

## Commission on Parliamentary Reform

### Fort William, Lochaber meeting

Friday 10 March 2017

Following introductions and welcome from John Finnie MSP, **we asked: How well is the Parliament working?**

#### **You said:**

- Most people do recognise they have 8 MSPs but regional MSPs don't usually hold enough surgeries and get out an about. As a result you are more likely to contact your constituency MSP. In some cases you might copy in other regional MSPs;
- It would be helpful if the Parliament could provide information to explain which MSPs represent an area that could then be used by all voluntary organisations to show to people;
- People tend think of those MSPs that you know as being the only representatives of the local area;
- Having 8 MSPs can be an advantage as you can cherry pick which MSP to approach such as depending upon which Committee they are on;
- You had experienced a wide range of engagement with the Parliament from attending a Committee meeting (when you were asked through a third party to attend as there is no national body); contacting all MSPs as part of work with advisory group; or in your role as a Community Councillor (in relation to road infrastructure);
- It was great to have local MSPs available to contact;
- People don't really think about how to contact that Parliament although some had visited the Parliament;
- The Parliament's outreach department was a very useful part of Parliament but it depends on willingness of MSPs to get involved;
- The Parliament needed a listening mechanism to make things better – it should be very much about listening and a two way process;
- Parliament is remote – it is too far removed from the people that they represent. There are councillors who are 65 miles away who will represent us but you then need the whole of Highlands to agree to get anything done. In that regard decisions need to be taken more locally. The Scottish Parliament is great but it needs a middle tier to connect to communities and civic Scotland;
- Parliament consultations can be flawed – they are held in big cities, missing the rural part of issues or else you have to travel to Edinburgh to represent that view. That is why the Parliament's Outreach meetings are excellent as they are held locally and you get to hear MSP opinions rather than their party's views.
- There needs to be more contact between MSPs and people; could more be made of skype (broadband permitting) to speak to Committees?

- Some had experienced considerable delays in hearing back from MSPs which can put people off contacting MSPs again. Others had found that all their MSPs had responded to them when they had written to them about a local issue. Some noted that if as a disabled person you experienced a barrier in getting a response from your MSP then you wouldn't try and contact the Parliament. Some questioned whether democracy was broken if MSPs aren't even able to reply to people.
- When MSPs are not re-elected then the knowledge and skills of their staff is lost and people can feel their case has been 'lost' which means they don't think highly of the Parliament;
- It was suggested that more could be made of local offices to support links between MSPs and local areas. Some questioned whether MSPs get enough support especially given they may be covering a large area.
- The Parliament should do more to publicise its successes which would encourage more people to get involved. It was recognised that not everyone can be helped.
- The 8 MSPs representing an area should be working together, and there is too much party politics when what was needed was combined representation – to work together so issues don't become a political football;
- Party politics discourages people from getting involved – especially as MSPs will follow the party line;
- People did not see any difference in the term Holyrood – meaning both Parliament and Government. More recently the Parliament had become more distinct due to there not being a majority political party in the Parliament -then people can see parties work together to oppose the Scottish Government;
- Most people are not aware of what the Parliament does and see it as the Government – very few people know the actual workings;
- 95% people in Scotland only see what is on the TV or newspapers and that doesn't really make them think about it in between elections;
- It was recognised that whilst more capacity needed to be built in communities so they could engage with the Parliament there wasn't really an interest other than from the same people. The Parliament is not engaging with wider public at that level. Education was important and local offices could perhaps do a lot more;
- Some said they had seen MSPs in local schools but the average youngster is not engaged (although a few are proactive);
- Remote and rural areas are overlooked and the use of single outcome agreements meant that councils rather than the Parliament were seen by communities as the place to focus on seeking funding;
- Some questioned whether there was any benefit to scrutinising legislation that did not include any enforcement mechanism or where there was already existing law – where is the benefit?

- There is a role for more post legislative scrutiny and the Parliament could use active community groups such as the Lochaber Disability Access Panel to help broker engagement with those impacted directly by legislation;
- One of biggest problems with any post legislative scrutiny undertaken was that the same people who gave evidence during the consideration of the Bill are the same who speak about how the Act has been implemented. It was questioned whether they represent the people they are supposed to represent when there may be different views across communities;
- The Parliament needs to find better ways for disabled peoples voices to be heard equally well as national organisations – it is about having space for dissenting voices;
- It is then for MSPs to decide how to interpret those views;
- It was also highlighted that there can be duplicate consultations on the same issues and then cherry picked sections from responses are used as evidence;
- It was felt that civil servants had to trust and value lived experience more;
- Scottish Parliament needs to review how much of the information they seek is relevant. Some don't have time to consult their members so they end up compiling the response themselves – creating more work – with the response being an amalgamation of views rather than reflecting the difference that may exist between different groups;
- Local organisations are sometimes encouraged to respond to their central body and not directly to the Parliament;
- More use could be made of third sector or local organisations to promote and educate people about the Parliament and MSPs – acting as an ambassador for the Parliament.

#### Key recommendations from the meeting participants:

- Funded independent advocacy to provide access on the ground;
- MSPs in the Highland area working together get information and access;
- People at the bottom want their voices heard and not disregarded – Parliament should be coming lower down to find that information;
- When Parliament affects people's lives people will get involved;
- There needs to be more clarity about who does what e.g. the new powers of social security;
- More Parliamentary engagement in Fort William would be welcomed.