

**Written views from Rt. Hon. Lord Jack McConnell****Background**

2010 – : Member, UK House of Lords

2001 – 2007: First Minister of Scotland

2000 – 2001: Minister for Education, Europe and External Relations

1999 – 2000: Minister for Finance

1999 – 2011: Member of the Scottish Parliament for Motherwell and Wishaw

I was a member of the Campaign for a Scottish Parliament in the 1980s and 1990s, and a member of the Scottish Constitutional Convention from 1990 and its Executive Committee from 1992-1998.

As Finance Minister, I led the first full Government bill through Parliament, the Public Finance and Accountability Act 2000, and I led on the Memorandum of Understanding with the UK Government. As First Minister, I proposed a number of changes to Parliamentary procedures in 2003/04 to improve the opportunities for Parliament to scrutinise the work of Scottish Ministers, but most were rejected. After 2011, some of those changes were implemented in part by the new Parliament.

**Introduction**

When the new Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, there was a genuine desire for the new Parliament to adopt a different style from the more traditional UK House of Commons. The initial principles of sharing power, accountability, accessibility and equal opportunities were broadly welcomed. Steps were taken to change the old practices and develop a new approach.

In some areas – notably in the Petitions Committee, the Freedom of Information Act, the budget process and Labour's implementation of a 50/50 approach to male/female representation – the new Parliament did indeed successfully implement these principles. But there has always been room for improvement, and some of the systems adopted in the early days have made the Parliament less effective rather than more.

The addition of significant new financial and taxation powers must surely lead to change and this review of Parliamentary procedures is therefore very welcome. It is important to hold to the founding principles, but also to learn from the experience of both coalition and majority Government, 17 years of a mixed-member electoral system, and the many debates and Acts of Parliament.

**Issues**

There are three areas that I would like to highlight and my contribution will be driven by the importance of transparency, the need to revitalise the link between MSPs and their constituents rather than their parties, and the role of the Scottish Parliament in providing a forum for national debate in these important times.

1. I believe that the balance between MSPs representing their constituents and being part of a collective party organisation has shifted too far in the direction of the party and is not strong enough in the connection with the constituents. I believe this is partly an outcome of the mixed-member electoral system, but also partly an outcome of the way in which the parties have operated internally, and how the committees function.
2. I believe there is a need to improve the opportunities for the Scottish Parliament to scrutinise Ministers, and to be a location for national debate. The reforms introduced to include time in the full Parliamentary Chamber earlier in the week are welcome but I believe that the hours of the Parliament should be more flexible and that the Ministerial Question Times need to change.
3. The Committees of the Parliament have involved a lot of hard work and have been a positive force for engagement with those outside the Parliament. But, with a few notable exceptions, they have neither significantly influenced legislation nor the direction of national policy. The Public Petitions Committee, the Education Committee in 2000 during the crisis facing the Scottish Qualifications Agency, and occasionally the Finance Committee have shown that it is possible to have a significant impact on events. However, committees are more partisan and reactive than was expected. There seems to be a need to change the system of appointments and to revisit the combination of roles between legislative scrutiny and longer term inquiries and reports.

#### **Further information provided by Lord McConnell**

1. In relation to the point about “whether Parliament should have a role in improving the quality of responses, policy and legislation”, the simple answer is, yes it should. In particular, I think that Parliament should take a much stronger line on unsatisfactory and late answers and there should be a specific responsibility somewhere for tackling this problem, and those responsible must be independent of the Government.