



HOUSE-TRAINED REGULATORS?

The desire to hold regulatory agencies to account, while insulating them from direct political involvement, is at the heart of regulatory politics. In the last decade or so, the United Kingdom has witnessed remarkable attempts by Parliament and its select committees to assert parliamentary control across different areas of regulation.

First of all, select committees nowadays hold pre-appointment hearings after the selection of candidates for high profile positions such as those of governor of the Bank of England, member of the Monetary Policy Committee, and chair of an independent regulatory agency. Such hearings can lead to testy encounters. For example, in September 2009, then Secretary of State Ed Balls refused to give in to the Education Committee's demand to overturn the decision to appoint Maggie Atkinson as Children's Commissioner for England.

Second, there have been demands for more parliamentary accountability regarding those statutory bodies dealing with professions – an area in which regulators such as the General Medical Council (GMC) scrutinise professionals' fitness to practise. The Privy Council – a formal advisory body in whose policy work only senior ministers participate – needs to consent to rule changes within the scope of the statutory provisions. In 2010, the Privy Council granted the Health Committee the right to hold annual accountability hearings with the GMC and the Nursing and Midwifery Council. This development has led to calls to increase parliamentary involvement in other areas of professional regulation.

Third, the debate about a potential legal backing for a new press regulator has highlighted the trade-offs between the concern to minimise the potential for political interference with the press and the demand to establish structures that would hold the regulator sufficiently accountable for its actions.

These examples highlight the kind of demands for enhanced control by, and accountability to, select