

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 11 June 2003
(Morning)

Session 2

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2003, Session 2

OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER

*Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West)
Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP)
*Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)
*Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
*Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab)
*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Nick Hawthorne
David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Wednesday 11 June 2003

(Morning)

[THE OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER *opened the meeting at 10:32*]

Phil Gallie (Oldest Committee Member): I welcome everyone to the first meeting of the European and External Relations Committee in the second session of the Scottish Parliament. Because of my age, I am in the chair this morning. It comes as a great surprise to me to find out that I am older than Dennis Canavan, who seems to have been around for years. However, my tenure as convener will be fairly brief, which should come as a relief to a few committee members.

It is a great privilege to follow on from Irene Oldfather, who was the committee's convener during the previous parliamentary session. I know that she has a great interest in Europe and, as far as I understand it, did a grand job as convener.

I welcome to the meeting committee members both old and new, members of the press and the public and officials. I also give a special welcome to two students, James Burrow and Caroline Selman, who are serving their work experience with the committee clerks. I am sure that they will enjoy that experience and learn much from the clerks who look after the committee's affairs. I should also mention that we have received apologies from Margaret Ewing and Keith Raffan. I believe that all other members are present.

Interests

Phil Gallie: My first duty is to ask members to declare any interests. I will start the ball rolling by declaring that I have no interests whatsoever that will interfere with my involvement in the committee.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I want to place on record my registrable interest as a member of the European Committee of the Regions.

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): I have no interests to declare.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): As far as I am aware, I have no interests to declare.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I am not aware of any interests, although there is reference to a farming business in my entry in the register of interests. I get no benefit from that personally, although a certain amount of European money goes into it.

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab): I have no registrable interests.

Convener

Phil Gallie: We will now elect a convener for this session. Under the rules of the Parliament, and as agreed, the nomination comes from the Scottish National Party. My understanding is that Richard Lochhead is that nominee.

Richard Lochhead was chosen as convener.

Phil Gallie: That being the case, my tenure in the chair comes to an end, and I am delighted to hand over to Richard.

The Convener (Richard Lochhead): Thank you, Phil—you made an excellent convener during your few minutes in the chair. I look forward very much to chairing the committee and working with committee members over the coming months and years, given current topical and challenging European and international debates. I am sure that we have an interesting time ahead, and that we will have no shortage of items on our agenda. I hope that the committee can make an impact, speaking to the people of Scotland about their views on Europe and about the issues that face us. We have important obligations in scrutinising the Government on its European and external relations policies and in representing the Parliament.

I pay tribute to the work of the previous committee. It produced many excellent reports, which I have been reading up on over the past few days. I also pay tribute to the work of Irene Oldfather, the former convener.

Deputy Convener

The Convener: It is my pleasure to move to the next item, which is the election of a deputy convener. As agreed by the Parliamentary Bureau, and as endorsed by Parliament, that position goes to the Labour party. I seek nominations.

Mr Morrison: I nominate Irene Oldfather.

Irene Oldfather was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: Congratulations, Irene. You have been elected deputy convener and maintain your role on the committee.

Legacy Paper

The Convener: The next item is the legacy paper that was left to us by the previous committee. I hope that all members have received a copy and have had enough time to read it. It is quite detailed, and I do not propose to go through each item in it. I hope, however, to take members' views on the general issues that the paper raises, and on any other issues. This is a good opportunity to go round committee members and take views on our future work programme.

This will be a short meeting. I hope that we will be finished by 11.30, by which time we have to vacate this room. We can discuss some of the issues on which we would like the clerks to produce briefings by the next meeting, which is in two weeks' time. I open the discussion by inviting members to raise points or make references to the legacy paper.

Irene Oldfather: Three of us have already visited the legacy paper, and it is perhaps more important to hear the views of new members. Given the challenges that face us over the next year, and with European Parliament elections coming up, it is important to stimulate debate. I hope that that will be a continuing role for the committee. We have made some inroads with scrutiny, and it is important for us to develop that role. It would also be helpful for us to continue to examine the future of Europe convention. The committee had a key role in that work and I hope that we can continue those discussions and keep up to speed with that debate.

We made a good start on interregional co-operation in the previous session and I hope that we might continue to address that issue. The future of structural funds after 2006 is a key issue for us all. A consultation document is out now, and the committee could consider that early in its work programme. I would be happy to hear the views of other committee members.

Mr Home Robertson: I congratulate you on your election, convener.

There are several major European issues on the agenda, including the constitution of the European Union and the euro. No doubt, we will want to take part in those discussions. The bread-and-butter work of the committee has been largely to increase awareness of stuff that is in the pipeline and which is being considered within European institutions or concerns new European obligations on the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament. It is important that we get into those deliberations early, before things are set in concrete.

As you are about to discover, convener, our clerks have to sift through a huge volume of stuff. We must try to identify what is relevant and important for Scotland as early as possible and farm that around other committees, ensuring that we react in good time to represent Scottish interests. For example, a paper on food supplements and traditional herbal medicines has been circulated recently and is attracting some interest. We have received a reply from the Executive, to which we might want to give some attention shortly. That is an important part of the work of the committee and we should carry on with it.

Dennis Canavan: As a member of the previous committee, I had an input into the legacy paper before the election. I would like to flag up some issues that should be given priority.

I agree with John Home Robertson about the future constitution of Europe, on which there is continuing debate. We have an important contribution to make in determining the role of the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament within the future constitution of the European Union, with enlargement just around the corner.

There is also the issue of the euro. In view of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's most recent statement, there has been speculation that Scotland may be in a fundamentally different situation from that of other parts of the United Kingdom in terms of meeting the five economic tests. Whether that speculation is accurate may be the subject of debate. However, the committee ought to take part in the debate about the potential effect of the UK's entering the euro zone on the Scottish economy and Scottish business and employment, and about the convergence tests and so on. We would be failing in our duty if we did not do something substantial on that.

In the other paper that has been prepared by the clerks, it is suggested that about 10 per cent of our work load should concern external affairs other than European Union issues. I am not sure whether 10 per cent is enough. The committee's remit was widened just before the election and we never really got down to doing much—if anything—about our role in external relations outside the European Union. The legacy paper refers to the suggestion—made by me—that we undertake an inquiry into the merits of tartan day. I did not want an inquiry simply into tartan day, however; I wanted an inquiry into Scottish-American relations, which would look into politics, economics, trade and cultural exchange and determine whether tartan day is an effective way of celebrating or expanding British-American relations.

Another area that I would like us to work on is relations with our Celtic cousins in the National

Assembly for Wales, in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland.

10:45

The Convener: Thank you, Dennis. You raised a lot of points there.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I echo the points that have been made about the European convention. I note that we should learn the final outcomes of the convention on 20 and 21 June and I expect that the clerks will present us with a fairly detailed paper. Analysing those outcomes and considering their effects on our devolved responsibilities will be major tasks for the committee in the months ahead, probably creating a massive work load. Other committees' areas of responsibility may also be affected.

I note with interest Dennis Canavan's comments on external affairs. He served on the committee in the first session of the Parliament and knows precisely how much time we can afford to devote to that issue. I am struck by the raft of proposals that seem to come to this committee from the European Commission. Every one of those proposals has an effect on the lives and businesses of people in Scotland. John Home Robertson referred to the volume of documentation. That, too, will be a major task for the committee. I would like to think that, as each paper arrives, the clerks will give the committee a brief synopsis—for the new members in particular, who are less experienced than the others. That will be a massive task.

Mr Home Robertson: If we try to do that for each and every paper, we will be buried.

Phil Gallie: I said "brief".

The Convener: The legacy paper talks about ways of prioritising the sifting of legislation and the many regulations that come from Europe. I hope that we can revisit those points in our briefings.

Mr Morrison: Three members of the committee have a distinct advantage in having served on the previous committee. My question may be for the clerks rather than for you, convener, but how are we going to establish a programme of work for the next year? We have only a couple of weeks until the end of June. Obviously, the purpose of today's meeting has been to choose a convener and deputy convener. We can all knock around ideas about structural funds, the euro debate or whatever, but will we settle on a programme of work before the summer recess?

I was interested in what Dennis Canavan said about the Celtic diaspora and about building on what has already been done in respect of relations with Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There have been good examples of bridge

building between the Celtic communities of Scotland and Ireland. As far as Scottish-American relations are concerned, the presence of Trent Lott cast a long, dark, ugly shadow over tartan day and all those events. That will be an area of interest to Dennis and other members.

However, my primary concern is how we can plan our programme of work. Between now and the end of the summer recess, how will we filter members' ideas?

The Convener: I will address that point and then invite Stephen Imrie, the clerk, to add his comments. One of the ideas behind this first meeting was to take ideas from round the table and to reflect on the legacy paper from the previous committee. I understand that the Conveners Group is advising all committees to go on away days as soon as possible so that members can have informal chats about how to prioritise the issues that they want to take up. Stephen Imrie will say a few words about that forum, at which we could discuss those issues. For the next meeting of the committee, we hope to produce a paper that distils some of the issues that have been raised today so that we can prioritise them.

Stephen Imrie (Clerk): Our suggestion to the committee is not to rush into deciding on an inquiry, but to take a few weeks—perhaps up to the summer recess—to reflect on the matter. There appears to be a consensus on a number of the issues that have been discussed. We will be delighted to bring the ideas back in a distilled form and give members an indication of the timetables to which others are working. That might give the committee an indication of when it has to start and complete inquiries in order to fit in with the European decision-making process.

If members agree to have an away day, our idea is to hold it fairly soon and to keep it informal. That would enable us to brief members at length about the way that the committee used to work in practice and, with the committee's agreement, to invite others to come and talk to the committee. The people who would come to give the committee their ideas could include members of the public or representatives of organisations such as the European Commission's office and the European Parliament's office in Scotland. We could then distil the ideas down into a work programme.

In the past, the committee has placed strong emphasis on the Commission's annual work programme, which is published every January. It spells out for the year ahead the legislative proposals that will emerge from the European Union. At that stage, the committee would visit the EU institutions in Brussels and meet members of the European Parliament and commissioners to

get a feel for the year ahead. The committee would then define its work programme on that basis, although it would retain some flexibility because things could come up during the year that it might want to work on.

Our advice to the committee is that we bring back some distilled thoughts to the next meeting and find out whether there is a consensus on the proposals. If the committee has an away day shortly after that, the committee will have the foundations of a work programme for the year.

Mr Morrison: I have a question for the clerk. The legacy paper mentions what other committees expect from this committee. Do we know, for example, what the Environment and Rural Development Committee expects from this committee?

The Convener: That is a good question; perhaps we should ask that committee what it expects from us.

Stephen Imrie: I would be delighted to get the committee more material on that.

There has been a sea change, of which members might wish to be advised. In the past, the committee was very much the sole repository of European activities in the Parliament, but in the latter days of the Parliament's first session there were the beginnings—certainly in the Rural Development Committee—of activity on European issues that were relevant to the subject committees. The subject committees now look for advance warning and early intelligence from the European and External Relations Committee to enable them to get into the detail of justice policy, common fisheries policy, transport policy and so on.

I suspect that all the other committees will have an away day and that all of those will have a European element. We should be able to give the committee feedback on what the Environment and Rural Development Committee might do on European stuff, for example. We can help the subject committees by providing early intelligence. The European and External Relations Committee tends to focus on the horizontal aspects—the broader-brush aspects—such as enlargement, the euro, the treaties and so on.

The Convener: Alasdair Morrison raises a good point. A great deal of legislation impacts on the Scottish Parliament, so if we are to be focused and effective the other committees might have to play a role in scrutinising European legislation.

Irene Oldfather: I will pick up on the important matter of early intelligence, which John Home Robertson raised. One of the mechanisms that the previous committee put in place was a post in Brussels to consider what information is around,

how it can be brought back to the Parliament and how we can support the subject committees. It might be helpful to have an early meeting with the new member of staff, who is now in post in Brussels, to seek from him further information on what he sees as the key issues that will develop within the committees in the European Parliament and so on over the next year.

The Convener: That is a good idea—I am sure that we can take that up as well.

Mr Home Robertson: We could all cite examples of things that have percolated through the system and, by the time we have realised that they are there, it has been too late. For example, it is obvious that whoever has been working up the legislation on rules on the transport of animals from islands and on waste water treatment on islands has been based in mainland Europe and simply is not aware of the special circumstances that can occur in areas such as Scotland. Mineral supplements is another example. We cannot overstate the importance of getting early intelligence about what is going on and getting early input. There are some good people in Brussels, within and around the Commission, who can brief the committee and, indeed, the Parliament. If we talk to the right people at the right time, we can do an effective job for Scottish interests. That is what we should try to do.

The Convener: I agree that it is important that the committee puts some effort into getting the mechanisms for scrutiny right. Clearly, we cannot do all the scrutiny ourselves, but our responsibility is to get the mechanisms right. Perhaps the clerks could clarify that in one of the briefing papers for the next meeting so that we can see in black and white exactly how the mechanisms will work. We can build on the recommendations in the legacy paper as well.

Are there any other comments on the legacy paper?

Irene Oldfather: On the timing of an away day, Stephen Imrie suggested that it should be quite soon. We do not have much time left before the recess. I do not know about other members of the committee but my diary is absolutely chock-a-block until the recess. I am not sure whether, when he said soon, Stephen meant in the next couple of weeks or early on after the recess. It would be helpful for members to know that so that they can plan their diaries.

The Convener: Perhaps the clerk could contact members individually to clarify the diary situation. Are members happy with that?

Phil Gallie: Is Irene Oldfather suggesting that there will not be a second meeting of the committee before the recess?

The Convener: There will be a second meeting in two weeks' time. I will clarify the details of that at the end of this meeting.

Phil Gallie: That is fine, but new members have a lot to pick up to try to keep pace. Somebody such as Irene has been steeped in the work of the committee for a long time. The summer recess will give new members a chance to do that to some degree. I, for one, will need quite a lot of information in that period, particularly about any upcoming issues, so that we can prepare for those.

The Convener: I encourage members to contact the clerk individually if there is specific information that they want on any issue. You are free to do that.

Unavoidably, our agenda has been set for us, to a certain degree, by the big European and international debates that are taking place. That is reflected in members' comments. There is the impact on Scotland of the EU constitution and of the euro and their respective impacts on the Scottish Parliament. I have no doubt that those matters will be at the heart of the paper from the clerks.

Dennis Canavan makes an important point about the committee's role in external relations. This is not only a European committee but a committee for European and external relations. We should take on board Dennis's comments about that. Given that the First Minister now has responsibility for Europe and external relations, I expect that the committee will want to call him to give evidence soon. It is important to get the First Minister's views on the Executive's role in external relations and not just in Europe, and I envisage that happening sooner rather than later.

I see Gordon Jackson sneaking into the room. I welcome him to the meeting.

Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab): I apologise for being late.

The Convener: You are in time for the final item, but before we proceed I ask you to declare any interests.

Gordon Jackson: I do not have any interests that are relevant to the work of the committee.

The Convener: Thank you.

Briefings

The Convener: The final item on the agenda is any additional briefings that committee members require from the clerks for our next meeting, which is in two weeks' time. I think that we have covered most of this already.

I take it that the committee is agreed that the clerks should produce briefings on the issues that have been raised by members, which should include the beginnings of a draft work programme that we can consider further and more details about our away day. Also, one thing that has not been mentioned is a visit to Brussels at some point, especially for new committee members. A visit to Brussels would help us familiarise ourselves with the institutions and meet the relevant people. We did not discuss that, but perhaps we should ask the clerks to give us further details on that.

11:00

Dennis Canavan: The clerks should also provide us with an early indication of the programme for future meetings, so that we can get the dates into our diaries as soon as possible. Similarly, we need to know the dates for the away day and for any possible visit to Brussels.

The Convener: That is a good point.

Mr Home Robertson: In that context, when the clerks are arranging dates for meetings, they should liaise with the clerks of other committees and with the Holyrood progress group. All kinds of difficulties can arise when members are on two committees that are meeting at the same time.

The Convener: I know that the clerks will try their best to get a date that suits everyone. The clerks will communicate with each member about the timings of our regular meetings.

Irene Oldfather: Will you confirm that we will also receive a paper on the UK consultation on regional policy? The closing date for the consultation is imminent—I think that it is in July. It is important that the committee at least receives a briefing on that.

The Convener: That is a fair point.

John Home Robertson mentioned food supplements. I envisage that that will appear as a brief item perhaps on our next agenda, given that the issue is live at the moment and that the committee produced a report on it in the previous session.

If members have no other items that they want to raise, I advise members that our next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 24 June at 2 pm in

committee room 1. I thank all members for their attendance. I look forward to working with you. We will see you at the next meeting.

Meeting closed at 11:01.

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