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forward.

In those days on a Monday night ministers would take the shuttle to Heathrow, spend the week in Dover House and, depending on the vote, maybe get the shuttle back on Thursday evening if they were lucky, or more likely the sleeper if the Commons sat late. Appearance before a parliamentary committee might entail the odd turn before the Scottish Affairs select committee, or perhaps even an outing with the Scottish Grand Committee as it went on tour round Scotland with Michael Forsyth.

By July 1997, with Donald Dewar in post as Secretary of State, he published his White Paper

amongst all Members and ultimately the people they represent. As an important constitutional development three of the eleven pieces of non-executive legislation have been Committee Bills. I have no doubt that we will see even more Committee Bills in the fullness of time. I am

This important legislation gives councils new powers to engage public sector partners in community planning and provides a 'power of community well being' which will allow councils to take action which they consider will benefit their communities.

And that brings me to another way of assessing the Parliament's success—just how accessible the Parliament is to ordinary Scots and their communities. Committees clearly support the principle of shared power between the people of Scotland and the legislature, providing as they do the opportunity for the public to identify issues requiring attention and action by the Parliament. With Committees actively seeking views of people, there is obviously some duty on the Parliament to respond to these. In this way, Committee agendas become shared responsibility, resulting ultimately in shared power.

In total, Committees have met nearly 50 times outwith Edinburgh. From the outset this was to be Scotland's parliament—not Edinburgh's, not a central belt Parliament but, a Parliament for all of Scotland. Parliamentary Committee reporters have undertaken more than 200 fact finding visits to every corner of Scotland. The fact that Committees have been willing and able to take evidence in different parts of the country has been extremely valued, not only by the Committees themselves, but by those giving evidence. Of course, the Parliament has also actively sought innovative ways to collect views and often this has involved staging events in the Parliament and inviting stakeholders to take part.

As part of the Renewing Local Democracy inquiry, the Local Government Committee held major civic participation events in Paisley, Inverness and Glasgow. The Glasgow event was held at the weekend to allow working people to attend, and was also targeted at the sectors of the population under-represented in the previous two events. The event was also used to test possible inquiry conclusions.

In 2000, the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee invited over 100 businesses to an

“ the main value for me was not so much a feeling of being heard/consulted, but hearing the perspectives of a range of others—people I don’t normally have much chance to debate with.”

And this perhaps sums up our inherent value.

Fast track courts created to speed up the compensation process for asbestos victims; the formation of an MMR Expert Group; calls for risk assessment procedures in GM crops to be improved, an expert group on Hepatitis C. These are real issues; topical issues; and important issues for many people in Scotland. And yet, these measures and many others, came about not at the Executive’s or the Parliament’s initiative but through the people of Scotland and their communities who decided they would take action, and became involved in the democratic process. By using the Parliament’s Public Petitions Committee, ordinary Scots have helped shape the agenda of the Scottish Parliament. The Petition system unquestionably plays a key role in fulfilling the Scottish Parliament’s overall commitment to accessibility, public involvement and openness.

Unlike Westminster where signatories of petitions are simply counted and put in a bag behind the Speaker’s chair, petitions that come to the Scottish Parliament—and there have been almost 600 to date—are all actioned in some way. In determining the appropriate action to be taken on a petition, account is taken of the strengths and depth of the support it enjoys and not simply the number of signatures the petition has.

Residents in the small community of Blairingone complained through a petition that waste from abattoirs was being spread on land near their homes. One petitioner commented in an interview that MSPs *“were actually sitting taking evidence from people in their own homes and that brought the Parliament much closer to the people than they’ve ever been before”*. The Transport and Environment Committee who considered this petition, subsequently made recommendations for changes to the regulatory framework governing the spreading of waste—the Executive implemented the necessary changes.

The Petitions Committee is taking steps to ensure that the petitions system is further developed and improved. For example, the Scottish Parliament leads the way in actively promoting the use of modern innovative petitioning techniques through its electronic petitions system, and this will come on-line shortly, following a successful two-year pilot.

But it is not just the Public Petitions Committee that has proved how accessible the Scottish Parliament is. The operation of a number of committee investigations has enhanced Scottish democratic life by making the system more accessible.

One leading children’s charity in Scotland commented,

‘Through individual MSPs and Committees we have felt there have been increasing opportunities for us, as a voluntary child care organisation, to make a contribution to debates on issues affecting children and young people. The Committees are to be applauded for carrying out the dual role of inquiry and the legislative scrutiny and for welcoming in representation’.

Returning to the openness of the Parliament, I don't want to dazzle you with figures, but just to give you an idea of how we have tried to be open here is a sample. Our telephone Enquiry Line and Public Enquiry Office has received nearly 350,000 enquiries.

Over 15,000 people have attended the Parliament's Open Days; we have received over 22,000 visits by school pupils through the education services and that's an important figure. I have no doubt that the work of our education services, which is linked to the school curriculum will result in greater civic awareness in years to come. The Electoral Commission recently pointed out that people in the 18—24 age groups were least likely to vote. And lastly our website—the modern age means to being open to modern ways.

The Parliament's website has been voted the third best of any Parliament in the world by a survey in an English newspaper. Well over 23 million hits have been recorded with many people finding the site easy to navigate and full of useful briefings and information.

One obvious sign of our openness has been the high profile and very public issue of putting in place robust procedures to regulate Members' conduct. In fact, the Parliament is to consider the appointment of a new Standards Commissioner this week—whose job it will be to ensure the highest standards of probity in public life. This openness in procedure and practices of Members does not happen to the same extent in other parliamentary institutions and has

kind. Another commentator even suggested I was proposing a body for my own personal continuation, ignoring the fact that I was discussing a post-2007 review, while a Daily Mail editorial had me building a second Chamber in addition to the expense of Holyrood!

Let me elaborate. We already have a limited revision mechanism. Every Act once passed by the Scottish Parliament is considered for a period of a month by the Law Officers in Scotland and Westminster to see whether in the course of its passage and amendment it might breach either the Scotland Act or the European Convention on Human Rights. If so, they can send it back for adjustment. It has never happened yet. Only after I have heard they have no objection do I write to the Queen requesting her Royal Assent.

What could be considered—and again I stress that the case is too early to be judged—is an external review panel, appointed by Parliament on all-party nominations, who could

the substance of the proposal were joined by those who objected to the procedure used.

Even in the election of a new Deputy Presiding Officer, the Parliament expressed a mind of its own; the elections of the Presiding Officers being the only time a secret ballot is used.

I should add that while personal relations have always been good the relationship between me as the Presiding Officer and the Executive is best described as one of creative tension! What is important is that the Presiding Officer should not only be independent of pressure from the Executive but manifestly seen to be so.

On a different front, looking at the debate surrounding the number of MSPs the parliament should have, the announcement by Helen Liddell means that further thought will have to be given to our system of election alongside the reduced numbers of Westminster constituencies.

Whilst I have my own thoughts on this matter, my impartial role as Presiding Officer prevents me from airing them tonight. Suffice to say that I have noted critical remarks made by the leaders of the Labour, Conservative and Scottish National Parties about the regional list selection system as it operated within their organisations.

One surprise following the creation of the Scottish Parliament—a surprise in the sense that no one foresaw this—is the extent to which the new institution has influenced the old one of Westminster.

The leaders of both Houses—Robin Cook and Lord Williams of Mostyn—have visited us and returned south to introduce both more daytime hours and shorter notice for topical questions. Mr Cook and the Commons Modernisation Committee are about to return to look further at our petition system, the role of the Presiding Officer, pre-legislative procedure in Committees, and electronic voting.

One further example of our influence over Westminster is that TV cameras were last year admitted to the Palace of Westminster central lobby. In the Scottish Parliament openness applies to the media and broadcasters as well. Following Westminster's observation of TV cameras in our Black and White corridor they have followed suit with broadcasts from central lobby.

A further surprise has been the extent to which the arrival of the Scottish Parliament has increased Scotland's profile abroad. Not only do we have an unexpected flow of visitors—causing us to establish an external liaison unit, and reflected in the expansion of the consular corps in Edinburgh—but we also have a heavy programme of external promotion of Scotland, for example, in the USA, Sweden and France.

Given that in North America alone over 20 million people claim Scots ancestry, the heightened international profile of Scotland can be turned to sound economic benefit especially in tourism.

Over four years we have seen steady and measured progress that has allowed the Parliament to put down strong roots and flower in the fullness of time. When you examine how the

Scotland Act works, it is actually an impressive piece of legislation that fits its purpose well and has facilitated a whole new culture of public involvement in the Parliament's work—it does not need wholesale revision.

Westminster's Amendment Act is likely to be fine-tuning rather than an overhaul. This was a monumental piece of constitutional reform that has transformed the political landscape. For all its magnitude we should not allow our eyes to lose sight of what has been achieved.

