To: All Members

8 July 2011

Dear Member

Programme for Change – improvements to chamber and committee business

I was elected to the office of Presiding Officer with a clear view that the Parliament had reached a point of maturity at which we should look to build on our achievements. My ambition is for a Parliament that is responsive to developments and meets the needs of the people of Scotland by ensuring topicality and relevance in its deliberations.

I have been working to put plans for change in place and I want to update you on discussions I have been holding with Party Leaders, Committee Conveners and Business Managers.

Beyond implementing changes that lie within the authority of the Presiding Officer – such as the changes I have made to FMQs and the increased speaking time for backbenchers during debates - I believe the time is right to have a wider look at how we organise chamber time and committee business.

Chamber business

Within this overall objective of developing the Parliament, I have discussed with Party Leaders and others two specific chamber aspects that would, in my view, benefit from more in-depth consideration and these are set out below.

- **Sitting patterns.** An overriding concern must be to ensure that the Parliament is in the best position to address relevant and topical issues. The business itself is, of course, a matter for the Bureau and the Parliament but I am not persuaded that the current sitting patterns always leave us in the best position to respond to urgent and emerging issues.

- **Question Time.** Questioning Ministers will always be a key function of Parliament. The current arrangements have strengths but I believe there is scope for improvement. For example, I do not think that Themed Question Time has worked as well as intended: there is scope in my view for more frequent and topical question sessions. Indeed, such changes might be linked to any alteration in our sitting patterns.
Committee business

Last month, I chaired the first meeting of the Conveners Group of the new parliamentary session. I am pleased to report that the conveners enthusiastically endorsed a reform agenda that should enable parliamentary committees to increase their agility, responsiveness and focus.

I am firmly of the belief that the Conveners Group will be key to delivering improvements in this regard and we have identified areas of common agreement which can be implemented quickly. The next two meetings of CG will focus on the detail for change and will include issues such as:

- **CG meetings**: Secretary of State for Scotland appearances before the Group have already been agreed in principle: the Group will also consider whether the First Minister should be invited to attend on an annual basis.

- **Committee inquiries**: more focused and objective-based remits should lead to increased quality of scrutiny and greater impact.

- **Committee debates in the chamber**: rather than relying almost exclusively on committee reports as the basis of debate, more effective use could be made of debates to inform possible inquiries or the early stages of committee work.

Overall, I believe we should seek to address both chamber and committee issues as a matter of urgency in order that any changes implemented can be used to the benefit of the Parliament for the large part of this session.

All Members have a valuable role to play in determining what improvements can be made and I would be very interested to hear any ideas Members may have either on the suggestions outlined above or on parliamentary reform more generally. I shall continue a dialogue with everyone I feel can best assist in bringing about the changes which I believe will ultimately improve our Parliament and better serve the people of Scotland.

Yours sincerely

TRICIA MARWICK