The Scottish Parliament and e-democracy

Janet Seaton

Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, UK

Abstract

Purpose – To describe the initiatives of the Scottish Parliament in the field of e-democracy and assess the prospects for future developments.

Design/methodology/approach – Analysis and review.

Findings – The Scottish Parliament has always seen the internet as one of the major mechanisms for engaging Scottish citizens in the Parliament's business and activities. Its most successful initiatives have been the e-petitioning system, the webcasting of proceedings, the discussion forums and the MSP video diaries.

Research limitations/implications – Relevant to parliaments and other representative institutions.

Practical implications – Simple implementable tools are described that have been shown to be effective.

Originality/value – Few parliaments have been able to put theory into practice in a short time. Applicable to other small parliaments with limited resources wishing to enhance democratic participation by electronic means.

Keywords Democracy, Parliament, Scotland, Citizen participation, Internet

Paper type Case study

The fact that the Scottish Parliament was established well into the age of the internet has given it a huge advantage in terms of incorporating new information and communication technologies into its practices and procedures. Although the Parliament was established as a result of the Scotland Act, passed by the UK Parliament in 1998, it was able to be created in an astonishingly short time because of the wealth of discussion and cross-party agreement that had taken place over many of the preceding years. Much of this prior planning was encapsulated in the work of the Consultative Steering Group (CSG), which was set up by the Secretary of State for Scotland in November 1997 under the chairmanship of Henry McLeish MP. Their report, *Shaping Scotland's Parliament*, was published in December 1998 and made detailed recommendations for how the Parliament should actually work (Scottish Office, 1998a).

The CSG identified four key principles on which the Parliament's operations should be based. These were endorsed by the Parliament in 1999, and are:

- sharing the power;
- accountability;
- access and participation; and
- equal opportunities.

The CSG was supported by an Expert Panel on information and communication technologies, whose remit was:

... to provide advice on how the Scottish Parliament might use technology to:

- promote internal efficiency and innovative ways of working;

- provide information about its proceedings and its work to the widest possible audience in the most accessible way;

- making it as easy as possible for the Parliament and individual MSPs to exchange information with external organisations and the public; and

- encourage democratic participation and involvement (Scottish Office, 1998b, pp. 87-8).

The Expert Panel's report (Scottish Office, 1998a) made detailed recommendations that would promote both parliamentary efficiency and openness, accountability and democratic participation, many of which were implemented in the Parliament's early years.

The first elections to the new Parliament were held in May 1999 and by polling day a fully functioning web site had been launched (see www.scottish.parliament.uk) with a commitment to make all of the Parliament's proceedings available to the public electronically as well as in printed form. Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) were supplied with standard IT equipment for use both at the Parliament Headquarters in Edinburgh and in their local offices. The creation of a standard IT network from the outset, to which everyone was connected with standard software, meant that the transfer of information was much easier than having to deal with a variety of different hardware and software installations. This enabled the Parliament to allocate to each MSP an individual e-mail address with a standard format (e.g. joe.bloggs.msp@scottish.parliament.uk). There was some discussion at the planning stage about the choice of domain name. An early assertion of the Parliament's independent view of itself was evident in its rejection of a ".gov" domain in favour of the albeit subordinate looking ".parliament" domain.

One of the disappointing aspects of early attempts to establish e-democracy initiatives was the relative poverty of the telecommunications infrastructure in Scotland generally. Five years later this picture is much improved, but Scotland still shares with some other places difficulties associated with poor connectivity and downloading large quantities of data.

From the outset, the Parliament established a network of Partner Libraries. This is a network of 80 public libraries spread geographically throughout Scotland. It began with one in each constituency but was expanded to include more libraries in remote areas. The successful rollout of the People's Network in Scotland has now achieved all 563 public libraries having free internet access. The Partner Libraries are offered printed copies of the Parliament's publications and staff are trained and supported in answering enquiries from the public about the Parliament and its publications. These libraries offer opportunities as venues for activities associated with the Parliament, and indeed some have been chosen as the location of MSPs' constituency surgeries. The Parliament's Outreach Service recently held a successful video-conferencing event with local community representatives in a library in Broughty Ferry in Tayside, who spoke directly to their constituency MSP at the Parliament in Edinburgh. This was enthusiastically received by the participants and is likely to be repeated in other Partner Libraries as facilities and opportunities arise.

Soon after the 1999 election it was possible to put biographical information about all new elected Members on the Web site together with their e-mail addresses and contact details. Naturally, as the first Parliament in Scotland for 300 years, this attracted a great deal of attention, and has set the benchmark for the improvement of the quality and interactivity of this type of information in the future. When the Parliament revamped its web site to coincide with its migration to the new Holyrood building, short biographical films of all MSPs were included. These went live in September 2004, making the Scottish Parliament the first democratic institution in the world to offer such a service to its citizens. One of the notable successes of this particular venture was the ability to attract the support of the Members for participation in this project, but also the dovetailing of biographical information, which is provided as text both online and in print, with a much more engaging and entertaining video snapshot of Members themselves. Many Members have developed their own web sites, with varying degrees of interactivity. The Parliament's web pages include links to MSPs' personal web sites, but their contribution to e-democracy is not considered here.

Webcasting was another service the Parliament was able to introduce at an early stage. The Scottish Parliament was the first Parliament in the world, it is believed, to offer such comprehensive webcast access to its proceedings. The opening ceremony in July 1999 was broadcast to the world, as were the Parliament's sittings in Glasgow in May 2000. From September 2000 this service became a permanent feature, and has steadily developed since then. Since the Parliament's recent move to the Holyrood building, all public parliamentary business, including all Committees, have been broadcast live. All live sessions are archived for a minimum of one month and a permanent archive of major parliamentary events has also been maintained.

Making pictures and documents available electronically and facilitating members of the public contacting both the Parliament and individual MSPs by e-mail is of course important. However, it can only provide the basic foundation for real engagement. More challenging is the objective of genuine interactivity between elected representatives and their constituents. The purpose of this activity is to enhance the democratic process. It is fruitless to embrace new technology for its own sake; it can only engage the citizen in the democratic process if it is integrated into a genuine dialogue between electors and the elected. The Scottish Parliament has tried to achieve this objective in two different ways.

First, the Parliament 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 26 such forums have been hosted, some of which have been remarkably successful. Participation levels in these online forums have varied greatly from as few as ten posts to over 400 in the case of a forum on wind farms. In part this reflects the differing levels of interest in the subject under discussion and is partly due to varying levels of promotion. 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 (*Scottish Parliament Official Report*, 2002). Many participants were thus able to see how their contribution could form part of the parliamentary process.

Interactive forums or bulletin boards have also been run in conjunction with some committee inquiries. For example, the Education Committee conducted one in March

2002 as part of its inquiry into the purposes of education, and the Enterprise Committee held one in June 2002 during their tourism inquiry. One recent success in this area was an online questionnaire used during the inquiry by the Finance Committee into the relocation of public sector jobs, including the proposed relocation of the Scottish Natural Heritage agency, which attracted around 2,250 signatures. This success was attributed in part to the fact that they guaranteed anonymity and also because their objective was to reach directly the affected individuals. The evidence gathered by this online questionnaire was backed up by the other evidence given to the Committee by organised interests, but it was given more weight because of its individual nature, and the Committee felt that it had been a worthwhile exercise.

The second and most successful demonstration of the Scottish Parliament's e-democracy credentials are evident in the success of the e-petitioning system. The Parliament's commitment to access and participation led directly to the establishment of a system for dealing with petitions from individual citizens (a single signature is enough) and of ensuring that the issues are examined within the Parliament in a meaningful way. From the outset it was possible to petition the Parliament by sending an e-mail through the contact given on the web site. The primary requirement for admissibility is that the petition must request the Parliament to do something that it has the power to do. The Public Petitions Committee accepted its first e-petition on March 14, 2000, the first statutory body to formally accept e-petitions (McMahon, 2004). This system was developed in partnership with the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University and was further developed and formally launched in February 2004.

The e-petitioner system allows a petitioner to gather signatures and to develop a discussion about the topic before the petition is formally lodged with the Parliament. Each e-petition has its own discussion forum where visitors and signatories can discuss the issues online. Supporting information can also be added so that the issue can be viewed in context. Once the agreed period for hosting the petition online has expired, the petition is formally submitted to the Public Petitions Committee. The International Teledemocracy Centre presents a report to the Committee reviewing the extent of the online support and a summary of the online debate. In addition, petitioners can track the progress of their petition through its life in the Parliament. Once the Public Petitions Committee has considered a petition it may investigate the issues itself or refer the petition to a more appropriate subject committee for consideration.

E-petitions have attracted signatures from many other countries and only the signatory's name and country appear on the site so that these can be identified. There is no requirement for a Member to sponsor a petition, so they are genuinely expressing the concerns of individuals or groups. They also overcome barriers of time and distance, and have encouraged participation in *real* politics by people who might otherwise have felt that there was no opportunity to participate.

The Public Petitions Committee has embarked on a programme of events to promote the petitions system, particularly in relation to groups traditionally marginalised from the political process. They plan to hold one event in each of the eight Scottish Parliamentary regions, and each event includes a presentation on e-petitioning. Members of the Public Petitions Committee and other MSPs support the e-petitioner system with great enthusiasm because they can see that it succeeds in

addressing constituents' concerns as part of a genuine democratic process. Not every petitioner is satisfied by the outcome of their petition, but people appreciate that it has been given serious consideration.

The Scottish Parliament has an explicit commitment to encourage the engagement of the Scottish people in the Parliament's business. As a new Parliament established on the eve of the millennium it prides itself on its ability to innovate, but to do so cautiously and only when resources and opportunities permit. In reviewing the effectiveness of the measures implemented to date, staff will take into account the appropriateness of different tools in different circumstances. Where using electronic technology can enhance the democratic involvement of the electors with the elected, the Parliament will continue to try new developments. Where Members of the Parliament can feel that these developments improve the quality of democratic representation they will support them. The role of staff is to identify and choose the most appropriate methods that will deliver the benefits that Members expect and deserve.

References

McMahon, M. (2004), "E-petitioning the Scottish Parliament", *Parliamentarian*, Vol. LXXXV No. 3, pp. 236-8.

Scottish Office (1998a), *Expert Panel on Information and Communications Technologies for the Scottish Parliament Report*, October, Scottish Office, Edinburgh.

Scottish Office (1998b), *Shaping Scotland's Parliament: Report of the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament*, December, Scottish Office, Edinburgh.

Scottish Parliament Official Report (2002), "Chronic pain", col. 9748-9751, *Scottish Parliament Official Report*, Scottish Office, Edinburgh, available at: www.scottish.parliament.uk