

Written views from Rt. Hon. Henry McLeish**Brief resume of discussion points**

The Scottish Parliament is a remarkable success story, 20 years on from the publication of the Scotland White Paper in 1997 and the endorsement by the people of Scotland in the September Referendum.

There are outstanding examples of innovation, ground breaking legislation, consistent and effective scrutiny of Government and excellent committee work. The Parliament has quickly become an integral part of the life of Scotland and has won respect from the many and even grudging respect from the few!

The Parliament- the staff and the MSPs- should be proud of its achievements which have far exceeded our expectations way back in 1998 when the Scotland Bill was going through the House of Commons.

Nearly 20 years on this is an appropriate time to reconsider and reappraise the institution and identify where we can improve and reform the work and procedures of the Parliament, ensuring it remains fit for purpose in what is a time of dramatic, challenging and often bewildering social, technological, political, constitutional and economic change.

The Parliament now represents, for the majority of Scots, especially the younger generation, the most important political and parliamentary focus for their aspirations and concerns. This is likely to be reinforced in the next few years. One thing is certain, the future of Scotland, regardless of its final constitutional destination, will see a Parliament obtaining more powers in the short term. And may, whether it is called Home Rule, Federalism, a new four nation solution or independence in the medium term, become unrecognisable in relation to the Scotland Bill of 1998 and the more limited powers devolved to Holyrood.

This requires a Parliament: able to effect reforms in relation to current weaknesses and challenges; adapt in the immediate future to the impact of the powers currently coming Scotland's way; and then ensure there is capacity and long term thinking to cope with changes that will transform the importance of the Parliament and the role it will have to play in relation to the Governance of Scotland and a much more onerous legislative programme.

Against this changing backdrop the following issues need to be addressed:

Parliament

1. Strengthening the role of the Parliament in relation to the Scottish Government
2. Creating and maintaining a greater sense of identity for the Parliament distinct from the work of Government
3. Raising the profile of the Parliament in terms of public engagement, accessibility and importance to the nation.

4. Giving the Presiding Officer (sorry I nearly said Speaker) a more significant role in the wider context of constitutional matters in Scotland and a more visible presence in promoting political awareness and civic literacy

Committee System and Chamber

5. Improving the effectiveness and importance of the committee system: creating a less partisan political atmosphere and less tribal forums for debate and decisions

6. Consideration should be given to electing the Chairs of Committees as part of giving more credibility to committee business, developing a higher profile for Parliamentary business as against Government business and allowing a different career path to be established for those MSPs who do not wish to be Ministers. There should be more opportunities for Chairs to be involved in media work.

7. Making the “select committee” function of committees stronger and exercising far more scrutiny of Scotland’s economic, social and institutional structures. There is a widely held view that the “Bill” committee function is so important and substantial and as a result there is not enough regard given to other work (there are clearly constraints in that the numbers of MSPs are limited, the size of the Parliament is smaller and Government business has to be prioritised)

8. Does the size of the Parliament and the length of the working week act as a constraint on more work in both committees and the chamber?

9. More thought should be given to the plenary sessions in the chamber. Can we create time for bigger debates and create a forum in which MSPs can develop debating skills, gain more confidence and experience and help establish a more powerful back bench presence in the Parliament: votes are invariably partisan in nature but debates do not have to be!

Looking to the Future

10. Many of the points made above are very much influenced by two things. First the amount of time available to the Parliament in the current working week. Second the number of MSPs which is incredibly limiting in the amount of work that can be processed in the current working week. There is no doubt that these factors will influence to a large extent the amount and quality of the work done and the ability of the Parliament to respond to new pressures and more powers. This is clearly an issue at the present time but in this turbulent political world thing could get a whole lot worse as Holyrood assumes more importance in the continuing redistribution of powers and responsibilities within the United Kingdom. This is not a partisan or political issue, it is of vital practical importance and significance if Holyrood is to be fit for purpose in this rapidly changing political landscape.

11. Responding to the challenges of 10 above requires us to look into the future and focus on the continuing capacity of the Parliament to be able to respond and plan ahead. New and original thinking is required and sometimes that can be difficult and unsettling. For this to work we need to have the widest possible dialogue with Scotland to help both understand the changing context we are facing and the tough decisions that will have to be made for Holyrood to be successful over the next 25 years. Some of the big issues are sketched below.

12. The size of the Parliament: some work may be underway to look at the Nordic countries especially those with a similar population to Scotland but if not this would be a useful exercise. There, Parliaments are bigger and have more elected representatives, per head of population, and are able to undertake a bigger workload consistent with their status of being sovereign nation states. Scotland's future is unknown but even anticipating some modest future increases in the number of powers and discounting anything more dramatic the work of Holyrood may be under significant pressure.

13. There are compelling reasons for Scotland to have a codified written and accessible Constitution. The UK is one of only one of a handful of countries in the world without one. Regardless of our future constitutional status a constitution would serve to define and protect the relationships: between institutions in Scotland; between the Scottish Government and the Parliament; between the Scottish Government and other public institutions, such as Local Government which has no real official status; and the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of the individual and their relationships with all of the above. This is where the sovereignty of the people would decide on their constitution after it was set in motion by the Scottish Parliament. This would make sense in terms of good government as well as ensuring people feel they have a greater say in determining their rights and freedoms. This is a legitimate role for the Parliament.

14. Have we reached a point where we can have a serious look at our electoral system and the way we elect our MSPs? Again experience of continental Europe might be of help. How forward looking is our system now? Certainly better and more democratic than the "first past the post" system still used by Westminster. More than half of our MSPs are elected by the old method. Is there a case to be made for some form of proportionality or alternative voting? Could Scotland create a fairer system based on multi member constituencies while abandoning the list system? Would it work? Does it enhance our democracy and our Parliament? These ideas are linked to the question of parliamentary size and the number of MSPs and in turn the issue of capacity that will start to dominate the workings of Holyrood in the years ahead.

Building on success makes the future much easier to cope with. With this in mind there is no reason why the Parliament and the Presiding Officer should not consider setting up a Standing Commission on the Parliament, involving Scotland but responsible to Holyrood. This would represent a progressive relationship between Parliament and people.