

PUTTING THE e- INTO DEMOCRACY

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The Scottish Parliament was set up by Statute in 1998 and opened in 1999. Being so new, it was able to incorporate new information and communication technologies (ICTs) into its operations and procedures from the outset. All staff, Members and their staff use the same standard IT hardware and software. This makes communication in general and the transfer of data in particular much easier.

During the process of planning how the new Parliament would work, a Panel of Experts made specific recommendations about the use of ICTs (Scottish Office 1998). They considered the following questions:

1. how can ICT assist the realisation of the Parliament's aim of promoting democratic participation, including community governance and citizen participation?
2. what contribution can ICT make to greater parliamentary openness and accessibility, and increased efficiency?
3. what information management and operational management arrangements will the Parliament need to make to get the best out of ICT?

Their report, presented in October 1998, made several recommendations for the use of ICTs in the short, medium and long term. Many have been implemented, but in some cases priorities have changed, or unforeseen circumstances have arisen, which has meant that some are no longer relevant or appropriate. This article discusses the extent to which the Parliament has answered the first of the Expert Panel's questions and used electronic means to enhance democracy in Scotland

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WEBSITE

The Expert Panel recognised that a significant element of the Parliament's public image would be based on the nature of its website. They emphasised that the website and the information available on it should be 'exciting, compelling, dynamic, interactive, and immediate' (op. cit., para.12). Some early decisions have laid the foundations of our approach and shaped later developments.

First, it was agreed that all of our publications should be available electronically. The result is a text-heavy website which is demanding to support, and it can be difficult to search and retrieve material successfully. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of information about the Parliament and its business available via the web to the citizens who are enabled to access it.

Secondly, it was agreed (before they were elected) that all Members of the Scottish Parliament would be allocated parliamentary email addresses in a consistent format (joe.bloggs.msp@scottish.parliament.uk), and that these would be available on the website to facilitate contact between them and their constituents.

Thirdly, the significant decision was made that a single signature was sufficient for a petition to be submitted to the Parliament (although there are other requirements for a petition to be admissible), and that it could be submitted via email. There is no requirement for an MSP to sponsor the petition. An email form facilitating this was available as soon as the Parliament opened for business, in May 1999.

Finally, a separate website was established to act as a webcasting channel. This has the potential to bring broadcast parliamentary proceedings into every citizen's own home. In webcasting the Opening Ceremony of 1st July 1999, the Scottish Parliament was the first in the world to broadcast its Opening on the web. After further pilot webcasts of the Parliament's sessions in Glasgow in May 2000, a permanent service was established in September 2000. We were the first Parliament in the world, we believe, to offer such comprehensive webcast access to its proceedings.

As well as being a founding principle of the Parliament, having regard to equal opportunities is also a core thread in the design and delivery of all of the Parliament's e-facilities and activities. The Parliament's website, for example, is designed to be accessible for visually impaired users, and gives

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users the ability to alter font sizes, styles, and colours as well as the colours of foreground and background pages.

When the Corporate Body came to review the strategic direction of the website in 2003, they agreed that one of its overarching principles should be to widen public opportunities to interact with the Parliament. The strategy document stated:

The web sites should enable people to become actively involved with the Parliament and with the policy making process. They should offer people a choice of how to contact Parliament, its Members and of how to use its services. They should encourage people to engage with the Parliament, through interactive elements and through obvious links to current business such as inquiries.

In preparation for its move to the new Holyrood building, a comprehensive review was undertaken of both the main website and the webcasting site. These are now seamlessly integrated, although the webcasting site is still hosted externally. Since the move, in September 2004, all public parliamentary business, including all committees, has been broadcast live. The Holyrood building also has its own internal Information Channel so that building users and visitors can watch parliamentary business live from any location. It presents a mixture of pictures and text, with a moving 'ticker tape' line to convey welcome messages or topical information.

We pioneered the use of interactive forums to support a discussion relating to an item of forthcoming Members' business. These are short debates initiated by individual MSPs and held at the end of the parliamentary day. Since September 2002 a total of twenty-six such forums have been hosted, some of which have been remarkably successful. One of the most successful Members' business forums concerned the subject of chronic pain. Many sufferers were able to present their own experiences in time for the Member who initiated the debate to incorporate this feedback into her speech (Official Report 2002). Many participants were thus able to see how their contribution could form part of the parliamentary process. More recently a forum on wind farms attracted over 400 postings. Participation levels in online forums have varied greatly, reflecting in part the differing interest levels in the subject under discussion and in part the varying levels of promotion of the forum.

Some parliamentary committees have experimented with online consultations. In the first session of the Parliament, the Communities Committee invited

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submissions on the subject of anti-social behaviour and posted these onto a publicly accessible bulletin board. The format was similar to that used by the Parliament of Australia. Since then, it has become the norm to invite evidence to be submitted electronically, and online consultations are used when the issue under consideration lends itself to that format. Climate change was the subject of one of the most recent online consultations, which attracted participants from other countries. Signatories' countries of origin are shown on the website so that these can be distinguished. All submissions, whether sent electronically or composed via an online consultation, are summarised and form part of the evidence that is put before the relevant committee for consideration.

e-PETITIONS

By far the most successful interactive element of our website is the e-petitioning system. From the outset in 1999 it was possible to petition the Parliament by sending an email through the contact given on the website. The Public Petitions Committee accepted its first e-petition on 14 March 2000, the first statutory body formally to accept e-petitions. The e-petitioner system allows a petitioner to gather signatures and to develop a discussion about the topic online before the petition is formally lodged with the Parliament. This allows those with an interest in the issues raised to have their comments taken into account when the Public Petitions Committee considers the petition. Once it has done so, it may investigate the issues itself or refer the petition to a more appropriate subject committee for consideration.

The system is a world first and has attracted considerable interest from long-established petitions committees in the German and European Parliaments, and also from parliaments in Canada, Australia and South Africa. The system is operated on the Parliament's behalf by the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University, Edinburgh. It also allows anyone to track the progress of a petition through its parliamentary consideration. The German Bundestag is piloting an e-petitions system based on the Scottish Parliament model from May 2005, and several local authorities in England have adopted similar systems. Its success, however, is founded on the fact that it is an e-enabled way of participating in what is already a genuine political process. E-democracy is only an enhancement of any democratic process; it is not an end in itself.

MSP WEB PAGES

Members of Parliament are, on the whole, enthusiastic supporters of e-democracy. The Scottish Parliament website contains pages dedicated to each MSP. These focus on biographical and contact details, and hold as much or as little information as the MSPs themselves care to submit. These pages detail the committees on which each MSP sits, and other information under the headings: *Political Activities*; *Register of Interests*; and *Contact Details* (the latter both at the Parliament and in the constituency or region). The *Contact Details* page includes live email links to each Member's parliamentary email address and, if there is one, a constituency email address. While this might seem basic and unspectacular to many for whom e-communication is a daily scourge, in parliamentary terms the Scottish Parliament is some way ahead of other legislatures and assemblies in making its Members so fully e-accessible.

Such is the prevalence of e-communications and the ease with which MSPs can be contacted (it is very easy, albeit tedious, to copy an email 128 times and then click 'Send'), that Members can become inundated, and have to choose what to respond to. Also, the escalation in recent years of online surveys, often used by lobby groups and campaign organisations to rally support and pressure elected representatives, means that MSPs can be inundated with these surveys and have to take appropriate action lest they become swamped. An interesting example is the UK campaign against the introduction of national identity cards. The Scottish branch of the campaign has on its website (<http://www.no2id-scotland.net/MSPs/index.html>) a list of the MSP responses to their campaign approach. One MSP has posted this response: 'It is not ---'s policy to respond to questionnaires of this kind, but as far as the issue of National Identity Cards is concerned ...'.

In September 2004, as part of the revamp of its website, the Scottish Parliament introduced short biographical video clips on all MSPs webpages – the first democratic institution in the world to do so. While this does not, of itself, constitute direct political engagement, it does add a personal touch, helping to establish a link between MSPs and the electorate and encouraging a personal appreciation of the individuals who represent us.

MSPS' OWN WEBSITES

In addition to their own pages on the Parliament's official website, just under half of MSPs (46%, or 60 out of 129) maintain their own websites. This has

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increased since we last surveyed them in 2002, when 42% had their own websites. Each of these websites has a live link to it from the MSP biography page on the official Parliament website. The content of these websites is the responsibility of the individual MSP or party concerned, and while they vary in currency and comprehensiveness they can give a useful local – i.e., constituency or regional – focus to MSP activities, making the medium more relevant and attractive to constituents.

An examination of these sites reveals a widespread similarity of approach on the part of MSPs in terms of making available information to constituents. The bulk of the content can be summarised into two broad categories:

- contact details – both in the constituency (i.e., listing details of constituency surgeries, such as time, frequency, venues, etc.) and in the Parliament;
- record of activity – detailing the MSPs work – again, both within the constituency and in the Parliament.

Most MSP websites have photo galleries of the MSP active in the constituency – satisfying a requirement for any politician: raising and maintaining their visibility amongst their electorate. In addition, many photo galleries record the MSP's support of local causes such as saving local hospitals, attending tea mornings, visiting nursing homes in the local area, accounts of a party leader's visit to that constituency, etc.

Other common themes in MSP websites are online polls, links to media coverage of local issues, and referrals to the Parliament's official website highlighting the MSP's contribution to parliamentary business, perhaps in the form of a motion tabled, questions asked in the chamber, or a contribution to a parliamentary debate.

A small number of MSPs use their own websites to extend beyond the standard format of contact details and record of activity. Online surgeries are an obvious example. Chris Ballance MSP has a regular ('Between 1-3p.m. on the first Saturday of every month') online surgery using the widely available MSN Instant Messenger platform. 'Chris will be available online to answer any queries you have. To use this service you can ask Chris questions live online. Your message will be instantly relayed to Chris, who will reply'. Mr Ballance acknowledges the apathy felt by many towards engaging with elected representatives: 'This is a unique MSP surgery, geared up to the fact

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that many people are more willing to use the internet than to walk in to an MSP's office.'

The website of Duncan McNeil MSP has interactive games. One is a draughts game where the pieces of one side are in the shape of Labour Party leader and First Minister Jack McConnell, pitted against the erstwhile SNP leader John Swinney. (That this demonstrates the need to keep websites current is incidental). Mr McNeil's political opponents might take more pleasure in another interactive game on his website – an online version of the fairground classic 'Mole Whacker' – where the user is invited to hit/click on the smiling Mr McNeil as his face appears at random across a pop-up grid.

Whether these activities contribute to enhanced democratic engagement and a greater understanding of the parliamentary process is debateable, but they undoubtedly add much needed light relief to what can often be quite dry web resources.

VIDEO-CONFERENCING

For a Parliament which has as one of its declared founding principles, *Participation and Access*, video-conferencing is a particularly attractive technology.

In large parts of Scotland issues of geography, distance and transport present very real obstacles to straightforward and productive engagement between MSPs and their constituents. The travel time required for a return road or rail journey to Edinburgh would be unacceptably long for what, in practice, may be a relatively short meeting. In such instances, video-conferencing can enable an immediate and direct contact between MSPs and their constituents not otherwise possible.

Use of video-conferencing by the Scottish Parliament falls into two broad categories: enabling constituents and community groups to engage in direct 'live' access to MSPs (typically two sessions are held each week during sitting time (about thirty-three weeks per annum)); and supporting the work of parliamentary committees.

In this latter area the Scottish Parliament has an impressive track record – most often focusing on evidence-taking in committee enquiries. Within this, video-conferencing has been used to establish productive links between the Scottish Parliament and other parliaments and devolved assemblies, negating

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the need for time-intensive and costly travel that would otherwise be necessary for inter-parliamentary liaison. Examples include:

- In 2002 a three-way session between MSPs on the Parliament's then European Committee and its sister committees in the devolved assemblies in Flanders and Catalonia was held as part of an initial bridge-building effort for NORPEC – a network of European parliamentary committees. This video-conferencing session entailed some confusion as to the etiquette of tri-lingual video-conferencing. There was some misunderstanding regarding which language the session should be conducted in. The clear learning outcome was that ground rules should be established beforehand to avoid such potentially embarrassing cultural *contretemps*. The need for adequate translation facilities should also be a key consideration in planning international video-conferences.
- In early 2005, the Scottish Parliament held a video conferencing session with Hilary Benn MP, the UK Secretary of State for International Development. This enquiry, by the Parliament's European and External Relations Committee, considered the upcoming G8 summit in Gleneagles and international development goals.

As well as geography and distance, the other obstacle which video-conferencing can overcome is *time*. Here again, the Scottish Parliament has made use of the technology to facilitate what would otherwise have been a costly liaison with experts on the other side of the world. For example:

- In early 2001, video-conferencing was used by the Parliament's Finance Committee to take evidence from a New Zealand-based expert on public sector finance (resulting in the peculiarity of an 8.00 a.m. start in Edinburgh and a simultaneous 8.00 p.m. start in Christchurch).
- A similar instance occurred in June 2004 when, in considering the then Members Bill on the Prohibition of Smoking in Public Places, the Parliament's Health Committee took evidence via video link from officials of the New York City Health Department.
- May 2005 saw the Parliament's Justice 1 Committee hold a video-conferencing session to take evidence from legislators at the

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Australian Parliament, to inform the committee's consideration of the Executive's Family Law Bill.

Video-conferencing also supports wider strategic and cultural efforts of the Parliament. In early 2005, Western Isles MSP Alasdair Morrison took part in a Gaelic-language video-conferencing session with pupils at the Gaelic medium education unit in Condorrat Primary School, North Lanarkshire. Although Mr Morrison is not the MSP for the area, as a native Gaelic speaker his participation in this event served to underline the Parliament's commitment to actively supporting the use of Gaelic in Parliamentary activities.

Video-conferencing can also serve more far-reaching, strategic efforts of the Parliament. The Parliament's innovative *MSPs in Schools* project (in association with the Hansard Society (Scotland)) aims to raise awareness in schools of what the Scottish Parliament is and how it works. A planning session (March 2005) with Plockton High School in the north-west of Scotland was required and the potential which video-conferencing offered for efficiency savings was clear: a forty-minute video-conference linking teaching staff in Plockton with staff from the Parliament's Outreach Services Team overcame the prospect of a ten-hour round trip from Holyrood.

In November 2004, the Parliament's Outreach Services Team also held a successful 'video-surgery' with a dozen local community representatives in Broughty Ferry, who spoke directly with their constituency MSP at the Parliament in Edinburgh. This community outreach event, which received widespread local media coverage, was enthusiastically received by the participants and is likely to be repeated in other venues as facilities and opportunities arise.

These activities demonstrate the potential value of readily available communications facilities to achieving more democratic and participative governance, not inhibited by constraints of geography or time.

ONLINE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

There can be few concerns so widely shared by politicians at so many levels as that of low voter turnout and the spread in voter apathy. This, combined with evidence of a wider social disaffection from politicians, politics and the

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political process, is often cited as the major threat to the health of democratic society.

Perhaps the most disquieting aspect here is the estrangement of young people from voting and politics. While many youngsters are exercised by global political issues such as fair trade, third world development, HIV/AIDS, and various environmental issues, understanding of, and participation in, more local political issues is too often overlooked. If this generation fails to engage with democracy, what hope is there for the next?

Can ICTs – can e-democracy initiatives – serve to reverse this trend? Increasingly more citizens are exploiting ICTs to access information and to understand the world around them, and many young people choose online games as their preferred recreation. Experience in classrooms shows that children are becoming increasingly more receptive to ICT-based learning through, for example, the use of interactive white boards, Internet, CD-ROM, DVDs, etc.

To reflect this, the Parliament's Education Service produces a range of learning and teaching resources aimed at all levels of school pupil – from primary through to senior secondary level. The vast majority of these resources are parallel-published – both in hardcopy and online (<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/vli/education/index.htm>) – reflecting a gradual shift in schools away from traditional book-based learning to more ICT based, self-orientated study – for example by using the school resource centre to search the Internet or to consult educational CD-ROMs and DVDs.

These online resources range from quizzes, games, jigsaws and wordbanks, to election result wallcharts for classroom display, downloadable 'Get Elected' snakes and ladders games, and street-scene posters aimed at encouraging a greater understanding of devolved and reserved areas. These resources are developed by former teachers and often in conjunction with Learning and Teaching Scotland. (LTS assists the Scottish Executive to 'review, assess and support developments in learning and education, including in the use of ICTs'.)

The Education Service web-pages focus not just on explaining what the Parliament is and how it works, but also seek to support formal teaching in the 5-14 Environmental Studies (People in Society) module, and also in Modern Studies. A future growth area for the Parliament's Education Service is online provision of materials to support citizenship education.

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As well as producing teaching and learning materials, the Education Service also runs a highly successful class visits programme; each week while the Parliament is in session eight school classes visit Holyrood for presentations, tours of the building and question-and-answer sessions with their MSPs. Prior to their visit, each class is advised to check the Scottish Parliament website beforehand to learn more about their MSPs, and to come prepared to ask questions. While this is a relatively low-level example of e-democracy, these are critical first steps in educating the future decision makers about *their* parliament.

The Scottish Parliament regards democracy education as fundamental to its remit of facilitating participation and enhancing access. Educating the voters – and the MSPs – of tomorrow is key to the future, not just of a responsive and participative Scottish Parliament, but also of a politically literate and empowered society. As ICTs are increasingly being used to enable interactive and participative e-democracy, the Scottish Parliament will continue to develop its educational and learning services and resources to accommodate this.

THE PARTNER LIBRARY NETWORK

One of the most visible means in which the Parliament delivers on its commitment to be open, accountable, accessible and participative *at a community level* is through the Partner Library Network – a scheme of eighty public libraries across Scotland which act as focal points in local communities for parliamentary information. Each Partner Library receives a collection of parliamentary publications, free of charge, and each has direct access, through an enquiry support service, to the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe).

In addition, every Partner Library now provides free public Internet access, as part of the National Lottery funded 'People's Network'. In planning the Partner Library Network in the period 1998-99, and in an effort to promote and raise awareness of e-access to the Parliament, a requirement of being granted Partner Library status was that all Partner Libraries should provide free public Internet access for any user wishing to view the Scottish Parliament website. However, this requirement was soon overtaken by the UK wide roll-out of the People's Network. As libraries become increasingly able to handle electronic documentation, they are encouraged by the

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Parliament to shift from hardcopy supply of parliamentary materials to e-access via the website.

Staff in every Partner Library received induction training on the parliamentary services and resources available to them as a designated Partner Library. This included, where appropriate, training sessions on the Parliament's website – focusing on those areas of most use to public library staff in handling enquiries about MSPs, the Parliament, its business and decisions. Surveys and discussions with Partner Library staff over the period 2000-2004 revealed that there were few user requests for assistance with accessing the Parliament website. This does not mean, however, that there was no interest, as the vast majority of web searching in public libraries is unassisted.

The track record of Partner Libraries in contributing to Scottish Parliament e-democracy is scant. Can we describe library users searching the Parliament's website as meaningful and participative e-democracy? Perhaps only at the most superficial end of the e-democracy spectrum.

The experience of the Parliament's Library Liaison Officer, responsible for establishing and maintaining the Network from 1999-2004, is that library users rarely accessed the Parliament's website. Instead, use of the website (and indeed, of the hardcopy resources) is most often undertaken by Partner Library staff in answering enquiries from users. Interestingly, anecdotal evidence from Partner Library staff indicates that the vast majority of enquiries about the Parliament are basic and tend to be of the 'Who is my MSP and how can I contact them?' variety – information which is relatively easily available on the Parliament's website.

One area where Partner Libraries do have potential for use as an e-democracy platform is through video conferencing – as mentioned earlier with the Broughty Ferry example. Research suggests that most local authorities in Scotland do not make available video-conferencing facilities in public libraries. Two which do, and which make relatively frequent use of their video-conferencing capability, are Dundee and Glasgow. Closely linked to this is the potential for Partner Libraries – and public libraries generally – to facilitate webcasting. Ready availability of relatively inexpensive web-cast hardware and software in public libraries could go some way to enhance opportunities for linking MSPs to their constituents. We can only hope that these enabling technologies will become more widely available when their potential to enhance democratic participation is more clearly understood.

SUMMARY

The Scottish Parliament's website and other e-services have received high-level industry accolades, being described in mid 2005 as 'a model for 21st century parliaments' at a major international conference (EPRI). Members and staff of other Parliaments, assemblies and legislatures have described the Scottish Parliament's ICT-based activities as 'visionary', and have suggested that 'any new parliament created in the 21st century should follow the Scottish Parliament's model.'

Particularly well-received are features such as the Parliament's e-petitions facility and the web-streaming of all chamber and committee meetings. In addition, features like the short MSP profile videos and making the business agendas and the records of debates available online are regarded as key to 'making ... the Parliament more accessible to the people of Scotland in ways unseen in many other countries.' Scotland's Parliament was the first statutory body in the world to take the lead in many of these areas.

The examples described here cover the broad spectrum of e-democracy activity; from online games and educational resources for junior school pupils, aimed at raising to a basic level awareness of what the Parliament is and how it works, to online forums and e-petitions which enable people to contribute directly to the legislative-consultative process. Although in some areas levels of participation are not overwhelming, any e-democracy activity where there was none before can only be regarded as progress.

The Scottish Parliament has an enviable track record in its short history of making itself not only open, accountable and participative – but also in using the latest ICTs to achieve this – to *widen and enhance* its accessibility. Where there has been a gap or where new areas have required to be developed, the Scottish Parliament has taken the lead. Scotland's Parliament has shown other elected bodies how, with well-designed strategies and with high level political support, ICTs can and do contribute to a more inclusive political process.

Each of these e-activities, platforms and mechanisms are evidence of the Parliament's commitment to e-democracy. They demonstrate the clear utility value of often relatively simple ICTs to achieving more inclusive, democratic and participative governance.

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