

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 8 June 2004
(*Afternoon*)

Session 2

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE 13th Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

*Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind)

*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 8 June 2004

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 13:33*]

Scottish Executive (Scrutiny)

The Convener (Richard Lochhead): Good afternoon. I welcome everyone to the 13th meeting of the European and External Relations Committee this year. We have received no apologies.

Agenda item 1 is pre and post-council scrutiny. I hope that members have had a chance to read the papers, and I invite comments on them.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I have always found that pre-council reports on general affairs and external relations seem to be skimpy, to say the least. Do we have any control over that or over the pre-council information that we receive? Compared with other pre-council reports, the report is thin. It does not tell us much, other than headings.

The Convener: We can try to find out from Executive officials why that is the case.

Mr Raffan: The main thing is that we receive a full report afterwards.

The Convener: I suspect that the report is brief because the Executive rarely has any input to that council's agendas, but we will certainly find out.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I will embarrass Keith Raffan by picking up on his point and agreeing with him. Paper EU/S2/04/13/1 mentions

"a discussion of the Commission's proposals for Future Financing of the EU."

We know that the outgoing Commission has proposals for direct taxation from 2007 to 2013, but what meat can we expect to be put on that bone in the council report? Should not there be guidance about how the Government or the Scottish Executive views the proposals that are already on the table?

The Convener: I can only suggest that we write a letter to the Executive to find that out.

Phil Gallie: I would welcome our writing such a letter, as I would like to know what the Executive's attitude is.

The Convener: We could send a brief letter to ask for more information.

Phil Gallie: Okay.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I have some small points to make. It was not clear to me whether "Implementation of Security Strategy" referred to defence. I think that I have mentioned previously that the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body is visiting Warsaw and undertaking a review of that. Perhaps the external liaison unit could keep the committee informed about what is happening; Alison Dickie is dealing with the issue in the main.

On fisheries, page 6 of paper EU/S2/04/13/1 refers to

"paving the way for progress during the Dutch Presidency."

I wondered whether the committee, as opposed to the Executive, might want to put something forward on its own behalf.

The Convener: The easiest way forward might be for you to suggest a future agenda item on whether the committee wants to put forward its own views. We could have a five-minute chat on that.

Mrs Ewing: Yes.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): What are you referring to?

Mrs Ewing: The agriculture and fisheries council and the Dutch presidency.

The Convener: It is open to members to suggest agenda items. That might be the best way forward.

Mr Home Robertson: I was going to express concern about the Netherlands' track record on environmentally friendly fisheries, but I suppose that doing so would be uncommunautaire. However, I can say that we know that Scotland has done a lot of work on better conservation in sea fisheries and has pioneered many techniques relating to different types of net and different ways of fishing. The Scottish Executive could take a lead in that field and we should encourage it to do so.

Phil Gallie: I was concentrating on the first pre-council report and did not realise that all the councils would be dealt with together. I want to pick up on what Margaret Ewing said. What submissions have been made? We are talking about a wide spread of measures. The paper states:

"The Executive supports the review, simplification and reform of the EU technical conservation regulations".

What are those regulations that the Executive supports? What is the detail of the support? What reservations might the Executive have? Margaret Ewing has highlighted a massive issue.

The Convener: All that I can suggest is that we should find out more information; I will put the matter on the agenda for a brief discussion at a meeting in the near future. Are members happy with that?

Members indicated agreement.

Phil Gallie: On financial services, the paper refers to

"Extending the EU committee structure to banking, insurance and investment funds, with the aim of enabling legislators and regulators to respond more effectively to technological change and market developments."

I think that everybody around the table and all the parties say that they are against added regulation and bureaucracy. However, that paragraph seems to me to say that we are looking to extend bureaucracy and regulation.

The Convener: You have commented, but I am not sure whether you have suggested any action.

Mr Raffan: I do not see where Phil Gallie sees that at all. Extending the European Union committee structure to cover matters that are basically multinational and cross-border seems to me to be eminently sensible. The paper does not state that there will be increased regulation. It says that that will be considered, but Phil Gallie is letting his Euro-paranoia get in the way of the English that is down on the paper.

Phil Gallie: I am sorry, but the paper refers to

"the aim of enabling legislators and regulators to respond more effectively to technological change".

We are talking about extending the EU committee structure. To me, that suggests that added bureaucracy and regulation must be involved somewhere, although we all agree that we are against added regulation.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I did not interpret the draft directive as necessarily meaning that there would be additional legislation. In my view, it could be about better monitoring and auditing. I would have thought that Phil Gallie was looking for that from the European Union. The committee structure is the democratic side of the EU. Surely it is a good thing for its remit to be extended, because that will involve better monitoring and auditing of procedures.

The Convener: I do not mind debating this issue for two or three minutes, but I want us to move on shortly.

Mr Raffan: I agree totally with Irene Oldfather. Having the committee structure cover banking, insurance and investment funds may smooth the way forward and make it easier to remove obstacles and obstructions that do not take into consideration technological change and market developments. It may ensure that structures, legislation and regulations keep pace with technological development and do not get in the way of it. The draft directive may do the very opposite of what Phil Gallie is suggesting.

The Convener: Would Phil Gallie like to have a final word on the issue?

Phil Gallie: Keith Raffan may be right, but the problem with European statements is that they always contain a "could be" element. Experience shows that that usually ends up causing the problems to which I have referred—extra interference, regulation and bureaucracy. The statement in the report is far too wide-ranging and is not clear. I believe that it could mean our accepting more damage.

Mr Raffan: Roll on 11 June.

The Convener: I thank those members who have aired their views on this subject.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind): Is the electioneering finished now?

Mr Home Robertson: Phil Gallie is voting for the UK Independence Party.

Mr Raffan: Does he want us to witness his ballot paper?

Phil Gallie: The election on 10 June is just the start—we are then into the debate about the constitution.

Mr Raffan: So this is just a warm-up.

Mr Home Robertson: Kilroy was here.

Mr Raffan: And Joan Collins.

The Convener: Unfortunately, there is only one journalist in the room, and he came in halfway through the item, so he may not have picked up this conversation. If Phil Gallie wishes, we can obtain a copy of the United Kingdom Government's memorandum and he can place the issue on the agenda for a future meeting.

We have received correspondence from Andy Kerr on the location of EU agencies. Members may recall that the committee has written to the minister a couple of times about securing EU agencies for Scotland—we have asked what has been done to monitor which agencies are available and to secure those for Scotland. Previously, the committee discussed a proposed agency for minority languages. I understand that

there is communication with the Commission on that issue at the moment.

The minister states in his reply simply that he is unaware that any more agencies are on the horizon. He refers to the proposed Community fisheries control agency, which will go to Spain, and to the fact that the UK has bid for two agencies, the European Police College, which was secured for Bramshill in London, and the European Maritime Safety Agency, which was not secured for Glasgow and has gone to Portugal. No other agencies are mentioned in the minister's letter.

Mr Raffan: The minister does not appear to respond to the point in the third paragraph of your letter about the fact that the proposed Community fisheries control agency will go to Galicia.

Mr Home Robertson: God help the fish.

Mr Raffan: The minister confirms that that is the case, but he does not say whether the Executive was aware that the agency was being created and whether it made a bid to secure it. It would be interesting to find out about that. The letter is pretty short—perhaps the minister was busy on the evening when he wrote it and overlooked the point about the Community fisheries control agency.

The Convener: I am not sure that we have moved very far forward in getting answers to our questions.

Mr Raffan: I suggest that when we write to ministers in the future—especially Mr Kerr, but other ministers, too—the letter should have an introductory paragraph, followed by a list of numbered questions. Ministers could then respond to each question in turn, which would make things clearer for them and simpler for us.

The Convener: That is a good idea. I am happy to support that helpful suggestion.

Irene Oldfather: Are any other letters outstanding? We have an agreement that any letters to ministers will be circulated to all committee members. I do not recall receiving this letter.

13:45

The Convener: As members will note, Andy Kerr's letter to the committee is dated 7 June. That is why the letter was not on members' desks until today.

Irene Oldfather: I was referring to our letter to the minister.

Stephen Imrie (Clerk): I will investigate whether all members received a copy of the committee letter dated 31 March.

I recollect that the only replies that are outstanding are to letters that the committee sent to the First Minister and to Andy Kerr. All members should have received a copy of those letters, which relate to the regions with legislative power group.

Irene Oldfather: Was a letter sent to both Andy Kerr and the First Minister? I recall seeing the letter to the First Minister about Regleg. Was a similar letter sent to Andy Kerr?

Stephen Imrie: A series of letters to both the First Minister and Andy Kerr has gone back and forth. The letter to which we are still awaiting a reply is a letter to the First Minister.

Irene Oldfather: So we have had replies to all letters from the committee to the Minister for Finance and Public Services.

Stephen Imrie: I believe so, but I will have to check in order to give the member a definitive answer.

Irene Oldfather: I would appreciate it if the clerk could check that.

The Convener: To keep members up to date, we will ensure that an updated note on outstanding correspondence is circulated. Keith Raffan has suggested that we need more information.

Mr Raffan: To answer the specific question that I asked.

The Convener: I suggest that in our reply to the minister we thank him for his letter and ask the further questions to which Keith Raffan referred. Would it be worth our approaching the European Commission to find out what point has been reached in discussions about the proposed European agency for minority languages and any other agencies that are being debated at present?

Dennis Canavan: If we write to the Commission, we could ask not just about the possibility of new agencies being located in Scotland but about whether any of the existing agencies are being considered for relocation.

The Convener: That is a fair question and I have no objections to our putting it.

Are members happy for us to seek an update from the European Commission and to put Keith Raffan's question to Andy Kerr, the minister with responsibility for external relations?

Members indicated agreement.

Sift

13:47

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of the sift documents. I invite comments from members.

Phil Gallie: Document 1152 appears to be simply a communication on self-promotion of the EU. I would like to know whether there is a budget for that and what the budget is. The communication is entirely about advertising all the good aspects of the EU. I can see no other purpose to it, although it may be a fairly sparse document.

The Convener: We can seek the information that Phil Gallie requests.

Mr Raffan: I am very glad that Phil Gallie has drawn attention to this document. It is admirable that the EU, in the midst of all its other tasks and despite its burden of work, is seeking to deepen understanding throughout Europe of the structure, tasks and achievements of the EU.

The Convener: That is a huge challenge. I would be happy to find out more information about it.

Phil Gallie: My question is about the cost.

The Convener: We will find out about the cost.

Irene Oldfather: I refer to document 1144, the white paper on services of general interest. The convener will recall that I have highlighted several times in committee the importance of that document to Scotland. I notice that a UK Government explanatory memorandum is available. We should request and examine that.

The Convener: We will certainly do so.

As members have no further comments on the sift paper, I bring the public part of the meeting to a close. We move into private session to discuss, hopefully for the final time, the report on our inquiry into the future of regional development funding in Scotland.

13:49

Meeting continued in private until 16:05.

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