

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Meeting with Anne Dame Anne Begg

Tuesday 28 February 2017

We asked: How has the House of Commons sought to improve its scrutiny and what might improve how the Scottish Parliament works?

You said:

Over the past few years House of Commons Committees have undergone a period of change which has resulted in the public (and those with disabilities) being more engaged with Committees' work including through social media.

As a former Chair of the Department or Work and Pension Committee, a key element of this success could be attributed to election of Chairs but the smaller number of MSPs in the Scottish Parliament might reduce this success. Being the Chair of a House of Commons Committee was very demanding despite the valuable support of clerks.

There are more opportunities to develop an alternative career path for MPs (than becoming a Minister) as the numbers are much larger and not everyone expects to be a Minister in their time.

Continuity of membership was also a key element of the success of House of Commons Committees although there was some turnover. For a Committee to be successful membership should be no more than 11 MPs. Committee do travel but it is less frequent if it involves too much time away such as overnight but overnight travel can be beneficial in terms of building Committee camaraderie.

The appointment of members to a committee should be taken out of the hands of the Party whips.

There should be different types of committees, following the Westminster model. Legislation should be dealt with by a Bill committee specifically constituted for that Bill. The members would be expected to have or gain some kind of expertise on the subject so they can lay and debate amendments as the Bill proceeds. Committees in the style of a Westminster Select Committee should be appointed for the term of the Parliament and have an intrinsic role in Parliament's scrutiny of the Executive.

Westminster Hall (WH) debates were valued by back bench MPs because of the high demand to speak in the main Chamber. WH debates provided an additional speaking opportunity for MPs and on occasion those debates could be packed with MPs wanting to speak whilst others may only have a few speakers. The Speaker selects the business for WH debates.

Given there is so much business going on at Westminster there are sometimes clashes for MPs in terms of trying to attend main Chamber debates, WH debate and Committee work which may be going on at the same time especially now that there is urgent business. MPs have to watch how they use their time.

MPs have longer to speak (8-10 mins minimum) in the Chamber than MSPs.

Westminster has learned from the Scottish Parliament's approach to engagement.

There are some opportunities for the Scottish Parliament to learn from changes at the House of Commons (such as the House of Commons Committee report on [Rebuilding the House](#) - also referred to as the Wright reforms):

- strengthened scrutiny – more control by clerks than Ministerial offices with Committee briefings from specialists and clerks
- More powers for Chairs compared with other posts such as shadow Ministerial posts and a clearer separation of select and standing roles of Committees;
- More post legislative scrutiny (instead of proposing new legislation taking time to understand more fully why it didn't work previously).

In terms of parties' power – numbers matter but for a Parliament to be effective it needs a few members to be awkward with their parties (and this doesn't necessarily mean breaking the whip). The parties in Scotland have more control over candidate selection which may contribute to increased party power at the Scottish Parliament but there is still a role for individual MSPs to take their role seriously.

Despite the proportional representation system in the Scottish Parliament there hadn't been the great inroads in the diversity of MSPs perhaps originally expected. In that regard Westminster is doing better than people might expect. More work was needed to encourage people from lower socio-economic areas to move into politics and becoming elected politicians. They are active in other spheres such as unions but potentially see becoming an elected politician as too expensive. Parliament should act as a key gatekeeper and challenge the Parties to put their house in order in relation to diversity of candidates. Potentially this could be easier with the proportional representation system.

In terms of the roles of MPs, MSPs and Local Government and the case work or local issues that they act on, there is a distinction between advocacy and policy work, but for the public there is no distinction if their representative gets the job done. That is grass roots engagement.

Training should be given to new MSPs on how to be an effective questioner.

Individual MSPs must take their scrutiny role seriously. This is particularly important for MSPs of the governing party. They are not there to nod through legislation or to protect their government from criticism in a committee or the Chamber. The purpose

of detailed scrutiny is to improve governance and to make legislation better, and the last thing a government backbencher should want is for their government to get things wrong because of their failure to pick up on obvious flaws.