

Written submission from Paul Sweeney MSP
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Consultation on Elected Conveners 2024

Over the last decade, the size of the Scottish Government has grown. Humza Yousaf's time as First Minister saw the largest Scottish Government ever with a record number of ministers, with a cabinet of ten and eighteen junior ministers, comprising over a fifth of parliamentarians. Whilst the government payroll has increased, concerns have been raised about the authority of Parliament and the ability of the remaining MSPs to effectively hold government accountable.

With less voices on the backbenches, it is a natural consequence that opposition to government has become more muted. For those willing to question the size of government and the consequential dilution of Parliament's standing, we could place blame squarely at the First Minister's door. By inviting an ever-greater proportion of MSPs to join government, the First Minister can limit the number of dissenting voices against the government's agenda.

But whilst this is problematic in and of itself, the issue is far more complex, and attention must be given to questioning the role of individual MSPs. The status of parliamentarians requires strengthening and the government payroll ought not to be the only means by which individual MSPs can build a career in Parliament.

By introducing elected committee convenors, we may seek to provide a route for MSPs to do just that.

MSPs with a keen interest or specialised knowledge could seek to become a committee convenor, encouraging cross-party representatives to vote based not on partisan grounds, but for individuals able to command genuine authority on policy areas. Indeed, this approach would loosen the influence of the party whip on our politics and perhaps even inspire more consensual politics, with elected members opening dialogue with opponents in order to win support in convenor elections. Indeed, one academic, reviewing changes to the UK Parliament's committee system, refers to an MP saying, 'Elected chairs made all the difference. They're elected by the House, so they *can't be too partisan or cliquey*.'¹ (emphasis added)

By directly electing convenors, parliamentarians could seek to build a reputation for themselves, enhancing the committee's status through being led by someone genuinely motivated by advancing excellence in public policy and more rigorous scrutiny of government policy, not just serving as their party's appointment.

Elected convenors would undoubtedly take greater responsibility for the committee's work. Through this, the scrutiny and attention paid to relevant legislation would likely be improved.

A Constitution Society paper, reviewing the move to elected Select Committee chairs at the UK Parliament, concluded that, 'changes in the system have elevated the profile and status of select committees in Parliament and government'.²

From the evidence given in this paper, some respondents exclusively attributed a committee's 'greater freedom to criticise the government' to the introduction of elected chairs.³

Furthermore, a 2013 report from the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee concluded that following the introduction of elections, amongst other reforms, committees were now more transparent, democratic and held in greater esteem.⁴

Others have reflected on the general mood of MPs following these reforms, noting that committees were now seen as having increased confidence and being properly independent from government.⁵

For the reasons outlined, I would therefore strongly support committee elections being introduced in the Scottish Parliament.

¹ Lucy Fisher, 'The Growing Power and Autonomy of House of Commons Select Committees: Causes and Effects' [2015] 86(3) *The Political Quarterly* 421

² Lucy Atkinson, *House of Commons Select Committees and the UK Constitution* (1st edn, The Constitution Society 2017) 36

³ *Ibid* 29

⁴ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright Reforms* (HC 2012-13 82)

⁵ Fisher (n 1)