Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Your Parliament Your Voice – CEMVO event

6 March 2017

Group 1 notes

Issues raised in the discussion

1. **Cross Party Groups**

- Confusion about who can take part and whether it is by invitation only.
- Felt that the people taking part were, in the main, 'usual suspects'.
- Low level of awareness
- Cost of travel to Edinburgh is a barrier

2. **Distance** – it was felt there are both physical and cultural barriers to getting involved

3. **Capacity** - with more powers there may be an argument for more MSPs but this wouldn't be acceptable to most people.

4. **Dissent** - party dominance and strong whips has meant that there is very little backbench dissent. This means that when there is a majority government it can be difficult for people to distinguish between Parliament and Government. The electoral system where parties choose list members helps to reinforce party dominance.

5. **Debates and questions** in the Chamber are very formulaic and ineffective.

6. **Committees**

- There is often a lack of expertise in MSPs
- Ministers are seldom challenged by their own party
- Membership changes too frequently

7. Parliamentary time – more flexibility might help but may not be popular

Recommendations

1. Parliament should be people friendly

- More participatory – e.g. on-line voting on issues
- MSPs more visible
- Needs broader educational approach to allow understanding

2. Committees

- More consistency of membership
- More expertise
- More diversity
- One suggested chaired by experts rather than MSPs (not maj view)
- Try to encourage stronger Parliament rather than party dominance and strength of whips.

Group 2 Notes

We asked: How easy is it to distinguish between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government?

You said: It important to know the difference but unless you are active in the Parliament's or Government's work then you probably won't know the difference. It's important to understand the difference because if you know more about the Scottish Parliament you can more easily know who to contact when you have an issue or want to give your views.

- We need to take a step back and ask what level of political engagement do people have – it has waxed and waned over the years and there are real differences in people's engagement. Whilst there are opportunities for greater engagement, people's level of motivation to engage with politics needs to be addressed.
- The advent of the Scottish Parliament has made it more clear what Parliament does as previously it was only Westminster.
- There is a need for more information about what Parliament does.
- It was suggested that there can be confusion when one party has an outright majority as it means the Parliament and Government are perceived as being the same. In those circumstances the strength of the opposition can make a real difference to how much the Parliament is seen as being distinct from the Scottish Government.

We asked: What has been your experience of engaging with the Scottish Parliament?

You said: The Parliament is seen as open and accessible which is the real quality of the Scottish Parliament. It has a combination of things – it is part of a wider UK set up but has its own devolved powers. Comments from colleagues are that they face greater challenges engaging with the UK Parliament and the National Assembly of Wales whilst it's a more positive experience at the Scottish Parliament. For example you don't have to use Freedom of Information requests to obtain information and you can get movement on issues.

- In relation to the register of lobby interests you said whilst there may be concerns about its impact on access to MSPs, if your organisation is open and willing to engage it is not so much an issue.
- There was a lot of engagement with cross party groups which provide opportunities to connect to MSPs, to seek support for motions and petitions and such groups can break down the barriers to taking forward an issue (especially in relation to sensitive issues).
- One issue for community organisations is responding to consultations – consultations are not that simple and can be a lot of work especially for organisations that don't have parliamentary officers. For smaller organisations, those with a dispersed membership which are not highly

organised or where there may be a range of views it can difficult to find the capacity to provide written views.

- In relation to the Muslim community there are approximately 100 mosques but their resources are engaged elsewhere e.g. teaching so they don't have the spare capacity to get involved. There are also lots of different leaders whilst other groups may have no key contacts at all.
- It was highlighted that there can be a variety of faiths within the Muslim community or there may a large number of languages (such as in Nigeria with 300-400 languages) so in order to seek their views you need to identify the key influences within that faith or language group. Some communities also don't have one set hierarchy like the different types of Christianity all of which make it more challenging for the Parliament to engage with them.
- One step forward would be to make the Parliament's process for engaging much simpler.
- MSPs are very welcoming and some faith groups had worked with them on big issues (rather than specific issues where there was less engagement) . In some cases different groups had worked together to engage on big issues such as same sex marriage but this was more difficult when the different groups didn't agree.

We asked: What would make Parliament more accessible?

You said: There a few key changes that could improve the Parliament's accessibility. Recognising the role of human rights is important and should come into every aspect of the Parliament's work. It needs to underpin the work of Committees and not be the preserve of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee.

There is also an accountability element of the challenge of engaging with more diverse groups in that the public servants working for the Parliament need to better reflect the diversity of the wider community.

- The Parliament needs to empower communities – at the moment it doesn't reach the grass roots who need to understand SP better so that any engagement with the Scottish Parliament is not fragmented.
- Communities need to better resourced with information, power and resources;
- It was highlighted that business also faces similar challenges in engaging with diverse communities as they only really skate across the surface rather than reaching into communities.
- Much more publicity about the Parliament is needed, as many people only become aware of the Parliament when it is an issue.
- The Parliament needs to simplify how it asks people to get involved by asking people their opinions, and not get lost in statistics. Committees need to use dedicated and simplified questioning so people can more easily come back with their opinion.
- Some ethnic groups can be found in every part of Scotland no matter where you are and in those circumstances it is then about scale. It doesn't serve

ethnic groups well to talk about volume when it comes to seeking views – it should be more about diversity.

- Lack of awareness of the Scottish Parliament is also an educational issue.
- The University of Strathclyde's work was highlighted where diverse communities are all brought together to experience each other's culture thus breaking down barriers to understanding – it was suggested that the Parliament might adopt this approach.
- MSPs are usually the first person people approach and the Government is seen as being approachable.
- There is a lack of diversity in elected office. Whilst some improvements had been made in relation to gender, it was queried as to who was responsible for putting forward more diverse candidates for consideration. Whilst it was agreed that people need to be selected as candidates on their own merit, there is a difference between locally and nationally elected politicians with much more diverse representation at a local level. One reason this might be is because there is a closer connection between local councillors and voters.
- It was noted that for most of the time people vote for the party and not ethnicity.

Your top three recommendations:

- The face of government, MSPs and Parliament staff needs to represent the diversity of Scotland and there needs to be more proactive recruitment of people of ethnicity ('you can't be what you can't see');
- More targeted approaches from Scottish Parliament to share experiences and break down barriers across communities including a specific programme to 'experience' the Scottish Parliament; an opening for listening;
- equality and diversity should be more of a focus in Committee work.

Group 3 Notes

Issues raised in the discussion

1. Engagement

- Communities that are predominantly of working age, with young families already lead busy lives with not a lot of spare time to spend engaging with the Parliament. Parliament needs to be able to fit around their lives if it is series about engaging with them.
- There is some confusion concerning who you should contact if you have a concern to raise. For example understanding who has responsibility: councillor, MSP, MP, MEP, Government Minister etc. This can act as a barrier and prohibit people from engaging. It was recommended that more education is provided to people, via schools/community groups etc. to clearly explain the differences.
- Another recommendation was that Parliament should get out into communities to explain its role and how they can provide their views to influence decision making. This would empower communities who feel they do not have a say in the decisions being made.

2. Diversity of MSPs

- The Scottish Parliament should reflect the diversity of the communities they represent. Initiatives such as the 50/50 campaign should be used by parities to promote wider diversity when selecting candidates. For it to succeed it is important to start engaging people at an early age.
- Parities should also do more to encourage people from all Ethnic Minority communities to become involved as activists, as this is the general route to becoming an MSP.

3. Scrutiny and legislation

- Increased scrutiny of Equality Impact assessments for legislation
- Equalities concerns all policy areas, therefore it shouldn't be restricted to just one Committee responsible for looking at it.

4. Website

- It can be difficult to find the information you are looking for on the Scottish Parliament's website due to the amount of information on it. A mobile app where information was sorted by topic, for example health, housing etc. would make it easier for people to get the information they want. Currently you have to know the committee responsible for a policy area to get any information.

5. Language

- The language used by Parliament can be a barrier for communities. Not everyone understands the political jargon used. Currently reports expect a certain degree of prior knowledge from the reader. This can discourage people from reading them.
- Therefore Parliament should produce a plain English version of all reports.

Recommendations

Workforce: The Scottish Parliament and Parties should do more to promote diversity of staff and skills. This will improve the relevance of Parliament to communities who currently feel unrepresented.

Language: Plain English versions of all Parliament materials.

Engagement: The Parliament should work closer with communities to build strong relationships.