



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## The Presiding Officer

Martin Whitfield MSP  
Convener  
Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

By Email

9 May 2025

Dear Convener

Thank you for your letter of 12 November 2024, setting out the Committee's deliberations to date on the recommendations for it arising from the gender sensitive audit report.

The Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group, which comprises cross-party MSPs and external experts and is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the audit recommendations, has now had the opportunity to discuss the letter in detail.

We are grateful for the consideration that the Committee has given to the recommendations. The Group welcomes the Committee's recognition of the importance of a Gender Sensitive Parliament. This is a vital step in ensuring that the Parliament works equally for everyone. At a time when there is increasing concern about the nature of political discourse and the hostility faced by women, in politics online and elsewhere, having a Parliament which leads the way in considering its structures, procedures and culture can send a clear signal of determination to have a Parliament that reflects the communities it represents.

It is positive that some of the recommendations have now been completed and can start to make a difference to representation and participation at Holyrood. Proxy voting is something that I know has already been beneficial to Members in a variety of situations, demonstrating that many of the recommendations can have positive impacts to all current and future MSPs.

It is clear to the Advisory Group that there is still more that can and must be done in order to remove the barriers which are still in place. I thought it would be useful to set out the views of the Group on those recommendations which are still to be completed.

I will address the recommendations in order, as you had helpfully set out in your letter.

#### **Recommendation 14**

The SPPA committee to consider these statistics (from Recommendation 13) biennially, and develop new rules and/or conventions to rebalance participation, where there is evidence of inequalities of participation

The Advisory Group is pleased that the Committee agrees on the importance of data about Chamber participation. Understanding the evidence on this is an important tool in ensuring that we keep reviewing whether we are making a difference with these recommendations.

You note in your letter that the Committee could consider any change to procedures to address concerns around participation. We consider that it would be helpful to establish a regular annual consideration of this, and this is something that it would be useful to discuss further with the Committee.

We also note the importance you have placed on ensuring that there is a package of measures for Members to support their continuing development of debating skills. Continuing professional development for Members is currently being considered as part of the Parliament's election planning work on induction for new and returned Members. However, CPD alone will not address the cultural issues which were raised in the Audit Report – highlighted by, for example, the fact that women are less likely than men to make interventions, and that men are also more likely to have their interventions accepted.

This is why it is important that we have an agreed approach to considering participation data regularly and acting on any issues it highlights.

#### **Recommendation 18**

The SPPA Committee to propose amendments to Standing Orders to specify there should be a minimum of 40% women, for

- SPCB
- Parliamentary Bureau
- Committee Convenerships.

#### **Recommendation 19**

The SPPA Committee to propose the introduction of a rule that there should be no single sex committees and to consider and agree, when ruling out such parliamentary committees, whether the rule should refer to: (i) a 40% minimum for women; (ii) a minimum % based on the numbers of women 'available' for committees (ie, excluding Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers, party leaders and Presiding Officer and Deputy Presiding Officers or (ii) the overall number of women in the Scottish Parliament.

## Recommendation 20

Following agreement of recommendation 19, the SPPA Committee to propose the introduction of a rule that where parties either elect or appoint more than one member to a committee the party's membership must be mixed.

Completing recommendation 18 in respect of membership of the SPCB and the Parliamentary Bureau would send a clear and strong signal that the Parliament is committed to ensuring equal representation in important leadership positions.

The Advisory Group encourages the Committee to work with it to deliver the bold change needed to send that signal, and to drive change in attitudes.

We would like to see a form of wording in Standing Orders that will deliver a minimum of 40% women in these leadership roles. Simply having regard to the desirability of gender equality is no longer enough.

We note that the Committee will consider committee membership and convenerships further as part of its Committee Effectiveness inquiry and request further details about how the Committee will consider gender and diversity sensitivity as a specific topic within the inquiry to enable the Committee to address this recommendation.

We are pleased that the Committee agrees that there should be no single sex committees.

The Group believes that this is an absolute minimum and that further consideration should be given to the importance of rules changes that would deliver at least 40% women membership of each committee or at least to deliver a minimum percentage based on the numbers of women 'available' to sit on committees. This should be reflected in convenerships.

As the Audit identifies, such rules are vital to drive equal representation and participation, and also vital for the reputation of the Parliament and public perception of engagement with committees. We believe that such rules can be agreed without placing a greater burden on women Members than on men.

As noted above, we believe that it is important that there is evidence on gender and diversity sensitivity as part of the Committee's inquiry. We would be happy to provide suggestions for witnesses who could provide evidence if that would be of use.

## Recommendation 21

The SPPA Committee to propose the introduction of a formal quota for Presiding Officer/DPOs - at least one man and one woman. This recognises existing experience, and by formalising an existing Scottish Parliament norm, protects and further legitimises this for the future.

This Group welcomes the Committee's agreement to this proposed rule change. As you heard, although this recommendation has largely been met since 1999, the rules do not currently guarantee that and so we cannot afford to be complacent.

This is an important change to the Standing Orders which, although in itself does not bring about any change to the current usual practice, will send a strong signal as to intentions.

### **Recommendation 22**

When the trial period of a proxy voting scheme, agreed to by the Parliament is concluded, the SPPA Committee should propose a permanent Standing Order rule to introduce a proxy voting scheme for (i) parental leave; (ii) illness; (iii) caring/bereavement leave; (iv) on same grounds as remote voting.

A proxy voting scheme should recognise that it is (i) up to parents to determine whether they wish to use a proxy vote or to use remote voting when on parental leave, as the former enables them to take leave that more closely resembles the form of parental leave available in other workplaces; and (ii) that it is for the MSP to determine who the proxy goes to.

The Advisory Group notes that this recommendation has been delivered. As I mentioned above, I know first-hand of the positive benefits that this has delivered for Members. Having the opportunity to designate a proxy has eased the burden on many of our colleagues at times of great personal stress. This is positive for all Members and is an important element of people considering that being an elected Member is a realistic ambition.

### **Recommendation 24**

The SPCB/SPPA Committee/Bureau as appropriate in consultation, with party leaders, to agree that MSPs taking parental leave will, on their return to parliament, be expected to be able to continue in their pre-leave Committee and party leadership posts and that there should be no expectation that MSPs taking parental leave will resign from bodies such as the SPCB. In relation to the SPCB, Standing Orders should be changed to allow for an 'acting' SPCB member along similar lines to the rule change that allowed for acting Conveners.

The Advisory Group notes that the Committee feels this is outwith its role. However, the Group would be interested to know what informal changes or practices the Committee feels could be used to deliver this recommendation.

The issues raised in this recommendation will become more significant over time. It is important that the Parliament can lead the way on this to ensure that the bodies at the very heart of how the Parliament operates reflect the ambition of the organisation.

## Recommendation 26

The SPPA Committee to consider whether complaints against MSPs related to bullying and harassment should be referred to an independent panel rather than to the SPPA Committee following investigation by the Ethical Standards Commissioner.

The Group noted the Committee's position that this recommendation will be considered once the on-going review of the complaints process is complete.

I hope that this letter provides useful context for you as you consider the recommendations further in your inquiry on committee effectiveness and I look forward to further constructive discussion with you and Committee colleagues.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alison Johnstone". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

**Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP**  
Presiding Officer