

COMMISSION ON PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

1 March 2017

John Mason MSP - Comments

1. Engagement: I do think that, on the whole, the Scottish Parliament has engaged effectively with the people of Scotland. Partly, this is because Scotland is a smaller country than the UK and, therefore, there are much closer links between the top and the bottom. I regularly receive comments from a whole variety of groups from the colleges' sector to smaller voluntary sector organisations who all say how much easier it is to have contact and interaction with a Scottish Minister or Scottish politicians, in general, than their counterparts do south of the border. I think generally they are very appreciative of this.
2. Obviously, as an MSP, I am directly involved with the Scottish Parliament so will not make any other comments on this point.
3. Increased Engagement: A major way in which the Scottish Parliament can engage with both individuals and organisations across Scotland is through the committee system. I am a strong believer in the committees which do a lot of the detailed work behind the scenes and which often do not get so much publicity. As an MSP I, and I think, many of my colleagues, spend a considerable amount of our time either at committees or preparing for these. Almost all of the committees which I have been on in my time in Parliament since 2011 have gone out and about in Scotland and that effort has been very much appreciated. I myself have been with committees to Hawick, Arbroath, Pitlochry, Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, Nairn, Islay and possibly more. Therefore, if there is to be improvement, one suggestion I would make is that committees should be no larger than having 7 members. In this way, there can be more committees and they can therefore engage with more people. Comparing the 2011 to 2016 Parliament with the present one, I consider it a considerable step backwards that committees have increased in size to 11 and this restricts the amount of engagement with both individuals and organisations outside Parliament.
4. Distinct Identity: I do think it is important that the Scottish Parliament is seen as separate from the Scottish Government and similarly the UK Parliament, House of Commons, House of Lords, UK Government and local Government. However, the reality is that there is a very wide range even within my constituency as to understanding all of these different legal entities. I do not think using Holyrood or Westminster are particularly problematic as these are convenient loose terms for the geographical location. I do think we all need to work at continuing to educate the public and I myself seek to do that by one to one interaction, putting out regular newsletters, visiting school modern studies classes when invited, and similar activities. However, I would say that many of my constituents do get confused between the responsibilities of Glasgow City Council, the Scottish Parliament, and the UK Parliament. For example, I am often called "Councillor" and I think people see this as a general term for

any elected member whereas, clearly, it is not strictly speaking the term that I should be given.

5. Strengthening the Scottish Parliament Identity: Obviously ultimately independence would give the Scottish Parliament a clearer identity and then when we said Parliament or Government it would be absolutely clear what we meant. At the moment, both Parliament and Government are often used in the media without a clarification as to Scottish or UK and I do think this leads to confusion sometimes even amongst elected members ourselves.
6. Checks and Balances: I think the system in the Scottish Parliament is perfectly acceptable and having worked in both Westminster and local Government, I think there can be a variety of structures which are acceptable. For me, the key issue is how independently minded individual MSPs (or councillors or MPs) actually are themselves. Any system with elected members who are not independently minded will tend to have weak checks and balances, whereas any system with members who are independently minded, will tend to be stronger. Where there is a minority Government, it probably does strengthen the whole process with checks and balances but clearly, in a democracy, it is entirely up to the electorate if they do want to give one party an overall majority. In this sense, Holyrood is in a much stronger position than Westminster is.
7. Stages of the Policy or Legislative Process: I am not sure there is always one stage which is the most effective. In some issues there is a huge amount of debate before the legislative process starts and, therefore, people may have made up their minds right at the beginning. An example of that might be same sex marriage with which I was involved and it became clear very early on where that was likely to go. From memory, practically no amendments to the legislation were accepted because there was such a large majority in Parliament across all parties. However, I have seen changes in policy, one being on freedom of information, which came to the Finance Committee between 2011 and 2016. In that case, the Government had resisted changes to include new bodies and to bring correspondence with the Royal Family under FOI but the committee came out strongly against the Government's position and the Government agreed to accept that. There are other examples but I do believe the committee system does work.

On the question of time for the whole parliamentary process, again, I think this varies from case to case. Much legislation has had sufficient time but I certainly saw in the year 2015/16, as we headed up to an election, a number of pieces of legislation being rushed and probably not receiving enough scrutiny. One example of that would be Land Reform. Another piece of legislation which was rushed was the Offensive Behaviour at Football Act but that was not because we were near the end of parliamentary session but for other reasons. I am a broad supporter of that legislation but do think it would have benefitted from a longer parliamentary process and I think I, myself, am guilty (having been a new MSP at the time) for not challenging the timescale at the time.

I actually do not think it is helpful that we keep re-examining ourselves on a very frequent basis. I think other parliaments do so with a fixed period of time and every ten years might be one option. However, there is a need to let things settle down and work over a longer period of time and even examining the parliament every 5 years I think may be too often.

I think these are the main points I would want to make and I am more than happy to answer any questions about these if that were felt to be helpful.

Many thanks for your work in this whole sector.

Yours sincerely,

John Mason MSP