Parliament & Poetry

Resources for teachers bringing groups to visit the Scottish Parliament

Written by Ken Cockburn
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Introduction

THESE RESOURCES ARE AIMED AT PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS BRINGING GROUPS OF PUPILS TO VISIT THE PARLIAMENT, WHO WOULD LIKE TO USE THE VISIT AS A STIMULUS FOR CREATIVE WRITING.

They encourage a consideration of the parliament building, inside and out; the way the parliament works, and parliamentary business, that is the topics debated and legislated on.

Except for "Written in Stone", they are based on poetry-writing workshops for schools run by Ken Cockburn at the Scottish Parliament between 2005 and 2008, organised by the Scottish Poetry Library.
PREPARATION

In advance

BEFORE... AND AFTER
Before starting any research, and without prompts, ask pupils to make a list of anything they know (or think they know) about the parliament. Put this away for now, to look at again after the visit. See what amendments and additions they can make then to their list.

Research

Find out some facts about the parliament. The Scottish Parliament produces many resources which can help with this research. See the website www.scottish.parliament.uk/education for available resources.

GENERAL
How many MSPs are there?
What is the difference between a regional and a constituency MSP?
How often are elections held?
When was the last election?
When will the next election be?
What powers does the Scottish Parliament have?
What powers does it not have?
How do committees work?

LOCAL
This information can be obtained from the Members’ pages on the Scottish Parliament website. www.scottish.parliament.uk/msps
What is the name of your constituency and your region?
Who is your constituency MSP?
Who are your regional MSPs?
Find out the voting figures for your local constituency and region at the last election – how close was it? See www.scottish.parliament.uk/electionresults

CURRENT
Which parties are represented in the current parliament?
How many seats does each have?
How many Ministers are there?
What are their titles?
What are their responsibilities?
What bills have been passed in the current parliament?
What bills are currently being discussed?
Building

The parliament building was designed by the Catalan architect Enric Miralles. His design practice worked in partnership with Edinburgh-based company, RMJM. You can take an online tour of the building. See www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/12502.aspx

The parliament is situated in Edinburgh’s Old Town, at the foot of the Canongate on the Royal Mile. Find out what other buildings are nearby. What lies immediately to the south of the parliament building?

Questions

You may be able to arrange to meet one of your MSPs in the course of a visit. See the individual MSP pages on the website for contact details. www.scottish.parliament.uk/msps

If you have arranged such a meeting, ask pupils to think of questions they would like to ask. These could cover areas such as:

- the MSP’s background, interests and enthusiasms
- their experience of working as an MSP
- their views on current political topics
- their views on local issues
- their views on schools and education more generally.
On the day

NOTE-CARDS (APPENDIX E)

These note-cards are for pupils to use during their visit, to remind them of their experiences and to provide them with words and ideas as starting-points when they come to write. There are three cards to make notes about the outside of the building, the inside of the building, and meeting an MSP.

During the visit the pupils could consider:

- **externally**
  - the different shapes, materials and buildings
  - the texts on the Canongate Wall
  - the relationship of the buildings to the natural landscape

- **internally**
  - the different shapes, materials and areas
  - the artworks on show
  - the views from the windows (city, park and sky)

- **both externally and internally**
  - the imagery of the building, especially leaves, boats and hands.

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**GENERAL BACKGROUND READING**

“A walk around the new Scottish Parliament building” by Angus Reid, in *Scottish Affairs no. 63*, spring 2008

*Creating a Scottish Parliament* by Alan Balfour (Finlay Brown, 2005)

*Voyage of Intent: Sonnets and Essays from the Scottish Parliament* by James Robertson (Luath, 2005)


http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/12484.aspx – Scottish Parliament website pages about the building

www.mirallestagliabue.com/projects_all.asp
www.rmjm.com/index_flash.php – websites of the architectural practices which designed the parliament building
WRITING PARLIAMENT POEMS

1. Questions

LEVEL:
P5 – S1

AIMS:
to formulate both straightforward and more complex questions
to encourage pupils to question their experiences of the parliament (building and business)
to consider the way questions are used within the parliament
to consider the importance of questions to the way we learn about the world

OUTCOMES:
individual questions
lists of questions
composite group or class poems

This lesson plan is based on a workshop run in October 2006 with a P7 class from Royal Mile Primary School, Edinburgh. Some examples of their work can be found in Appendix A.

DISCUSSION/NOTE-TAKING
List question words on the board what - when - where - how - why - who - is - are - were - did - etc.
Have everyone write one question word in large letters on a sheet of paper, and stick these up around the room.

WRITING QUESTIONS I
Why do we ask questions?
Discuss why questions are important in a parliament.

Ask a question that has a specific answer, which you know. For example
Who is the current First Minister?
Where do all 129 MSPs meet?

Now choose an answer, and ask the pupils to write a question which has this as its answer.
WRITING QUESTIONS II
Ask pupils to choose their own answer – perhaps taken from the notes they made when visiting the parliament – and devise a question for it.

Ask some of these questions out loud, and see how easily they can be answered.

WRITING QUESTIONS III
Ask pupils to devise questions they don’t know the answer to.
Keep the questions linked to the parliament.
Perhaps it’s a question that has no answer.
They should use as many different question words as possible – perhaps use each question word once, or twice, only.

PRESENTATION
Compile a selection of questions into a poem.

Pupils can do this individually, in pairs or in groups; or the teacher can do this by selecting from all the questions written by the class.

Arrange the questions in groups of 3, 4, 5 or 6, to makes verses of a question-poem.

Think about how to arrange and sequence the questions, for example
- by the question word
- alternating two or more question words
- by the subject of the question
- by the answer
- randomly
- shortest to longest, or vice versa
- alternating short and long questions

FURTHER READING
The Book of Questions, edited by Alec Finlay (platform projects, 2005)
2. Haiku

LEVEL:
P5 – S3

AIMS:
to record memories and impressions of the visit
to build a poem from a mix of given and created words and phrases
to encourage writing that is selective, concise and concrete

OUTCOMES:
individual haiku poems – which can be linked to build a bigger text about the parliament

This lesson plan is based on a workshop run in June 2008 with a P7 class from Heathery Knowe Primary School, East Kilbride. Some examples of their work can be found in Appendix B.
SOME NOTES ON HAIKU

Haiku is a three-line verse form which originated in Japan.

A haiku traditionally describes aspects of the natural world. The parliament building sits on the edge of Holyrood Park, beneath Salisbury Crags, so has an immediate link with the natural world.

Haiku can be thought of as snapshots – a momentary, yet often revealing, view, which can be a close-up or a long shot.

Haiku are rarely written in the first person – feelings or opinions are dramatised or expressed through the image rather than directly stated.

Rhyme has little or no impact in Japanese verse, and Western haiku are also mostly unrhymed.

A haiku in Japanese is usually 17 syllables long: a first line of 5 syllables, a second of 7 and a third of 5. English-language haiku sometimes use the 5-7-5 pattern, but 17 syllables is generally thought of as a maximum length.

IN THIS EXERCISE THE EMPHASIS IS ON SELECTION AND CONCISION, SO PUPILS SHOULD NOT BE ENCOURAGED TO AIM FOR AN EXACT NUMBER OF SYLLABLES (THIS OFTEN LEADS THEM TO ADD WORDS UNNECESSARY TO THE POEM, OR INHIBITS THEM WRITING DOWN WHAT IS IN THEIR MIND) – BUT, ONCE THEY HAVE DRAFTED A POEM, THEY CAN BE ENCOURAGED TO REWRITE IT MORE CONCISELY, WHILE STILL RETAINING ALL ITS ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS.
WRITING: EXTERNAL
The following grid system, based on elements of traditional haiku, helps pupils compose the first two lines of a haiku. They can then write a third line of their own, based on their experience and appropriate to the setting.

The haiku grid involves four elements –
- time of year (season, month)
- time of day (general, e.g. morning, or more specific, e.g. ten o’clock)
- place
- weather

These are combined – in any order – to form two lines of the poem.

For example: cold summer morning
outside Queensberry House

To complete the poem, have something happen in this setting. Think about different ways this could be written, e.g.
- description
- command
- surprise
- question

For example: cold summer morning
outside Queensberry House
black limos drive past

You can start by writing one on the board based on the pupils’ suggestions. Then ask them to write individually, or in pairs.
WRITING: INTERNAL
Once the pupils have written haiku about the outside of
the building using the support of the grid, try changing and
removing some of the elements when they write about the
inside of the building.

The season is less important so it can be omitted.
The time of day is optional.
Instead of place, name a room or area of the building.
Instead of weather, describe the mood or atmosphere here.
Then complete the poem by describing something that
happens there.

For example: debating chamber
quiet and empty
echoes of our country's voice

in the education room
Ken Cockburn is teaching us
to write haiku

FURTHER READING
The British Museum Haiku, edited
by David Cobb (The British
Museum Press, 2002)

Seasons of the Heart by Alan
Spence (Canongate, 2000)

Clear Light by Alan Spence
(Canongate, 2005)

www.britishhaikusociety.org.uk –
website of the British Haiku Society
Edwin Morgan with a copy of his poem “Open the doors!”
3. “Leave symmetry to the cemetry”

LEVEL:
S3 – S6

AIMS:
to write a poem about the interior of the parliament using different types of sentence and poetic techniques

OUTCOMES:
individual poems on areas of the parliament building

This lesson plan is based on a workshop run in June 2007 with a S3 class from Queensferry High School, Edinburgh. Some examples of their work can be found in Appendix C.

READING
Edwin Morgan’s poem “Open the doors!” was written for the opening of the Scottish Parliament on 9 October 2004. If possible, read the poem before your visit to the parliament. It can be found at http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/Education/15392.aspx
Appendix D includes some questions to help pupils think about the poem.

After your visit, reread the poem, and discuss the building in terms of some of the words the poem uses to describe it:
flower
tongues
curves
caverns, nooks, niches
slate
stainless steel
oak and sycamore

Also discuss the building in terms of what the poem says it is not:

“classic columns and predictable pediments”
What are these, where might one find them in Edinburgh or elsewhere in Scotland?

“Gothic grandeur”
What is this, where might one find buildings like this in Edinburgh or elsewhere in Scotland?

“IKEA”
What words could one use to describe this style?
A poem presents language patterned in different ways.
What patterns are used in this poem? Think about, and identify examples of
rhyme
alliteration
lists
repetition
questions and commands
not... but... sentences

What do you think the poet means when he writes “Leave symmetry to the cemetery”?

NOTE-TAKING
Make a list of the different areas of the building you visited.
Then choose one of these areas, and draw up a class word-list for it, thinking about
nouns (objects, people)
adjectives (size, shape, colours, materials)
verbs (what happens there)
sounds
mood or feel
connotative/associative words

Ask pupils individually to choose a different area of the parliament, then to make their own word-list for this, as above.

WRITING
Edwin Morgan’s poem, like the parliament building, is full of patterns, but these are irregular – “Leave symmetry to the cemetery”.
Ask pupils to write verses containing irregular patterns about each of the two areas they have made notes on.

They should try to include in each verse – and these can come in any order – a question
a command
an example of alliteration
a rhyme
a not... but... sentence
a metaphor or simile

Read the poems aloud, and ask other members of the class for feedback.
Ask the pupils to rewrite the poems after they have read them aloud, adjusting any parts that felt awkward or could be written better.
4. Written in stone

LEVEL:
S1 – S6

AIMS:
to consider “Scotland” in broad historical and geographical terms
to reflect on material read, to select from this and to justify this selection
to build complex sentences from simple elements

OUTCOMES:
short texts about Scotland
commentaries on the above texts

The Canongate Wall features short extracts from works by Scottish authors, and works about Scotland.

Ask pupils to choose or write a text for the Canongate Wall.

CHOOSING
Pupils should choose an extract from an existing work, perhaps a poem or story they have been reading. They could look for material using the Further Reading list below.

The extract should be short – probably no more than about 30 words.
It should say something striking about Scotland.
It should stand alone, that is, make sense when read out of context.

Discuss with pupils why they have chosen a particular text.
What does it add to the building?
What would it add to a visitor’s experience of Scotland?

Think about its design – lettering, shape, stone colour, etc.
Lineation – how would you break up your text to present it on the wall?
Sketch your design.
WRITING
Here is one way of trying to link different aspects of Scotland in one sentence.
Pick two places that sum up different extremes of Scotland. For example, they could be
a city and an area of countryside, say Edinburgh and Rannoch Moor
a town and a village
somewhere in the south and somewhere in the north
somewhere in the east and somewhere in the west
somewhere beginning with “A” and somewhere beginning with “Z” (or perhaps “Y” if that’s unfeasible)
somewhere very ancient and somewhere very modern

Then pick something you think is typical of each place, say
the tenements of Edinburgh and the heather of Rannoch Moor.

Then think of something that links them, say
The rain lashes the tenements of Edinburgh and the heather of Rannoch Moor.
or
The moon silvers the tenements of Edinburgh and the heather of Rannoch Moor.

Pupils could write individually, or in pairs/groups.
A class poem could be compiled using say one line by each pupil.
Pupils could be given a batch of lines by other pupils or groups, and asked to make an edit or “remix” of them. There could be some limitations, e.g. they are only allowed to use half the available lines, or they have to choose 1 or 2 lines as a refrain.

FURTHER READING
These are anthologies of writing from and about Scotland.


*Wish I was here: a Scottish multicultural anthology*, edited by Kevin MacNeil and Alec Finlay (pocketbooks, 2000)
Appendix A
Scottish Parliament Questions

These were written by pupils from P7 at Royal Mile Primary School, Edinburgh, at their workshop in October 2006. They have been edited by Ken Cockburn.

SOME WHATS AND WHERES OF THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT
What is the building on the Royal Mile?
What’s the building in Holyrood called?
What is the building down the road from the school?
What is the building over the road from Holyrood Palace?

Where did we go on our trip today?
Where is there glass in every room?
Where has tight security?
Where does every desk have a microphone?

What is the grey building?
What is the greatest building?
What is made of wood and stone?

Where is the debating chamber?
Where do MSPs vote and debate?

SOME QUESTIONS FOR THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT
Why is there a parliament?
Why is the parliament so big?
Why are there so many microphones?
Why are there 131 seats?

Why are the tables wooden?
Why is there glass in every room?
Why are there wooden walls?
Why is the parliament made of grey stone?

Why does the parliament have a debating chamber?
Why is there only one debating chamber?
Why is the debating chamber so big?
Why are there so many lights in the debating chamber?

Why are there MSPs?
Why are there 129 MSPs?
Who is the most important person in the parliament?
How long will the parliament last?

Why is the parliament so close?
Why are there crosses on the roof?
Why is there only one mace?
Why do we need the Scottish Parliament?
Appendix B
Scottish Parliament Haiku

These poems were written by P7 pupils from Heathery Knowe Primary School, East Kilbride, at their workshop in June 2008.

in the city
people come to visit
the big building

grey morning in June
overcast city alive
with the bustle of politics

cold summer morning
outside Queensberry House
black limos drive past

warm rainy morning
outside our parliament
staring up at the huge boat shapes

mild and grey morning
at the Scottish Parliament building
police watch the palace

all bends and curves
one man’s design
for our own democracy

in the main hall
St Andrew’s crosses
above our heads

the garden lobby
dangling lights
reporters wait

a morning in June
inside the parliament building
I laid eyes on the Arniston stone

the bright floor
in the black and white corridor
makes people dizzy

debating chamber
quiet and empty
echoes of our country’s voice

in the education room
Ken Cockburn is teaching us
to write haiku
Appendix C

“Leave symmetry to the cemetery”

These are extracts from poems written by pupils from S3 at Queensferry High School at their workshop in June 2007, edited by Ken Cockburn.

The curved, bright room open to ideas.  
The table turned and crafted into a relaxed shape.  
The shape of clever thoughts.  
This room is where the committee is thorough.  
Anything passed in will not be passed out in the same form.

Its crown,  
The debating chamber.  
Yet,  
it’s not worn on its head  
but in its belly.  
A womb.  
Where a bill is conceived  
Where a law is born.

What makes Parliament?  
Is it concrete and metal  
or passion and devotion?

To enter, is to change perceptions.  
Non-conformist, radical and odd.  
All words to describe not a building  
But an emotion.  
This building expresses feelings, thoughts, an identity –  
Freedom.  
Throwing them wildly into the open air,  
For scrutiny, to separate the wheat  
From the chaff.

In the debating chamber  
anticipation runs high,  
will the country change?  
The designs on the windows inspect every aspect,  
like the people outside waiting, waiting.  
Waiting.  
The doors open.  
The law is released.
Appendix D
“Open the doors!” Questions

After reading the poem “Open the doors!” by Edwin Morgan:

1. Write down three words that catch your attention in the poem. Why are they interesting words to use?
2. Write down one metaphor that is used in the poem.
3. Write down one simile that is used in the poem.
4. Write down two examples of Scots words being used.
5. Why do you think the poet uses these kind of words?
6. What words does the poet use in verses 4 and 5 to show that he is speaking to the MSPs?
7. What do you think Edwin Morgan is telling us about the parliament?

These questions are taken from an Imaginative Writing resource developed by teachers completing a placement on the Excellence in Education through Business Links (EEBL) programme with Careers Scotland. The teachers were: Yvonne Kelman, Harestanes Primary; Catriona McKenzie, Oldmachar Academy; Shona Pearman, Sciennes Primary; and Zena Richardson, Yarrow Primary.

The full resource can be found at http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/Education/15392.aspx
Look around, think, make notes about some of these:

- parliament buildings
- building materials
- shapes and patterns
- colours
- words
- nearby buildings
- nature
- your feelings
- your thoughts
- your opinions
Look around, think, make notes about some of these:

- rooms
- materials
- furniture
- objects
- words
- artworks
- sounds
- external views
- your feelings
- your thoughts
- your opinions
Appendix E (continued)

What to ask? What did you find out? Make some notes about:
- name
- party
- constituency
- region
- background
- answers
- your feelings
- your thoughts
- your opinions

QUESTIONs
The Scottish Poetry Library and the Scottish Parliament are delighted to be working in partnership through our series of Parliament & Poetry schools' workshops, and now, in the form of this resource.

THE SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY
Nurturing the Life of the Imagination
SPL believes that poetry is a vital element in the life of the imagination, and central to the development of language and self-expression. We aim to inspire and encourage children of all ages, and their teachers, to discover and rediscover the pleasures of reading and writing poetry. Our children's collection and poetry teaching resources, together with the developing Curriculum for Excellence, underpin an exciting and varied year-round programme of poetry workshops for all ages and stages, led by professional Scottish poets. And our Continuing Professional Development workshops offer support and enable teachers to approach poetry writing in class with greater confidence, creativity and enjoyment.

THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT EDUCATION SERVICE
Educating the citizens of tomorrow
The Education Service works with young people and teachers who want to learn more about Scotland’s Parliament. Through visits to the Parliament, an outreach programme, continuing professional development seminars and a variety of online and printed resources, we aim to educate about democracy and citizenship.

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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