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Q15

Do Department -related Parliamentary Standing Committees keep the administration on its toes and inspire reverence for parliamentary control? Evaluate the working of such committees with suitable examples.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · GS II · 15 marks · Parliament and State Legislatures

Parliament and State legislatures - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers and privileges and issues arising out of these.

Core demand of the question

- Do Department-related **Parliamentary Standing Committees** keep the administration on its toes and inspire reverence for parliamentary control? Evaluate the working of such committees with suitable examples
- Honour the official stem. Evaluate with concrete committee illustrations
- Keep the explanation within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

DRSCs since 1993 scrutinise clustered ministries through Demands, bills and policy reports, off-camera and often by consensus.

They summon secretaries and use secretariat plus CAG-type numbers, which does keep officials on their toes.

Finance, Defence and Health committees are working examples of written justification extracted from ministries.

- **Reverence is weaker:** bills skip referral, Action Taken can be ritual, and the public sees the floor not the room.

Default referral and a floor debate on major reports would convert useful control into visible parliamentary authority.

Introduction

Department-related **Parliamentary Standing Committees**, in their present form from 1993, were meant to take ministries out of the glare of the whip and into clause-by-clause and rupee-by-rupee scrutiny. They do keep the administration on its toes on a good week. Reverence for parliamentary control is rarer: reports are often unread, and the House still passes bills without them.

Body

Design that can keep officials on their toes

- Twenty-four DRSCs cover clusters of ministries; members from both Houses sit off-camera, which allows cross-party questioning that the floor, under a whip, will not.

- They examine **Demands for Grants**, selected bills, and long-term policy, and they summon secretaries - a civil servant's most regular taste of Parliament outside a PAC hearing.
- Consensus reports, rather than division, are the culture; a ministry that is embarrassed in a unanimous report feels a professional sting even if the party numbers on the floor are safe.
- The committee secretariat and CAG-fed numbers give amateurs in the House a briefing they would not get in a shouting Question Hour.

Examples of working

- The **Standing Committee** on Finance has repeatedly gone into tax administration, GST architecture, and financial-sector bills, forcing the Department of Revenue to justify circulars in writing.
- The Committee on Defence has questioned capital acquisition delays and research outcomes, which is parliamentary control in a sector that prefers secrecy.
- Health and family-welfare committees have reported on drug regulation, COVID preparedness, and Ayushman-type coverage gaps, putting the Health ministry on a published clock.
- IT, communications, and home committees have examined data, telecom, and internal-security Demands, sometimes producing the only accessible public record of a technical bill.
- When the government refers a major bill - Insolvency, labour codes, or a data-protection draft in various years - the committee stage has extracted concessions; when it skips referral, the toes stay comfortable.

Limits on 'reverence'

- Referral of bills is not automatic; an executive in a hurry bypasses the committee, which teaches the administration that Parliament is optional.
- Attendance, party research capacity, and the chair's proximity to the ruling party vary; a captured chair does not inspire reverence.
- Reports are recommendatory; ministries file Action Taken notes that can be formulaic. Unlike a confidence vote, a DRSC cannot sack a minister.
- Secrecy of proceedings helps candour but hides the spectacle that creates public reverence; citizens see disruption on television, not a clerk sweating over a grant.

Evaluation

- **On the toes:** yes, for budget grants, for officials who must file replies, and for bills that actually go to committee - a real, under-advertised form of control.
- **Reverence:** only partly. The administration still treats the floor majority as the true master and the committee as a delay to be managed.
- **Recommendation:** default referral of all non-money bills, a published deadline for Action Taken, and a short floor debate on each major DRSC report, so control is seen as well as filed.

Flow diagram

Department-related Standing Committees -> Demands for Grants

Department-related Standing Committees -> Bills and policy reports

Demands for Grants -> Administration on its toes

Bills and policy reports -> Administration on its toes

Skip referral weak ATR -> Limited reverence

Administration on its toes -> Parliamentary control

Conclusion

Department-related **Standing Committees** keep the administration on its toes when Demands and bills actually meet them, as Finance, Defence and Health illustrations show. They do not yet inspire consistent reverence for parliamentary control, because referral is optional, reports are soft, and the public never sees the work. Strengthen the default and the follow-up, and the 1993 design will match its promise.

Facts & figures

1993 DRSC system

Present department-related standing committee architecture covering Union ministries in clusters.

Twenty-four committees

Approximate working number of DRSCs shared between the two Houses.

Demands for Grants

Annual financial scrutiny that is the committees' most regular hold on a ministry.

Standing Committee on Finance / Defence / Health

Illustrative committees that have grilled tax, acquisition and public-health administrations.

Action Taken reports

Ministry replies to recommendations; the soft end of control unless the House follows up.

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