

Introduction

The Evangelical Alliance is Scotland's largest alliance of evangelical churches, organisations and individuals. In Scotland, we represent a range of churches, organisations and individuals. Some of our well-known members include the Baptist Union of Scotland, Bethany Christian Trust, Blythswood Care, Free Church of Scotland, Glasgow City Mission, Salvation Army, Scripture Union Scotland and Tearfund Scotland. Across the UK we represent around 4000 member churches and estimate that 600,000 people attend an EA member church each week.

Our members are engaged in delivering a vast range of services across Scotland including running foodbanks, debt advice centres, night shelters, youth and children's services and refugee support. We welcome the opportunity to engage in with the parliamentary commission on behalf of the many thousands of people in our church communities across Scotland.

Has the Scottish Parliament engaged effectively with the people of Scotland so far? Has it engaged better with some groups or on some issues better than others?

The Scottish Parliament has made a conscious effort to engage with the people of Scotland and it should be commended for this work. There are many positive aspects of the parliament's work in this area including the accessibility of the building, committee visits to locations in Scotland, the educational programme and the existence of the Petitions committee.

However we are also quite aware that the parliament connects more easily with interest groups than local communities or individuals. It often appears that in order to be engaged effectively stakeholders must first engage the parliament themselves. This leads to better resourced interest groups having more chance to engage than ordinary members of the public who may not have the time or knowledge for example to understand the workings of the committee system and the various times at which evidence may be submitted. This does mean sectors and demographics which are more equipped to engage the parliament may be over-represented compared to others.

From our position as a coalition of churches it does sometime seem that the parliament is unaware of some of the valuable work undertaken by the Christian community in Scotland. Whilst it has been proactive at engaging the church in issues seen as traditionally ethical or moral in nature, e.g. assisted suicide, it often does not fully take the opportunity to engage in other issues where the church is active, e.g. poverty or community empowerment. The work of churches and crucially our connection with local people on the ground is often overlooked, and this could be a valuable resource for the parliament to engage with ordinary people in communities across Scotland.

What has been your experience of direct engagement with the Scottish Parliament?

The Evangelical Alliance has engaged with the Scottish Parliament in a variety of ways. We regularly submit consultation responses, meet with MSPs and civil servants, and hold parliamentary meetings and events. Occasionally we have also given oral evidence to committees. More recently we have helped signpost parliamentary officials to individuals with specific life experiences to give evidence to committees on particular topics. In all our dealings

with parliamentary staff we have found the processes professional, friendly and easy to navigate.

How can the Scottish Parliament increase its engagement with the people of Scotland, especially those who are less interested in the Parliament?

For those less interested in the Parliament, visibility in local communities and schools certainly helps and efforts to hold committee meetings around the country and parliament days have been a positive development. With the increasingly digital world, the digital-first worldview of younger people especially, engagement will be improved by embracing the media by which people naturally engage with. This does not need to be at the expense of face-to-face meetings, but the ability for people to contribute electronically, e.g. through apps and online surveys, reduces the barriers to engagement. The adversarial nature of parliament and legislations means that often evidence is taken from those either supporting or opposing legislation and it's important for parliament to continue to look for creative ways of engaging people across a range of opinions when discussing legislation.

Is it important that the Scottish Parliament is seen as separate from the Scottish Government?

It is important as they are not one and the same; however, in our experience people are used to the distinction between the UK Government and its Parliament (often pejoratively referred to as "Westminster"). In the Scottish context, "Holyrood" is usually understood as referring to the Parliament rather than the Government – so in our experience it doesn't overly appear that there is confusion between the two. There is, however, confusion around the distinction of powers between the UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament and local authorities and their respective governance arrangements.

What should the Scottish Parliament do to strengthen its distinct identity?

Over the past ten years or so, the growing distinction between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government has effectively developed this. We feel it does have a distinct identity already. However, the ongoing nature of changes to devolved and reserved matters does mean the capabilities of the Scottish Parliament are often less understood by the public than its identity. The need to communicate its powers and then how to engage with them is more important.

Do any of the checks and balances need strengthening to better enable the Scottish Parliament to hold the Scottish Government to account?

When the parliament was set up in 1999 there was great hope in both the electoral system and the committee system to provide effective checks and balances. For a time there was also hope that political culture would be less adversarial in style. Both the elements have been somewhat undermined by the strength of the political party system in Holyrood which regularly means debate is limited to those topics chosen by party leaders and voting takes place strictly along party lines. The committee system whilst less adversarial in style also reflects these voting patterns rather than evidencing much by the way of independent challenge as is sometimes seen in the Westminster parliament. Whilst the parliament cannot do much about the strength of political party discipline it would be good to consider ways of strengthening the committee system to encourage a partial rebalancing of loyalty between committee and party in this context.

At what stage of the policy or legislative process is the Scottish Parliament likely to have the greatest influence or impact in terms of improving Government policy or legislation?

The committee stage should be the area of greatest influence as it should have the highest level of interaction with policy and legislation, but also the advantage of taking in feedback from public evidence. The evidence stage in the Scottish Parliament is relatively open and it is easy for the public to feed into this, although perhaps more could be done to make this known. Additionally, the problems mentioned in the previous answer have somewhat limited committee effectiveness in holding the government to account.

What other factors impact on the effective conduct of parliamentary business and how can these be addressed?

As previously mentioned the electoral system could be examined to consider whether there is a way of electing MSPs that is less dependent on party position or patronage. Whilst the Additional Member System has broadly brought fair representation of election results the list MSPs largely owe their election to internal selection battles and national results rather than any link to their constituents. This also has the added challenge of meaning it is very difficult for the electorate to de-select an MSP if they have a high enough party position. This in turn strengthens the position of the political parties in the tone, style and voting patterns of parliamentary business. There are no easy answers to this issue but we hope the commission will at least consider ways in which this could be improved to make the parliament more democratically accountable to the electorate.