

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 21 June 2005

Session 2

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE 12th 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:

Lorna Clark (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department)

Simon Hodgson (Scottish Refugee Council)

Ali Jarvis (Commission for Racial Equality Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Alasdair Rankin

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Nick Hawthorne

David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 21 June 2005

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

The Convener (Mr John Swinney): Good afternoon. Welcome to the 12th meeting this year of the European and External Relations Committee. I have received apologies from Irene Oldfather, who is on Committee of the Regions business in London. Dennis Canavan has intimated that he will have to leave for the dubious privilege of attending part of the Parliamentary Bureau's meeting this afternoon on his St Andrew's Day Bank Holiday (Scotland) Bill, which has wide support.

I have also received apologies from Phil Gallie, who is attending the meeting of the Edinburgh Tram (Line One) Bill Committee. He has asked me to raise in his absence an issue that came up at our meeting on 24 May and was the subject of commentary at our meeting a fortnight later, as recorded in the *Official Report*. I have agreed to raise the matter simply because Mr Gallie cannot be here because of his obligation to be at the Edinburgh Tram (Line One) Bill Committee meeting.

At our meeting on 24 May, Mr Gallie remarked on a vote on the working time directive in the European Parliament and stated that Liberal Democrat MEPs voted against the opt-out. Iain Smith denied that; he stated at the next meeting that no Liberal Democrat MEP had voted against retaining the working time directive opt-out and that those who voted on the amendments voted to retain the United Kingdom opt-out. As I said, Mr Gallie cannot be here today, but he has asked me to read out a brief statement in response to comments that are in the *Official Report* of our last meeting.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): Must you?

The Convener: I will come to that in a moment. The statement reads:

"At the meeting on 24 May the *Official Report* indicates that I made comment along the lines that Conservative MEPs had stood against the ending of the Working Time directive opt out 'as did Nationalist MEPs.'

Mr Smith interjected 'as did the Lib. Dems.'

I responded that 'Unfortunately they had not.'

I accept that the Scottish Lib. Dem. Elspeth Attwooll abstained on the initial vote but she then voted for the legislative resolution which allowed the pursuit of the ending of the opt-out to continue.

I see no reason therefore why I should withdraw my earlier remarks."

Mr Home Robertson asked whether I had to read out the statement. Indeed, I am beginning to regret allowing any comments on the matters to go in the *Official Report*, which is a salutary lesson for even the most experienced among us. If Iain Smith wants to say anything, I will give him the opportunity to do so—then that is it.

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I emphasise that we are talking about the first reading of the legislative proposals and that, as would be the case at stage 1 in this Parliament, members may comment on aspects that they will come back to later in the debate. The Liberal Democrats have made it clear that they will continue to oppose the removal of the British opt-out. That is all that needs to be stated on the record.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Mr Home Robertson: This is pantomime stuff: "Oh yes they did," "Oh no they didn't."

The Convener: The matter is now well and truly concluded and I have no intention of revisiting it at all. I hope that that goes into the *Official Report*.

Fresh Talent Initiative Inquiry

14:06

The Convener: Item 1 is the continuation of our inquiry into the Scottish Executive's fresh talent initiative. I am pleased to welcome our first witness, Lorna Clark, who is the head of the fresh talent initiative in the Scottish Executive. Members have seen your written submission, Lorna, so I invite you to make some opening remarks to the committee.

Lorna Clark (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department): Most of the information that we wanted to convey is in the paper. Perhaps the only area that I did not cover was the size and make-up of the relocation advisory service team. There are seven of us altogether. I head up the relocation advisory service, as well as the fresh talent policy side. The other six members of the team are involved in direct advice provision.

Two people were seconded in specifically to deal with immigration issues. We were aware that we were likely to get a lot of inquiries about how people could legally get to this country and work here, so we brought in two people to specialise on that. One of them comes from the Home Office and one of them comes from the Immigration Advisory Service.

We recently added another secondee to the team. She is from Scottish Enterprise and her role is to act as the link between the relocation advisory service and the business community to raise the profile of fresh talent and to work with Scottish businesses to convey to them the potential benefits of fresh talent. The other three members of the team are Scottish Executive staff who provide generic advice, such as on how to get a work permit or on what university to study at. I hope that that gives the committee some idea of the size and scope of the team and the people who are dealing with inquiries.

The Convener: Thank you. In addition to the helpful written information that we have received on, for example, the number of inquiries and where they are from, could you set out the process that an individual goes through if they contact the relocation advisory service to take part in the fresh talent initiative? Could you take us from initial contact by, for example, e-mail, to how an individual is handled thereafter?

Lorna Clark: Most of the inquiries that we receive are by e-mail. We also have phone inquiries and face-to-face inquiries. Most people come in through the website. There is a lot of information on scotlandistheplace.com, within which there are pages for the relocation advisory

service. People can come to us through the website in two ways: they can fill in a general form that asks for more information about moving to Scotland or they can send us a more personal e-mail that contains more detail about what they want to know and the information that they are after.

E-mails come into a general inbox, which relocation advisory service staff read. We divide them up by subject matter—the ones that ask particularly about immigration are sent to the two immigration experts and the remaining, more general inquiries are split between the rest of the team. We go through them on a first-come, first-served basis.

We have a number of standard responses that we send out. If someone says that they are looking to get a job in Scotland, they will get a standard response that sets out the various options that are available to them and some useful websites for them to explore. Their inquiries will be logged on to our database, because we keep a record of all the customers that come to us. Whether we issue a standard reply or the team needs to do some research, the information will be pooled—we will put the e-mail together and send it. Sometimes that is the last we hear of people and sometimes people will come back with further questions.

The Convener: Effectively, there is a one-to-one communication on the individual inquiry.

Lorna Clark: Yes.

The Convener: You have given us a number of helpful statistics about the sourcing of inquiries, the method of communication and the subject matters with which you deal. The overwhelming majority of inquiries are about finding employment. What proportion of the inquiries that you have received have proceeded to an application that is at an advanced stage or have resulted in an individual relocating here?

Lorna Clark: I cannot give you that information now, but we are considering the matter in relation to our evaluation of the service. The idea is that in a few months' time we will send out a questionnaire to a certain percentage of our customers, saying to them, "You contacted the service on such-and-such a day and you asked these questions. Where are you now? What's happening? Are you still interested in coming to Scotland? If not, what changed your mind?" We will start to gather information about whether people have acted on the advice. If they have been put off for some reason, we will try to find out why. The information relates to the long term, because people often come to us quite early on in the process. There are a lot of issues that they will have to consider and steps that they will take. We

hope to have the information in future, but we do not have it to hand now.

The Convener: You do not yet know whether any of the 5,390 inquiries that you have had in total has led to someone deciding to locate in Scotland.

Lorna Clark: We have not asked for that information yet, but we will do so.

The Convener: Do you have a feel for whether any of them has?

Lorna Clark: It is hard to tell without following the inquiries up. We can tell that some people are fairly far on in the process because they will have got a job, for example, and they will be asking us about accommodation or about support for their family—we can tell that those people are likely to be with us in a few months' time. Some people are far more speculative and are just asking for basic information. It will be some time before they come—if they do—because they need to go through more steps. There is no typical RAS customer; they are all at different stages of their thinking and different stages of the move to Scotland.

The Convener: The point that interests me is that if you have no follow-up to those inquiries—in the sense that you have satisfied the request and no further information is required—there seems to be no mechanism that will allow us to verify whether, in any calendar year, we have recruited 8,000 more people into Scotland, which is the objective of the initiative.

Lorna Clark: No. The 8,000 figure, which is cited quite a lot, originated in the statement that the First Minister made to the Parliament in February last year. At the time, the population was set to drop below 5 million in 2009. All we did was to take the population in 2004 and the projected population in 2009 and calculate how many more people a year we needed to keep the population above 5 million. The projection has changed since then; it is now thought that the population is not likely to drop below 2000 levels until about 2017. The 8,000 figure was only ever indicative of the kind of numbers that we might be considering, but the projection has changed.

We can track how many people have heard about Scotland and how many people have contacted the RAS. Over the course of the three-year pilots, we will send out questionnaires and see where people are, particularly the people who are about to move on to the new leave-to-remain scheme for students, whom we will keep in touch with regularly. We will start to gather that statistical information about what people are doing.

There are also general benefits, which are perhaps harder to quantify. The very fact that the

RAS exists and gives out good-quality advice is helping to raise Scotland's profile and to give people a positive experience of Scotland. There are lots of benefits from the way in which the service is working.

The Convener: If I understand you correctly, there is no longer a target to attract 8,000 people a year.

Lorna Clark: The 8,000 figure was only ever indicative of the number of people whom we might have needed to attract to keep the population at a certain level in 2009. However, the target date has now changed. We simply want to attract bright, talented and hard-working people. We do not want to get tied down to an exact number, because we are trying to attract people of a certain quality and calibre. We will not say, "We've got 8,000 and we don't need to do any more." We must continue to bring in as many people as we can through the fresh talent initiative.

14:15

The Convener: I had the impression that the 8,000 figure was a slightly more robust target than the indicative figure relating to a particular total that you have alluded to. I accept that the methodology and calculations were based on the fact that the population was projected to fall below 5 million. However, my impression of Government policy was that 8,000 was the target for, as you say, bright, talented individuals, because the initiative was focused on students. I am surprised to hear that the target is not as robust as I thought that it was.

Lorna Clark: As far as I know, the 8,000 figure was used only the one time in that statement to the Parliament. Since then, it has been used every time anyone else has written about the initiative. The figure has come to be seen as a far harder target than we ever imagined it would be.

The Convener: I am surprised by that response.

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab): I am delighted that we no longer seem to be so heavily dependent on the target, which has changed because of projections and because of the good news that was released a couple of months ago.

I want to ask about the types of people whom we are attracting and the gaps in the public and private sectors that we have to plug. Are there any areas where you have successfully attracted the number of people that you wanted to and areas where there is still a great deal to be done to attract properly qualified people?

Lorna Clark: In the fresh talent initiative, we have deliberately not targeted particular skill shortages, because those change regularly and

because other organisations such as Scottish Enterprise and Futureskills Scotland are far better than we are at looking at skills gaps. We have taken a far more generic and strategic approach to attracting bright, talented and hard-working people. Those people might well be plumbers or brain surgeons; we simply need to get in people who want to contribute to the economy and Scottish society. As I have said, we have not gone after particular skills sectors. Instead we have targeted elements such as number, diversity and the entrepreneurship that those people bring with them.

Mr Morrison: Presumably, you are in a position to work and liaise with people in the public and private sectors.

Lorna Clark: We are. We have started those discussions, which will continue as fresh talent and the RAS develop. We have looked at working with some industries that have identified shortages to find out how we can assist them. However, we will always focus on the broader attempt at getting in more people instead of getting in a certain percentage of plumbers or dentists. Obviously, the jobs market will determine the sort of jobs that people get and the sectors that are attractive.

Iain Smith: I have a question on a practical matter. In your written submission, you say:

"The first port of call for many of our customers is the website www.scotlandistheplace.com."

How do people find that first port of call? After all, the website address is not exactly obvious; it does not trip off the tongue.

Lorna Clark: We have done a lot of promotional work. For example, we have sent many brochures to overseas Foreign and Commonwealth Office and British Council offices and to Scottish universities and further education colleges. We have also done a lot of press work overseas to try to raise our profile. We have given journalists from countries such as India a tour of Scotland and more information about services and they have worked to raise our profile in their media.

To give one good example, when we brought some journalists over from India just before Christmas, an article in the *Hindustan Times* that gave the website address resulted in 500 inquiries overnight. We have been doing a lot of promotional work to get the website known more widely in the countries across the way. The website has had a lot of traffic—it has had something like 100,000 visitors, who have looked at about half a million pages—and obviously we will do more work on raising the profile and linking into other sites to ensure that there is traffic between them.

Mr Home Robertson: That comment might raise some more questions about your statistics. How many inquiries did you say that you had received as a result of that press report?

Lorna Clark: There were 500 overnight.

Mr Home Robertson: Your figures for the total number of customers registered and the total number of inquiries received need to be considered in the context of that sort of information.

Lorna Clark: The number has been going up. We went live only on 12 October and we did not do a huge amount of promotional work for the first couple of weeks because we wanted to give members of the team, who took up their posts only in September, time to bed down and to get used to what they were doing. We had a bit of a spike in the figures in December and a large increase in March, following some education fairs that we attended in Poland. Month on month, the figures are increasing.

Mr Home Robertson: This is all encouraging stuff, but I am a little worried that you could be giving yourself some difficulties by quoting the sort of figures that you are quoting. In six months' time, people such as us might be saying, "You've had 6,000 inquiries but only 10 or 20 people have actually come through." A high percentage of the inquiries must simply be people asking for names and addresses and for basic information and references.

Lorna Clark: A lot of them are general inquiries, yes.

Mr Home Robertson: You talked about the membership of the group. Could you say something about the liaison that takes place with the Home Office and the Immigration Advisory Service? As far as they are concerned, the initiative must be rather an unusual animal.

Lorna Clark: It is an unusual animal as far as anyone is concerned. As far as we are aware, there is nothing quite like the RAS anywhere else in Europe. The Home Office has always been interested in the service and we were pleased that it was keen to second someone to it to provide detailed advice. It is interested, as are many others, in the statistics and information that we have. On the policy side, there is a lot of discussion with the Home Office about schemes such as the fresh talent working in Scotland scheme, which goes live tomorrow. We have a good and constructive relationship with Home Office officials about fresh talent generally.

Mr Home Robertson: A good and constructive relationship with Home Office officials, you say.

The Convener: That is oxymoronic.

Mr Home Robertson: Knowing Whitehall as I do, I suspect that there might be some sort of institutional resentment of what Scotland is up to. I am not bothered about that, but we need to be prepared for it. No doubt, as your work goes on, cases will emerge in which Scotland will be enthusiastic about interpreting the rules in one way in order to encourage people to come here, but the co-operative Home Office people, who come from a different standpoint, might say that we must not set precedents. I do not suppose that that has happened yet, but are you ready for it if it does?

Lorna Clark: We are probably straying somewhat into the policy discussions that you will have with ministers subsequently. To date, our experience is that, as long as we have evidence for why we need to do what we are doing, the Home Office is willing to discuss issues with us. We were pleased that the Home Office's five-year plan, which was produced in February, made specific mention of Scotland's particular demographic problems and the fact that we need to take a particular approach because of that. The Home Office acknowledges that Scotland wants to do something different. As long as we can explain why we want to do what we are doing, the Home Office is keen to discuss things with us.

Mr Home Robertson: I suspect that there will be occasions when you will need a bit of political covering fire. Is it the intention that ministers will get regular reports from the team about the general direction of the work that is being done and about any problems and opportunities that might be emerging?

Lorna Clark: Yes. Certainly, ministers are interested in what is coming out of the fresh talent initiative and the RAS. We send them regular reports that contain statistical information and details of the discussions that we are having with the Home Office.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): In the section of your written submission that deals with requested information, you say that 24 people asked about career development or accreditation. What did those inquiries include? Were they asking about the recognition of their educational qualifications, for example?

Lorna Clark: Yes. For example, a mechanical engineer from Poland might write to ask how their qualification would be viewed in Scotland. We also receive questions about whether people need to register with a professional body. We get a lot of inquiries from teachers who want to know what the requirements are to register with professional bodies when they come here. The questions are usually about what a person's present position will mean when they come to Scotland.

Mrs Ewing: Do you find that the majority of the people with whom you deal have good language skills? I appreciate that people have skills that they have learned in their countries, but one issue that emerged in a previous evidence session was that qualified and highly skilled people who could contribute massively to the Scottish economy often have language skill difficulties. Are you involved in directing people to improve their language skills?

Lorna Clark: We advise people on the various options that are open to them in that regard. We have connections with colleagues in the Executive who take the lead on issues such as the provision of English courses for speakers of other languages; the information that we get from them will feed into our advice. We tell people how to find information on where and what courses are available, whether for them or their family. People who want to come and work here may have good English language skills, but their families might not. We tell people where they can get advice and what information is available.

The Convener: You mentioned the reactive nature of the RAS in that it deals with inquiries from individuals. Will you say a little more about how the service decides what type of individuals we want to attract to Scotland and how that influences the choices that are made about the service's communication and promotion work in different countries? That relates to Alasdair Morrison's point about the skills shortages that may drive the service's work.

Lorna Clark: At a more strategic level, we have focused on tackling particular skills shortages. In our promotional work, we have gone to events in countries that have a good track record in terms of people contacting the RAS or coming here. My colleagues have been to education fairs in India, China, Malaysia and Singapore and we have done promotional work in Poland. So far, our work has been on finding out where there is interest in moving to Scotland and then going out and maximising that interest. We have not been out recruiting more bus drivers, because people are doing that already—we support their work and provide additional help.

The Convener: Do you exclusively go to education fairs?

Lorna Clark: No. We have been to recruitment fairs. A lot of our work has been on students, but that is not the whole of the fresh talent picture—we want to get more involved with workers. The events that we attended in Poland were about specific employment opportunities. We have also been to graduate fairs in Scotland to promote the scheme. We were at a big one in Glasgow a few weeks ago and, today, some of my team have a stall at a refugee jobs fair in Glasgow. We aim to

use the promotional opportunities in Scotland and the rest of the world.

The Convener: So there are two elements. First, there is the work here that is aimed at students—or refugees, which is an interesting perspective—through which you provide information about staying on in Scotland. The other element is attending comparable events in selected countries.

Lorna Clark: That is right. Some of our work at fairs in this country is targeted not only at individuals, but at Scottish businesses, with the aim of ensuring that they think about a slightly wider pool of talent than they might have done previously. We aim to ensure that businesses are aware of what they can and cannot do when they employ people. We also aim to raise the profile of the working in Scotland scheme so that businesses realise that there is a body of bright young overseas graduates whom they can recruit easily. We work to raise the profile of the fresh talent initiative and to highlight the benefits of diversity. Our work is not just about individuals; we aim to bring Scottish businesses on board, too.

The Convener: You mentioned the refugee fair. What potential clients are at the fair and what is their immigration status?

14:30

Lorna Clark: The fair is organised by the Scottish Refugee Council, working in conjunction with Careers Scotland. I do not have a huge amount of detail on it, but my understanding is that they wanted to invite employers such as councils and larger organisations that are interested in recruiting refugees. They wanted to have a jobs fair at which refugees could talk to companies about job opportunities and to raise the profile of a pool of migrant labour that companies might not have thought about.

The Convener: The people at the fair will be people who have been given Home Office clearance to stay in this country. Is that correct?

Lorna Clark: My understanding is that the emphasis is on refugees, because they have the right to work.

The Convener: What thinking has gone into deciding which countries to target and which are the most potent markets for attracting people to come and live in Scotland?

Lorna Clark: Because the service is fairly new, we have based some of that on experience. We have been speaking to the universities and colleges about where they get their international students from and where they are doing promotional work so that we can piggyback on that. We targeted India, China, Singapore and

Malaysia because an awful lot of students from those countries are interested in moving to Scotland and we wanted to make the most of that. There has been an awful lot of interest from Poland in the relocation advisory service and in job opportunities in Scotland in general, which is why we went to the jobs fair there. Some of our work has been a little opportunistic, in that we have started in places where we know we have a good success rate to see whether the fairs result in an increased interest in moving to Scotland that we can build on in the next few years.

The Convener: So ministers and officials have not made a conscious decision about the most likely markets for people who want to come to live in Scotland. It is much more about reinforcing efforts in places where we have been successful in the past to get more people to come.

Lorna Clark: So far it has been about that. The report, "New Scots: Attracting Fresh Talent to Meet the Challenge of Growth", which was the founding document for the fresh talent initiative, referred to countries such as China and India as providing good sources of emigration that could be built up. We have been working where we know there is a lot of support and seeing what lessons we can learn from a warm market before we think about some of the areas that we would like to develop further.

The Convener: If there is not a target of 8,000, what targets have ministers given officials?

Lorna Clark: One of the targets is to provide a good-quality service. The other target is to grow the service. Because the service is new and we have not done anything like it before, it was difficult to say from day one how many inquiries the RAS could expect, but the idea is that we will build up over the three years and will have a greater number of inquiries and greater market penetration by the end of that time.

The quality of advice that we give is something that we can control directly. The service is being evaluated independently. We knew that there would be a great deal of interest in how we were doing and we wanted to ensure that, right from the word go, there were people looking at the services and standard of advice that we provide. The initial report will be concluded in December and will be published soon after, which will help to give us an idea of the standard of the services that we are providing, how our partners perceive us and whether they see us as a useful addition in the marketplace.

The Convener: Other than providing a quality service, what targets have ministers given you?

Lorna Clark: The target is to grow the service. We do not have hard targets for that because we need to see what number of inquiries we get in the

first six months to a year. Then we can ensure that, by the end of the three years, we are dealing with more inquiries and with a wider range of people and countries than we were dealing with at the start. The aim is to grow and develop the service and to work with partners to see whether there are areas that we are not covering that we might usefully work with them to cover.

The Convener: Who is carrying out the independent evaluation?

Lorna Clark: It is being done by two organisations—the British Market Research Bureau and DTZ Pidea. We went through an independent tender to recruit the external consultants to evaluate the fresh talent initiative.

The Convener: They are reporting in December 2005. Is that correct?

Lorna Clark: Yes, they are reporting to us in December this year.

The Convener: Will that report be published?

Lorna Clark: Yes, it will.

Mr Home Robertson: There is obviously a difference in emphasis between what we are doing in Scotland, where we want to encourage more people to come and work because of a particular situation, and the approach of the United Kingdom, which tends to put greater emphasis on the control of immigration. The difficulty that we face is that, when somebody comes to Scotland, there is nothing to prevent them from going straightaway to another part of the United Kingdom. Have you or has anybody else in the Executive given any thought to initiatives that would help to encourage those who come to Scotland to stay here for their benefit and to reassure our colleagues in the United Kingdom Administration?

Lorna Clark: We have considered that, particularly with regard to the fresh talent working in Scotland scheme, which is the scheme for overseas students. We cannot compel them to stay in Scotland for the whole of the two years but, when they apply, they must show that they intend to stay in Scotland, perhaps by giving evidence that they have been applying to Scottish employers or signing on with Scottish recruitment agencies. We will keep in touch with them at intervals of, probably, six months throughout their two years to find out where they are and what they are doing. Much of the work will be about encouraging them, keeping in touch with them and ensuring that we liaise with businesses to ensure that there are opportunities for those on the scheme just as there are for any Scottish students. We will want to find out whether they move away and, if so, what the reasons behind that are. We want to start getting some good, hard data and

case studies on what makes people stay in Scotland and what makes them leave so that we can use that information to inform future policy development.

Mr Home Robertson: Thanks.

The Convener: I thank Lorna Clark for coming to the committee today and sharing that information with us. We will have reported by the time the independent evaluation is carried out, but we look forward to seeing it.

We continue with our evidence-taking session on the fresh talent initiative. We are joined by Simon Hodgson, who is the head of policy communications at the Scottish Refugee Council—which had an honourable mention just a moment ago—and Ali Jarvis, who is the interim director of the Commission for Racial Equality Scotland. I thank them both for their written submissions, which have been circulated to members, and invite them to make brief introductory remarks before we begin questions.

Ali Jarvis (Commission for Racial Equality Scotland): Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to you this afternoon. We have submitted a paper to the committee, so I will keep my opening remarks brief.

The fresh talent initiative falls firmly within our three core objectives of eliminating race discrimination, promoting race equality and promoting good race relations. We have a strong interest in the initiative, as it is firmly within our locus of operations, and we very much welcome it. Anything that is positive about immigration to Scotland, brings in new people and celebrates the diversity of Scotland's workforce is a good thing, but we have a significant caveat: the current policy is narrowly defined and is built on narrow foundations. Our concern is that to bring in new people is one thing but, unless we address the sustainability of retaining them, ensure that they integrate effectively into the communities in which they live and ensure that they do not suffer an ethnic penalty in the workforce, we will only create another short-term problem that will have to be dealt with later.

We believe that political and business leadership will be key in addressing such matters and that more work needs to be done on integrating existing ethnic minority populations—who are often excluded from the workplace, too, and in which much fresh talent currently resides—as well as on integrating new migrants. We must also make a much more conscious effort to address issues to do with workforce diversity and whether Scottish employers and the broader Scottish host population are really ready to welcome and embrace fresh talent.

Simon Hodgson (Scottish Refugee Council): I thank the committee for inviting me to the meeting and apologise for submitting my paper slightly late—it was submitted this morning. I am not sure whether people have had enough time to read it. Obviously, I do not want to read it out, but it can form part of the official record.

I echo much of what Ali Jarvis has said. We, too, have broadly welcomed the initiative and have been involved at various levels from the early stages. It has much to do with our involvement in work in recent years on integration of people who have arrived in Scotland. In particular, we have done work on employment. The Scottish refugee integration forum has been involved in a number of employment projects and lessons can be learned. We work closely with colleagues in that area.

We are involved in today's jobs fair with Glasgow Chamber of Commerce and a number of people. The idea was that the fair should be like employers' milk rounds at universities—employers with vacancies and refugees with status would meet face to face so that the refugees can find work. The event should still be going on—it is scheduled to run until 3 o'clock. A reasonably broad range of employers is involved. Some of them have already taken on refugees and have had good experiences, whereas others have recognised that they have labour needs that they cannot currently meet. We will receive a report of the event later.

I want to make one broad statement on an issue that often arises in discussions about refugees and asylum seekers, who are obviously the locus of much of the Scottish Refugee Council's work. On their own, refugees who participate in the fresh talent initiative will not be the solution—they can only ever be part of the solution. We heard that the 8,000 figure that has been mentioned was worked out for different reasons and that it might have changed. When the figure was being developed, I did a rough calculation and found that if every person whom we might expect to be granted refugee status in the UK this year was granted such status, the total number might just about match that figure. All those refugees would have to come to Scotland to provide the solution. Therefore, refugees can only ever be part of the solution.

We are concerned most by what Ali Jarvis said about integration. If we cannot get things right for people who are already here, why should anyone else want to come to Scotland? We must learn lessons and deal with the issues that are faced by people who are currently in the country, otherwise people will come and go and the initiative will not have long-term sustainability.

I am happy to answer questions.

The Convener: I thank both of you for your opening remarks.

I note from the submissions that you have been involved with the Executive in the formulation of the fresh talent initiative. Will you say more about your organisations' involvement in that respect? What issues—if any—concern you about the way in which the initiative has been established?

Simon Hodgson: Our chief executive, Sally Daghliah, was on the original advisory committee. We have been concerned all along that policies should be joined up. The work that has been done around the Scottish refugee integration forum in bringing together different departments in Scotland is the way forward—similar work took much longer to happen south of the border. Delivering on fresh talent cannot be the responsibility of only one bit of the Executive because, when people come here, jobs will not be the only issue—the issues will include where people's children will go to school and whether they will meet people who speak the same language and share the same religion and cultural interests. Anyone who has ever worked overseas will know that if one is not fluent in the language of the country that one is in, the experience can be isolating. Occasionally, it is good to have a conversation with someone who speaks one's own language. Even if one speaks the other language well, it is helpful to be able to ground oneself.

It is important for the other factors to be put in place, but that can happen only if education, health and housing departments all work together. That was done, albeit not perfectly, when the Scottish refugee integration forum was established; staff from all those departments sat around the table. We would like more such work to be done so that policies do not pull in different directions.

Much of our work involves the Home Office, so we are well aware of the tension between the iron curtain that has been put up around Europe to stop people getting here to claim asylum and the work that is being done to recruit people. China is a great example—a large number of people from China are refused asylum and removed from the United Kingdom through fast-track processes, but at the same time we are sending people off to recruit people from there. It has been acknowledged that there are clear contradictions in the messages that are going out.

14:45

Ali Jarvis: We had input from an early stage, but we found it difficult to engage effectively because—I return to my opening point—the fresh talent policy area has been defined rather narrowly. We can make certain inputs to the

specific policy initiative, but we have found it more difficult to engage in linking together the variety of policy initiatives that tackle the same issue. We regard the one Scotland, many cultures campaign, the draft employability framework, "A Smart, Successful Scotland" and "The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland" as elements that will contribute to the success of the fresh talent initiative, but we have found that case a hard one to make. We have tended to drive the agenda forward as an equalities issue, through the Scottish Executive equalities unit, rather than as an issue of Scotland's economic development, which is what we believe it to be. It should be led by those responsible for the enterprise agenda.

Because the fresh talent initiative's remit has been shaped quite narrowly and does not allow the broader discussion, although we had the opportunity to contribute to it, we found our engagement difficult. As a result, we have taken the initiative and tomorrow, for example, will host a summit that will bring together a range of policy makers, business leaders, public sector workers and others to start to consider the broader issues. However, it feels as though we are trying to widen out a debate that is being aggressively narrowed down, hence our concern about how we can engage effectively in the interests of race equality and the avoidance of race discrimination.

The Convener: Where is that narrowing down coming from?

Ali Jarvis: We get the sense that there is a clear view in the Executive teams that are working on the matter that fresh talent is a specific initiative. We understand the need for focus, but that seems to miss out the areas where there are overlaps with other initiatives. Earlier, we heard about the requirement for teaching of English as a second language and the need to tie in with the work of bodies such as Careers Scotland. The employability framework that is being set up does not seem to be in tune with the initiatives that fresh talent will need to pull things together. At the moment, an overarching strategy to pull together the variety of initiatives seems to be absent.

The Convener: Is the danger of having that narrow focus that the fresh talent initiative is painted as being an initiative about immigration? Might that generate resentment among people who say, "If we want to tackle the problem of Scotland's declining population, we should put as much effort into retaining our domestic population as we put into attracting people from other countries"?

Ali Jarvis: That is quite a leading question.

The Convener: Never from me.

Ali Jarvis: Never.

Our position is clear. We do not see fresh talent, in its widest sense, as being about immigration. It is about our being able to exploit all the talent that exists in Scotland or might be attracted to it. If we narrow the issue down to immigration, we perpetuate the ethnic penalty that exists among settled ethnic minority populations, and indeed among other groups that are excluded from the labour market, whether they are marginalised through disability or other factors.

The Convener: Is that a possible consequence of the formulation and current direction of the policy?

Ali Jarvis: We have significant concerns that attention is not being paid to the eventual impact on good race relations.

The Convener: Does Simon Hodgson want to add anything before we move on?

Simon Hodgson: No—it is not really my area.

Mr Morrison: I want to return to the issue of Scotland's state of preparedness to integrate the greater number of people who we hope will move here. Have you done any work on communities that have already played host to people from outwith the United Kingdom? For example, the Western Isles has a substantial Italian community and has had an Asian community since after the first world war. Language learning has been mentioned. Many of the people who moved to the Western Isles learned two languages. Has any work been done on the lessons that could be learned from places such as the Highlands and especially the islands?

Ali Jarvis: I am not aware of any work that has been done specifically on the Western Isles. The UHI Millennium Institute has done work on recent patterns of migration into the north-east of Scotland, where in the past five years significant movement and change have been driven by agendas in the food processing business. There have been examples of both very good practice and relatively poor practice. The good practice takes place when responsible employers realise that to make a venture worth while, they need X per cent of their attracted new talent to stay for Y amount of time and then do a market assessment. When it comes to balancing the books, there is a break-even point.

Good employers also put in significant amounts of effort to supporting their new employees and their integration into local communities and to actively minimising the likelihood of any community tensions. Members might have noticed that wind farms in the Western Isles have received a great deal of coverage in the press recently. The construction of the farms could result in between 200 and 400 migrant workers—usually single men—living in work camps. I think that the quote

from the local health board was, "They are not exactly going to sit around knitting of an evening." When there are vast population movements, we must consider what the employers who are responsible for them do to integrate and support the affected communities.

In Aberdeen, two things have happened. In some cases, small groups of people have been put in small flats and given help to integrate into the local community; in others cases, workers have been put in large-scale hostel accommodation and resentment among the host population has built up fairly quickly. Whether that resentment has been exacerbated in any way by anything that the workers have done is irrelevant; what matters is that it was there from the outset.

Mr Morrison: I am sure that knitting clubs are very popular.

Iain Smith: I acknowledge the points that Ali Jarvis made about some of the migrant workers who come to rural communities, usually on a short-term basis.

The CRE submission stresses the importance of workforce diversity and highlights the fact that, as far as employment is concerned, there is a gap between the ethnic minority communities and the non-ethnic minority communities. It indicates that, in contrast to what is happening at Westminster, where the Prime Minister has set up a working group to eradicate racial disadvantage in the labour market,

"there has been no clear commitment or action in taking this forward in Scotland."

Given the restrictions on addressing reserved matters, what should the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament be doing to tackle those problems in the labour market? What contribution could that make to the fresh talent initiative?

Ali Jarvis: The first thing to say is that the issue seems to drop into the fictional devolution gap. Although, ostensibly, employment is a reserved issue, the development and promotion of enterprise, the provision of support for lifelong learning and people's capacity to join the labour market are devolved issues and could be being led on in Scotland.

I would never claim that weighty reports equate to action, but the Prime Minister's task force has produced reports such as "Ethnic Minorities and the Labour Market" and "Equality. Opportunity. Success. Year 1 Progress Report" and, more recently, in May 2005, the National Employment Panel, which is an employer-led forum, has published "Enterprising People Enterprising Places". Those three reports are jammed full of practical, concrete steps that are being taken to integrate ethnic minorities into, and develop their

role in, the workforce and to eliminate the ethnic penalty that exists. To date, there has been no action along the same lines in Scotland. When we challenge the Cabinet Office, we are told that such matters are devolved and the Executive should be leading on them, but when we have worked with the Executive, there has been a sense that they are reserved matters that cannot be touched—hence the devolution gap.

I am pleased that the Executive has announced today that it will consider bringing together an action force in Scotland, to link initiatives such as those outlined in "The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland" and "A Smart, Successful Scotland", fresh talent and the employability framework and to consider them in the round, rather than separately. However, that proposal must translate into action quickly, because we are at least four years behind England. The committee has heard about fears that people who come to Scotland might migrate over the border into England. If a settled, ethnic minority member of the population stands a better chance in England of not being discriminated against in the labour market than they do in Scotland, we can understand why people would head south.

Mr Home Robertson: You are right to flag up a range of issues that need to be addressed. The committee has heard evidence that the relocation advisory service is seeking bright, talented, hard-working people to come to Scotland and is portraying Scotland as a wonderful place that presents great opportunities. However, when those talented people arrive, they might find that the host community regards them not as bright, talented, and hard-working but as people who speak a different language, are a different colour or have a different religious tradition. We would be deluding ourselves if we did not admit that that gives rise to problems.

However, perhaps the situation also presents us with an opportunity. There are vast swathes of Scotland in which people have had no experience of working with or living in the same neighbourhood as Muslim people or black people, for example, so if more such people come here, I presume that there will be an opportunity to improve understanding. There have been high-profile campaigns on the issue. Given that we hope that hundreds—perhaps thousands—of people will come here to take up the opportunity, what more can you or we do to reduce the risk of problems and improve the opportunities for better social engagement?

Ali Jarvis: I am an eternal optimist and I agree that the initiative presents a huge opportunity. We raise the issues not to be critical or negative but because we want the initiative to work well for Scotland.

Two immediate things can happen. First, we need political leadership that tackles racism by talking about the subject and making it clear that there are no excuses for it. We must acknowledge that there is a problem before we can tackle it, but in some quarters it is still not acknowledged that Scotland has a problem. Secondly, we can create more opportunities to facilitate dialogue, so that people can express their fears and concerns. Most of the antipathy that is expressed or is converted into action—we highlight the increase in racist incidents—is based on ignorance, misapprehension, misunderstanding and myth. We must tackle such ignorance more proactively. That is one of CRE Scotland's responsibilities, which is why we are hosting a fresh talent summit tomorrow. We want to increase dialogue and encourage people not to fear the fresh talent initiative but to regard it as an opportunity.

The two approaches that I have identified relate to culture and behaviour. We need to do more work on initiatives such as the one Scotland, many cultures campaign. Although the campaign laid good groundwork, many people who work in Scotland do not think that it relates to them and reviews of the campaign have shown that it has not had an impact on attitudes in the labour market among employers or co-workers. We need to tackle attitudes more proactively through campaigns and other measures.

We must also support businesses. The Executive talked about a one-stop shop that would support businesses in integrating difference and workforce diversity. However, when Charlie Woods of Scottish Enterprise gave evidence to the committee, he said that Scottish Enterprise is doing "a reasonable amount" in the area, which seemed to reflect a less enthusiastic response than we might have hoped for. At a recent policy reception on Scotland's diverse workforce, Highlands and Islands Enterprise showed a vast amount of leadership and demonstrated a positive and optimistic approach to what it regards as an opportunity to start with a clean sheet. We would like there to be more of that approach in the enterprise arena.

The Convener: In summary, has the message of fresh talent failed to percolate through the various Government agencies that could make the initiative broad based?

15:00

Ali Jarvis: The message of the fresh talent initiative is about immigration, which is a difficult word for people to understand. There is no recognition of what fresh talent could be; if there was, that would be a lot more beneficial for the whole of Scotland and the initiative would not be seen as so narrow.

The Convener: That relates to some interesting evidence that we took a fortnight ago from the Scottish Trades Union Congress, which made a powerful case for the fresh talent initiative being about tackling the problem of economic inactivity, which affects all our communities. I do not think that that breadth of vision would be commonly recognised by the fresh talent initiative as it is currently constituted. Has the balance between encouraging a new population and getting the existing population more involved surfaced as an issue in your contribution to the development of fresh talent?

Ali Jarvis: Yes. We have to look at the existing population and the distinctions. There is no doubt that the first step should be to engage the existing population. For a variety of reasons, sections of the existing population are economically inactive or disengaged from the labour market. For some people, it is down to a lack of skills or expertise; for others, it might be about physical illness or welfare; for others, it is about issues such as racism or prejudice. The parallel initiative that is under way to tackle economic inactivity—the employability framework—is adopting a one-size-fits-all process, although it is clear that the barriers to inclusion are distinct for different groups of the economically inactive in Scotland today. We have concerns that a one-size-fits-all approach will not necessarily help the broadening out of the fresh talent initiative.

The Convener: Let us focus for a moment on a point that is raised in the Scottish Refugee Council's submission—it may also appear in the CRE's submission—under the heading:

"Consistency of message that Scotland is a welcoming country".

We have talked a bit about the one Scotland, many cultures campaign. Let us consider our ability to get across the message of the fresh talent initiative to an external population. Is the point that is being made that, in effect, that message is being undermined by other, contradictory messages that are less welcoming of people coming to this country? If so, what are those messages?

Simon Hodgson: Yes. There is still fairly overt racism, which is sometimes disguised in some of the media as anti-immigration sentiment. The worry is that, although we might be able to legislate to prevent people from being called offensive names because of the colour of their skin or their sexuality, their immigration status will not be protected. That is not on the table even for the equalities agenda that is being developed at the moment. It is almost as though people can get away with that. We are not advocating that there should be more censorship; it is about understanding the power of language, the ability to

blame people and how that gets interpreted. That has serious consequences.

Research that will be published shortly by the Institute of Public Policy Research will demonstrate that people cannot tell, when they are walking along the streets of Glasgow, what somebody's immigration status is—whether they have been born and bred in Glasgow; whether they are a visiting professor at the University of Glasgow; whether they are a refugee; or whether they are still waiting for their asylum claim to be heard. People cannot tell that by walking down Sauchiehall Street and seeing somebody in a different cultural costume, or whatever. It is impossible to tell, but assumptions are made, with the consequence that people are made to feel uncomfortable.

It is seen to be allowable for people who are seeking asylum to be called all sorts of names in the media, where the terminology is constantly misused, despite all the attempts to challenge that. It has almost gone beyond the point at which we can salvage the situation by getting people to say the correct things. We spend our lives trying to do that. Refugee week, which is this week, is all about trying to present positive images of cultural diversity and the contribution that people can make to Scotland. However, we are fighting a losing battle unless we address the racism that exists. We must not try to pretend that it does not exist.

It is interesting to note from the research in, for example, rural areas that have no tradition of having people from different ethnic minority backgrounds, that people are much more nervous. During the general election campaign, we were told that the biggest single election issue for men between the ages of 20 and 30 in Dundee, for example, was immigration and asylum. We asked how many asylum seekers there were in the Dundee area and found that three people were receiving support from the national asylum support service. That attitude comes from the fact that migrant workers work in the area, on the farms and in some of the factories. People assume that those workers should not be there or that they are doing something wrong and that attitude needs to be addressed. We are talking about people from European countries that we could go and work in tomorrow; nobody would think that strange, but when they come here, it is a problem. Somehow, communication is not getting through to people.

People just need to understand. I do not think that the argument that Scotland's population is falling sinks into the national psyche in a way that means anything to people. They think, "What do you want me to do about it?" It is perceived as a macro thing and that is not helpful as a key message.

The Convener: The converse argument is that fear of immigration, which is a negative attitude, might register much more quickly in the psyche than a positive attitude about encouraging more people to come here and solve our population crisis.

Ali Jarvis: That is the point at which we have to return to the complex relationship between perceptions of immigration and race. For some time, Scottish Enterprise has been running a programme called—somewhat confusingly, given that it has nothing to do with the fresh talent initiative—talent Scotland. The programme is targeted primarily at highly qualified Americans in the life sciences and other areas and there is no perceived problem with that. Perception of immigration as a problem is linked strongly with whether the people who are identified as immigrants look and sound like us. There is a genuine issue about where immigration and race overlap.

The Convener: Mr Hodgson mentioned the general election; a large proportion of the debate during that period concerned immigration. Have you any evidence to indicate that there has been a deterioration in attitude towards immigration as a result of that campaign?

Simon Hodgson: No, apart from the obvious, by which I mean that the issue was in the media a lot and our media inquiry levels rose hugely during the campaign. I do not think that the campaigns or the media north of the border were anything like what they were south of the border. Unfortunately, newspapers can cross borders—in the same way that people who have studied in Scotland can—and we have to deal with that.

In some ways, it was strange to be in Scotland during the election campaign and to see the national agenda, which took a "We'll be as tough as anything" line. What was not being said was that the policies that the Government has put in place to control the borders are working and have worked incredibly effectively, as long as someone is not trying to enter the UK to seek sanctuary. The Government has put in place measures and clamped right down so that it is virtually impossible to get into the UK by any legal means to claim asylum. The numbers have dropped right down.

However, nobody was prepared to say that or to talk about the race issue during the election campaign. That is what it comes down to. There are thousands more overseas students in the country than there are people trying to claim asylum. I do not want to get into the numbers game because people cannot visualise them, but nobody was prepared to say that the issue was really about race.

I understand that the biggest overstayers of work visas, who are in the country illegally, are Australians; that point was made earlier. To the best of my knowledge, there are no Australians in Dungavel or in any other detention centre. Similarly, in Australia, the biggest overstayers of work visas are British people. Why is that not the front-page scandal in the *Daily Mail*? Clearly, it is because we do not mind them or white Americans coming here.

Ali Jarvis: Exactly. Although we have not quantified the figures and the changes, a BBC Scotland poll that was conducted shortly after the election showed that 68 per cent of Scots think that immigration should be kept low. That figure is higher than in any previous poll. The issue is starting to translate fairly rapidly into the national psyche.

The Convener: What are the implications of that for campaigns such as one Scotland, many cultures? Is the campaign being undermined before it even starts to communicate its message?

Ali Jarvis: Certainly, it is entering a hugely hostile environment. A general awareness campaign is useful and valuable, but we must be clear that it cannot do everything. The Executive is keeping the campaign fairly general and high level, but it needs to find the trigger points that will make the campaign relevant to the person in Dundee or to someone who works on a berry farm in Blairgowrie. In a sense, people are looking at the campaign and saying, "Yeah, I kind of agree with that, but it's not about me." We need to look at ways of drilling the message straight down into people's true local experience. We do not need some nice conceptual idea that people agree with vaguely but do not see as relevant.

The Convener: Members have no further questions. We will reflect on the content of your submissions and on your oral evidence. Thank you for your attendance.

G8 and Council of the European Union Presidencies Inquiry

15:11

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is the Executive's response to the committee's report, "An Inquiry into the Scottish Executive's Preparations for the G8 Summit at Gleneagles and the UK Presidency of the EU and the Contribution Scotland Can Make to These Events". Are there any comments?

Mr Home Robertson: The Executive agrees with us.

Mr Morrison: The response was encouraging.

The Convener: I am always enthusiastic about receiving encouraging responses from the Executive, but we need a clearer idea of the massive economic benefits that Scotland will gain from the G8 summit. I raised that issue in the chamber during the debate on the G8.

The Executive makes it clear that a post-event impact study will be done, but there is no shortage of ministers at present who are prepared to say that the summit will bring massive economic benefit to Scotland. For reasons of good planning and the good use of resources, we should have some idea of what we are trying to achieve from the exercise. That is my only comment on the Executive response. Do members have any other points?

Members: No.

The Convener: Okay. We will note the response.

Mr Home Robertson: We welcome it.

The Convener: Okay; perhaps we should go that far.

Mr Home Robertson: The Executive says seven times that it agrees with us.

The Convener: That is nice and it makes a pleasant change. The minister will publish a post-event impact study, which the committee might look at in due course.

Pre and Post-council Scrutiny

15:13

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is consideration of a paper on pre and post-council scrutiny. Members have a summary of the various council meetings.

Mr Home Robertson: We have no papers on the environment council meeting of 24 June. Is there anything that we should be concerned about?

The Convener: The meeting is at the end of this week. We have no information on it; it is just one of those things that will fall because of the recess.

Mr Home Robertson: The minister is a Liberal, so we should be worried.

The Convener: It is clear that we are getting near the recess—who knows, there might not be a Liberal minister by the end of it? A reshuffle might have happened; I am told that changes are afoot.

Mrs Ewing: The agriculture and fisheries council of 30 May is covered in annex A to our briefing paper. We are still awaiting information from the Scottish Executive. For the whole time that I have sat on this committee, the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department seems to have had the worst record of any department for sending details to the European and External Relations Committee. I could be wrong—I have not kept statistics—but that is my interpretation. Could we send a letter to SEERAD to that effect, saying that we continue to be concerned about its lateness in responding?

The Convener: I would be quite happy to do that, subject to the clerks checking that that is indeed a regular occurrence—I have not been on the committee as long as Margaret Ewing has. I am happy to raise that point.

A couple of meetings ago, I raised issues about the rural development regulation, which will have an impact on a number of our constituencies. Just before I came to the meeting, I noticed in my inbox a statement from the NFU Scotland, welcoming an agreement that had been reached in Luxembourg last night. The agreement was rather incomplete, in the sense that it had been reached on the structure and focus of the rural development regulation, but not on the amount of money to be associated with it, given the wider problems with the EU budget. I suspect that we will return to the issue in due course.

Sift

15:16

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is the sift of EU and EC documents and draft legislation. There are a number of points in the “Documents of Special Importance” section of the sift document. The first document is aimed at

“Addressing the concerns of young people in Europe—implementing the European Youth Pact and promoting active citizenship”.

I recommend that we send that to our colleagues on the Education Committee and the Enterprise and Culture Committee. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The second document is a communication from the European Commission on the review of the scope of the universal service directive. I propose to forward the document to the Enterprise and Culture Committee. Thirdly, there is a progress report on cohesion, which we will require to look at in due course. The Enterprise and Culture Committee should consider that report, too. Finally, there is a series of related documents on the European year of equal opportunities for all, 2007, which I am sure will be of interest to our colleagues on the Equal Opportunities Committee.

Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Convener's Report

15:17

The Convener: Agenda item 5 is the convener's report, under which I have two matters to deal with. The first concerns a letter that I have received from Irene Oldfather in relation to a proposal to host a meeting and seminar in the Scottish Parliament by the commission for economic and social policy of the Committee of the Regions, with which Irene Oldfather is involved, as members know. I understand that the letter has also gone to the Enterprise and Culture Committee, and that that committee is supportive of the bid.

Alasdair Rankin (Clerk): The Enterprise and Culture Committee has not expressed a view as a whole.

The Convener: My apologies.

Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab): It seems a good idea.

The Convener: I believe that the proposal needs to be sanctioned by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, but I think that we are quite happy to associate ourselves with it.

Mr Home Robertson: It seems eminently sensible. We should recommend that it goes ahead.

The Convener: We will do so.

The second matter relates to correspondence between myself and the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, Mr McCabe. Previously, there was some correspondence about the proposed European Union bill. As members will have realised, and as is confirmed in a letter from the minister, no progress will be made on the EU bill until such time as progress is made on the wider issues. As I indicated to members a fortnight ago, I invited Mr McCabe to appear before the committee to give us an update on the European situation, but, due to diary pressures, he was unable to accommodate us. That will have to wait until after the summer recess. By then, I am sure that we will have a date for a discussion with the Minister of State for Europe in Her Majesty's Government, Douglas Alexander, who has expressed a willingness to come to the Parliament. By that stage, we might be clearer about the implications of the weekend's events.

Iain Smith: We received, via an e-mail from the clerks, the "Declaration by the heads of State or Government of the Member States of the European Union on the ratification of the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe". That indicates, in essence, that the thing has been put

on hold for a year to allow for discussion within member states on how to proceed. At some point—perhaps at our away day—could we discuss how the committee can help to engage Scotland in the process of wider discussion?

The Convener: That comment is helpful and we will want to discuss the issue with the minister, because it is relevant to his responsibilities. We will hear from the minister after the summer recess, but we can certainly consider the issue at our away day.

Mr Home Robertson: I will try my luck here. If Mr McCabe had been able to see us any time soon, I imagine that several colleagues on the committee would have wanted to ask about the extraordinary story about the competition for the supply of fishery protection vessels. It is obvious that that has European ramifications. It seems very strange that the European Commission has concerns about the Polish bid. The UK Government also has concerns about it, but it seems that the Scottish Executive, which is purchasing the vessels for Scottish public service, intends to proceed. I do not know if there is any way for the committee to raise this particular Scottish interest, not least because of what the constituency MSP said on the subject.

The Convener: It is certainly a legitimate issue for us to raise with Mr McCabe, so I am quite happy to entertain a discussion on that point.

Mr Home Robertson: It is rather urgent; perhaps a letter would be appropriate.

The Convener: I am happy to express a committee view in line with what John Home Robertson said about the concerns of the Commission and the UK Government. We could encourage the Executive to share those concerns and to take the necessary action to award a contract. Does that sound agreeable?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Okay. I will send the letter today.

That concludes the convener's report. This was our final meeting before the summer recess.

Gordon Jackson: Tonight is the drinks evening.

The Convener: I am glad that you have taken such trouble to put that in the *Official Report*, Mr Jackson.

Although we will be in recess, the clerks have arranged an away day for 1 September, in the Parliament, at which we can discuss our forward work programme. I hope that members will be able to make that event. I wish members an enjoyable recess.

Meeting closed at 15:22.

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