

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Committee reform inquiry

Written submissions received from Alison McInnes MSP – on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats

Thank you for your letter of 11 August regarding the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments' inquiry into options for reform of the Scottish Parliament's committee system. I am responding on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrat parliamentary group in my capacity as business manager.

Scottish Liberal Democrats agree with the Presiding Officer that there is scope to strengthen the Scottish Parliament's committee system through cultural and structural reforms.

Change could assist committees in managing their current workload. However, reform is certainly required if they are to effectively scrutinise the new powers that are set to be delivered by the Scotland Bill currently passing through the UK Parliament.

Our Parliament is becoming one of the most powerful devolved administrations in the OECD. The devolution of further substantial and wide-ranging additional powers compels members to closely consider what new arrangements could assist in empowering committees, facilitating effective scrutiny and supporting robust inquiries.

With the devolution of additional powers also comes the responsibility to maintain, or preferably enhance, the standard of scrutiny currently applied by the committees of the UK Parliament. The absence of a second chamber in Scotland means that this responsibility is all the more important.

Regardless of what form any reorganisation takes, I anticipate the principal challenges facing the committee system during the next Parliament will include increased workloads, the need to nurture expertise among members and the broadening of committee support services.

At present, the scrutiny of current bills takes precedence over other business. This means many committees have limited opportunities to undertake inquiries and virtually no time for post-legislative scrutiny. Reforms should seek to increase the time available to committees for these activities, as well as facilitate scrutiny of the additional legislation that will arise from the devolution of further powers.

It will also be important for reforms to encourage committee members to acquire expertise in existing and new disciplines. It is in some respects regrettable that each reshuffle of ministers, the shadow cabinet or spokespeople tends to be accompanied by the reorganisation of committee memberships. For example, there were three changes to the nine-member Justice Committee during the 18 months between the Committee publishing its Stage 1 report on the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill in

February 2014 and its considering amendments at Stage 2 in September 2015. Such chopping and changing is common across the committee system. It limits members' opportunities to draw upon evidence sessions, visits and other similar experiences, and ultimately has a detrimental effect on a committee's ability to provide effective scrutiny. As the Presiding Officer observed in her speech to the David Hume Institute on 30 March 2015, "specialisms need to have more time to develop".

Another significant challenge will be ensuring that the Scottish Parliament has sufficient staff to service any revised committee structure and that they are qualified to support expanded work programmes which encapsulate the new devolved powers.

My colleagues and I would also be interested in whether any reforms could seek to curb the culture of the party whip and enhance the independence of committee members. Scottish Liberal Democrats firmly believe that committees are at their best when all their members work in the public interest. Every member has a responsibility to scrutinise legislation and policies proposed by their own party just as closely as they would if they were proposed by an opponent.

Your inquiry will also need to examine whether the number of committee rooms available could accommodate any reconfiguration of the system. As a member of the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing I am acutely aware that our meetings are curtailed, and on some occasions constrained, by the fact that we are compelled to meet on Thursday lunchtimes between plenary sessions. Careful consideration will therefore need to be given to whether reforms will generate further conflict between committee and chamber business.

I have informed the committee clerk that I am able to attend a formal evidence session on 8 October 2015. I welcome the opportunity to explore these issues and more at this session and look forward to continuing to work with the Presiding Officer, business managers, the Committee and other parties on the development of proposals for sustainable committee reform.

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