

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19 June 2007

Session 3

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2007, Session 3

OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER

*Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

*Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

*John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

*Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP)

*Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Dr Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Emma Berry

Lewis McNaughton

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 19 June 2007

[THE OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER *opened the meeting at 11:01*]

Interests

Ted Brocklebank (Oldest Committee Member): Good morning and welcome to the first meeting of the European and External Relations Committee in the third session of the Scottish Parliament. I confess that I am indeed, despite appearances, the oldest member of the committee and, as such, I will convene the early part of the meeting. I discovered only yesterday that I am the oldest committee member; that was due to the diligence of my former parliamentary aide, Dominic Heslop, who is now seeking gainful employment elsewhere for having drawn that fact to the clerks' attention.

I have received apologies from Alex Neil—I had thought that his age easily exceeded my own, but apparently not—who has a prior engagement at a conference on autism in Belfast.

The first agenda item is members' declarations of interests. Section 3 of the "Code of Conduct for Members of the Scottish Parliament" requires members to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee's remit. Members can see that the clerk's paper sets out the background.

I will start by declaring my interests, and then ask members in turn to declare theirs. In the register of members' interests, which will be made public on 6 July, is recorded my visit to Taiwan for the purposes of observing and studying its economy. I was a guest of the Government of the People's Republic of China and costings are given for that particular trip. I also list heritable property in my home town of St Andrews. I own shares in SMG plc, a media company, and I am on the boards of various other organisations, but those positions are unremunerated—all are listed in my entry in the register.

Starting with Jackie Baillie, we will go round the table and ask each member to declare any interests.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I have no interests to declare that are relevant to the operation of the committee, other than those that are in my entry in the register of members' interests.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I have no formal registrable interests, but I want to record that I am a member of the Transport and General Workers Union. From time to time, the committee might take evidence from the trades unions and the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I have no relevant interests to declare.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Other than interests that are in the register of members' interests, I can think of nothing that I should declare.

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I have no registrable interests to declare. However, I place it on the record that, during the previous parliamentary sessions, I undertook some work for the British Council and the John Smith Memorial Trust in relation to eastern Europe. Those interests were listed in the previous register but are no longer listed.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I have no interests to declare, other than those I have already registered, although I am a member of Amicus.

Convener

11:02

Ted Brocklebank: The second agenda item is to choose the committee's convener. Parliament has agreed that only members of the Labour Party are eligible for nomination as convener of this committee. That being the case, can I have nominations for the position?

Irene Oldfather: I nominate Jackie Baillie.

Jackie Baillie was chosen as convener.

Ted Brocklebank: Congratulations to Jackie Baillie. I will now leave the chair and return to my accustomed state of obscurity.

Deputy Convener

11:03

The Convener (Jackie Baillie): Thank you, Ted. I have probably aged since I swapped chairs with you.

Agenda item 3 is to choose our deputy convener. Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish National Party are eligible for the position. I therefore seek nominations for deputy convener.

Alasdair Morgan: I nominate Alex Neil.

Alex Neil was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: Alasdair Morgan is delegated to tell him.

Work Programme

11:04

The Convener: Item 4 is our approach to developing a work programme. Members will find enclosed with their papers a short briefing note from the clerks. Are there any comments?

Iain Smith: It is important that we consider a couple of issues. First, it is important that the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture come before the committee at an early opportunity to outline the new Executive's strategy for European and external affairs. It would be ideal if that could happen before the summer recess so that we could all have some idea of what we need to think about over the summer in relation to our work programme. I accept, however, that time is tight, so if it is not possible to do that before the summer recess, then we should certainly have the minister come before us at our first meeting after the recess. There could be some significant differences between the previous Executive's strategy and that of the new Executive.

Secondly, the legacy paper mentions an area in which I have a particular interest, because I was one of our representatives on the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. We need to look at the Executive's role in the British-Irish Council, and we perhaps need to help in developing links with the other United Kingdom devolved Administrations and with the Irish Government and Parliament. That is important now that devolution has been fully restored in Northern Ireland, so we need to do more work in those areas.

The Convener: That sounds sensible. Without pre-empting the committee's consideration, the clerks have been in touch with the minister's office—if the committee wants to talk to the minister before our away day, and certainly before recess, provisional arrangements have been made. We can return to those arrangements, depending on what other members feel.

Alasdair Morgan: I agree that it would be helpful to see the minister before the recess, so I am happy to proceed along those lines. I would also be happy for the work programme to be developed more fully during the recess and at an away day, and to leave to the clerks, the convener and the deputy convener any decision about the format for such an away day.

Irene Oldfather: I agree with Iain Smith's proposal for having the minister before the committee. Although we have regularly taken evidence from the Executive, there might have been a change in priorities. It would therefore be helpful for the committee to identify any likely changes, because they would inform our work programme.

One of the annexes to the previous committee's legacy paper suggests some issues for the Parliament's European officer to track. Things come on and off the European Commission's agenda quite quickly—it can change fast. I understand that 10 pieces of proposed legislation in the Commission's earlier work programme have been abandoned. If we are to have another meeting before the recess, it would be helpful to have the European officer along to update us on changes. We have all been focusing on other things since March, when the legacy paper was written.

Towards the end of the previous session, we felt it important to consider how to organise our work programme better—that is outlined in the legacy paper. We concluded that we should examine issues in two ways: upstream and downstream. I call them PF and TIE: that is, policy development and the formulation of legislation on the upstream side, and transposition, implementation and enforcement on the downstream side. We can identify lobbying upstream and European scrutiny downstream. We came to that quite late in the previous session and we did not get the procedures in place for the committee to analyse things in that way.

It might be helpful to think in those terms at our away day. The downstream side—transposition, implementation and enforcement—brings fewer opportunities for Scottish influence, but we could have considerable influence on the upstream side, which concerns policy development and early legislative proposals. Perhaps we should develop that way of thinking and transpose that into our work programme.

I echo what Iain Smith said about the opportunity for joint working with the other devolved Administrations in the UK: we should seek to do that early on. We should also consider the other regions with legislative powers and the big issues that they are identifying, in which there might be opportunities for collaboration.

We have yet not talked about the external relations side of our remit. In the previous session, we focused on European scrutiny and so on. In the legacy paper and in the paper that Jim Wallace produced, we set out some pointers for possible ways ahead, but we did not do much on external and international relations. We might have scope to spend more time on that at the away day.

Late on in the previous session, we considered international aid in Malawi. The committee might have an opportunity to review how that is working, whether the aid money is going to the right projects and what the benefits are to Scotland and Malawi.

There is also the matter of offices being set up in Washington and Beijing, and we spoke about the possibility of having an office in India. I am not sure what has happened about that, but we could perhaps take up those matters with the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture next week, or whenever we arrange for her to come before us.

The Convener: That was helpful, particularly given your work on the previous European and External Relations Committee. Such continuity and knowledge will be very helpful for the committee's future work.

I am picking up that the committee would welcome an early opportunity to have the minister before us. That should be possible, looking at the programme for Tuesday next week. Perhaps the previous committee's legacy paper and "Report on an inquiry into the scrutiny of European legislation" should form the main thrust of the away day, in addition to a number of items that have already been highlighted, including international development in the context of our external relations remit and the value of our having offices elsewhere. We will leave the clerks to go through those matters in some detail—including opportunities for relationships under the British-Irish Council or further afield—and to develop their thinking on them in time for the away day.

Irene Oldfather raised something that I think is worth putting on the agenda for next week: we should get information and an update—by way of a written briefing—from our European officer on which proposals have been dropped and which are still valid. I propose that we invite the European officer to our away day. It would be helpful to have that link and to have there the officer who will be able to discuss with us what is going on. In addition, we should find out whether Scotland's MEPs are available. We will consider organising different slots in the away day in which we can engage other stakeholders in the work of the committee. Does that seem sensible?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I seek the committee's formal agreement to hold an away day. We will leave it to the clerks to liaise on the arrangements and the programme. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you. There being nothing else on today's agenda, I thank you all for attending.

Meeting closed at 11:16.

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