Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee’s investigation into revisions to the parliamentary week.

In this letter, sent on behalf of Liberal Democrat colleagues, I offer an outline of the sorts of changes that we believe will significantly improve the scrutiny that Parliament can make of the Scottish Government.

There are four distinct suggestions that we believe should be given consideration.

1. Topical Questions: There should be further reform to ministerial question time to increase the opportunities for MSPs to ask topical questions of ministers. That would involve members submitting their name for a question but not being required to submit the question itself. The actual question can wait until the Chamber. Parliament should expect ministers to be well enough briefed on topical matters to allow them to respond to questions ‘live’. At present the gap between an incident occurring and questions being asked is too long. This is the case even now that the ballot for question slots has been separated from the tabling of the question.

   A new space for topical questions of perhaps 20 minutes could be created on Wednesday to enhance scrutiny.

2. Interpellations: The Committee should reconsider the recommendation from the 2007 report on interpellations. These work in many other parliaments and are a way for members to drive the topics that come up for questioning.

3. Questions followed by debate: the Scottish Parliament should adopt the system used in at least six European parliaments for oral questions followed by debate. Under this, periodically (but not every week) a number of questions are posed to a minister on a topic. There is then a short debate on the answers to those questions. This tackles the problem that ministers, currently, always have the last word and can leave the situation unsatisfactorily resolved. Under this proposal, MSPs will have the chance to debate the answers given and for ministers to add to their answers in
response the debate. This does not need to be the route used for all question time sessions.

4. Scrutiny Committee: to help bridge the period between ‘events’ and questions about the ‘event’, perhaps a special general purpose scrutiny committee could be established. This could meet on Tuesdays at, say, 5pm.

First it could follow up ministerial statements from the week before if it was felt that the ministerial answers were not fully satisfactory, if there are unresolved issues or if further information has emerged since the statement. The minister concerned will already have been briefed for the statement and should be in a position to answer further questions at this committee just a few days later.

Second, the new committee could ask any minister to appear in order to answer urgent questions. For example, on the week of the 25th September, the Education Secretary might have been asked to appear to answer questions about the merger of Abertay and Dundee universities which had been in a confused position over the weekend.

The committee itself would decide the issues to pursue, probably on the Monday. Perhaps the rule could be that two political groups need to agree on the items to be brought before it. That way there is a fair balance between government and opposition. Under this proposal, all members would be able to go to the new committee to ask questions but MSPs would not be required to attend routinely.

We would be happy to expand on any of these suggestions with further details if you believe it would help inform the Committee’s work.

Alison McInnes MSP
31 October 2011