Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party

- Whether there should be criteria for participating virtually in Chamber business or whether it should be a matter for a Member to decide upon themselves? If there were criteria, whose role should it be to approve virtual participation? Should there be time limits for a Member indicating that they wish to participate virtually?

No criteria: it should be up to individual Members.

However, it should also sit on their consciences if they are not performing their duties. We are sure their corresponding parties and voters will notice.

- Should there be different expectations or requirements in relation to Ministers appearing physically in the Chamber than Members more generally?

Yes, while all Members should be expected in the Chamber for business as default, Ministers must be even more so, for proper scrutiny.

The unavoidable reality is that virtual debates/question sessions are not as strong in scrutiny as in-person. Therefore, Ministers must be in the chamber when their portfolio is being debated/questioned.

One argument put forward against this is that the Code of Conduct treats all MSPs equally. If Ministers were considered equals with MSPs, they would not receive an additional salary bump and corresponding perks, like chauffeur-driven cars. Ministers of the Crown must be held to the highest standard and must not hide from scrutiny.

- Does the Bureau share the concerns expressed by some about the impact on debate of Members participating virtually or the potential for a diminution of opportunities for Members who attend the Parliament less as they are able to participate virtually?

Yes. Visitors (both tourists and the electorate) expect to visit a functioning Parliament, not a virtual hub.

Additionally, a lot of effort goes into arranging events and exhibitions. Members who find it easy to be virtual will miss out on these more and more, as well as not being present when the Scottish public and tourists visit the Parliament, which is an insult to the voters who put them into Parliament.

On top of this, having more virtual MSPs discourages cross-party relationships and could add to a culture of hostility between parties as a result.

- Should there be different types of approaches for different types of Chamber business? For example, many Members stressed the importance of being in the Chamber to participate in debates but there appeared to be less concern about question times.

Ideally, all debates should be held in the chamber. The Standing Orders imparted an importance on Members being present in the chamber for the opening and closing speeches. As before, it is up to each Member.

- Is there the potential for meetings to be completely virtual in certain circumstances? For example, in the event of a potentially severe weather event or a recall of the Parliament during a recess, would the Bureau consider agreeing that a meeting of the Parliament should take place completely virtually?

Yes, in extreme circumstances as has been shown in the summer Covid meetings. Only if there are justifiable reasons as to why it cannot be in person.

- Whether the Bureau would support the use of pilots in order that changes to procedures could be tried and evaluated before being adopted?

Yes. This is a very sensible way to trial changes and has been established to work in the past (moving from 10 PQs to 8 PQs per session).

- The extent to which the voting system has changed the pattern of voting in the Parliament and whether the Bureau supports the continuing use of the virtual voting system in the future?

Remote voting has allowed for greater flexibility in MSPs' lives. We should retain remote voting, but we have to address the problems.

It has extended the duration of the whole voting process, due to the painfully long technical breaks and the Points of Order. We should not be accepting a voting system that requires ANY points of order to confirm votes, let alone the frequency of Points of Order we are currently at.

We _must_ improve the system to the point where voting takes no longer than it used to, pre-pandemic. We must also have a remote voting app that includes committee votes.

If these problems persist post-summer recess, we must not be shy in immediately seeking to secure a new third-party app for voting that has its own improvements team and professional experience in the area. We must not settle for a system that is not adequate for a Parliament.

- Whether the introduction of a proxy voting system would provide a further route for members to ensure that they could exercise their vote, for example in relation to parental leave or in cases if ill-health?

Yes, for maternity/paternity cover. This Parliament should encourage people of all ages and life stages to be an MSP and should account for life events, such as having a child. The proxy could be controlled by a single Member nominated by the MSP on leave.

As outlined last week, given the agreement on this, this should be the first pilot we do. We could commence the pilot just after summer recess 2022.

This is particularly feasible given that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party both have Members' expecting to be on parental leave during that time. As these Members would usually be paired anyway, the timing is perfect to trial proxy voting.