



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Security Committee

Thursday 13 June 2019

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

17th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

*Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con)

*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)

*Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Security Committee

Thursday 13 June 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:32]

Poverty and Inequality Commission: Appointments

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 17th meeting in 2019 of the Social Security Committee. I remind everyone to turn off mobile phones and other devices or put them into silent mode so that they do not disturb the meeting.

We do not have a full complement of members yet, but I hope that we will, as no apologies have been received.

Under agenda item 1, the committee will consider the nominees for appointment as members of the poverty and inequality commission and the content of a draft report. Before this meeting, three members of our committee met the nominees for appointment to the commission. The committee agreed at the beginning of the recruitment process that that should be done in private in order to ensure that the process—we need not have worried about this, but it was the right thing to do—was not intimidating or off-putting for applicants with no experience of public committee hearings. I have to say that it was a hugely positive meeting. We will say more about that in a moment.

It is important to note that the nominees have already passed a rigorous public appointments process and that we were not re-interviewing them this morning. Our role was not to do that, but rather to confirm that, as a group working with the chair, Bill Scott, they will be able to fulfil the functions of the poverty and inequality commission as set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017.

Before I say any more, I point out that I was joined by Jeremy Balfour and Alison Johnstone, and I ask them whether they want to make any comments.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I was pleased to be part of the meeting earlier this morning. It was a welcome opportunity to get to know the nominees better and hear from them directly. It was noted in the meeting that, individually, they have a wealth of experience and expertise, and I think it is fair to say that, as was suggested, they will be greater than the sum of their parts because they are a formidable group. I

think that they will challenge politicians and be stridently independent. They will not sit on the fence and mince their words.

They reminded me that poverty is not an intractable issue and that we have policy choices. They spoke, too, of the fact that social security is an area where United Kingdom and Scottish policy meet and often diverge. There are challenges in that some of the policies that are made at Westminster impact on what we may choose to do here, but they also discussed the fact that we have options and there are things that the Parliament can do, too.

I very much welcome the appointments. The nominees, both individually and in their combined force, will make a real difference to the ability of us all to tackle poverty, exclusion and inequality.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I do not have a lot to add to that. It was really helpful to have an hour together so that we could learn about some of the skills of the new commission members. They bring diversity to the commission, which the committee was keen to have, and they are all there on merit, which is really important to note.

I hope that other bodies can learn from how the process has worked because we have got that diversity and that expertise. I hope that the new commission members will be able to use that independent scrutiny to challenge not only the Scottish Government but the Parliament and this committee over the next few years. It was a very encouraging meeting.

The Convener: Thank you for those comments. I was hugely impressed by the diversity of the appointees and the skills and talents that they will clearly bring to the commission. Alison Johnstone is absolutely right—together, they will be greater than the sum of their parts.

It was important to see that the candidates were already seeking to be challenging and inquisitive of each other, as well as of us as committee members, which is precisely what we want, because the commission's role is to be fiercely independent, to be challenging of the Government and this committee and, without fear or favour, to look at the hard reality of poverty as it impacts the communities that we all serve in this country.

It is worth pointing out the direct lived experience of poverty and the huge range of talents that can be found within the appointees. I was struck by comments that it is not just about how Governments seek to implement manifesto commitments, but why Governments are doing what they are doing; it is not just that they have said that they will do something and what the outcomes might look like, but what might make the biggest impact on tackling poverty in our country.

It was a privilege to meet everyone and it is great that they are now in the public gallery. I thank them for coming, along with Bill Scott, who is chair of the commission.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I echo everything that has been said. The fact that we have arrived at this point, with such a fantastic commission, with the kinds of individuals that we hoped to have, is a testament to the parliamentary process. It seems so long ago—I am sure that Bill Scott will testify to this—since the committee started on the process. It is a testament to the robustness of the committee system that, when we pushed hard for it to be an anti-poverty and anti-inequality commission, through the ingenuity of the Government ministerial team—Jeanette Campbell in particular—when Angela Constance was the minister, we found a way forward. It should not be forgotten that that is where we started, and now we have arrived at a point at which the commission and all those who serve on it will have one of the most important Scottish public policy jobs that there is.

We read through all the CVs and I think that we have arrived at a tremendous and, as Bob Doris says, really diverse group of people who have fantastic CVs. The individuals who have been appointed to this important role show the lived experience and all the things that we would have hoped for in a commission that will take forward this work for the people of Scotland. As Alison Johnstone rightly says, tackling these issues is achievable in our country, although it might take some years to do so. I put on record my thanks to all the individuals who have agreed to take on this important role.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): I echo other members' sentiments. I have not met the members of the commission yet, but I read through the CVs and it is an impressive array of people with a good range of experiences. I would like to ask one question, just to check. When you were speaking to everybody, was anything raised about any gaps or was everybody satisfied that all the skills were present? We talked a lot in the run-up to this about making sure that the commission had all the necessary skills. I could not spot any that were missing after going through the CVs but I just wanted to ask—are you comfortable that all the skills are there?

The Convener: I think so, although I do not know what Jeremy Balfour and Alison Johnstone think. Obviously, the conversation was private, but it is not giving away any secrets to say that we talked about what the child supplement might look like.

Michelle Ballantyne: You mean the income supplement.

The Convener: I am sorry—the income supplement. The chair of the commission is having a discussion about international comparisons, the greatest impact and data analysis. All of that work can be done, but what will it mean to the lived experience of those who are experiencing poverty now and need money in their pockets as quickly as possible? There must absolutely be a double check to ensure that it is about not just doing the academic research and looking at the data but considering what things will mean and the reality on the ground.

From what I could see, there seemed to be quite a broad range of skills, and every base seemed to be covered. It was pretty impressive.

I do not know whether Alison Johnstone or Jeremy Balfour wants to add anything to that.

Alison Johnstone: Yes. It was apparent from the nominees' CVs and meeting them in the room that they have a great range of diverse lived experience and academic expertise. There is a mixture of people who really know what they are talking about, and there is a desire to ensure that any actions are evidence based and that we do all that we can to improve data collection, what we look at while ensuring that we know why we are looking at it, and how we can use that information to get the best outcomes. After this morning's meeting, I feel very reassured that the group can make a great difference.

Michelle Ballantyne: Good. Thanks.

The Convener: It might be worth saying that the chair of the commission spoke very well about not only analysis and scrutiny, but coming up with constructive solutions for the Government as well as analysing what the Government is doing in its policy and its implementation. It was also really interesting to hear about that, and it is appropriate to put that on the record.

The committee is considering whether to recommend to the Parliament that the eight nominees to the poverty and inequality commission be appointed. I will put their names on the public record: they are Linda Bamford, Yvonne Blake, Alex Cobham, Lindsay Graham, Katie Schmuecker, Shona Stephen, Morag Treanor and Douglas White. Does the committee agree to recommend to the Parliament that those nominees should be appointed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the nominees for their time this morning.

Does the committee agree to give authority to the convener and the clerk to prepare a short factual report to inform the Parliament of our recommendation?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: There being no other business before us—I am looking at the clerk to ensure that I have not forgotten anything—we can now close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 10:42.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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