

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 22 February 2005

Session 2

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

3rd 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)

*Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

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

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Sue Fisher (Save the Children in Scotland)

Helen McDade (WWF Scotland)

Duncan McLaren (Friends of the Earth Scotland)

Judith Robertson (Oxfam in Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Alasdair Rankin

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Nick Hawthorne

David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 22 February 2005

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:03*]

G8 and Council of the European Union Presidencies Inquiry

The Convener (Mr John Swinney): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the third meeting in 2005 of the Scottish Parliament's European and External Relations Committee. Before we commence our business, I intimate that I have received apologies from Dennis Canavan and Margaret Ewing, both of whom are participating in a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visit to South Africa and Malawi, and from John Home Robertson who, less salubriously, has the flu.

The first agenda item is to begin the committee's inquiry into Scotland's contribution to the G8 summit and the United Kingdom presidency of the Council of the European Union. We have two panels of witnesses. The first is made up of Judith Robertson, the head of Oxfam in Scotland, and Sue Fisher, the acting programme director of Save the Children in Scotland. Written evidence from those organisations has been circulated to members. I ask Judith Robertson and Sue Fisher to introduce themselves and to make any brief introductory remarks, after which we will begin questioning.

Judith Robertson (Oxfam in Scotland): I am the acting head of Oxfam in Scotland—I am not quite in the full position yet, as you suggested, convener, but that is okay, because I will be. I thank the committee for the invitation to be part of the process.

In our written evidence, we approached the issue in two ways. The first is that, from the perspective of Oxfam and other agencies, the major focus for the G8 summit is on the goals of the make poverty history coalition. We see those goals as a major part of the role of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Executive in relation to the G8 summit. Secondly, we are concerned with the slightly longer-term process of the international development component of the Scottish Executive's international strategy. Those are the two main strands to the evidence that I will give this afternoon.

Sue Fisher (Save the Children in Scotland): I thank the committee for inviting Save the Children

to participate. Like Oxfam, we are members of the make poverty history coalition, which is our focus for the G8 summit and for the evidence that I will give today. In addition, we are keen for the G8 summit to consider the millennium development goals as key targets to be achieved. I am not an expert on all the issues that are raised in our written evidence, but I am happy to go back to my organisation and gather additional information if that would be useful.

The Convener: I will lay out a bit of background to the committee's approach. Many of the issues that are to be discussed at the G8 summit and that are to be the focus of the UK presidency of the EU will be reserved issues. However, the committee has been intrigued by the publication of the Government's international strategy, which has for the first time explicitly included a focus on Scottish Executive involvement in some form of international development activity. That is welcomed across the board in the Scottish Parliament, but we are interested to establish what the strategy is about, what it means and what the Government plans to do. I use that point to illustrate the committee's approach to the inquiry, which is not necessarily to evaluate the content or output of the G8 summit but to evaluate whether the Scottish Executive is successful in influencing the G8 agenda and ensuring that its concerns and priorities are reflected in the issues that are discussed at the summit.

I offer that as background information, but it brings me to my first question, which is for Judith Robertson, who referred to the Executive's international development strategy. What dialogue has Oxfam in Scotland had with the Executive on its international development activities and how will that dialogue help to influence the approach that the Executive may take to make an impact on the G8 summit?

Judith Robertson: The main vehicle for that dialogue has been the Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland, which in shorthand we call NIDOS. I am not sure how familiar committee members are with that network—some may be more familiar with it than others are. NIDOS recently ran consultation exercises involving members of the network, of which there are currently about 45, including big agencies in Scotland such as Oxfam, Save the Children, Christian Aid and Tearfund, and a range of much smaller agencies—members are drawn from across the sector.

The first exercise that NIDOS ran was a written consultation asking for a series of responses from the aid agencies, to which we submitted evidence, and the second one took place at last week's annual general meeting. The summary of the written consultation went to the Minister for

Tourism, Culture and Sport, Patricia Ferguson, about a month ago. Given the Executive's timescale for launching its strategy in early March, I am not sure how much influence the consultation that took place at the AGM will have. I do not know how tightly formulated the strategies are.

The Convener: What were the main themes that you want to share with the Executive that emerged from the first consultation exercise involving international development organisations?

Judith Robertson: Oxfam's main emphasis was on encouraging the Executive to take a strategic approach to international development, for example by taking the millennium development goals as a main focus for its work overall. The £3 million that is available per year is not a great amount in international development terms so, in order for it to have the maximum impact, it needs to be focused strategically. The framework of the millennium development goals should be used to achieve that.

There are various proposals on support for the international development sector in Scotland and various perspectives on what that might mean. Some of what is needed is capacity building in the sector to communicate better—to build better international development awareness among the population of Scotland and to build better understanding of international development processes.

There is a need for the Executive and potentially the Parliament to learn how international development works. They need to learn about the processes that are fundamental to the practices of the big agencies and the Department for International Development, such as processes for the participation of poor people in the development of policy, and processes to encourage Governments to engage in those processes when looking at pro-poor development.

The Convener: In terms of the practical way in which that dialogue can be built on, what approach do you expect the Executive to take?

Judith Robertson: There is a number of options and then there is the process. There are specific activities that need to be developed in conjunction with the Executive. It is hard for us on the outside to say, "You can do this," because we do not necessarily know what the Executive can do, but we know what we think that it can do and we know how we would like that to happen.

If the Executive is going to develop Government-to-Government support for specific processes, it will use the millennium development goals as the framework. The Executive could consider an education strategy within a developing country—possibly in Africa, because the countries there are furthest behind—and work with the Government of

that country. It could ask, "How can we support you to develop your strategy for achieving the millennium development target on education?" We have huge skills in education in Scotland. The Executive is considering skill share, but that needs to be done on the country's terms, not on Scotland's terms. That is key in any international development approach.

The Convener: Do you see that as the most likely role that the Executive will settle on in terms of establishing Government-to-Government rapport?

Judith Robertson: It is certainly a potential role, although I do not know whether it is the most likely one.

We can also consider the issue from a completely different angle. We should promote the understanding in Scotland of international development. Oxfam would want that to be done through improved education on development in the curriculum. There should also be support for development education centres around Scotland. I do not know whether committee members are aware of that network.

14:15

The Convener: So there would be an internal and an external dimension to the strategy that should be formulated.

Judith Robertson: Definitely.

The Convener: In your written submission, you suggest a number of areas on which the G8 summit should focus and on which the Executive should use its influence if possible. Are there particular arguments of which the committee should be aware and are there areas in which the Executive should take a lead to ensure progress at the summit?

Judith Robertson: The biggest area in which the Executive could take a lead is the conditionality that is attached to debt, aid and aspects of trade. The Executive has to understand better the conditions that are being put on developing countries—the provisions that are supposedly in support of those countries. It has to become an effective advocate of changing the balance of power in our relationships with those countries.

The substance of my argument is in the papers that I have submitted. If committee members wish, we can send a lot of additional information. Building understanding of the impact of conditionality and then focusing its advocacy work within Government relationships should be important for the Executive.

Sue Fisher: I would add that the UK Government still has a long way to go before it reaches the 0.7 per cent target for international aid. Some other European countries are much nearer to the target. There is an argument that we should take a unilateral approach and say that we hope to meet the target within a much shorter time than is currently expected.

Dropping the debt is another issue. The UK stance needs to be on the agenda if countries are to be able to free up their domestic income so that they can make education free for their children and make health care free for all their people.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I thank both witnesses for their written submissions, which were very helpful. I wanted to pick up on a couple of points in Oxfam's submission. You mention "protectionism" and "massive agricultural subsidies". We seem to have a huge opportunity here. Scotland is giving a lead in, for example, regulations on passive smoking, but that has to be juxtaposed with the huge European Union tobacco subsidies that are being made through the common agricultural policy. Will the UK presidency offer an opportunity to highlight some of the protectionist policies? Should tobacco subsidies be highlighted?

Judith Robertson: Our work on subsidies has focused on the CAP and agricultural subsidies and has been mostly to do with cereal production. We have also focused on the negative impact of those subsidies on developing countries. So, yes, to answer your question, we have a significant opportunity to highlight the impact of subsidies on developing countries. However, we have focused not on tobacco but on cereal production.

Irene Oldfather: Under the CAP, huge amounts of money are given in tobacco subsidies. There is also a lot of dumping on the third world of substandard tobacco. I have huge concerns about that. Because of our health agenda and our passive smoking agenda, we have an in-built opportunity to lead the way—especially on tobacco subsidies. Would you agree with that notion?

Judith Robertson: I do not have the information on tobacco subsidies, so I cannot give the expert evidence that you want on that. However, it may exist, although not necessarily within Oxfam. The Scottish Executive could find out exactly how the subsidies operate and the impact of that on developing countries. It will be a huge issue.

Irene Oldfather: On another issue, how could we do more on ethical procurement? There are opportunities for us there. At around the same time as the G8 summit, we will have T in the Park. In the past, there has been an ethical threads campaign to encourage bands to use ethically

sound produce at such major events. Are either of your organisations involved in that? The timing of those two major events is quite good. Do you foresee any tie-in with T in the Park?

Sue Fisher: That activity sends a strong statement to the public about how important it is for them to think about their role as consumers in relation to the situation in developing countries. All sorts of guidance can be made available on which products have been fairly traded, which products are linked to child labour, and so on. Such activity sends a powerful communication about what ordinary people can do.

Judith Robertson: There is another dimension to the impact on developing countries of ethical procurement policies such as those of the Executive. We wonder whether the Executive has ever conducted an audit of the impact of its procurement policies on developing countries. Does it know what that impact is? If it knows, that is great. What is that impact and how can we improve it? If it does not know, finding out would be one way of establishing a baseline of information from which it could consider ways of improving practice.

Oxfam is a member of a body called the corporate responsibility coalition Scotland—CORE Scotland—which has conducted a considerable amount of research into ethical procurement practices in local government and public sector bodies to establish ways in which the social and environmental impact of those practices can be diminished. Consumer action is really important. We are heavily involved in the promotion of fairly traded coffee—I think that people at the Parliament are heavy drinkers of it.

Irene Oldfather: Yes, we are.

Judith Robertson: There is also a bigger, more structural issue to do with the way in which we purchase our goods and services and the way in which we tackle corporate responsibility and legislate for corporate responsibility to be part of that process.

Irene Oldfather: There seems to be an in-built consumer group that is quite interested in that. Groups of young people are quite interested in environmental, debt and trade justice issues. We could link some of those together, as well as doing the Government-to-Government things. There are opportunities to involve younger people and to motivate them in some of these campaigns. I presume that the way forward for organisations such as yours is to get young people enthusiastic and interested. Perhaps we could have further discussions about that as policies develop.

The Convener: I would like to pursue that last point about development education, which you also raise in your written submission. We

sometimes wrestle with what is devolved and what is reserved, but education policy is almost entirely devolved to the Executive. Has there been any dialogue about expanding the components of the curriculum that would relate to development education? If so, how extensive is the dialogue that is going on? You also talk about the cohesion of government. This is an obsession of mine, but has the Government's commitment to an international development strategy percolated through into its education strategy, or are we not talking to each other?

Sue Fisher: I think that dialogue is happening in different places on these issues and there has been dialogue on development education with the Education Department. This year, an initiative called enabling effective support, which has been funded and supported by the Department for International Development, provides us with a great opportunity. If the Executive can give support to that initiative, which will work with development education centres and non-governmental organisations throughout Scotland to improve development education and invest resources in it, that will be important.

The Convener: Excuse my ignorance, but is development education part of the curriculum in Scotland?

Sue Fisher: Yes, so to speak.

The Convener: "Yes, so to speak"? Various parts of the curriculum relate to citizenship, lifestyle choices and so on, but I wonder whether development education features prominently within that.

Judith Robertson: It comes under the curriculum for global citizenship.

Sue Fisher: Yes, and subjects such as environmental studies. There should be elements of development education in a number of curriculum areas, which is the case with citizenship. For example, there are aspects of the teaching of history, economics or subjects relating to the environment and people in society that we would describe as being development education and which would involve raising development issues. There is no one subject in which the issue would sit.

Judith Robertson: There has been an interesting sustainable secondary schools project. Development education is not only about educating people about development; it is about a methodology of educating that involves engaging young people in the process not of deciding what they are taught but of running the way in which systems work within a school. That project, which has just come to an end, came up with some valuable findings. If the committee is interested, we can give you more information on that.

There is a wealth of information about development education. A network of agencies called the International Development Education Association of Scotland—IDEAS—is working to integrate development education into all aspects of the curriculum. The Education Department is supporting various processes that are under way. However, as ever, more support would be good, particularly with regard to the development education centres around Scotland, which make up a network of small—tiny, in fact—resource centres for teachers in communities throughout Scotland. They contain a range of classroom resources that relate to development issues and use development education methodologies. The centres are not expensive, but they are vulnerable. They have the potential to underpin our ability to take this work forward in a meaningful way.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I apologise for my late arrival and thank our witnesses for their submissions, which I have read.

In her response to Irene Oldfather, Sue Fisher suggested that we should be much closer to the 0.7 per cent target than we are. That indicates that there should be a change to the UK budget with respect to the amount of money that is allocated to international development. The Oxfam submission says that Scotland should do more to change UK policy. How could Scotland play a part in helping the Chancellor of the Exchequer meet that 0.7 per cent target?

Judith Robertson: I believe that Hilary Benn will give evidence to the committee soon. You could bring the matter to his attention.

Phil Gallie: To be fair, I am raising the issue with you because you wrote the words in the Oxfam submission.

Judith Robertson: That was a genuine answer. The power to reach the 0.7 per cent is reserved to Westminster; it is not within the gift of the Scottish Parliament to raise development aid to that amount. However, it is within the gift of the Parliament and the Executive to apply pressure on the Treasury to create the space to make that 0.7 per cent target reachable and to create an awareness among the population of Scotland that it is a credible and viable way of helping to make poverty history.

There are various strategies that the Parliament and the Executive can use to do that and there are certain strategies that, if I were the Executive, I would not use. There is a great deal that the Executive can do in relation to generating enthusiasm and public support for meeting the 0.7 per cent target and ensuring that people see it as a valid goal for the Government to reach within our lives.

14:30

Phil Gallie: Okay. The point that I am really trying to make is that perhaps Scotland could be a little magnanimous and recognise the Treasury's problems. We could say to the Treasury that we will accept a limited reduction in our block grant to help to achieve the target, which would be action rather than simply words of good will. What do you think about that?

Judith Robertson: I am not sure whether Oxfam would care to take a view on that.

Phil Gallie: I should say that I am not surprised.

I want to move on and pick up on what has been said about the CAP. You have homed in on cereals, but you have not done any calculations for tobacco, which is a shame, as I think that we would all appreciate those and would all like to see changes in that respect—I say that to Irene Oldfather. Have you considered what your suggestion on cereal production would mean to farmers in the UK, for example, and what effect it would have on their finances?

Judith Robertson: We have—I have the exact figures somewhere. It is clear that the poorest farmers in the UK are not receiving the greatest subsidies. Rich agribusiness is receiving the largest proportion of subsidies from the EU—that comment applies to Scotland and to England. A recent parliamentary question revealed that 8,200 farmers in Scotland do not receive any CAP subsidy because they are not eligible. That means that the vast majority of farmers—although what I am saying may not cover the largest proportion of production—does not benefit from the CAP and therefore will not suffer if the CAP changes. They may benefit if we choose to restructure very differently the way in which we support our agricultural community and rural communities and if subsidies shift from going into the hands of big agribusiness and are more equitably or completely differently distributed throughout the UK economy.

Formerly, I worked for the UK poverty programme. We worked directly with small hill farmers in the north of England. Some hill farmers survive on £3,500 to £4,000 a year—the committee knows that. They are not rich people and they do not receive CAP subsidies—indeed, they will probably never receive them. From Oxfam's perspective, any restructuring of the CAP would have to take into account that we are not in the business of trying to destabilise poor farmers but that we want to make the whole process more equitable and ensure that, as a result, we do not destroy the livelihoods of farmers in poor communities all over the world. To answer your question, we have done research.

Phil Gallie: I welcome your analysis and the fact that you have considered that matter. I, too, would

like to see major changes to the CAP, which is perhaps fundamental to the European Union's existence.

A rough interpretation of your comments on debt would be that there should be debt relief or loans without conditions, which seems to me to be quite an extreme and difficult position for anybody—including any Government or bank—to endorse in full.

Judith Robertson: Oxfam's position on conditionality is clear but is not explicitly stated in the submission. We would look to put conditions on debt relief that are different from the conditions that are currently applied. The conditions that are currently applied concern liberalisation, opening up economies, internal restructuring and the privatisation of goods and services within countries. The conditions that we would seek to apply would be that debt relief should be spent on health and education and providing open access to free, universal primary education and health provision. With the money released through debt relief, pro-poor policies could be developed that put the onus on Governments to generate increased democracy, reduce levels of corruption and engage the population in determining processes that will best meet their local needs. Conditions would have to be considered, but they would be very different from those that currently apply.

I point out that certain conditions have had a positive impact on poor people. For example, in 2001, Tanzania was granted significant debt relief, but it was directed to use the money for priority sectors such as health, education, water, roads and HIV/AIDS. Although there was conditionality, it ensured that positive poverty-reduction processes were put in place. As a result, the primary school population has increased by 66 per cent and we have built 45,000 classrooms and 1,925 new primary schools. The list goes on and on, and it shows that debt reduction has led to significant improvements in Tanzania.

At the moment, conditionality often leads to the privatisation of water, education and health provision and the liberalisation of those markets to make them accessible to external providers. As a result, those services become completely inaccessible to poor people. Such actions will potentially help companies in countries that provide the debt relief but will not generate poverty reduction in the countries that desperately need it. Oxfam's perspective on the issue is that we need to shift the balance of how conditionality works.

Phil Gallie: Has Tanzania's economic viability improved as a consequence of debt relief? I am not referring to big companies, but surely if such countries are to develop in the way in which we want them to develop, they must see an overall

economic benefit that will allow them to help themselves to develop in future.

Judith Robertson: According to the millennium development goals, universal primary education and health provision are basic tenets of overall national development and create the bedrock for a country's development. Tanzania has said that it believes that its goal of universal primary education can be attained by 2006, which is nine years ahead of the 2015 target. I do not have any figures for Tanzania's economic development, but I know that it is making significant improvements in the aspects that were targeted by the millennium development goals. As I said, such improvements provide a footstool for achieving other development goals.

Phil Gallie: Are you able to give us figures for Tanzania's economic development?

Judith Robertson: Yes.

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): Both submissions are very critical of the European Union's proposals for economic partnership agreements. For example, Oxfam's submission says:

"There is growing evidence that this approach to international development exacerbates and entrenches poverty rather than reducing it."

Will you tell us about that evidence? How can Europe create partnership agreements with developing countries that would deal with those issues?

Judith Robertson: The basic tenets of the partnership agreements stipulate that the countries with which the agreements are made should open up their markets to the EU and remove any tariffs and subsidies that they might have. As a result, the limited protection that is available to their own markets is removed and those markets become very accessible. However, at the same time as the EU is demanding that subsidies be removed from the poorest of the poor countries, it is not planning to reduce subsidies to its own farmers.

The arrangement is completely inequitable. It is clear that the only people who will benefit are those in the rich northern countries. The balance of power is such that it is incredibly difficult for poor countries to negotiate on equal terms. That is the basic problem with the EPAs. I do not know whether Susan Fisher wants to add anything.

I can give Iain Smith a lot of documentation about the EPAs. We have a lot of written information if he is interested in knowing about and understanding the process. It comes back to the point that I made earlier about conditionality. The conditions attached to the agreements are very restrictive on the developing countries and, in

practice, they will not promote their development. In free market economic theory they will, but in practice there is no evidence of that happening.

Many of the policies of the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund in effect deliver structural adjustment programmes, which have been discredited as a way of eradicating poverty. The programmes are effective in supporting the development of northern industry and northern business, but they are not effective in eradicating poverty. That is where the shift needs to come.

Iain Smith: What sort of trade agreements and partnership agreements should we try to promote as alternatives to the existing policies if they are so harmful? I am not disputing what you say, but if they are so harmful, how do we create a situation that allows poorer countries to trade in a way that is to their benefit rather than to their disbenefit, as you suggest is the case?

Sue Fisher: The main solution would be to untie the conditions that are involved, such as conditions about tendering and opening up public services to competition. Public services have to be funded and procurement must be done in ways that we probably would not want for our own country. Those aspects of the agreements are particularly disastrous.

Judith Robertson: A fundamental issue is on whose terms the agreements are being negotiated. If the negotiations were conducted much more from the perspective of the developing country than from the perspective of the northern country, the agreements would be very different in nature. Many developing countries know what their markets need to grow, expand and be nourished and, generally, it is not what is being provided or advised by the European Union. It is about shifting the terms on which the debate is held.

The Convener: The nub of the inquiry that we are undertaking is the extent to which the Executive can make a contribution to or impact on the G8 summit. You have gone through a number of issues on which you think the Executive can use its position to lobby for or promote a different approach. Is there anything in particular that the Scottish Executive can and should do—beyond what it is doing already—that would make a particular impact on the preparations for the G8 summit? Will you comment on the political opportunities that hosting the summit here in Scotland provides to advance some of the issues that concern you?

Judith Robertson: To be honest, to some degree that is already happening. A style and a tone have emerged. The Scottish Executive will have a certain role to play, perhaps not so much in

hosting the G8, but in hosting events around the G8 and inviting people to activities and so on. There will be many opportunities for the Executive to permeate those events with information, literature, commentary and perspectives on some of the issues that will be dealt with at the G8, whether climate change or the goals of the make poverty history campaign on debt, aid and trade. There will be ample scope for the Executive to permeate its packaging and marketing of those events with aids to understanding.

Those activities will set the scene. I do not know how strong the Executive's presence at the summit itself will be, so I am not sure whether it will have opportunities to exercise direct influence or to lobby. If it cannot act directly, it will still be very helpful for it to act through the indirect routes that I have described.

14:45

Sue Fisher: Between now and the mobilisation for the G8, a number of events will be held by members of the make poverty history coalition and all the agencies. MSPs are more than welcome to attend those events and to show their support for the information, ideas and campaigns that we are trying to promote. We can share our diary of events with the committee.

It is important to remember that we have a chance to support children in understanding and making sense of the issues and to help them to contribute to the debate in their own way. Some of the offers in relation to capacity building that have already been made to the non-governmental organisation sector, such as those to do with the secondment of staff, will be useful, as will some of the funding that has been offered. More could probably still be done to ensure that children have an opportunity to engage with the issues, so that they realise that there are important matters that the Government wants them to have the chance to learn about.

The Convener: As members have no further points, I thank Judith Robertson and Sue Fisher very much for coming to present evidence to the committee and for kicking off our inquiry. If you have any further information that you think would benefit the committee, please send it on to us. Members of the committee would certainly like to receive further detail from Oxfam on the tobacco issue that was raised.

Judith Robertson: I will see where that is at. Thank you very much.

The Convener: Our second panel of witnesses will concentrate on environmental issues as they relate to the G8 summit and the UK presidency of the EU in 2005. As members will probably have gathered, there have been some changes in the

witnesses. Fred Edwards and Jessica Pepper are unable to be with us—a major environmental issue, congestion charging, has been resolved today, which has somewhat distracted some people—but we are joined by Duncan McLaren, who is the chief executive of Friends of the Earth Scotland, and Helen McDade, who is the campaign officer for WWF Scotland. They are both welcome.

I offer the witnesses the opportunity to introduce themselves and to give us a little bit of background. The committee members have copies of the submission from Scottish Environment LINK, which was issued yesterday.

Duncan McLaren (Friends of the Earth Scotland): Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence. I am not only the chief executive of Friends of the Earth Scotland, but chair of CORE Scotland—the corporate responsibility coalition Scotland—about which you heard from the previous witnesses, and an active member of a grouping called G8 alternatives, so members might want to ask questions about those as well. Jessica Pepper and Fred Edwards give their apologies. Fred Edwards is, unfortunately, at a Scottish Environment Protection Agency board event and Jessica Pepper has been called to a National Trust for Scotland board event, so their absence has nothing to do with congestion charging.

The Convener: My excuses were completely ill-founded, so I apologise for besmirching their good name.

Duncan McLaren: I am sure that they would have things to say about that issue too. They would very much have liked to have been able to appear before the committee.

I am aware that the committee has had only a short submission from Scottish Environment LINK, so I will take a little time to run through a few points, which might help to structure members' questioning.

We are aware that international policy development on the environment, whether at the World Trade Organisation or G8 summits, goes on with little involvement of the public or parliamentarians, but the G8 summit gives Scotland an opportunity to stimulate a constructive and adult discussion with a high level of public participation. It provides two opportunities: to extend a positive and constructive welcome to those who come to give their views peacefully; and to kick-start debate in Scotland, particularly as part of the United Nations decade of education for sustainable development, which has just begun.

Scotland has a clear opportunity to intervene, and that opportunity is less bound by the protocols of sovereignty than is the opportunity that the UK

as a whole has. There are clearly two topics. One is climate change, which is our priority, and the other is the broader sustainable development agenda, of which the make poverty history coalition is a strong supporter and is part. We do not perceive any contradiction between those two agendas.

We are hopeful that Scotland will take opportunities to influence the G8's agenda and will use the fact that the summit is happening here and that the UK will have the presidency of the European Union to challenge and improve Scottish practice on climate change and poverty. We have some specific actions that we hope we will have the chance to present to the committee during the evidence-taking session.

Helen McDade (WWF Scotland): I am the campaign officer with WWF and I am also on the team for the everyone campaign, which is a joint campaign with Scottish Environment LINK to encourage participation in elections. The committee might have seen the launch last week of our climate change campaign, which is running up to the election that, we assume, will take place before the G8 summit. As part of that, we are working to try to get people involved in politics. We look on the G8 summit as another great opportunity for that. We are concerned that people in Scotland have a chance to make their voice heard when the event comes to Scotland. We do not want politicians to be parachuted in to have a meeting behind closed doors and leave again without our having been able to impact on them or vice versa. Therefore, we ask the committee to consider ways of ensuring that such an impact is made.

We flag up slight concerns about the amount of publicity that is being given to the number of police who will be involved, the areas that will be closed off and the numbers of sheriffs and cells that will be on standby. A very off-putting message is being sent to members of the public who want to demonstrate peacefully or make their point at the events that are being organised throughout the countryside.

Another issue that we would like the committee to consider is the suggestion that the G8 event itself could be footprinted. In other words, the event's consumption of world resources could be assessed. The convener is laughing, but it seems like a very reasonable suggestion.

The Convener: I was not laughing at the suggestion; I was laughing about what the contents of such an assessment might be.

Helen McDade: From that, advice on how to reduce such consumption could be circulated for the benefit of further events in other countries. At the end of the day, people can smell hypocrisy a

mile off. If delegates sit around talking about saving the world but do their bit to damage it during that time, that is the message that comes across. We are interested in the democratic input to the event.

Duncan McLaren mentioned the top two priorities: the third world and Africa; and climate change. We see the two as running together. It is now widely recognised that climate change will have a devastating effect on the third world. It is not a case of putting either environmental issues or development to the fore—the two are related. The education 21 Scotland conference, which is connected with the United Nations decade of education for sustainable development, is taking place in June, and I think that the Scottish Executive is supporting that. That is another opportunity for Scotland to feed in.

The Convener: I thank Helen McDade and Duncan McLaren for those remarks. I would like to start at the same place as I did with the previous panel of witnesses. The emphasis here is slightly different, given the focus on climate change that you have both highlighted, and given that climate change is an environmental issue for which the Scottish Executive has direct responsibility here in Scotland.

On the type of influence, message and argument that you would like the Scottish Executive to contribute to both the G8 summit and the UK presidency of the EU—which we have not talked about an awful lot so far, although it is an equally important opportunity, given the platform for advancing issues that such events provide us with—which of the Executive's current actions would you like it to do more of, or what new initiatives would you like it to take to advance some of the issues that concern you?

Duncan McLaren: There are two central points to make. First, the issue of climate change is urgent and needs a rapid and continuing response. The Executive is currently undertaking a review of climate change policy and has the opportunity to set year-on-year targets for reductions in emissions. If that opportunity is taken, it will send a message to other countries about the urgency and importance of the response.

Secondly, there is the question of climate justice. Members have already heard that the developing nations of the world are the ones that will be most severely affected by climate change. That does not mean that we, living here, will escape, but we have more resources and a greater ability to react. Primarily, climate change has been caused by emissions from rich, developed countries. If we consider the cumulative historical effects, the G8 nations form the primary source of climate-changing emissions, but the

impacts will fall on countries that will not be at the table at the G8 summit—the developing nations. The long-term targets that Scotland and the international community adopt need to recognise that. As well as having short-term year-on-year improvement targets, Scotland needs to set long-term targets, at least of the order of 60 per cent by 2050, and ideally significantly more than that—about 80 per cent by 2050. That would give recognition to how the current climate injustice can be solved. I could go on to provide much more detail, but I will stop there.

Helen McDade: On the slightly shorter term, we recognise the fact that Scotland cannot make a 20 per cent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010. Therefore, in our campaign we have been asking that we commit to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 12.5 per cent by 2010, which Scotland could achieve. If the Scottish Executive committed itself to that before the G8 summit, it would have the moral high ground, so to speak, and could say that it is sticking to its part of the Kyoto protocol and that we have a right to be involved in the discussions. That is specifically what we, as a group, are asking for.

15:00

Duncan McLaren: In the context of the EU presidency, one of the key challenges on climate justice is how countries including the UK and Scotland engage with the US. In our view, there is a risk that the G8 summit will be seen as an opportunity to set an agenda that brings the US on board but, in doing so, weakens the principles of the UN framework convention on climate change and does not take account of the principles of climate justice.

We would rather see the UK, as the host state of the G8 summit, take the G8 and the EU process as part of a process and recognise that the EU, as a whole, has the ability to set climate policies that will provide an economic incentive to the US to come on board. The EU does not need to make concessions in the framing of policy or in the stringency of the targets; it has an opportunity to set an agenda that will create economic incentives. That would be a better outcome than its watering down the objectives of the climate treaty at the G8 and setting up some separate process outside the UN framework convention, which the US is signed up to even though it has not signed the Kyoto protocol.

The Convener: Your message is that we should avoid a soggy compromise and come to some arrangement that creates a credible vehicle for achieving some of the reductions in emissions that you have talked about.

Duncan McLaren: Absolutely. There is a series of policies that could be delivered at the EU level, both in climate policy and with the on-going review of the EU sustainable development strategy.

The Convener: Is that debate going on between Scottish Environment LINK, its counterpart body in the United Kingdom, the Scottish Executive and the United Kingdom Government?

Duncan McLaren: Scottish Environment LINK and others have been inputting to the Executive on its climate policy. This is probably the first time that we have had a chance to put it in the context of exactly what that means for the G8. Our colleagues in London and in Brussels have been putting the same or a similar message to the relevant authorities.

Irene Oldfather: I am interested in the points that you are making about the need to be careful not to portray the G8 summit in a negative way by talking about the number of police officers that will be needed, the roads that will be closed and so on. I note, from school visits and from young people to whom I have spoken, that there is an amazing amount of awareness out there about the summit. I do not recall any political event that I have spoken to more young people about than this. I wonder how we can use that awareness. Previous witnesses have spoken about the campaign to make poverty history. I wonder whether environmental groups have considered how we might harness the interest within our schools and among our young people to highlight some of the environmental issues. Have you had any discussions or thoughts about that?

Helen McDade: We have not had direct interaction with schools in campaigning. However, through our everyone campaign, which is detailed on our website, we hope to engage the public in general, including young people, in taking action to become involved and make their voices heard. At the moment, the campaign is targeted specifically at the general election, but it is our intention to continue it.

It is hoped that, through the public events that we hold—the hustings and so on—we will get people interested and convince them that they can feed in and make a difference. That is why it is important that the events that have been organised by well-recognised groups should not be tarred with the same brush as the worst demonstrations or events that have taken place at other summits. That is a concern. I was thinking about taking my children to the events, but when I saw the news reports at the weekend I wondered whether I would. However, that is not right and there is no need for it. We are extrapolating from events that have happened in other countries and assuming that the worst will happen here, but we have had such events before and the worst has

not happened. In such double-bind situations, the politicians often say, "Oh, it's terrible that nobody's interested in politics and public affairs and we wish they'd get involved." Then, as soon as they do, the politicians say that there is potential for problems.

Irene Oldfather: Where do you think that the negative message comes from? I noticed it in the press at the weekend. Does it come from Government or the police?

Helen McDade: Perhaps undue weight has been given to the precautions that will have to be taken. Sadly, the potential exists for problems and we have reached the stage at which Gleneagles will become a no-go area and residents will have to have a pass; that is sad, but perhaps necessary. The media might be making more of the situation than they should, but the Parliament has a role to play in asking for public involvement and saying that politicians are genuinely open to hearing the public's voices and input. That is the only way to make people engage with politics. There are plenty of single-issue examples that prove that people will turn out because they care. As you say, it is clear that young people care, but if they feel that they cannot say anything, the message might be channelled in the wrong direction.

Duncan McLaren: It is unfortunate that that message is coming from the Executive. I was at a reception last week at which Jack McConnell and Jim Wallace spoke about the summit. They saw the summit, the 5,000 media people and the entourages of the delegations—the large footprint of the summit—as an economic opportunity and somehow missed the opportunity that will be presented by those 200,000 almost exclusively peaceful, often middle-class, well-heeled individuals—

Helen McDade: Speak for yourself.

Duncan McLaren: Those people would be at least as likely to come to Scotland again afterwards if they are welcomed and far less likely to return if they feel that they have been met with an oppressive or unwelcoming environment.

Helen McDade mentioned one double-bind, but the other is that the more we portray events such as the make poverty history march or other protest events as places at which there is likely to be violence, the more people will keep their children and families away and, as a result, it is more likely that there will be violence at those events. The best policing is the self-policing that comes from having events where all the family feels that it can participate and where everyone is welcome. I urge parliamentarians to be in the front ranks and say, "We will participate in these events. We want the G8 summit to be open to the message of the public and their elected representatives." You

politicians can take a leadership role in that respect.

Iain Smith: We tend to focus on what we can do through the UK presidency of the G8 summit to influence the decision makers at a macro level. However, is there not an opportunity at a micro level for us to use the events to influence individuals in Scotland to change their behaviour? Have you given some thought to how that approach could be developed? Is there anything that the Parliament or the Scottish Executive can do to assist that process?

Duncan McLaren: There are two or three measures at that level. The largest of those is concerned with the United Nations decade of education for sustainable development that Helen McDade mentioned. That initiative goes beyond the school level and provides an opportunity to map and audit what all sectors are doing to provide education for sustainable development, using the summit to kick-start debates and discussions and to raise awareness. Then, support will be rolled out through educational budgets, the international strategy and the international fund.

That would also have benefits at the macro level if the Scottish public were to become more aware of and concerned about international development and environmental issues. If that were reflected in the advocacy of Scottish organisations and supported by the Executive's international fund, we could help to have an impact on subsequent international events.

Had Fred Edwards been here, he would have pointed to Scotland's past role in the enlightenment and said that we have a chance to be the hotbed of an ecological enlightenment that will roll out far beyond Scotland if we take the chance to spread it through our educational system.

The second area is climate change and there are benefits in the Scottish climate policy. The third area would be procurement, to repeat something that has been mentioned by other witnesses. We could be setting an example through ethical and environmentally directed procurement by the Executive. In turn, that would support small Scottish businesses and create a tone and dynamic within the Scottish economy that would be beneficial to the economy, the environment and society.

The Convener: What is your assessment of where we are in relation to procurement? I cannot imagine that you are 100 per cent satisfied, but are we in better shape than we were five years ago?

Duncan McLaren: We have taken significant steps. Good progress has been made on

parliamentary procurement, although at a reception here recently, I noted that there was no fairly traded wine. However, you have fairly traded tea and coffee.

Less progress has been made in all the other public agencies that could be driven by an agenda set by the Executive and the Parliament. The new definition of best value is explicitly not just about value for money, but that is what we see all too often, and that is the incentive or measure by which procurement officers' practice is assessed.

There is a step beyond considering procurement as being only about what we buy. There is a question about who we buy from and about ensuring that suppliers are environmentally sound and ethical in their other practices, not just in relation to the quality of the product on the table.

The Convener: Your answer raises issues that will preoccupy the committee in relation to European rules on procurement.

Phil Gallie: Absolutely.

The Convener: I hate to give Mr Gallie heart by what I am saying.

Helen McDade: To link back the issue of procurement to the issue of climate change, we would like all new large buildings to have combined heat and power and/or renewables. Such a commitment could make a huge impact.

Iain Smith asked how we can engage with people and change their behaviour. It is noticeable that people can see the value of such ideas in public buildings, particularly in schools. There has been a lot of talk about the private finance initiative schools that are being built and whether they have built-in sustainability; that relates to some of Duncan McLaren's points. The children in such schools are engaged with those ideas and often do projects about them. That would seem to be a particular point that could be taken on board. I wonder whether the Scottish Parliament could use the United Nations decade of education for sustainable development to explain to schools and other organisations further afield why they should be interested in the G8 summit. The summit is not just something that is coming to Scotland but which has no relevance to their lives. It links into the other messages that are being given out and there could be an interesting project in that.

The Convener: There is an important issue in what you said about procurement issues for PFI schools. You will be familiar with the issue in Aberfeldy in my constituency, because the headquarters of WWF Scotland is there. Measures to try to make schools more environmentally sustainable come up against PFI rules. Thankfully the minister is engaged in addressing some of those issues.

Irene Oldfather: Is either witness aware of the ethical threads campaign? Everyone knows about fairly traded coffee and tea, but young people at music festivals—even though they are environmentally aware—will pay £20 for a tee-shirt that probably cost about 99p to make, so the middleman takes about £19. If we offered them an ethically produced tee-shirt for £20, they would buy that rather than give a middleman somewhere £19. Not enough information about that is available.

15:15

Duncan McLaren: I am aware of that campaign and of several other initiatives on the ethical sourcing of clothing, such as the no sweat campaign, which runs in the US, and the clean clothes campaign, which runs in Europe. Like many issues, the subject could have much more publicity. Perhaps members already model such clothing—that is an opportunity to show leadership. I would welcome such initiatives.

Helen McDade: I am aware of but not well acquainted with the campaign. We have touched, several times, on the subject of joining up the issues for people. Once people start to understand sustainability and how it can have positive impacts for our country, they will consider the hidden costs of everything. That is an education issue. Mostly, people do not understand what is behind the item in front of them. The hidden costs are not explained, so education is the key.

Phil Gallie: It is nice to see Helen McDade back on the parliamentary scene, to which she is no stranger. She mentioned that we could ensure that all new public buildings are energy efficient. What does she think of the Scottish Parliament building as a model for that? Should it be emphasised or hidden at the G8 meetings?

Helen McDade: The Scottish Parliament has had mixed reviews. Some aspects of the building take energy efficiency on board, which is great, but perhaps there were some missed opportunities. We are all aware that discussions took place about sustainable sources when the building was built. However, I attended a committee meeting the other week at which probably 100 lights were on while sunshine was blazing in, which drove me insane, and that committee was undertaking an inquiry into climate change, so more can be done. We have the building and we must see what we can do. It would be better to ensure that what we have suggested is done in future buildings.

Phil Gallie: You have made the point for me that we are good at making statements but not as good at living up to them.

I recognise the research that both the witnesses' organisations have undertaken on climate change issues. Roughly what proportions of emissions are attributable to aircraft, motor cars and other forms of land transport and energy generation in Scotland?

Duncan McLaren: Does Helen McDade have those figures in her head?

Helen McDade: I am afraid that I do not.

Duncan McLaren: I can give ballpark figures.

Phil Gallie: That will do.

Duncan McLaren: Transport as a whole accounts for about 20 to 25 per cent of emissions. Air travel is a relatively small fraction of that—I believe that it is about 5 per cent of the total—but emissions from air travel are forecast to rise to about 15 per cent. Energy generation does not account for all the remainder, because land use and other elements contribute, but it accounts for about 60 per cent of emissions.

Phil Gallie: We are talking about Scotland. Are those figures true of Scotland? Did Scotland not start from a much lower emissions base when the targets were set? Does that not make it harder for us to reduce emissions?

Duncan McLaren: I do not recognise that, I am afraid. In the UK as a whole, the dash for gas in the 1990s led to a significant reduction in emissions and, when the Labour Government made its pledges on coming to power in 1997, the trend was already set. In Scotland, however, we did not replace our two main fossil-fuel plants—Cockenzie and Longannet—so the Scottish base was not already reduced at that point. One of the unique challenges for Scotland is that we have a relatively high proportion of emissions from land-use sources, but the figure is still only around 12 per cent—I would need to check those figures.

Helen McDade: Our policy officers can certainly provide you with the detailed figures. At the moment, the bulk of the emissions relate to energy production, which is why that has been concentrated on. However, transport is forecast to overtake that in the relatively near future. That is why we must consider that matter with some urgency. However, the power sector currently accounts for up to 70 per cent of emissions.

I will check the figures and get back to you.

Phil Gallie: That would be useful, thank you. I remind Duncan McLaren that England was trying to catch up with Scotland with respect to gas. Nuclear power accounted for more than 50 per cent of our power generation and a further 10 to 20 per cent came from what was, in effect, water power. That is why I said that Scotland started from a lower base, which makes it much more difficult for us to reduce our emission levels.

I have every interest in the expansion of the aircraft industry, but is there not a conflict between the fact that the Executive is trying to promote greater levels of air travel and the fact that that contributes to emissions? What should the Executive do about that?

Helen McDade: There is an obvious conflict. You raise a key issue that must be resolved. One of our main demands is that the true costs of travel should be reflected. No one is talking about targeting emergency air travel or flights to the isles. However, the sad fact is that while it still costs a fortune to fly to Shetland, you can fly to London for £16.99—that was what I was quoted the other day. It is obvious that such prices cannot be sustained without some cost to the country.

The climate change inquiry should consider the true costs of travel. People say that everybody has to get cheap holidays abroad, but it is important that that issue is approached from first principles. We need to know what such flights cost. If they cost the earth, they are not cheap. We are not talking about access to the Highlands and Islands—I come from Thurso, so I know what that is like. It is still extremely expensive—not to mention exceedingly difficult—to get to some places by public transport; I had to use a car, a bus and a train to come here today.

Duncan McLaren: We think that the on-going climate change inquiry is positive but we were saddened by the fact that the Minister for Transport declined to give evidence to the inquiry when he was invited to do so. I note that the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning also declined to give evidence. There is a challenge in joining up policy across the Executive to address climate change in the way that is best for all elements of Scotland's society and economy.

Phil Gallie: In effect, both of your organisations are saying that the cheap flights that provide many jobs in areas such as Prestwick and which provide people with easy access to family and friends south of the border and to cheap holidays will have to end in the interests of the global environmental scene.

Helen McDade: It is not only the interests of the global scene that we are talking about. At the end of the day, we all pay to travel all the time. The thing that people have a lot of trouble with, and which costs them a lot of money, is their travel to work.

Phil Gallie: I am talking specifically about low-cost flights. What is your attitude to such flights?

Helen McDade: Our attitude is that the price of all transport journeys should reflect more fairly the actual cost, including the environmental cost. Clearly, that would have an impact on cheap

flights—there is no doubt about that—but, equally, it might bring gains in public transport. People fly abroad perhaps once or twice a year, which is great, but if it costs a person a fortune to travel every day on public transport, perhaps they would prefer money to be put into public transport. Nobody can deny that hard choices must be made, but at present we are not getting the best of all worlds—it is swings and roundabouts.

The Convener: I am interested in your assessment of the environmental components of the G8 summit. It would be a fascinating piece of work to understand how the focus on climate change affects the preparations for the event. You may want to carry out such work.

Duncan McLaren: We proposed such work to staff from the Executive when we were asked what could be done to make the summit a greener event. However, as far as I am aware, the Executive has shown no interest in the proposal, despite a specific offer from WWF, which has developed a methodology to help the Executive with such work.

The Convener: You mentioned that you have had dialogue with the Executive on how to make the G8 summit a greener event. Have you had dialogue on the wider issues that should be discussed at the summit and which the Executive should seek to include in the United Kingdom position? On a similar issue, to what extent does on-going dialogue take place between your organisations as a network and the Government on that wider agenda?

Duncan McLaren: The dialogue is good, but direct dialogue on the G8 summit has been limited, although the channels of communication are open and we were recently encouraged again to keep the Executive informed of our plans in relation to the G8. We had the chance to urge the adoption of policy positions, though the Executive has been at least a little reticent and said that, because policy positions will be developed at Whitehall, it can have only a little impact. However, more widely, the dialogue tends to be good. The Minister for Environment and Rural Development and staff from the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department are open to hearing our views, although implementing our views is still a challenge for them. As I implied, we struggle a little more to get our views across to other departments that have an environmental aspect, particularly the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department.

Helen McDade: We are delighted that climate change is one of the top two issues that Blair continually headlines and that he followed our lead in picking his campaign. The summit is a great opportunity for the different aspects to feed in and for Scotland to make an impact.

The Convener: It has been fascinating to hear from the witnesses. We realise that we called you early in the inquiry, so, as the weeks go by and you see the evidence that we take, if you want to feed in other material, please feel free to do so—we would welcome your input.

Pre and Post-council Scrutiny

15:29

The Convener: Item 2 on the agenda is the familiar briefing paper on pre and post-council analysis and scrutiny. At annex A, there is a table of recommendations on points from the Executive. I was not struck by anything that I want to highlight. Do members want to raise any points?

Phil Gallie: I will raise my traditional points. I question many of the issues that are raised in the papers because I understood that they were under national Government control. In so many papers it is clear that we are breaking into areas that I have always believed are still under our Government's control. Irrespective of constitutions, there is creeping Europeanisation.

The Convener: I fear that we will hear more about that in the next few weeks. I note Phil Gallie's comments.

Phil Gallie: May I pick up on the broad economic policy guidelines? In what way will those affect the United Kingdom? Are we excluded from them?

The Convener: Which page is that on?

Phil Gallie: It is in annex B to the paper. Would we be excluded simply because we have not adopted the euro?

The Convener: I do not think so; some of the paper relates to the overall financial perspective and planning of the European Union, which affects every member state. The United Kingdom Government is very much to the fore in that dialogue. In addition, there is the Lisbon strategy and its implications for every aspect of economic policy, which features heavily in the sift paper that we are about to come to. I cannot imagine that we are excluded.

Irene Oldfather: Perhaps Mr Gallie wants us to join the euro zone. Maybe that is where he was heading.

The Convener: I did not pick up that hint.

Phil Gallie: How could Irene Oldfather reach that conclusion from a perfectly honest question?

Sift

15:32

The Convener: Item 3 is the sift, which is pretty much dominated by the policy agenda of the Commission; certainly, the first few documents are. The first document is on the strategic objectives for 2005-09, and the second is on the Lisbon strategy which will, as has been mentioned, be central to the priorities of the new Commission. We expect to hear a great deal more about that when we are in Brussels next week. The issues apply to a wide range of committees because—without wishing to give credence to Mr Gallie's argument—most subject committees will be affected by the Commission's priorities. The Lisbon agenda is far reaching in relation to economic and social policy, so we should be aware of it and refer the documents to other parliamentary committees.

The remaining papers affect mainly enterprise, and we have referred them to the Enterprise and Culture Committee for its consideration.

Are there any points on the sift?

Irene Oldfather: I would like to say just that the broad economic policy guidelines that Mr Gallie referred to are included in the sift. I am sure that he will want to scrutinise them in great detail.

The Convener: It is clear that that will be the focus of the Commission's work programme.

Phil Gallie: On reflection, there is one area of the Commission's economic programme that causes me some concern. I am not sure where in the papers we can find it, but I note that the Commission intends to provide for European environmental taxation on aviation fuel. If that proposal is referred to in the legislative proposals that come before us, I will be interested to find out about the effect that it will have.

The Convener: We will ask the clerks to find out when that proposal will appear in our schedule.

As we have discussed on previous occasions, I am keen that the committee should have at the heart of its scrutiny role a much greater focus on policies and legislative proposals that are in the think zone rather than in the implementation zone. The parliamentary infrastructure is now being put in place to support that objective. The issue that Phil Gallie highlighted is possibly a good example of a proposal that will have serious domestic implications, which concerned members would want to identify early and assess accordingly.

Convener's Report

15:35

The Convener: The final item on the agenda is my report. I want to draw three items to the committee's attention.

First, I have received correspondence from Mr McCabe concerning our scrutiny of a Sewel motion on the European Union Bill, which was introduced in the House of Commons on 26 January after it was announced in the Queen's speech in November. As well as a copy of the bill and the accompanying explanatory notes that were provided to the House of Commons, our papers contain a Sewel memorandum from the Scottish Executive that contains the contents of the Sewel motion that will be lodged. As I understand it, the committee will debate the Sewel motion before it is considered by Parliament, but the Parliamentary Bureau will determine how the motion should be handled in Parliament once the motion has emerged from the committee.

Mr McCabe's letter indicates that he will be available to appear before the committee on 22 March, when he can give evidence both on our current inquiry and on the Sewel motion on the European Union Bill. The question for members on how we handle the Sewel motion is whether we should obtain, invite or procure further evidence in advance of hearing from Mr McCabe on 22 March. If we do, we will need to create opportunities to hear from other witnesses. Alternatively, we could ask the clerks or researchers in the Scottish Parliament information centre to prepare relevant information for us.

Iain Smith: The Sewel motion will be on complex technical amendments to the powers of Scottish ministers, so it seems to me that we need not hear a great deal of evidence. Obviously, the bill and the constitutional treaty are much wider issues, but those are not matters for this Parliament or for our committee. It will be adequate for us to hear only from the minister for the information that we require.

Phil Gallie: We should point out to the minister that any Sewel motion would probably be acceptable providing that it does not, as has happened on previous occasions, include opinions on the merits of the bill.

I am well aware of concerns elsewhere about the European Union Bill, but I doubt that we will get the opportunity to consider the bill in detail. However, one witness that we might consider is my House of Commons Labour colleague Austin Mitchell, who is a member of a Labour Party European committee. He has, to my mind, expressed the reservations that many committee

members might have about the scope of the bill. The bill does not simply provide for a referendum on the European constitution; it goes further by eradicating the need for future debate on how the constitution should be implemented if it is ever accepted.

We should point out to the Executive that the Sewel motion should not express any opinion on the bill. Let us have a simple Sewel motion.

Irene Oldfather: I would be happy with that. My understanding is that we are talking about just the technical side of our legislative competence in relation to the bill. There will be a huge campaign, to which I am looking forward. I am sure that Mr Gallie and I will have many opportunities to discuss the range of issues with which the bill deals. As far as the Sewel motion is concerned, I would be happy for us to take evidence from the minister and to agree to a fairly technical and factual motion.

The Convener: I assume that the Sewel motion has been lodged.

Irene Oldfather: Our paper says:

"The Motion to be put to the Parliament".

The Convener: So the motion awaits our deliberations. If the committee is satisfied that we should take evidence from Mr McCabe, we will do that on 22 March. We will discuss the motion when we have heard from him.

Secondly, I draw members' attention to an exchange of correspondence. Today, members have been given copies of the letter that I wrote to the First Minister on the proposed Scottish institute or forum for European and international affairs, the idea for which arose from discussions that I had with representatives of the University of Edinburgh and other institutions. We have received a reply from Mr McCabe. I invite members' views on whether the approach that is suggested is right or whether they want to take other steps.

Irene Oldfather: For some time, members of the committee have had an interest in setting up such a forum. It was helpful to get a copy of the letter that you sent to the First Minister, which we obtained only today. In the past, we have had an agreement that any correspondence that was sent to ministers would be copied to all members. That would be helpful.

The Convener: Okay. That is fine.

Irene Oldfather: The response is reasonable. We obviously do not want to duplicate the work of the Europa institute or other bodies. I am sure that it is just a question of getting together and considering how we can make progress. In principle, the establishment of a forum is a good idea that should be supported.

Phil Gallie: I hesitate to add my support because there are so many forums. I see no evidence of what they achieve, but I have no hard feelings about them. If people want to express their views, that is fair enough.

The Convener: My concern is that although a tremendous amount of expertise is available on European affairs in Scotland, I am not sure that the Executive does all that it can to draw all that together and to give it the platform that it deserves. A discussion is continuing on some of the proposals. We can pursue that further with Mr McCabe. I have no difficulty at all with copying correspondence to members.

The third and final aspect of my report concerns arrangements for the committee's visit to Brussels between 28 February and 1 March. I cannot find a paper on that.

Irene Oldfather: I do not have a paper on that, either.

Nick Hawthorne (Clerk): We hope that packs will be brought round to members by lunch time tomorrow. They will contain the full programme and a copy of members' e-flight tickets, as well as full briefings and maps.

The Convener: Okay. There are no more points. The next meeting of the committee will be on 8 March at 2 o'clock. It would be helpful if I could have a brief word with members after the conclusion of the meeting.

Meeting closed at 15:44.

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