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Parliamentary democracies get the information services they deserve

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Thank you Presiding Officer.

I'd like to welcome my national and international colleagues who have the privilege, as I do, of working for a representative institution. Whether your members are elected or appointed, they all have the same job – to speak and act on behalf of others in the interests of the whole community. Our job is to help them to do their job as well as they can – discussing the issues of the day, dealing with the problems people have brought to them, and examining proposals for new laws.

Devolution in the United Kingdom was designed to bring decision-making closer to the people, in those parts of the country that felt they had a distinctive identity. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all wanted more local control and accountability on issues such as health, education and agriculture. The Labour Government that came to power in 1997 achieved this by securing the passing of Acts in the Westminster Parliament to allow some powers to be devolved to three newly established representative bodies. Each of these bodies has a different set of powers and responsibilities, intended to answer the particular needs of the community it serves.

Scotland had already had its own Parliament, until about three hundred years ago, when it agreed to unite with England in a new state of Great Britain, under the Parliament at Westminster. It was a controversial decision at the time, and there has always been pressure to restore a measure of independence from Westminster. This came to a head in the 1990s, after a long period when the vast majority of representatives that Scotland sent to the Westminster Parliament were always on the opposition side, rather than the government side.

During that time a consensus had been formed within Scotland about what a new Parliament should be like and how it should work.

A ministerial advisory committee called the Consultative Steering Group translated this consensus into a detailed blueprint. The report of this group has had a profound influence on the shape and development of the Scottish Parliament.

It spelled out four guiding principles for the Parliament:

1. sharing the power – the Scottish Parliament should embody and reflect the sharing of power between the people of Scotland, the legislators and the Scottish Executive
2. accountability – the Scottish Executive should be accountable to the Scottish Parliament, and the Parliament and Executive should be accountable to the people of Scotland
3. access and participation – The Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, considerations and scrutiny of policy and legislation
4. equal opportunities – the Scottish Parliament in its operation and its appointments should recognise the need to promote equal opportunities for all

These key principles are often summarised in the belief that the Parliament should be:- open, accessible, accountable and participative. These principles have provided a clear and practical vision for the Parliament's role and operation.

This blueprint also included plans for the sort of research and information service that would be needed to support the new legislature. The information strategy stated:

Only well-informed citizens can maximise the opportunities which this presents for individuals and organisations to contribute to the democratic process. Only well-informed Members of the Scottish Parliament can contribute fully to the governance of Scotland.

These have become our objectives.

So, what does all this mean for the Scottish Parliament's research and information service? How have we put these principles into practice?

First, it means that we decided not to call ourselves a library. With all due respect to the fine book-lined rooms and deep leather armchairs of the House of Commons Library, where I worked for many happy years, a brand new parliamentary information service opening in 1999 needed a 21st century image, not a 19th century one. So we called ourselves the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, SPICe for short. Perception is important.

Second, it means that our first priority is to provide research for Committees. In a unicameral Parliament with multi-function committees, this is a heavy responsibility. It means that we not only provide research briefings, we also advise on suitable witnesses and advisers, we suggest lines of questioning, and we commission external research as and when necessary. We aim to provide background briefings for most plenary debates, and we also answer individual enquiries. This remit puts us at the heart of the Parliament's daily business. That's where every research and information service should be.

Third, it means that we are also open, accessible, and accountable. Our research papers are brief, focussed, and in plain language. They are all on the Parliament's website, so that everyone can see the briefings that are available to all Members of Parliament. This opens us

to challenge from the public, but our researchers welcome constructive criticism, and are able to judge whether a paper should be revised as a result.

Fourth, and finally, it means that we encourage the people of Scotland to participate in their Parliament. It is not enough to wait for people to ask for information about the Parliament. You have to get them interested. More than that, you have to explain how it works, what it's doing, and why it's relevant to their lives.

I think that the Scottish Parliament's research and information service is a good reflection of the particular culture of parliamentary democracy in Scotland. But if you think that democracy in your country is not as open, accessible, accountable and participative as you think it should be, I want to say this to you:

a strong and independent-minded parliamentary information service can make a difference.

My advice is this:

- get close to your parliament's business
- talk to your members. What are they doing? Where can you add value?
- make your service something they can't do without, not an optional extra
- get information out into the public domain and engage with your communities

We don't simply recycle old information – we create new perspectives, make new connections. By our choices, our judgements, our expertise, we can open eyes, we can open minds, and more than that – we can promote understanding.

Knowledge and understanding are the essential ingredients of an effective and democratic parliament.

Be bold, not bland. Be professional, earn respect both within the Parliament and from those outside. Promote knowledge and understanding, and help your members to serve the people they represent.

Make your information service a player in the democratic process, not a spectator.

Then your Parliament will have the information service it deserves.