

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 September 2007

Session 3

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2007, Session 3

CONVENER

*Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

*Alasdair Morgan (South of 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)

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con)

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Dr Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Emma Berry

Lucy Scharbert

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 4 September 2007

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 11:00*]

Work Programme

The Convener (Jackie Baillie): Welcome to the third meeting of the European and External Relations Committee in the third session of the Scottish Parliament. Before we start, I introduce to members our new assistant clerk, Lucy Scharbert, who joined us this week. I record our thanks to Lewis McNaughton, who has left us to undertake a secondment at the National Assembly for Wales—so we will get him back at some point. I have received apologies from Alex Neil, so I welcome Keith Brown, who is attending in his capacity as committee substitute. I also welcome Margo MacDonald, who has a keen interest in matters European and wants to contribute later in the meeting.

We have only one agenda item to consider today—our work programme, which we need to agree formally. Today's meeting follows our discussions at the committee away day—all our considerations are contained in the paper that is before members. It might be helpful if I briefly remind members what we agreed, because there have been additions to the recommendations. First, in relation to paragraph 19, three members—Irene Oldfather, Alex Neil and Iain Smith—have agreed to act as reporters on developing the recommendations in the report into scrutiny of European legislation. We will return to that matter when we consider paragraph 19 later.

On paragraph 43, on scrutiny of the Executive's international relations policies, we agreed to wait until the Scottish Executive has concluded its internal review of existing strategies and agreements before we look at how we want to scrutinise such issues in our work programme.

The committee agreed at the away day to undertake an inquiry into international development and we agreed to explore that remit with a number of stakeholders on 2 October. I will reconfirm that with members later.

We also agreed to undertake a mapping exercise on the European and international political organisations that include MSPs representing Parliament, including the current method of accountability, following the recommendation at paragraph 47.

Finally, on our consideration of the Scottish Executive's white paper on independence, the committee was firmly of the view that although we want to scrutinise the white paper, we should in the first instance write to the First Minister for clarification of which Scottish minister will be in charge of the white paper; what the intended progress will be; what the format for consultation will be; and what will be the timescale, including for any legislation that is required. Once we have received that response, the committee will be better able to scope out the nature of the inquiry that we want to have.

I now invite members to consider the recommendations that are in bold type. First, does the committee agree to the recommendation in paragraph 12?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Does the committee agree to the recommendation in paragraph 17, to invite the minister to the committee?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Does the committee agree to the recommendation in paragraph 19, to appoint as reporters three of our number?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Do we agree to the recommendation in paragraph 27?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Excellent. This will be the quickest committee meeting in history.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We are still to hear from Margo MacDonald.

The Convener: That was unkind.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): He is getting his retaliation in first.

The Convener: We have already covered paragraph 39 with the supplementary information that I provided. Subject to that, are members content with the recommendation?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We have also covered paragraph 43 with supplementary information. Do members agree to the recommendation?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We have considered paragraph 45 and have resolved to write to the First Minister about the issue with which it deals. I believe that the letter is before members. Is the recommendation in paragraph 45 agreed to?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Now that we have agreed the committee's work programme, I invite Margo MacDonald to speak to us. She is a welcome attendee at our meeting.

Margo MacDonald: I would like to speak to the committee—conversations are all the rage.

From the rundown on the committee's work programme, it sounds as if your timetable will be heavy. The item that is right at the top of the European agenda is the constitution by any other name—it is now being openly referred to as such. The constitution was previously rejected, but has been re-presented without a flag and without an anthem. Who would notice the difference?

Gordon Brown has said that he has drawn red lines on the map to protect particularly and peculiarly British interests, but that is debatable and the Trades Union Congress has signalled that it will demand a referendum. I think that it is incumbent on the Scottish Parliament at least to discuss the contents of what is on offer so that our opinion, as a Parliament that represents Scottish interests, can be advanced and made known to the Prime Minister and Government.

I will give an example. I believe that today a conversation is taking place at the offshore exhibition and fair in Aberdeen about who should control—in inverted commas—energy supplies. For the first time, the European constitution will enable the European apparatus of governance to be the final arbiter of energy policy. Given that that is an issue in which we in Scotland have a particular interest, it is surprising that no one has raised it. I would like to know that the committee will at least discuss the matter; I would also like to hear from the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture on it. I think that I picked up from what the convener said that the minister might appear before the committee.

The Convener: Indeed. Before I bring in other members, it might be helpful to point out that we have a European officer, who monitors and tracks a number of pieces of legislation. Part of his responsibility to the committee and to the Parliament is to track the European Union constitution. Margo MacDonald will be pleased to hear that that is already within the scope of the committee's work. I am sure that additional information on progress of the reform treaty can be provided to members of the committee and to MSPs more generally.

Margo MacDonald is right that the issue is on our agenda, in the sense that the minister will appear before us on 18 September, when the Executive's priorities for the EU will be laid out. I am sure that the EU constitution will form part of the range of priorities about which members will want to question the minister. Any member of the

Parliament can attend our meetings and if Margo MacDonald is free on 18 September, we look forward to welcoming her along.

Do members have any comments or views?

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I would welcome a briefing from the minister and the Executive on the implications—particularly those for Scotland—of the treaty or constitution, which we had a chat about at the away day. However, my reasons are probably entirely different from Margo's.

Margo MacDonald: No—we are together on that.

The Convener: Unity has broken out.

Ted Brocklebank: As members know, the away day was held under Chatham house rules, so one cannot report exactly what was said. However, an eminent professor who attended appeared to suggest—I do not want to misquote her—that the reform treaty is not dissimilar to the constitution. Other people have claimed that it is 96 per cent the same as the original constitution. For reasons that are possibly not the same as Margo's, the Conservative group is extremely keen on a referendum.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): It may help Margo MacDonald to know that I have lodged a question on the issue for question time on Thursday. Margo may get to speak if she attends and indicates that she wants to contribute.

Margo MacDonald: To be communautaire—the European way of putting it—about it—

Gil Paterson: Say that again, Margo.

Margo MacDonald: I have had a motion lodged for weeks; I do not know whether Gil Paterson has signed it.

The Convener: I will bring the discussion to a close, not least because there will be an opportunity to raise the issue on 18 September. I take on board Irene Oldfather's point about asking the Executive for further information.

Would anyone like to raise any other issues?

Members indicated disagreement.

The Convener: In that case, I look forward to seeing members on 18 September. Representatives of the Scottish Executive will be in attendance, together with members of the European Parliament. The meeting will start at 10:30 am.

Meeting closed at 11:11.

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