



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 6 June 2019

Session 5



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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 6 June 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:33]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Bill Kidd): I welcome all members to the 10th meeting in 2019 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Item 4 is consideration of the committee's work programme and item 5 is consideration of correspondence that the committee has received. Do members agree to take items 4 and 5 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Cross-party Groups

09:34

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an application for recognition from the proposed cross-party group on Russia. Andy Wightman MSP has joined us; he would be the convener of the CPG. I welcome Andy Wightman to the meeting and invite him to make a short opening statement on the purpose of the group.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): Thank you very much, convener. As the committee will be aware, a CPG on Russia existed in a previous parliamentary session; it also existed earlier in this parliamentary session. It is a group that is intended to foster better understanding and awareness of Russia, its place in the world and our relationships with it.

From your papers, you will be aware that the group was disbanded—I am not sure whether that is the right word—due to a failure to comply with the rules and I am happy to talk about that if you wish. However, the significant point is that I think that there is a growing interest in Russia, our relationships with Russia and Russia's place in the world. We are keen to see the group re-established.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): What was the membership of the original group and the wider membership of the group in this session? Obviously, there are MSPs who are members, but I did not get a sense from the papers of who is coming along to the group. Who are the interested parties that want to get into discussion with MSPs about Russia's position in the world?

Andy Wightman: I am afraid that I do not recall who the members were in the previous version of the group. I did not prep myself for that. However, the non-MSP members of the group that was wound up in 2017 included the Princess Dashkova centre at the University of Edinburgh, the Scotland-Russia Forum, the National Museums of Scotland and Thorntons Law LLP. I think that there was one more organisation and there were a number of individuals.

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): Have you contacted those organisations and have they agreed to join?

Andy Wightman: Yes, indeed—

Tom Mason: Why did you not list them on the application?

Andy Wightman: The application went in immediately after we had an initial meeting a few weeks ago to agree the purpose of the group,

decide on the office bearers and submit the application. We wanted to get the application in early. We have emailed the members of the previous CPG and so far, all bar one of the individuals want to become involved again; one has just not replied yet. The Princess Dashkova centre at the University of Edinburgh and the Scotland-Russia Forum have said that they wish to become members but of course that will only be formally agreed at the first meeting of the CPG.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): You said that you contacted previous members of the group. Did you not think to email all MSPs and researchers to say that you were thinking of setting up the group again and to see whether there was wider interest in it?

Andy Wightman: I am pretty sure that I sent out an email some months ago asking whether MSPs were interested. That is when the five MSPs listed in the application form expressed interest. I do not recall—

Maureen Watt: I cannot recall seeing an email. I tried to check back and I could not see a CPG on Russia coming up in any items, including deleted items. It is important that CPGs do more to reach out to MSPs, not just when setting up a group, but when they are having a meeting. There may be something on the agenda that interests people who do not necessarily want to be members of the group. It is important that CPGs—not just this one, but all CPGs—are more expansive in the information that they send out.

Andy Wightman: Yes. I confirm that we circulated an email to invite all MSPs to the meetings that we did have. I can say a little bit more about our meetings if you like, convener.

The committee's information notes correctly that there were two formal meetings of the cross-party group. The first was on 28 October 2016 and the second was on 9 February 2017, when we had Dr Derek Averre from the University of Birmingham to talk about Russia's policies in Ukraine and Syria.

We held two more events in Parliament that year. The cross-party group hosted the events, but they were not formal CPG meetings; that was my fault. Plenty MSPs attended those meetings, which means that if I had made them formal meetings, the group would have been in compliance with the rules.

On 9 May 2017, we had an event called "Loaded Words". About 100 people attended that, including five or six MSPs, plus four or five MSP staff. Speakers included Ben Nimmo from the Atlantic Council digital forensic research lab, Andras Racz from the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest, Floriana Fossato from the centre for media and society at the University of Oxford, and Jakub Kalensky from the east

stratcom task force of the European Union. That was a popular event that attracted a lot of media attention. As I recall, it even got on to the front page of *The Herald*.

On 25 October 2017, the CPG hosted another event—not a formal meeting—with Angus Roxburgh, who I am sure members will know as the former BBC Moscow correspondent. He was talking about his memoirs, "Moscow Calling: Memoirs of a Foreign Correspondent". Again, that meeting was well attended. We had more than 100 people and, as I recall, there was a waiting list.

We were actually very active, but it is perhaps my fault that I did not think to make those last two meetings, which plenty MSPs attended, formal meetings of the CPG.

The Convener: Thank you for that. There are always lessons to be learned.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): One of the topics that you have indicated that you will cover is propaganda and disinformation. You have covered a number of organisations that will not be members of the group. How will you manage your engagement, if there is to be any, with representatives of the Russian state and other organisations that might have links to the Russian state, such as some of the media organisations that might have a less than independent viewpoint? Have you considered that?

Andy Wightman: If the CPG is approved, we will engage as appropriate with representatives of the Russian Government. For example, we are keen to pursue the subject of trade and commerce. At an event at the University of Edinburgh, I met somebody who used to work for the British Chambers of Commerce in Moscow. They were not involved in the previous iteration of the group and were very keen to become involved and participate in a meeting.

If we had a meeting on trade and commerce, it would be almost inevitable that we would at least reach out to the commercial attaché—or whatever they are called at the Russian consulate—on that. We would engage as appropriate.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: What about organisations such as RT, or Sputnik, which has a base in Edinburgh? Have you considered those?

Andy Wightman: I do not think that it is usual for media outlets to be members of cross-party groups. Those particular organisations are agents of the Russian state and were the subject of the meeting that we had on 9 May 2017. In fact, one of them was very vocal in the Russian media about why it had not been invited to the meeting, but we had decided not to invite it.

Tom Mason: On a point of consistency, Russia does not appear in the Government's trading nations report, on the list of possible trading partners, yet we are setting up a CPG on Russia. Does that make sense?

Andy Wightman: Could you clarify that? We trade with Russia.

Tom Mason: The recent Government report—I think that it is called “A Trading Nation”—listed the countries that we would ideally trade with in order to get the best returns. That list, which included Japan, the US, Germany and various other countries, did not mention Russia. Setting up a cross-party group on Russia seems inconsistent with the objective of trading with the countries set out in that list.

09:45

Andy Wightman: With respect, I do not know the report that you are referring to, but our intention has nothing to do with what the United Kingdom Government thinks—

Tom Mason: It is actually the Scottish Government.

Andy Wightman: Or indeed what the Scottish Government thinks. This is a cross-party group of parliamentarians and outside interests, and it has nothing to do with Government.

As far as volume of trade is concerned, Russia is not, I think, high on the UK or Scotland's list of trade relationships. I am sorry that I do not know where it is or have that figure, but it will not be in the top 10. However, there are very strong and extremely historic links between Scotland and Russia. In the current world climate, we need to build trust and confidence and reach out to others, and I think that Russia is one of the most important countries with which to engage in order to build peace and stability in Europe and the wider world. Scotland has a key role to play in that respect.

The Convener: We will have to bring the discussion to a close, as we have run on a bit longer than we expected to, but Gil Paterson has one final question.

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I have just a quick question. Mr Wightman, you seemed to allude to the previous group ceasing to function because the non-attendance of MSPs made it non-compliant, but you did not actually say that. Was that the reason?

Andy Wightman: Yes. I thought that that was set out in your papers.

Gil Paterson: I just wanted you to put it on the public record.

Andy Wightman: That is fine. As I understand it, the requirement is for a minimum of two quorate meetings a year. We had two formal meetings of the CPG, only one of which was quorate, and we did not hold an annual general meeting, because we were aware that we had failed to meet the rules. I suppose that we could have convened a pseudo-CPG to comply with the rules, but as I have said, it is my fault that I did not think to make the two extremely popular events that we held formal meetings of the CPG. If we had done 10 minutes of formal business before getting into the substance, that would have kept us straight. However, what you have said is correct, Mr Paterson.

Gil Paterson: I would not beat myself up about that. It happens.

Andy Wightman: I will take your advice on that. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That was a worthwhile evidence-taking session, and I hope that it was not too stressful for you, Mr Wightman. Thank you for your attendance. After we have had a conversation about the matter, we will let you know our decision, which I hope will be as soon as possible.

Andy Wightman: Thank you very much, convener.

The Convener: We move to agenda item 3, which is to consider whether to accord recognition to the proposed cross-party group on Russia and the proposed cross-party group on the USA. Do members have any comments?

Gil Paterson: As I said, I do not think that Mr Wightman should beat himself up over this. We can all make mistakes.

I am not judging whether the proposal is good or bad on this basis, but I point out that such a turnout to an event suggests that there is a need and that the group will be successful. I propose, therefore, that we approve the group.

Mark Ruskell: I agree. It is clear that it is in the wider public interest to have this group and that it has been successful. Perhaps the only glitch has been the way in which the secretariat has been organised and the failure to identify the two very popular meetings as meetings of the CPG itself. Clearly, had that been done, it would have remained compliant. If the committee was minded to approve the group, we could write back to Mr Wightman with some tips on how to ensure compliance. As I said, it seems to be very much in the public interest and it provides an interesting match with the proposed USA CPG.

The Convener: To be honest, Andy Wightman recognised that there were secretariat issues to

look at, and the fact that the issue has been brought up today will be useful in that respect.

Does anyone else have any comments?

Tom Mason: I would have been happier to have seen more information on the application, instead of having to wait for it to be set out in the presentation. I have no objection to the proposal as such, but I find it a bit inconsistent with the fact that, as a nation, we do not have Russia high in our sights as a trading partner. However, that does not matter in itself.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that.

Do members agree to accord recognition to the proposed cross-party group on Russia?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I will move on to the proposed CPG on the USA. Dean Lockhart, the convener of the group, has provided the committee with the further information that we asked for. Do members have any comments?

Gil Paterson: The list of people who will be attending the group suggests that it, too, will be fairly successful. In my view, the questions that we asked last time round have been very well answered and I have no problem with approving the group.

Tom Mason: I agree.

Mark Ruskell: I agree, too. The information that we asked for was supplementary, but it paints a stronger picture of the group's work and focus. Comments from the US Consulate and others have been supplied, and it is useful to see who exactly will be contributing. I am therefore content to approve it.

The Convener: Everyone seems to be of one mind that we accord recognition to the proposed cross-party group on the USA.

That brings us to the end of the public part of the meeting, so I must ask the public to leave. Thank you all very much.

09:52

Meeting continued in private until 10:19.

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