

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-AlbaJohn McCormick
Chair
Commission on Parliamentary Reform
Scottish Parliament
Room CG.07
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

22 March 2017

Dear John,

SNP Parliamentary Group Response to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform

On behalf of the SNP Parliamentary Group in the Scottish Parliament, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Commission's work. While individual members of the group have expressed a wide range of views on specific issues, I hope to set out in this response the majority position of the SNP Parliamentary Group in regards to each of the Commission's three key areas of focus:

1. To look at how the Scottish Parliament engages with the people of Scotland
2. The identity of the Parliament
3. Whether the Parliament has the right 'checks and balances' in place to ensure effective Parliamentary business

From the outset of this submission, I would like to stress the group's strong view that, while we believe that reflection on the Parliament's role and function is a healthy process, such a review should take into account the whole experience of the Parliament since devolution and not merely react to present circumstances. The membership of our group can draw on a wide range of experience, serving as MSPs through every session of Parliament since 1999. Likewise, the SNP Parliamentary Group has experience throughout the last 5 sessions of being in opposition, minority government and majority government. This response is meant to be viewed within the context of this shared experience, and I hope the Commission will give this context due consideration going forward.

1. Engagement

The ability of people to engage with the Parliament has always been strong and, in our view, should continue to evolve to meet the needs of communities throughout

Scotland. MSPs in earlier sessions look back to when committees more regularly left Holyrood to hold meetings in other areas of the country, to allow further engagement with the Parliament. While committee visits still do take place, they are often restricted to non-sitting days due to Members being required in Parliament for plenary sessions on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. This has the knock-on effect of taking away from a Member's engagement in their own constituencies on Mondays or Fridays. Due to the significance the SNP Parliamentary Group places on committee work and the importance of people being able to engage with this work, we support any attempts to increase committee engagement. However, new ways to do this may need to be explored in order to accommodate these capacity issues.

A recurring theme discussed under engagement was the Scottish Parliament's need for a more robust digital presence. The group feels that we could do more to develop the Parliament's engagement with digital services. Whilst the available IT technologies and support are first class, there is perhaps more we could do to take forward digital services that would assist both the public and Members to gain easier access to the work carried out in the Parliament, and in so doing, promote better engagement.

The Commission may wish to consider such matters as enabling the Parliament website to have more multi-media content on Members' pages, the Official Report and committee pages. This could lead to the creation of a suitably moderated facility that could invite direct contributions and questions from the public with the opportunity to communicate both ways. These are just a couple suggestions that would promote engagement, and the group would welcome further discussion on this as the Commission's work progresses.

2. Identity

We believe it is important for the Parliament to assert its identity as distinctly different from Westminster, reflecting the 'new politics' intended by the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament in 1998. While it is tempting to look to the Westminster model for solutions to modify the Scottish Parliament's operations, it is crucial to recognise the intentions behind these initial decisions.

One key element of the Parliament's identity has been its commitment to family-friendly working practices. While not all members agree that it has been a success, the policy has benefitted many MSPs and their families, as well as Parliament staff. Inclusive working practices such as this should continue to be upheld, however it should not simply be limited to keeping rigid business hours. With its increasing workload, the Parliament will need to operate more flexibly as required. Therefore, a balance will need to be reached between inclusive and flexible working practices going forward.

3. Effectiveness

As stated previously, we would like to see committee work take a more prominent role in the Parliament. There has been a tendency to move away from highlighting committees since the introduction of plenary sessions on all three sitting days. It could be suggested that there be a move back to one day devoted to committee work and two days of plenary sessions, however there was no conclusive decision in the group on this matter. More importantly would be the improvement of committee efficiency going forward. There has been a great deal of work done on this by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee in Session 4, and the Commission may want to revisit this work, specifically in terms of committee sizes and the number of committees. We would take no issue with further consideration by the Commission as to the composition and scheduling of committees.

Effective use of time in plenary sessions is also an important issue to address. While debate management largely comes down to the discretion of the Presiding Officers, the current system tends to discourage interventions or more thoughtful contributions due to the lack of time each Member has to speak. We would advocate looking for new ways to allow more flexibility in debates, which would allow Members to deliver more effective, rather than just efficient, Parliamentary business.

A recurring instance of inefficiency can be seen at oral Parliamentary question times (Portfolio and General Questions), where it is common for less than half of the questions to be taken in the time allotted. This suggests the need for more time or fewer questions to be scheduled. Alternatively, the Presiding Officer could implement a random answer tool in which the order of the questions taken is randomly decided on the day, allowing those drawn further down the list a chance of having their question answered rather than sitting through an entire question time with no chance of being called.

I hope these comments can be of some use to the Commission's work and the group would welcome any consideration given to these matters.

Yours Sincerely,

Sandra White MSP
Depute Convenor
SNP Parliamentary Group