



Constitutional and Election Issues

Agenda 2011

Consultation Paper

The Co-operative Party in Scotland has had considerable success in establishing an active group of Co-operative MSPs in the Scottish Parliament which meets regularly and advances the Co-operative agenda through debates and through legislation in that Parliament. Our MSPs have raised awareness in other political parties to the extent that there is now a Cross Party Group on Co-operatives, Co-operative Development Scotland working within Scottish Enterprise, legislation benefiting Credit Unions, and moves towards establishing Scotland – with Wales – as a designated Fair Trade Nation.

In Local Government, the Scottish Co-operative Party is building a network of Co-operative Councillors to develop and act as advocates and sponsors of Co-operative and Mutual solutions to the challenges faced by Councils in delivering services from Housing to Leisure, from maintenance to Care for the Elderly.

Devolution brought with it changes to the electoral system in Scotland. PR of different kinds for elections both to the Scottish Parliament and to Local Councils have changed forever the way in which both operate. As well as power to the Parliament devolving down from the UK, it also devolved up, and away from Councils. The multi member ward system diluted direct local accountability, and the lack of an overall majority both in the Scottish Parliament and in most Councils has made it difficult for any broad political agenda to move forward.

Traditionally, the Co-operative Party in Scotland has been supportive of the first past the post system because in returning majority government, it enables our Political Agenda to be pushed through and implemented. Proportional Representation – which is with us in some form or another to stay – means that we have to look to other ways in which to advance our political aims.

We do have some obvious advantages. It is useful that many members of Parties other than the Labour Party to which we are the sister party consider themselves to be Co-operators, and are indeed members of Co-operatives. The Cross Party Group may be able to build on this, especially in times when at Westminster as well as in Edinburgh, there may be changes to the voting system which make Labour governments with overall majorities less likely.

As a party in one of the UK's devolved nations, we must also consider options for returning more Co-operative party members to the Scottish Parliament in circumstances where it might be more difficult to return additional Labour/Co-operative MSPs under the list system.

Relationships between Councillors, MSPs, and MPs and MEPs have frequently appeared at best tenuous, at worst fractious. Yet the need for elected Co-operators to work together, share information, plan strategies for their shared areas, is self evident. No one Council or Parliament can deal with Justice, or Poverty, or Economic Development, or Housing without mutual communication, respect and accountability.

Many Third Sector organisations, delivering services to communities at council level, are largely funded by Holyrood, subject to legislation from Holyrood, Westminster and Brussels, and following national strategies developed by cross party groups of the Scottish Parliament which are 9 years old. They began by being accountable to local voluntary self help groups. Now they are effectively agencies of the State, accountable to no-one.

The shortage of family lawyers and the distance of courts from many people in rural areas, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, make it very difficult for thousands of Scots to access the law or social justice. The on-going reforms to the current legal aid system may provide an opportunity to introduce co-operative solutions.

A few questions for consideration

How much do we know about what the implications of the Calman Commissions report are for Co-operatives in Scotland?

How can we ensure the greatest possible influence for Co-operative ideas in Councils and Parliaments where there is no over-all majority?

How could Labour/Co-operative Councillors secure Co-operative governance structures for service delivery departments and organisations when the Co-operative business model has not been deemed appropriate?

How can we strengthen the links, relationships and Co-operative agenda of our elected representatives on Councils, the Scottish, UK, and European Parliaments?

It seems likely that that the voting systems which currently apply in Council, Scottish, and UK elections will be subject to review in the near future. How can we establish the view of our membership, and ensure that it influences electoral reform?

What would be the advantages and drawbacks of urging our elected representatives to work together across all levels of government on promoting and developing one Co-operative issue at a time? (eg. Year 1. Care for the Elderly, Year 2. Housing, Year 3. Renewable Energy)

How could urban law centres and family lawyers co-operate with local communities, both urban and rural, to ensure equal and universal access to the law and to fiscal and social justice?

Making Submissions

The Scottish Policy Committee is extremely keen to ensure that all views expressed at branches should be included in written submissions to the Scottish Policy Forum. We would ask branches to invite the Scottish Policy Committee to the meeting which considers this paper so that views can be recorded.

Submissions should be made by **19 February 2010** at the latest to Mary Lockhart, Secretary, Scottish Policy Committee, at m.lockhart@party.coop.