

From: Dorothy-Grace Elder, former MSP and journalist who often writes about the Parliament.

Commission on Parliamentary Reform. Submission.

I'm glad that the Commission is concentrating on scrutiny, engagement and identity. It is everyday working practice which can be improved relatively simply.

The public and MSPs require aid over engagement and scrutiny.

Scrutiny: Backbench committee needed.

I raised previously with you – and repeat in this formal submission - the need for a Backbench Committee to ensure that more voices are heard better - which would aid scrutiny. It is a ridiculous situation that someone with expert knowledge of a subject can be confined to only a few minutes in debates - or cut out - because they are a backbencher. (I've seen that happen on health issues to a doctor MSP with decades of NHS experience who was a backbencher at the time.) Holyrood promised in 1999 to “do things differently”.

Parties should not expect long allotted slots to be given automatically to front benchers every time, irrespective of any expertise on a subject. Ministers get lavish set time – and from 1999 to today, you could sometimes observe Ministers struggling to fill their time, while every unnecessary minute meant others risked being cut down or cut out. There will still be many times when it is right to allow Ministers full time.

The present PO has tried for fairness. But Holyrood remains a front bench Parliament, a rather snooty concept. Parties draw up Speakers' lists. Non favourites of Party establishments, usually the outspoken, can be given worst places and timings.

The need for backbench fairness in many aspects beyond debates was mentioned widely at the evidence taking from former MSPs. Few viewers would believe Scotland has 129 MSPs due to over concentration on the same cast.

Suggested action: Establishment of a backbench committee plus discussion with the Presiding Officer, Parties and Government over time slots.

Scrutiny & engagement: derisory replies to questions.

Parliamentary questions by MSPs, especially written questions (the majority) are meant to be a key form of scrutiny. But official answers are often a disgrace to transparency claims. MSPs question Government on issues raised with them by the public. The paucity of many replies is embarrassing. Some 7,605 written PQs were lodged last year, reportedly costing £91,000, (a debatable figure). But the inadequate, low standard of many replies is insulting to public intelligence. Behind scenes, the civil service often supplies fuller briefing sheets for a minister - the civil service is not wholly responsible for the result.

Pathetic non answers add to claims of dodging openness and a culture of secretiveness, much of it kneejerk and unnecessary. Similar brush offs are also given regularly in letters from departments directly to the public.

Anything goes as this random sample indicates;

Here, a) the same useless reply is duplicated over two different questions on one subject.

b) That both questions involve equality of patient access to a specific NHS hospital, is not addressed.

Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (Scottish National Party): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that people from all NHS board areas have equal access to treatment at the Glasgow Homoeopathic Hospital.

(S4W-27954)

Maureen Watt: Some of the therapies delivered at the Centre for Integrative Care are also provided locally by some NHS boards. It is open to NHS boards in Scotland to make such services available based on an assessment of needs within their respective areas.

Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (Scottish National Party): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance it will provide to people wanting treatment at the Glasgow Homoeopathic Hospital if their NHS board refuses to pay for it.

(S4W-27955)

Maureen Watt: Some of the therapies delivered at the Centre for Integrative Care are also provided locally by some NHS boards. It is open to NHS boards in Scotland to make such services available based on an assessment of needs within their respective areas.

Suggested Action: That there is an independent review of PQ replies – especially to written questions - and a radical improvement plan. Also, a review of departmental letters to MSPs and the public.

Scrutiny: Takeover by unelected organisations and quangos.

Quangos and other unelected bodies cost around £12 billion, roughly a third of the whole Scottish budget but Parliamentary scrutiny of them is extremely difficult, sometimes impossible.

The interests of Parliament and public are being overlorded by unelected bodies of various kinds allowed to become increasingly powerful. For instance, Health Boards declare that they ‘are answerable to Scottish ministers’ but ministers increasingly hand over to – or are accused of hiding behind - boards and quangos, avoiding direct accountability.

This situation (concerning two health quangos), was pursued by the Health and Sport Committee in January and February 2017 who queried quango “independence” and value to the public. However, there are scores more quangos beyond health, remaining largely unchallenged and unscrutinised.

Suggested action: All lack of transparency by unelected bodies should be subject to a Parliamentary inquiry, assisted by independent University researchers. All Parliamentary questions involving unelected bodies should have answers studied.

Public Engagement: Member’s Debates

The most damaging sight to the perception of public engagement is of the Chamber emptying when a subject affecting huge numbers (e.g. health, environment, education) gets poor MSP attendance because it is a Member’s debate. These debates don’t have a vote and MSP attendance is not therefore compulsory. Not all MSPs leaving the Chamber are "rushing to get their tea" - many have evening engagements for

their Parties and Cross Party Groups to attend. But the exodus still looks awful. It makes for abysmal public relations, seen onTV and by those in the public gallery.

Suggested Action: Why not extend Parliament time to make sure most MSPs are still there and, as one ex MSP suggested: introduce a vote. As member's debates are supposed to be issue raising and consensual, unlike other debates, motions could be crafted to fit those requirements. A list of names is still important for the public to see.

Holyrood's scant time for member's debates does not compare with Westminster Hall debates. Scottish Parliament members put much work into their individual debates: so do supportive members of the public and charities who attend, who often put work into briefing sheets for all 129 members and are shocked at the regular stampede to leave.

Business Managers – too much power?

The "closed door" Party Business manager system which even chooses member's debates can encourage tribalism and also internal Party favouritism. The subject and its urgency should be paramount; not which Party or MSP is proposing an issue. In the Commons, Speaker John Bercow's promotion of urgent issues has been welcome. It is hoped that the Scottish Parliament's Presiding Officer's urge for reform is successful.

Action suggestion: Urgent important issues get priority on member's debates, as well as mainline debates, irrespective of Party or member.

Identity

That many people still do not understand the difference between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament is a tough one – but common to other Parliaments over centuries, and our Parliament is still in its teens!

Holyrood staff have done extensive promotion work, it must be acknowledged. Perhaps working with secondary school pupils, who can inform their families, may be the most fruitful.

A small, basic suggestion: please consider if putting a strapline at the foot of every letter sent by the Parliament to anyone clarifies that

the Parliament is separate from the Scottish Government. This could contain a simple link to the full explanation.

In all publicity, **petition** is a key tactic, embedding a basic message.

(Many also still do not realise that they can access eight different MSPs in their region and if first choice is not helpful, they can approach others. This is a tremendous asset point for the Scottish Parliament and not understanding this is a problem.)

Overall

Serious concerns over Party political dominance remain; obedience to Party lines dominates to a crushing degree.

There may not even need to be official whipping sometimes. Response is Pavlovian and some MSPs seem really scared not to toe the line completely.

Party groups operate in their own bubbles at Holyrood without independent scrutiny.

Bullying atmospheres behind scenes should be investigated for the good of the Parliament.

All that said, Holyrood is superior to Westminster in almost every facet of its approach.

The Scottish Parliamentary staff, from the first encounter by the public with the exceptionally good security staff to the front desk and others, deserve praise for their attitude and efforts.