



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

The Presiding Officer
Rt Hon Tricia Marwick MSP

Stewart Stevenson MSP
Convener, Standards, Procedures and
Public Appointments Committee
TG.01

31 October 2014

Dear Stewart

ELECTED COMMITTEE CONVENERS

As you know, my aim since becoming Presiding Officer has been to develop the Parliament as an institution. At the start of this session, I instigated a programme of reforms to ensure the Parliament and its committees were more relevant, more topical and more in touch with the wider public and civic Scotland.

Your Committee has performed a valuable role in ensuring that ideas for reform have been thoroughly developed and implemented. In writing to you proposing further reform I am reminded of the opening words of the SPPA Committee's first report on parliamentary reform in 2012:

...the Parliament has achieved much in line with its founding principles of sharing power, accountability, access and participation. The Parliament cannot, however, continue to be successful and evolve if it is not willing to look at itself with a critical eye

As I made clear on reconvening Parliament after the Referendum, I am determined that the process of evaluation and reform must continue. Amongst other changes, I consider that introducing a system for electing committee conveners is a natural next step in this process. Electing conveners would, I believe, underline the importance of the role and help to enhance the Parliament's scrutiny function. I am therefore writing to invite the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to undertake an inquiry into this proposal.

Conveners play a significant role in the fulfilment of the Parliament's responsibilities as Scotland's legislature. They are driving forces in holding the government and its agencies to account. This includes in committee work scrutinising legislation, taking evidence on issues of public interest and developing recommendations for change. Conveners also review committee working practices on an ongoing basis and progress reform together on the Conveners Group.

I believe that electing conveners could realise benefits in the following areas:

Enhanced sharing of power - At present, members are selected to be conveners by political parties with no real reference to the Parliament or the committees

themselves. If conveners were elected by the whole Parliament, they would derive their authority and mandate from the Parliament itself. This shift of responsibility for selecting conveners would strengthen the role of the Parliament and so enhance the sharing of power between the government, the Parliament and the people.

Enhanced scrutiny - The approach of the convener has a significant impact on how effectively committees function and how they are perceived. Being elected would provide additional authority and status to these influential parliamentarians. This would support conveners in their scrutiny role and would set a confident example for other committee members seeking to become more prominent. All of this would contribute to enhancing the impact and profile of our committees.

Enhanced accountability - The Parliament's accountability to the people is a fundamental element of our founding principles. Electing conveners would strengthen the line of accountability for conveners, making them directly answerable to all members and in turn to the people of Scotland.

As ever with proposals for change, the detail of how convener elections would work in practice needs careful consideration and consultation, but I would hope such an important change could be implemented by Parliament immediately after the 2016 election.

I hope I have provided sufficient insight into my motivation for writing to you, but if I can provide you with any supplementary information to aid the Committee's work then please do not hesitate to contact me or my officials.

I am copying this to all Members for their information.

Yours sincerely



TRICIA MARWICK