

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Scottish Parliamentary Service event

Monday 23 January 2017

We asked: how can we improve Parliamentary checks and balances?

You said:

Changes would be valuable if they help to better achieve:

- sufficient time for effective scrutiny, including committees setting their own agendas
- Sufficient resource to support better scrutiny
- enhanced support for members as Parliamentarians & committee members, to balance their roles as party members and constituency representatives.
- Increased capacity to focus scrutiny on long-term impact, in addition to short-term effectiveness, and on the policy areas that have the most complexity and impact.

Summary of ideas members of this group thought had most potential:

- More resources to develop members' scrutiny skills
- More resources going into supporting members on committees eg clerks and researchers
- More post-legislative scrutiny
- Greater input to committees from external experts
- Better planned/longer timetables for bill scrutiny, from Stage 1 to Stage 3
- More creative and flexible sitting patterns for Chamber and committees
- Discussion about the number of MSPs and how they are elected
- Elected committee conveners

Ideas in more detail:

Time

Committees could be asked to propose the timetable for bills they are scrutinising to make sure sufficient time is allowed – including taking account of lost time in recesses and committee's previously agreed work

Revisit structure of the Parliamentary week – The changes to the sitting patterns made during Session 4 have resulted in some Committees having less time for meetings. It is especially difficult for Committees to now undertake visits outside Edinburgh (which used to be possible on Tuesdays as Parliament did not sit in the afternoon).

Better balance between legislation and debates in the Parliament with more time for bills at Stage 3 – e.g. across two days where necessary. Time could be found by

having fewer debates on general topics (which can sometimes struggle for speakers for the time initially allocated).

Experiment with more flexibility about timetabling in debates – so that people can take interventions confident that they will still be able to complete their speech, thus facilitating greater debate between members.

Members' business is important to the groups involved in the topic but can sometimes be less well attended by MSPs. Could these debates take place in a Committee Room which might provide for a better atmosphere and also make more available in the Chamber?

More committee time could be created by allowing committees to meet at the same time as the Chamber more often.

Sub-committees could be used more often especially for committees like Justice who have always had difficulty undertaking scrutiny inquiries because they have so much legislation to consider.

More flexibility over timing of decision time so that debates don't have to be artificially extended or curtailed.

Resources

More debate about whether there are enough MSPs to fill backbench roles with the advent of new powers (and more to come).

Smaller Committee memberships would enable most members to focus on one committee only (as recommended by SPPA Committee at end of last session). This could also free up members' time for external engagement or acting as reporters to committees on particular topics (a power of committees that has not been fully utilised).

Review the number of full-time equivalent staff supporting different areas over the Parliament's life and compare to the workload (number of committees, major new policy areas taken on), increased expectation of wider public engagement, including digital. Such a review should look at the workload on all teams e.g. SPICe briefing on a wider set of issues, OR and broadcasting covering more hours when more committees are meeting and more regularly, demands on Outreach when committees want more public engagement.

Is there scope for more flexibility across the staff body eg could some staff who have more pronounced weekly peaks and troughs of work take on secondary roles in other offices?

Make more use of external experts to support committees' scrutiny capacity – including people working closely with committee over a period of time ("virtual committee members").

Short inquiries can be a very effective use of resource – but they need to be followed up later. Committees' recommendations also need to be followed up over time, to maintain pressure on the government to implement fully. .

Members as Parliamentarians

Continue and enhance the programme of professional development for members and members' staff including whether consideration of whether further resource might be required to support the programme.

Reconsider electing committee Conveners (as happens in House of Commons and Welsh Assembly)

Further consider the list system for election of regional members to create stronger links between individual regional members and their constituents eg using open rather than closed lists

Better and wider promotion of Committee successes and impacts so that public is more aware of the work that members are undertaking on committees

Focus on policy impact & importance

Better coordination of cross-cutting work by committees

More post-legislative scrutiny (which may happen now that there is a committee with responsibility)

Review new powers to ensure there is nothing falls outside of committee remits eg which Committee is responsible for elections?

Review whether the Bill process allows sufficient time to scrutinise all the detail and workability of the Bill especially in light of later agreed amendments.

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We asked: How can the Scottish Parliament ensure its identity is distinct from the Scottish Government.

You said:

- Media use of the term 'Holyrood' to describe both Parliament and Government can cause confusion amongst the public. This can negatively impact on the perceived impartiality of the Parliament if the public view them as being one and the same as well as on people's willingness to give evidence (if they didn't vote for the Government of the day).
- The Scottish Parliament building has become almost too successful as it is now almost always used as an image by the media when discussing anything political (Parliament or Government) in Scotland. This has possibly impacted on the Parliament's ability to create a unique identity.
- The message about what the Parliament is for too complex to easily convey to people. This is without considering the unique roles of the different parts of Parliament (chamber, committees, convenors etc.)
- If people do not feel their views are represented and there is a lack of understanding about the unique role of Parliament then it can put people off engaging. It is important people understand their views are represented.
- Unless people go seeking information about the Parliament it can be very difficult to ever identify the difference between SG and SP. Are there any high profile awareness programs?
- Currently it can be difficult for people to get information about subject or policy areas from the website. You have to know which Committee is looking into your area of interest before being able to get the information.
- The multiple use of the building by both Government Ministers and Parliament for administrative purposes can confuse the public. People can often come into Parliament wanting to speak to the Government or Ministers, rather than visiting the Scottish Government's buildings. Where can people go to access or speak to Scottish Ministers (what is the role of the Parliament in facilitating access to Ministers of the Scottish Government)?
- The small number of MSPs compared with the House of Commons can create the impression Parliament doesn't truly act independently from Government.

Where we want to be

- When speaking with the press stress the importance of differentiating between Parliament and Government. Only use 'Holyrood' to describe the work of the Parliament and create a clear visual identity between the two (for example when discussing Scottish Government policies or decisions could a picture of St. Andrews house be used). It was highlighted that media used images of the UK Parliament when referring to the House of Commons or and No 10 when referring to the UK Government.
- Could the Parliament make better use of the media to highlight the work of the Parliament such as a documentary series following the work of the Parliament such as the recent House of Commons documentary. It could focus on how people outside of Parliament engage, for example following a petition from introduction, giving evidence to Committee etc. people coming into visit MSPs (their life story bit), following people looking after the building. This would help show all the different ways Parliament works, focusing on the people rather than the politics.
- Education from an early age about the importance of the unique role of Parliament has in holding the Government to account and representing not just the views of those who voted for the Government but all of society. Parliament can, and should play a key role in this education (through school visits, educating visitors).
- Using a system trialled elsewhere, develop ambassadors in communities who can promote the work of the Parliament. People will know who they can go to in their community to find out information. This will empower and enable people to become more involved with the work of the Parliament. Could use people who have previously engaged with Parliament.
- It was recognised that a strong Parliament holding the Government of the day to account, will increase awareness of Parliament as an independent body representing the views of all people in Scotland.
- Improve the website to allow quicker and easier access to information on topics and policy areas that affect them.

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We asked: How could the Scottish Parliament engage better with the people of Scotland?

You said:

Personalise Parliament

Engaging using issues and people's experience is more effective at generating interest and interaction. People like concrete examples.

- The Moving Stories travelling exhibition which told individual stories about people's experiences was a good model but costly to take on tour.
- A video booth in the Main Hall may be a relatively inexpensive way of gathering views and personal experiences although it would need to be managed and perhaps themed to tie in with current business.
- Use Parliament staff to explain what they do and how the public can influence decisions – such as through house videos.
- Could the focus of publications/resources/tours etc be moved to issues rather than the building and internal procedures?
- Could the image for engagement be made less 'corporate'. One suggestion was to commission a young film maker to produce something fresh looking.

Education

People in general don't understand how the Parliament works including what's devolved and reserved, and the difference between Parliament and Government.

- This should be included in all education visits programmes
- New approaches such as twilight session in schools for parents should be considered
- Is there an opportunity to provide training around this for MSP staff as they speak to lots of people in the community
- More opportunities for SP staff to learn about all roles within the Parliament. This could lead to more understanding, collaboration and reduce any duplication.

Marketing and research

The Parliament needs to further improve marketing and should consider whether there is a need for a specific marketing department. This could lead to more effective research into:

- Who our audiences are
- What message we put out
- How and why we engage
- How to measure outcomes
- What would encourage engagement

- Collaborative marketing
- The purpose of politics and the Parliament and what we do.

This could result in a more focussed and effective engagement strategy where outcomes could be measured.

Methodology

Diverse methods of engagement are necessary to meet needs of Parliament and those wishing to engage. The use of digital resources needs to be better evaluated to ensure their usefulness and effectiveness. It was felt that often they are used just because they are there.

Greater thought should be given to what type of consultation should take place in each circumstance. There should be more facilitated engagement rather than ad hoc views being collected via social media.

Realistic expectations of the outcomes of engaging with the Parliament should be set out for those participating.

It was felt that the Parliament could get out to the people more, building on the models used for PO away days and Parliament Days.

it was suggested that a more diverse experience should be provided for casual visitors to encourage them to become more interested in the Parliament.

It was questioned whether there was an opportunity to enable MSPs to work with local communities to raise awareness of the issues being debated.

Communication

The quality of all communication both internally and externally could be further improved including:

- Upgrading the website so that it is more mobile friendly and improving the search engine
- more participative two way interaction than providing information only
- A more joined up approach across the whole organisation.