## Temporary Changes to Chamber Business: Written Evidence

**Elliot Wortley, University of Edinburgh (19th November 2026)**

1. I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh conducting a project examining scrutiny in the Scottish Parliament. As part of my PhD, I have been studying, and will continue to study, recent procedural changes. This note summarises key insights based on my research, which I hope will be useful to the committee.

## Executive Summary

2. The evidence below suggests that the overall effect of these changes has been mixed. The changes to points of order and intervention procedures are positive. However, splitting FMQs has decreased the visibility of backbenchers in the eyes of the media and public and the loss of topical questions has removed a valuable opportunity for sustained scrutiny of the government. Finally, given that it appears the main opposition parties are struggling to find enough speakers for the "open debate" section on government motions, it is questionable whether the extra Chamber time is being used effectively.

## Points of Order

3. Stating the relevant procedure at the beginning of a point of order is a good thing and will hopefully prevent Chamber time being wasted.

4. In the first 46 sitting days of this session, 14th May to 17th November 2026, 45 points of order were made in the Chamber (excluding those related to voting – e.g. "my app could not connect"). This compares with 68 that were made across the first 46 sitting days of session six (13th May to 10th November 2021).

5. The session six figure may be slightly inflated due to the COVID pandemic and practical challenges this caused at the time. And, of course, it is impossible to know the true effect of the changes on how many points of order have been made this session. However, it is reasonable to suspect that the new approach has resulted in fewer spurious points of order, particularly as there are instances of irrelevant points of order being cut short and these cases may act as a deterrence (see, for example, on 26th May 2026).

## Interventions

6. It is harder to gather comparable data on interventions, particularly as the COVID measures at the start of the sixth session meant that it was not initially possible to intervene on those contributing virtually. Nevertheless, observing debates, it seems that protected time encourages speakers to take more interventions – creating a livelier discussion and more opportunities for members to engage with/challenge the arguments of others.

7. It is worth noting that, since these changes were introduced, the time taken for interventions has not consistently been given back to speakers. For example, in one debate on 4th November 2026 the Deputy Presiding Officer ruled that "time for interventions has to be absorbed by the speaker." The justification for this was that business was running over and "interventions must be taken in the allotted time that the business managers agreed."

8. Therefore, greater clarity could be given around how this procedure works in practice as the original announcement of this rule was not caveated (and, in the example above, this judgement put further pressure on Chamber time by triggering numerous points of order).

**First Minister's Questions**

*Backbench Question Session*

9. Findings so far suggest that the impact of separating FMQs has been mixed. On the one hand, it makes sense, given that the similar number of opposition MSPs for each party (ranging only from 10 to 17) means that they are all entitled to be represented properly in leader questions, and backbench members may have been squeezed out if the session remained 45 minutes.

10. However, the changes have arguably led to backbench members having more limited visibility given that the public/press gallery is much emptier for the FMQs sessions on a Tuesday than Thursday (and receives far less press coverage). Arguably, this impacts scrutiny as it means that relevant issues raised may receive less attention than they would have otherwise.

*Published Questions*

11. Removing the published questions has allowed more time for questions to be taken in the backbench session and therefore a greater number of members to be heard.

12. However, a consequence of this is that there is now less sustained backbench questioning of the First Minister on a single topic as the supplementary questions that followed the three/four published questions each week are (obviously) no longer taken. This mechanism allowed members of different parties to put forward their views and/or to scrutinise the First Minister, meaning questions could build on one another.

13. For example, on January 15th 2026, Pam Duncan-Glancy and Liam McArthur were able to question the First Minister on the proposed assisted dying legislation (putting forward different views) while Douglas Ross, Ruth Maguire, and Pauline McNeill had questions that built on one another in relation to the practicalities of

housing prisoners following the Supreme Court's ruling on the Equality Act 2010. These sorts of exchanges are now less likely to take place.

## Other Questioning Procedures

### *General Questions*

14. The increase in the number of general questions means that, as pointed out by the Presiding Officer, the total number of "non-First Minister's questions… [rose] from 32 to 38 per week". However, an increase in the quantity of questions asked does not automatically mean an increase in the quality of scrutiny taking place. Indeed, I believe that it is regrettable that one of the new general question sessions has replaced topical questions, for the reasons below.

### *Topical Questions*

15. Topical questions gave backbench members an opportunity to lodge questions on relevant topics at short notice (compared to general or portfolio questions). Arguably, this has been enhanced with the opportunity to raise topical issues with the First Minister at backbench FMQs. However, the overall impact of these changes has been negative because:
    - The First Minister is likely to be less familiar with the issue than the relevant Minister would be (particularly with no notice of the question in advance). If the purpose of questioning is to advance issues and get detailed answers for constituents then engaging with the Minister is perhaps preferable.
    - Topical questions allowed the member lodging the question to ask two supplementary questions. This provided the opportunity for sustained scrutiny to take place. MSPs receive no supplementary questions at backbench FMQs (and one at general/portfolio questions – only if they were the original questioner).
    - Other backbench MSPs were then able to ask additional supplementary questions on the issue, something not guaranteed at backbench FMQs. This ensured greater scrutiny from across the political (and geographic) spectrum on important issues of the day.

## Timetabling

### *Chamber Business*

16. Given the noted pressures on Chamber time in the last session, extending the parliamentary day to provide "more time for scrutiny in the Chamber" makes sense in principle.

17. However, examining the 35 Government debates that took place between 26th May and 17th November 2026 raises questions over how this time is being used and whether it has actually enabled greater scrutiny. Indeed, the "open debates" on these motions have been overwhelmingly dominated by backbenchers from

the governing party (as shown by Table 1). Moreover, 10 of the 35 debates had no speeches from opposition MSPs in the "open debate".[1]

**Table 1.** Avg. No. of Speakers from Each Party in the "Open Debate" on Gov't Motions (26/5/26–17/11/26).

| | SNP | LAB | REF | GRN | CON | LIB |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mean** | 5.4 | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0 |
| **Median** | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

18. Parties have the right to decide how they allocate their debate time. However, in practice, evidence suggests that the main opposition parties are struggling to put up enough speakers to ensure that a thorough, varied debate takes place (outside of opening/closing speeches), which raises questions about whether extending the parliamentary day has made any practical difference in improving scrutiny.

19. The effectiveness and impact of this change also deserves further consideration as:
    - The day can already be extended if business is running over and this was done frequently during the passage of legislation in previous sessions.
    - The new decision time of 17:30 on Tuesdays and Wednesdays arguably undermines the principle of the Parliament being a family-friendly workplace (particularly as Member's Business still needs to take place after decision time). This potentially impacts those with caring responsibilities or who require additional assistance themselves.
    - Relatedly, when coupled with the new intervention rules, there is increased unpredictability around the timing of decision time. For example, on the first three Tuesdays/Wednesdays of November decision time has begun at: 17:41, 18:03, 17:38, 17:29, 17:37, and 17:39.

*Committee Business*

20. The change to the Thursday schedule is sensible and, in particular, should help ease pressure on those committees which will conduct stage two proceedings on Thursday mornings.

[1] This means that the Presiding Officer's plea that "parties… [should be] flexible in how their debating time is used" has not come to fruition. This issue, of course, can't be addressed through standing orders.