Yes	Yes	2
2012	House of Lords Reform	Joint Committee on the Draft House of Lords Reform Bill	Yes	No	15

(*) this inquiry was suspended following the decision of the committee to focus instead on the issue of MPs' expenses

(**) no report published