



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

**REPORT OF THE VISIT BY THE PRESIDING OFFICER TO THE HOUSES OF THE
OIREACHTAS, DUBLIN, 7 & 8 APRIL 2022**

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Introduction

1. The Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, the Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, visited Dublin for meetings at the Houses of the Oireachtas on 7 and 8 April 2022. This was the first overseas visits by the Presiding Officer since being appointed in May 2021.
2. Purpose – The purpose of the visit was to discuss with the Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil Éireann and the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann along with TDs, Senators and officials a range of matters of interest to the Presiding Officer in her role. A number of these matters were covered in a report, commissioned by the Ceann Comhairle, and which is expanded on below.
3. The Presiding Officer is grateful to all the parliamentarians and officials she met for their time and attention across all discussions and for sharing their thoughts and experiences on the core matters relevant to making parliaments work effectively. The friendships between Scotland and Ireland are long and deep and this has underpinned the relationship between both parliaments since 1999. As well as developing awareness and thinking on core aspects of how parliaments work, the visit met other outcomes in the Parliament's [International Strategy](#):
 - enhance the Scottish Parliament's institutional and international reputation through the meetings with parliamentarians and policy thinkers; and
 - support and promote, through the Scottish Parliament's participation, activities which could bring wider economic benefit and added value to Scotland
4. The cost of the visit was £980.25 which covered the cost of travel, accommodation and incidental expenses for the Presiding Officer and two supporting members of staff.

Programme discussions

5. The visit programme is annexed. The following summarises key issues discussed across the various meetings.
6. Parliamentary reform – The issue of parliamentary reform has been a recurring focus for both legislatures over recent years and featured in face to face meetings between the Ceann Comhairle and the previous Presiding Officer. In 2016, the [Standing sub-Committee on Dáil Reform](#), chaired by the Ceann Comhairle, published a report on procedural reforms, some of which cover similar issues to the recommendations of the 2017 [Commission on Parliamentary reform](#) established by the then Presiding Officer. This included recommendations around:
 - more power for parliament to plan and make arrangements for its own business, with a new Business Committee comprising both government and opposition TDs, who together plan the House business on a weekly, sessional and yearly basis
 - better scrutiny of the annual budgetary cycle by a new Budget Oversight Committee, supported in its work by a new Independent Budget Office, which will 'crunch the numbers' for the new Committee

- changes to the rules around ‘groups’, to allow more than one ‘technical group’ to be formed enabling independents and members in small parties to join forces to get a greater share of parliamentary set pieces, for instance, private members’ time
- a rearrangement of the sitting day, so that the House, wherever possible, does not clash with committee meetings; enabling members to give more time to both plenary sittings and committees – members will not have to choose whether to attend one or the other
- members being able to formally record their abstention from a vote (not previously available), and put an explanation for their abstention, or for the way they voted, on the record of the House
- arrangements for oral questions to Ministers. Rules in the Dáil provide for unanswered questions to the Taoiseach to ‘roll over’ to a future week, specify time limits for questions to be asked and answered and for members to appeal to the Ceann Comhairle where they consider that an answer to a question has not been sufficient

7. In March 2021, the Ceann Comhairle established a [Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament](#), which reported in November 2021. The Ceann Comhairle asked the Forum’s 15 members, representing a range of experiences and views, to generate practical and achievable recommendations that could make the Houses of the Oireachtas a more inclusive, family friendly and gender sensitive workplace. The recommendations in the report represent a way forward in achieving these aims.

8. The report made recommendations on a range of matters of interest to the Presiding Officer:

- sitting hours
- hybrid working (touching on caring, maternity, paternity leave for parliamentarians)
- diversity
- public engagement

9. The Presiding Officer met with former TD Mary Upton, who chaired the Forum, and Breda Burke of the Forum secretariat.

10. In discussion, the Presiding Officer asked about the drivers for change, what was needed and why, what approach was adopted to taking this project forward. During the discussion there was particular focus on issues around liaising with the political parties on this reform programme and seeking their agreement to progressing with necessary changes; tensions and practicalities around committees and plenary sitting at the same time; the establishment of the Business Committee and what improvements this had brought about in forward planning of business.

11. There was also discussion around the lasting effect on procedures and working practices as a result of COVID and hybrid working.

12. A point was made about the importance of changes arising from the report not to be seen to downgrade or reduce the importance of individual aspects of parliamentary

business. Taking elected members, the government of the day, and the public along with such reforms to ensure there was no negative reaction was important.

13. The implementation of the Forum's report will be led by the Ceann Comhairle with three senior staff from within the Dáil overseeing this work. Implementation of the recommendations was to be reviewed every six months and a report on progress would be published in an annual report over the next four years.

14. The [Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments \(SPPA\) Committee](#) is conducting an inquiry into future practices and procedures which will consider issues around the continuation of hybrid business arrangements.

15. The Presiding Officer has written to the Convener of the SPPA Committee to draw its attention to the Forum's report. Given the range of issues covered in that report, it is hoped that there are learnings and further discussions to be drawn.

16. Chairing proceedings – In separate meetings, the Presiding Officer met with Senator Jerry Buttimer and with Jennifer Whitmore TD and Fiona Cashin. Senator Buttimer was the Chair of Oireachtas Health Committee during the consideration of the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 while Jennifer Whitmore TD and Fiona Cashin are the Chair and Clerk respectively to the current Oireachtas [Joint Committee on International Surrogacy](#). The interest of the Presiding Officer was in managing business which can be seen as contentious or sensitive and how the policy issue is still subjected to fair, balanced and thorough scrutiny.

17. In discussions, the Presiding Officer highlighted the importance of ensuring courtesy and respect in debates.

18. The Presiding Officer also noted discussions which took place amongst the party business managers to reach agreements on how more contentious issues are dealt with. There was recognition of the importance of committees engaging with diverse views on issues and creating opportunities for such views to be expressed directly to the parliament.

19. Diversity – The Presiding Officer met with Senator Fiona O'Laughlin, Chair of the [Irish Women's Parliamentary Caucus](#), to discuss its work and wider matters around creating a more diverse legislature. The Caucus was established in 2017 as a cross-party forum for Irish women parliamentarians to discuss and campaign on issues predominantly affecting women.

20. A number of the recommendations in the report of the [Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament](#) specifically address this in the context of proxy voting, ensuring gender balance on committees and in committee convenerhips. In addition, the sometimes late sitting pattern of the Oireachtas as well as responsibilities around caring could have a detrimental impact on people looking to stand for elected office.

21. The Presiding Officer highlighted the [Gender Sensitive Assessment which she launched](#) and which should be undertaken by December 2022. This will collate and analyse data examining the representation and participation of women in the Parliament. The [Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament](#) report includes a recommendation for a similar assessment to be undertaken by December 2022 followed by a two year plan of actions.

22. There were general points made in the discussion around female representation on committees in both parliaments and around the number of women parliamentarians. The Presiding Officer highlighted work being done with other organisations to promote involvement in parliamentary politics and, importantly, actions by the political parties.

23. The Presiding Officer has asked officials to communicate with the Houses of the Oireachtas on the gender sensitive assessments which both parliaments are conducting and consider any complimentary or joint work which might be conducted now or once the assessments are completed.

24. Parliamentary privilege and citizens' rights – The Presiding Officer met with Elaine Muldoon from the Journal Office to discuss the new arrangements put in place in relation to parliamentary privilege.

25. The Working group on parliamentary privilege and citizens' rights was established in June 2019 by the [Dáil Committee on Procedure and the Seanad Committee on Procedure and Privileges and has reported](#) with recommendations on the changes considered necessary in response to the Supreme Court judgments in the Kerins and O'Brien cases and fulfil the constitutional obligations to provide protection for the rights of citizens in respect of matters which occur within the Oireachtas and its committees.

26. The Report contained recommendations relating to:

- oversight of a committee's remit
- role of the committee chair and the conduct of meetings
- [remedies for persons adversely affected by parliamentary utterances](#)
- sanctions for disorder and breach of privilege
- [the Protocol for persons giving evidence to committees](#)

27. The Presiding Officer discussed how this tied in with the role of 'developing the parliamentarian' and of work done to increase awareness of specific issues around privilege. In addition, discussion considered how the role and core purposes of a committee was not impacted in its ability to question and hold witnesses to account while respecting the right for witnesses to expect a 'fair hearing'.

28. The Presiding Officer has highlighted this new process in the Oireachtas to Parliament officials for further consideration and asked that they communicate with the Oireachtas as necessary.

29. Public engagement and education – The Presiding Officer met with Derek Dignam, Head of Communications, and Conor Reale, Education Officer, to discuss the Oireachtas approach to public engagement, tours, education, outreach etc.

30. There has been good communication at official level between both parliaments on the approaches and methods of undertaking public engagement work. While the Oireachtas was relatively new to some aspect of its schools education work, and the impact of COVID has meant it needed to react quickly and innovatively to methods of public interaction, such as through virtual tours, it was committed to fully embedding this work and looking at new methods of engagement.

31. The Presiding Officer discussed what other methods of interactive engagement it might provide virtually and the advantages this can bring across the country (in that people wouldn't need to travel to Dublin). There was also discussion around the engagement with children and young people being an established part of the inquiry work of committees. The [Exploring Democracy](#) project was part of the curriculum delivered by teachers. The Presiding Officer was also interested in work being done to monitor the demographics of people visiting the Parliament and participating in parliamentary business and around how the Oireachtas is seeking to challenge perceptions about parliament.

32. Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil Éireann – The Presiding Officer met with Seán Ó Fearghaíl, Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil Éireann. This discussion covered the issues which the Presiding Officer had discussed earlier and focussed on the reform initiatives, specifically those arising from the [Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament](#).

33. The Presiding Officer also discussed the format for Question Time, which she had observed earlier that day, and the role and responsibilities of the Ceann Comhairle in relation to oral questions to the Government. The discussion also covered the approach taken by the Ceann Comhairle to ensuring a balanced spread of questions, time allocations for questions and answers, and the general approach to maintaining order and respectful debate.

34. The Presiding Officer extended an invitation to the Ceann Comhairle to visit the Scottish Parliament to continue discussions around the reforms and other issues covered across the meeting and to further strengthen the friendship between both parliaments.

35. The Presiding Officer will also discuss with the Consul General of Ireland what further work might be undertaken arising from the Scottish and Irish Governments [report](#) on areas of bilateral cooperation 2021-25 including the recommendation:

The Consulate General of Ireland in Edinburgh and the Scottish Government Office in Dublin will work with the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Scottish Parliament to

support increased contact between parliamentarians and cross-party engagement in our joint work

36. Museum of Literature Ireland – The Presiding Officer attended an event sponsored by the Scottish Government at the Museum of Literature Ireland. The *Myth/Story/Song – Breaking Boundaries* event featured Scottish and Irish artists ‘pushing at the boundaries of their traditions through readings and conversation’. The Presiding Officer also met with Katy McNeil, Head of Scottish Government Office in Ireland.

37. Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann – The Presiding Officer met with Senator Mark Daly, Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann. The discussion centred around issues of interest in both legislatures. There was also discussion around general current affairs in both Scotland and Ireland and elsewhere.

38. The Presiding Officer extended an invitation to the Cathaoirleach to visit the Scottish Parliament to continue discussions and to further strengthen the friendship between both parliaments.

Annex: Programme

Thursday 7 April 2022

- Depart Edinburgh
- Arrive House of the Oireachtas, Leinster House
- Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament: Meeting with Mary Upton, former TD and Chair of the Forum and Breda Burke, Forum secretariat
- Observe Leaders' Questions, Dáil Chamber
- Chairing proceedings and diversity: Meeting with Senator Jerry Buttimer, Chair of Oireachtas Health Committee during the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013, and Senator Fiona O'Loughlin, Chair of the Women's Caucus
- Chairing proceedings: Meeting with Jennifer Whitmore TD, Chair and Fiona Cashin, Clerk, Oireachtas Special Committee on International Surrogacy
- Meeting with Peter Finnegan, Clerk of the Dáil and Secretary General
- Parliamentary privilege and citizens' rights: Meeting with Elaine Muldoon, Journal Office
- Public engagement and education: Meeting with Derek Dignam, Head of Communications, and Conor Reale, Education Officer
- Meeting with Seán Ó Feargháil, Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil Éireann
- Museum of Literature Ireland

Friday 8 April 2022

- Meeting with Senator Mark Daly, Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann