

The week at Westminster



The UK Parliament is very new, so new in fact that the Queen's Speech has still to be heard which it will be this coming week with all the pomp and ceremony of the [State Opening of Parliament](#).

There is not enough room to seat all 650 MPs at the same time but senior members of the government have places and Her Majesty's Official Opposition have theirs on the opposite side of the despatch box. The 56 SNP MPs elected at the beginning of the month now form the third largest political group in the House of Commons and they apparently tried to muscle their way into the Labour seats when Parliament convened last Monday, including trying to displace veteran Labour MP Dennis Skinner from the position which he has made his own for the length of his 45 year parliamentary career.

According to [The Guardian](#) the Father of the House Gerald Kaufman thought this behaviour reprehensible and he was moved to brand all the SNP group of MPS 'goons'.

[listen to 'Father of the House, Sir Gerald Kaufman, on the SNP' on audioBoom](#)

Four out of five of our Edinburgh MPs are also brand new and still getting their feet under their respective desks. Parliament first met last Monday when they went to Westminster to get their bearings and have instruction on parliamentary rules. We asked all five Edinburgh MPs what they thought of Gerald Kaufman's comments.



Ian Murray MP for Edinburgh South is the only Labour MP in Scotland and he has been returned to Westminster for his second term. He has just been appointed as Shadow Secretary of

State for Scotland, and could be described as an 'old lag' in comparison with the four SNP representatives. Murray told The Edinburgh Reporter what he thought about the SNP group's actions: "I've found their behaviour slightly embarrassing. Many of the procedures at Parliament are in place to facilitate the smooth running of the place and ensure MPs, staff and members if the public are safe. I'm sure their constituents will reflect on whether they are in parliament to represent their constituents or to play silly games and juvenile stunts. Part of the problem is that they are being egged on by some of the more established figures in the SNP who have been MPs for some time.

"In terms of seating it's a totally childish and futile argument from the SNP. There are no strict rules written down except the protocols and established precedents that are emphasised by Erskine May (the parliamentary procedures bible). Basically, the normal procedure would be that the third party sits below the gangway on the three benches above the front. The Lib Dems sat there for decades with more seats than the SNP. However, seniority is an established rule at parliament and Dennis Skinner and the "father of the house" should not be forced out of a precedent that they have set to sit on the first row below the gangway. I can't see why the SNP would not just allow him to sit there. It's one seat from rows and rows but they have chosen this issue to "shake up" Westminster. I'd advise that they would be better to get on with their jobs than sitting in the chamber for hours upon hours when it is closed to "claim seats". I would be using those hours for constituency work if I were them.

"Lastly, we even had the veteran SNP MP Peter Wishart trying to dislodge the leader of the opposition from the opposition despatch box during the swearing in ceremony and for the election of speaker. These childish antics must stop as they demean us all, bring the trust in politicians even further down in the public's eye and don't give a very good first impression. If they want to change the rules they can do so through the normal channels.

"All workplaces operate with mutual respect and abiding by the rules – parliament should be no different."



Michelle Thomson is the new SNP MP for Edinburgh West. She told The Edinburgh Reporter: "Seating arrangements at Westminster are done by convention rather than rule. The SNP have been confirmed as the third party and, as such the convention suggests that our group should sit where the last third party were during 2005-2010 (LibDems).

"Our chief whip Mike Weir asked for a meeting with the Labour Group to discuss seating and they refused. We in the SNP group think it important that this is sorted and believe it will be soon.

"As for Kaufman, I can understand that at his age he is resistant to any change. We do not want to upset anyone, but cannot see the rationale that the SNP should be required to sit at the back against previous precedent – and I would suggest that it is precedent that Kaufman is commenting on. He cannot have it both ways."

You can see the layout of the House of Commons in this video here:

In the council chambers in Edinburgh the SNP and Labour councillors sit along the length of the chamber in separate groups but side by side to denote their coalition. The Conservatives who form the largest single opposition group are seated at the north end of the chamber and the remaining groups are seated at the other end. But then this is a big enough room to seat all 58 at once!

Just before Westminster reconvened last week the Scottish National Party claimed that its 56-strong group of MPs would be the real and effective opposition to the Tories – in contrast to what it described as a 'leaderless' Labour Party, which in their view had failed to develop a strong alternative to Tory policy in a range of areas.

SNP Westminster Leader Angus Robertson MP said:

"For the sake of people in Scotland and across the UK, it is

vital that there is a strong and effective opposition to the Tory Government at Westminster – and that is a responsibility the SNP are ready and willing to discharge. We will work in partnership with the Scottish Government and Members of the Scottish Parliament, and are prepared to reach out across party lines at Westminster.

“Indeed, I believe that the SNP will form the real opposition to the Tories. Labour are leaderless at Westminster and mired in a leadership crisis in Scotland, but the issue is deeper than that.”

The SNP group has secured its first Westminster debate which will take place next Thursday 28 May. The debate will centre on Trident safety and will take place during the first week of the new parliament.

The SNP hope that debate titled Safety at HM Naval Base Clyde will allow them to press the UK government on recent revelations concerning the safety of Trident nuclear weapons at Faslane naval base divulged by a former submariner William McNeilly who was detained at Edinburgh Airport earlier this week.

Commenting, SNP Foreign Affairs spokesperson Alex Salmond MP said: “This is the SNP in action – standing up for Scotland in the first week of Parliament.

“The SNP will continue to keep the pressure on the government until we are satisfied that not only have they have investigated Mr. McNeilly’s claims thoroughly and have acted on the findings but that those findings are put into the public domain.

“Trident is a key issue for people in Scotland. It is bad enough that Scotland is forced to house these weapons of mass destruction but these alleged breaches of security are deeply worrying – there must be absolutely no complacency.”

SNP will chair the Energy & Climate Change and the Scotland Select Committees.

Commenting on the news Chief Whip Mike Weir MP said: "I'm delighted that the SNP has secured the convener-ships of these two very important committees following our record-win of 56 seats in the general election.

"Both the Energy and Climate Change select committee, and Scottish Affairs select committee, are especially important to Scotland in this parliament.

"We will be seeing one of the major bills coming forward in the Scotland Bill on more powers for Scotland, and of course the Energy and Climate Change committee is of particular importance with our oil and gas sector and renewables industry."

Other matters to be discussed during this Parliament will be set out in the Queen's Speech but the House of Commons Library researchers for Members of the new Parliament in 2015 produced this briefing :



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