

# Presiding Officer on parade

**The Presiding Officer of The Scottish Parliament, Alison Johnstone, MSP, is on an official trip in the US and Canada, and part of that is to attend the 25th anniversary Tartan Day Parade.**

She is accompanied by two MSPs, Colette Stevenson and Finlay Carson, forming up a cross-party delegation of Scottish parliamentary politicians all here to learn what they can from other legislatures.

She is speaking at several events over the weekend, extending a warm welcome to all Americans or the Scottish diaspora to come and visit the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. She will also march the parade route on Saturday along with the other Members of the Scottish Parliament carrying The Scottish Parliament banner.

During our conversation on Friday morning, we talked about the new proposed ticketing system which is to be introduced at Holyrood in the wake of protests and disruption by some of the protesters in the public gallery. We asked her about the need for this.

We also touched on the Judicial Review of the UK Government's use of its powers under S.35 of the Scotland Act. While it is the Presiding Officer's duty to direct the proceedings in the Chamber, it is of course not her job to take any political stance.

A lot of parliamentary time was spent on the Gender

Recognition Reform Bill which was passed before Christmas, but then the UK Government invoked its powers under Section 35 of the Scotland Act to prevent the bill being passed along for Royal Assent. This was the first time that the power had ever been used.

Ms Johnston said: “It is a process that exists. There is provision under the Scotland Act 1998 for the UK Government where it believes that a bill may have an impact on a reserved matter, and Section 35 enables them to prevent a bill of the Scottish Parliament going forward for Royal Assent. Normally I would write to His Majesty after a bill has been passed by The Scottish Parliament but in this instance that won’t be happening because Section 35 means that the bill is now stopped at this point.

“The Scottish Government are pursuing judicial review at the moment and certainly it would not be appropriate for me to comment any further, but I think that what is really important is that both parliaments continue to communicate effectively so that we can ensure that we’re making the most of our opportunities to scrutinise legislation and to undertake our duties in the most effective way possible. It is important that I don’t involve myself in any policy discussions, but these are matters of process.”

*The Presiding Officer [@POScotParl](#) is on a visit to the US and Canada and spoke to us in the latest episode of our podcast about her visit, the need for a ticketing system at Holyrood and then she spoke to us about the S35 judicial review initiated by [@HumzaYousaf](#) this week [pic.twitter.com/prCUxjpdR0](https://pic.twitter.com/prCUxjpdR0)*

– Edinburgh Reporter (@EdinReporter) [April 14, 2023](#)

# The US Trip

She talked more freely about the trip to the US and its importance. She said: "I'm here with a delegation from the Scottish Parliament, I have two MSP colleagues accompanying me Colette Stevenson from the SNP and Finlay Carson, of the Conservatives. They too are visiting organisations that are of interest to them in their work, but we are showing very much our support for Scots, across the globe, we're promoting the Scottish Parliament and our work. And we're building on the many important ties that there are between us in The Scottish Parliament, and those who are situated across the globe. And we're meeting many important partners."

I asked if Ms Johnstone thought that people here with Scottish heritage follow what's happening in the Scottish Parliament quite closely.

Alison replied: "Certainly, some of them do. I'm aware of that from conversations. There are people who clearly tune in to the website and to Parliament TV and are quite up on what's happening back in Scotland, and there are others who want to learn more, and we've got a really good opportunity to do that while we're here."

As to the whole trip it is packed with a hectic schedule. She said: "I think there will never be a dull moment, I think it's really important that we make the most of the opportunities we have when we travel. So our days are very well scheduled. So afternoon, I'm attending an event at Bryant Park, which is related to Tartan Week.

"I'm speaking there, I had an opportunity to address the St. Andrew's Society of New York last night on behalf of the parliament. And then this afternoon, we go on to have a

meeting with United Nations Women on issues of equal representation in politics.

“UN women have made significant progress in ensuring that women’s voices are heard across the world in all sorts of ways. And that ties in with the work we’ve done in the parliament on the [gender sensitive audit](#).

It’s all too easy for members of the public to think that this trip is just a bit of a jolly but Ms Johnstone agreed that this is not the case.

Alison explained: “These trips really do have a purpose. Parliament hasn’t been to Tartan Week since 2019. This is the 25th anniversary and I think it’s important that we mark that and that we are involved, and that we show our determination to maintain and enhance the links we have. When we travel we have always a very busy programme of events, and we return to Scotland with ideas that we’ve learned from other parliamentarians. And we’ll be doing that in Ottawa, and Quebec too.

“It’s really important that we don’t always assume that the way we do everything, is the best way, that we’re prepared to look at listen and learn, and that we go home with new ideas. And also we have an opportunity to share the work we’ve been doing. Because I know other legislatures are always keen to hear from us.”

One of the things which is to happen in The Scottish Parliament is that they are having to introduce a kind of ticketing system to try and stop all the interruptions from the public gallery. There were five suspensions of business at the last FMQs.

The Presiding Officer said: “I think one interruption is one interruption too many. The visitor code of conduct that we’ve used since the parliament was reestablished has made it clear that it’s not appropriate to disrupt or engage. It’s a meeting

in public, it's not a public meeting. The overwhelming majority of people who attend the parliament are really keen to see their elected representatives at work, scrutinising legislation, developing policy, putting questions to the government.

“And unfortunately, when that is disrupted, it has an impact on business and, you know, potentially even on the amount of business that we can get through. The parliament really prides itself on its openness and accessibility. We want everyone in Scotland to be able to come to their parliament, it is their parliament. So there's a lot of work on always to engage and develop these relationships. So when you have to put barriers in the way it is beyond frustrating. I think it is highly regrettable, but we have had so many disruptions in recent weeks that we've come to the conclusion that we must act more stringently, to see what we can do to ensure that those who seek to come to parliament to disrupt the business are prevented from doing so.”

There will be a ticketing system and telephones and other mobile devices will have to be handed in before visitors access the public gallery.

The Presiding Officer continued: “A couple of the measures that we've introduced, because a lot of this footage is being shared on social media. Regrettably, we've had to introduce lockers for storage of mobile devices. Previously up to this point, we wouldn't have imagined that someone would come in and think we'll film a protest in the gallery. Unfortunately, that's what's happening. So that's one way.

“We've not had to take such measures up until now, but we're also asking for identification too so that we have records, so that we can contact those who seek to disrupt our business in this way.

“It is just really important that parliamentarians have

optimal opportunities to put questions to the government, and when government ministers are answering that they have ample opportunity to do so too. And that becomes very difficult when there's disruption in the gallery.

"It's undoubtedly difficult for all parliamentarians, and this is what is so frustrating about it. Parliamentarians are seeking to develop policy, to question policy decisions to put these questions to the government, so it's vital that we get back to a situation where this isn't a frequent occurrence."

I asked the former Scottish Green MSP what she is doing to offset the carbon impact of the trip.

She replied: "Well, I try all the time to live as sustainably as I can, and that is with regards to, what I might eat what I might buy how I might travel. Obviously, we've travelled economy, as you would expect, so all of that has an impact on minimising our emissions. The parliament is committed to looking at its emissions overall, that is very much part of the corporate plan. That's something we discuss as a corporate body too, and we all have a part to play. And I think it's essential too that sometimes we do leave our own parliaments and travel outwith. Obviously, we've revolutionised the way we work and we we can now meet people from across the globe online. But there's something still to be said early March about making relationships and meeting people and that has to happen at times."

The Presiding Officer and her two parliamentary colleagues are travelling on to Ottawa and Quebec after the New York weekend.



Alison Johnstone Presiding Officer of The Scottish Parliament  
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