

# **EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 22 June 1999  
*(Morning)*

Meeting 1

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## THE OLDEST MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE:

\*Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

## COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

\*Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)  
\*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
\*Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)  
\*Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
\*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
\*Kate MacLean (Dundee West) (Lab)  
\*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)  
\*Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
\*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)  
\*Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
\*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
  
\*attended

## COMMITTEE CLERK:

Martin Verity

## ASSISTANT CLERK:

Rodger Evans



# Scottish Parliament

## Equal Opportunities Committee

*Tuesday 22 June 1999*

*(Morning)*

[THE OLDEST MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE *opened the meeting at 10:46*]

**Mr John Munro (Oldest Member of the Committee):** Good morning and welcome to the first meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee. This committee will have a wide range of subjects and issues to debate over the months and years ahead. I am sure that many people who supported us and who sent us to the Scottish Parliament will be interested to see how we exercise our discretion in the debates that we will have.

My position today is not one that I cherish or relish—I am the oldest member, and therefore I am required to take the chair in order to set the committee in motion.

### Interests

**Mr Munro:** The first item on the agenda is the declaration of interests. As members will know, they were required to submit a declaration of their interests by 18 June. I am sure that everyone has done that. I am invited to ask whether members wish to make an oral declaration to the committee this morning. If not, we can proceed to the choice of convener.

### Convener

**Mr Munro:** As members will appreciate, the choice of convener for the Equal Opportunities Committee falls to Labour and, without any ado, I seek nominations for the post of convener for this committee.

**Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab):** I nominate Kate MacLean.

**Mr Munro:** May I have a seconder for that nomination?

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** I second the nomination.

**Mr Munro:** Thank you. The nomination is duly noted. Are there any other nominations? I declare Kate MacLean Convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee.

*Kate MacLean was elected convener by acclamation.*

**The Convener (Kate MacLean):** Thank you, John. The papers that were circulated should have referred to the most senior member, rather than the oldest member. I think that that was a little cruel.

**Mr Munro:** It would have been kinder.

**The Convener:** I thank you all for your support.

I am delighted to be convener of this committee, as I see its remit as being the most important in the Parliament. We have done well in terms of women's representation, but wide sections of the community in Scotland are not represented in the Parliament and our challenge will be to ensure that their views are well represented. We will discuss later how we will achieve that.

We have always said that equality will be at the very heart of everything that this Parliament does. During the election campaign, I spoke to women's groups, black and ethnic minority groups and disability groups. They have very high expectations of this Parliament and of what we can do for them.

The situation here is very different from that at Westminster; this is a mandatory committee with a duty to oversee the work of the Parliament and ensure that other organisations that deal with equalities are scrutinised and monitored. We have a wide remit and I hope that the committee will be able to deal with it in a non-partisan way for the benefit of the people we represent. I look forward to working with all members of the committee over the coming months to achieve that and to meet those expectations.

### Remit

**The Convener:** Item 3 of the agenda concerns the remit of the committee and topics for further briefings. Although it is not on the agenda, I would like to discuss also how we will engage with people who are not represented in the Parliament, in terms of their representation on this committee, and whether the committee should meet in other areas in Scotland. Rather than people having to come to Edinburgh, we might go to them to take evidence.

Does any member have questions on, or issues to raise about, the remit of the committee?

**Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** Perhaps the remit of the committee could include the Parliament's internal structures and procedures. Last week, when we were discussing the consultative steering group report, I mentioned the possibility of an early audit of the make-up of staff in the Parliament. We will want to look at recruitment procedures and the rest but, obviously, as staff are in place, a bit of work has been done so far.

I think that it would be in order for this committee to request an early audit, in order to examine the number of staff who are from ethnic minority communities or who have disabilities and so forth. That is a request that I would like to make at an early stage.

**The Convener:** The remit of the committee includes examination of equal opportunities within the Parliament, which covers Parliament staff and how the Parliament operates.

**Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** I wish to raise the issue of access for disabled people in the present and the new parliamentary settings. I have raised this matter in the chamber twice, as there are a number of concerns about the facilities for disabled people at present and in the new building.

I would like guidance on whether it is in the remit of this committee to have briefings on any further adaptations that are planned for the present site, and on plans for the Holyrood site.

**The Convener:** I do not see any difficulty with a briefing on access although, unlike Michael Matheson, I was rather impressed when we met the project team by the consideration that is being given to people with mobility and sensory difficulties. However, it is within the remit of this committee to ensure that there is equality of access for everyone.

**Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD):** We are tinkering at the edges when we talk about specific buildings. What scope is there for this committee to investigate whether building regulations can be changed so that every new building is barrier free? If we were able to attack the heart of the matter we would be doing something very useful.

**The Convener:** My understanding is that although most of the legislation on equal opportunities is reserved by Westminster, it is within this committee's remit to consider and scrutinise anything that the Parliament does in terms of equal opportunities. A general briefing on access can be arranged if members feel that that would be useful. We can discuss later when we will have such briefings and whether we will have them during the recess.

Members will see in the report on briefings that there are other suggestions for subjects on which we might want briefings—the remit of this committee is very wide.

**Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** We all share your concerns about how to ensure that the voice of minority interests is heard and taken account of in this committee. Before we go too deeply into the issue of additional briefings, it may be appropriate to consider the method and process that we will put in place to ensure that we

hear from relevant groups of people every time we discuss an issue.

**The Convener:** One of the suggested briefings is on the participation of under-represented groups in the committees. That would be a useful briefing to have before we consider anything else.

This is the time for committee members to say on what areas they wish to have briefings.

**Michael Matheson:** I want to raise the issue of Lord Hardie's comments on institutional racism in the criminal justice system, which has been in the media for a week and a half. It is a serious allegation and there is a duty on the committee to seek a briefing on it. I would appreciate that. Depending on what arises from that briefing, there may also be a need for a meeting of the committee during the recess. I would like guidance on how that can be achieved and how, if necessary, the appropriate minister can be brought to the committee to explain the situation.

**The Convener:** We can discuss whether we will have meetings during the recess in a few minutes' time.

It would be useful to have a briefing from the Commission for Racial Equality. The committee can ask ministers to come and give evidence, either formally or informally, but it might be useful to have a briefing from the CRE first to find out what it has to say about Lord Hardie's comments. I noted that in the press a lot of groups that deal with racism welcomed his comments and welcomed the fact that he had recognised that institutional racism exists.

**Michael Matheson:** My comments were not intended to be a criticism of Lord Hardie: they were an attempt to deal with the issue and to make progress on it, given that the allegations are so serious.

**The Convener:** Does the committee feel that it would be useful to have a briefing from the CRE?

**Johann Lamont:** The problem with this meeting is that we could begin to address all of the areas that we have waited for a long time to discuss. On the issue of access, I have a particular interest in how accessible and child-friendly buildings are. The buildings in which we are situated now are not child friendly. If someone comes to lobby us, there is not so much as a highchair. Those things can be pursued.

On the issue of racism, some serious work must be done and we should consider how we will structure our work with regard to the different subject areas.

I have been trying to raise a question about the census. In Scotland, we appear not to be asking the same questions as are being asked south of

the border, specifically in relation to religion. How are we to plan services if we do not have that kind of information? Whereas a parliamentary question simply raises an issue and may encourage the minister to go and do something about it, we may want to explore further what sort of information we need to plan and prepare for the things that we are talking about. We might want to examine the census as well.

**Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab):** I am excited, but rather daunted, by our massive agenda. We must realise that the agenda is massive. Like many people, I was at the seminar on social inclusion yesterday, at which Rowena Arshad said that although a lot of good work had been done on social inclusion, the current policy was colour-blind. I realised that we must look at all policy areas, which makes it important that we establish some priorities, because the remit of this committee seems to be as long as a piece of string—there is no end to it.

I know that some women were concerned that there is no women's committee and that there has been some argument in local government about equality committees taking on women's committees. Can we establish that everything that would have been the remit of the women's committee is now the remit of the Equal Opportunities Committee? During the past two years, the Scottish Office has done a lot of work on mainstreaming women's issues but, presumably, women's issues are now within the remit of this committee.

**The Convener:** The remit of the committee is outlined in paper EO/99/1/2 and covers all women's issues.

11:00

**Mr McMahon:** Should we set the agenda for the areas that are to be addressed in our briefings? It may be more advantageous to have representations from interested groups. That would concentrate this committee on the areas that are most pertinent and give us an initial focus on the areas that we should pursue, rather than our assuming that we are tackling the issues in the best way by asking for briefings and information on particular subjects. We should ask organisations to guide us into the areas that we should pursue.

**The Convener:** That is why we should take up Irene's suggestion and address ourselves to how under-represented groups are to be involved in the committee structure. We have noted down the other matters for briefings, but it would be best to address the issue of under-represented groups in the first briefing so that we can think about how to proceed.

**Shona Robison:** I take the point that this committee has a wide scope, but it is inevitable—it is true for other committees—that issues that have to take precedence will arise. For example, as Michael Matheson said, we may be expected to address the issues surrounding the criminal justice system and to address the Macpherson report. This committee must determine what its role will be in examining the Macpherson report. There are a number of areas to examine, but because of Lord Hardie's comments and Macpherson, the issue of racism may be pushed up the agenda.

The Justice and Home Affairs Committee will have a role to play in studying Macpherson. We should get guidance on how to work around the overlap on that and other matters. Our roles should be clarified.

**The Convener:** There will be areas of overlap with the Justice and Home Affairs Committee. We will overlap with the work of many committees. The standing orders state that it is appropriate for committees to consider jointly any matters that fall within the remit of the committees concerned, so there will be no difficulty.

**Shona Robison:** Perhaps a joint briefing on the Macpherson report for this committee and the Justice and Home Affairs Committee would be in order.

**The Convener:** I have no objection to that, although it is obviously up to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee to decide whether it wants a joint briefing.

**Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD):** We all have our own agenda. As individuals, we have our own ideas about what equal opportunities means. As has been suggested, there are groups and organisations that have their own interests, some of which we have probably never even thought of.

Provision is made to enable disabled people gain access to public and other buildings, but that distinguishes them from other people. Any influence that we have should ensure that disabled people are treated in the same way as more mobile members of the community. Disabled people should have free access through the same routes as the rest of us.

During the past couple of weeks I have had a tremendous amount of mail on something that I thought had been settled amicably: prayers in the Parliament. When we agreed that there would be interfaith prayers, I thought that that was fine, because it deals with everyone and we are all equal. However, a lot of the mail that I have received suggests that there are many who do not agree with that decision. Things that we thought were settled amicably may cause us a bit of difficulty.

**The Convener:** It is important that we get briefings on access issues from statutory agencies that deal with disability issues, such as Disability Scotland, and from the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality, as well as from the parliamentary information centre. It is important to have briefings from statutory organisations because we do not know what the agenda is. We may think that we do, but it would be better to hear it from organisations that are working on the ground.

**Mr Munro:** Until Mr McGrigor came in, men were outnumbered two to one on this committee by the female element.

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** The general information on committees says that committees may examine matters that are referred to them by other committees. Does that suggest that this committee must wait for matters to be referred to it, or can we be proactive in examining what is coming out of other committees?

The same information also says that although interaction between all committees may take place from time to time, it is likely that the European Committee and the Subordinate Legislation Committee will liaise with other committees more frequently. I would have thought that this committee will frequently liaise with all other committees and look at what they are doing.

**The Convener:** You are right to say that this committee will liaise with others. We can be proactive, other committees can ask us to look at things and we can ask other committees to look at things.

If there is nothing else on that point, we will move on to consider when we will start to meet. I know we are meant to be a family-friendly Parliament and that we said that we would not have formal meetings during the recess, but because the committees have just been set up I think that we should start to have briefings and meetings during the recess—although I am in the committee's hands if any member objects. It should not be ad hoc—we should set aside one or two weeks of the recess when we can have briefings. We should also discuss not necessarily meeting in Edinburgh. May I have comments on whether we should meet during the recess and where?

**Mr McMahon:** It is important that we address where we meet right from the start, because it will set the pattern for the longer term. I am interested to see whether we can identify areas of the country that are particularly pertinent to the Equal Opportunities Committee and where it would therefore be appropriate for the committee to meet. I am sure that race issues are more relevant

to some parts of the country than to others. I suggest that we get some information on where we should meet in relation to the issues we will discuss, as well as address when we will meet.

**Malcolm Chisholm:** I am very keen to get started—we will have to find a consensus on that—but we should be mindful of school holidays. Although I no longer have children at school, as a matter of principle my preference would be to meet in the second half of August.

**Nora Radcliffe:** I would like to come back to the committee moving round the country. We need equality of access as well as of opportunity. If we are going to put ourselves where our mouths are we should plan a programme of meetings all round the country now so that we can advertise it well in advance and so that people know and can make arrangements to come. We should have geographical equality—including Shetland, because how many people go there? We talk about being equally accessible but we must practise what we preach, even if it is awkward.

**Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I endorse that. In the Highlands especially, there is a feeling that there was not even the equal opportunity to say where the Parliament should be situated. It will be a great help if a good many of the committees move around the country—people will then feel that they are being looked after better.

**Shona Robison:** We will have to meet during the recess. How often and when will depend on how many briefings we want to get through. We should decide on some priorities for that. I take Michael's point but suggest caution—in moving about we should avoid a numbers game because there are ethnic minority communities that may be even more isolated in the Highlands, for example. We should avoid making assumptions: we need to take the equal opportunities message everywhere. It is equally valid to hold meetings and take soundings throughout the length and breadth of the country—and it may be even more important to take soundings from fairly isolated communities. However I certainly want to meet during the recess and definitely want to take the committee around Scotland.

**Michael Matheson:** I agree with much that has been said about meeting elsewhere, but it is important that we try to prioritise the issues on which we want briefings. As Malcolm said, if we are going to meet during the recess, we should respect the school holidays. It would be best to decide on a number of things that are urgent or a high priority so we can get on with briefings on them, if need be during the recess. It is important to establish some level of priority, otherwise we could end up with a full list of things that we will try to address during the recess but will be unable to



manage.

**Johann Lamont:** Yesterday, at the social inclusion seminar, Rowena Arshad spoke about pace. She said we should slow down and take our time—we do not have to do everything in the first three weeks. One of the problems we will have is, as I and others have said, that there are so many issues that we want to address—and we want to be open and accessible—that the temptation is to meet right through the summer and to go all over Scotland. We must set priorities and be clear about the structures that we will establish within the committee, particularly to address different kinds of issues.

We must be very careful that we do not substitute being seen to be open and accessible for actually being open and accessible. If we are a travelling circus that people are not particularly aware of, or do not feel they are able to approach and communicate with, or have not been given enough time to get in touch with, we will be no more accessible than if we sat here and talked to ourselves.

Access is less about where we meet than about how much information organisations and individuals are given before we meet about the kind of influence that their organisation can have, about communicating and about why we are discussing what we are. A great deal of work on equal opportunities is already being done. We know from our correspondence that there is huge expertise in organisations, and there are individuals and groups beyond organisations to consider.

We need to take some time to think about how to make ourselves open and how to ensure that we are communicating with folk, rather than thinking that for the want of something better we will go to different places. I would not argue against that as it is important that we do move outside the Parliament, but we have to be clear that being in a different place does not necessarily mean that we are any more open to the folk who are currently excluded. Instead, we may be accessible to a geographically different group of the people who already have a strong voice. I hope that when we timetable visits we will also look at the work we need to do before we go.

**Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab):** I would like to support what Johann has just said. Some people in the committee have children, so it is really important that we meet outwith the school holidays. I suggest that we prioritise one or two issues on which we would like to have briefings. We are all very keen to get started; that would allow us to get started and ensure that everybody can attend. We could then look at venues—but make it outwith the school holiday period.

**The Convener:** Malcolm suggested the second two weeks in August. Does everyone agree with that? At this stage, would committee members be happy to draw up some suggestions for a timetable and briefings, taking on board what everybody has said? We can then send that out and have another meeting to discuss it.

**Michael Matheson:** On a point of clarification—is the timing in the second two weeks of August for when the committee will meet or for when briefings will take place?

**The Convener:** Probably for when briefings will take place, although we could arrange briefings before then if that is what members want. Taking on board what has been said about the school holidays, and given that this is the Equal Opportunities Committee, that might not be right in terms of being family friendly.

11:15

**Michael Matheson:** I recognise the importance of being family friendly and take on board what members have said, but there may be an instance when we have to meet during the school holidays.

**The Convener:** Members accept that.

**Michael Matheson:** I would not like to say that we will meet for briefings only in the second two weeks of August unless something comes up that means that we have to meet beforehand.

**The Convener:** If the committee remits it to me, I will speak to all committee members. We could have some briefings before the second two weeks in August. Members can agree that we will come back from recess early to meet during the second two weeks in August, but it is possible that we could have briefings during the holidays as well.

It is up to members to decide what they want to do, although the standing orders state that we will not have meetings during the recess. I would prefer not to force people into meeting during the recess. I hope that we can reach agreement. Remit it to me and we can meet again to discuss the proposed timetable of meetings and which matters we will have briefings on.

**Nora Radcliffe:** Will it be helpful for this committee's support mechanism to consider venues around Scotland and give us a list of suggested venues?

**The Convener:** I have been given a list. The Parliament's head of security has checked these venues—Aberdeen, Ayr, Cupar, Dumfries, Dundee, Galashiels, Glasgow, Helensburgh, Inverness, Perth and Stirling.

**Nora Radcliffe:** Are there no suggested venues north of Inverness? An awful lot of Scotland is north of Inverness.

**The Convener:** Those venues are possibilities; we can consider others.

**Nora Radcliffe:** Please start to think a bit wider.

**The Convener:** I take that point on board.

**Shona Robison:** You said that we will meet again to consider the proposals for further meetings. Will that be before 1 July?

**The Convener:** I think that it will be possible to have an informal meeting before 1 July.

**Shona Robison:** If we intend to agree the committee's priorities at that meeting, there will have to be some level of formality.

**The Convener:** We would not necessarily agree our priorities; we would agree a series of initial briefings. As Johann said, there is no need to rush into discussion about the committee's priorities. We could have an informal meeting prior to the recess to consider a timetable of briefing meetings and venues and progress from there.

**Shona Robison:** Presumably the timetable will be open to amendment if members feel that it is appropriate.

**The Convener:** That is the point of having the meeting. If the timetable were not open to amendment, it would just be sent out to members.

**Mr McMahon:** Perhaps we should take a sounding on the timing of that informal meeting. There is only a week and a half before the recess, so it may not be possible to fit it in during the day. We might have to decide whether we are prepared to meet in the evening. I would not be particularly keen to do so, but—depending on the importance of the meeting—I would consider it and try to accommodate it.

**The Convener:** We should be able to organise an informal meeting at lunchtime on a day when the Parliament is meeting. We will get in touch about that. How do members feel about an evening meeting?

**Mr McMahon:** If the committee does not want to meet in the evening, we might as well rule it out now.

**Nora Radcliffe:** Evening meetings are no problem for those of us who stay in Edinburgh during the week. Another point is that people who work cannot come to our committee meetings during the day. If we have some meetings in the evening, it may make the committee more open to people who would not otherwise be able to see how we work.

**The Convener:** Michael was talking about a one-off meeting.

**Mr McMahon:** I was talking about a one-off meeting and I saw from the clerk's reaction that he

was not sure about the timing of the meeting.

**The Convener:** Michael is talking about the meeting before the recess. The general matter of when we meet will have to be addressed when we discuss how to get under-represented groups involved.

**Malcolm Chisholm:** Can we set a time for the meeting before the recess now? I suggest Tuesday lunchtime. We are the Equal Opportunities Committee and I think that it would set a bad precedent if we were to meet in the evening. We must be mindful of the fact that some members of the committee have young children.

**The Convener:** I would be happy to meet at lunchtime on Tuesday.

**Elaine Smith:** I do not mind a one-off evening meeting if it is absolutely necessary, but as we are supposed to be family friendly and work normal business hours, that is not a precedent that I would like to be set. Tuesday lunchtime would be fine for me.

**The Convener:** Will I send a note out suggesting next Tuesday lunchtime?

**Shona Robison:** Next Tuesday lunchtime is no use to me as I have a meeting. Trying to set a date by committee will be impossible.

**The Convener:** We will get in touch and try to set up a meeting before the recess; we could be here all day trying to decide on a suitable time.

There is nothing else on the agenda. We will try to set up a meeting before the recess. Thank you for your attendance.

*Meeting closed at 11:22.*

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