

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 23 September 2003
(Afternoon)

Session 2

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

4th Meeting 2003, Session 2

CONVENER

*Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West)
*Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP)
*Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)
*Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)
Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
*Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab)
*Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)
Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*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 23 September 2003

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:07*]

Regional Development Funding

The Convener (Richard Lochhead): Good afternoon, colleagues, and welcome to our fourth meeting in the second session. I have received no apologies for today's meeting. I hope that the members who have not arrived yet will do so before the end of the meeting.

We move straight to item 1 on the agenda, which is our proposed action on structural funding. We discussed the issue at our last meeting and decided to wait until the United Kingdom Government had made a statement on its intentions, as we knew that such a statement was imminent.

As members will see from their papers, Patricia Hewitt made a statement to the House of Commons on behalf of the UK Government, in which she indicated that the Government had consulted on the future of regional funding and had listened to consultees. Generally speaking, the Government is to continue with its original proposals. However, it will make further information available to everyone, which was one of the requests from all those who made submissions in the consultation.

I hope that members have had a chance to go through the paper and to read the UK Government statement. Members will recall that a number of concerns were expressed by the organisations that made submissions to the committee. Those concerns revolved around the UK Government's proposals for the renationalisation of the funds and the lack of information about guarantees. The UK Government said that if regional funding were to be renationalised, it would continue to match the funds that would have come from Europe.

Before I take comments on the paper, I want to bring it to the committee's attention that no other House of Commons or Scottish Parliament committee intends to undertake an inquiry into the issue at this point in time. The issue has moved on since we inquired into it. Members around the table have taken a close interest in some of the issues. The Scottish European structural funds

forum is looking at the issue. Members will remember that the Executive submitted its views to the UK Government through that forum. However, the forum is not an open forum like the committee; it is a closed shop. I hope that we can take the issues on board.

One of the options that are set out in the paper is that we conduct a brief inquiry into the subject. Given how things have moved on, such a brief inquiry would allow us to put out a call for evidence on some of the basic questions and take evidence from the relevant ministers. I invite members to comment on the paper.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): As it says in the paper, the debate has a long way to run. I would be surprised if, in the end, other Scottish Parliament committees or those at Westminster do not look at the issue. I am in favour of the option that the convener recommended of holding a short, focused inquiry. That would enable us to put forward our views at an early stage.

Ultimately, the committee's responsibility for the issue will cross over with that of the Enterprise and Culture Committee. If the whole issue of the funds that are to be repatriated or renationalised is to be considered, it is almost inevitable that that committee will want to look at the issue at some stage. As I said, we should hold a new, focused and brief inquiry. We are in the early stages of what will be a lengthy debate.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I have read the paper very carefully and my first comment is that I do not like the word "renationalisation"; "repatriation" is more acceptable for all of us.

There has been a huge element of feet dragging at Westminster. Having served on the European Scrutiny Committee at Westminster for many years, I do not see why additional work cannot be done at this stage. Paragraph 3 of the paper says:

"The Committee of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was also not looking specifically at this issue, but was just completing a look at regional disparities in England and Wales."

It seems to me that somehow or another Scotland is being squeezed out of the debate. The Scottish Parliament—I use the word "Parliament" advisedly, as we are not an Assembly—should take a much firmer stance on the issue. We should involve ourselves in a direct exchange of letters with the Trade and Industry Committee, the Select Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Treasury Committee, all of which have responsibilities in the area.

No committee in the House of Commons is looking at the issue. Although we might say that it will be 2005 or 2006 before all of the

rearrangements come about, if we do not start in 2003, Scotland could be left behind. Speaking as a member who represents the Highlands, I think that it is important that we get involved.

I suggest that we contact the Scottish Executive. Page 4 of the paper says:

"The Scottish Executive has not yet produced a definitive public statement on the merits of"

the various proposals. The paper goes on to say:

"the DTI hopes to have an initial policy response by early September 2003."

Is there such a response or have I just missed out on one of the papers?

As we are the committee that deals with Europe and external relations, we should put very firm pressure on the various committees in the House of Commons and on the Scottish Executive to ensure that Scotland is not left trailing behind. I know what happens with European documentation—it gets lost.

Like Keith Raffan, I support option 3.

The Convener: Just for clarification, I confirm that the impending UK response to which Margaret Ewing referred would have been the statement that Patricia Hewitt made to the House of Commons last week.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I have further questions on the subject. It seems to me that European parliamentarians will determine that repatriation is unlikely in any case. That might affect the longer-term activities at Westminster. The issue that runs through the debate is that we all feel that we will lose out to a degree to the new incoming countries. What will that mean to the UK Government and the Scottish Executive when we approach them for support for our own industries when we feel that that is necessary?

In all the documentation that I have seen, I have not seen anything that pertains to that aspect of the subject. The changes to regional development funding could mean that we lose out on structural funds and end up with over-regulation from Europe. I am concerned that single market rules could limit us from supporting our industries, companies and educational processes. We should consider that issue.

14:15

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): Phil Gallie raises an important point. I wanted to bring up something about the inquiry. The original consultation document refers to the importance of regional flexibility in relation to state aid. Such flexibility would be very important to Scotland. Our predecessor committee actively sought that for Scotland and welcomed it in its initial

consideration of the consultation paper. It is not explicitly mentioned in the key questions in the committee paper, but I hope that we can build it in, because it is important.

I welcome the updated paper and the reference to the Scottish European structural funds forum. Margaret Ewing mentioned that the Executive has not produced a definitive statement. As I attended the structural funds forum, I can tell her that the reasoning behind that is that external research is going on and is being reported to the forum. Local authorities, universities and other sectors throughout Scotland are represented on the forum. People feel that it is important that we get the academic input before any definitive Scottish view goes out.

Also, as the Department of Trade and Industry has produced a response to the consultation, we will probably find that Westminster will begin to look into the issue. The United Kingdom delegation at the Committee of the Regions has discussed it. Obviously, regions throughout England find themselves in a similar position. They are wondering what will happen and want to know how the proposal will affect them post 2006.

A wider debate about the matter is going on, but many have been waiting for the minister's views before participating. I am sure that further inquiries will come on stream and it is important that we link into them. It is particularly important that we link into the work of the Scottish European structural funds forum.

The committee has a role to play in open and transparent government by inviting evidence from interested groups from throughout Scotland on what the proposal will mean for them. Last time, the committee was minded to work towards option 3 and I would be happy to continue in that vein.

The Convener: Thank you for that, Irene, and for shedding light on other issues.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I have a couple of words of caution. One, which is rather pedantic and procedural, is that we are the European and External Relations Committee and, whether we like it or not, we are moving to a position in which the European structural funds will not be much use to us after 2006, so what we are talking about is not really European. The funding will be repatriated or renationalised. Whitehall is proposing a reinvention of structural funds so, strictly speaking, is the matter European any more? However, if we can consider it, by all means, let us do it.

The parallel word of caution is that the situation is difficult. Other European countries will be watching what is going on in Britain. Our Government has said that it intends to find a way of reinventing structural funds to ensure that they

continue to be available to assist regions that need them. We should do nothing that makes that more difficult in relation to other parts of the European Union by attracting unwelcome attention. It would also be a mistake for us Scots to do anything that might jeopardise the possible scale of our share of renationalised funds. This matter needs to be approached with some caution with the objective of getting the best possible deal for Scotland.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): I favour option 3:

"launching a new, focused call for views".

However, I hope that as well as calling for views, whether by written evidence, oral evidence or both, we will have time to come to some firm conclusions on the matter. My recollection is that our predecessor committee failed to reach any firm conclusions because of time constraints—we merely sat on the fence. I hope that, after hearing others' views, this committee will be able to come to some firm conclusions and make some recommendations.

We should obviously take evidence from the Scottish Executive because, as Margaret Ewing pointed out, it has not yet produced a definitive public statement on the merits or otherwise of the UK Government's proposal. Obviously we want to get an update on the Executive's thinking on that matter, as well as the views of local authorities. We got some views from local authorities in the previous session, but an update would be valuable. No doubt other organisations such as the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry Scotland would like to give us some evidence.

We should also try to get—directly or indirectly—the views of some of the other states in the European Union, including some of the new applicant states. When we assess the various views and evidence we should think not only of the effect on Scotland. The Scottish dimension is obviously very important for the committee, for our Parliament and for the people whom we represent, but we ought to consider the wider repercussions throughout the EU, including the possible impact on new member states—in particular the poorest member states. I hope that we could also encompass that in our inquiry.

The Convener: I know from previous discussions that the committee has had with the Czech Republic that that state has strong views on the issue. Our videoconferencing session with the Finnish Parliament is coming up, so that will be an opportunity to explore these issues.

Mr Raffan: I want to come back on what John Home Robertson said as I disagree with it rather strongly. In her statement to the House of Commons on 17 September, Patricia Hewitt stated:

"we put forward for consultation a proposal to reform the EU Structural and Cohesion Funds through the establishment of an EU Framework for Devolved Regional Policy."—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 17 September 2003; Vol 410, c 53WS.]

That is clearly a matter for the committee. It is a question of what we are allowed to do once the EU and the Commission have discussed the issue. The matter is still very much within our remit and we should examine it.

I strongly agree with Dennis Canavan's suggestion that we should consult other countries, in particular the accession countries—one of which I visited last weekend. It is very important that they be consulted. It may be that that might be difficult prior to accession, but this brief and focused inquiry should be by way of an interim inquiry. We may well want to return to the issue again in the course of a lengthy debate that will last until 2005-06.

Irene Oldfather: I will follow on from the point that Dennis Canavan and Keith Raffan made. The production of the European Commission's cohesion report, which I think should be published in November or December, will be vital to the inquiry. The report will give us a picture of exactly what this will mean throughout the EU and in particular for the new accession states. That will take on board many of the points that Keith Raffan and Dennis Canavan have raised. We have not mentioned the cohesion report, but I have taken it as a foregone conclusion that we will consider it and take it on board in our deliberations. That will be important.

We must also consider the EU budget across the board. What are the alternatives? What will the budget have to be in order to maintain cohesion policy? The EU budget and the cohesion policy should form part of the basis of the inquiry.

Phil Gallie: I might be looking at the matter totally the wrong way. However, as far as I can see the accession countries are looking forward to coming into the EU and one of the reasons for that is that they will get access to European structural funds. They cannot wait to benefit from that and I do not blame them one bit for having that in their minds. I thought that the remit of the committee was to look at European matters from the perspective of how they affect Scotland and to consider the benefits and disadvantages for Scotland. I would like any inquiry that we conduct to be centred very much on Scotland's interests.

On the distribution of European structural funds, I think that disadvantage for Scotland will be built into the fact that we are bringing in poorer countries, to which Dennis Canavan referred. On that basis, we must look at ways in which Scotland can get round those problems. I do not take the same view as John Home Robertson, who

suggests that we have to look at the wider European ideal.

Mr Home Robertson: Did I say that?

Phil Gallie: You did in your analysis. You did not use those words, but you asked how it would affect the wider European objectives if we looked at some of the aspects that have been suggested. I will read the *Official Report* to see what you said, and stand to be corrected. However, as far as I am concerned, Scotland's interests come first, and that is the way in which we should approach the issue.

Mrs Ewing: I have listened to the various contributions. This issue will have a huge impact across Scotland and the UK. The clerks might be able to tell us whether the issues are going to be examined by the Finance Committee, the Enterprise and Culture Committee and the Local Government and Transport Committee. Regional funding impacts on so many aspects of life. Could our clerks contact the conveners of those committees to see whether they wish to contribute to any deliberations that we wish to pursue?

The Convener: I know that the clerks to other committees are waiting for this committee to take the lead. There will be lots of scope to involve other committees.

I propose to bring this discussion to an end, unless anyone who has not spoken wishes to do so. We have a consensus that we should proceed with option 3, and hold a short, focused inquiry. Many members made important points, which we will take on board and include in our inquiry. The nature of the inquiry will be to assess the impact on Scotland of this debate and the options that exist. As Dennis Canavan said, it will be up to the committee to reach conclusions. However, none of the issues that have been raised round the table are mutually exclusive, so they can all be built into the inquiry.

The paper suggests that we should have the inquiry wrapped up by Christmas, if everything goes according to plan. We will put out an open call for evidence, but if anyone round the table feels that there is someone who should give evidence, please pass their details to the clerks so that we can ensure that they are notified.

Phil Gallie: I have a question on the completion date. We thought that there was a need for urgency, given the time limits on the previous consultation, but now we are talking about well into 2005, so we may not have to bring the inquiry to a conclusion so soon.

The Convener: We will remain flexible. The cohesion report from Europe will come out before the end of the year, so many of the initial decisions will be taken early on as to the direction of the

debate and, if we want to influence it at an early stage, we may want to complete our inquiry sooner rather than later. However, we can play it by ear, depending on the evidence that is produced.

If everyone is happy, we can instruct the clerks to proceed with that inquiry.

Members indicated agreement.

Draft European Union Constitutional Treaty

14:28

The Convener: Item 2 is our proposed inquiry into the impact on Scotland of the convention on the future of Europe and the EU constitutional treaty. Before I discuss the meat of the paper that was given to members, I ask members to note that we have received a reply from Andy Kerr, the minister for Europe, who gave evidence at our last meeting. He discussed the intergovernmental conference and the constitution, and sent us a follow-up letter, which is on members' desks. I hope that members have had a chance to read it.

To put our forthcoming discussion into context, I should say that at the meeting the minister touched on issues such as his support for the Executive being involved in a national debate and perhaps attending the IGC. However, that does not seem to be the case in his follow-up letter and we may wish to take that into account. The letter indicates that only member state Administrations will be represented at the conference. There is no indication in the letter that the Executive plans to have a public debate. Given that we are about to embark on a discussion about our having a national debate, it is important that we are aware of that feedback from Andy Kerr and the Executive.

We initially agreed to have a civic debate to involve the people of Scotland and to heighten the profile of the future of Europe debate and the contents of the draft constitution. Our briefing paper suggests that we could have three to five public hearings around the country that would be along the lines that we initially agreed. We may need a third party, in the form of the Scottish Civic Forum, to help us to organise the hearings, which would enable us to engage the public—that would be the inquiry's core—and take evidence from relevant witnesses. If we move speedily, we could have the hearings in the next couple of months. Clearly, time is of the essence, so anything that we agree will take priority. The clerks and I would get things in train as soon as possible.

Other countries are consulting the public through various initiatives that are similar to what we propose to do. No other public consultation on the issue is on the cards for Scotland. If we support the idea of public consultation, it appears to fall to the committee to push it forward.

Peter Hain previously offered to come back to speak to the committee, if we wanted him to do so. We may wish to pursue that option, if we decide to have a short evidence-taking inquiry alongside the public hearings.

Members have had a chance to read the briefing paper, so I invite comments that will allow us to reach a conclusion about what form the consultation should take.

Irene Oldfather: Obviously, there has been continuing work in this area over the past couple of years by the predecessor committee and the present committee. However, I am a little concerned about the timing of the public consultation, because the IGC begins next week.

I note from the briefing paper that many other countries have been doing during September what we propose to do. The predecessor committee did consultation work last year and the Executive did a lot of public consultation last year. I am not too sure what is to be gained at this stage by perhaps raising expectations by inviting the public in and asking them to look at the treaties and so on.

I do not think that there is much opportunity to influence matters at this stage in the game. The predecessor committee undertook quite a bit of work and, having consulted civic Scotland, gave pointers on what we wanted from the IGC. I believe that we now have two volumes of evidence on the issue. I would not like to raise expectations within the community as a whole about our being able to do something, because it is too late in the negotiations for us to influence matters.

I am always open to consulting the public. However, much depends on what we want to achieve with the public hearings. It is not a realistic ambition to consult the public with the intention thereafter of trying to change treaties. I want to know more clearly what the civic consultation is to be about. If the purpose of the consultation is to inform and discuss, that might be okay, but if the intention is to try to change things, we have left it a bit late. That is no criticism of the present or the predecessor committee, both of which have done a great deal of work over the past two years, as committee members will be aware. However, I am happy to hear what other committee members feel about the issue.

The Convener: On the time scale, my understanding is that the heads of state will meet in early October and that the Italian presidency wants to wrap up the IGC by the end of the year. However, there is every possibility that the IGC may go beyond that. We do not know. There will be many meetings of the foreign ministers between now and the end of the year. It is September now, so time is of the essence. If we are to go down the road of an inquiry we must decide that today and start preparing.

Mr Raffan: I strongly agree with what Irene Oldfather has said. I am concerned that there is a slight contradiction in the briefing paper. It says that bids will take some time to compile and go through, and that

"the organisation of the civic events will take some time to arrange."

We are then told that the events are to run in October and November, but October is only just over a week away. The schedule will not work out, so we have a major problem there.

I have reservations about delegating the organisation of the events to the Scottish Civic Forum. The Scottish Civic Forum was, frankly, a disappointment to many of us during the first session. We had hoped that it would have a much higher profile and would do much more. In fact, it was nearly invisible. Notwithstanding the newsletter and papers that it circulates, from what I have seen of what the forum does, I am not confident that it is capable of organising the events on our behalf. There is a danger that we will organise the events in a way that is too rushed, with the result that they will go off at half cock, that hardly anybody will attend them, and that the whole thing will turn out to be chaotic. That could be detrimental to the reputation not only of the committee but of the Parliament. It is too late for us to affect events. Some other countries have interesting plans, which include conferences. Perhaps we ought to organise a conference once the final draft of the constitution treaty is agreed—which I think will probably happen under the Irish presidency in the new year.

There is a danger in trying to organise the civic events at this time, although they would serve to inform. I certainly think that we have a role there, especially given the lamentable, shameful and disgraceful situation in Scotland, where none of our national media has a permanent representative in Brussels or covers anything that is going on there, including the convention. There is a complete lack of knowledge here. I was in Lithuania last weekend, and the people there know far more about what is going on than we do. We know a hell of a lot about Posh and Becks, but we know bugger all—excuse my language; delete that from the *Official Report*. We know very little through our media about what is happening with the convention. It is a national disgrace, which reflects extraordinarily badly on our broadsheet, so-called quality newspapers, which are increasingly tabloid. We have a responsibility and a role to inform. I do not see how we can enter into a debate with the public until they know what is happening, and they certainly do not know what is happening from our media.

The Convener: Indeed, the lack of coverage of European issues is a major factor in Scotland, which is perhaps an argument for more events taking place.

Dennis Canavan: I do not share Keith Raffan's views about the Scottish Civic Forum. The forum has some experience and contacts that would be

useful for helping to organise meetings throughout the country. I like the idea of a series of public meetings around Scotland. However, I wonder what the attendance at those meetings might be—despite the efforts of the Scottish Civic Forum. I suggest that we try to organise, either directly or through the Scottish Civic Forum, one major event, to be held in the chamber, similar to the one that was held in the previous session, which I think was one of the most successful events that we organised. We got good feedback about it, and it was not just the usual suspects who attended. There were people with differing views and of differing ages and some of the most positive contributions were from young school pupils. I think that something along those lines should be organised as part of our consultation process.

Mrs Ewing: I will not try to emulate Keith Raffan's language, but I thoroughly agreed with what he said about the lack of information on events in Europe that reaches the public in Scotland. There are a lot of misperceptions among the public about what the European Union is about and what it can do for us.

I have been listening to what other members have been saying, and I was wondering if we might make a link back to the paper on European structural funds that we discussed as, inevitably, structural funds and constitutional change will be interlinked. I am much in favour of Peter Hain coming to address the committee. I like putting UK Government ministers on the spot if at all possible. I would also like to hear the views of Scottish ministers, including their views on regional funds. Could we combine the subjects of the constitutional treaty and structural funds, given the limited amount of time available? Irene Oldfather mentioned the time scale for the IGC earlier. If we could combine our efforts on those topics, that would probably be better for us, and it would provide the Scottish Civic Forum and MSPs with a wider picture.

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab): I share other members' enthusiasm for public engagement, but I also share the concern expressed by Keith Raffan and Irene Oldfather. We may be too late. The clock is ticking and we may have missed the boat.

If we were to engage with UK ministers, it would be Denis MacShane who would come to the committee.

Mrs Ewing: He is a nice guy.

Mr Morrison: He is very nice and very capable, and he is doing a good job of selling Europe. I would certainly support any proposal for Denis MacShane to come to the committee. However, it takes time to publicise meetings. If we are to have any meaningful engagement, the people who are

organising the meetings have to have the opportunity to do a proper job, to do justice to the meetings.

The Convener: I do not mind the work.

Mr Morrison: My only concern is that we have missed the boat.

Phil Gallie: We are well past the time to change the proposed constitution. The President of the European Commission has made it clear that only minimal changes will be acceptable. Members have mentioned other countries. Not only are other countries consulting but they are looking to hold referendums on the issue. Somewhere along the line, the UK Government may also decide to do that. If that were to happen, it would be important to ensure that people in Scotland were informed about the contents of the constitution document. We carried out a little local survey that revealed that people do not know what is in the document or what its effects will be. A large question mark hangs over the constitution. People will say right off that they do not approve, but I do not think that that is a good enough argument for not informing people. We must give people more information to ensure that any judgments that they make are informed. We cannot change the document, but this committee can induce an element of knowledge among the public about the constitutional changes that are coming up.

Mr Home Robertson: I share the anxieties that Irene Oldfather, Alasdair Morrison and others have expressed. It would be a mistake to create the illusion that we can change things at this stage. It would be fundamentally dishonest to organise an event, or a series of events, that could be interpreted as a vehicle for changing the terms of the treaty. We should not do that.

The Convener: If we have one task over the next four years it will be to try to ensure that the phrase "we are too late" becomes redundant. It is a phrase that we have heard several times, even over the past four meetings.

Can I turn to—

Phil Gallie: May I make one point? It was only in June this year that the proposed constitution for Europe was issued. Anything that was done before that time was done without the knowledge of what would be contained in the convention's final proposals. The problem does not lie with this committee; the problem lies with the European organisations.

The Convener: I accept your point. The committee will have to consider how to persuade other people to create mechanisms into which we can input.

Irene Oldfather: I think that—

The Convener: I do not want to open up a debate.

Irene Oldfather: Well, I think that—

Mr Raffan: I want to reply to that point.

The Convener: Okay. Keith Raffan had his hand up.

Mr Raffan: You were about to go on to the minister's letter but I—

The Convener: No, I was not.

Mr Raffan: Well, okay, but I still have two points. I do not understand the situation. This is a draft treaty. The IGC is on 4 October and the Italians will want to wrap the matter up by December. However, we all know that it is likely to go on into next year. If this is a draft treaty, surely things can be inserted as well as deleted. I do not understand why the Executive seems to have thrown in the towel with regard to the Hain paper on Europe and the proposals for reform of the Committee of the Regions. I would like our minister to be pressed on this issue. He says that we will pursue matters outside the treaty process through the work of Regleg—the group of regions with legislative power. I would like clarification about what exactly he intends to do. If we have not got what we want in the initial draft, let us try to get it put in, for goodness' sake. Our minister should be pressing the UK ministers on that. In addition, I am concerned that we will not have observer status at the IGC.

14:45

The minister seems to have passed the buck back and forth—that is buried in a letter of civil service-ese. What he says is wonderful:

"you asked whether the Executive has any plans to resource and promote a national campaign across Scotland on the implications of the draft Treaty."

He states:

"I know that you have been considering a series of roadshows on the IGC."

It is like a tennis match in which he bungs the ball back into our court. The Executive has not said that it will not do anything, but it is clear that it will not do anything much.

I shall not repeat my earlier diatribe against the national Scottish media, but someone must do a roadshow and inform people. Whether we are talking about a tidying-up operation or a major step forward—which I increasingly think it is—that may require a referendum, someone ought to inform people. It is absolutely incumbent on us and a duty of the Parliament to ensure that the Scottish people know what is going on. The buck should not be passed back and forward.

The Convener: Irene Oldfather will have the final word before I wrap up the debate.

Irene Oldfather: It is important for the record that I correct one or two things that Phil Gallie said. The process that we are discussing has been the most democratic way of reforming treaties since the 1986 Single European Act and the Treaty on European Union, negotiations for which were conducted when the Conservatives were in power. National Parliaments were involved and a convention process was set up, in which the Conservatives were represented. Indeed, with respect to the draft papers, the thinking that was involved and the academic input, the process has been the most democratic way in which treaty revision has been conducted in the history of the European Union. We might not have got everything that we wanted to get out of the process and we might still need to argue about some changes that we want to make, which I hope we will do over the next few months; however, that is a slightly different matter from what we are discussing today, which is whether we should go out to civic Scotland to consult again when we have already done so. We need to record in the *Official Report* that the committee went through a consultation process last year, as Dennis Canavan rightly said. We were quite successful in involving people other than the usual suspects, which Dennis Canavan also said. Therefore, we should say not just that it is too late but that it is too late for what the paper suggests, as a lot of what it suggests has already been done.

The Convener: I want to go through some of the issues that members have raised. I am still trying to reconcile Keith Raffan's two passionate speeches, one of which was about our not having enough time to consult, whereas the other was about the importance of consulting.

Mr Raffan: There is a difference between consulting and informing.

The Convener: Two or three themes have emerged from the debate. I take it that there is consensus around the table that we should take evidence on the constitution and the IGC. Is that agreed?

Irene Oldfather: I do not know. Is it agreed?

The Convener: Every member said that it would be good to have the UK ministers here.

Irene Oldfather: I think that Margaret Ewing suggested dealing with other aspects of Europe, too. I do not know whether—

The Convener: Two or three members supported taking evidence and that suggestion was not opposed.

Irene Oldfather: I would be happy to invite a UK minister.

Mr Home Robertson: We might want to address other subjects at the same time.

The Convener: I accept that, but there was no opposition to taking evidence from ministers.

Mr Raffan: We need clarification of points raised in the minister's letter. I am not happy with some of the things that are buried in it. We need to ask the minister a range of questions. Has the Executive thrown in the towel on the proposals in the Hain paper on Europe relating to the Committee of the Regions? We need to find that out. What will be done to try to reinsert them? What does the Executive intend to do through Regleg?

The Convener: Okay.

As far as I could see, there was a consensus that time scales are too tight for a series of roadshows throughout the country that could have a genuine input into the IGC, although there was support for having some kind of event. Previously, the committee agreed that one of our duties is to raise the profile of European issues, such as the issue that we are discussing, and to involve the people of Scotland in European issues as much as we can. Dennis Canavan suggested holding another event in the chamber. Perhaps we can use that as a starting point, but that does not mean that we will not hold events elsewhere to provide information.

Mr Morrison: That is a starting point, but we are talking about involving the people of Scotland, and I am not sure whether an event in the chamber achieves that.

Mrs Ewing: Members should be involved, first.

Mr Morrison: Such an event might involve members from different parts of Scotland, but I hardly think that the good people of Barra or the Butt of Lewis will feel part of an event that is held in the chamber. We must be careful with the language that we use. I support a short inquiry during which we take evidence from Andy Kerr and Denis MacShane, who could sit together at the table, but we must think about the time scale for civic engagement and how to involve people.

The Convener: Are you in favour of civic engagement?

Mr Morrison: I am in favour of the principle, but I think that we have missed the boat.

Mr Home Robertson: We have had civic engagement already.

Irene Oldfather: Yes, we have done it.

The Convener: We have not had civic engagement on the IGC and the constitution.

Irene Oldfather: We have, actually.

The Convener: We had civic engagement on the convention on the future of Europe.

Dennis Canavan: I will clarify my suggestion. I do not oppose in principle a series of public meetings throughout Scotland, which would include places such as the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland. However, I foresee difficulties with logistics, because of the time constraints.

I suggested an event in the chamber not as an alternative to such meetings, but to supplement those meetings, which would probably be smaller public events. We should have one big event in the chamber, but if we have time and if the Scottish Civic Forum is confident that it can organise a series of public meetings throughout the country, such meetings would be a good idea.

Phil Gallie: I thought that the consensus was not on consulting, but on Keith Raffan's point about informing the Scottish people. That is important. I approve of having meetings in the venues that were suggested or in other venues. If we are to bring ministers on board, I would like to hear from people who have different views on the constitution. A minority report was produced on the constitution, and David Heathcoat-Amory has views on the constitution which might be just as important as Peter Hain's.

Mr Raffan: Perhaps there is a way out of the situation. The consultation has happened. If we hold meetings, they should be informed. That does not mean that people should not hear the debate, but it is too late to consult. Would it not be better to wait for the IGC's outcome, and then, like Germany, bring together members of the European Parliament, national politicians and academics to debate the outcome? We could debate the IGC's outcome at a conference after the IGC is over. That would be appropriate and would give us a long lead-in time.

Similarly, we could launch five meetings around the country. They would be useful, but they should debate the IGC's outcome and inform people at that stage. That would give us more time for organisation. The only problem is that those meetings might coincide with the European Parliament election campaign. My proposal would prevent us from being in a rush and allow us to plan, which would mean that the events stood a better chance of being successful.

Mrs Ewing: I will add to that suggestion, which is sensible. We are in danger of thinking that we are the only people who are interested in the subject, but there are various organisations—both pro and anti—out there. Could we ask what the European Movement and other organisations are doing to provide a civic forum? As parliamentarians, we should not consider providing civic forums to be our role alone.

Perhaps the Scottish Parliament information centre could produce a compact disc or DVD that showed both sides of the argument. We want the debate to be balanced, which is fair enough. I think that we will be taking on too much responsibility if we think that we are the only people who can inform people about the IGC.

The Convener: Okay, perhaps we should draw the discussion to a close. One option might be not to take decisions today but to produce a further options paper on how we will inform the people of Scotland about the IGC. Am I right in saying that there does not seem to be any support for consulting, because of time scales?

Members indicated agreement.

Mrs Ewing: However, there was an agreement that we should have ministers before us.

The Convener: We could take evidence from ministers, which would serve the purpose of allowing us to inform the public about the issues that are at stake. We could also produce options for a programme of information events, which we would have to put to the vote in two weeks' time, if we could not reach a consensus.

Phil Gallie: I would like some clarification on whether the decisions that are made at the end of the IGC are irrevocable or whether the member states are given time to sign up to those decisions. I would also like to know what the relevant time scales are.

Stephen Imrie (Clerk): I can provide members of the committee with further information. It is my understanding that, with any treaty that is agreed in the European Union, different member states have different ratification processes. Some member states might have a public referendum and vote on the treaty; others go about treaty ratification in a different way. There will be different timetables for that. Unless Aileen McLeod from SPICe has anything to add, we will be happy to gather information for members on the processes vis-à-vis treaty ratification that are followed in each member state.

Irene Oldfather: It is certainly the convention within the United Kingdom that any treaty is always ratified in the House of Commons.

Mrs Ewing: The imperial Parliament.

Irene Oldfather: That is likely to be the procedure once there is agreement at the IGC. Treaties normally go to the House of Commons for ratification.

Phil Gallie: I am happy with that. That was my understanding. I would be interested in the time scales.

The Convener: I want to wrap up the discussion by saying that we are agreed that we will take

evidence from the relevant ministers, that there is a case for a series of information events and that we will have more options on the nature of those events at a future meeting, at which we can take final decisions. Do we want to open up the issue to the public by calling for evidence?

Irene Oldfather: I do not think so.

The Convener: We will proceed after we have heard from ministers. I will give Margaret Ewing the final word.

Mrs Ewing: Irene Oldfather spoke about member states' different ratification mechanisms for treaties. In that context, I wonder whether the clerks, when they provide details of how ratification is achieved in all the member states, could indicate what significance has been attached to devolved Parliaments, and what their say has been, in other states. That is an issue for the European and External Relations Committee. As far as I can recall, the constitutional treaty will be the first major treaty since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. I would like us to have a voice in some element of the ratification process.

Phil Gallie: I have another query. When you referred to ministers, did you mean Scottish Executive ministers or UK ministers?

The Convener: I take it that we will have both.

Phil Gallie: If we invite UK ministers, I reiterate that I would like David Heathcoat-Amory to be involved.

Mr Home Robertson: He is not a minister.

Phil Gallie: As a parliamentarian, he was involved in putting together the democratically arrived-at constitution. He produced a minority report. If we want to inform the people of Scotland, they should have all sides of the argument.

The Convener: Phil Gallie's point is a fair one. I want to put a final question to the committee on the subject. We have mentioned ministers but, of course, other people have been involved in the discussions, such as those who attended the convention on behalf of Scotland and the UK. Do we want to involve such people as well?

Irene Oldfather: That depends on the objective. Are we taking evidence or are we having a procedure whereby ministers report back progress at the IGC and the committee holds them to account? I understood that ministers report back and the committee holds them to account. That reflects Keith Raffan's comments about the minister's letter. If that is what we are doing then we have to hear from ministers, otherwise we will open up the debate on the convention again.

Phil Gallie: We are informing. I thought that we had agreed that we are going to—

The Convener: Hold on a moment. Irene Oldfather has made a relevant point. Andy Kerr has indicated that he is not going to the IGC so I suggest that we take the line that Irene Oldfather has proposed and that we invite only UK ministers, not Scottish Executive ministers.

Irene Oldfather: I do not necessarily agree with that because Scottish Executive ministers are involved in discussions.

The Convener: I will take some brief soundings. At the moment we have agreed on UK and Scottish Executive ministers. No one else seems to support Phil Gallie's point that we should broaden that out.

Phil Gallie: In that case, if you are putting it to a vote, I will record my vote against on the basis that we are not being democratic.

The Convener: I am not putting it to a vote but your views will be recorded. We look forward to receiving the next paper on options for information events from the clerks.

Scottish Executive (Scrutiny)

15:01

The Convener: The next item is on pre and post-Council scrutiny and a report from the Scottish Executive. This is the first time that scrutiny has been on our agenda in the second parliamentary session. Members will note that what we have is, in effect, a pre-Council scrutiny paper, although I do not doubt that we will get the post-Council paper after the Council of Ministers meetings have taken place.

The paper is quite helpful and there is a lot of information, particularly on the transport council. There is also information on the other meetings. I hope that members have had a chance to look through the paper. I invite comments.

Mrs Ewing: I have several comments. The competitiveness meeting that is mentioned in annex B of the paper has been taking place yesterday and today—I know that today is 23 September because it is my husband's birthday.

There is a series of issues about which we should have had prior notice; for example, in relation to the internal market strategy for professional qualifications, what about the Scottish education and legal systems, as well as other specifically Scottish matters?

Item 7 is about ingredients that are present in foodstuffs: the paper says:

"There is no specific Scottish interest on this issue".

Well, excuse me, but what about Arbroath smokies, smoked mackerel and the fish and food processing industries in Scotland, in which we have particular interests, although they might not impact on the UK?

Item 13 is about G10 medicines and pharmaceuticals. I would think that many members will have had letters from pharmacists and individuals in our constituencies. There will be

"an informal meeting of the European Health Ministers in Milan early in September to prepare the ground for conclusions".

Has that meeting had an outcome? Has the Scottish Executive given any input?

Item 14 is about biotechnology. Again, that is a contentious issue for the Scottish public.

I was not at the previous meeting of the committee for a good reason, but I wonder whether I missed out somewhere. Did the committee or the Parliament not manage to make representations on the issues that I have picked up? Other members of the committee might want

to take up other points. It is pointless to have a paper before us that describes meetings that have taken place or which are taking place today—it is a waste of paper. I do not mean that to be critical of our staff, who are very hard-working, but we have to examine procedures to see whether we can get further advance notice.

The Convener: That comment also links in to the sift process, which is also on our agenda for today. I am happy to write to the ministers on any issues that are raised by members in response to the paper. Members should feel free to express their concerns.

Irene Oldfather: I draw the committee's attention to the agriculture and fisheries council meeting that will take place on 29 and 30 September. I notice that the common agricultural policy reform package has been generally agreed. Discussions are about to take place on the detail—with this, as with everything, the devil is in the detail. I would, therefore, welcome further information on the detail of the package.

I am interested in two specific matters. The first is the sugar regime in the European Union, because there is very much a monopoly. The world price of sugar is about half the price of sugar in the European Union; that has implications for Scottish manufacturing and jobs. I would be interested to see what progress is being made in relation to the common agricultural policy reforms as they apply to sugar.

The second matter in which I am interested—which I raised in a debate in the chamber last week—is EU tobacco subsidies. I know that we are making some progress on the issue, but we have a long way to go. I hope that the committee will get some more detailed information on EU tobacco subsidies.

The Convener: That may also be the appropriate council for discussion of genetically modified organisms. Members may have seen news coverage of that issue over the past couple of days; it might be worth finding out whether that coverage is accurate. Do members have any other comments on the paper?

Mr Raffan: I am new to this kind of scrutiny, but I agree with Margaret Ewing's remarks about the timing of our receipt of the paper. We are being informed, but we can hardly consult or contribute.

The general affairs and external relations agenda does not give the kind of in-depth background that the other agendas—on competitiveness, transport, and so on—contain. That is disappointing because it is difficult to work out against what background the debate will take place. Perhaps that is all the information that foreign ministers get—I do not know. They can then just witter away endlessly on any aspect that

they like. Nevertheless, it would be helpful for us to get further background to the agenda, especially on the northern dimension, which I had not encountered before.

I agree with what is recommended regarding the sharing of EU information on telecommunications systems and the siting of masts because that is a major issue in Scotland. It was debated in Parliament last week and remains tremendously important.

There are a number of issues under the heading "Action Plan on 3% objective 'more research for Europe'."

I understand that the Executive is taking action because our business expenditure on research and development in Scotland is lower than the UK level which, in turn, is lower than the levels of our counterparts in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. I would like to know more about that and about what we are trying to achieve.

Finally, we are told that the common agricultural policy reform package is generally agreed, but that there will be a possible report on the World Trade Organization's negotiations, in the collapse of which the CAP reform package seems to have played a considerable part. The EU does not seem to be very keen to get on to the last part of that agenda. Nonetheless, I think that the two issues are related and it is a matter of major concern that international development and free trade are being undermined by the EU's agricultural policies.

The Convener: Okay. Do any other members have comments?

Phil Gallie: Reading through the paper, I did not notice any comments about herbal medicines. Is something missing, or is nothing happening about that? Is the directive just going to be railroaded through?

The Convener: We will find that out for you, Phil. I am happy to write to the ministers for more information on the issues that members have raised. I will also mention Keith Raffan's point about some agendas containing more information than others.

Mrs Ewing: I was trying to go through the paper in logical order; I have further points to raise on justice and home affairs and on transport.

On page 13 of the paper, in the section on justice and home affairs, our attention is drawn to the

"Proposal for a Council Directive on minimum standards on procedures for granting and withdrawing refugee status."

That matter is reserved to the UK Government: the Scottish Executive's only direct interest in such a

directive would relate to the provision of legal aid to asylum seekers. Can we seek clarification on whether the Scottish Executive has a view on the matter?

Page 22 of the document refers to a

"Proposal for a Directive on the Interoperability of fees collection in road transport".

Would that have any implications for the Skye bridge tolls or for any congestion charging schemes that might be introduced? Should we put forward views on that proposal? I picked those matters up as I read through the documents and raise them simply for general discussion; I am not making any particular recommendations on them.

The Convener: I thank members for their contributions.

Convener's Report

15:10

The Convener: We move to the next item on the agenda, which is the convener's report. Before I proceed, I point out that we have not received any response from the Scottish Executive on the hallmarking directive or on the waste electrical and electronic equipment directive. As members will recall, we sought information on those directives; it is unfortunate that we have not received those responses because that means that we cannot discuss the matters at this meeting.

The first item in my report concerns initial feedback from the Irish on the likely agenda and priorities for their presidency of the EU. It makes very interesting reading. Does any member wish to comment briefly on the paper?

Dennis Canavan: It might be worth our while to invite the Irish consul to come and give oral evidence to the committee about the Irish presidency's priorities.

The Convener: We will take that comment on board. In any case, we will receive our six-monthly briefing from Irish representatives.

Mr Raffan: I support Dennis Canavan's suggestion. I presume that the Irish ambassador will also visit early in the new year. I must say that I found the Minister for Foreign Affairs's presentation to be unusually impressive. By that, I do not mean that the presentation was impressive for the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs; it would have been an impressive and comprehensive achievement for any foreign affairs minister.

I agreed totally with the Irish wish to move Africa and the problem of HIV/AIDS further up the agenda. That issue comes under our external relations remit, particularly given our country's strong, long-standing and historic connections with sub-Saharan Africa, and is precisely the kind of thing that we could raise with the Irish consul. I cannot speak for other members, but I strongly support the Irish line on the matter. As I said, I found the presentation to be very impressive and agreed with all of it. For a small country, Ireland seems to be very well organised—I know that Margaret Ewing will agree with me totally on that.

The Convener: I am also quite sympathetic to that point of view.

The next item in the report concerns the monthly report on the Parliament's external relations activities, which gives the usual run down of inward and outward visits.

Irene Oldfather: Last week, when we considered the paper on our inquiry into promoting

Scotland worldwide, we agreed that we would find out what the external relations unit is doing about tartan day. Perhaps the convener will clarify when we will receive that information.

I was also a little bit surprised to notice on the Parliament website a press release saying that the committee would be evaluating tartan day, given that we had agreed at the previous meeting that we wanted further information on the matter to allow us to determine how far we could go down that line. It would have been helpful if that information could have been brought back to the committee before the press release was put out.

The Convener: My understanding is that the press release refers to our overall inquiry and lists some of the areas that would be included in it. We all agreed that tartan day would be one such area. I cannot answer the specific question about when we will receive the information. That matter is in other people's hands.

Dennis Canavan: I think that it was I who first raised the possibility of examining the value or otherwise of tartan day. However, I did not intend our examination to target only tartan day, but to take in Scottish-American relations in general.

15:15

The Convener: That is my understanding as well. I do not think that Irene Oldfather or anyone else was suggesting otherwise.

Mr Raffan: I gather, from a motion that has been lodged, that the idea has now spread to France and that 4 April will now be the French tartan day. Obviously, that will be worth considering when we conduct our external relations inquiry.

Many of the Parliament's visitors are from Commonwealth countries. I am involved with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, along with Margaret Ewing, and I think that it might be worth suggesting to the external relations unit that its invitation lists might be widened in relation to meetings with visiting politicians from the Commonwealth. It should not be only members of the CPA executive, the Scottish Executive and those who have asked for an invitation who meet such visitors; members of this committee should be able to do so too, particularly in view of our widened remit, so we should be on the mailing list.

The Convener: We could raise that point informally with the relevant authorities.

Mr Raffan: I know that a number of members met the Speaker of the Estonian Parliament when she was here last week, but I think that she was collared by the Executive for most of the hour and a half that she was here—I hope that she found that to be productive. It is important that, whenever

possible, members of this committee meet politicians from Europe. I am a bit disconcerted that one hears about such visits only when one is informed in the chamber that there are visitors in the gallery. I understand the background issues because I make the effort to find out about them, but I maintain that it would be extremely useful for us to meet European politicians when they come to Scotland. Many parliamentary officials seem to give those people briefings, but some of us would be prepared to do that.

The Convener: That is mainly a housekeeping issue, but I will let Stephen Imrie have a quick word.

Stephen Imrie: The Parliament's external liaison unit makes the committee's clerks fully aware of all visits to the Parliament. When visitors express interest in meeting the committee or discussing European issues, we seek expressions of interest from members of this committee and attempt to find out who is available. When the incoming people do not express particular interest in European issues, we make a judgment. If members would find it useful, we will let you know informally about all visits to the Scottish Parliament, regardless of whether the visitor has asked to meet members of the committee. If a particular member has an interest in a particular visit, I am sure that the external liaison unit would be happy to accommodate that member's wishes.

I remind the committee that its external relations remit applies to scrutiny of the Scottish Executive's external relations policy, not the Scottish Parliament's external relations activities although, in the first session of the Parliament, Sir David Steel and Paul Grice informed me that they were always happy to receive informal comments on such points and that they wanted to have a good relationship with the committee.

Mr Raffan: That is helpful. I disagree with the convener, however, that it is a housekeeping issue—it has been a matter of concern to me for some time. The Commonwealth politicians who visit the Parliament meet an incredible number of officials but few members. Of course members are busy people, but I think that we should, in relation to this issue, take possession of the Scottish Parliament at last. It is up to us to decide whether we can meet visiting politicians. I think that we should meet them as a matter of general courtesy if at all possible.

On the committee's remit, we are allowed to question the Executive's strategy and priorities and we are able to suggest that other elements be included. In that case, we can widen the remit.

Mrs Ewing: I know the people in the external liaison unit, because I work with them in relation to the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. One of

the difficulties that we have is that a lot of visits are not reported back to other members in any meaningful way. We cannot always be there because of travel arrangements and constituency engagements, but I wonder whether, given our remit for external affairs, we could make an arrangement with the ELU for some form of either written or oral report to be made to the Parliament on the events that are taking place. I suspect that most of us do a weekly column, and it would be nice to be able to write about people who have come from Trinidad and Tobago or people who have been to the Cook Islands or the Falklands, but if we do not know about it, we cannot write about it. I would like the Parliament to promote its external affairs.

The Convener: Some of us do not quite know what the situation is on that issue, so I suggest that we ask the clerks to draw up a brief paper explaining what the situation is just now, who is notified, who is in charge of those visits and what the relationship is between this committee and the Parliament's external relations strategy. That is an issue that has been raised two or three times in the past four meetings, so it might be helpful to have a paper that will put us in the picture about exactly what our role is.

Dennis Canavan: I agree entirely with Margaret Ewing on the matter of reports back to Parliament. I raised the issue some time ago with the Minister for Parliamentary Business and was told that reports would appear on the Parliament's website. I have not checked to see whether that is the case in every instance of an overseas delegation, but it would be interesting to find out.

Mr Raffan: I do not want any of the remarks that I have just made to be interpreted as a criticism of the external liaison unit of the Parliament, not that anybody was—

Mr Home Robertson: You have offended everybody else.

Mr Raffan: Only you, John.

Mr Home Robertson: I will survive.

Mr Raffan: I think that the external liaison unit does an extraordinarily good job. Roy Devon, Grahame Wear, Margaret Neal and their new colleague, Douglas Millar, are all doing an exceptionally good job. Considering the number of people who come through and the amount of work that they have to do, I think that they are marvellous, but that does not mean that we should not have an input and work closely with them. I think they would welcome that.

The Convener: Thank you, Keith. I think that you have dug yourself out of that hole quite well.

Phil Gallie: A group from Saxony is due here on 24, 25 and 26 September. I believe that their principal interest is in the justice committees, but no reference at all has been made to their visit, although they are coming from a European federal state.

The Convener: We shall take all those points on board and ask the clerks to come back with a paper so that everyone understands what the issues are.

The final item in the convener's report concerns a response to a parliamentary question that was answered indicating that the Executive has no plans to join the Nordic Council of Ministers. I thought that it was worthwhile to put that on the agenda, not to discuss whether or not Scotland should join the Nordic Council of Ministers but simply to use the answer as a hook to get an update from the Executive on its plans for dealing with the council, given that it is a priority for the Parliament and has been shown to be a priority for the Executive in the past.

Mr Raffan: I totally agree with you. There have been media reports about that and I am concerned and saddened that the Executive seems to have taken the position that it has, particularly as we had the Nordic Council conference in the chamber not so long ago. Many of us participated in that, and we hoped that we would develop closer relations with the council at parliamentary level and at Executive level. I fail to understand the decision, in view of our historic and current strong links with the Nordic countries. It is absolutely right that you should have drawn the answer to our attention and proposed the action that you have suggested.

Mr Morrison: I am not quite as animated about the issue as Keith Raffan is. I do not recall question S2W-2070 being asked, although obviously there are good reasons why there are links between the Scottish Parliament and the Nordic Council.

Whichever minister responded said:

"The Scottish Executive believes that closer co-operation between the Scottish Executive and the Nordic Council of Ministers will deliver benefits for Scotland."

Nothing in the answer suggests that ministers will not have close links with their Nordic cousins. I really do not see why members are so animated. What is the difference between close relations and complete and absolute membership? I am not too sure.

The Convener: I do not think that many of us are very sure.

Mr Raffan: I continue to be animated, because I feel strongly about this. There is a difference. Alasdair Morrison did not quote the next sentence of the answer, which states:

"It is not necessary to become a member of the Nordic Council to enjoy these benefits".—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 5 September 2003; p 605.]

Let the ministers come and tell us how we are going to get the same benefits without being a member. I will continue to be animated until I get a convincing response from the Executive.

Irene Oldfather: I do not recall the matter coming before the committee before. Given that there is a written answer, there must have been a written question. I assume that it came from the convener. I just want to check how the issue got on to the agenda.

The Convener: I came across it in press coverage and asked the clerks to check whether there was a parliamentary question and there was, so I thought it was worth drawing to the committee's attention.

Mr Home Robertson: We will have long agendas if they are going to be based on press cuttings.

The Convener: Some members of the committee feel that we require clarification from the Executive, because we are here to scrutinise the Executive's external relations policy.

Mr Morrison: You used the word "housekeeping" in another context. I hardly think that this is how we should be conducting business. I am sure that members could e-mail the clerks with a list of 15 items every fortnight if we were to respond to some of the nonsense that appears in the much-maligned press—maligned by Keith Raffan, of course.

Mr Raffan: You should declare your interest.

Mr Morrison: I do not think that we should dredge up issues that appear in the media, because each of us could insist that a host of issues appear on the agenda and we would be here till doomsday every fortnight.

The Convener: All members are free to e-mail the clerks about any item that they think should appear on the agenda.

Dennis Canavan: That is a change from the days of Hugh Henry's convenership.

The Convener: I put my own issue on the agenda. I get the feeling that most members are content to get an update from the Executive on relations with the Nordic countries.

Phil Gallie: It is useful to have this sort of item on the agenda. I take a different view from that of my colleagues. Well done, convener. Surely the committee is all about examining issues of interest to it.

Mr Raffan: Hear, hear.

Irene Oldfather: That is why I asked whether the convener asked the question.

The Convener: It was a parliamentary question, but I did not ask it. If members are content, we will get a report and bring the matter to the next meeting.

Sift

15:28

The Convener: The last item on the agenda is our good friend the sift paper. We will get a proper discussion paper to the committee as soon as we can, but some thinking has to go into the sift. Do members have anything to raise in relation to the paper?

Irene Oldfather: It is interesting to have documents of special importance listed. I note in particular the document on education and young people, for which the explanatory note reads:

"May be of relevance to the promotion of Scots Gaelic, Scots etc".

Perhaps the clerks will clarify this, but I think that I am right in saying that the paper deals with the promotion of modern languages, which I know the Commission is keen to advance. The Parliament has expressed interest in that in a number of debates and I hope that there is a reference to modern language learning as well as to linguistic diversity.

The Convener: I shall find out for you. Documents of special importance have been listed on the front of the document for the first time, which should be helpful for members. We will consider that as a way of developing the sift system in future.

Mr Home Robertson: I thank the clerks for listing the papers of special importance, because hitherto the sift document has been a great long catalogue. It is helpful that the clerks have flagged up documents of particular interest.

Mrs Ewing: I echo what John Home Robertson says about the list of documents of special importance. I highlight the one about the protection of animals during transport, because the issue will be a contentious one for this Parliament and the UK Parliament. I wonder whether it will go directly to the Environment and Rural Development Committee or whether it will come to us first. What procedure will we observe? I have already had endless hours of discussion on the issue.

The Convener: I ask Stephen Imrie to update us on conversations that he might have had with the clerks to the Environment and Rural Development Committee.

Stephen Imrie: Under the normal procedure in relation to the sift document, and the new idea of listing documents of special importance, the relevant extracts from the sift paper are sent to the relevant convener and clerk. On this occasion, the convener of and the clerk to the Environment and Rural Development Committee will have been

made aware of all the documents that are relevant to their area and, in particular, the documents that this committee has highlighted as being of special importance, and the reasons for that. I will have to confirm this, but I think that the Environment and Rural Development Committee is aware of the matter and I will try to clarify its intentions in respect of the document.

The Convener: The next meeting is on Tuesday 7 October. I look forward to seeing you all then. Members, particularly new members, might wish to stay behind and talk to the clerks about our trip to Brussels.

Meeting closed at 15:31.

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