



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

The Presiding Officer
Tricia Marwick MSP

Dave Thompson MSP
Convener
Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments
Committee
M3.09

23 August 2011

Dear Dave

When we spoke just before the recess, I undertook to write to you setting out what I consider to be an important role for the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee in the coming months. I am aware that your committee will soon be considering its work programme and I hope the following is helpful for your business planning day later this month.

As you know, I have been holding discussions with various parties in relation to what I see as necessary changes to the way in which the Parliament operates. I have already implemented reforms to First Minister's Question Time and have ensured that there is more time available for backbenchers to speak in parliamentary debates. Subsequent to this, I had an extremely useful discussion with you and your fellow committee conveners about changes that I see as being vital to improve the way in which parliamentary committees operate. At the same time, I have been speaking to party leaders and business managers about possible changes to plenary business.

My aim in all of this is to develop the Parliament as an institution. My ambition is for a Parliament that is responsive to developments and meets the needs of the people of Scotland by ensuring topicality and relevance in its deliberations. Within this overall objective, I have discussed with party leaders and others two specific areas that, in my view, would benefit from the more in-depth consideration that your committee can provide:

- **Sitting patterns.** The current time gap between the Parliament rising on a Thursday evening and resuming on a Wednesday afternoon means that the Parliament may not always be in a position to respond to emerging or urgent issues. I consider this to be a weakness that could be addressed by, for example, the Parliament meeting in plenary session on three afternoons a week (ie Tuesday to Thursday) to reduce the times during which the Parliament is not able to consider issues; and committees meeting on three mornings a week. I am aware that this change would not, of itself, require a

change to Standing Orders recommended by your committee but in seeking to improve the structure of the parliamentary week I am also very mindful of the need to use parliamentary time to best effect. I would therefore welcome a view from your committee on the possible benefits to be derived from such a change.

- **Themed Question Time.** My personal view, for a number of reasons, is that Themed Question Time has not worked as intended. It is not always very well attended and often does not engage many more Members than those who have a question selected for answer. I am not convinced that the current time slot of a Thursday afternoon is necessarily conducive to detailed scrutiny of Government Ministers. More importantly, I think that the current Standing Orders requirement for a question for oral answer to be lodged eight days before it is scheduled to be taken in the chamber is not conducive to questions that are relevant and responsive to emerging issues. This has led me to consider making more use than my predecessors have of urgent questions. I believe that more flexible sitting arrangements along the lines of those suggested above would allow for an alternative approach to the timing of oral questions to Ministers.

I consider that we should seek to address these issues as a matter of urgency in order that any changes implemented can be used to the benefit of the Parliament for the bulk of this session. To that end, I would request that, should your committee agree to inquire into these matters, that it does so with a view to the Parliament considering your recommendations by the end of this year. In the meantime, I shall continue a dialogue with those I feel can best assist in bringing about the changes that I believe will ultimately improve our Parliament and better serve the people of Scotland.

Yours sincerely



TRICIA MARWICK