

## **Commission on Parliamentary Reform**

### **Meeting with RSE, Monday 20 February 2017**

#### **Note of meeting**

##### **Present—**

Rt Hon George Reid, Fellow, RSE

Professor David Bell, Fellow, RSE

Bristow Muldoon, Head of Policy Advice and Parliamentary Affairs, RSE

John McCormick, Chair, Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Geoff Mawdsley, Member, Commission on Parliamentary Reform.

##### **Relevant papers—**

Response from the RSE to the Commission's call for written views (CPR/011)

##### **Engagement—**

- Scottish Parliament is accessible and has engaged well but more could be done.
- The Scottish Parliament could do more to engage more fully and have dialogue with the public – it needs new voices to be heard and using new methods. For example, committee witnesses should be able to question MSPs. Outreach Services is making important developments in this area.
- It was suggested that, for some organisations, 'engaging' with the parliament has come to mean 'lobbying' the parliament.
- The emphasis should be on sustained, long term engagement.

##### **Identity—**

- The Scottish Parliament will earn a strong identity through the quality and commitment to hold the Scottish Government to account and this must be the Commission's focus.

##### **Holding the Scottish Government to account—**

- There was too much discussion about a 'new politics' when the Scottish Parliament was established and this has not materialised. The political system is adversarial. There is too much opportunism, with parties taking advantage of events to score political points.
- There is a case for elected committee conveners. There should also be more independent support and research for conveners.
- There should be more post-legislative scrutiny.
- Longer term analysis should be more of a priority, making more use of links with academia and Scotland's Futures Forum (SFF).
- There should be support and opportunity for parties to have 'space to think' outside party conferences.
- Committees need more resources and should make better use of SFF, commission research and RSE.
- Institutions might be cautious about civic participation models as they are seen as a potential rival.

- There should be more support to help members understand legislation better. There should also be better quality legislation.
- Committee reporters should be used more often.
- Committee membership should be more stable to address the ‘musical chairs’ of previous sessions.
- It was suggested the PO is more important than the Speaker in the House of Commons as the PO chairs the Parliamentary Bureau and SPCB and has “discrete influence around the back”.
- It was suggested it would not be in the government’s interests to encourage debate and scrutiny and party whips try to limit the PO’s abilities to manage debates through nominated speaking lists, etc.
- There is a lack of focus on science and technology issues.

### **Fiscal scrutiny—**

- It is important to consider whether public money has been spent correctly and spent effectively.
- There is an issue about the extent to which committees are interested in engaging with Audit Scotland about effective spending.
- More priority should be given to following up preventative spending and to track it over the longer term.
- Committees should give more focus to following up government spending against its Outcome Agreements.
- The UK has one of the least debated budgets in the world. It is too late to focus on the proposed budget within the current budget process – September to February – plus, there are delays, political trade-offs which exacerbate the difficulties.

### **Capacity—**

- Consideration should be given to increasing the number of MSPs and extending the parliamentary week.
- There should be greater flexibility of timings for Chamber debates and committees should be able to meet at the same time as plenary session.