



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

John McCormick Esq
Chair
Commission on Parliamentary Reform
Scottish Parliament
Room CG.07
Edinburgh
EH4 1SY

9th February 2017

Dear John

Whilst I am a new Member of the Parliament I would like to make a contribution to your Commission

Size of Committees:

I think that there is a fine balance to achieve regarding the size of Committees. Currently the committee which I am on consists of eleven members. I understand that this was in part, a way of reflecting all the five different Parties in the Parliament. It does however make it difficult to ensure that all members get an equal chance to contribute, especially if the witness panel consist of more than three of four people. It is also more difficult to get a unanimous decision.

With more powers coming to the Parliament it could be argued that bigger Committees can undertake more work. I am not sure that I subscribe to this argument as it assumes each member may be happy to only contribute to specific areas of work that the Committee undertakes. Conversely members would have to agree not to be involved in all the work the Committee does. I have seen no evidence that this will be the case. Every member of a Committee will always look to either be seen to be defending the Government or delivering the killer blow. I doubt any member will magnanimously give way to another even if they are in the same Party!

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Working:

I am sure all Committees have pressures on their time, either as a result of Committee work or other Parliamentary duties. I wonder if consideration should be given to changing Committee working, to allow them a whole day to work in, for example a Monday. This would facilitate external visits and allow the Parliament to reconnect with those out-with easy travelling distance of Edinburgh. It might be suggested that this would reduce time allowed for Constituency work, however many constituents contact MSPs by email or social media than did in the past reducing the need for surgeries. This may mean one weekday in the constituency is sufficient. Another solution to allow one Tuesday a month as a Committee day with additional chamber time on a Wednesday or Thursday to compensate. Indeed, it might be that decision time from that Tuesday being carried forward to another day.

I understand that this would cause pressure on 'clerking' support but I believe this should not necessarily be the limiting factor.

Authority of Committees:

Before I was elected I was always of the opinion that the real way to hold the Government to account was via the Committee system. They were effectively the second chamber that is part of the parliamentary system in many democracies. Obviously, in Scotland when there is a Government with a large majority, the Committee system does not work. This was evident in the last session. I have been somewhat surprised, in this session, by the way the Committee that I am part of has been treated. Some of the issues include:

- A Cabinet Secretary saying an hour and a half was all he could be reasonably asked to spare the Committee to scrutinise the budget.
- Reports that would form the basis of questions to a Minister not being released till just after (two hours) the Minister had been to the Committee.
- Announcements on social media, whilst the Committee was taking evidence on a specific subject, that the Cabinet Secretary was setting up an independent inquiry of the same subject.
- Legislation Consent Motions being submitted without the opportunity to scrutinise them.

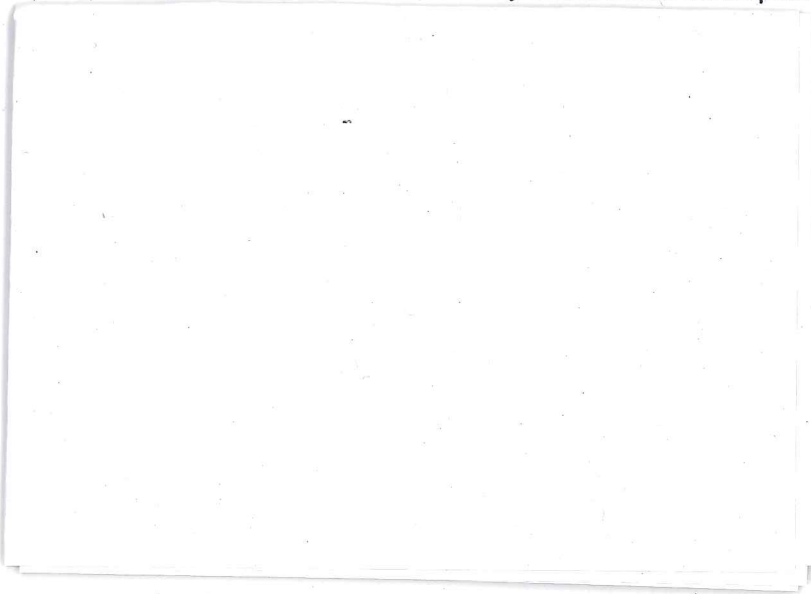
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Please do not think that I believe Committees should be all powerful but I do think they should be treated with more respect than they are.

I trust these view may be of some assistance to the Commission and I would be happy to expand on these matters if they feel it would be helpful.



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