

The Commission Secretariat  
Room CG.07  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
Scotland  
EH99 1SP

22 February 2017

Dear John,

**Commission on parliamentary reform.**

Although I have already made a submission to the commission on the subject of reforming the voting system to improve the engagement between the Scottish Parliament and the people of Scotland, ahead of the session with Business Managers I would like to submit this second letter to you about issues of procedural reform which I feel need to be addressed.

I believe that the current system of debate management and the management of Ministerial Statements is in need of real overhaul.

There are five political parties recognised as political groups in the Parliament which have representation on the Business Bureau. However, two of these parties are treated in an inferior way in debate management.

At the moment, the opening speaker from the Conservative and Labour parties are always called to speak first and in order. They are given a great deal of time to speak. After they have finished speaking their back benchers are called to speak, normally for just 6 minutes.

The opening speakers from the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Greens are not given opening speeches or opening questions and are relegated in the "batting order". This practice is quite frankly poor debate management if one of the main purposes of any debate is for the political parties to "set out their stalls" to inform the course of debate.

I do not question the fact that the two smaller parties are only ever allocated one speaker but it is quite unacceptable that their opening speaker, and in important debates it is often the party leader who speaks, is treated by the debate management system as just another back bencher. This treatment is not only unfair but fails to acknowledge the distinctive contribution that parties can make and quite frankly is simply dysfunctional to effective debate.

This dysfunctional process can sometimes be circumvented when the Presiding Officer selects an amendment submitted by either the Greens or the Liberal Democrats. However, this is a circumvention of the debate management system and as such it tries to make a dysfunctional system more acceptable!

I would suggest that every political party represented in the Business Bureau is treated in the same way in the Chamber. This would mean that there should be opening speakers from all the parties, the length of their contribution reflecting their party strength. Once this has been done the debate should then move to back bench contributions. This would ensure that the debate genuinely reflects opinions in the chamber and should lead to debates becoming more effective and relevant to the people we represent.

One further change which should be examined by the Commission to ensure debates become more topical is to look at the way time for debates in the chamber is allocated.

I do recognise that the vast majority of time in the Chamber needs to be allocated to the government of the day in order to get its programme through Parliament.

However, I would like to see a system developed where one debating session per couple of weeks is allocated by the Presiding Officer in much the same way as Topical Questions are allocated.

Topical Questions are a new development and have worked tremendously well. If all the Scottish Political parties on the Bureau submitted a motion for debate on a topical issue this could be selected by the Presiding Officer for this "slot". This would ensure the topicality of the debate and would enhance the Parliament in the eyes of the public.

I look forward to exploring these two issues with the Commission at our meeting on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March.

Yours sincerely,

Mike Rumbles, MSP