SUBMISSION OF EVIDENCE TO THE
SCOTTISH COMMISSION ON PARLIAMENTARY REFORM
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Executive summary
- We welcome this timely Commission, and the commitment to understanding and improving how the Scottish Parliament engages with the public and carries out its work.
- This submission answers questions 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8 from the Call for Views. It focuses on developing a culture and approach to public engagement which could strengthen the relationship between the Scottish Parliament and the people of Scotland.
-We call for public engagement, with multiple audiences, in multiple ways, to be a central part of all work of the Scottish Parliament, and a focus on building political literacy across the country as a whole.

Introduction:

1. The political, economic and social context in which the Scottish Parliament operates has changed significantly since it was first established in May 1999. The decision by the Presiding Officer to launch a Commission on Parliamentary Reform is therefore to be welcomed as indicative of a reflective, mature and self-aware institution.

Question three: How can the Scottish Parliament increase its engagement with the people of Scotland, especially those who are less likely to be interested in the Parliament?

2. In relation to the issue of **public engagement** the design and architecture of the Scottish Parliament was intended to nurture new relationships and to provide a flexible and friendly focus for Scottish politics. The simple argument of this submission, however, is that the emergence of increasing evidence of political disengagement and rising levels of anti-political sentiment demands that all political institutions, but particularly parliaments and legislatures, seek to adopt increasingly novel and creative approaches to the public. The recommendation we made to the House of Commons Liaison Committee, which the Committee endorsed in its First Special Report of Session 2015-16: that "public engagement should figure in all inquiry activity", should also be a standard rule of practice for committees within the Scottish Parliament.[1]

3. The basic principle might be one of 'engaging with multiple audiences in multiple ways' in order to highlight the existence of a range of different communities within and beyond Scotland with whom the parliament might establish, maintain or develop relationships. We note the warnings of Bonney (2003) that engagement should go beyond "stakeholders" and reach the general public, and the research of McLaverty and MacLeod (2012) who found that Scottish Parliament Committees had made an effort to involve people who do not usually play a role in formal politics, with their work, but that the problem had not yet been solved.[2]

4. The emphasis on 'engaging in multiple ways' also suggests a need to move away from text-based outputs or even more formal 'public meeting-style' events and to venture into the terrain of on-line activities or non-conventional locations for engagement events. Where public meetings and evidence sessions are used, we would restate our recommendation to the House of Commons Liaison Committee that these sessions should be designed to maximise a more meaningful two-way dialogue and learning process. Oral evidence sessions are often framed around Members asking witnesses questions, but rarely allows witnesses to ask questions of Members.

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[1] House of Commons Liaison Committee, *Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach,* First Special Report of Session 2015-16, HC 470
[2] Bonney, N. (2003), The Scottish Parliament and Participatory Democracy: Vision and Reality. The Political Quarterly, 74: 459–467. McLaverty, P. & MacLeod, I. (2012) Civic Participation in the Scottish Parliament Committees, International Journal of Public Administration, 35:7, 458-470

5. At a more basic level, thinking about 'engaging with multiple audiences in multiple ways' might encourage a little basic reflection on how issues such as room layouts, jargon or language – even clothing (i.e. suits and ties) – can affect not just public engagement but the nature of that engagement. Commissioners might like to read the detailed research on non-traditional public engagement that the Crick Centre undertook for the Liaison Committee in the House of Commons.[3]

Question four: Is it important that the Scottish Parliament is seen as separate from the Scottish Government [or from the UK Parliament (House of Commons and House of Lords), UK Government and local government]? What are the reasons or evidence for your views?

In your answer, you may want to consider — ● Do you think the Scottish Parliament is confused with the Scottish Government, and do terms such as 'Holyrood', commonly used to refer to the Parliament and/or Government, add to this confusion? ● Do you think the Scottish Parliament is confused with the UK Parliament (House of Commons and House of Lords), UK Government or local government?

6. There is no detailed evidence or data as far as we are aware that suggests a problem in relation to the **identity** of the Scottish Parliament as opposed to the Scottish Executive or UK government. Where there is existing evidence, data relates to the generally low levels of public knowledge and understanding about any of the UK's political institutions or even about what elected representatives actually do.

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

7. It may well be that the Scottish Parliament, instead of focusing on developing its own identity, would be better advised to adopt a more vibrant and ambitious approach to political literacy by seeking to promote a baseline understanding of how political decisions are taken in Scotland, how they can be challenged and how the public can play a role.

Question six: Do any of the checks and balances need strengthening to better enable the Scottish Parliament to hold the Scottish Government to account? What are the reasons or evidence for your views?

8. A healthy political institution that plays a leading role in nurturing a mature and confident society understands the notion of investing in democracy. Adopting an ambitious and creative approach to public engagement is one example of investing in democracy; as is promoting political literacy and citizenship education from an early age. Another sign of a healthy political institution is the existence of a proportionate system of **checks and balances** that achieves an appropriate balance of governing capacity (for the executive) and democratic scrutiny (with parliament very clearly at the apex). The issue of checks and balances is therefore crucial but must also be weighed against the existing research on the negative impact of overly demanding or bureaucratically cumbersome scrutiny systems that stop organisations from being able to concentrate on their primary tasks. There is little point if the checks and balances overseen by the Scottish parliament made departments or organisations 'go MAD' (in the sense of falling foul of what is known as 'multiple accountabilities disorder').

9. Scottish politics is likely to be most efficient and effective where: (1) the public are engaged in the co-design of policy-making and in the scrutiny of its implementation and impact; (2) where the Scottish Parliament acknowledges that too much scrutiny can be as problematic as too little and therefore looks for efficient procedures in terms of joint inquiries (building on the recent joint inquiry with the Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, for example), shared data use, short reports, follow-up sessions; and where accountability is measured in terms of *quality and not quantity*.

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[3] House of Commons Liaison Committee, *Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach,* First Special Report of Session 2015-16, HC 470