

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Meeting with SCVO Intermediaries' Network, Wednesday 8 March 2017

Note of discussions

The following points were raised—

- The initial focus of the Scottish Parliament, as envisaged by the CSG, was “to do politics differently and better”, with greater involvement of civil society. This is a recurring theme today. There is scope for a three way partnership between the Scottish Parliament, civil society and the third sector and it should be easier and more valued for civil society, through the third sector, to be represented. There is a sense the Scottish Parliament has become “tired, lazy, introverted and more difficult to engage with”.
- Whilst the Scottish Parliament as an institution, especially the committees, are easy to engage with at evidence gathering stage, strong party discipline at report drafting stage means committees are less critical and less willing to hold the Government to account than at the House of Commons.
- It must be more difficult for those who are not professionally connected to the Scottish Parliament to engage with the parliamentary process.
- There are lots of opportunities for different forms of scrutiny, such as post-legislative scrutiny, which are not being maximised. Post-legislative scrutiny would represent “genuine follow through” of holding the government to account in some policy areas.
- There is a problem with capacity in the Scottish Parliament, members are being spread too thinly across too many committees and their other roles. Members and committees are not resourced sufficiently. Possible solutions suggested were an increase in the number of MSPs and a second chamber.
- Parliamentary debates are too managed in terms of the speaking lists and too many speeches being read. It was argued there is better quality and more effective debate in the House of Commons chamber.
- It was felt that the level of scrutiny undertaken in Scottish Parliament committees was less robust and members less informed than at the House of Commons.
- It was felt the Scottish Parliament is good at engagement and will make the effort to engage in new ways with young people/people who do not feel comfortable giving evidence in the ‘traditional’ format. It was recognised some of this work can be very resource intensive to organise.
- Strong concerns were raised by the short timescales being imposed by some committees who have adopted the approach of undertaking a number of short and focused inquiries. It was stressed that a written response can involve a significant amount of work which is very challenging to meet within a three week deadline. It was also argued that, where an issue crosses into the remit of other committees, it can be disappointing when a committee considers them solely in relation to their remit.
- The role of social media was discussed. Some argued it was easier to get a response from an MSP through Twitter than via email. It was argued the Scottish Parliament shouldn't rely too much on social media as it risks devaluing debate on complex issues and it is important to publish some information in order for it to be ‘on the record’.

- The role of Outreach and Education teams were complimented, but were felt to be under-resourced, disconnected from committees and parliamentary business.
- It was suggested the Parliament meet outwith Edinburgh, perhaps for a week. It was argued that if this was done on a systematic basis, it wouldn't appear tokenistic.
- The number of MSPs who have no work experience from outside the "parliamentary bubble" prior to their election was highlighted as a concern as they are "more like each other and less like us".
- The role of the party in controlling who gets selected to stand for election was stressed.
- The 'family friendly' working pattern was noted, albeit that it only really applied to members living in the central belt. It was also noted there are different interpretations of 'family friendly', where someone is a carer for an elderly or disabled relative.
- It was suggested the diversity could be increased by a greater use of job sharing, remote working (and use of technology such as Skype).
- Diversity of MSPs was seen to be a responsibility of the parties but it was felt the Scottish Parliament needs to have the structures in place to facilitate and encourage a diverse chamber.
- Parliament should be able to plan its future workload as there is enough awareness of some business – such as the annual budget process – in advance.
- The role and authority of a Convener, in comparison with the Chair of a House of Commons select committee, was raised.
- The Scottish Parliament should consider whether it has a role in scrutinising the performance of public bodies.