

**PE1587/C**

10<sup>th</sup> February 2016

Re: Public Petition PE 1587

The petitioner's response to the submissions on the petition from the Scottish Government and the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations.

Petition PE 1587 calls for the reinstatement of the Scottish Civic Forum with funding at a level which will allow it to succeed as an instrument of social cohesion and democratic governance in Scotland.

I am grateful to the Public Petitions Committee for accepting this petition and to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) for their submissions on it.

Summary of my response to the submissions:

I welcome the Scottish Government's openness to proposals to improve consultation with the people of Scotland and look forward to working with it in this respect. I reject the SCVO's view that a publicly funded forum of the people is unnecessary and would not be a wise use of public funds.

Neither consultee addressed the social cohesion aspect of the petition. However, I would suggest that it should always be borne in mind that such a forum as a properly functioning Scottish civic forum would not only assist the Government in its consultations but would also provide a facility whereby all of the Scottish people could speak to each other in a spirit of patriotism and cooperation which, to the best of my knowledge, has not previously been available to us.

Response to Scottish Government's submission:

The Scottish Government is currently engaged in a mission to find better ways by which to gather the views of the people on how the common business of Scotland can be better managed and how we can all work together to enrich the quality of our Scottish society.

In keeping with the spirit of that mission I have suggested that apart from considering completely new initiatives it makes good sense to look again at initiatives which have been tried in the past but failed in order to see if the re-tuning of such initiatives could make the difference between success and failure.

Like the people who set up the original Scottish Civic Forum I firmly believe that such a forum has the potential to be a great aid to governance and democracy in Scotland. And I believe that a greater commitment from the Scottish Government to support the Forum and thereby to allow it to achieve its full potential is all that is needed to make that difference.

Response to the SCVO's submission:

I will respond to the SCVO's submission by addressing the four "Key points" of its objection:

Point 1): "There isn't only one way or route to getting your voice heard". This is obviously true however, any means by which fresh voices may be heard must surely be welcomed.

Point 2): "More people have access to Parliament (and more influence over what it does) than, for example, Westminster".

People outside parliament having more influence over the Scottish Parliament than the UK Parliament has little bearing of the desirability or otherwise of there being a Scottish civic forum. We can never be too democratic. And representative democracy demands that people outside any parliament must have every available opportunity – including through a national civic forum – to influence the decisions which are made on their behalf by their democratic representative.

Point 3): "Civil society is heterogeneous and pluralistic and its relationships with the Parliament are diverse and multi-layered".

Again this is obviously true however, it actually makes the point that a body such as a Scottish civic forum – essentially an "open to all" think-tank of the people - requires its own particular way of engaging with the Parliament.

Point 4) "We also do not see value in a Forum which seeks to impose a unified view on civic society which we believe would be too corporate for the Scottish culture". I would question why it should be thought that a Scottish civic forum operating in a spirit of respect and inclusiveness would seek to impose a "unified" view on any part of Scottish civic society. A Scottish civic forum could only succeed, even survive, if it was seen to respect, record and accommodate dissent from any majority view. In addition, a true Scottish civic forum would by its very nature aid civic society to reach better informed and considered views – and views which are also compatible with our Scottish values and culture.

The social-cohesion aspect of a Scottish civic forum:

Although neither of the bodies consulted considered it appropriate for it to address the social-cohesion aspect of the petition promoting the cohesion of our society is an integral part of the petition's aim.

And we cannot escape the fact that Scottish society has seldom been more divided than it is at present.

It should not be overlooked that an ethical civic forum has two prime functions: Primarily, to provide an opportunity for all the people of country to come together to discuss and where possible to reach considered views upon what should be done about challenges which we collectively face.

Secondly, upon reaching those views either to decide what action the forum itself can take or, where appropriate, to advise the authority with the appropriate powers of the forum's views and recommendations for action.

Therefore, supporting this petition must offer a wonderful opportunity for the Scottish Government to tap into the wisdom and patriotism of that huge number of Scottish people who stand outside the corridors of power and influence.

Personally, I am not aware of any body existing in Scotland today which offers our citizens and our government those facilities. This surely constitutes a huge gap in the political landscape of any modern democracy.

If the Scottish Parliament wishes to demonstrate its commitment to that Founding Principle of the Parliament which binds it to the sharing of power with the people of Scotland I can think of no more clear or powerful way of doing so than by reinstating and adequately funding the Scottish Civic Forum.

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Petitioner