Background to the Scottish Youth Parliament

Our vision is of a stronger, more inclusive Scotland that empowers young people by truly involving them in the decision-making process.

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratically elected voice of Scotland’s young people. We listen to young people, recognise the issues that are most important to them, and ensure that their voices are heard. In working towards our aims, we support the following values:

Democracy – All of our plans and activities are youth-led, and we are accountable to young people aged 14-25. Our democratic structures, and the scale of direct participation across Scotland, give us strength and set us apart from other organisations.

Inclusion – We are committed to being truly inclusive. The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that all young people have a right to a voice; it doesn’t matter who we are or where we come from. We celebrate our diversity.

Political impartiality – We are independent from political parties. Only by working with all legitimate political parties can we make progress on the policies that are important to young people.

Passion – We believe that drive and energy are key to successful campaigning. We are passionate about the key issues and believe that young people are part of the solution, not the problem.

Introductory Remarks: Background and Context

The SYP welcomes the opportunity to be able to submit and present written and oral evidence to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee’s Inquiry into Scotland’s Economic Future Post – 2014.

Our submission to this inquiry is based on the policies selected and passed by our democratically elected Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYP) at our tri-annual National Sittings, where MSYPs meet in plenary to debate policy issues of importance to their constituents. Our contribution is further grounded in the policy statements contained in our youth manifesto, “Change the Picture”, which received almost 43,000 consultation responses.¹ Therefore, our remarks are shaped by the genuine views of young people.

¹ You can see the list of SYP Policy, including our youth manifesto here: http://www.syp.org.uk/policy-W21page-340-.
The referendum on Scotland’s constitutional future is a historic moment of self-determination where the people of Scotland will have the opportunity to fundamentally shape their own future. We believe that young people, as the group that will live with the legacy of the outcome the longest, should be provided with opportunities to engage with, and shape, the debate.

Like many other organisations, we recognise that much of the recent polling data highlights the importance of the economy and public finance as a key issue among voters. Over the last number of years, MSYPs have continued to bring forward policy issues to our National Sittings concerning youth unemployment, continued funding for further and higher education, zero hour contracts, the living wage and many others. This demonstrates that the economy and public finance is also an issue of importance with young people and young voters.

Through their dialogue with young people in their constituencies and organisations, MSYPs are acutely aware of the importance of the economy and economic development for their future prospects. A thriving dynamic economy, that provides opportunities to be creative, diverse and to fulfil potential, is a key priority for young people.

In addition, there is a strong commitment to social justice throughout recent SYP policy developments with equality and fairness embedded in many of the policies in relation to the economy. This was evident most recently in the decision of the SYP Membership to campaign for a living wage in 2013.

Our remarks will exercise caution in relation to many of the specific topics considered by this inquiry given their intrinsic political character. We note that many of the issues considered such as monetary policy, fiscal autonomy, currency etc. entail significant constitutional questions. To take a position on many of these issues could be construed as taking a de facto position on Scotland’s constitutional future.

As an organisation, the SYP’s strength and credibility is founded in our ability and desire to remain politically neutral, working with all political parties and in all political settings. Therefore, we do not believe it is appropriate to comment either way on many of these issues. We also note that they have been covered extensively by previous witnesses from the public, private and academic sectors.

As our contribution pertains to the “Civic Scotland” section of the inquiry, our remarks will focus on the importance of involving civic society in post 2014 economic development and in the creation of any new economic institutions. More specifically, our remarks will address: the importance of this inquiry in equipping young people with the information they require to make an informed decision about Scotland’s constitutional future; the issues that matter to young people in relation to the economy; and, the importance of engaging young people, and wider civic society, in economic institutions.
Engaging young people in the economy: the importance of options

As previously mentioned, the SYP notes the importance of the economy in the debate on Scotland’s constitutional future, and indeed we note the importance of economic issues to young people more generally.

As a wider part of our work in engaging young people with the forthcoming referendum, we actively encourage all stakeholders to present their arguments in a clear, concise, relevant manner so that the public, including young people, can make an informed decision based on their own preferences.

Our ongoing dialogue with young people and practitioners suggests that complex economic arguments, which are often convoluted with party political narratives, often act as a barrier to engagement, leaving young people feeling confused and unable to make an informed decision.

We believe that this inquiry presents an important opportunity to establish the facts about the different economic visions and options in question.

We note the importance of the policies and issues in question in this inquiry. However, we believe they need to be presented in a manner free of party politics and in a way that outlines a range of options, and the pros and cons of those options. By doing this, young people will have the information they require in order to make their own decision, based on their own assessment of the facts.

We believe the Committee should consider this when conducting the rest of the inquiry, and in the composition of the final report.

Priorities for the economy

The purpose of the SYP is to provide a platform for young people to discuss the issues they feel are important, and to affect the change they wish to see in society.

The SYP’s youth manifesto is produced every five years. The mass consultation process seeks the views of young people on range of issues. The last consultation received almost 43,000 responses. Therefore, our most recent youth manifesto, “Change the Picture”, along with previous manifestoes, are an accurate assessment of the policy priorities for young people.

The following policy statements from “Change the Picture” reflect the economic/public finance priorities for young people, and therefore reflect what the SYP would wish to see whatever the outcome of the referendum:

People should be paid equally for doing the same job. There should be an equal minimum wage for all, including those in training.

There should be an emphasis on the long-term development of young people as part of the labour market, emphasising the provision and the availability of
apprenticeships and placements which will equip young people with important skills and experience on which to build careers.

The success of Scotland’s students must not be compromised by financial worries. Immediate action needs to be taken to ensure students don’t face poverty and hardship in the pursuit of their education.

All young people should have the chance to participate in work experience.

To tackle in-work poverty, the Scottish Government should set up a recognition scheme for employers that pay a Scottish Living Wage of at least £7 per hour to all employees, which is regularly reviewed to make sure it is meeting minimum income standards.

Tuition should remain free in further and higher education. Top-up fees are not an option for a society which puts ability to learn above ability to pay.

The Scottish Government should do more to help young people looking to buy a home for the first time. This could include continued funding and a high-profile awareness campaign for existing schemes to help first time buyers.

Scotland’s local tax system should be changed so that it is based on household income rather than the value of your home or the area you live in.

Entrepreneurship and enterprise opportunities should be encouraged and promoted through the provision of start up funding and support geared directly at young people.

Other important policy areas, as decided by Members Motions and debates at our Sittings have included issues such as: banning Zero Hour Contracts; increasing the National Minimum Wage to reflect the cost of living; the importance of good quality work experience in reducing youth unemployment; and, using tax on alcohol to pay for the costs of anti-social behaviour.

It is worth noting the social justice dimension of much of the SYP’s policy concerning the economy and public finance. Whilst the importance of opportunity, ambition and creativity is apparent, there is an obvious equality and fairness sentiment throughout.

Regardless of the outcome on Scotland’s constitutional future, it is clear that there is a preference for an economic system and institutions predicated on equality, fairness and social justice.

Civic Scotland: co-design and participation
The SYP exists to give a voice to young people. We believe that young people are active, talented and passionate citizens who should be given the responsibility to take the lead in their own lives. We believe that any future economic system and institutions
should actively involve young people in decision making therefore empowering them to shape their own economic futures.

We note the very positive relationships and the cohesion that exists across civic society in Scotland, especially through the strong partnerships that exist across the voluntary sector. There is significant potential in involving civic organisations across Scotland in whatever economic institutions exist after the referendum, whether devolved, independent or other.

By involving civic society in these economic institutions, there is the potential to harness the positive partnerships that already exist and combine institutions and grass roots engagement to achieve more positive, consensual outcomes. We believe that harnessing the potential presented by civic Scotland would lead to more positive policy outcomes from any future economic institutions by combining expertise, knowledge and networks.

The consultation work we carry out on a regular basis with young people consistently highlights their wish to be more involved in decision making processes. There is significant potential to utilise existing structures, such as youth representative bodies across Scotland, to achieve this. Our submissions to the Scottish Government’s consultation on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill and the Commission for Strengthening Local Democracy highlight the need for more meaningful engagement between young people and institutions.

The SYP believes that co-design i.e. the involvement of young people in the design and delivery of public policy, and participation has the potential to achieve more optimal policy outcomes.

It is our view that any future economic systems and institutions should have co-design and participation at the heart of their design and operation.

Whatever the outcome of the referendum and its impact on economic and public finance institutions, we believe there is opportunity to improve outcomes in this regard.

Kyle Thornton, Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament
Gareth Brown, Public Affairs Co-ordinator, Scottish Youth Parliament
May 2014

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2 A further policy statement in our youth manifesto, “Change the Picture” reads: “All young people should be involved in the services which affect them and should have the opportunity to get involved in local decision making opportunities.”

3 Scottish Youth Parliament, “A Response to the Consultation on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill” and “A Submission to the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy”, http://www.syp.org.uk/recent-consultation-responses-W21page-287-