

PoliMonitor Briefing:

Inside Holyrood: How MSPs exert influence in the Scottish Parliament



Image by John Seb Barker via Flickr

Scottish politics faces a turning point in 2026. The elections on May 7th will decide the future of how Holyrood operates, and will bring with it a significant realignment of influence.

On the surface, the upcoming election indicates continuity: the Scottish National Party (SNP), aided by the divide in the unionist side of the vote, is likely to maintain control of the Scottish Parliament as they consistently lead in [polls](#) across both the regional and constituency vote. John Swinney should therefore return as First Minister and Labour, the Conservatives, and Reform UK are unlikely to be able to prevent this.

However, beneath the surface, the elections will shift long-standing political structures. Firstly, even if the SNP hold on to power, Holyrood will see a raft of new faces introduced. A third of Members of Scottish Parliament (MSPs) are set to stand down, many of them from the SNP. Since Reform UK are set to make significant inroads into Scottish politics, it is possible that as much as half of the new Parliament may have never sat as MSPs before.

What's more, though the party in charge will likely remain firm, the political landscape beneath their feet is constantly shifting.

Seat projections across a variety of polls highlight the scale of this change. The Conservatives, currently the official opposition party, are likely to have their seat share cut in half, to be replaced by Reform UK as the leading party of the right and, potentially, the new Opposition. The Greens and Liberal Democrats could also expand their seat share.

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The entrenchment of multi-party politics means that influence at Holyrood is increasingly exercised beyond headline moments. For those working in politics, understanding this shift and how it plays out in practice will be crucial. It will raise pertinent questions: How do MSPs hold the ruling party to account? Where are they exercising their influence? What are parties doing to establish their place in the agenda?

PoliMonitor is here to help. We have analysed parliamentary data to understand how MSPs work in practice. We examined Parliamentary Questions and Spoken Contributions in the Holyrood Chamber to research which MSPs exerted their influence, and where, in 2025.

How the data was collected

Our data was drawn directly from the Scottish Parliament website, which details all Parliamentary Questions and chamber speeches made by MSPs. Across both categories, we recorded all contributions from MSPs from 1st January 2025 to 31st December 2025, taking note of their party in December 2025.

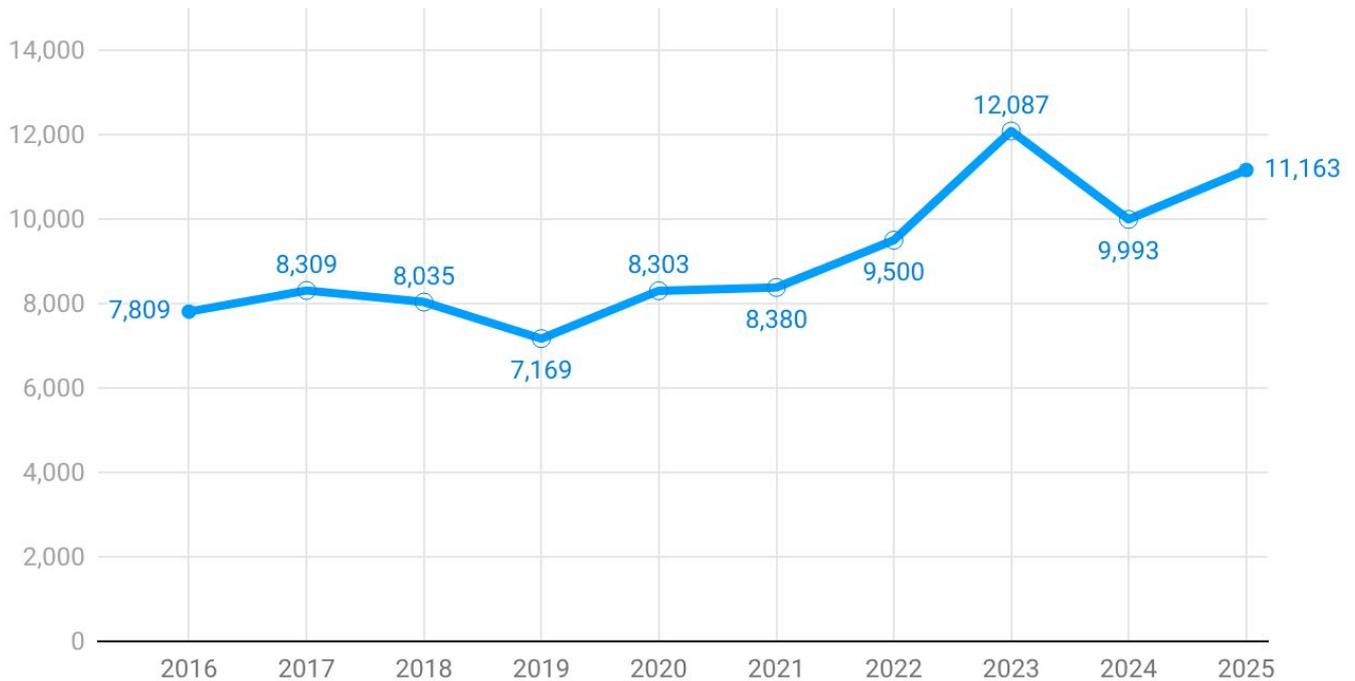
For [Parliamentary Questions](#), we included questions across all categories. Unlike in Westminster (where MPs direct Written Questions to a specific department), Parliamentary Questions in Holyrood comprise all tabled questions, including First Minister, Portfolio and Topical Questions. On the Scottish Parliament website, date range searches include questions that were answered and tabled during the selected period. As a result of this, we checked the record of each MSP to ensure any questions tabled in late 2024 and answered in early 2025 were not included in the research. Because of this, the figures appear lower in this research than the figure that first appears when you use the website.

For [spoken contributions](#), we included all Chamber business, but excluded Committees. As our focus is the Chamber, where legislation is debated and agreed, committee activity was excluded to avoid skewing the findings.

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Number of Parliamentary Questions Tabled/Answered in Each Calendar Year Since 2016 in the Scottish Parliament



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Parliamentary Questions

Sky News Deputy Political Editor Sam Coates’ [piece](#) on Written Questions at the start of this year made waves across Westminster, revealing that the number of Written Questions (WQs) asked in 2025 in the Commons was nearly double that of 2024. The article featured quotes from government figures who claimed that MPs were artificially ramping up the number of questions they asked by using AI.

PoliMonitor’s [last research](#) in this area, published in September 2025, noted that new MPs such as Ben Obese-Jecty, Edward Morello, and Rupert Lowe stood out with their seemingly relentless approach to tabling WQs; each submitting over one thousand during their first year in Parliament. The figures gave a sense of the approach taken by the 2024 intake of newly elected MPs: with speaking time limited and personal brands yet to be developed, tabling a barrage of Written Questions allowed MPs to heighten pressure on issues relevant to their constituencies, and showcase to voters the work they had been undertaking.

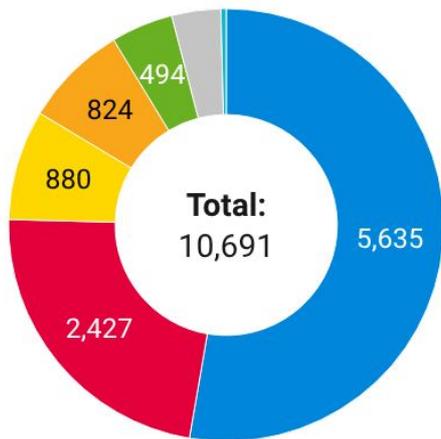
Conversely, Holyrood is yet to witness this trend. Though the number of Parliamentary Questions tabled each calendar year has increased since the last election in 2021, the stark rise seen in Westminster has not been mirrored in Holyrood.

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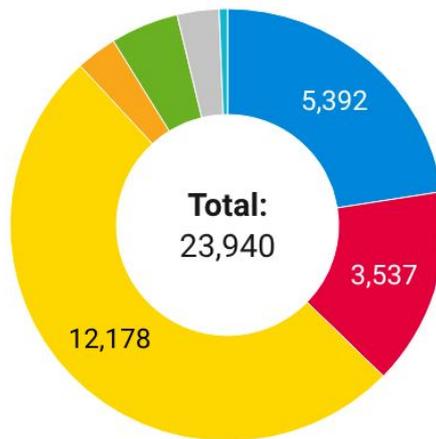
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Parliamentary Activity for MSPs in 2025

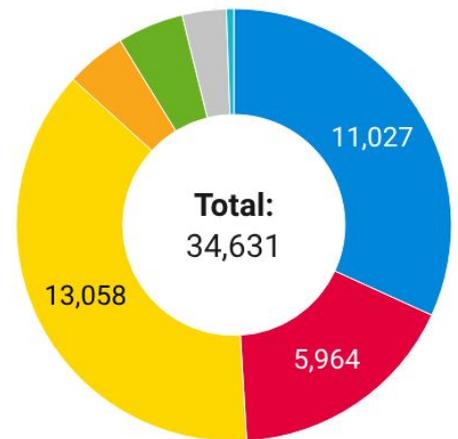
■ Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party
 ■ Scottish Labour
 ■ Scottish National Party
 ■ Scottish Liberal Democrats
 ■ Scottish Green Party
 ■ Independent
 ■ Reform UK



Parliamentary Questions



Spoken Contributions
(Excluding Presiding Officers)



Total (Excluding Spoken Contributions from Presiding Officers)

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If the data in London reflects Parliament’s upheaval in 2024, in Scotland it is indicative of enduring party dynamics.

The Scottish Conservatives have been the official opposition in Scotland since 2016, following a sharp decline in support for Labour. Therefore, it should come as little surprise that they asked the most Parliamentary Questions in 2025, accumulating 5,635 out of a total 10,691. In second place; Scottish Labour, who asked 2,427 questions, followed by the SNP in third place with 880.

Proportionally, both the Conservatives and Labour account for a significantly higher share of Parliamentary Questions than their seat share would suggest. The Conservatives asked 53% of all questions tabled in 2025, despite only representing 22% of MSPs, with 12 of their 28 MSPs asking more than 100 Questions across 2025. Labour meanwhile, hold 16% of the seat share and asked 23% of all questions.

Opposition dominance in this regard is to be expected. More than a third of SNP MSPs hold government positions, limiting their role in tabling Parliamentary Questions. Of the MSPs to ask zero questions, 23 of the 24 (the exception being Presiding Officer Alison Johnstone) were SNP Ministers.

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There were no SNP MSPs who submitted over 100 Parliamentary Questions in 2025; Kenneth Gibson was their most active, submitting 54 questions in total - the 47th most overall.

However, quite *how* the Conservatives delivered their Parliamentary Questions is worth noting. Out of their 5,635 questions, 2,678 were submitted by just two individuals: Stephen Kerr and Douglas Lumsden.

Lumsden has attracted significant media and political scrutiny for his use of Parliamentary Questions. In January 2025, he submitted 803 Parliamentary Questions, facing accusations of using AI to “[bombard](#)” the Government with questions on frivolous topics. Curiously, Lumsden did not sustain this rapid pace: although he tabled 99 questions in February and 89 in March, he did not table more than 50 throughout the rest of the year.

The tally drew attention to the vast costs Parliamentary Questions can bring, with [The National](#) reporting that each question costs £138.07 to answer and three hours and forty minutes of civil servant time, meaning Lumsden’s tranche of questions in January could have cost the taxpayer more than £100,000. Some questions were criticised publicly as offering limited policy value, including queries on the output of the Scottish Parliament’s beehives, further intensifying scrutiny.

Removing the contributions of Kerr and Lumsden, who together tabled more than a quarter of all Parliamentary Questions last year, the rest of the Tory cohort still outperformed their share in Parliament, delivering more than a third of all other questions tabled.

This concentration of Parliamentary Questions is notable given that both Kerr and Lumsden also rank among the Conservative MSPs with the highest number of spoken contributions.

In Kerr’s case, the focus on accountability appears partly rooted in his broader critique of how the Scottish Parliament scrutinises legislation and Ministers. In recent months, Kerr has published a variety of articles and interviews decrying the state of the Scottish Parliament, particularly the lack of scrutiny given to Ministers over legislation and the overly scripted nature of question sessions in the Chamber.

Across the other opposition parties, Parliamentary Questions use is fairly consistent, though with notable diversions in personnel. Five of the ten most active MSPs for Parliamentary Questions were Labour MSPs, including Jackie Baillie - their Deputy Leader. Anas Sarwar is notably absent, having asked just 36. For the Scottish Labour Leader, it appears that impact stems from carefully timed interventions, rather than relentless scrutiny.

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This contrasts starkly with Liberal Democrat leader Alex Cole-Hamilton, who asked 301 Parliamentary Questions last year. Cole-Hamilton’s role as the party’s spokesperson on Health, Social Care and Drugs policy requires a more procedural approach to scrutiny, and his questions reflected the need to hone in on specific areas of health policy, as well as the political reality of only having five MSPs to hold the Government to account.

It is in the average number of Parliamentary Questions asked that we can observe their importance for opposition parties to provide scrutiny. Finishing in last place; the SNP with an average of just 15 questions tabled. Conversely, the Scottish Greens’ seven MSPs averaged 71 Parliamentary Questions last year, Labour 116, the Liberal Democrats 165, and the Conservatives 201. Above all, this data demonstrates that, as Scottish politics threatens to undergo a significant restructuring, especially among those holding the Government to account, Parliamentary Questions will mark a key battleground.

Parliamentary Activity for MSPs in 2025

	Party	Parliamentary Questions	Spoken Contributions (Excluding Presiding Officers)	▼ Total (Excluding Spoken Contributions from Presiding Officers)
1	Scottish National Party	880	12,178	13,058
2	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	5,635	5,392	11,027
3	Scottish Labour	2,427	3,537	5,964
4	Scottish Green Party	494	1,211	1,705
5	Scottish Liberal Democrats	824	729	1,553
6	Independent	389	746	1,135
7	Reform UK	42	147	189

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PoliMonitor reached out to several of the MSPs with the highest rates of activity, and asked them to explain how they approach parliamentary activity in their own words.

Stephen Kerr MSP



“Scrutiny is the job of an MSP, no matter what the party. Parliamentary questions are not simply a way of criticising the government, they are essential to ensuring that taxpayer money is spent appropriately and that public services operate with the highest possible standards. Questions are a way of opening up government and getting that assurance, but perhaps more importantly, a democratic culture is ensured by open questioning. It changes the way that people in Government operate, knowing that the important decisions they are taking and taxpayers money that they are spending may be subject to questions.

My approach is to question as much as possible and on as wide a range of subjects as possible. All the questions I and my team have submitted over this term have been pertinent and serious and I hope that they have in some way contributed to the openness and effectiveness of government in Scotland.”

Martin Whitfield MSP



“Scrutiny is one of the most important duties of any MSP, particularly after nearly two decades of the same Government. Written Questions and Chamber contributions are essential tools to hold Ministers to account, challenge complacency, and ensure transparency.

My approach has always been to use every parliamentary tool available to press the Government where progress has stalled, uncover facts on behalf of constituents, and ensure their voices are heard. This is about standing up for communities across Scotland and making sure the Government delivers on its promises.”

Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP



“I’m actually surprised to have been recognised in this way. I am only doing my job in serving the residents of my community to the best of my ability. It isn’t a chore, it’s a privilege.”

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Spoken Contributions

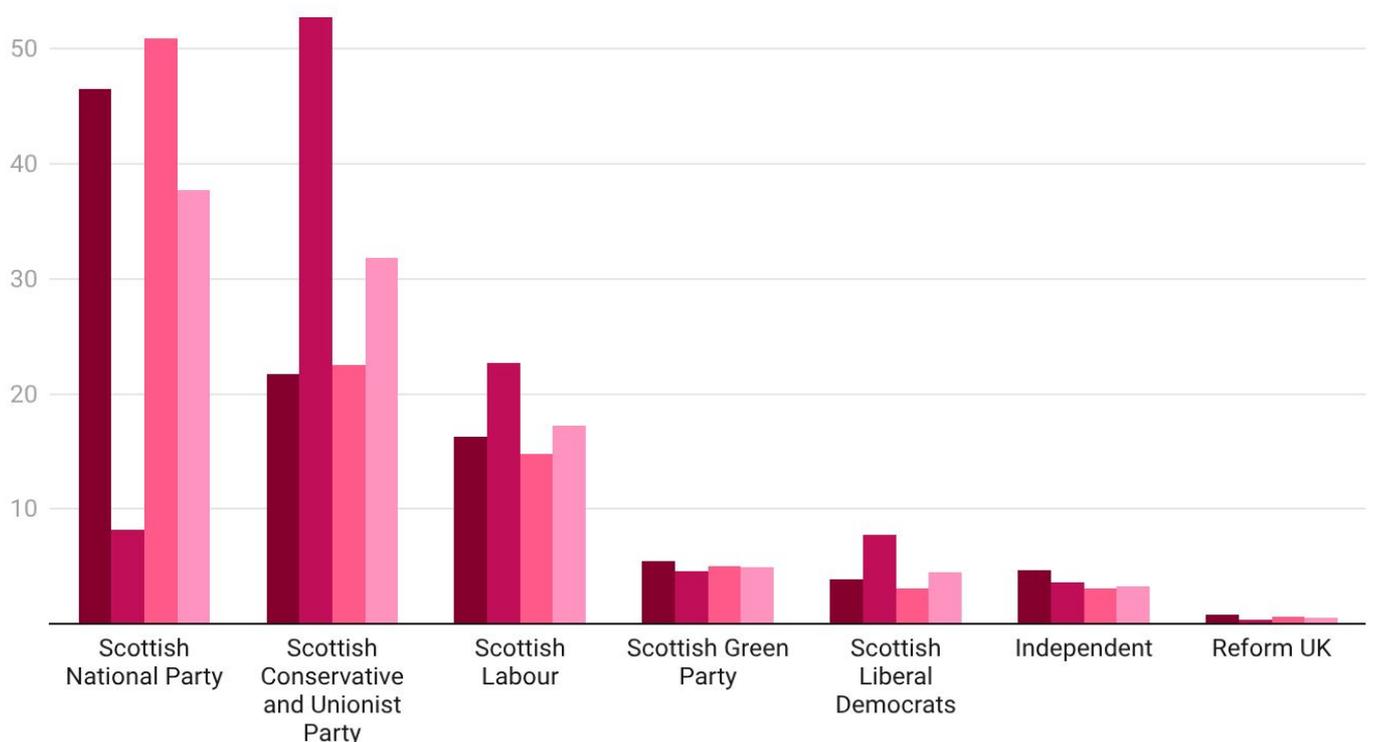
Across speeches in the Chamber, one pattern is clear: the Government dominates speaking time.

On one hand, this is born from political reality. The SNP controls the Holyrood agenda, and it is their Ministers who answer questions from all parties. As such, it should be no surprise that 51% of speeches made in the Chamber (when excluding Presiding Officers) were delivered by their MSPs.

Most striking is the degree to which speaking time closely mirrored the overall composition of the Parliament. As the table below shows, each party’s contributions closely matched their proportion of seats. This would suggest that, for those looking to articulate their position in the Holyrood chamber following the election, the party makeup is a neat indicator of how frequently voices will be heard.

Proportional Parliamentary Activity by Party

■ % of Seats in Scottish Parliament ■ % of Parliamentary Questions ■ % of Spoken Contributions (Excluding Presiding Officers) ■ % of Total (Excluding Spoken Contributions from Presiding Officers)



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Such a strong alignment with the overall makeup of Holyrood necessitates a greater focus on the individual level, to look at who across government and opposition are making their voices heard.

In this regard, it should come as no surprise that First Minister John Swinney leads all MSPs in spoken contributions by some distance, speaking more than twice as much as the second most active MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care Neil Gray. Swinney's prominence in the Chamber is largely driven by weekly First Minister's Question Time, which gives him a regular speaking role unmatched by most other Ministers.

Swinney's dominance in speeches mirrors Westminster. Data from the House of Commons Enquiry Service illustrates that from July 2024 to August 2025, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer spoke the third most of any MP in the Commons Chamber. The Prime Minister came after Leader of the House Lucy Powell and DUP MP Jim Shannon respectively. Before the September reshuffle, Powell undertook the mammoth task of Business of the House, while regular watchers of Parliament will know Shannon appears in virtually every debate.

The prevalence of SNP Ministers among the most active speakers reflects their role in Holyrood. Rather than asking Parliamentary Questions to draw out responses, their role is to provide visible accountability and explanation.

Perhaps, then, it shouldn't be surprising that most scrutinised Ministers are those covering the most significant briefs. Second and third in terms of spoken contributions for the SNP are Neil Gray and Kate Forbes, the Cabinet Secretaries for Health and the Economy respectively.

From the Opposition, two Conservative MSPs were particularly notable: Shadow Minister for Employment and Investment Stephen Kerr and the party's former leader Douglas Ross.

The extent of Kerr's activity goes well beyond his brief for employment and investment, with his contributions spanning a range of debates on topics including education and health. So too does the work of Ross who, now without a government role, has shown himself keen to challenge the Government across a range of policy areas.

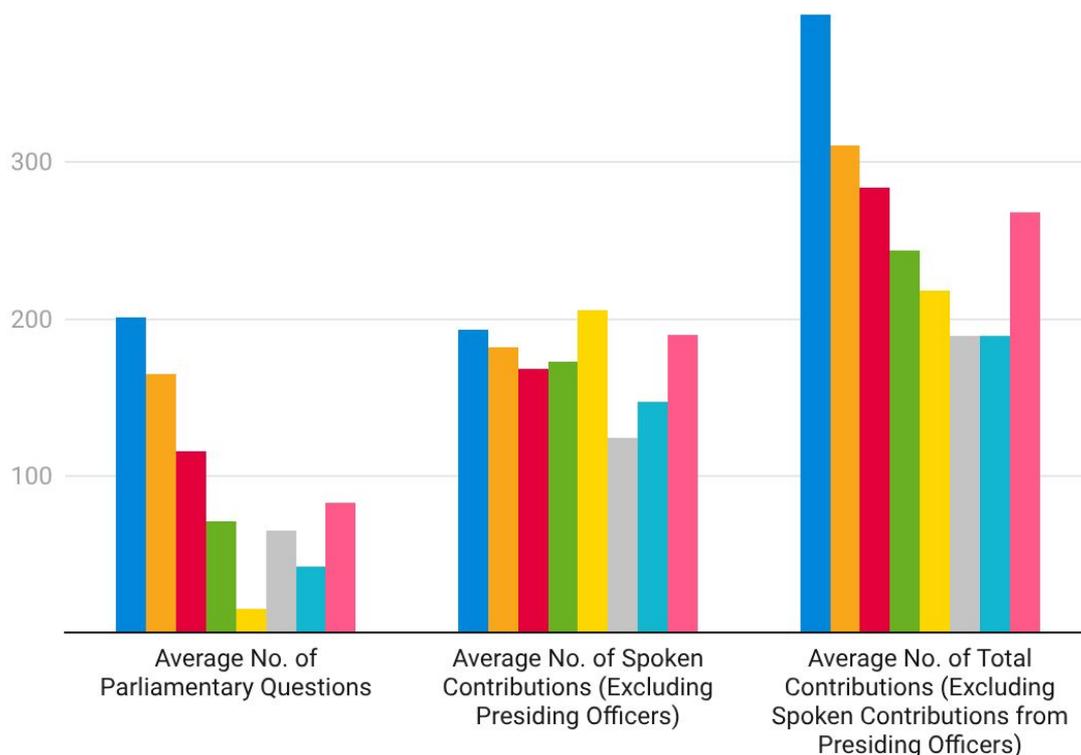
Westminster observers will find clear similarities in how opposition party leaders operate in Holyrood. Both Russell Findlay and Anas Sarwar confine their speeches in the Chamber to First Minister's Question Time and debates of particular political significance. As with Parliamentary Questions, less is often more.

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Average Parliamentary Activity for MSPs in 2025

■ Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party
 ■ Scottish Liberal Democrats
 ■ Scottish Labour
 ■ Scottish Green Party
 ■ Scottish National Party
 ■ Independent
 ■ Reform UK
 ■ Overall



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As Holyrood approaches a period of political turnover and likely fragmentation, these patterns of parliamentary activity offer a clearer guide to influence than headline moments alone. Understanding where scrutiny is applied, which MSPs are making their voices heard, and how parliamentary tools are used will be central to navigating Scottish politics after the May elections.

PoliMonitor is expanding its Scottish monitoring to reflect the importance of the upcoming election, with full transcriptions of all proceedings in Holyrood, along with instant alerts for key terms. At the same time, we are constantly updating our CRM with in depth biographies of candidates as they are announced.

Thanks, as always, for using PoliMonitor.

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Rank	Name	Party (December 2025)	Parliamentary Questions (No.)	Spoken Contributions (No.)	Total Contributions
1	Stephen Kerr MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	1,491	574	2,065
2	Douglas Lumsden MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	1,187	300	1,487
3	John Swinney MSP	Scottish National Party	0	1,327	1,327
4	Tim Eagle MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	641	177	818
5	Paul Sweeney MSP	Scottish Labour	300	310	610
6	Martin Whitfield MSP	Scottish Labour	223	353	576
7	Neil Gray MSP	Scottish National Party	0	575	575
8	Kate Forbes MSP	Scottish National Party	0	569	569
9	Craig Hoy MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	175	383	558
10	Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP	Scottish Liberal Democrats	301	228	529
11	Jackie Baillie MSP	Scottish Labour	299	184	483
12	Miles Briggs MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	323	146	469
13	Douglas Ross MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	56	409	465
14	Carol Mochan MSP	Scottish Labour	280	183	463
15	Jenny Gilruth MSP	Scottish National Party	0	448	448
16	Jim Fairlie MSP	Scottish National Party	0	436	436
17	Angela Constance MSP	Scottish National Party	0	434	434
18	Liam Kerr MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	211	204	415
19	Ivan McKee MSP	Scottish National Party	0	408	408
20	Angus Robertson MSP	Scottish National Party	0	399	399

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Rank	Name	Party (December 2025)	Parliamentary Questions (No.)	Spoken Contributions (No.)	Total Contributions
21	Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP	Scottish Labour	90	295	385
22	Willie Rennie MSP	Scottish Liberal Democrats	96	275	371
23	Brian Whittle MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	115	255	370
24	Rachael Hamilton MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	166	203	369
25	Gillian Martin MSP	Scottish National Party	0	340	340
26	Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP	Scottish National Party	0	338	338
27	Christine Grahame MSP	Scottish National Party	29	307	336
28	Daniel Johnson MSP	Scottish Labour	56	272	328
29	Russell Findlay MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	45	265	310
30	Monica Lennon MSP	Scottish Labour	251	58	309
31	Fiona Hyslop MSP	Scottish National Party	0	309	309
32	Ariane Burgess MSP	Scottish Green Party	190	117	307
33	Jamie Greene MSP	Scottish Liberal Democrats	154	150	304
34	Rhoda Grant MSP	Scottish Labour	130	171	301
35	Finlay Carson MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	84	214	298
36	Maggie Chapman MSP	Scottish Green Party	33	262	295
37	Edward Mountain MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	28	267	295
38	Michael Marra MSP	Scottish Labour	22	270	292
39	Mercedes Villalba MSP	Scottish Labour	186	95	281
40	Ross Greer MSP	Scottish Green Party	62	216	278

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Rank	Name	Party (December 2025)	Parliamentary Questions (No.)	Spoken Contributions (No.)	Total Contributions
41	Natalie Don-Innes MSP	Scottish National Party	0	277	277
42	Murdo Fraser MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	45	231	276
43	Fergus Ewing MSP	Independent	98	177	275
44	Patrick Harvie MSP	Scottish Green Party	56	215	271
45	Sarah Boyack MSP	Scottish Labour	71	195	266
46	Alasdair Allan MSP	Scottish National Party	4	262	266
47	Ben Macpherson MSP	Scottish National Party	24	241	265
48	Sharon Dowey MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	148	115	263
49	Kevin Stewart MSP	Scottish National Party	53	209	262
50	Lorna Slater MSP	Scottish Green Party	53	206	259
51	Shona Robison MSP	Scottish National Party	0	257	257
52	Maree Todd MSP	Scottish National Party	0	256	256
53	Siobhian Brown MSP	Scottish National Party	0	249	249
54	Mairi Gougeon MSP	Scottish National Party	0	249	249
55	Mairi McAllan MSP	Scottish National Party	0	246	246
56	Maurice Golden MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	141	103	244
57	Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	115	129	244
58	Mark Ruskell MSP	Scottish Green Party	77	165	242
59	Emma Harper MSP	Scottish National Party	40	200	240
60	Kenneth Gibson MSP	Scottish National Party	54	182	236

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Rank	Name	Party (December 2025)	Parliamentary Questions (No.)	Spoken Contributions (No.)	Total Contributions
61	Richard Leonard MSP	Scottish Labour	79	152	231
62	Tess White MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	67	163	230
63	Meghan Gallacher MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	60	168	228
64	Sue Webber MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	62	165	227
65	Pam Gosal MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	102	121	223
66	Paul O'Kane MSP	Scottish Labour	49	170	219
67	Stuart McMillan MSP	Scottish National Party	51	166	217
68	Elizabeth Smith MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	30	185	215
69	Katy Clark MSP	Scottish Labour	79	134	213
70	Graeme Dey MSP	Scottish National Party	0	212	212
71	Richard Lochhead MSP	Scottish National Party	0	202	202
72	Mark Griffin MSP	Scottish Labour	106	85	191
73	Jenni Minto MSP	Scottish National Party	0	190	190
74	Graham Simpson MSP	Reform UK	42	147	189
75	Pauline McNeill MSP	Scottish Labour	51	135	186
76	Anas Sarwar MSP	Scottish Labour	36	149	185
77	John Mason MSP	Independent	13	167	180
78	Jeremy Balfour MSP	Independent	58	122	180
79	Jackie Dunbar MSP	Scottish National Party	30	150	180
80	Foysol Choudhury MSP	Independent	69	111	180

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Rank	Name	Party (December 2025)	Parliamentary Questions (No.)	Spoken Contributions (No.)	Total Contributions
81	Liam McArthur MSP	Scottish Liberal Democrats	178	Presiding Officer	178
82	Audrey Nicoll MSP	Scottish National Party	24	154	178
83	Ash Regan MSP	Independent	88	90	178
84	Roz McCall MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	52	123	175
85	Alexander Stewart MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	36	138	174
86	Sandesh Gulhane MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	47	125	172
87	Paul McLennan MSP	Scottish National Party	4	167	171
88	Beatrice Wishart MSP	Scottish Liberal Democrats	95	76	171
89	Michelle Thomson MSP	Scottish National Party	29	140	169
90	Clare Haughey MSP	Scottish National Party	37	131	168
91	Bob Doris MSP	Scottish National Party	27	141	168
92	Tom Arthur MSP	Scottish National Party	0	167	167
93	Jamie Hepburn MSP	Scottish National Party	0	167	167
94	Rona Mackay MSP	Scottish National Party	27	139	166
95	Emma Roddick MSP	Scottish National Party	47	119	166
96	Claire Baker MSP	Scottish Labour	57	109	166
97	Clare Adamson MSP	Scottish National Party	33	131	164
98	Jackson Carlaw MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	45	109	154
99	Fulton MacGregor MSP	Scottish National Party	47	98	145
100	Colin Smyth MSP	Independent	63	79	142

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Rank	Name	Party (December 2025)	Parliamentary Questions (No.)	Spoken Contributions (No.)	Total Contributions
101	Kaukab Stewart MSP	Scottish National Party	0	134	134
102	Elena Whitham MSP	Scottish National Party	31	99	130
103	Neil Bibby MSP	Scottish Labour	24	103	127
104	Karen Adam MSP	Scottish National Party	16	107	123
105	Alexander Burnett MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	88	33	121
106	George Adam MSP	Scottish National Party	12	101	113
107	Marie McNair MSP	Scottish National Party	22	86	108
108	Gordon MacDonald MSP	Scottish National Party	19	79	98
109	Keith Brown MSP	Scottish National Party	24	70	94
110	Alex Rowley MSP	Scottish Labour	22	72	94
111	Annie Wells MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	46	44	90
112	Evelyn Tweed MSP	Scottish National Party	22	61	83
113	Bill Kidd MSP	Scottish National Party	15	67	82
114	Oliver Mundell MSP	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	29	43	72
115	Colin Beattie MSP	Scottish National Party	16	55	71
116	David Torrance MSP	Scottish National Party	16	52	68
117	Willie Coffey MSP	Scottish National Party	17	48	65
118	Collette Stevenson MSP	Scottish National Party	10	52	62
119	Michael Matheson MSP	Scottish National Party	10	49	59
120	Davy Russell MSP	Scottish Labour	16	42	58

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Rank	Name	Party (December 2025)	Parliamentary Questions (No.)	Spoken Contributions (No.)	Total Contributions
121	Gillian Mackay MSP	Scottish Green Party	23	30	53
122	Ruth Maguire MSP	Scottish National Party	11	35	46
123	James Dornan MSP	Scottish National Party	15	23	38
124	Annabelle Ewing MSP	Scottish National Party	34	Presiding Officer	34
125	Joe Fitzpatrick MSP	Scottish National Party	4	25	29
126	Humza Yousaf MSP	Scottish National Party	7	19	26
127	Stephanie Callaghan MSP	Scottish National Party	13	12	25
128	Nicola Sturgeon MSP	Scottish National Party	6	12	18
129	Alison Johnstone MSP	No Party Affiliation	0	Presiding Officer	0

Please contact the PoliMonitor team at info@polimonitor.com for more information.

