

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 18 September 2001
(Morning)

Session 1

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

15th Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

*Kate MacLean (Dundee West) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lee Bridges

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 18 September 2001

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

The Convener (Kate MacLean): I open this meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee.

I have received apologies from Cathy Peattie.

Interests

The Convener: I welcome Gil Paterson to the Equal Opportunities Committee. I know that he has a particular interest in issues around violence against women and I am sure that he will find the committee's work interesting. I ask him whether he has a declaration of interests to make.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): The only interest I think I need to tender at the moment is the fact that I am the convener of the cross-party group on men's violence against women and children.

The Convener: Thank you.

Item in Private

The Convener: Item 2 is to ask whether the committee agrees to take item 7 in private. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Reporters

The Convener: The third agenda item is consideration of the appointment of a reporter for sexual orientation and disability issues. We have had so many changes to the membership of the committee in recent months that although we have had a reporter for race issues and one for gender issues, we have not had reporters for sexual orientation and disability issues. We have new members on the committee now. Instead of my asking for volunteers, I suggest that members who are interested in the positions e-mail the clerks. We will discuss the matter at the next meeting. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Civic Participation Event

The Convener: The fourth item on the agenda is the civic participation event that took place on Friday. I am sure that anybody who was able to attend agrees that the event was successful on a number of counts. It was good to see so many black and ethnic minority people sitting in the chamber. That glaringly illustrates the fact that we are a white Parliament that does not involve members of the minority ethnic communities in parliamentary decision making. The political parties need to take that on board.

Another good aspect was the three-minute silence to show sympathy for what happened in America. People from all races and cultures stood together. In the light of that, it is disappointing that people have used what happened as an excuse to commit racist attacks, not only in the USA, but in this country. I understand that there has had to be increased security at mosques throughout Scotland. The people who commit such racist attacks and harassment are racists, who are using what happened in America as an excuse to attack people. They are not tolerant and respectful of other people's cultures. That is the worst tribute to the people who lost their lives in the American terrorist attacks.

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I entirely agree. We should try to find a positive course of action. Perhaps the committee could write to the Executive asking it to redouble its efforts to promote good race relations. The word "war" has been bandied about quite a lot in the past week. If we are going to get involved in a war, it should be a war against racism. The committee has an obligation to ensure that something positive comes from the events. Could we write to the Executive asking it to do something constructive and visible to meet that challenge?

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): I reiterate what everybody has said. We must recognise that the civic participation event took place only three days after the terrible events in America. I was sitting with two Muslim women and all they could talk about was the events in America. They were at least as distressed as me and the other people who were there. It was good that the event went ahead, because other events were cancelled. It was a poignant occasion, with people of all races standing in silent respect for those affected by what happened in America. All nations, creeds, colours and religions expressed together their absolute distress at what had happened.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I agree with Michael McMahon. It would be an extremely good idea for the Executive to have

something high-profile. I know that there was talk of having to cancel last week's event, given that other things had been cancelled out of respect, but when you saw the event in the chamber, you realised that it was right to go ahead with it and to send out a positive message to Scotland from the committee.

The Convener: If members remember, one of the action points agreed at Friday's event was to have a high-profile campaign against racism. We have said that we will explore all the action points. If members agree, we will pass a copy of that particular action point to the Executive and ask whether, in view of what is happening in Scotland, it will immediately consider starting a high-profile, zero-tolerance campaign against racism. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the clerks for the tremendous amount of work that they put into the civic participation event. I know that it took blood, sweat and tears. It has been suggested that we have such an event every year. That is something that we can explore when we evaluate Friday's event, but I am not sure whether the clerks will get over the amount of work that was involved in a year.

Mr McMahon: That gives them a year to get on to another committee.

The Convener: I think they might ask for a transfer.

Members have a paper on the evaluation of the event. Do members have any comments on the evaluation form or any changes to suggest? Is everybody happy with it?

Kay Ullrich: People were disappointed at not being called to speak at the event. I do not know what we could do about that in future. Perhaps Richard Walsh has a suggestion.

Richard Walsh (Clerk): Although we do not have any ideas about how we can give everyone a chance to speak without lengthening the event, several people who wanted to speak and had prepared speeches gave us their speeches afterwards. They will be printed up with the report of the event. Similarly, we received late e-mail submissions from people who were not called to speak, who have asked for their comments to be included in the report. We are attempting to address the situation by making this Friday the cut-off date for late submissions.

Kay Ullrich: I want to thank my fellow MSPs who attended for not pressing their request-to-speak buttons. It was not a day for speeches from MSPs.

The Convener: Just because MSPs were not called does not mean that they did not press their buttons.

Kay Ullrich: I obviously have great faith in human nature.

The Convener: I will not mention any names.

As I said at the start of the event, members of the public who were watching from the gallery or on the web and people who were not called to speak could send in their submissions for consideration. We have tried to be as inclusive as possible, although some people did not get to speak publicly in the chamber.

Elaine Smith: Given the limited number who could be accommodated in the chamber, I am sure that there were people who wanted to attend the event but could not. The evaluation paper is a good idea, as it will provide an indication of what we should take into account if we hold a similar event next year.

The Convener: Part of the evaluation process is finding out how the Parliament can initiate an inclusive discussion with a group that has no representation.

Do members agree the content of the evaluation questionnaire, and to allow the clerks to distribute it?

Members indicated agreement.

Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is consideration of a briefing paper on the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Committee members have already agreed to the list of mailing contacts included in the paper. If there are no comments or questions, do members agree the format of the consultation paper and to authorise the clerks to issue it to the list of consultees?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Guide Dog Week

The Convener: Item 6 concerns a request from the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association to highlight the problem of access for people with guide dogs to restaurants, pubs and outlets that serve food. It costs £35,000 to train a guide dog to help blind people, so it is important that fundraising remains one of the main purposes of guide dog week; however, the association also wants to use the week to promote a voluntary code of practice for pubs and restaurants to be guide dog-friendly. Such a code involves knowing the best place in establishments for people with guide dogs to sit, providing water for the dog and so on. The association is asking the committee to become involved in an event at which MSPs would be blindfolded and, with the aid of a trainer, would walk guide dogs into the Parliament restaurant.

Does the committee endorse a voluntary code of practice that could be put together with the help of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Does the committee agree to support in principle the event, which is proposed for 4 October? Obviously, we would have to discuss the matter with the restaurant management and get enough MSPs—maybe four or five—to take part.

Elaine Smith: Perhaps it would be appropriate if you, as convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee, lodged a members' business motion on the issue to be debated during guide dog week.

I am glad that providing water for guide dogs was mentioned. I have discussed the matter with Anne McLean, who is mentioned in the association's letter to the committee. She pointed out that it is important that facilities other than access for the person and the guide dog are provided.

The Convener: I am happy to lodge such a motion for that week.

If any members want to take part in the event, they should e-mail the clerks. A small amount of pre-training is necessary before the event can happen. Are members agreed to support the event in principle?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We now move into private session.

10:13

Meeting continued in private until 10:44.

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