

THE FAMILY-FRIENDLY SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT?

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In the run-up to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament much was made of its proposed 'family-friendliness' and its commitment to family-friendly policies (FFPs), policies intended to help MSPs to combine family responsibilities with political careers. Two of the better publicised examples were the commitment to scheduling parliamentary sittings within Scottish school term dates and confining parliamentary business to normal office hours. However, as part of a wider study into gender issues in the Parliament, it became clear that, in the eyes of some MSPs with children, these policies had not lived up to their promise. So what was the background to FFPs and can anything be said as to their effectiveness in practice, two years after the Parliament was established?

ACHIEVING GENDER BALANCE

A Scottish parliament, if it is to be worth having, must have the political will and sufficient power to redress the impoverishment - economic, industrial, social and cultural - that has been caused by successive Westminster governments of whatever party to the people of Scotland. Let's make Scotland different. The Scottish parliament should generate an atmosphere which is different from the present Westminster system - one which is welcoming to all Scottish people, men and women alike.
Allan, H., *Scotsman*, 27 December 1994, quoted in Mitchell (1996)

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The Family-Friendly Scottish Parliament?

Helen Allan's piece encapsulates the hopes the Scottish people had for a Scottish Parliament. They wanted their Parliament to be different from other parliaments, in particular from Westminster, which had always seemed distant in composition, location, and economic and social priorities – part of the so-called 'Democratic Deficit'. In particular it was seen as essential to achieve greater gender balance, as in 1997, when female representation doubled, still only 17% of the total number of MPs in Westminster were women (Bryson 1999, p. 115); the percentage has slightly fallen in the 2001 general election.

In the Scottish Constitutional Convention (1989-1995)¹ and in the run-up to the 1997 Referendum frequent references were made to the importance of gender equality in a new Scottish Parliament:

One of the key principles of the Convention's vision is that there should be equal representation of men and women in Scotland's Parliament. Locally and nationally, women have been persistently under-represented in all areas of public life in Scotland. We believe that a new Scottish parliament is a great opportunity to improve radically the representation of women in Scottish politics. Scotland's Parliament should represent the whole community and reflect the priorities of the people of Scotland.
Scottish Constitutional Convention (1995, p. 22)

Thus it was argued that the advent of a Parliament in Scotland could offer women a unique opportunity to increase their political voice. A round-table discussion on 'The Implications of a Scottish Parliament for Women's Organisations' in 1991 concluded with the following statement:

This is one of the rare occasions in history when there is the opportunity for real change. In this particular instance, unlike the past, there is commitment to provide equality for men and women in the Scottish Parliament. It is incumbent on us all to seize this unique opportunity so

¹ *The Scottish Constitutional Convention was supported by the Scottish Labour Party, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, and a number of smaller political parties. It also included most of Scotland's MPs and MEPs, and representatives from most Local Authorities, Trades Unions, religious bodies, ethnic minority groups, women's movements and representatives of the business community. For a membership list, see **Scotland's Parliament. Scotland's Right**, Appendix II, 1995, page 34-5*

Scottish Affairs

that we do not allow other people, mainly men, to set the agenda for the future.

Yvonne Strachan, quoted in Paterson (1998, p. 215)

Perhaps the seminal publication in the development of the Parliament, however, was the Report of the Consultative Steering Group (CSG) which identified equality of opportunity as one of its key principles for the Scottish Parliament:

the Scottish Parliament in its operation and its appointments should recognise the need to promote equal opportunities for all.

Consultative Steering Group (1999, p. 3)

The Report recommended that the goal of equal opportunities would underpin 'all policy development, implementation, evaluation and review practices' (CSG 1999, p. 12). Although the aim of equal opportunity included under-represented groups other than women (CSG 1999, pp. 8-10), it is clear that attaining gender balance in Parliament was one of its central tenets. This was particularly reflected in its proposals for the working patterns of the Parliament:

- the sitting pattern of the Parliament should be 'family friendly';
- the arrangements for the operation of the Parliament should be equally attractive to men and women; and
- the Parliament should meet during normal business hours on a regular, programmed basis.

CSG (1999, p. 13)

The CSG thus viewed the integration of FFPs into the working patterns of the Parliament as crucial for attracting greater numbers of women - and parents of both sexes - into active political participation in Scotland.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES – HAVE THEY MADE A DIFFERENCE?

So what is the reality? The fact that 37% of MSPs are women suggests that the CSG recommendations were successful in redressing the traditional gender imbalance in Scottish politics. However, I thought it may be

The Family-Friendly Scottish Parliament?

interesting to disaggregate MSPs in terms of their family responsibilities, being mindful of Bryson's assertion that in general those women who succeed in attaining high status occupations are far less likely to have children (Bryson 1999, p. 142). I also considered the age-range and number of their children to be an important factor, given that younger children place greater demands on parents in terms of childcare and other support.

As table 1 shows, almost 78% of all MSPs have children, with 5% more male MSPs having children than their female counterparts (80% and 75% respectively). The figures therefore show little difference between women and men in this respect, although the larger families (3 children or over) tend to be those of male MSPs overall (31%, in comparison with 17% of women).

Table 1
Number of MSPs with Children

	Women		Men		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No	%
with Children	35	74.5	59	79.7	94	77.7
no Children	12	25.5	15	20.3	27	22.3
Total	47	100	74	100	121	100

Source: Who's Who in Scotland 2000. Data for 8 MSPs was missing (1 female 7 male). Percentages are of MSPs for whom data was available.

Table 2
Age of Children by Sex of MSP

Age of Children in Years	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
Under 5	4	10.2	8	12.7
5-12	5	12.9	15	23.8
12-18	8	20.5	16	25.4

The Family-Friendly Scottish Parliament?

The MSPs were asked what they thought FFPs entailed and all said 'no late [parliamentary] sittings'. However MSPs from outwith the Edinburgh area said that sittings were only a small part of the job anyway - indeed some said that they would prefer late sittings if they could have a later start in the mornings, as then at least they could help getting the children ready for school. Geographical issues hindered this, as they had to be in Edinburgh early in the morning. These MSPs alluded to the fact that FFPs offer little help to MSPs who do not live in or near Edinburgh, and none of them envisaged making use of the planned childcare facilities at the new Parliament building. Furthermore, they asserted that FFPs take little account of the large amounts of time MSPs spend travelling between their constituencies and the Parliament.

All the MSPs had high levels of evening work in their constituencies. One male MSP said 'my youngest boy gives me regular tests on my knowledge of what's going on in his life - he knows it makes me feel a bit guilty', indicating that at least this child was aware of his father's regular absence from the family home, and also that the father perhaps felt guilty about spending so much time away. Most asserted that they had to try very hard to restrict evening engagements to two or three evenings per week, with one observing 'you get invited to a lot of things in this game. I usually only go if I can bring my kids and its something they'll enjoy. They'll probably grow up expecting lots of freebies, but I get to spend more time with them'.

Alluding to the adoption of FFPs by Parliament one male MSP had the following to say:

I would first say bollocks to that. Parliament meets in working hours on a Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, but there's no childcare facilities and kids' presence is seen as a hindrance. There's a shocking attitude to having kids in the office - absolutely shocking. I feel let down by this - I had a good job, good hours and good pay and I came to this in the hope of something better for my family, but this isn't better.

Another asserted:

There was a big problem with bringing the kids to the opening of Parliament. Some of us MSPs with kids said we would publicise this to the media. That set the tone of Parliament's attitude to kids. How could my wife and I both come and not bring the kids? Never mind the CSG

Scottish Affairs

report, it's all down to those who make the decisions. There's no place for my kids when I bring them in - nothing to occupy them and you would expect this from an employer of this size ... but family-friendly policies mean nothing. ... There's this veneer of family-friendly policies - this is untrue - it's all rhetoric, nobody cares or is committed to it. Time is the currency around here.

With reference to whether colleagues are generally considerate of their parenting commitments and supportive to them as parents, MSPs generally responded negatively, some suggesting that other MSPs were mostly only supportive if they had young children themselves. One MSP said that on several occasions he had to refuse to attend meetings on the grounds of childcare problems, but the meetings were never rescheduled to take this into account - 'they just went ahead without me'. One female MSP said 'not at all'. Another, male, MSP said 'women are the worst. Some women take a hard-line against family-friendly policies and don't allow meetings to be deferred to suit childcare'. However, when questioned further, he said that this was 'mostly women without children'.

The MSPs were also asked whether they thought that female MSPs with children were able to devote as much time to the job as their male colleagues. One woman remarked 'its down to individual choice, there are often different parenting styles amongst men and women. Some women work very hard'. Another said 'It's very difficult for them - in general women spend more hours working than men'. Do female MSPs thus believe that they have to demonstrate commitment in terms of longer hours worked to fit into what one male MSP referred to as 'the laddish culture' of Parliament?

Whilst all MSPs I spoke to thought that career progression was as open to politicians with young children as those without, one male MSP asserted 'you really need a supporting partner to get on in politics'. Another, female, MSP said 'yes, but you don't go for jobs that will harm your family'. However, they all observed that time was the most important factor in career progression, one male MSP saying:

It's just time that's the issue. My family is more important so I try to protect the weekends. This might change what they [the political party] think of me, but this is where I draw the line ... There's no formal discrimination, but I probably discriminate against myself.

The Family-Friendly Scottish Parliament?

Although MSPs said that their respective political parties were mostly indifferent to or broadly supportive of their having young children, they asserted that time commitments were of paramount importance to the parties, and the nature of their family commitments didn't matter. However, one MSP alluded to the 'time consuming nature of politics' which 'doesn't take family into account. You can see this by how they scheduled the Falkirk by-election [2000] in Christmas week. What does that say about family-friendly policies?' This highlights the limitations of FFPs in attempting to confine the business of Parliament to normal, nine-to-five, office hours.

LIMITED EFFECT?

Perhaps surprisingly, having children does not appear to have been an immediate barrier to female MSPs aspiring to careers as parliamentarians in Scotland, albeit with the caveat noted in the 5-12 year age range. However, it was apparent that patterns of childcare are highly gendered, with male MSPs usually being supported by their partners in this regard, whereas female MSPs tend to manage their childcare responsibilities differently from their male counterparts, as they appear unable to rely on their partners to take the primary childcare role.

Whilst MSPs said that the promise of FFPs was an important factor in their decision to stand for election, they felt, in reality, that these policies had little impact on the working practices of the Parliament. Furthermore they felt that any commitment in principle to FFPs was more than offset by the high time demands placed on professional politicians. This requirement for long hours is exacerbated by political events such as by-elections which intensify the time pressures on MSPs with children.

It was also suggested that MSPs without children appeared in the main to be unsympathetic to the pressures of combining a political career with the parenting role. Moreover, FFPs were considered largely irrelevant to MSPs whose constituencies lie outwith the Edinburgh area - the majority of parliamentarians. The location of the Parliament in Edinburgh places greater pressure on these parents, in terms of travel time, and the requirement to attend early morning meetings and parliamentary sittings. Furthermore, it is not envisaged that the provision of childcare facilities in the new parliament building will be of great benefit to these MSPs, although it may help to ease

Scottish Affairs

the childcare burden of MSPs whose constituencies lie in closer proximity to the capital.

Clearly the limited nature of the pilot study which forms the basis of this article is insufficient to judge whether the promise of FFPs as outlined in the CSG report was successful in attracting more women, and parents in general, to the Scottish Parliament. Further research would be required to determine the motivations for those individuals who chose to enter the selection process, those who were successful, and the motivations behind decisions not to participate. Moreover, the recruitment procedures for all political parties would require investigation, to reveal the processes that resulted in the selection of particular candidates.

In order to better gauge the extent to which FFPs can inform the working practices of the Parliament it would also be necessary to interview all MSPs, as FFPs aim to facilitate MSPs with a range of caring responsibilities. Furthermore, the extent to which FFPs are successful rests on the extent of commitment of all MSPs to them. As the interviews have suggested, for example, MSPs without children may perhaps be less supportive of the policies.

It is perhaps indicative of the lack of tangible commitment to family-friendly policies in the Scottish Parliament that they receive no mention in the **Annual Report** of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (2000). Although the Report alludes in Aim 4 to its future hopes of achieving a 'culture and conditions where we can achieve an appropriate balance between work and private life' (<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/spcb/spar00-05.html>), it fails to either assess family-friendly policies to date, or indicate how it will assess their benefit in the future. This is perhaps unsurprising, given an all-male membership of the Corporate Body, and a mean age of 57 years (10 years higher than the mean age of all MSPs). It is arguable that family-friendly policies might not be a priority for these MSPs, whose children have perhaps outgrown the need for childcare support. Perhaps the Corporate Body needs to broaden its membership if FFPs are to have a real impact on the working practices of the Parliament in the future?

For the moment, however, whilst the inclusion of family-friendly policies may be a laudable principle, my initial investigation into their impact on MSPs' working lives suggests that they have limited effect in reality. These policies appear constrained by the time demands of modern professional

The Family-Friendly Scottish Parliament?

politics, and my pilot-study suggests that efforts to implement them may have so far been an inadequate response to the burden of MSPs with family commitments.

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