

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Consultation response

An '8 Citizens Initiative' for The Scottish Parliament

Introduction

It's fair to say that The Scottish Parliament is one of the most open, forward-thinking and accessible national assembly's in the world.

The Scottish Parliament outreach service, education programmes, publicity and marketing are strong and effective. A proportional voting system and similar characteristics help deepen and entrench democracy in Scotland.

Ordinary citizens being able to influence policy through formal consultations, meetings with officials and MSPs, giving evidence to Committees and taking part in Cross-Party Groups is also warmly welcomed. Certainly The Scottish Parliament and the way it operates has not stood still since its foundation in 1999.

However, fundamentally, The Scottish Parliament is the same as every other parliament in the world. Similarly to other national forums in Europe and in other democratic countries it has such characteristics as: a separation of the powers of government and parliament, committees scrutinising legislation and questioning witnesses and the election of representatives.

It is this election of representatives that is the primary symbol of what we have come to know as 'democracy'. The opposite of this being seen as oppression, in the form of a dictatorship or a one-party state.

Despite this fact, if any modern parliament could be seen by an ancient Athenian or Roman then it would not be recognised as 'democracy' at all. In those two examples 'democracy' was direct decision-making by all citizens. (That's not to deny that ancient societies of all kinds had their many flaws, slavery and the subjugation of women being the most obvious examples).

In our society 'democracy' and 'elections' have now come to be seen as the same thing - but they are not.

A modern form of direct democracy for Scotland

Despite our modern, responsive parliament it's true to say that the vast majority of Scots will never sit in the chamber of The Scottish Parliament to make any of the decisions about our country.

The voices of well over five million people are unable to be heard in any direct, meaningful way. Unless we make some fundamental (yet easily implemented) reforms then the doors of The Scottish Parliament will always, ultimately, remain closed to the people of Scotland.

The crisis in voter turnout at elections does not represent a lack of interest in politics among ordinary people at all. It represents a lack of modern decision-making opportunities and the means to initiate real change. Only with fundamental reform to our key democratic institution will we see a real increase in political engagement.

With the Commission on Parliamentary Reform and with our relatively new and innovative parliament we now have a unique opportunity to do something different and better. We can in fact ensure that Scotland has the world's leading, most unique and most democratic parliament.

Guiding principles

I'm proposing that The Scottish Parliament introduces a modern and easily achievable principle of direct democracy, that gives every adult in Scotland a potential voice in our national parliament. In practical terms this would mean:

- Eight Scottish residents aged 18+ would be chosen from the electoral register to serve in The Scottish Parliament as MSPs.
- This is the 'jury service' principle that already exists within Scotland's legal system. The difference being that this system would be voluntary.
- One Citizen MSP would be selected from each of the eight current electoral regions of The Scottish Parliament.
- Citizen MSPs would serve for only one standard parliamentary term and could step down at any time.
- In addition the system would seek to achieve a broad representative sample of Scotland's population (in terms of gender, age etc).
- The eight Citizen MSPs would exist on equal terms to any elected MSP, with the same voting rights, salary and adherence to the same rules and regulations.
- The existence of Citizen MSPs would not affect the election of MSPs or the normal operation of parliament in any way and would complement the existing arrangements.
- The introduction of Citizen MSPs would be cost effective. With only eight additional MSPs this would increase the capacity and democratic legitimacy of parliament, as an alternative to, for example, a second chamber.

In terms of reforms to the operation of the current Scottish Parliament I would also advocate: a switch to the Single Transferable Vote system for elections, MSPs seated in geographical representative blocs (as opposed to current party political blocs), three-term limits for elected MSPs and a Presiding Officer/Deputies directly elected by Scottish voters, on a non-party political basis. Taken as a whole these measures would substantially increase democratic legitimacy and citizen engagement.

I do hope that you take this response (and any similar responses) into account when making your decision and that the final report reflects an ambitious and substantive road map for change.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. I genuinely value the work that the Commission has undertaken in listening directly to the people of Scotland and I look forward to reading the proposals.

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