

Deputy First Minister
and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy
John Swinney MSP



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Chair, Political and Constitutional Reform Committee
House of Commons
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Graham Allen

Thank you for your letter of 14 November to Nicola Sturgeon MSP, First Minister of Scotland, enclosing a copy of the Political and Constitutional Reforms Committee's report 'Voter Engagement in the UK'.

Many of the proposals in the Committee's report relate to recommendations for political parties, and it will be for political parties to respond specifically to those questions. However, a response is set out below outlining the Scottish Government's approach to addressing some of the issues highlighted in the report, which may also be of interest to the Committee.

Relationship between local and central government

The report highlights the need for all political parties in the UK to look at ways of ending over-centralisation and extending devolution as a means of engaging the electorate much more in deciding their own affairs.

The Scottish Government's approach is one of partnership with local government – a way of working highlighted for its success by the Council of Europe last year. This is an approach which varies substantially from the approach taken in some other parts of the UK and is based on a shared vision of strengthened community planning, involvement and empowerment. Indeed, the Scottish Government's approach to devolution does not stop at local authority level. The Community Empowerment Bill, introduced to the Scottish Parliament in June, will help shift the balance of power more towards communities.

An example of the Scottish Government's commitment to subsidiarity is *Empowering Scotland's Island Communities*, published in June 2014. This saw the first steps towards implementing the Lerwick Declaration that will provide greater powers for Scotland's islands.

The Smith Commission published recommendations on further devolution to the Scottish Parliament in November 2014. Amongst these recommendations was further devolution of powers to local authority level. This will be an important part of our considerations as we move forward with implementation of the Smith Commission recommendations. *Empowering Scotland's Island Communities* already includes commitments to ensure local communities benefit from the revenues of the Crown Estate, one of the areas proposed for devolution.

Democratic engagement

The referendum on Scottish independence has re-ignited an interest in politics and civic activism across the country. This provides a great opportunity to encourage people's involvement in the democratic life of Scotland at national and local level.

In our Programme for Government, published in November, we set out our vision of Scotland as an open and engaging country, where the creativity and wisdom of all its people help to shape our future. We will work collaboratively with local government in Scotland, a range of existing experts in participative democracy, the wider public sector and communities to identify the best ways to achieve this.

The first meeting of the Rural Parliament in November 2014 demonstrates the new approach we want to take in engaging with rural communities. We have also committed to making sure that we have strong connections to the Older People's Assembly and Scottish Youth Parliament – both of which reflect the interest in shaping our future across the generations, as well as with the emerging work of the Poverty Truth Commission.

We are committed to being a more open, accessible Government, engaging directly with people on the issues that matter to them. This approach will underpin the whole range of our policies, and will be reflected in how we carry out the business of Government itself. We have already held very successful Summer Cabinet meetings throughout Scotland, and these will be expanded so that at least one meeting of the Scottish Government's Cabinet will take place outside Edinburgh each month. We will lead an outward-looking Government which is more open and accessible to Scotland's people than ever before.

Re-engage the electorate

Last year the Scottish Government launched a consultation 'Scotland's Electoral Future', seeking views on how we can improve the quality of democracy in Scotland by encouraging wider engagement and participation in elections. This consultation highlights many of the issues that your report has identified. The responses will now be considered alongside analysis of the high level of participation in the referendum, with a view to developing proposals for future work. We will continue to work with electoral administrators, the Electoral Commission and other groups to identify ways to improve accessibility and participation.

Since the consultation above was published, the incredible participation levels in the Scottish Independence referendum have emphasised that there is a huge appetite in

Scotland to participate in the democratic process. Both the referendum and the consultation responses emphasised the importance of increasing the political literacy of young people; extending the franchise for 16 & 17 year olds; and exploring ways to improve the voting process to reduce the barriers to participation.

The Scottish Government is moving ahead with work to extend the vote to 16 and 17 year olds in Scottish Parliament and local government elections. A commitment has already been secured from the UK Government to early transfer of the necessary powers in line with the Smith Commission agreement. The intention of extending the franchise is to engage people directly in the democratic process from an early age. The inclusion of these young voters in the referendum was widely viewed as having contributed considerably to high levels of engagement and participation.

As your report notes, there will clearly be other factors that influence participation in the democratic process that will be for political parties, the media and other stakeholders to consider. However, there is also much that governments can do to help remove barriers to participation and facilitate greater engagement. I hope that this outline of the Scottish Government's approach to voter engagement and democratic renewal is of interest to the Committee.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'J' and 'S' followed by a horizontal line.

JOHN SWINNEY