

Scottish Labour Parliamentary Group
Submission to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Suggestions are made in four groups: relevance, scrutiny, engagement and allowances.

1. Relevance

The way the Parliament has developed since 1999 has meant that the business of Parliament is often out of step with the issues of the day. Frequently, major issues that are receiving extensive coverage in the press (such as NHS waiting times, service changes or new reports on public services) have to wait days or weeks for statements to be heard in the Parliament, by which time they are no longer topical. This has resulted in Holyrood being far less responsive to the news agenda than Westminster, where Urgent Questions mean that issues of the day are frequently discussed the same morning.

The following issues should be examined:

- The introduction of Urgent Questions, or a looser interpretation of the criteria for Emergency Questions. In Westminster, the criteria for urgent questions has been more loosely interpreted by the Speaker allowing for topical issues to be considered on the day.
- More encouragement for Ministers to come to the Chamber with Statements. This is particularly important as Holyrood goes through the process of taking on more powers, and the establishment of new Government structures to cope with that.

2. Scrutiny

In the era of majority Government or near-majority Government, there is a need to ensure that Parliament is properly empowered to hold the Government to account. This will become even more important as Holyrood takes on more powers. Consideration should be given to:

- Improving the overall quality of debate. With set speaking times and allocated slots per party, pre-written and unchallenging speeches to fill time regularly prevent quality debate. More flexibility around speaking time should be given so that MSPs do not regularly provide basic speeches to fill time. Until the quality and variety of debate is improved, there should be little consideration given to extending sitting time. There should be more discretion given to the PO to select speakers during debate.
- Consideration should be given to running committees alongside parliamentary sessions. Committees can sometimes be constrained by proceedings following on immediately in the chamber, limiting their time to consider important issues.
- Committee chairs should have more powers to bring witnesses before them, in line with the abilities of Westminster committee chairs.
- Committees should be more independent of party politics and government.
- There should be a presumption that Business in Parliament is decided by the Parliament, and not the Government. At its most extreme version, this could mean that the representatives of the Government parties lose their 'payroll vote' in overall voting numbers in the Bureau.
- Guarantees that Opposition Spokespeople are able to ask questions in areas in their portfolio. This ensures people who are more specialist in their areas can bring more scrutiny to bear on the Government. This may mean a reform of Portfolio Questions, prioritising those with portfolio relevance to question ministers, rather than randomly selected MSPs.

- The issue of election of Committee Chairs needs to be examined. If this is taken forward only MSPs not on the Government payroll should be able to vote.
- Parliamentary Questions. The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments committee should introduce a complaints mechanism for MSPs to raise issues where appropriate about the standard of responses to Parliamentary Questions. This would be similar to the complaints mechanism open to MPs through the Westminster Procedures Committee. This frequently leads to Government Departments being rebuked for poor responses to PQs.
- Increased power for the Presiding Officer to compel ministers to provide better and fuller answers to parliament, as government ministers regularly avoid giving detailed answers to MSPs.
- Reduction in the number of government debates which on some occasions are viewed simply as fillers.
- The system for PQs should be improved, with shorter timescales, and a system which has teeth, like for instance the FOI system. Two weeks is too long to wait for questions to be answered – in Westminster the UK Government turns them around in a week. The policy of not issuing responses over the recess periods should end.
- The Parliament needs to consider how all its Business systems could be better integrated - using technology to force efficiencies - so we can all work better. Official reports written up in real time, or Q&M linked with the responses.
- Reform of the motion system - there are too many of poor quality. Consideration should be given to a separate petitions system to highlight local causes and issue/conscience campaigns, and a separate motions system only for issues appropriate for parliamentary debate.
- A time limit on questions at FMQs should be looked at to allow more speakers. There should also be a later deadline for submission – a Monday morning deadline limits the number and relevance of questions to be put before the First Minister on a Thursday afternoon.

3. Public and Outside Participation

The Parliament was founded on the basis of making it more open and accessible to people across the country. Consideration should be given to:

- Additional formats for First Minister's Questions, such as opening the session to the public for questions, as well as third sector and external groups.
- Taking the Budget on the road. Introducing a statutory stage of the Budget process where the Finance Minister has to face members of the public in communities across Scotland.
- Reform and reestablishment of the civic forum.
- Establishment of joint committees between MPs and MSPs on specific issues of joint responsibility. For example, on employment, jobs and the economy. Similarly, new systems of joint working between MSPs and local government.

4. Allowances

The following changes should be considered:

- A review of the staffing budgets for MSPs. Even with the recent rise, MSP staffing allowances are still less than Assembly Members in the Welsh Assembly.
- Short Money Reforms. Short money in the Scottish Parliament is still a fraction of what is on offer for the official opposition and third parties at Westminster. This needs to be reviewed.

- A review of the staffing budgets, remuneration and other allowances on offer to opposition leaders. The current system does not adequately provide for the extra costs associated with leadership of a multi-party parliament.
- Comparison of the finances and resources available to opposition parties against that of the government and civil service to be factored in to this.
- A review of the allowances available to MSP staff, including the expenses system for reimbursing travel. While HMRC rules dictate tax allowances for paying for travel to Edinburgh, it should not be seen as a general office cost. Additionally, overnight allowances for MSP staff for exceptional circumstances, such as CPG meetings in the evening and early committees. In addition, where an MSP covers a wide geographical area, for example Highlands, consideration should be given to include an overnight allowance for staff who have to accompany an MSP on visits that involve an overnight stay.

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