

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 25 March 2003
(Afternoon)

Session 1

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2003, Session 1

CONVENER

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)

*Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP)

*Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West)

*Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)

*Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP)

*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

*Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Nick Hawthorne

David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 25 March 2003

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:34*]

The Convener (Irene Oldfather): Welcome to the fifth meeting of the committee in 2003 and its final meeting of the session. We have received apologies from John Home Robertson, who hopes to come to the meeting, but might be a little late.

I record my thanks and appreciation to current and past members of the committee. Members have worked well together over the past four years—there has been co-operation, good will, dedication and commitment. I thank Hugh Henry, who convened the committee in the first couple of years. Other groups have testified to the good work that has been done, which we have recorded in various reports. I was delighted when the President of the European Parliament said that the Scottish Parliament's European Committee is where it is at. That was recognition from mainland Europe of the work that we have done on the future of Europe debate, on structural funds and on a whole raft of matters in the past four years.

Although Ben Wallace is not yet here, I thank him and Colin Campbell, who will not join us in May. All of us are unsure about which committees we will return to, but Ben Wallace and Colin Campbell will leave us. I thank them for their work and effort.

I also thank the clerks. All members will agree that in the past four years we have received tremendous assistance from Stephen Imrie, David Simpson and—more recently—Nick Hawthorne. I thank Christine Boch, who is our legal adviser, and staff in the Scottish Parliament information centre. No one from SPICe is with us today, but its staff have continually supported the committee by providing background research papers for our inquiries. I know that all committee members will endorse the sentiments that I have expressed. [MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Over the four years, many people have given a lot of their time to the committee in submitting written and oral evidence. There have been fairly regular visitors from the European Parliament and the European Commission, who have supported us in external events over the past four years. It is appropriate to recognise their contribution to our work.

Items in Private

The Convener: Agenda item 1 is consideration of items in private. Do members agree to take items 6, 7 and 8 in private, as they relate to draft committee reports?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Executive (Scrutiny)

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is pre and post-council scrutiny. There is a table of recommendations on page 3 of paper EU/03/5/1.

It is recommended that we note and welcome the information on the general affairs and external relations council of 24 and 25 February, the economic and financial affairs council—ECOFIN—of 18 February and 7 March and the competitiveness council of 3 March. The meeting of the transport, telecommunications and energy council of 7 March did not take place, so we do not have a briefing on it.

It is recommended that we welcome and note the information on the employment, social policy, health and consumer affairs council of 6 March, particularly on the changes to the European employment strategy and social protection activities. The committee has given a lot of time to that matter and will deliberate on it later when we discuss our report. It is recommended that we welcome and note the information on the environment council of 4 March, particularly with regard to the progress of the new bathing water quality directive and the environmental liability directive—that information is useful. It is also recommended that we welcome and note the information on the agriculture and fisheries council of 20 and 21 February and on the justice and home affairs council of 27 and 28 February.

Do members agree to those recommendations?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Convener's Report

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is the convener's report. The first item of business is the monthly report by the clerk/chief executive and external liaison unit on the Parliament's external affairs activities. Members have a copy of the report.

In addition, there is a review of the first session, which is a useful document, and which spends a bit of time on the role of European affairs in the Parliament. I recommend that we note the contents of the report and welcome the information. Is that recommendation agreed to?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Members will recall that we had plans for a meeting on corporate social responsibility with Stephen Timms MP. Unfortunately, because of the time scale of the committee's employment and corporate social responsibility inquiry and Stephen Timms's diary commitments, the meeting had to be postponed. Since then, we have been in dialogue with Stephen Timms, who is interested in speaking to the committee. It would be helpful to have a meeting with him, but that will obviously have to be in the new session of Parliament. I recommend that we welcome the principle of a meeting and ask the clerks to arrange one, subject to the successor committee feeling that that would be a useful development. Is that recommendation agreed to?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Finally, members will be aware that the United Kingdom Government has recently announced proposals for a new framework for a regional development policy in the United Kingdom and how that might affect structural funding post 2006. Colleagues will recall that the committee produced a paper on the matter, but that was an early paper and was produced in advance of other key groups, including the Scottish Executive, formulating views on the matter. Stephen Imrie has circulated an information paper to members.

The difficulty is that the deadline for submissions to the consultation on the proposals is 4 July 2003. The proposals are an important piece of work and relate to work that the committee has done. Since this is our last meeting, the matter will be up to the new committee, but it might be helpful to have a recommendation on the way forward. If anything can be done between now and the new committee taking office, the clerks can begin to pursue that.

There are a number of options to consider. Given that the election will get a little bit in the way of the committee's business, we could ask for an

extension to the deadline on the consultation, which would allow the new committee to take evidence and formulate a viewpoint on the matter. However, the clerks have tested the water and have found out that, although discussions will be on-going, the consultation is unlikely to continue beyond 4 July, as the UK Government would like it to be fixed.

Another option is that the new committee could deal with the matter as a priority and try to take evidence on it quickly. I do not think that there is anything to prevent the clerks from seeking written comments and evidence from groups that might be interested in the consultation or affected by the new proposals. Obviously, there is a range of actions that we could take. I am in the hands of members as to how best to proceed, but it is important that we make a contribution to the debate, one way or another. I am happy for members to express a view.

The most realistic options are either to pursue an extension to the 4 July deadline, which takes us into the recess and does not give much leeway for the new committee to take evidence, or to task the clerks with writing to interested bodies with a view to gathering information that the new committee could assimilate quickly. In that way, the new committee could at least make a basic response.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): The situation is difficult because, after today, we will not be a committee any longer. We have done a lot of work on the issue and, if the clerks ask people for their views on the proposals, our successor committee could be presented with that range of views and the paper that we produced earlier. That would give the new committee a basis for getting into the issue and, I hope, allow it to make a response.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): The matter is vital. As I understand it, the Government's proposals are fairly radical, so it is critical that the committee should discuss the issues and take a view on them. In the past, structural funds have had an important role in the life of Scotland.

I do not think that the proposed routes are mutually exclusive. It would be useful if the clerks could write officially to Westminster to highlight the history of the structural funds' importance to Scotland and to say that we regret the timing, which is causing difficulty that is outwith our control—the elections and the start of the Parliament's recess in July are facts. It is critical to consider the matter. I support Sarah Boyack's suggestion that, in the meantime, the clerks should write to interested people throughout Scotland to seek their views. The committee should recommend that the next European and

External Relations Committee considers the issue as a matter of priority.

14:45

The Convener: As no one is otherwise minded, the consensus is that that is the way to proceed. We will ask the clerks to write to ask interested bodies for their views on the new consultation document and we will recommend that the matter should be an urgent item on the first agenda of the European and External Relations Committee in the next session.

Sift

The Convener: As members know, we categorise European Community and European Union documents and forward them to the relevant committees. As members have no points to discuss, do we agree to forward the documents as recommended?

Members *indicated agreement.*

EC/EU Legislation (Implementation)

The Convener: Since August, we have been discussing with the Executive the format of a paper on the transposition and implementation of EC/EU legislation in Scotland. We asked for a way of highlighting new directives to avoid our going over the same directives because they had not dropped off the paper or because we had not realised that a change had been made. The shading of the new directives on the paper is a welcome step forward. The paper also contains further information about several directives for which we had asked.

I welcome the fact that the Executive has taken on board the recommendations, which will improve the way in which the committee deals with the information. We will go through the paper page by page, because dealing with each directive individually would be cumbersome. Page 1 relates to the finance and central services department. Page 2 contains the additional information that the committee sought from the Executive and we are reasonably satisfied with that.

Page 1 of 3 from the Food Standards Agency deals with directives that we have seen before. We have no comments on pages 2 and 3 from the Food Standards Agency. The next page contains further information for which we had asked. We have no comments on the page from the justice department or pages 1 to 4 on agriculture from the environment and rural affairs department. Page 5 contains a reply from SEERAD. We have no comments on pages 1 to 3 from the environment group of the environment and rural affairs department. Page 4 from that group contains further information on directive 2001/81/EC.

Do members agree to the recommendations in the paper?

Members indicated agreement.

Legacy Paper

The Convener: Before we conclude the public part of our meeting, we will discuss our legacy paper on matters that the new committee might investigate. We must also consider reports on food supplements and on our employment inquiry.

The legacy paper will be published following our discussions. I invite members of the committee to comment on the paper in general, without going into detail. We had a discussion about the committee's work load and agreed that we wanted to make public some of the issues that the new committee might discuss. We will do that when we publish the legacy paper, but if members want to record any comments at this point, they may do so.

Sarah Boyack: As someone who was not on the committee at the start, I recognise, from looking at the work that the committee has done over the four years, that the committee has geared up its scrutiny of what is happening in Europe. That is to be welcomed.

The European Committee has not been the most high-profile committee in respect of media coverage, but it has carried out a huge amount of work in broadening the transparency of what is happening in Brussels and in communicating that to the other committees. The recommendations for the future are about how the committee can use its time as effectively as possible. That will be a challenge, given that the new European and External Relations Committee will be able to do so much. I do not envy the new committee the challenge of trying to prioritise.

However we might amend the detail of the report, it provides a good account of the kinds of issues that the committee has had to deal with. People outside the Parliament will find it useful as a sort of route map of the development of the committee. I hope that it will be a way of engaging with the future European and External Relations Committee.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): I would like the successor committee to conduct an investigation into the value, or otherwise, of the so-called tartan day. I will not go on about that at length just now. I am in favour of building good relationships between Scotland and the United States of America, but I question whether tartan day is the best way in which to build such relationships. I hope that the successor committee will take that matter up.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): I think that we have done some pioneering work, especially the videoconference that we had with the president of the Fisheries Committee of the

Galician Parliament. Future committees should take part in such activities more frequently.

Understanding other people, rather than understanding the directives of the European Union, is the way to develop Europe. The quickest and most sensible way for us, as a devolved Parliament, to do that is to interconnect directly with the devolved Parliaments of the other states. The fact that I have seen our papers on the desks of senior political and administration figures in other states is the clearest statement of the effect that we have had beyond these walls. We may be unaware of that or believe that we have had a low profile in this country, but I assure members that our profile in other countries has been far from low.

The most pressing issue for the next committee—aside from dealing with straightforward directive issues such as the food supplements issue—is, without doubt, the constitutional convention. If I have one regret, it is that the committee did not regard that as a priority at an earlier stage. I genuinely believe that we have failed to stay on top of the discussion. We have not had discussions on the issue at every meeting, as we should have done from the moment that the convention began to sit, to keep a clear view of the shifting sands of constitutional politics in the rest of the European Union.

Given some of the exchanges between convention members over the past couple of weeks, it is clear that a change has occurred as a result of the broader political issues in the world and the conflicts that exist within and between European Union states. It is incumbent on the next committee to engage with the development of a constitution for Europe, which will affect all states, irrespective of whether they are member states or have autonomous Governments. The issues will stay with us for ever and will affect the fundamental law of every country and the fundamental rights of every citizen throughout Europe. Without doubt, the convention is the most important issue on the European stage at present.

I have enjoyed my time on the committee enormously and, on behalf of those of us who were on the committee under the previous convener, I thank Hugh Henry, who was a damn good convener—as are you, convener. We had interesting times in the first few months, and I put on record my admiration for the way in which Hugh held the line while he was convener.

The Convener: Thanks very much, Lloyd. I am sure that Hugh Henry will be touched by those comments.

Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP): If not amazed.

The Convener: I certainly feel that the future of Europe inquiry report is the biggest report that we have produced in the past six months. As convener, I have been involved regularly in meetings outwith the committee to ensure that we continued to advance the viewpoints that the committee report pulled together. We led with Catalonia and Flanders in making a formal submission to the future of Europe convention, and, as I mentioned at the beginning of the meeting—before you came in, Lloyd—the President of the European Parliament credited us with leading the way on such issues. That is recognition of the fact that the committee has continued to work in that area.

I thank all members for their comments and contributions. No doubt, the next committee will take them on board and will give them due consideration. I also thank the members of the public who have regularly attended the committee. It has been good to have their support.

14:56

Meeting continued in private until 17:00.

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