Prime minister rules out home affairs committee's proposal, arguing that drugs policies are already working 10/12/12.

A report by the Commons home affairs select committee said that after taking evidence from all sides of the drug debate, "now, more than ever" there is a case for a fundamental review of all UK drug policy.

The influential cross-party group of MPs said the prime minister should urgently set up a royal commission to consider all of the alternatives to Britain's current drug laws, including decriminalisation and legalisation.

The committee chair, Keith Vaz, told the BBC Radio 4 Today programme that a royal commission to look at every aspect of drugs policy and report back by 2015 is "not a big ask".

But Cameron said he wanted the focus to be on policies that were working rather than a long-winded royal commission.

"I don't support decriminalisation. We have a policy which actually is working in Britain. [Drugs](https://www.theguardian.com/society/drugs) use is coming down, the emphasis on treatment is absolutely right, and we need to continue with that to make sure we can really make a difference. Also, we need to do more to keep drugs out of our prisons.

"These are the government's priorities and I think we should continue with that rather than have some very, very long-term royal commission."

"The home secretary has said that she doesn't think that a royal commission is the answer at this time but we are open to new ideas and evidence-based research to carry on reducing the harm caused by drugs in this country."

On the government's current strategy, he said: "It is not true to say we are making no progress on drugs. There's been … dramatic falls in the amount of drugs consumption happening and the harm caused by drugs.

"That includes very serious drugs so heroin, for example, crack cocaine, there have been dramatic falls in recent years. The average age of heroin addicts is going up. Fewer younger people are coming on stream as heroin addicts. There's been significant progress on treatment."

Case study of 2 committees

Good parliamentary scrutiny has significant potential to improve the effectiveness of government, shaping the way government goes about its business and succeeds or fails in achieving the outcomes it desires. Parliamentary committees are one of the key mechanisms used by Parliament to conduct scrutiny. During the 2010-15 parliament a number of committees very obviously increased their public profile. What’s less clear is whether this increased visibility led to a corresponding increase in their impact on government

The main roles of parliamentary committees are to hold the government to account on behalf of the legislature, and to scrutinise government activity. Committees have been a feature of the parliamentary landscape for centuries but in the last parliament their public profile increased significantly. This happened under the leadership of chairs who for the first time in 2010 were elected rather than chosen under the influence of the whips. Some managed to achieve a higher profile than certain cabinet ministers. Committees conducted major inquiries into subjects such as phone hacking, the tax affairs of multinational companies and standards in the banking industry, which contributed to public debate and raised public interest in the part that committees play in our democratic system.

Three examples of reforms which were implemented in 2010 were: the creation of a **Backbench Business Committee** (a committee composed of elected backbenchers and given responsibility for the allocation of time for backbench-initiated business in the Commons chamber and Westminster Hall, previously a responsibility of the party whips); the introduction of **elections for committee chairs** by secret ballot of all MPs; and **elections for committee members** by their own parties.

The Defence Select Committee

The Defence Select Committee (DSC) had a well-respected and consensual chair,

Which enhanced its ability to scrutinise the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The DSC also used social media tools to gather evidence from witnesses who would otherwise be difficult to reach.

But the DSC’s impact on government appears to have been limited, for two main reasons. The first was the nature of the department and policy area it was scrutinising. The size and complexity of the MoD, the degree of secrecy surrounding its activities, and the attitude of its ministers to the Committee at certain periods during the parliament combined to restrict the impact it was possible for the Committee to have. Although the Committee produced high quality outputs the evidence we found was that the civil servants and ministers of the MoD found them relatively easy to ignore. This was compounded by the low-key approach of the chair and Committee to attracting media coverage for their work.

The second reason that the DSC’s impact on government was limited was the tendency of the Committee to focus on influencing government through Parliament. Their strategy was to inform other MPs about defence issues and thereby strengthen the capacity of Parliament as a whole to hold government to account. However, informing backbenchers about policy issues is not an easy thing to do, and influencing MPs to create an impact on government is more difficult still. Most MPs are so busy with constituency business and their other parliamentary, party and personal priorities that they have very little time available to read reports or even to attend debates on reports from committees other than their own. Building a backbench coalition to exert pressure on the government to act on a committee’s recommendations is extremely difficult even if the issue at stake is very high profile.

Key impacts

**Political consensus building**

The Defence Committee’s work on the role of the Service Complaints Commissioner also led to legislative amendments which significantly widened the investigative scope of the Ombudsman beyond what had originally been proposed.

**Creating legitimacy**

Those we spoke to who were required to account to committees for their decisions and actions told us that they valued the legitimacy created by the discipline of answering the questions of elected representatives in a public forum. Jon Thompson, Permanent Secretary of the MoD, noted that were it not for the Defence Committee and the PAC he would never have to answer for himself in public. To do so was an important discipline.

The Home Affairs Committee

The Home Affairs Committee (HAC) had a high-profile chair and shaped its agenda of evidence sessions around the main inquiries it had launched, but it reserved a portion at the end of each scheduled evidence session for ‘topicals’ – issues which had only just arisen.

This enabled it to maintain one of the highest media profiles of any committee and establish itself as a player within the home affairs field. The combative style of many of its evidence sessions produced a number of largely-attributable impacts in the form of resignations and apologies and was impossible for government to ignore. Thus the HAC was highly effective at achieving the short-term impact it was trying to achieve.

Key impacts

**Obtaining testimony**

The HAC in particular provided examples of occasions on which unwilling witnesses from inside and outside government had been compelled to give oral evidence by the threat or actual use of the Committee’s power to send for ‘person, papers and records’ (PPR).

**Confidence**

The HAC held an evidence session during the parliamentary recess in 2011, to question the police on their response to the riots that had broken out across England that summer. Staff felt that this was particularly important because, in the absence of any debate in the House, the public could see that elected politicians were paying attention to what was going on and fulfilling their role within the democratic system.

**Childhood obesity demands bold Government action committee report finds**

**30 November 2015**

Health Committee publishes report saying the scale and consequences of childhood obesity demand bold and urgent action from Government.

Treating obesity and its consequences is currently estimated to cost the NHS £5.1bn every year. It is one of the risk factors for type 2 diabetes, which accounts for spending of £8.8 billion a year, almost 9% of the NHS budget. The wider costs of obesity to society are estimated to be around three times this amount. By contrast, the UK spends only around £638 million on obesity prevention programmes. Ongoing cuts to public health budgets within the spending review will put prevention services under further strain.

Physical activity is enormously beneficial whatever children’s weight and increasing exercise alone will not tackle the rising toll of obesity. The Committee points to the clear evidence that measures to improve the food environment to reduce calorie intake must lie at the heart of a successful strategy.

The report highlights nine areas for improvement. They are:

* Strong controls on price promotions of unhealthy food and drink
* Tougher controls on marketing and advertising of unhealthy food and drink
* A centrally led reformulation programme to reduce sugar in food and drink
* A sugary drinks tax on full sugar soft drinks, in order to help change behaviour, with all proceeds targeted to help those children at greatest risk of obesity
* Labelling of single portions of products with added sugar to show sugar content in teaspoons
* Improved education and information about diet
* Universal school food standards
* Greater powers for local authorities to tackle the environment leading to obesity
* Early intervention to offer help to families of children affected by obesity and further research into the most effective interventions

Chair of the Health Committee, Dr Sarah Wollaston MP, says:

"One third of children leaving primary school are overweight or obese, and the most deprived children are twice as likely to be obese than the least deprived. This has serious consequences for both their current and future health and wellbeing and we cannot continue to fail these children. There are many causes and no one single or simplistic approach will provide the answer. We therefore urge the Prime Minister to make a positive and lasting difference to children’s health and life chances through bold and wide ranging measures within his childhood obesity strategy.

We believe that if the Government fails to act, the problem will become far worse. A full package of bold measures is required and should be implemented as soon as possible. We believe that a sugary drinks tax should be included in these measures with all proceeds clearly directed to improving our children’s health."

Are Parliament’s select committees working? – I say no

Our parliamentary select committees need to be taken seriously. Yet, for them to be so, we need to clarify their legal powers, use wider expertise and practice what we preach.

Select committees have recently been in the spotlight, and Parliament’s liaison committee — made up of the chairs of all the select committees — has announced a detailed review as doubts over effectiveness have grown. Last week the Energy and Climate Change Committee examined the spiralling cost of energy; but, despite the fact that price hikes for millions of homes is a top political priority, only one of the big six energy companies thought the occasion worthy of sending their CEO. Today we had the less than edifying spectacle of police officers being hauled back before the Home Affairs Select Committee amid accusations of misleading Parliament, yet the sanctions available are limited at best.

Committees often lack source material. Next week the Public Accounts Committee will report on Universal Credit without access to a review penned by Howard Shiplee on his first 100 days overseeing the project, which will leave the committee’s report lacking key insights on the pivotal issue of IT.

So, how do we resolve these problems?

Parliament needs to clarify its legal powers. There is still confusion over what documents select committees have access to, as shown by the dispute with the BBC over the names of senior executives who received payoffs. A joint committee of Parliament produced a detailed report earlier this year on Parliament’s lack of clarity over its own powers.

Critics are right to challenge the current performance of select committees; but they are wrong in the lazy assertion that all MPs want from these sessions is to grandstand. The incentive for many MPs is to do the job they were elected to do: holding bodies to account on behalf of their constituents. Many of us prefer to use the microscope to the blunderbuss. Parliament needs to update its tools.

1. **Explain the purpose of committees in parliament.**
2. **Provide an example of a way that a committee holds the government to account.**
3. **Explain the limitations on committees to hold the government to account.**

**Analysis-To what extent do committees influence decision making.**