

REBUILDING SCOTLAND'S "NEW POLITICS"

**A CONSTRUCTIVE PARLIAMENT TO BUILD
TRUST IN SCOTTISH POLITICS**

**Dave Hawkey and
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ABOUT THIS PAPER

Political disillusionment is growing in Scotland and policy is not delivering against targets even when these are backed by cross-party support. Drawing on interviews with MSPs leaving parliament at the 2026 election, this paper asks how the Scottish parliament currently works and how it could be improved.

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SUMMARY

Twenty-seven years of devolution have disappointed hopes that the Scottish parliament would foster a fresh “new politics” in Scotland. Voter turnout collapsed in 2026, mirroring the slump in citizens’ regard for their political class. Only a minority trusts the parliament to work in Scotland’s interests while two thirds say politicians do not listen to people like them.

Disillusionment with the parliament is not just a widespread public feeling, it is also felt by MSPs themselves, with a record number deciding not to stand again at the last election. This report, based on a set of anonymised “exit interviews” with high profile MSPs, reveals deep frustrations with how politics and policymaking currently work. Across different political parties we heard common complaints of limited involvement in policymaking processes, an ineffective committee system, incentives to make bad legislation, but above all about partisanship getting in the way of agreeing good policy.

Scotland’s political institutions are stuck between two poles. On the one hand, the design of parliament and its procedures assumes a process of negotiation, in which representatives of different groups and interests work together to build a consensus. On the other hand, Scottish politics inherited many of the impulses of Westminster to conduct politics as a contest between adversaries each trying to secure a majority.

This mismatch leads to many of the dysfunctions that frustrate MSPs and voters alike. Where parliamentary debates should be a constructive search for common ground and compromise, they turn into “*reading out contests*”. Where committees should be deep pools of expertise capable of interrogating ministers and shaping laws, they have veered towards the shallow, the formulaic and party-lines. Where legislation should be a collaborative process drawing on expertise and ideas both within and beyond parliament it has tended towards the performative and headline-grabbing, resulting in what many MSPs describe as bad law.

These problems have grown over the course of devolution, and are becoming more acute for three reasons:

- The issues confronting Scotland – climate, inequality, North Sea decline (with or without new licences), ageing, etcetera – demand a new policy agenda with broad backing across the population, precisely what a consensus-seeking form of politics is able to deliver.
- The mismatched system is not working for anyone – politicians are increasingly frustrated in their efforts to make change, and the adversarial style of politics may underlie voters’ growing impression that politicians prioritise party interests.
- Politics in Scotland is fragmenting, with 2026 showing the highest diversity of votes across competing parties. The strain between

Westminster-style and consensus-building politics is likely to continue growing.

Some of the problems with the parliament have been apparent since 1999. Far from developing deep pools of expertise, committees see a high turnover of members, with the median stint having been around one and a half years in every session of parliament. Others have been getting worse, with committee meetings turning more into a series of monologues than an active debate. One interviewee told *“the greatest disappointment [when appearing before a committee] is always how rubbish their questions are. They're all sitting on their phones, you get to their shot, they ask a pre-prepared question, it's either political or general [...] and then they go back to scrolling on Twitter”*.

Complaints about ill-considered Scottish legislation are perennial, and we heard them from across the political spectrum. Experienced MSPs decry the shift of legislative action out of the committee stage, where supposedly expert MSPs should collaborate to build a consensus on effective legislation. Instead, the action has increasingly moved to full-chamber debates. Originally conceived as the arena for final decisions on clearly delineated legislative choices these debates increasingly handle detailed amendments. The scale of stage three debates compared with stage two has increased by around a third since the first session.

Dispiriting as these observations are, we are hardly the first to identify structural problems in the Scottish parliament. The MSPs who spoke to us are far from unique in their diagnosis, with various commissions and reports highlighting problems over the years. Yet change is rare, and recent examples represent minimal improvements.

Control over parliament's practices lies with politicians, but MSPs are poorly positioned to advocate for changes to their own circumstances. Changes that alter the distribution of power create losers (who resist) and winners (who are therefore dismissed as self-interested).

Our core recommendation, therefore, is to set up a Citizens' Commission on Scotland's Democracy. This body, external to parliament, will work on upgrading Scotland's democratic institutions. The commission itself should be thoroughly democratic, to enable Scotland's citizens to review and report on the functioning of Scottish democracy. Citizens should be involved in setting the commission's remit, ranging from rules governing committee memberships to changing the voting system or introducing a second chamber.

Participatory decision making, using tools like citizens' assemblies and juries, would be its primary way of working. This would both ensure the commission links institutional change to ordinary people and give a weight to its recommendations that past bodies comprised of “the great and the good” have lacked.

According to our interviewees, parliament has fallen into bad habits. It is time to refresh Scotland's democracy and give citizens a voice in building a new consensus on how Scotland is governed.

1.

INTRODUCTION

“This was an election which basically went past with most people not knowing what was going on and not really caring.” – Anonymous MSP

From the walls of the Scottish parliament’s debating chamber, human-shaped cut-outs peer into proceedings, intended as a reminder to MSPs of the people they serve. Yet the real versions of those people have become disconnected from parliament and increasingly distrustful of politics itself.

FIGURE 1.1

Scotland’s citizens are represented abstractly on the left side of the wall of the parliament’s debating chamber



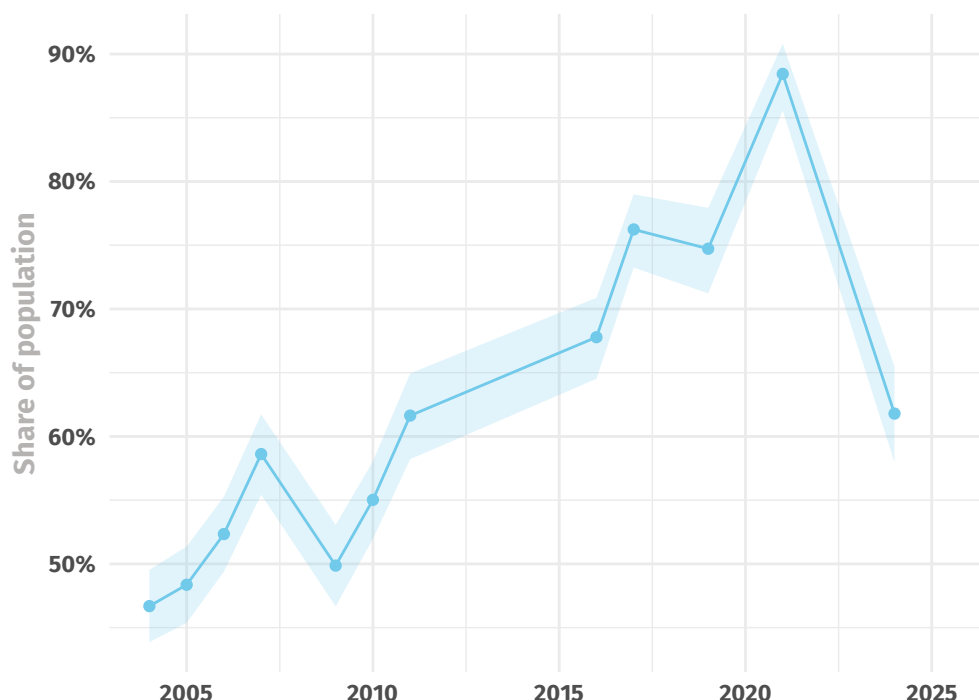
Source: Wikimedia Commons (Debating chamber of the Scottish Parliament by S. Perquin, CC BY-SA 4.0)

This is clearly seen in attitudes to voting. Through the first 22 years of the parliament, people in Scotland increasingly saw voting in Scottish elections as important. But since 2021 this has collapsed, falling by almost a third (figure 1.2). Voter turnout tells the same story, with 2021’s modest high point (63.5 per cent) falling by ten points to a mere 53.4 per cent in the 2026 election.

FIGURE 1.2

The proportion of people in Scotland who see voting in Scottish elections as important has fallen

Proportion of Scottish adults agreeing that “it is very important to vote in Scottish parliament elections”. Shaded region shows 95% confidence interval



Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey data from Scottish Centre for Social Research (2026 and earlier)

On more specific attitudes to Scotland’s democratic institutions the deteriorating picture is the same. In the 2010s 60-70 per cent of Scottish adults trusted the parliament to work in Scotland’s interest, but this has now fallen to be a minority view (47 per cent). That the Scottish parliament gives people more of a say in how Scotland is governed has also become a minority view (falling from 63 per cent to 45 per cent from 2021 to 2023). Amidst this growing dissatisfaction it is no surprise that three quarters of the public think the system of government in Scotland needs to be improved¹ (all figures calculated from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey).

These dim views reflect a wider mood of political disaffection. Three quarters think politicians care more about their party than the people they represent; two thirds say politicians do not listen to the concerns of people like them; and 70 per cent think that, even when politicians change, they see no progress (JRF 2026). The majority (54 per cent) thinks Scotland is heading in the wrong direction (Understanding Scotland 2026), and the public anticipate the seventh session of the parliament will fail to deliver on their priorities (IPPR Scotland 2025).

Declining confidence in politics and government is a problem. Scotland faces formidable challenges: cutting emissions and managing the impacts of climate change, providing health and care to an increasingly elderly population, reducing our excessive levels of inequality, shepherding the economy as North Sea fossil resources dry up. Solving each of these will require far reaching policy across

¹ In 2024, 46 per cent said governing in Scotland “could be improved quite a lot” and 29 per cent said it “needs a great deal of improvement”.

many aspects of Scottish daily life. With twentieth century economic growth rates unlikely to return, addressing our collective challenges will need us to pool more of our resources (Scottish Fiscal Commission 2025a, b). Low trust in politics is a major barrier to building the consensus we need around such sharing. Concretely, if citizens lack trust in politics, they will not agree to pay the taxes we need to fix our shared problems.

The performance of parliament in forging such consensus has some serious gaps. Totemic targets on issues like climate and child poverty received cross-party support when first adopted, but this has not translated into adequate implementation. Climate targets have already been watered down, and the Scottish government is now looking at revisions to child poverty.

This is not to say the parliament is hopelessly riven by factionalism – there are real and important instances where cross-party consensus has been forged, and which have led to laudable successes. One underappreciated example is the successful creation of Social Security Scotland (SSS) where, even if parties disagreed on the substance of social security policy, consensus-oriented politics enabled a safe transition. The transition from DWP to SSS benefits ran smoothly and mitigated the risk of recipients falling between administrative gaps.

About this project

How can constructive politics be expanded in Scotland, gain public trust and shepherd the country through its challenges? To address this question, we conducted a series of eight interviews with people who have intimate knowledge and long experience with the Scottish parliament. Core to this series are seven ex-MSPs who, between them, clocked up 47,001 days as parliamentary representatives. To enable interviewees to speak freely, and to focus our research on parliamentary issues rather than party conflicts, we have anonymised their contributions. While their tenures started at various points, they all included the sixth session from 2021 to 2026, and several were part of the 1999 intake. Their experiences range from backbench to senior cabinet roles, and their party affiliations span the SNP, Labour and Conservative parties.

We are grateful to our interviewees for their generosity in engaging with us. This report presents and interprets aspects of what we heard across the interviews, but we emphasise that, as with any research, we have made editorial decisions about what to include. Although we use our interviewees' words to illustrate and highlight issues, they should not be taken as implying our interviewees endorse our conclusions or recommendations. Any shortcomings in these are ours alone.

2.

THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT – A HYBRID INSTITUTION

Our recommendations envisage an open, accessible Parliament; a Parliament where power is shared with the people; where people are encouraged to participate in the policy making process which affects all our lives; an accountable, visible Parliament; and a Parliament which promotes equal opportunities for all. – Henry McLeish, foreword to the Report of the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament (1998).

The creation of the Scottish parliament in 1999 aimed to address a democratic deficit in Scotland in more ways than one. In procedural terms, a backlog of legislation pertaining to Scotland's distinctive institutions (health, education, law, etc.) had built up, struggling to find time in a Westminster legislature numerically dominated by representation of English constituencies. The Scottish parliament improves the accountability of legislative processes at the same time as relieving this "pressure cooker." Indeed, the first term of the Scottish parliament finally repealed various ancient laws related to land ownership, which some describe as "finally abolishing feudalism".

Alongside these issues sat aspirations among some in Scotland for a different *kind* of politics. This view saw problems with the winner-takes-all political style of Westminster. For some, this was epitomised by the fact that Scotland was governed in the 1980s by a Conservative government because of that party's majority in England (Cairney and Johnson 2013). But the concern was not just party political, it also stood against the adversarial majoritarian model of Westminster. It was hoped that Scotland could instead create a "new politics" based on more collaboration and consensus-building.

This contrast reflects different patterns of democracy seen across the world. How should decisions be made in a democracy when citizens have different interests and perspectives? Democratic government appears to face a tension between representing that diversity and being able to make decisions. Different ways of responding to this tension lie on Lijphart's (2012) classic spectrum from majoritarian to consensus democracies. Majoritarian institutions tend to concentrate power so that decisions can be made efficiently. This can be achieved in various, mutually reinforcing ways, but the totemic component is the voting system. Westminster is the archetype, with 2024's election result starkly illustrating the dynamic – the Labour party translated 34 per cent of the vote into 63 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons and 100 per cent of government positions.

At the other end of the spectrum, consensus democracies like Nordic countries, are characterised by institutional arrangements that disperse power, bringing as

wide a range of actors as possible into the process of decision making. The notion of consensus here is not that everyone agrees, but that decisions are arrived at through processes that require politics to try to *build* a consensus. Voting systems are emblematic with proportional systems creating parliaments in which parties must bargain, negotiate and compromise to get things done.

Do some kinds of democracy lead to “better” decisions than others? Across measures of governance, economic management and maintaining civil peace, Lijphart (2012) concluded that majoritarian does not outperform consensus democracy. This undermines the conventional wisdom that concentrating power is necessary for decision making to be effective. But Lijphart did find superior performance among consensus democracies in the quality and representativeness of government across measures ranging from gender balance in parliaments and cabinets to civil liberties. Strikingly, given the sinking faith of the Scottish electorate, citizens in consensus systems express greater faith in and support for their democracies, and more interest and participation in elections and parties (Lijphart 2012).

Where do Scotland’s democratic institutions sit on this spectrum? Following the devolution referendum, the Consultative Steering Group (CSG, 1998) was established, with cross-party and civic society membership, to recommend rules and standing orders. They agreed four principles:

- The parliament should embody and reflect the **sharing of power** between the people of Scotland, the legislators and the Scottish Executive
- The executive should be **accountable** to the Scottish parliament and the parliament and the executive to the people of Scotland
- The parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, develop procedures which make possible a **participative approach** to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation
- Recognise the need to promote **equal opportunities** for all.

Clearly these principles aim at a system that disperses power and under which decisions would need to be made through negotiation and consensus *building*. However, while some of these principles - such as empowering parliamentary committees to initiate legislation- were built into the design of the parliament; other aspects represent more of a compromise with a majoritarian system. The electoral system is a stark illustration, a mixture of majoritarian-style first-past-the-post constituencies with an additional layer of regional proportionality grafted on top.

The Scottish parliament is a hybrid institution, combining elements of consensus and majoritarian democracy. This is the lens through which we look at how parliament is currently working and what exiting MSPs told us of their experience.

3.

THE GOOD – WHEN POLITICS IS COLLABORATIVE

“The Parliament's now 27 years old and [...] I had hoped that by this point we might have seen a bit more genuine cross-party collaboration.” – Anonymous MSP.

We structured our interviews to explore whether Scottish policymaking can keep pace with the evolving policy landscape. While we heard of many issues holding the system back, our interviewees also gave us clear examples of how Scottish democracy is working well.

The parliament's committees are designed for politicians from different parties to work together. Later we will review evidence of committees not living up to their potential, but where good committee work was described to us, cross-party collaboration was seen as fundamental:

“It's not obvious to external people, but there is a lot of very good cross-party work happens in committees. That is a strength of the parliament because it empowers the committee members to work together. Whereas in the chamber [...] it's always been quite aggressive.” – Anonymous MSP.

More generally, we heard about cross-party relationships between MSPs as being important:

“When I joined [...] there was a pretty good programme put together for the first seven, eight days, which forced you to talk to other MSPs who weren't part of your own party [...] And so you built relationships with people from across party naturally and you got to know them as, you know, human beings.” – Anonymous MSP.

This MSP attributed some of the unproductive polarisation of the sixth session (2021-2026) to Covid lockdowns preventing this same collaborative induction.

Effective relationships were highlighted as important to good government beyond the Scottish parliament too. Working relationships across Scottish and UK governments were described as better or worse at different points, with variation not necessarily following the degree of political alignment across governments.

“Two of us [ministers in UK and Scottish governments] worked through every couple of months [on] a to-do list of things that we were both trying to fix. And these would alternate between massive, big national problems and ‘oh, by the way, this government mentioned to me that they're trying to

do X, Y, Z. Could you have a look at it?’ ‘Yes, no problem’. Then we’d come back a couple of weeks later, have the same list.” – Anonymous MSP.

Similarly, good working relationships between MSPs and public sector leaders in Scotland were also valued:

“Relationships matter as much as policy, because actually if you’ve got good relationships at that governance level, at all levels, right, you know, right through the system, relationships can allow you to respond nimbly and know what’s happening and be able to anticipate things.” – Anonymous MSP.

We also heard specific instances of cross-party working that MSPs valued. One example, the budget, has a clear forcing mechanism:

“[The budget produces] very constructive discussions [...] and I wonder if it’s because, you know, enough of them realise that if there’s not an agreement around the budget, people don’t get paid and services don’t get delivered. [...] So they then pitch up and say, ‘We might as well try and get something out of this process and be seen to be the grown-ups in the room.’ So the budget is interesting because it does show that when push comes to shove, folk will step up” – Anonymous MSP.

The devolution of social security has been one significant change, with administration of some benefits transferred from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to Social Security Scotland (SSS). This process had high stakes as mistakes could result in people being denied the benefits they needed, particularly support for disabilities. Jeanne Freeman (Minister for Social Security between 2016 and 2018) was credited in several interviews for building a cross-party consensus that helped ensure the transition ran with minimal disruption.

The assisted dying legislation was another example where MSPs highlighted the value of substantive deliberation:

“Because people were taken out of their party environment, you actually, for the first time in a while, saw genuine kind of thoughtful contributions and people talking with each other rather than at each other. [...] It’s not that the parliament doesn’t have the capacity to do that, it just seems to not be able to translate that level of thoroughness, thoughtful reflection and decision making [...] into the more political sphere.” – Anonymous MSP.

However, this valuing of consensus-building should not be mistaken as evidence that these processes are working well. Indeed, assisted dying was also cited as an example of the parliament’s processes not working. We explore MSPs’ frustration with the legislative process in chapter 5.

4.

THE BAD – THE OBSTACLES OF PARTISANSHIP

“We imagined [...] that the consensus building that got us the Parliament would continue post implementation. And it was blown out of the water.” – Anonymous interviewee.

Politician’s incentives

Political scientists highlight three goals politicians pursue: vote maximisation, acquiring office and influencing policy. Majoritarian democracies make it harder for politicians to gain either office or policy influence because parties that do not come first in an election are far more “frozen out” than in consensus democracies. Pettitt (2008) argues majoritarian politics therefore raises the stakes and pushes parties to centralise control of their policy agendas and election campaigns. He contrasts political parties in Denmark (a strong consensus democracy) with Scotland, arguing Danish parties involve their members much more in policy formation than do Scottish parties.

In our interviews, several MSPs raised similar issues, suggesting systems in Scotland leave little room for MSPs (let alone members) to play a role in the development of their parties’ policies.

“What surprised me, maybe naively, was how little input many MSPs have on their own party’s policy development [...] it was quite a controlled environment, and thus policy development was more limited than I expected it to be” – Anonymous MSP.

These limited channels for internal policy formation arguably also contribute to the make-up of parties, with members standing for election less likely to have a hinterland to draw on, not least because success within parties is not necessarily linked to contributing policy ideas.

“If you look at [my party] it’s largely [...] people that have been in the party machine for quite a while and are getting elected, not because they’ve got any drive to sort of, you know, ‘I’ve been a plumber all my life and now I’ve got a new way to do the plumbing’ or ‘I’m a farmer all my life, I really want to fix farming’. They are people that are [just] in the political machine.” – Anonymous MSP.

Another MSP contrasted recent sessions with a “good kind of amateurism” that characterised the 1999-2003 session, with the initial intake of MSPs having very little experience of front-line politics and a vast amount of experience in other fields.

In this context, the criticism from within parliament that its debates have become “reading out contests” (Jenny Gilruth quoted in the Scotsman 2024) may not *only* be about the use of tablets and phones but also reflects limitations on MSPs’ engagement with the substance of policy.

This is not to say MSPs are incapable of influencing policy, either within their party or more directly through their work in parliament. Politicians generally pursue a mix of votes, office and policy influence, but do so in a given institutional structure that rewards some objectives more than others. The issue is that majoritarianism in Scotland steers politicians away from pursuing their own policy objectives. One MSP specifically linked the Scottish parliament’s institutional design to politicians being unwilling to do more than follow the party line.

“People will be thinking, I want to get re-elected in five years’ time. I want, I need to be number one or two on the list to do that. I’m not going to rock the boat. So, you know, I think that whole structure of how the parliament is designed to work means that you don’t have that outlier.” – Anonymous MSP.

These features of Scottish politics arguably contribute to the growing disillusionment across public opinion reviewed above. The incentives baked into the way Scottish democracy currently operates create fertile ground for the perception that politicians don’t listen, and that they put their party’s interests over the wider public good.

Collapsing consensus

If this is right and parties in Scotland veer away from inclusive policy development, this potentially illuminates why the last five years have seen a remarkable growth in political disaffection. This period represents both an inflection in public opinion and a breakdown in apparent policy consensuses that were built up through the 2010s: the fifth session (2016-21) saw targets for stretching climate goals, child poverty and fuel poverty passed with cross-party support and no votes against (Scottish Parliament 2019a; 2019b; 2019c).

High ambitions were not coupled with concrete delivery plans; they were instead developed after parliament had agreed the targets. From one perspective this is reasonable – it is unrealistic to set out details for such far-reaching, long-term projects. However, this sequencing meant the consensus on targets was tenuous and did not survive when it came to material policies.

“The Parliament agreed the legally binding targets for both child poverty reduction and for net zero, but [you see] people turning away from those principles or the policy announcements they make running completely contrary to what is a parliamentary legal requirement... A knee-jerk reaction to the proposition”. – Anonymous MSP.

In parallel, we heard accounts that the expectations of what the parliament could deliver had grown beyond what could be realistically achieved. We heard different expressions of the same difficulty from different parties:

“The perception that the Scottish parliament can fix problems that they have no powers to fix has also increased. And so it’s not just a case of the Scottish parliament suddenly deciding, oh, we rather fancy fixing new problems.[...] The pressure on them to fix new problems has grown, both because of the actual responsibility they now bear, and secondly, because of the perception that has grown.” – Anonymous MSP.

“Without winning the [independence] referendum, you couldn't test what they were saying. Suddenly we stopped delivering and started kind of promising the earth and with no hope of delivering it.” – Anonymous MSP.

“The parliament has had a tendency to operate and think as if it had all the tools in the box. When you look at some independent countries in Scandinavia, for example, [...] they've got all the tools and they've struggled on their journeys.” – Anonymous MSP.

Where did these growing expectations come from? The quotes above include suggestions that either the independence referendum or the increase in powers that followed it played a role. Another interviewee saw the impact of the 2014 referendum as:

“A huge awakening in people's appetite to talk about the state of Scotland, how it's governed, what its future might look like, whether it will be different... We campaigned for a No vote in the referendum [not] because we wanted to keep things as they were [but] precisely because we wanted more radical change.” – Anonymous MSP.

“There was a lot of debate, not just in Parliament, but within civic Scotland that got people talking about the art of the possible, [...]. So it did shake things up and it did get people talking and maybe raising their horizons.” – Anonymous MSP.

A similar sentiment of public involvement in change was expressed in “the vow” issued by UK leaders of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties on the eve of the referendum: *extensive new powers will be delivered for the Parliament [...] and it is our hope that the people of Scotland will be engaged directly as each party works to improve the way we are governed.* (The Vow, see BBC 2014)

Tying these threads together, we suggest the following hypothesis. The independence referendum shifted political debate in Scotland into expansive territory. This contributed to a growing sentiment among the public that the Scottish parliament is important (see figure 1.2). At the same time, parties tried to live up to these ambitions by agreeing to stretch targets on climate and poverty. But this “participation from above” was not matched by participation in the substance of policy formation, either inside parties or through parliamentary and government processes. That narrowed the bandwidth through which public debate could engage with the trade-offs implied by the targets. This left expectations high but targets unsupported by agreement on their delivery.

We stress this is our hypothesis and not the opinion of our interviewees. Other obvious factors – pandemic, inflation – also made delivery difficult. However, clearly something shifted in Scottish politics between the fifth and sixth sessions, showing that cross-party agreement on abstract targets was not sufficient to build a policy agenda that delivers.

5.

THE UGLY – PARLIAMENT FALLING SHORT

The Scottish parliament, not just the government, has the opportunity to improve Scotland and navigate difficult times. However, the way its systems are used by MSPs falls short of delivering on that potential.

Committees

Committees in the Scottish parliament are “all-purpose”, combining Westminster select committee activities (running inquiries, interrogating ministers, taking evidence, etcetera) and public bill committees (tasked with line-by-line scrutiny of proposed legislation).

Our interviewees described the original intention of this design as being to create powerful committees on which MSPs would sit for long periods and develop deep subject expertise. As such, they would function as a powerful counterweight to the Scottish government, embodying a dispersal of power across parliament (and within committees, across parties). Committee members with developed expertise would in theory be able to balance their party interests with their own ideas about the substance they were considering. They were meant to be an important institutional force for orienting parliament and government toward consensus building.

However, committees have not lived up to those original aspirations. First, MSPs generally do not spend a long time sitting on any given committee. In every session of parliament, the median time served as a committee member has hovered around one and a half years.

With short tenures, MSPs are not able to build up the kind of expertise a longer tenure would deliver. With limited experience, committee MSPs are often perceived by their peers as failing to perform their functions adequately.

“There has been an insufficient appetite to challenge from the committees, the government of the day, and I think that's really disappointing.” – Anonymous MSP.

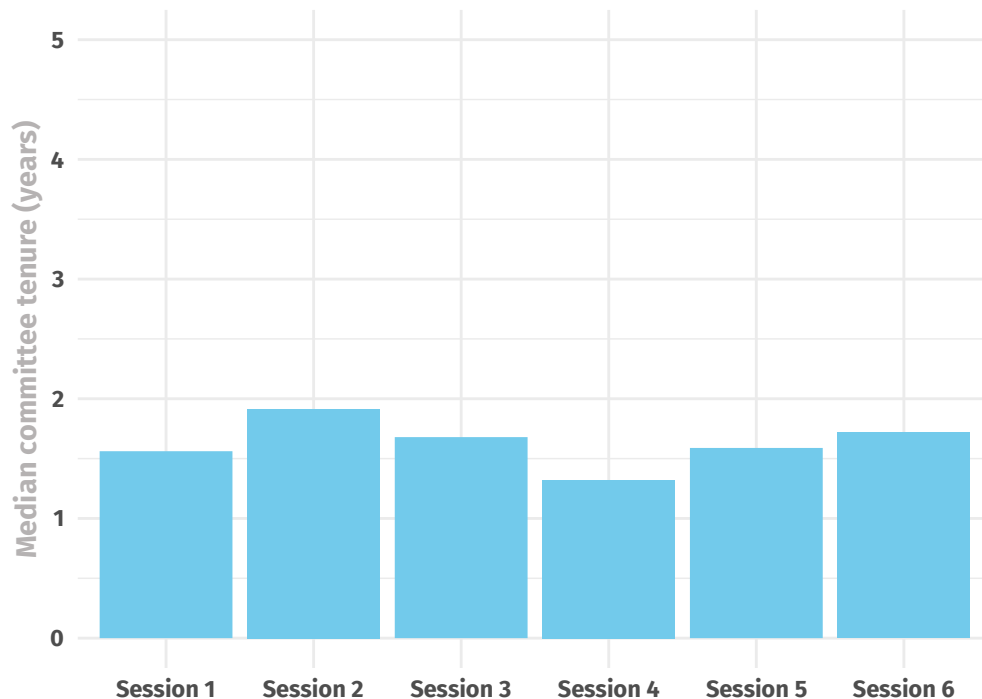
Some MSPs went further, arguing that committee members too often fall back on party lines and pay insufficient attention to the matters they are engaging with:

“If you go as a minister to be interrogated by the by the opposition or backbenchers, the greatest disappointment is always how rubbish their questions are because they're all sitting on their phones, you get to their shot, they ask a pre-prepared question. It's either political or general most of the time. And then they go back to scrolling on Twitter.” – Anonymous MSP.

FIGURE 5.1

The median time an MSP serves on any given committee is one and a half to two years

Median total time MSPs serve as members of a committee in each session



Source: Analysis of Scottish Parliament data. Exclude bill committees, and treats mid-term replacement committees as continuations (such as session 5's Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee which was replaced by the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee)

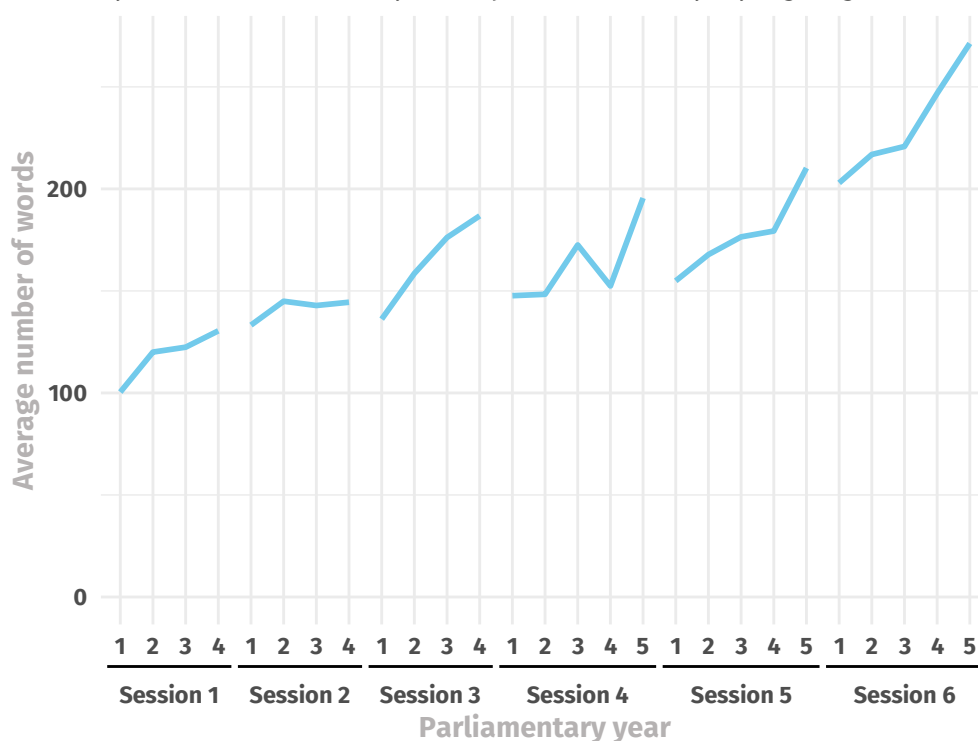
"Committees have become much more politicised in the last 10 years...back in 1999...the committees were far, far less political. People went in, they almost lay aside the politics...come to a committee view on this...[today] you end up in private with the committee clerks producing a good report which will ultimately be altered and watered down." – Anonymous MSP.

Not all committee members were described in these terms, with some singled out as being independently minded and engaged with the substance of their work. However, these were highlighted as the exceptions that proved the rule.

Looking across all committee meetings, we find evidence of a general drift away from interactive debate within committees and towards a system of turn-taking. Figure 5.2 shows how many words committee members speak (as recorded by the official report) before another committee member speaks. In the first parliamentary session, the average contribution was 117 words, but by the sixth session this had doubled to 232. Where committees could be spaces of cross-party dialogue they have become increasingly turn-taking arenas in which, by the accounts of our interviewees, members pay little attention to each other.

FIGURE 5.2

Committee members ‘turns’ have become much longer as the parliament has aged
Average number of words spoken by committee members before another committee member speaks (excludes interruptions by conveners and people giving evidence).



Source: analysis of Scottish Parliament official report

Our interviewees also highlighted some positives: occasional collaborative working “behind the scenes” and interesting reports. However, these were glimmers in a generally gloomy picture of committees dominated by parties, and reports “ultimately being altered and watered down” before getting published. The problems with Scottish committees are widely recognised, including by committees themselves (Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee 2025). But we also heard the concern that committee shortcomings damage parliament’s reputation:

“When committee members don't even read their papers, you can tell they've not read their papers, and that's their credibility undermined. It also means that they'll be undermined in the world of what they're engaging with. I get feedback of people saying, ‘oh, we had such and such come along, but they didn't know what they were talking about,’ and that's embarrassing to everybody. That's a parliament thing.” – Anonymous MSP.

Legislation

Legislation in the Scottish parliament goes through three stages. At stage one, the general principles of a bill are introduced and the parliament votes on whether the bill should proceed. Stage two is the committee stage, during which a lead committee considers the draft bill, takes evidence and collaborates to amend the bill. This stage is intended as the main opportunity for parliament to make detailed changes. Stage three is intended as a plenary debate where final “tidying up” amendments may be proposed or the main substantive issues the committee

could not agree are decided, culminating in a parliament vote whether to make the bill law.

Across our interviews we heard exasperation with this process, especially with the ineffectiveness of stage two.

“Stage two in the last parliament was starting to become irrelevant because people would just come back with exactly the same things and then it would be a rerun.” – Anonymous MSP.

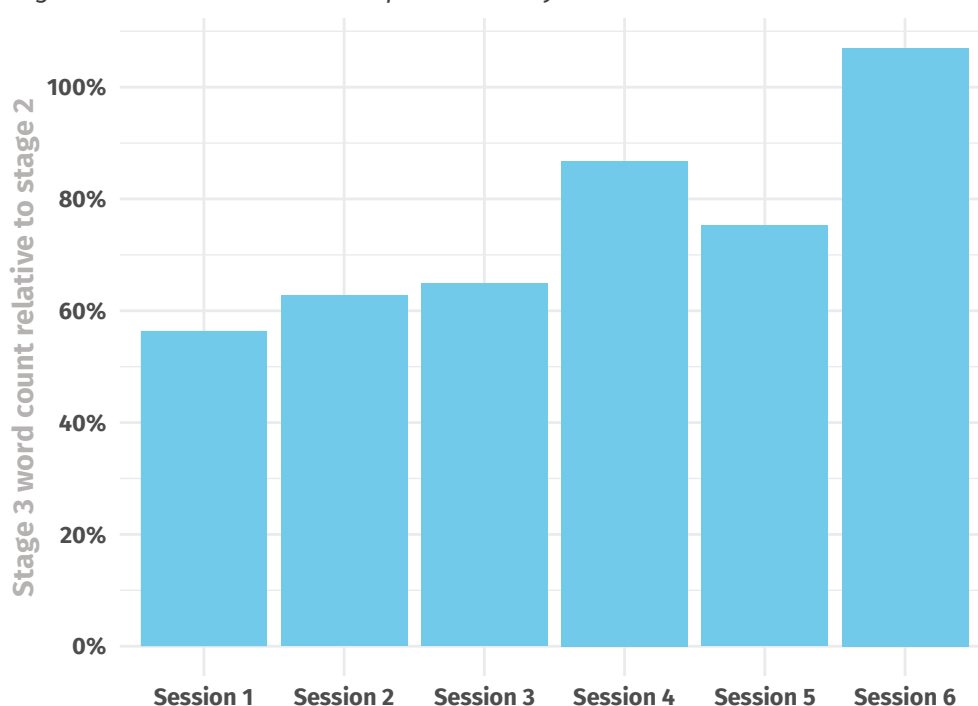
But, as another MSP pointed out, the rerun is with a larger group of MSPs who haven’t heard the evidence presented to committees. This in turn contributes to bad legislation sense-checks, and final decisions of stage three are supplemented with substantive amendments.

“While sitting, trying to follow the stage three of the assisted dying bill, I was thinking, oh my goodness, and this could go through tonight. And I myself, although didn’t know every line of the bill, knew that there was huge chunks of the bill that almost contradictory things in them.” – Anonymous MSP

Figure 5.3

In the last session parliament spent more time debating bills at stage 3 than at stage 2

Total number of words spoken in stage 3 debates relative to total words spoken in stage 2 committees across each parliamentary session



Source: Analysis of Scottish parliament official report. Only includes legislation for which there was both a stage 2 committee session and stage 3 debate. This means the small number of instances where stage 2 was taken in the chamber are excluded, as are any bills that had stage 2 deliberation but were “timed out” before stage 3 could take place. Budget bills are included, though excluding them produces very similar results.

The perception that legislative action has shifted from stage two to stage three is borne out by the number of words spoken (figure 5.3). In the parliament's first session, stage three debates together comprised about half as many words as stage two. By the sixth session more was said in stage three debates than the supposedly detailed stage two discussions.

Some of this shift can be attributed to committee shortcomings described above. But our interviewees also highlighted perverse incentives on MSPs to bring amendments to stage 3.

"You have legislation that grows arms and bells and whistles. [During recent stage three debates] I was thinking, oh my goodness, I cannot believe we're actually accepting or agreeing to this amendment that, in one line, will give somebody a headline that they have helped, you know, promote a particular issue, but will cause a huge tail end of policy issues." – Anonymous MSP.

This contributes to a concern we heard about the quality of legislation passed by the Scottish parliament (and the lack of post-legislative scrutiny to pick up any problems).

"We passed so many bills which in practice either don't do what we're meant to do, or we haven't quite got it right" – Anonymous MSP.

In parallel, various interviewees argued that Scottish legislation includes

"Far too much performative legislation that says we've done something, so it's sorted." – Anonymous interviewee.

Alongside problems with the legislative process, we heard concerns that there is too much legislation going through the parliament, and certainly more than the institution had been designed to manage.

"There's legislation that goes through that doesn't make a jot of difference. So we legislated on greyhound racing, there were no greyhound tracks to be banned in Scotland. So kind of, that's stupid." – Anonymous MSP.

"One of my final experiences in the parliament was over [a particular bill], which some people have interpreted as being world-leading, groundbreaking. And for me, it was just an instruction to local authorities and other local public bodies to come up with a plan, a written plan." – Anonymous MSP.

This is not to suggest that every clause in every bill, or every stage three amendment is performative. However, accounts from experienced MSPs suggest that some of this activity may be motivated in this way, and that such motivations cut across party lines. This is what might be expected in a majoritarian political culture, in which MSPs are vying for attention and acclaim to the detriment of deliberation and collaboration.

6.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Scotland has a mismatch between the consensus-ideals of the parliament's designers and the majoritarian practice of its politics. This tension and the ensuing frustrations are themselves reasons to change the system. But political and policy dynamics are likely to accentuate these tensions, making change more urgent.

Political fragmentation is likely to continue

The Scottish electoral system is a hybrid majoritarian (first past the post) and proportional system. The proportional element (regional MSPs) is designed to correct for the disproportionality generated by the first-past-the-post element (constituency MSPs). How well the regional seat allocation achieves this can change with different voting patterns. With a small number of relatively large voting blocks, the regional element may be able to make the parliament proportional to vote preferences with a small number of seats. More fragmentation in the vote would need a larger proportional element.

Figure 6.1 shows how parliamentary seats would have been distributed across parties if the number of MSPs returned on the list vote in each region were different. The vertical dashed line highlights the actual system (7 non-constituency seats per region for a total of 129 MSPs). With more regional seats the overall distribution changes towards a more proportional overall distribution.

One of our interviewees argued the parliament should, from the start, have had 145 MSPs “to be proportionate”. Looking across past elections, a more proportionate parliament would have changed the makeup of the parliament. For example, it would have reduced the size of the Lib-Dem/Labour coalition majority in the first parliament and eliminated it in the second (figure 6.1).

However, by far the greatest impact would have been in the current parliament – not only would a 145-MSP strong parliament look very different to the current 129, but an even bigger parliament would also be much more of a “rainbow”, demanding more balanced coalitions.

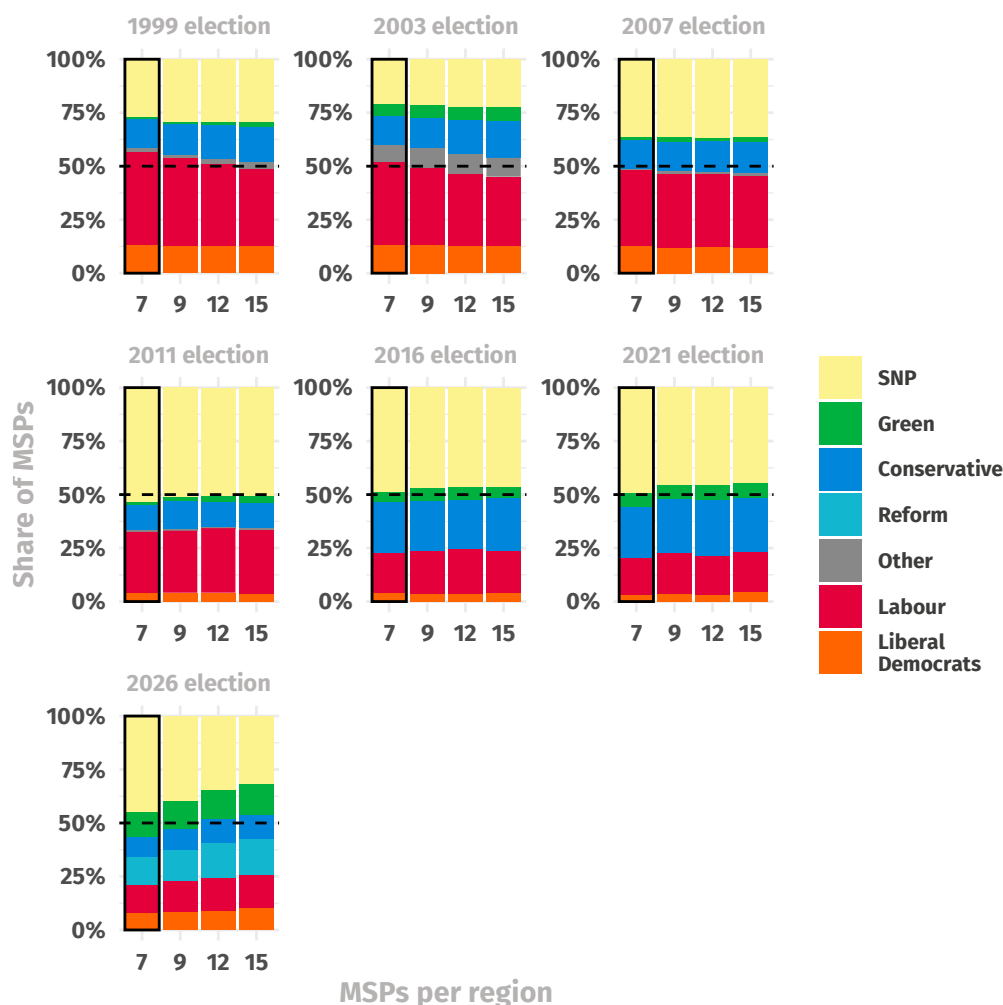
“It should have been 145 to make it proportionate, but also it has taken on so many additional powers and life has got so much more complicated. You know, if you look at Wales, they've now got 90 odd for a population of what is it, 3 million or something and we've got many more powers than they do. So I would make it bigger” – Anonymous interviewee.

Aside from the merits of such coalitions, figure 6.1 shows that something has significantly shifted in Scottish voting patterns. The three elections from 2011 gave one party – the SNP – a roughly 50 per cent share of parliamentary voting power which would have been stable in a more proportional system. However, this has changed. The number of parties that can legitimately claim to represent a sizeable proportion of the electorate is higher than ever.

Figure 6.1

A larger parliament would be more proportional

Modelled party shares of parliamentary seats calculated from actual constituency and regional vote shares, but changing the number of regional MSPs allocated (using the D'Hondt method) in each region. The actual outcome with 7 list MSPs per region (for a total of 129) is outlined in black. A horizontal dashed line shows the 50 per cent mark.



Source: Regional and constituency vote counts from Wikipedia (accessed 26/08/2026).

This has two related consequences. Whereas the three previous parliaments may have fostered a majoritarian approach to government, for the current parliament and government to make progress a degree of consensus building will be needed. But second, the disproportionate seat distribution in the current parliament accentuates the problems of majoritarian politics – parties that approach politics as a battle to monopolise power will risk appearing to the electorate to be dismissive of their concerns, preferences and interests. Approaching parliamentary work in the spirit of consensus-seeking is a way around this problem. It holds the potential for politicians across parties to earn the trust of the electorate.

The policy agenda is getting more complex

The early activities of the parliament were relatively bounded and could be addressed through specific legislation (e.g. undoing market structures within the

NHS, banning smoking in public places). The targets agreed by the 2016-21 parliament are stretching, cover extended timeframes, span multiple policy domains and are not amenable to single pieces of legislation. While parliamentary systems have changed little, the powers devolved to Scotland have expanded. And the issues facing Scotland are both more complex than had been anticipated and compound together in common with global challenges.

“I would also say there's on one level more complexity...[on] climate change... We know more about that now, given what we understood about it before the Parliament was established, more complexity and technology is changing at a rate of knots. And [...] the Parliament actually has more responsibilities than it did when it was established in 1999.” – Anonymous MSP.

“I don't think when we set the parliament up, we ever imagined that in the 21st century we'd be facing the kind of crises [...] poly crises that we are” – Anonymous interviewee.

However, we heard frustration from MSPs that the political process was struggling to develop answers to these challenges. On one level, an MSP outside government observed:

“Here we are in the middle of the election campaign, which is all too often reduced to personal smears, when I think politics should be a battle of ideas.” – Anonymous MSP.

But we also heard from MSPs who had held high profile government posts that the system, in a wide sense, has not been working:

“You have politicians, government and parliament all under pressure to fix problems for which they have almost no ideas, because there's no ideas coming from themselves or from the wider society.” – Anonymous MSP.

“This is maybe my fundamental point about what the system in its widest sense, and that includes parliament, opposition and government and think tanks need to do, is they need to do the homework. [...] I think one of the fundamental changes that I've seen from policy think tanks and indeed parliament opposition is people's attention span doesn't seem to be very long anymore.” – Anonymous MSP.

“We have a very immature debate which pits [climate and energy security] against each other and there's a lot of rhetoric about a just transition with very little substance and that is because I think again my view is that civic Scotland is not actually engaging in the debates and you can't expect politicians to really get beyond the rhetoric.” – Anonymous MSP.

The view that no ideas are being offered was not universal:

“We've got think tanks that have come up with really good ideas and nobody will do anything with them.” – Anonymous interviewee.

Rather than diagnose whether think tanks like us have been coming up with the goods, the more interesting question is what a better system would look like. The implication of the quotes above is that the current system is struggling for answers, and that a more effective system would have more effective participation from outside government.

Parliament has demonstrated limited willingness to change its own procedures

“Everyone talks about this [post-legislative scrutiny] within the Parliament, everyone acknowledges it, but nothing changes” – Anonymous MSP.

These problems in the Scottish parliament have long been recognised, and various recommendations have been proposed and often gone unimplemented (McLean 2026). For example, the Commission on Parliamentary Reform (2017) suggested expanding the bill process to five stages to allow for more collaboration and follow up. Whether or not this would have solved the problems identified above, it is striking that problems with the legislative process have been long rehearsed yet changes are generally discounted by parliamentarians: the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee (2025) concluded pre-legislative collaboration would mean committees being expected to amend legislation they had a role in drafting, barking in the assumption that parliament’s role in the legislative process is adversarial rather than constructive.

The one exception, where parliament has implemented reforms proposed from outside, is in the election of committee conveners. In theory, elected conveners have greater personal legitimacy, their position is secure against party interference, and therefore they would act more independently from the party-line.

The proposal was adopted at the beginning of the seventh session, and elections for committees were held in June.² As in previous sessions, convenerships are allocated to parties in proportion to MSP numbers. In previous sessions, parties would then simply have appointed an MSP to fill this role. Under the new system, candidates from the party to which the convenership has been allocated stand for election by their fellow MSPs.

The pool for each election is, in consequence, very small. The seventh session is the first in which no non-government party has more than 17 MSPs (the previous low was the SNP’s 26 MSPs in the second session). These small pools generally failed to produce a contest, with only one convenership having more than one candidate. The other 15 committees elected conveners who stood without an alternative. Whether these conveners relied just as much on agreement within their party as in previous sessions is far from clear.

2 <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/official-report/search-what-was-said-in-parliament/meeting-of-parliament-09-06-2026?meeting=20167&iob=223714>

7.

CONCLUSION – CITIZEN-LED REFORM OF SCOTTISH DEMOCRACY

The dysfunctions of parliament reviewed above are not inevitable. We hope Scottish politicians reading this report will be inspired to seek to work more collaboratively. But we also recognise they operate in a political context. The pressures and incentives on politicians come from many directions and don't reduce to a single cause. Many elements – traditional and social media, the civil service, think tanks and wider civil society – shape the opportunities and incentives presented to politicians and parties. But while there may be no silver bullet, how parliament and its procedures are designed plays a huge role in shaping what politicians can do and whether they can achieve more through collaboration. One way to fix things is to change how parliament operates.

This should be guided by scrutiny and creative thinking coming from outside party politics. The conflicts of interest in a politics-led approach are obvious and the tendency of politicians to reject considered recommendations points to inertia within the system.

Our objective is for decision-making in parliament to work better for the people it serves. Those people should therefore play a central role in the process. A participative process would make MSPs answerable to the public they serve for accepting or rejecting their recommendations.

We recommend the creation of an independent body with a strong element of participatory deliberation. That body, which we provisionally call Scotland's Commission on Democratic Renewal (SCDR) would:

- be tasked with reviewing Scotland's democratic institutions and making recommendations for their improvement.
- be guided by deliberative processes able to give voice to Scottish people's evolving aspirations for their democratic system.
- scrutinise parliament and the broader political process and make recommendations for system changes.

The commission should have freedoms to set its own agenda and decide what aspects of Scottish democratic institutions need investigation and how. While many of the questions around democratic institutions have technical complexities, they also embody issues of value which should be open to public deliberation. Such questions include:

- Does the Scottish parliament have the right number of MSPs? Its powers have grown and several of our interviewees told us MSP workloads are becoming excessive. Would more MSPs change the proportionality of the parliament and is that desirable?

- Should the electoral system be overhauled more significantly? What do voters want in terms of the balance between proportionality and the “constituency link”? Do voters want a system that more strongly forces coalition working or one that concentrates power?
- Should committee members be better incentivised to engage substantively rather than on party lines and how should this be achieved? Should rules for appointment to committees be changed? Are there other ways of changing behaviours on committees, such as periodic reviews by citizens’ juries?
- How should agenda-setting power be distributed across the parliament? Government ministers and, to a degree, committee conveners, play important roles in shaping not just what gets discussed in parliament, but also the legislative agenda. Do procedures for allocating convenerships and committee seats create the right balance of this kind of power?
- How can the work of the Scottish parliament be made more visible and engaging to the electorate? Should parliament return to holding meetings across the country? Should the narrowing of media bandwidth to “clippable” parliamentary interventions have a counterweight, such as documentaries linking parliamentary debates with real world experience?
- Should participatory deliberation be a more significant part of parliamentary procedure? If so, what can be done to ensure such processes do more than only discuss questions when stakes are low or uncomfortable answers are unlikely?
- Does the parliament need more radical changes, such as the creation of a second chamber? If so, how should it work (on what basis should members of a revising chamber be selected, what powers should they hold etc.)?

Sitting outside politics, the commission would not have any formal power to alter parliamentary procedures – those powers would remain with politicians³. This creates the obvious risk that uncomfortable recommendations are dismissed. This should be handled in two ways: first by ensuring that parliamentarians are able to inform the commission’s deliberations by appearing as expert witnesses, explaining their view on opportunities and challenges for proposed change (which the commission could take on board but wouldn’t be bound by). But second, the process will need to avoid the fate of past citizens’ assemblies – recommendations largely ignored, leading to the dissolution of the frustrated assemblies.⁴ There are various technical means by which this could be achieved, but ultimately they depend on politicians making meaningful commitments before hearing the recommendations.

The Scottish parliament has long embodied a contradiction between the hope it would foster a “new politics” in Scotland and the sense that old practices have prevailed. The public is growing increasingly wary and distrustful of politicians. The need for workable solutions with broad-based support to tackle Scotland’s 21st century challenges is becoming more acute. The moment is ripe to forge a new consensus for a consensus-building parliament.

³ Some relevant powers are reserved to Westminster.

⁴ For example, the Climate Assembly’s (2022) despaired at the government’s anaemic response to their recommendations: “Government needs to think less about what they can’t do and instead demonstrate a positive attitude... [We] are disappointed with the Government...as it does not appear to recognise the urgency behind the Assembly’s recommendations.”

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