

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 18 January 2005

Session 2

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2005, Session 2

CONVENER

*Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (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)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Alasdair Rankin

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Nick Hawthorne

David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Sift

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 18 January 2005

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 14:06]

Item in Private

The Convener (Mr John Swinney): Good afternoon. I convene the first meeting of the European and External Relations Committee in 2005. I wish members who have weathered the storms to be with us today a very happy new year. We have apologies from Phil Gallie and Alasdair Morrison. Quite understandably, Alasdair has been detained on constituency business in the Western Isles, with which we very much sympathise.

The first agenda item is to invite the committee to take in private item 6, which is consideration of our draft report on the promotion of Scotland inquiry. Is that agreeable to members?

Members indicated agreement.

Pre and Post-council Scrutiny

14:06

The Convener: Item 2 is pre and post-council analysis and scrutiny. The Scottish Executive has supplied us with a number of documents. The information within them is largely self-explanatory and, certainly, I do not want to pursue anything in them with the committee. Some of the material is before us because we have not been able to schedule consideration of the reports at other meetings. As members have no points to raise, we will move on.

14:07

The Convener: Item 3 is the sift paper, EU/S2/05/01/2. I invite members to turn to the section on documents of special importance. The first document that is referred to is the fourth European innovation scoreboard, which has been produced as part of the Lisbon process. The material is relevant to us in the context of the work priorities of the Commission—which we await—which, I suspect, will focus heavily on the Lisbon agenda's implications. The EIS document is particularly relevant to the Enterprise and Culture Committee and we will draw its attention to it.

The second document, again, is relevant to the Enterprise and Culture Committee. It sets out an update of the multi-annual programme for enterprise and entrepreneurship. I suspect that that will fit into the Enterprise and Culture Committee's inquiry into business growth.

The third document is a proposal for a Council regulation on fishing, which is of relevance to the Environment and Rural Development Committee, as are the two documents on the regulatory environment for the common fisheries policy. The latter of those two documents might also have implications for the Subordinate Legislation Committee's inquiry into the regulatory framework for Scotland.

Those are the key points that arise on that section. Do members have any points?

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I thought that we would discuss the Commission's proposal for a Council decision on information extracted from criminal records, which is mentioned on page 3 of the main sift document. I have received various inquiries—as I suspect most of us have—about how Disclosure Scotland might fit into that and whether it has been asked for its view. That is quite important.

The Convener: We could certainly inquire about that. Our general approach has been to encourage other committees to become more involved in the consideration of European issues, and the justice committees have been particularly active about raising their awareness of issues on the justice and home affairs council's agenda. Therefore, we can certainly write to ministers and copy the letter to the convener of the relevant justice committee.

European Union Legislation (Transposition and Implementation)

14:11

The Convener: Item 4 is on the transposition and implementation of European Union legislation in Scotland. The briefing paper, EU/S2/05/01/3, considers the Executive's record on progressing in Scottish domestic legislation particular items of legislation that have emerged from the EU. The paper goes through a range of instruments and outlines the Executive's progress on them.

From my recollection of the paper, there is a section at the end, starting at page 12, which shows where the Executive is behind schedule. Obviously, we warmly commend the Executive for completing what is detailed in the previous 11 pages, but the latter part of the paper outlines what might require attention. There are explanations of why some of the legislation has not been applied. I leave it to the committee to discuss whether it wants to pursue any points in relation to those items.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a useful paper.

The Convener: It is. It certainly clarifies exactly where things have worked and it explains why issues do not rush on to the statute book.

Mrs Ewing: I take it that all members can pick up this information on the web or via the Scottish Parliament information centre.

The Convener: Yes.

Mr Home Robertson: There are no red flashing lights—or even amber flashing lights—in the document. What it details is all within the bounds of what can reasonably be expected.

The Convener: I do not think that there are any particular points of concern.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I seem to recall considering one or two of the directives before, particularly the one on zoonoses monitoring.

The Convener: I am glad that that preoccupied the committee in the old days.

Irene Oldfather: It did so only briefly.

Convener's Report

14:13

The Convener: We move on to item 5, which is the convener's report. The first point is that we have received written responses to the committee's report on the EU fisheries control agency from Ross Finnie, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, and Ben Bradshaw, the United Kingdom Minister for Nature Conservation and Fisheries. Members will recall that we finalised the report towards the end of last year and communicated it to both ministers and to Elspeth Attwooll, who was reporting at that time on behalf of the European Parliament's Committee on Fisheries.

The responses from both ministers are favourable, not least because we took broadly the same tack as the Government does. I certainly have no further comments, other than to say that we will have to watch developments to guarantee that the issues in the report are addressed. Obviously, they are on the Government's radar screen.

Irene Oldfather: The fact that the report seems to have been quite well received is encouraging. Clearly, the committee has identified a number of issues that the UK Government needs to keep under review, and we did so within quite a short timescale. It was a constructive piece of work, which is being pursued constructively.

Mrs Ewing: We should note our thanks to Alasdair Morrison.

Irene Oldfather: Absolutely.

Mr Home Robertson: It is also worth acknowledging the particularly helpful reply from a UK minister, which we do not always get. We certainly got one on this occasion.

Mrs Ewing: I remember it well.

The Convener: It has certainly been a useful piece of work and we record our thanks to Alasdair Morrison and the clerks for undertaking it. It has received a fairly warm response, but we shall ask the clerks to monitor the situation.

The second point is to advise members that the Luxembourg ambassador to the United Kingdom will make a public address on 27 January, which I will host, as part of the committee's on-going facilitation of discussion of the priorities of the presidency of the European Union. All members are welcome to attend the event.

The final point relates to the committee's away day, which was held on Friday in Glasgow. I certainly felt that the day was useful and constructive and that helpful contributions on

issues relating to the EU and the external relations strategy were made by the two academic presenters, Professor Drew Scott and Professor Charlie Jeffery from the University of Edinburgh.

The general points of agreement were that, in the light of the length of time that we have spent on the inquiry into the promotion of Scotland, members broadly favour shorter, sharper inquiries. The committee took the view that an early priority would be to undertake an inquiry into what the Executive hopes to and can achieve from the hosting of the G8 summit in Scotland in the summer and the contemporaneous UK presidency of the European Union.

If members are agreeable, we could begin by agreeing the remit for the inquiry on 1 February, with the aim of concluding the report by the Easter recess. I think that that timescale is achievable. I will consult members in due course about the possibility of having additional meetings to ensure that that is possible, but do members agree to that broad timescale?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Irene Oldfather: I echo your points about the away day, which was a useful and constructive day. It is also appropriate to place on record our thanks to Charlie Jeffery, Drew Scott and Liz Holt, who was able to come along too. It will be an interesting inquiry and I look forward to seeing the remit at the next meeting.

The Convener: Thank you. I have no other points to raise.

Mr Home Robertson: I want to raise something that was mentioned briefly and informally at the beginning of the meeting. Colleagues will have seen press reports about the difficulties that Scottish Water and Scottish Power have got into over the disposal of sewage residue at Longannet power station. Obviously the situation gives rise to serious difficulties for a number of agencies and for the Scottish Executive, which is disappointing, given that the practice seemed to be a good solution to a difficult problem and that the Executive has put a lot of money into disposing of sewage waste in that way. For companies to run into legal difficulties because of the interpretation of European legislation is disturbing.

I do not know whether the committee can usefully become engaged in the matter, but given that the problem arises from the interpretation of European regulations it might be worth while at least to make inquiries about that aspect of the problem. The problem is serious and the Executive is going to have to find a solution to it rather urgently.

Irene Oldfather: We have a new legal adviser and I am sure that the matter would be an appropriate one for the committee to consider with our adviser's assistance.

Alasdair Rankin (Clerk): We would be able to provide the committee with a note that clearly sets out the nature of the problem.

The Convener: We shall take that forward today so that we have before us at our next meeting an explanation of the issues at stake and the origins of the problem. We all echo the comments that John Home Robertson has made. It is a matter of regret that the issue has got to this stage. A report on the matter would be helpful.

14:20

Meeting continued in private until 16:06.

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