



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
School of Divinity



Devolution @25

**Reflections, perspectives and visions of
the Churches' relationship with the
Scottish Parliament**

**4 September 2024
Assembly Hall, New College**

Conference Papers

Foreword

by
Prof. Rachel Meurs
Professor of Divinity and
co-director of the Centre for
Theology and Public Issues

This conference will be a unique chance to think together about how faith and politics relate in Scotland, and how the churches, the academy and those engaged in public life can collaborate for the common good. We will be bringing together an exciting group of speakers with very different expertise and experience to share, to learn from the last 25 years and to think about what the future might look like. As the Centre for Theology and Public Issues we are committed to bringing academic research in theology into deep conversation with everyone who has an interest in the questions that theology raises – including questions about justice, community, working together across difference, and other concerns that are at the heart of politics. We're delighted to be co-organising this conference and to have the chance to forge new connections and take our thinking forward.



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David Bradwell makes his introductory remarks



The event was attended by a wide range of public policy professionals, academics and interested individuals



Welcome

by
David Bradwell
Scottish Churches Parliamentary
Officer

In this room in spring 1999, the Scottish Parliament reconvened after a recess of nearly 300 years.

We chose this space as the venue for our event today for this reason, that the architecture and sense of place – of this place – was linked with those first tentative steps into what a devolved legislature for Scotland would be like.

I am very much looking forward to hearing from our speakers and contributors, and from you in our discussions.

We will hear from those involved in the work of the devolution campaign and the links to the work of the Constitutional Convention.

We will hear from those involved in Church life in 1999, to help paint a picture of what the atmosphere and relationships were like in the early days of the Parliament. We will hear from thinkers and researchers on how things feel now, and what they might look like in the future.

And we will hear from contemporary practitioners, sharing their perspectives on how their activity is developed and their relationships are built.

About the SCPO

The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office – or SCPO for short – was established by the churches in Scotland in 1999, to be ready for the first elections. You'll hear more of this later.

At the time it was a physical office, with a distinct team and remit. Over the years the SCPO has adapted and evolved in relation to how the Parliament has worked.

It is no longer strictly speaking an 'office' but is more a network of fellowship and relationships, and a forum to share ideas.

Today our work is to build good relations between Scottish Churches, the Scottish and UK Parliaments and the Scottish and UK Governments.

The Churches which work together through the SCPO see this as a sign of ecumenical commitment and to enable ecumenical co-operation.

This is both an essential characteristic of the Churches' life and work together, as well as being a more effective way to relate to decision-makers.

The values the SCPO underlines includes:-

- The Churches' commitment to the common good
- The role of churches and congregations in communities.
- Prayer and pastoral support for Parliamentarians
- The Churches' multiple roles, as a prophetic voice, as a candid friend, and as a promoter of respectful dialogue and informed debate on national political issues.

Our work

The SCPO network is the current heart of our work and relationships. This group is open to anyone working for a Scottish Church or Christian organisation on parliamentary issues. A monthly meeting considers key issues on the parliamentary agenda, where information, ideas and intelligence can be shared, and contacts can be made for deepening partnership and fellowship. The network is regularly updated with information and notices relevant to their work. I'm so pleased to see so many members of the network here today. Later today we'll hear from the Rev Gethin Rhys, Policy Officer for Cytûn – Churches Together in Wales. Gethin does for the Welsh Churches what SCPO does for the Scottish Churches – and I think the contrast and comparison between our two Parliaments and nations will be very useful to challenge and inspire us for our future work.

Comment on ecumenism

We live in a time where ecumenism is not 'trendy'. It has been said to me that the 1990s were a time of ecumenical optimism.

The Swanwick Declaration of 1990 was followed by an uptick in a hopeful vision for the Church's closer working together, especially on areas of service and resourcing rather than of policy or theology.

It was in this context and culture that the SCPO – and the Welsh counterpart in Cytûn – were formed.

For one reason or another, I think it is fair to say that this spirit of optimism has not lasted to our current time.

I think I'd like to pose the question, if the moment of devolution were to happen today, would the Churches seek to or want to work together?

Is the continued existence of the SCPO something important to hold on to whilst so much else ecumenical becomes looser or less institutional?

Or is it time for the SCPO to further adapt and evolve?

And what is the right role for the Church of Scotland in supporting this work, when other Churches at a Scottish or UK level are staffing and working on their own Parliamentary agendas?

How can the Church of Scotland both convene the SCPO network but also have its own policy witness and pastoral relationship with the Parliament?

These are some of the practical issues I have to think about, and today will I hope be a chance for me to explore with you all where this work might go in the next few years.

What is your vision?

Where will we be in the next 25 years?

What would be the theme of a conference in this hall in 2049?

Space and Time

I mentioned earlier that our choice of this venue was deliberate, as the meeting point for the Parliament in 1999.

It is perhaps a remarkable connection between the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Parliament. You may have noticed the corridor outside the doors behind me – known as the Black and White corridor for the diamond floor tiles.

When the General Assembly is in session, the Black and White corridor is used for the behind-the-scenes conversations to negotiate an agreed wording of a motion or to plan some intervention in debate.

So too was the Black and White corridor used when the Parliament met here, a convenient place to slip out to, to confer or confront opponents.

If you have the chance to visit the Holyrood Parliament campus, and are able to take a tour or be accompanied behind the scenes, you'll find that they too have a Black and White corridor, a space just outside the debating chamber.

A design feature which remembers a different space.

The physical connection between the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Parliament does however go back much further than 1999.

In the late 16th and early 17th Centuries, the Scottish Parliament met a few hundred metres from where we sit, in the chamber of the Court of Session which was then situated in the central aisle of St Giles Cathedral.

Charles I – that King who had so much trouble with the English Parliament – ordered the construction of a new meeting place for the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, the result was Parliament House adjacent to St Giles. The King who sought to impose unwanted reforms on the Church of Scotland still believed that the Scottish Parliament must have a permanent home of suitable grandeur and significance. And the construction of Parliament House did still have a connection to the Church of Scotland – three manses belonging to ministers of St Giles had to be demolished to make space for it to be built. So what does this mean for us, here today?

Perhaps nothing! But if the imprint of stones and wood and glass can leave a memory on the Parliament, and on the nation and its sense of self, can there be a similar imprint in the intangible legacy of the Churches' work: the values and teaching of Jesus Christ?

How does the truth of the Gospel inform the decisions taking by today's MSPs?

How is the experience and understanding of the Church – in its many different traditions and cultures, in local communities and through international connections – influencing and inspiring all those who work in and around the Parliament?

If a Black and White floor can be reconstructed, is it possible to reconstruct a sense of public service, truthfulness, decency and creativity.

The end of our conference today we will hold a short act of worship.

This will use as a theme the four Mace Values – the words etched on to the mace in the Scottish Parliament – the ideals that we hope our politicians and all our leaders will aspire to:

- Wisdom
- Justice
- Integrity
- Compassion

This act of worship will be a thanksgiving for the journey that we have been on, and a recommitment for the future.

I invite you all to join us for this after our day of thinking and sharing.

Wisdom

Justice

Integrity

Compassion

Keynote Speech

by
Rt. Hon. Lord Wallace of Tankerness KC
Deputy First Minister of Scotland (1999-2005)



I have a vivid memory of the service held in St Andrew's & St George's Church, when the Rev. Graham Blount was commissioned as the first Parliamentary Officer of the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office (SCPO). I had been invited to attend as Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, but as I tried to find somewhere to park, I reckoned I was going to be cutting it fine to arrive in time for the start of the service. No matter, I could slip in and sit in a pew at the back. However, on arrival at the church door with about one minute to spare, I was grabbed by the minister, Andrew McLellan and told, gently but firmly, where I had to stand in the procession due to enter the sanctuary.

No one had explained to me beforehand that I had a role to play – thankfully not a speaking role and I was sufficiently familiar with Presbyterian tradition not to be daunted when it came to extending the right hand of fellowship with Graham.

Over the ensuing years, I became well acquainted with Graham and the work of the SCPO, and after standing down from the Scottish Parliament, I became the Church of Scotland's representative on the inter-denominational steering committee of the SCPO.

It was an exciting time in Scottish politics and dare I say in the relations between Church and Parliament. We were about to embark on a new venture – the Scottish Parliament which many of us had campaigned for over many years, and which the churches, through the Constitutional Convention, had not only campaigned for, but had also contributed in shaping. The individual contributions of people like Canon Kenyon Wright of the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Rev Norman Shanks from the Church of Scotland were valuable and considerable

There was a sense, if I can borrow from Paul's second Letter to the Corinthians that "everything old had passed away; and see, everything was becoming new!"

Perhaps we were carried away with the prospect of this new Parliament, but in reality, as church men and women, we were not really trailblazers.

During my time in Westminster, I, along with other MPs, received the Report of the Church and Nation Committee, and on occasions we would be lobbied by the Kirk on specific issues. Latterly, the convener of the Church & Nation Committee would come to Westminster and meet with the respective party groups and have very worthwhile discussions on current national and international issues.

But I am very conscious that in the immediate post-World War II years, the Kirk's engagement with the state of the nation had undergone a sea-change. That's not to say that Christian witness in the political life of the nation only started in 1945. But it is staggering to reflect that during the economic crises and mass unemployment of the 1930s, the General Assembly was far more pre-occupied by the size of Scotland's Catholic population and what to do about it.

It was against that background that the Kirk established a Commission under the chairmanship of Professor John Baillie. The Commission's report – "God's Will for Church and Nation" – stated,

"The Bible teaches clearly, and the truth of this teaching the Holy Spirit witnesses in every sensitive Christian conscience, that the commandments of God extend to every sphere of human action and there is no part of our life into which Christ does not desire an entrance."

The Baillie Commission's report provided a powerful wake-up call and spur to the Church of Scotland and influenced and nurtured people in all parties to engage in the political life of the nation.

Nor was it the preserve of the Church of Scotland. The strong ecumenical tide which was flowing also identified common cause among denominations in political action.

I'm sure many of us were inspired by the ideal of establishing a new Parliament in a country which already had established democratic institutions; an opportunity to remedy the shortcomings of a system which seldom found sufficient time for Scottish legislation and created a backlog of necessary reforms.

The Constitutional Convention had drafted the blueprint for the Parliament including a more proportional electoral system; and it was to the credit of the incoming Labour Government that it honoured the agreement, even if it wasn't to their political advantage – a rare example of political self-sacrifice. It is also worth recording that the new Government got off the mark. Legislation to enact a referendum was among the first Bills introduced after the 1997 election and it's worth recording that the referendum took place just over four months after the election.

I must admit that my party had opposed the two-question referendum. It was a breach of our Convention agreement and the shades of the 1979 referendum still haunted us. We couldn't let this opportunity slip through our hands.

In the event, the referendum campaign was overshadowed by the tragic death of Princess Diana, and, by agreement, the respective sides suspended the campaign until after the funeral. That left four days of campaigning before referendum day. Four manic days of debates and campaign events; and, in the event, well rewarded by positive outcomes to both questions.

In retrospect, I was wrong to be sceptical about the idea of a referendum. We spent hours in the Convention wrestling with the question as to how we might entrench the Parliament. In the event the Scottish Parliament was entrenched by a popular mandate, which may not have had strict constitutional effect, but had profound practical effect.

There then followed the Scotland Bill to work out the details. Many hours of debate – mostly constructive. And in parallel a Constitutional Steering Group, under the chairmanship of Henry McLeish, was established to consider the some of the practical workings of the new legislature, including exciting issues such as Standing Orders, but also, significantly, what values it ought to embody.

The report recommended four founding principles:

The Scottish Parliament should embody and reflect the sharing of power between the people of Scotland, the legislators and the Scottish Executive;

The Scottish Executive should be accountable to the Scottish Parliament and the Parliament and Executive should be accountable to the people of Scotland;

The Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation;

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

These principles were subsequently endorsed by the Parliament in its early days. I shall reflect later on whether they have been honoured.

With some key building blocks in place, what was needed was a building and elected members to populate it. A controversial proposal to build a new Parliament building on an old brewery site at Holyrood was brought forward and led to several years of controversy. But in the meantime, agreement was reached with the Church of Scotland that the Parliament could occupy the General Assembly building where this event is taking place today. I have memories of this Hall both as a former MSP and as a former Moderator of the General Assembly.

The election date was set for 6th May 1999.

For me the liberating feature of the 1999 Scottish election campaign was that after years of fighting elections where the constitutional issue was never far away, it was now possible to focus on issues such as education, housing, transport, health. We sought a Scottish Parliament not as an end in itself but as a means to the end of serving Scotland's people and communities better, not least through addressing the people's priorities.

In the event, the election, as predicted, did not produce a majority government, and I was quickly engaged in talks with Donald Dewar and his Labour colleagues to see if we could establish a coalition government.

Donald suggested that we should meet on the Saturday after the election, in what was then the Secretary of State's official residence, Bute House. Donald had written out 4 sides of A4 for a possible policy deal.

On the Lib Dem side, I had commissioned a colleague to distil a possible policy programme from our manifesto, and my new Scottish Parliamentary colleagues agreed the 28-page policy document when we met on the Saturday morning after the election. In the event, that formed the basis for the negotiations which then ensued.

We arranged for small groups from both parties going through the manifestos and identifying areas of common ground. Where there was divergence, these were put in square brackets to be resolved by the principal negotiating teams. I recall one meeting where Donald alighted on a particular policy on which there was no concurrence and said, "What Liberal nonsense is this?" To which I replied, "I think you'll find that comes from the Labour manifesto." In fairness, he laughed wholeheartedly.

A Programme for Government was eventually agreed and we could get down to the business of Government and Parliament. And Donald Dewar undoubtedly set the tone for the new Parliament when he spoke on the opening day in this Hall in the presence of the late Queen Elizabeth. Among a number of memorable quotes, he said,

"We are fallible. We will make mistakes. But we will never lose sight of what brought us here: the striving to do right by the people of Scotland; to respect their priorities; to better their lot; and to contribute to the commonweal."

And,

"Today there is a new voice in the land, the voice of a democratic Parliament. A voice to shape Scotland, a voice for the future."

That was the political background to the way Parliament and the politics of Scotland subsequently unfolded.

That was the political background in which the newly established Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office would work to try and influence policy and legislation from a Christian perspective. In some respects, there was an open door. Many MSPs were people of faith or had been influenced by the legacy of the Baillie Commission. The first substantive debate in the Scottish Parliament was on the subject of 'Prayers' It's still worth a read to see how seriously MSPs from all parties addressed the issue of whether Prayers should be said before plenary sessions of the Parliament. There was a strong sense that unlike the Anglican monopoly at Westminster, there should be inter-denominational, indeed multi-faith prayers. My late colleague Donald Gorrie even proposed some form of proportional representation.

The motion "That this Parliament agrees in principle for Prayers to be held on a non-denominational basis, at the start of each plenary session of the Parliament," was carried by 69 votes to 17, with 37 abstentions.

And in October 1999, Graham Blount as The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer delivered the first 'Time for Reflection.' Graham certainly echoed the sense of purpose which had driven many of us along as we embarked on this new venture:

“We pray for our Parliament, offering our faith and our vision, that this may be a place where folk can come when they have no one else to turn to, a place of listening and of healing and of hope. We pray for one another, for folk we see as friends, rivals, colleagues and opponents, aware of the pressures and the failings and the possibilities we share.”

But it was also the case that however welcoming, the Churches were not going to be accorded special privileges. One of principles enunciated by the Consultative Steering Group was that "The Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation." On that basis, the SCPO had to make its case along with others. But in fairness to Graham and his successors, not only did SCPO disseminate information about the Parliament and its work, but made cogent representations on a number of issues. One of the drawbacks, however, was if the different denominations couldn't speak with a united voice. In the first year of the Parliament a great storm was raised over the Executive's proposal to repeal what was colloquially known as section 2(a) – a measure which had been introduced by Mrs Thatcher's Government to outlaw any teaching or reference in schools to matters related to homosexuality. There was not exactly unanimity among the church voices.

Another early issue was the possible inclusion of a question on religion in the upcoming 2001 census, for which I had ministerial responsibility. In 2000, the Cabinet voted against the inclusion of a religion question in the 2001 census. It was a rare, and possibly the only occasion when we raised our hands in a vote. By a narrow majority of one, we resolved not to include a religion question with Donald Dewar commenting that as a 'cultural Presbyterian', he wasn't sure how he would answer. I was not readily persuaded that the answers would provide any meaningful information which would guide future delivery of public services. I had a very difficult time trying to justify the decision before the Equal Opportunities Committee.

Indeed, so unpersuasive was I, that I had to bring in the legislation to meet the Committee's will. That was a good example of the robust independence of the Committees.

In a Parliament where every party was a minority party, the Committees, in theory at least, could be powerful bodies, holding the Executive to account. And by giving Committees both a legislative scrutiny and an investigative role, it was thought that a sense of collegiality among members would enhance their effectiveness and authority.

Arguably, at first, it worked. In these early days, I considered the Scottish Parliament's Committee system to be a marked improvement on what I had experienced in the House of Commons.

In my experience, all committee members engaged in the process, and whilst Ministers often succeeded, nothing could be taken for granted. Very often a backbench amendment would only be withdrawn on undertakings of further consideration and discussion with the member.

That was a considerable contrast with Westminster, as I had known it.

On several occasions, I was on the receiving end of Committee members' scrutiny not least Liberal Democrat MSPs asserting their independence from the Executive. Admittedly, today, I view from a distance; but I have heard sufficient reports to suggest that in more recent times, such a spirit of Committee independence has not been as robust. Dissent from government supporting members is frowned upon. Going forward, the Committees must surely revive their robust and rigorous scrutiny of Ministers' actions and legislation, if for no other reason than it can lead to more effective legislation. Virtue signalling is not a good recipe for effective law-making.

Moreover, it is more likely that organisations such as the SCPO can have greater opportunity to shape legislation if the Committee members are open to ideas and persuasive argument, rather than be bound by tribal allegiance. Recalling those early years, there were a couple of events which did not fall within the Parliament's remit, but which had a profound effect on us all and on political debate and dialogue: The attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11 and the Gulf War of 2003. What these events particularly brought to the fore was the need for reassurance of care and inclusion and engagement with people of all faiths, especially Scotland's Muslim communities. The Scottish Executive was determined to try and provide such reassurance and engagement.

And as Deputy First Minister, I was given the role of visiting places of worship to convey that message. I recall remarking that there was a period of time when I reckoned I had visited more mosques than churches.

I think there was a greater engagement with other faiths, and if the SCPO had been established five years later, it might well have been sensible for it to be inter-faith as well as inter-denominational. Indeed years later, during the Covid pandemic, the inter-faith bonds which had been established allowed both an opportunity to feed mutual concerns into Government, as well as a resource which Government could use to disseminate information. And then in 2021, during COP 26 in Glasgow, the value of inter-faith work allowed much opportunity for common endeavour on such a crucial issue. Surely here, there is opportunity for further joint development as we look ahead to the next 25 years.

A more fundamental challenge to the role of the churches and the Church of Scotland, in particular, was highlighted – I suspect unintentionally – by the words of Donald Dewar, which I’ve already quoted: “Today there is a new voice in the land, the voice of a democratic Parliament. A voice to shape Scotland, a voice for the future.”

For many years, there was a notion that the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was the closest Scotland came to having its own Parliament. The parish-based structure meant that all parts of Scotland could be represented. There was nightly TV coverage and the Church and Nation debate could usually be guaranteed to attract much attention in the broadcast and print media. Here was a body debating – sometimes with great vigour – the key issues of their time. But now there was a much more representative body, ironically occupying the very building of the General Assembly, which understandably was attracting much more attention and for more than one week in the year.

To Kirk members, the General Assembly possibly still mattered, even matters, but its impact on the Scottish public and body politic was undoubtedly diminished. In an important respect that made the role of the SCPO even more important in ensuring the voice of faith was/is heard in the public square. But as time has gone on, that role arguably has become more important and necessary. One of the biggest changes over the years is that whilst in the early years, the domestic agenda was to the fore, there is no doubt that in for the second half or longer, the debate has been dominated again by the constitutional issue. That poses particular problems for church and faith groups. In many cases members are divided on whether Scotland should be independent or not and even whether there should be a referendum at all.

In 2014, the Church of Scotland responded to the challenge in sponsoring a ‘Respectful dialogue’ between the competing sides, and from personal experience, I can say that the debate I took part in with John Swinney under the skilled and watchful eye of the Moderator, John Chalmers, was one of the best events I participated in, during the referendum campaign. Not only was the debate respectful and didn’t descend into cliché and point scoring, but it obliged the participants to be thoughtful about the real strengths of their respective cases. But with divided views within the churches, it has been impossible to carve out a distinctive position on the issue dominating the political agenda and indeed, social media (which represents another major change in the political environment since 1999).

But here is surely a challenge and an opportunity.

The 20 year anniversary stock-taking by members of the Consultative Steering Group reflected on some of these changes and reported that, “Polarised debate prevents, in our view, proper cross-party working. We do not believe that we were naive in 1998, but we find little reason to be as optimistic on this point as we were back then. The tribalism we have seen has blunted the scrutiny function of the Parliament and has prevented, in most cases, a pluralistic approach to policy scrutiny. On broad areas such as wealth creation and climate change, there can be little that separates the parties, yet we see a reluctance among the parties to come together to present a community against the challenges of the world.”

We went on to reflect that,

“Our report envisaged that the Parliament, not just through its committees, should play a key role in the policy development process as well as scrutinising any legislation subsequently brought forward. In our view, Parliament has not yet reached its potential as a forum for policy development and debate.”

There is space in the public arena for policy initiatives, and from a church and faith perspective, there is no shortage of pressing issues to investigate and on which to develop ideas:

- Drug deaths and drug misuse;
- Provision of social care;
- Climate change;
- Tackling child poverty and energy poverty;
- Immigration and welcoming strangers in our land;
- The housing crisis and plight of the homeless;
- The overcrowding of our prisons and criminal justice issues generally;
- Addressing the demands of our health service,

To name just a few. I know from meeting people, both as a politician and a former Moderator of the General Assembly, that there is real expertise within the churches and other faiths who can make a significant contribution on these critical issues. And in spite of what a recent Logos poll may have said, my experience as Moderator was that the political parties and political leaders are willing to engage. I wouldn't want to put words into their mouths, but I suspect that many would welcome others making an informed contribution on issues which address the priorities of our communities.

So whilst we could bemoan less TV and media coverage, or a sea-change in lobbying practice, which seems to favour the professional over the voluntary, I still believe that there is an important role and an important contribution for our churches and faith communities. And it's not just an opportunity, it's surely a necessity. The exhortation of the Baillie Commission to engage in the political life of the nation is as compelling today as it was in the mid-1940s. But may I leave the final word to a former Director of the Centre for Theology & Public Issues, Professor Will Storrar. In his book, “God In Society” published in 2003, shortly before the Scottish Parliament relocated from the General Assembly Hall to its present building, Professor Storrar, played on the name ‘Holyrood’ and saw a flash of divine humour. “[T]he new Parliament,” he said, “was to be built on a comic site par excellence, the former site of a brewery bearing the name of a gallows.” He continued, “The place of Christ's Rood, his Cross, is the place where we see shockingly juxtaposed God's suffering love for humanity with the terminal violence of the powerful against the innocent. It is a holy place precisely because it is a healing place for a suffering world. Through the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit, the holy rood remains a source of hope for humanity.” He does go on to say that he would not wish the churches “to turn the Scottish Parliament into a moralising arena for political holy Willies, or a new theocracy to oppress non-Christians or non-believers.” But he did hope that there might be “the capacity to bring something of that cruciform holiness to our politics, to our people, and to our small bit of the planet.

I say ‘Amen’ to that.



Clare Flenley reads Lord Wallace's Keynote speech in his absence

Session 1

Scottish Churches and the Parliament: 25 years of change.

Dr. Alison Elliot

**Former Associate Director of the Centre for
Theology and Public Issues, New College**

Revd. Dr. Graham Blount

**Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer (1999-
2008)**





David Bradwell introduces Session 1: Scottish Churches and the Parliament



Dr Alison Elliot recalls the work of the Church of Scotland in the years leading up to Devolution.

Dr. Alison Elliot

Former Associate Director of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, New College

Twenty-five years is a long time and memories fade. But some are still vibrant.

Every time I pass a cut field, with bales of hay glowing in the evening sun, I think back to September 1997, when the Bus Party toured Scotland in the 100 hours before the devolution referendum. Our task was to persuade people to come out and vote for the future of Scotland. About a dozen of us crammed into a small mini-bus – writers, singers, academics, journalists and church people – to take our message to schools, church halls, Council chambers and barbecues – “This matters! You have a vote to decide the future of Scotland. Make sure you use it!”

The following day, the EICC sizzled with excitement as the first result came in. 80% of the voters in Clackmannanshire had voted in favour of a Parliament and the other local authorities piled in behind it. I remember walking home as the sky lightened, thinking, “We’ve done it! Scotland is now a different place!”

I had been heavily involved in the process of securing a Parliament for Scotland. I was Convener of the Church of Scotland’s Church and Nation Committee. We had prepared the ground carefully. We had scoured old reports of the Proceedings of the General Assembly and discovered that, every time the question of concentration of political power had come up, the Assembly voted to disperse it to other bodies, basically following the principle of subsidiarity.

We took this as indicating that our predecessors would be in favour of devolving power on this occasion too, and, luckily, the Assembly agreed. They also agreed to give us permission to join the various civil society fora that were campaigning for a referendum, something that our predecessors in 1979 had failed to do when devolution was last on the political agenda. It gives you a glimpse of how the Church of Scotland did politics before devolution – cautiously and carefully. It all came back to securing the authority of the General Assembly. Its Church and Nation Committee prepared reports on ‘what action the church should take in the highest interests of the people’ (its remit from 1919), covering issues including open cast mining, community development, minimum wage, international debt, the Maastricht treaty and so on. It had a wide and varied membership.

I remember the discussion in the Committee of the open cast mining report. We had a minister who had open cast mining in his parish, a member of SEPA (the Scottish Environment Protection Agency) and a shop steward from Ravenscraig, who did not take kindly to the idea of Scotland’s industrial heritage being landscaped over and prettified. As well as preparing the Assembly report, the Committee got out and about. On a regular basis, we visited Westminster and discussed our report with Scottish MPs. We touched base with the national offices of the main political parties and with other civil society organisations, like the CBI or SCVO. We chose one local authority area, such as Aberdeen or Dumfries and Galloway, and spent a day there, hosted by the presbytery and the local authority, with opportunities to see first-hand some of the issues that concerned people there. And occasionally we visited places that were relevant to our report, such as the Dalquhandy open cast mine.

Our calling card was the current report, which focussed discussion for the visit, in the hope that further correspondence would follow. The report was then presented to the Assembly, who voted on various recommendations attached to it. These ranged from proposing that congregations and presbyteries should study the report, to urging the Government to take specific action, such as supporting Jubilee 2000, or respecting the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. At times, the recommendations went backwards and forwards with passion, year after year, particularly on Trident, or on Israel Palestine, so that some Commissioners expected that there would be blood on the floor on Church and Nation Day and were disappointed when there wasn't!

The media loved this way of doing things and gave plenty of coverage to the annual debate. Between Assemblies, the Convener of the Committee, in particular, would frequently be asked for comment as political issues arose and the skill was to relate the new topic either to general Christian principles, or to questions the Assembly had already pronounced on and craft a reply from that, or from other people who had more specialised knowledge on the matter. I remember being asked for comment when the Scottish Secretary announced that they were going to return the Stone of Destiny to Scotland, which resulted in a frantic half hour of phone calls to historians and lawyers, in search of a line. All the time, you were conscious that any public comment could be challenged at the next Assembly.

The Assembly was at the heart of any political action. Generally, the Committee's agenda was determined by the political issues of the day, though occasionally a topic could be proposed from the floor of the Assembly.

Looking back on it, it was a particularly controlled and stultified way of proceeding, but it was the way of the times. The trick was to establish a corpus of positions that were taken to be the views of the church, on the basis that the General Assembly had endorsed them, and then conduct the public debate by lining them up and comparing and contrasting them with positions held by other organisations, like the STUC, the CBI or the voluntary sector, through SCVO. Very little free-flowing engagement, very few Vox Pops where anyone other than a bona fide representative or a media commentator could insert a view into the public debate. The institutional view held sway over personal opinions.

I became so adept at operating in this way that I lost touch with what my own views were! When I was Moderator, I was interviewed by Sally Magnusson, who stopped the interview at one point and commented, 'You keep telling me what the Assembly thinks, Alison. But what if there are people out there who want to know what you think, as a person of faith?' Frankly, that flummoxed me! This was a freedom that I wasn't used to and it was quite scary.

It was a strange way of doing things. In its culture, it was very Parliamentary in a Westminster kind of way and it was consistent with the idea, expressed frequently, that the Church and Nation debate was the closest Scotland got to a Parliament of its own. What passed as 'the view of the church' was the majority view of Assembly Commissioners, as it would be in the House of Commons, despite the fact that they were not representative even of church members, though there had been women in the hall since the seventies. But there was also a sleight of hand that conflated the view of the church with a true Christian position, despite the understanding within the church community that the truth often comes from the margins, not from the majority or the powerful.

This was still a time when church people prided themselves on speaking for the poor; the idea that the poor could have the opportunity to speak for themselves was rather novel. This was well before the launch of the Poverty Truth Commission or similar initiatives.

This emphasis on the church at national level, and the way in which that stifled local expression was not going unnoticed. Other people in the church had been bending their minds to how the church should shape itself for the new century, through the Commission on Review and Reform. In 2001, it produced one of these frequent reports that the Assembly is so good at preparing but not so good at implementing, the Church without Walls Report. It aimed to give the people of God the tools and the trust to shape a vision for the church in their own area. It called for a U-turn, whereby the local church dictates the agenda and is served by Presbytery and the national church offices. Local and relational were the watchwords of the report, emphasising the importance of building social capital in our congregations. At the time, 'many perceive things to be the other way round'. Of course, this change in emphasis did not preclude political action arising from a local issue, but it did take the focus away from the concerns of the Parliament as the source of a congregation's agenda for action.

So, 25 years ago, what was seen as the political voice of the Church of Scotland was living out an identity that had features of a Westminster Parliamentary system. It had no executive power, of course, but it could stage a good debate and keep political issues alive within the church. What is really surprising is the extent to which the Committee did not anticipate what was going to happen once a real Parliament, for which it was campaigning, took up residence in Edinburgh.

Who, outside the Kirk, would be interested in its views once there was a proper body there not only to debate matters, but to take action, particularly when church members were being encouraged to take action locally? The writing was on the wall on the Wednesday in May 1999 when the General Assembly had to vacate the Assembly Hall on the day of the Church and Nation debate to make way for the first sitting of the Parliament, in its temporary home, courtesy of the Church of Scotland. Relations were very civil, but it vividly marked the changing of the guard. Naturally, the Parliament was concerned to make its mark, by doing politics differently from Westminster.

The Consultative Steering Group laid out four principles to guide the Parliament's activity: power-sharing, accountability, accessibility and equal opportunities. They were keen to give a voice to people who previously had not been heard and, indeed, to reach over the carefully crafted positions of civic bodies to hear these voices.

To this end, they explored the potential of e-democracy, by using digital means of communicating directly with the public. It was now their job as Parliamentarians to identify and respond to what the people of Scotland wanted.

Gradually various bodies took on board the presence of the Parliament and the opportunities it afforded. One such organisation was the Centre for Theology and Public Issues. Its Director in 2000 was Will Storrar, and, in recognition of the coming of the Scottish Parliament, he was quick off the blocks in choosing citizenship as the defining theme of the Centre's work. He appointed the writer and journalist, Neal Ascherson, to the position of writer-in-residence, with an office in New College next door to the Parliament making it very handy for casual conversations with MSPs. These conversations confirmed the suspicion that several MSPs had about the usual suspects and aggregated opinion whose efforts would be redundant in this new landscape.

He focused on the idea of e-democracy and the Parliament's efforts to promote this. These efforts had been widely praised, with Scotland being declared 'out in front' as regards digital participation. Neal's work was central to the material presented at a CTPI conference and book entitled *Netting Citizens*, which was prescient in identifying many of the risks and opportunities presented by social media that we're aware of today in engaging the public with political issues. The distinction between empowering the citizenry and affirming civil society organisations was rearing its head.

Reading the book again, I'm struck by how the whole world looked very different in 2000. A new Parliament was only one feature that was changing how we did things. Communicating by email was still pretty novel, with its potential to disrupt relationships, as when presbytery clerks were discovered setting up email groups which subverted the centre's attempts to insist on being the channel through which parish ministers found out what was happening.

And online worshipping communities were growing up and encountering difficulties long before COVID made this mainstream. The one feature of the new arrangements that we had anticipated was the need to have a mechanism to help the churches relate to the Parliament, by setting up the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office. The SCPO was an ecumenical body and so it accommodated the views and concerns of other churches that did not have the same kinds of entrenched processes for coming to a settled view on a topic as the Church of Scotland and would not necessarily agree if they did. Opening up this ecumenical window at a time when the institutional voice of the church was being overtaken presented opportunities for the churches to embrace different ways of doing politics.

In 1990, the Scottish Churches had come together in ACTS, Action of Churches Together in Scotland, a very different body from the Scottish Churches Council, which had had an overarching governing body that could take positions on social and political matters on behalf of its members. ACTS included the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches Together model was chary about making statements on behalf of all the churches. Bishop Mario Conti was fond of saying that it was the churches that held a position, not ACTS. Its Justice and Peace, Social and Moral Issues Commission brought reps together from all the ACTS churches and had some excellent discussions about tricky questions but generally without coming to a conclusion about them. Sexual identity politics was coming to the fore then and, in that area, it was more difficult to identify common positions in the various church traditions than in matters to do with poverty or Trident or the war in Iraq.

Of course, ecumenical bodies had always prepared significant papers on contemporary issues. Their reach was often greater than that of national churches and those coming from CEC or the WCC drew on expertise that few local churches could muster. I had the privilege of preparing reports for the WCC on the role of international economic sanctions and on humanitarian intervention, sharing reflections with delegates from right across the world. Sometimes, they explored ways in which the churches came to different conclusions on political questions. At the time of the Kosovo war, CEC noticed that the views of the churches reflected the positions that their national governments took, so they brought representatives together to try to resolve this. Unsuccessfully, which goes to show the shortcomings of trying to aggregate opinion across bodies, churches and nation states.

How much the reports penetrated local church thinking is another matter, but they offered people an exciting window on issues that concerned us all. Sometimes, the reports were notable for the theological twist that they gave to contemporary debate, though probably not as often as they might have done. The Church of Norway produced a stimulating report on vulnerability just after 9/11, which had the potential to reset the international debate and subsequent war in Iraq had its message been heeded.

The churches also benefitted from the work of specialised ecumenical bodies, such as the Churches Commission on Migrants in Europe. Throughout the 90s and later, as well as preparing worship material to help people in the churches to get their minds round the problem, CCME did sterling work probing the nasty reality of migration, with hands-on work on exploring trafficking for sexual exploitation and for taking advantage of economic migrants.

This was just after the fall of the Wall in 1989 and Europe was full of vulnerable people who fell for the tales of these ruthless gangs. I heard about this through the work of the churches in Europe long before it was a political rallying call at home. Within Scotland, the churches were less inclined to set up specialist bodies on social and political issues, though Scottish Churches Housing Action kept the churches up to speed on the reality of homelessness and churches set up organisations to support asylum seekers.

Other ecumenical initiatives showed what could be done when the constraints of the institutional church were relaxed. For example, the Poverty Truth Commission was an imaginative way, not just of bringing the reality of poverty right into the heart of the churches' consciences but also of presenting these matters to Parliament. Commissioners were appointed who either had first hand experience of poverty or of how to pull the levers of power. When I was involved with it, it took on the issue of kinship carers and how they could be supported, because their situation fell between various remunerative stools. A group of us took these concerns to Holyrood, along with some terrifying Glasgow grannies, who were not ready to take No for an answer. We also visited government officials in Victoria Quay to share the stories of some of our Commissioners and so to widen the understanding of the civil servants of the traps people could fall into in trying to make ends meet.

Getting out of our committee bubble to share in some of the initiatives that the churches were introducing also led to more varied encounters with politicians. One of the heartening features of the early days of the Scottish Parliament was how often you came across an MSP at events that had not necessarily been designed for them

The Chance to Thrive initiative set out to combine local community development projects with support for new or adapted buildings and I remember attending one event that was proud to present two ministers in its line-up, a parish minister and a Government minister, both supporting the initiative.

So, opening up the churches' political engagement to an ecumenical imagination has been fruitful and has promoted a less constrained way of looking at churches' engagement in politics. In a past generation, institutional clout and consistency were strengths and the church used these qualities to bring Christian values and voices into the public debate. But times have changed and these qualities look clumsy in a digital age where social media has more influence over people's views. They are ill-suited to a world dominated more by identity politics than by justice, peace and the integrity of creation. An emphasis on the procedures of one Christian denomination is embarrassing and insular in a world of many faiths where the challenge is to humanise, as well as to spiritualise, people's world views.

Perhaps that maps out the journey we have been on since devolution and outlines the dangers and opportunities faced by the churches, as well as by the Parliament they brought into being.

Revd. Dr Graham Blount

Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer (1999-2008)

I'm grateful to SCPO and CTPI (both of which I've enjoyed working for, and with) for this chance to reminisce, and to reflect on the early years of the Scottish Parliament.

I came through by train to meet Alison Elliot for a chat about this session, and spotted David Wallace-Lockhart of the BBC's Scottish Political team sitting nearby. Picking up on a practice I developed when commuting to SCPO, I moved to sit beside him and introduced myself and the reason for my journey; I asked if he thought the Parliament had lived up to the hopes we had for it 25 years ago, and he quickly put me in my place by saying he didn't know much about these hopes as he was nine years old when the Parliament opened!

So I am going to take you to that moment in 1999 - "I know because I was there", and I want to share some selected glimpses.

It was just a few months since The Scotsman thought the appointment of "God's Lobbyist" was worthy of a front-page headline, and the Parliament was starting to meet here, in this General Assembly Hall, with the kirk as landlord ... or host ... or what?

The first Presiding Officer was a son of the manse; the Deputy First Minister was a future Moderator of the General Assembly (though we didn't know that then); The First Minister was only a "cultural Presbyterian" (who thought my role was an "interesting little job"); the "Leader of the Opposition" was pleased to claim as his middle names, the name of the minister who baptised him.

Around 10% of MSPs were Church of Scotland elders (statistically a disproportionately high number) as was the Scottish Political Editor of the Sun (a stereotype buster there!); many other MSPs - within the church or not - claimed to have had their political education through reading Church and Nation Committee reports. The Parliament's first substantive debate was (as we've heard) on prayers; the first petition it received was from Sandwick & Cunningsburgh United Free Church in Shetland; one of the first meetings I arranged with a Scottish Executive Minister was bringing representatives of several denominations to discuss land reform with the Rural Affairs Minister, who himself had been the co-author of the most recent Church & Nation report on land reform.

The first major public stramash for the Parliament was announced by the Communities Minister, a daughter of the manse, speaking not in Parliament but in Glasgow, across the road from the church of which she was an active member. This was the repeal of "clause s2a" which banned the teaching of homosexuality in schools, and provoked a bitter campaign (led by the Roman Catholic Cardinal, the Daily Record (!) and the evangelical entrepreneur who financed it); it produced a torrent of letters, many of them shocking MSPs by how abusive they were, coming from people who described themselves as Christians). Which (if any) of these glimpses are important? Which speak of a bygone day? What do they say about the churches' engagement with the Parliament? I believe they show that engagement is multi-faceted, and they are all significant, perhaps especially those that tell of the "formation" or nurture of politicians in the churches.

Some years later, Gerry Hassan wrote that “The retreat of trade unions, churches and even local government ... have decreased the settings where political talent and experience used to be identified and nurtured. These were nurseries of political learning on the job of how to be leaders, shapers and initiators”[1] (today we might say “influencers”).

And we shouldn't exaggerate that “retreat”. We have recently had two Muslim party leaders coming from a faith community background; the present First Minister is an active church member, happy to display a Good News Bible on his bookshelves in Zoom interviews; the Deputy First Minister is, conspicuously, a member of the Free Church, the next Tory leader may well be a committed Christian and if so would be the third Tory leader to be so; the next Green co-convenor might be someone trained in the Scottish Christian Youth Assembly, Labour's head of policy at Holyrood is a Christian and their national policy adviser used to work for SCPO. What does it mean to recognise all that? Should we use, nurture and/or support these church people?

Nothing I've said so far represents a “lobbying success”. We resisted the label of “God's Lobbyist”, although Robbie Dinwoodie in The Herald cautioned me that the more we resisted it, the more the media would use it, so we stopped trying.

Like the Parliament itself, SCPO emerged from the Constitutional Convention - of which the churches, together, had been an important part - with its lived themes of partnership and participation. Ironically, the groups Hassan mentions as being in “retreat” or declining position (churches, unions and local government) were at the forefront of the Convention: was that retreat/decline caused by displacement when the Parliament itself began or just coincidental? As the churches had been together in the Convention, so SCPO was ecumenical (in a broader fashion than the ecumenical body ACTS), though not inter-faith - less a conscious decision than a mark of a time when that was not thought of and there were few structures to represent other faith communities. We were quickly approached for advice by the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, and worked with them as well as helping the Scottish Inter-Faith Council come into being. Because we were ecumenical, there was little scope for lobbying on a united party line. Our model looked to the way the Conference of European Churches worked with the European institutions in Brussels and Strasbourg (which I visited, with gracious help from Alistair Hulbert, to learn my new trade).

The model focused on enabling “the church” or churches to engage with Parliament. What did that mean in practice

- Information and advice through regular briefings papers on topics and monthly updates on the topics churches told us they were interested in (so broad a range that one of the MSPs asked to receive our updates as he said they told him things no-one else told him was happening in the Parliament!)
- Using and creating opportunities for engagement, including responses to consultations, giving evidence to Parliamentary Committees, participating in Cross Party Groups (as well as initiating and staffing some of these)

[1] “Lessons in Civics” in Hassan & Barrow: Scotland After The Virus, Luath Press, 2020, at p129

- Bringing together church people on major issues (like the Scottish Churches Social Inclusion Network) to discuss issues among themselves or with government ministers, MSPs and civil servants
- Bringing the direct experience of local churches and those they worked with to bear on issues

Building relationships of trust was key to this, though it was more at national than local level; also key was just “being there” (perhaps I was overdoing this when an MSP, who had met me at the same place in the new Parliament building twice in as many days, asked if I was an architectural feature of the building).

It was less about institutional self-interest, but we did deal with some of this, eg charity law, land reform, water charges, bringing possible conflict between institutional pressure and the churches’ expressed vision. As in politics, the means (whether party or church) often becomes the end.

So that is how it was and what we did, but did it (does it) work?

For the Kirk, it took us beyond the focus on a report and getting it through the General Assembly. Back in 1986, Bruce Millan told a CTPI conference that as a politician he would like to see more ongoing engagement between the kirk and politicians, beyond just sending out a report[2]. SCPO at least did that.

It fitted well with the spirit or ethos of time (of the CSG principles and the heady early days, with what Lindsay Paterson later called the “almost utopian rhetoric” that made the Parliament as a “forum for civil society, especially its articulate professional segments”[3]). Hazel MacIver’s PhD thesis saw SCPO as part of a “proliferation of alliances and networks of interest groups that sprung up”, noting that, before the parliament, there were a “lot less Parliamentary Officers and researchers around to form these”[4]. So we were not alone, but different. For example, I think I was the only Parliamentary Officer who was told not speak to the media (more because of the institutional restraints of Presbyterianism than the risks of supping with the devil). In that at least, a different approach was taken by the Catholic Church who, after an initial appointment sympathetic to the SCPO ethos was quickly set aside, changed to a more reactive lobbying model with a narrower agenda and operating with Catholic MSPs.

Some researchers have reported politicians saying this approach was more effective; should we have got “more real”? Like the Parliament, SCPO was challenged by the “Section 2a” debate - a polarized debate with high media interest and institutional stances divided (not just between different churches but within the Kirk, where two national committees were on opposing sides of the argument). We were criticized for having a low profile in the debate when we should have been leading the charge to “keep the clause”.

[2] “Church and State in Scotland Today”, in Elliot & Forrester: *The Scottish Churches and The Political Process Today*, CTPI, 1986, at p18

[3] “Civil Society and the Parliament”, in Jeffery & Mitchell (eds): *The Scottish Parliament 199-2009*”, Hansard Society, 2009, at p115 and 117

[4] H MacIver: *The Institutional Effects of the Scottish Parliament upon Organised Interests*, unpublished PhD thesis, Aberdeen, 2004

Gerry Hassan says that this debate killed any illusion that civic Scotland was a “land awash with rich complex institutions and opinions just waiting to contribute to the new politics”.

Yet the independent consultant’s 5-year report on SCPO affirmed our way of working (I particularly cherished the assertion of one party leader to the consultant that “it was the churches that kept poverty and debt on the Parliament’s agenda”, and wished it was true).

There was also an emerging institutional recognition by the Scottish Executive/Government of individuals from the churches who had developed expertise, independent of parties on topics and who were invited to help take issues forward (eg Alison Elliot chairing a land reform commission, Martin Johnstone taking the work of Poverty Truth Commissions into government strategy, and my own appointment as chair of the Fuel Poverty Forum. Recognition or co-option – probably a bit of both.

There were positive signs, yet after ten years, I knew SCPO needed a re-think (and left hoping that would enable this to happen, thanking CTPI for the next step that enabled this for me personally).

To judge the effectiveness of anything, you need to ask what they are trying to do?

Were we there to hold on to a status that has gone? To be critically supportive godparents to the new Parliament (a model we did play about with)? To speak truth to power (Nathan to King David “you are that man” – a line I never got to use to any First Minister) to bring God’s word to bear on the state of the nation (Moses to Pharaoh “let my people go”) to express the passionate commitment to the well-being of all Scotland’s people that we inherit from the man whose statue is just outside (John Knox), to seek first God’s kingdom, to witness to justice and peace, to enable the voice of the voiceless?

All, except keeping hold of status, are things we tried to do, but what do they mean in the context of polarized debate and tribal politics between parties whose dominance we and the CSG hugely underestimated)? Let me edge towards that by offering a brief case-study of a highly polarized debate, reflected in three referenda on devolution or independence. For the first devolution referendum in 1979, the Church and Nation Committee issued to the kirk’s ministers a letter highlighting the Church’s consistent support over many years for some form of devolved Assembly. This was to be read to congregations on the Sunday before the vote, urging them to vote “yes”.

A hastily convened Commission of Assembly decided that the letter should not be read and the church should be neutral. A debacle sadly illustrating that, for some at least, Assembly deliverances on such matters we all right so long as they didn’t really matter. Ten years later, the Committee produced (and the Assembly received) a report on devolution and sovereignty rich in theology and influential in being later substantially embodied in the Constitutional Convention’s “Claim of Right”. That made the Church’s engagement in the Constitutional Convention and in the “Yes” campaign for the 1998 referendum much more rooted and grounded, without directly telling people how to vote. It enabled the Church to respond quickly to that positive vote and take the lead in establishing SCPO.

A kirk-organised colloquium in 2007 marked the anniversary of the Treaty of Union and was a contribution to the “national conversation” Alex Salmond had called for.

In the lead-up to the 2014 referendum, there was “Imagining Scotland’s Future”, a brave attempt to re-frame the debate about independence by making the primary focus on what kind of future people wanted. It engaged many in the church and maybe fewer beyond (though I remember a lively discussion in Smithycroft Secondary School, next to Barlinnie). Yet neither the process nor the report it produced achieved much media profile, and when the crunch vote approached, the church’s voice was calling for “respectful dialogue” and offering the “morning-after pill” of a service of reconciliation, a kind of “neutrality” that assumed any talk of independence was destructive.

So, in light of these glimpses, of what Hassan and Barrow call the “demise of the kirk as a major force in public discourse” and of the church’s own increasingly inward focus, where do we go from here?

Lesley Orr has suggested that the church can still be “a background but vibrant factor for many people ... and a major force for transformation”[5]. I think that we can indeed be that, and – as part of this – there may be scope for a potential think-tank model (along the lines of Theos, Ekklesia and others) alongside creative presence with Parliament, beyond reactive lobbying – maybe CTPI working with the churches could develop this? We should also be informing and nurturing Christians with a calling as politicians. We can do this, beyond the quandaries of institutions, find a language and practice of Christian faith and hope that resonates beyond our diminished numbers.

[5] “Religion and (Beyond) Belief in Scotland” in Hassan & Barrow: Scotland The Brave, Luath Press, 2019, at p240-241

Right: Dr Alison Elliot and Revd. Dr Graham Blount stand in New College's 'Black and White Corridor'



Below: Dr Alison Elliot



Revd. Dr Graham Blount reflects on the early years of SCPO following Devolution



Session 2

**University of Edinburgh School of
Divinity Panel Session**

**Chaired by
Stephen Noon**



**“Religious communities and politics in
Scotland – where are we now and what
might the future look like?”**

Panellists:

**Dr. Steven Sutcliffe,
Senior Lecturer in the Study of Religion**



**Prof. Mona Siddiqui
Professor of Islamic and Interreligious
Studies,**

**Dr. Alex Chow
Senior Lecturer in Theology and World
Christianity**





Dr Alex Chow discusses the topic of migration in relation to Scottish politics



Dr Steven Sutcliffe considers the most recent census data on religion in Scotland

Session 3

Quick Fire Talks

The work of church Parliamentary Officers in devolved nations.



Sarah Komashko
Parliamentary Engagement
Officer (Scotland), Quakers in
Britain



Major. David Cavanagh
Assistant Secretary for
Scotland, The Salvation
Army



Anthony Horan
Director of the Catholic
Parliamentary Office



Revd. Gethin Rhys
Policy Officer, Cytûn: Eglwysi
Ynghyd yng / Churches
Together in Wales

Sarah Komashko - The Scottish Parliamentary Work of Quakers in Scotland

Hello everyone. As has been said, my name is Sarah Komashko, and I've been the Parliamentary Engagement Officer of Quakers in Britain for about 14 months now. I have been asked to share with you today a few reflections around Quakers in Scotland's engagement with the Scottish Parliament. I'm going to briefly discuss some of the history of this engagement, and highlight some key events and learnings we've had over that time.

Wider Quaker political involvement

For those who are not familiar with Quakers, they are a faith group committed to searching for truth and working for equality and peace, believing that each person can have direct experience of the Spirit of God and that something of God is expressed in everyone's life. These beliefs underpin Quakers' political engagement, which is rooted in the Quaker testimonies of peace, truth, equality, simplicity and sustainability.

As one example of that global political engagement, Quakers maintain houses in Geneva and New York to work with diplomats in the UN, multilateral organisations, and NGOs. They often use a method of 'quiet diplomacy', bringing people from different sides together in a neutral space, centring the time on listening deeply, speaking truthfully, and finding a common way forward. Quakers in Britain similarly have a team of staff to engage with representatives at Westminster, and support Quakers to do the same at a local level.

The development of Quakers in Scotland's work with the Scottish Parliament

Quakers in Scotland have their own part to play, and have been engaging with Holyrood parliamentarians since the Scottish Parliament was set up, initially primarily through the SCPO. In 2011, there began to be a feeling that there was a place for a distinctively Quaker voice communicating with the Scottish Parliament. In particular, the Quakers in Scotland sent in some consultation responses, in relation to same sex marriage and other issues of interest to the group. In 2012, a Parliamentary Liaison Function Group was set up, composed of volunteers who sought to do advocacy on Trident, marriage equality, and criminal justice. The focus of the group was both to do advocacy themselves, but also to provide materials which could be used at a local level by local meetings and individual Quakers.

The group of volunteers felt they could increase effectiveness by having a staff member, and since 2015 there has been the part-time role of Parliamentary Engagement Officer working with the group, now known as the Parliament Engagement Working Group. My PEO role is supported by the wider resources of Quakers in Britain and connected in to the work that my colleagues there do at a UK level. The work of the Parliament Engagement Working Group and the Parliamentary Engagement Officer draws upon Quakers' longstanding and deeply held belief that there is 'that of God in everyone', with everyone having an individual voice which should be heard. Priorities of the group are discerned by the Scotland-wide body of General Meeting for Scotland, and have ebbed and flowed over the years depending on opportunities for influencing and sharing Quaker perspectives.

Examples of our work with the Scottish Parliament

Let me share some examples of how this work has manifested over the years.

An early concern was militarisation in society. This work began with a single Quaker, David Turner's concern, and grew into a significant project. For two years, we sent all MSPs white peace poppies, together with some information about the white poppy initiative. Some of these were then worn in Parliament. This initiative evolved into a partnership with Forces Watch, to oppose the military presence in Scottish schools. A petition lodged by former Parliamentary Engagement Officer Mairi Campbell-Jack gained over a thousand signatures, and Quakers in Scotland were asked to give evidence to the Petitions Committee about the topic. This led to the Committee publishing a report recommending a Children's Rights Impact Assessment on military visits to schools, as well as recommending that careers information provided to young people should reflect the challenges and risks involved in an armed forces career, so that they are fully informed.

Our partnering with other groups is a theme and, we believe, a strength of our approach. Over the years, as relevant to the work we're engaging in at the time, we've also partnered with Edinburgh Peace and Justice Centre and Campaign Against the Arms Trade on peace issues, Together Scotland in relation to issues relevant to children's rights, and Christian Aid and Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, also known as SCCS, in relation to our climate justice priority.

This allows us to show a broader range of support for our aims, and to bring our Quaker influence into the joint work. For example, soon after I started, I attended a meeting with SCCS and the Scottish Government in relation to carbon capture and negative emissions technologies. At first, the relevance of Quakers to the meeting wasn't clear, as there were a lot of technology specialists in the room, but actually SCCS found our presence very helpful in giving a voice for truth and honesty in relation to the feasibility of these unproven technologies.

Another example of our work with others was the 'Wangari's Trees' performance and peace education exhibition which we held last September, together with Scottish Mediation who carry out peer mediation projects in some Scottish schools. This built on meetings with MSPs to discuss 'Peace at the Heart', a report produced by the peace education team at Quakers in Britain in 2023. 'Wangari's Trees' was a performance by primary 5 pupils from Glasgow, some of whom hadn't even been to Edinburgh before. It was an example of their classroom use of peace education to consider questions of global impact and empathy – as well as creativity in coming up with songs and drama to tell the story of Wangari Muta Maathai.

The performance and subsequent exhibition were well-attended by MSPs and we received many signatures for our motion calling for more consistent funding of peace education in Scottish schools. One final case study of our engagement that I wanted to share was of an opportunity for an event that came on the back of a time for reflection given to the Scottish Parliament by Quaker attender Lesley Morrison in April 2023. Lesley spoke on the theme of 'Are we being good ancestors?'

This was well-received by MSPs, and led to Christine Grahame MSP sponsoring an event in March 2024 on the subject of health and climate, looking at the 'win-win' solutions which could improve our national health, and also benefit the planet. Given the ongoing political concern around health and its cost in budgetary terms, this was a really effective way of highlighting our concern around climate change.

At the event, Quakers and friends, including a young person, spoke to several MSPs, including Maree Todd, Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport. Several more MSPs participated in individual discussions with us after the meeting about the issues we'd highlighted. After Lesley's positive experience, we've helped other Quakers submit pieces for Time for Reflection - though with the assurance that not every one need lead to an event like this!

Engagement strategies

Reflecting on these experiences, I wanted to finish up by briefly sharing some of the lessons we've learned about effective engagement. First, collaboration is important. Working with other organisations amplifies our voice, allows us to share expertise, and brings our Quaker perspective to broader discussions. Collaboration within our own community has been important too: drawing on knowledge and longstanding commitment among Scottish Friends has been vital for the group while also, we hope, strengthening a sense of unity and shared purpose for Quakers in Scotland.

Secondly, local connections are really helpful for MSP engagement. We've found that when local Quakers reach out to their MSPs, particularly if they've otherwise been in correspondence with them, it significantly increases interest in our events and messages and opens doors which would otherwise be closed.

Finally, continuity and follow-up are crucial. One piece of work (such as on militarism in schools) can link to or support others (like peace education and raising questions about military carbon emissions). At the health and climate event, our information pack and request for follow-up discussions led to individual meetings extending our impact beyond just those attending the events.

Conclusion / looking forward

So in closing, as we look to the future, we see continued opportunities for speaking truth on climate emergency mitigation and calling for climate justice, exploring themes of integrity in public life, and promoting peace education. While politics can often seem gloomy, Quakers find hope in our personal connections with MSPs. We seek to live faithfully and influence those around us, including politicians, bit by bit. As the Scottish Parliament moves into its next 25 years, we will continue our engagement, guided by the Quaker belief in 'that of God in everyone' and our vision of a peaceful and sustainable future built on just relationships.

Anthony Horan - 'A Christian Witness in Contemporary Scottish Politics: Challenges and Opportunities'

Ladies and gentleman, it is an honour to be here with you today.

On 12th May 1999, when the Scottish Parliament was enjoying its first session after the Scottish people voted overwhelmingly for devolution [and here in this very room], I was most likely sitting university exams, hoping to become a lawyer; either that or I was in the university union bar celebrating exam completion. Whatever I was doing, my mind was not on the Scottish Parliament, nor indeed on politics at all.

I did become a lawyer, and enjoyed that profession for many years, but it started to become clear that God had other plans.

And so, on 25th July 2016 I walked through the door of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland to start a new chapter in my life: as Director of the Catholic Parliamentary Office.

In truth, I had never been an avid follower of politics. My interest could be described as 'Politics Lite'. I was driven more by my interest in the law and, increasingly, a passion for my faith. Which is perhaps why I saw the opportunity to work for the Catholic Bishops' Conference as one too good to miss; and I guessed that I would soon learn all about the wheres and whatfors of politics. And I did. At least I think I have!

And, sad political geek that I now am, I find it fascinating. But it is also challenging.

There are people who say that religion, Christianity included, should be kept out of politics and public life. That it should be kept private. A 2023 poll of 53 MSPs would suggest that calls to privatise religion have, to some extent, been successful. The poll found that while 55% of MSPs belonged to a specific religion or faith, only 23% said that religion has a very important role in their life. And just 21% said that their faith influences how they make decisions in the Scottish Parliament. It can be challenging to engage day-to-day in the world of politics as a person of faith.

There are recent examples of politicians who have been on the wrong end of flak for daring to speak openly and honestly about their beliefs and values that they hold dear and that are in keeping with their Christian faith. Publicly mocked and vilified for being honest about what they believe in. And we have witnessed this in both Holyrood and Westminster. All of this adds to the anxiety of Christian politicians being open about their beliefs and suggests that life is just easier if you don't share it. But surely a privatised religion is no use? If we want a truly diverse, tolerant, and democratic politics that is open to all people, all perspectives and viewpoints, and in which honest and robust debate takes place on the most important issues affecting our nation, then there must be a place for faith in it.

As Christians we proclaim the Good News! If it truly is good news, then surely Christians, Christian politicians included, should be desperate to share it? For the common good if nothing else! Nobody should be cowed or coerced into privatising their beliefs

Another challenge is the decreasing number of people of religion in Scottish society. You will have likely seen the recent census results for Scotland which reveal a smidgen over half of the population consider themselves to be of 'no religion'. 43% said they belong to a religious group. Of course, there are significant question marks over the use of the word 'belong' in the census which is open to interpretation and may cause confusion. Nonetheless, the results are sobering. When we look around us today, lack of hope and despair are not found wanting, especially among our young people. Perhaps there is a link between this and the apparent decline of religion in Scotland and the wider UK, I don't know.

But there is a lot of uncertainty and uneasiness in the world. War, conflict, pandemics, poverty, addiction, environmental concerns, inequalities, job worries; these are just a few examples highlighting the challenging world in which we live. We have witnessed society becoming more fragmented and factional, dividing itself. And politicians are often caught in the crossfire, between competing interests.

But in these challenges does there lie opportunity? I think we need to strive more consciously to find common ground that unites us all. To touch a visceral nerve. A key ingredient that none of us can do without. Perhaps that key ingredient is our dignity.

Human dignity cuts across all aspects of life, including the social and political. There is no policy or legislation that fails to have an impact on human dignity and the Scottish Parliament is grappling with these day and daily, including right now. Consider the devastating recent announcement regarding drugs deaths; another year another unwanted record.

And ongoing attempts to tackle poverty. And also, the Parliament's consideration of the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill. There may be divergence of opinion in this room on the Bill, but what we can surely agree on is that human dignity has to be at the centre of the debate. If there is one thing I hope and pray for as we wave goodbye to one quarter century of the Scottish Parliament and welcome a new one, it is that over the next 25 years we will work hard to put human dignity at the centre of our social and political discourse; that human dignity, as the thread that runs through all of us without exception, will be the prism through which all future legislation and policy is consciously debated. Not a nod and a wink in its direction, but a genuine effort to explore and understand human dignity and to ensure that it is given the respect it deserves.

I have worked with many wonderful people over the last eight years. Every day I find myself working with Christians from all traditions and backgrounds. And people of other faiths too, and some of no faith. We meet regularly, we share information, ideas, we dialogue, sometimes we find opportunities for joint working. All working towards the common good. And a lot of this work is facilitated and supported by the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office through committed people like David Bradwell, and Chloe Clemmons and Irene MacKinnon before him, and with whom I also had the pleasure of working.

Through devolution, churches and other faith groups have, in many ways, been invited to engage more regularly and more locally in dialogue on various aspects of social and political life in Scotland. And this is all to the good.

And the pandemic, whilst our first thought must always be for those who lost their lives and those they left behind, it did bring faith communities closer together in a new way, as we grappled with the crisis and supported the establishment of a Scottish Government Faith & Belief Team, which still meets regularly and is a key point of contact between faith communities and the government. The interconnectedness between faith communities, the government and politicians is arguably better than it has ever been. The infrastructure is there. We just need to make the most of it.

The mace of the Scottish Parliament is constructed of Scottish silver with an inlaid band of gold panned from Scottish rivers. The gold band is intended to symbolise the marriage of the Parliament, the land, and the people.

The words "Wisdom, Justice, Compassion, Integrity" are woven into thistles at the head of the mace to represent the aspirations of the Scottish people for the Members of their Parliament.

Wisdom: is the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment; the quality of being wise.

Justice: is just behaviour or treatment

Compassion: is sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others

Integrity: is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness.

These are noble principles and serve as an important guide for our nation. And the reason these principles are noble, and very important, is...human dignity.

For without it, they would not be necessary. For example, what point justice if there is no human dignity? It would be wonderful if the next 25 years was to bear the hallmark of a quarter century centred, aided by our witness, on the human person and our dignity as a son or daughter of God. We may be ministers, priests, social carers, volunteers, politicians, activists, lobbyists, lay faithful, parents, grandparents, and so on, but fundamentally we are witnesses. Witnesses to our faith.

Pope Francis said this to young people on courageous witness (and it is relevant to us too):

"Remain steadfast in the journey of faith, with firm hope in the Lord. This is the secret of our journey! He gives us the courage to swim against the tide. Pay attention to go against the current; this is good for the heart, but we need courage to swim against the tide. Jesus gives us this courage! There are no difficulties, trials or misunderstandings to fear, provided we remain united to God as branches to the vine, provided we do not lose our friendship with him, provided we make ever more room for him in our lives.... With him we can do great things; he will give us the joy of being his disciples, his witnesses."

It's important that we don't shy away from a Christian witness in the world. We aren't trying to force our beliefs on others. It's not coercion. It is honesty. And it is responsible citizenship.

So let's share our joy, our hope, our love. Let people see what it is like to be a follower of Christ, including parliamentarians, and let's do so without compromising or privatising aspects of our faith.

We are called to convince others, politicians included, to aim for something higher. To give people meaning, something to live for. Not just here in the present, but for eternity. And by looking to the ultimate goal in the future, we can do great things here in the present.

I have been immensely blessed to have met and worked with many wonderful people from other churches and other faiths in my work as parliamentary officer for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland. It gives me great hope that, by continuing to work together, we can make things better going forward. Continuing to work tirelessly to respect, protect, and promote the dignity of the human being...every human being.

Putting human dignity front and centre of social and political discourse for the next 25 years and beyond.

Thank you.

Major David Cavanagh- The Work of Church Parliamentary Officers in Devolved Nations: The Salvation Army in Scotland

Good afternoon! I am grateful to the organisers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to speak this afternoon, and I am grateful to you for staying to listen as we head towards the end of a long day in which there have been so many ideas and so much information to absorb! For the last four years, I have served as the Assistant Secretary in the Scotland Office, which takes care (amongst other things) of The Salvation Army's engagement with the public arena in Scotland, and in particular the Scottish Parliament and Government^[1] and of our ecumenical and interfaith relationships at national level in Scotland, where the conversations are usually about what the churches and faith movements want to say and do in the public square.

The Scotland Office was actually established some years before devolution. Back in 1990, in a rather different "union" to that of 1707, what was then the Scotland Territory was absorbed into the present UK & Ireland Territory. It was, however, recognised that Scotland is, in important respects, "another country" with a distinctive history leading to significant differences in the legal system, in education, and more generally, in a culture deeply shaped by the historic influence of the "Kirk" and its close involvement in Scottish life ever since the 1707 Act of Union and the dissolution of the Scottish Parliament at that time.

The advent of devolution has strengthened the distinctive character of Scotland over the past twenty-five years. The Scottish Parliament was granted wide-ranging powers, and it has made significant use of them, introducing a series of legislative measures which have diverged in important respects from the those of Westminster. As a Parliamentary Officer for The Salvation Army, my task, as I understand it, is to speak in the public arena, preferably together with other Christian churches (and to a lesser extent, other faith movements), to further the gospel and its vision of a society in which truth, integrity, justice, compassion, and mercy reign.

Although The Salvation Army is not an established or national church, I think we could be described as a "public" church. You probably know that The Salvation Army had its origins in the inner-city slums of Victorian England, and from its very beginnings adopted a "social gospel", addressing issues of deprivation and poverty. William Booth, the founder of The Salvation Army together with his wife Catherine, spoke of having "a gospel for both worlds", by which he meant the present world and the world of eternity. The Salvation Army is still known today for its "practical Christianity".

Every so often, I stand on nearby Princes Street to sell the weekly "War Cry" magazine, and people often tell me that they never pass by The Salvation Army without donating because of the support we gave a grandparent during the War, or because of the support that we gave a relative when they were experiencing homelessness or struggling with alcohol or other substance addictions.

[1] In the early years of devolution, the term used tended to be "Scottish executive", but the shift to "Scottish government" now seems well-established.

So. The Salvation Army has a long-standing, deep, and broad engagement with civil society. The Salvation Army in the UK has also recently adopted and adapted the “marks of mission”[2], meaning that reconciliation and social justice, together with care for creation, have been added to our traditional evangelical and Wesleyan hallmarks of saving souls, growing saints, and serving suffering humanity.

The extent of our engagement with civil society is illustrated by the campaigns and consultations we’ve run over recent years. You will probably not be surprised if I tell you that in the last four years The Salvation Army has produced two major reports on homelessness in Scotland. You probably will not be surprised to hear that over recent weeks I have spent considerable time working with colleagues to think about how The Salvation Army would respond to the latest drug-related death figures (released last week), and to the alcohol-specific death figures (due next week) and to the housing and homelessness figures (due later in September).

You might be a little more surprised to hear that since 2020, The Salvation Army in Scotland has responded to consultations on proposed legislation on a wide range of issues, including: safety for sex workers (2020), assisted dying (2021), a social care system (2021, and again this year during the committee stage of the proposed bill), Protect Duty (2021), the circular economy (2022), domestic violence (2022), alcohol minimum unit pricing (2023), heat in buildings (2023), PVG fees (2024) and palliative care (2024)[3].

In addition to all that, we have also, together with other faith movements, campaigned for asylum seekers to be granted free public transport, supported the call for the government to guarantee minimum levels of pay for workers in social care, and engaged substantially with the proposed “Right to Recovery” bill.

In my experience, the opportunities and challenges of political engagement are often really just the two sides of the same coin. I want to briefly mention three...

First, the issue of capacity. The Scotland Office is a very small team – two officers and a secretarial employee. This means that we usually have to work in partnership with other teams to get anything done. When we’re developing a response to a consultation, for instance, we are usually relying on other teams to provide raw materials and drafts which we then collate, redraft and present for final approval before publication. That requires a high level of coordination, it’s often a challenge – and, I suspect, one which other Parliamentary Officers know only too well! At the same time, this means that we are working across all kinds of departmental boundaries and breaking down operational silos, and that furthers a framework of integrated mission.

Second, in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith society such as modern Scotland, it is a challenge to find a framework and idiom that will effectively communicate the relevance of the Christian faith and its contribution to the common good.

[2] Defined as: sharing the good news; nurturing disciples of Jesus; serving others without discrimination; seeking justice and reconciliation; and caring for creation.

[3] All these responses can be found at [The Scotland Office | The Salvation Army](#).

Rowan Williams has described this as faith “experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment”, suggesting that it is a “witness to the gospel’s capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment”. The opportunity is that this experiment “may uncover aspects of the deposit of belief hitherto unexamined”[4], and so offer new insights which broaden and deepen our understanding of the gospel.

The danger, by contrast, is that an uncritical adoption of contemporary frameworks and patterns may instead dilute our grasp of the gospel and weaken its relevance and impact to reflection on what actually constitutes “the welfare of the city”[5].

Finally, there is the search for a common understanding amongst the churches. At several points today, there have been appeals to the need for “a Christian voice”: some comments have asked if the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office might be that voice and in his volume on Christian mission in Scotland[6], Liam Fraser has expressed the hope that the Scottish Christian Forum might be able to act in this capacity.

I have to say that, at this particular moment in time, I think that is a mirage. The reality is that there is a plurality of Christian voices. While the Christian churches agree on broad principles, it seems to be more and more the case that we have different views on how these apply to cultural and social issues: for instance, we all agree that human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are therefore endowed with an inalienable worth and dignity that should be respected and protected – but we differ on how that principle applies to the question of assisted suicide: some churches believe that assisted deaths perforce violate the dignity of human life, other churches believe that dignity demands that people be free to choose to end their lives to avoid awful suffering and pain.

The danger here is that the voice of the Christian churches no longer gives a clear call and has less impact: if the trumpet give an uncertain sound...although I am not convinced that rank and file church members always paid much attention to the institutional “clarion call” (let alone members of the general public!).

The opportunity is that, because we recognise one another as brothers and sisters in Christ who share a common identity and are bound together at a level far deeper than our differing views, we can model “good disagreement” – and I increasingly think that is perhaps the most valuable contribution we can make in a society where debate is often highly polarised and in which politics is often, as we have heard at various points today, characterised by tribalism.

[4] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. xiv [5] Jeremiah 29:7 (NRSV). [6] Liam Fraser, *Christian Mission in Contemporary Scotland* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 2021)

Revd. Gethin Rhys - 'Reflections from a Welsh perspective'

Thank you so much for the invitation to a really fascinating day today. I am pleased to be able to be part of the ongoing co-working between Scotland and Wales which Graham Blount described to us from the early years of devolution.

I am not going to attempt to replicate our day's consideration of 25 years of Scottish devolution by compressing 25 years of Welsh devolution into ten minutes. Rather, I simply want to reflect one significant similarity between our experiences, one difference (although we may in practice have ended up in a similar place) and point to an elephant in the room.

Firstly, the similarity. In both nations, effective Christian or faith civic engagement begins from people being active Christians or persons of faith (as Alex Chow and David have both already illustrated). Those who work in foodbanks soon start to ask, 'why are people hungry?' Those who welcome visitors to warm hubs soon ask 'why are people cold?' Those who host refugees in their homes soon advocate for a Nation of Sanctuary – a policy which began with Cytûn and since 2021 has been the Welsh Government's own aspiration for Wales. As Mona said, Christians and people of faith have real influence when we are not self-serving.

Secondly, the difference – Unlike the Church of Scotland here, Wales has no single established or even dominant church. The Church in Wales was disestablished in 1920, and even prior to 1920 it was not numerically dominant.

Although now the largest single denomination in Wales, it contains only a minority of practising Christians in Wales. Therefore, the decision not to have prayers at the beginning of sessions was a relatively straightforward one (no vote on the floor of the Assembly required) – and the first Llywydd (Presiding Officer), a devout member of the Church in Wales himself, extended this to not allowing religious acts on any part of the Assembly estate. However, from the beginning an exception was made for a Christmas carol 'concert', which was a service (with readings and prayers) in all but name. Subsequent Presiding Officers relaxed this rule, and Muslim, Christian and other worship events have been held in the public rooms of the Senedd for many years now.

There is also a quiet room on the public side of the estate, used for prayer by a number of faiths. A more recent development has been the institution of formal chaplaincy provision by the Senedd Commission, with currently unpaid but officially appointed Christian, Muslim and Humanist chaplains, and the facility to signpost to others. This arose from the work of my predecessors, especially Revd Aled Edwards, who in effect acted as a chaplain, especially during the tumultuous first year of devolution in Wales, and again following the tragic suicide of Welsh Government Minister Carl Sargeant.

Nonetheless, it took some time for the Senedd Commission to shift that original commitment to a secular institution, meaning no visible religious presence, to being a secular institution in the sense of being open to all religions and beliefs. After 25 years, I think we have got there!

Faith groups have always had a voice in the Senedd and Welsh Government. A government-led churches' forum was established in 2000 and after 9/11 this became the Faith Communities Forum, which has continued to meet regularly ever since. However, there has been a hiatus since September 2023 due to the Welsh Government receiving legal advice that the Forum must, on equality grounds, include non-faith groups such as the Humanists as well. This has been unanimously opposed by the faith communities – after all, Welsh Government maintains an LGBTQI+ Forum without straight representatives and a Race Forum without white representatives.

9/11 led also to the foundation of the Interfaith Council for Wales, originally intertwined with Cytûn but since early 2023 entirely independent of Cytûn, with no government funding and purely voluntary led. This change has given the Council a new lease of life, with its 21st anniversary event heavily oversubscribed, and no fewer than three Welsh Ministers present. The Council has a formal representative role as part of the Welsh Government's Third Sector Partnership Council (a requirement of the Government of Wales Act), where Religion is one of 25 areas of third sector representation. I act as the Lead Representative for Religion, elected by the Inter-faith Council.

Despite these institutional differences, however, perhaps the contemporary reality is very similar to Scotland. In both nations, at the most recent census a majority of the population have declared that they have no religion. Not surprisingly, this has led to a lack of religious literacy amongst civil servants, who often need to be guided through even the most basic understanding of religious institutions. This lack of religious literacy may lead in turn to fear of the religion (fear of the unknown) and a consequent desire to regulate, for example, Sunday Schools and other children's work, or volunteers in church youth work. I wonder whether a similar phenomenon lay behind the Logos research we heard about earlier indicating that a majority of people of faith in Scotland felt discriminated against on grounds of faith.

That said, as in Scotland, religious people are heavily over-represented amongst Members of the Senedd (no surprise given the first point I made – one response to being an active Christian or person of faith is to want to not just ask questions but seek elected office) and this aspect of engagement remains overwhelmingly positive.

Then thirdly, there is an elephant in the room.

We have nodded to it occasionally, so we know it's there, but we have not really wanted to discuss it. That is the climate and nature crises.

In Wales, we have the Well-Being of Future Generations Act, requiring all public bodies to bear in mind the interests of future (unborn) generations when making decisions. I cannot help feeling that from the perspective of those future generations much of our discussion today will seem like fiddling around the edges. After all, failing to tackle this crisis is for people of faith, surely not just suicidal folly (that is true for all humanity), it is blasphemy. In another 25 years' time – only one generation away – the Senedd building could well be literally underwater.

So if a similar conference convenes then, what will those present feel about our agenda today, and how we responded to this elephant? Thank you.



David Bradwell and Dr Robyn Knight join Revd. Gethin Rhys, Major David Cavanagh, Sarah Komashko and Anthony Horan (left to right) in the 'Black and White Corridor'



Left: Rev. Gethin Rhys challenges the conference to address the 'elephant in the room' - the climate and nature crisis



Right: Anthony Horan reflects on his work as Director of the Catholic Parliamentary Office

Worship

Ecumenical Service of thanksgiving and recommitment to the work of the Christian Churches in Scottish Politics

Led by The Very Revd. Sally Foster Fulton
UK and Global Church Ambassador
Christian Aid.



Litany of the Scottish Mace

Wisdom

‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.....’ Ps 111.10

Integrity

‘The integrity of the upright guides them.....’ Pr.11.3

Justice

‘What does the Lord require of you but to do justice.....’ Micah 6:8

Compassion

‘As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion.....Col 3.12’

A Man's A Man for A' That

Robert Burns

Sung by Kirsti Wilson

Accompanied by Colin Renwick

Is there for honest Poverty
That hings his head, an' a' that;
The coward-slave, we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a' that!
For a' that, an' a' that.
Our toils obscure an' a' that,
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The Man's the gowd for a' that.
What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin grey, an' a' that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine;
A Man's a Man for a' that:
For a' that, and a' that,
Their tinsel show, an' a' that;
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that.
Ye see yon birkie ca'd a lord,
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that,
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a coof for a' that.
For a' that, an' a' that,
His ribband, star, an' a' that,
The man o' independent mind,
He looks an' laughs at a' that.
A Prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, an' a' that!
But an honest man's aboon his might –
Guid faith, he mauna fa' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
Their dignities, an' a' that,
The pith o' Sense an' pride o' Worth
Are higher rank than a' that.
Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a' that,
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth
Shall bear the gree an' a' that.
For a' that, an' a' that,
It's comin yet for a' that,
That Man to Man the world o'er
Shall brithers be for a' that.