

EUROPEAN COMMITTEE

Tuesday 5 September 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE **15th Meeting 2000, Session 1**

CONVENER

*Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West)
*Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
*Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)
*Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP)
*Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con)
*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)
Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con)
*Allan Wilson (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

*attended

ADVISER

Professor John Bachtler

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Stephen Imrie

ASSISTANT CLERK

David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

European Committee

Tuesday 5 September 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:06*]

The Convener (Hugh Henry): Good afternoon, colleagues. Welcome to the 15th meeting of the European Committee this year. I am sure that you are all suitably refreshed after the recess and I hope that everyone managed to take one or two weeks' holiday. I know that one or two of our colleagues were star turns in what I am told was the highlight of the fringe. Obviously there is hidden talent in the committee. I look forward to some singing and dancing at a future meeting.

I have apologies from Sylvia Jackson, who is at the Local Government Committee. Maureen Macmillan is at another meeting and will come along later. Tavish Scott hoped to be here, but I believe that he will be delayed indefinitely because of a problem with fog—that is one of the problems with representing the islands.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I understand that Ben Wallace will be coming, but has been delayed.

The Convener: Not in eastern Europe, I hope. Has he made it back from there?

David Mundell: Yes, he has. However, as he will be late, it might be appropriate to hear his report a little later in the meeting.

The Convener: Okay. That simplifies things to a large extent.

Reporters

The Convener: Members will recall that, earlier this year, we decided that some members of the committee would act as reporters on specific work to try to take our agenda forward. Unfortunately, two of the three members from whom we wanted to hear have been delayed; I do not know whether that is because we were due to hear from them today. One of the reporters, Bruce Crawford, is here and I am sure that we all look forward to the continuation of the debate on the euro. Bruce, could you give us an update on where we are with the investigation?

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Yes, but do not expect any singing and dancing from me.

When the committee last discussed the work of the euro reporter, it was decided that I would complete certain sections of work before halting and allowing the committee to continue with the work jointly. The reason for that decision was primarily the difficulty of applying the resources that would allow me to finish the report.

I was asked to consider six areas, the first of which was the background to and rationale for the requirements for European monetary union and what has brought us to this stage of European integration. The second was a review of the euro zone, the Maastricht criteria and how Scotland and the United Kingdom sit in comparison with the convergence criteria. The third was an examination of the advantages and disadvantages of the economic and monetary union and its potential effects on the social and economic development of the European Union. The fourth was how Scotland is progressing in terms of preparation for entry, looking at the different sectors. The fifth was the potential impact on government, public sector and business decision making. The sixth was consideration of other EU member states, such as Ireland and Denmark, that have comparable population size and peripheral locations.

The first three have been completed, apart from the effects on social and economic development, which is part of the third area. Stephen Imrie has the papers on the background and rationale, and the review of the euro zone and the Maastricht criteria. I am beginning to look at the objectives and disadvantages of the EMU.

I have concerns about some of the statistical data that I used in the report, as they are from June and things have moved on since then, particularly the UK's and Scotland's position in relation to the convergence criteria. I am also worried that because the draft was written earlier

in the summer, it does not contain any examination of the one-policy-fits-all argument. That is particularly relevant because of the difficulties that are beginning to be experienced between the German economy, which needs lower interest rates for growth, and the Irish economy, which needs higher interest rates to cool it down. I have not had time to look at that, but I have produced the first three sections of the report.

I have suggested to Stephen Imrie that the best way to progress would be for the papers to go to all committee members so that they can give their views and have an input. Stephen has agreed to look after that process, which, if we agree, can begin now.

The fourth piece of work contains a summary of the consultation meetings that have been undertaken. We have spoken to Business for Sterling, the Commercial and General Union, the Royal Bank of Scotland, Standard Life, the Bank of Scotland, the Scottish Food and Drink Federation and the Scottish Council for Development and Industry. The SCDI is about to publish the findings of a wide-ranging survey of Scottish businesses that should be relevant to how the committee might want to view the potential impact on business of joining the euro zone. We had hoped to take evidence from other organisations, but were unable to because we could not have the assistance of a consultant. Pauline Archibald has prepared a note on the discussions that took place and the main points that were made; I will add that note to the material to be circulated.

I hope that I have explained where we are at. Once we have members' responses, we will have to come to some conclusions about the advantages and disadvantages of EMU. I have my own views, but I have not included them at this stage because it is important to surf the views of committee members first to ensure that our report has at least a solid majority behind it.

The Convener: Thank you for a good overview. Are there comments and questions?

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Bruce Crawford mentioned including other countries, such as Ireland, in his report.

Bruce Crawford: Had we carried out the initial remit that would have happened, but because of the decision that was taken towards the end of June, I did not have the resources for a consultant to help us. As a result, the final section of the report—along with the fourth and fifth sections—will have to be a joint view from the committee.

Dr Ewing: I am curious to know whether countries keep their currency in parallel when the euro begins. Can that be done?

Bruce Crawford: That is being done, but only until a certain date. Once 1 January or 1 June 2002 is reached—forgive me; I cannot remember the specific date—countries will have to fly without dual currency.

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): Unless the Danes vote no, in which case that will have to be amended at the end of the presidency, so perhaps it would not be a good idea to spend much time going into that now.

Bruce Crawford: I think you are right, Margo.

14:15

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): It is difficult to comment further until we see Bruce Crawford's drafts, which we look forward to reading. We will then be able to decide whether any information is missing.

Bruce Crawford: I emphasise that the initial drafts are early thoughts. I need members' thoughts before we can move to the next stage.

The Convener: Can we agree to circulate the drafts as private papers? I stress that they will be private at this stage as they are for further consultation and debate. I hope that members will treat the papers as such, as they have no status as committee comment at this stage but are there to help us to progress the discussion. Stephen Imrie will make the appropriate arrangements and we will return to the issue.

We will leave the other two reports for the moment.

Convener's Report

The Convener: The next item is the convener's report. The first item under that heading is an invitation from the Scottish Executive to nominate two representatives to the proposed Scottish European structural funds forum. The recommendation that has been circulated is that, as convener, I should attend on behalf of the committee. The question is who the second representative should be. The function of our presence on the Scottish European structural funds forum is non-political; it is to make representations and to comment on behalf of the committee. Given that, I suggest that the deputy convener should be the second nominee. Are there any other suggestions?

Dr Winnie Ewing: Is it you, convener, plus two others or plus one?

The Convener: It is me plus one. Are there any other nominees? If not, we will move to the next item under this heading.

A number of items of correspondence have been received, which have been circulated with recommendations. Are those recommendations agreed? Are there any specific questions or comments?

Ms MacDonald: I think it is a brilliant idea that Phil Gallie should be asked to look after little furry animals. Whoever thought of that should be commended. *[Laughter.]*

The Convener: Thanks, Margo.

Allan Wilson (Cunninghame North) (Lab): There have been developments regarding the carousel since the letter we have received was written. Has there been any attempt to update the correspondence to take account of those developments?

The Convener: That is entirely in the committee's hands. This is an important issue for Scotland, which it may well be worth coming back to.

Allan Wilson: I am thinking in particular of the reported comments of at least one industrialist, if not more, who indicated an intent to sue for losses to their business as a consequence of what they perceive to be European intransigence on the issue. It might be worth while pursuing the matter.

Ms MacDonald: I was in the Borders last week as part of my on-going investigation for the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. I was struck by the fact that at meetings such as the knitter's forum, the second agenda item, after apologies, was the banana wars. Those folk have had it up to here. We have given no support or

guidance—nothing. To be honest, they did not look to us for that. They have been looking to Brian Wilson, because he has been working with them to do something in Europe. The reason I mention that is that we do not appear to have a locus in their real world, which involves trying to export cashmere goods all over the world. Their difficulties are not the result of the strong pound, but of the fact that there is a banana war and a trade sanction in place. They appear to have no way in apart from through Brian Wilson, and I think that he is finding it quite difficult.

The Convener: Given the comments that members have made, I suggest that it would be appropriate for us to consider the matter further. Clearly, concern has been expressed about the attitude that is being taken within the European Union, and our remit is wide enough to allow us to comment on that. We accept that the matter is reserved, but if we are able to say to the European Union that there are worries and fears about the consequences of its attitude, that will give comfort to sections of our community. It is important that the committee should do that, with the endorsement of the Parliament.

I suggest that we discuss that at a future meeting as a specific agenda item. We could consider the option of having a member of the committee, such as Allan Wilson, liaise with Stephen Imrie and present a brief report, or we could ask Stephen to produce a paper. If members are happy to leave that with me, I will seek to establish the easiest and most flexible way of bringing the issue on to our agenda in the near future.

Dr Ewing: I support what Margo MacDonald has said, but, as she probably knows, the effects of the dispute are not limited to the Borders. Johnstons mill in Elgin is affected, as are manufacturers of shortbread and biscuits, which, oddly enough, also seem to be well established in Morayshire. Harris tweed was also on the list, but eventually members of the Senate committee were persuaded that that industry was too defenceless and small and it was withdrawn.

In my view, the retaliation by America and the World Trade Organisation is flawed. If Stephen Imrie is doing a report, I would like him to consider the following specific question. Given that the preferential deals that we made with the Lomé partners for bananas and many other things preceded as international trade treaties the existence of the WTO, why does the WTO have the right to tell Europe that those treaties are of no value? For the best of reasons, we gave preferential tariffs to countries in the third world that were ex-colonies of Britain, France and so on. Jamaica, for example, was very dependent on exporting bananas to Britain.

The irony of all this—and Stephen Imrie may be able to get hold of the statistics—is that Europe takes only 8 per cent of its bananas from the third world. We get all the rest from the dreadful companies that are involved in producing genetically modified food and that supply the Republican and Democratic parties of America with their funding. I am told that they employ child labour, but I cannot prove that at the moment.

What is being done seems to me to be flawed. No retaliatory measures are being taken against Ireland—surprise, surprise. Very few retaliatory measures are being taken against most of the European member states, although France has suffered with regard to perfume and handbags, which are defined as luxury items. Luxury is all very well, but workers losing their jobs is not a matter of luxury. For the Borders, the dispute is devastating. I believe that it is based on the flawed premise that the WTO has the right to condemn as illegal the preferential deals that we made before it came into existence. I wonder whether Stephen Imrie will address that matter in the paper that I hope he will produce.

The Convener: We will get some legal advice on those points.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): Obviously, this has been an agenda item before because the matter was raised with us via the Scottish Trades Union Congress, which was concerned that this dispute not only affected the cashmere industry, but had potentially much wider consequences. It would be useful for us to get an update on what is happening, particularly given that the TUC is coming to Glasgow next week. I am sure that this item will be live and on the agenda, so we should consult with the unions.

Ms MacDonald: Winnie Ewing is probably correct about the legality of it, but the truth is that we are up against sheer, naked American fire power here. The reason our cashmere has been picked off is that it is now our biggest dollar earner; it is earning us even more than whisky is. We will not be doing our job properly unless the people working in the cashmere industry in the Borders see the European Committee and the Scottish Parliament as relevant. We are supposed to have links with Europe and I do not want simply to use soft words and say, "But it's the Yanks." I want to find out whether this committee can actually do something, so that people feel that it is worth their while to go through all the hoops that they are going through.

The Convener: I do not want to get into a debate on the powers of the committee or the Parliament and on what matters are reserved. It is clear that there will be a number of issues relating to Europe on which we can comment, although the

final decision will rest elsewhere. I hope that we can undertake some work that will allow our opinions to be helpful, but I do not want us to start arguing in a fractious or divided way. It is important to say at the moment that the committee and the Parliament are fully behind the industries affected, and we can discuss the other issues later.

We shall put the matter on the agenda as soon as possible. When Stephen Imrie has spoken to those who have an interest in or knowledge of the subject, we can work out the best and quickest way to proceed. At that point, I shall ask for Stephen's advice as to whether we need representatives to give oral evidence to the committee or whether we can work on the basis of written evidence. I shall come back to members with suggestions about the best course of action.

The next item of correspondence concerns visits to Scotland by European Commissioners Michel Barnier and Anna Diamantopoulou. I have been invited to an event with Commissioner Barnier, and Cathy Jamieson has been invited to an event with the Employment and Social Affairs Commissioner.

Dr Ewing: Could we make a plea for the committee to meet Commissioner Fischler, who has always shown a lot of concern about rules that do not always make sense when applied to remote places?

The Convener: Commissioner Fischler's visit is still provisional. You probably understand better than the rest of us, Winnie, the demands on commissioners' time. We do not yet know for sure whether he will be visiting. If he comes, we shall certainly try to do what we can to put our points to him.

We have received a number of press releases from the European Commission, mostly on environmental matters. Do members agree the recommendations set out in the paper?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I am sorry that the next item was added to our agenda quite late, but there is a degree of urgency attached to it. We are all aware that there is a proposal from the European Commission to change the way in which the football transfer fee system works. Through the press, we have already heard of concerns from football clubs in Scotland.

I understand that the Union of European Football Associations and FIFA have submitted proposals to the Commission that might alter the arrangements. Observers have highlighted concerns for Scottish clubs, particularly at a lower level. The question for us will be quite similar to the one we asked a couple of minutes ago in

relation to cashmere: what can this committee do to influence the process or support those involved in trying to effect change? The worst thing that we could do is to do nothing. Those who have concerns about the difficulties that the proposals could cause to the Scottish game want the Parliament to comment on the issue.

We do not yet know the definite timetable for the Commission's proposals. We had been told that the Commission wanted responses by 20 September, which would require us to have an early meeting. We have contacted the players union, the Scottish Premier League and the Scottish Football Association to see whether their representatives might be available in the next two weeks to give evidence to the committee. I would like members to think about how to take this matter forward. We need to hold a meeting as early as possible, depending on timetabling considerations, and we may want to hear from some of the organisations that have a direct stake in the issue.

14:30

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): This is an extension of the debate about the Bosman ruling a few years ago. At the time, when I was convener of the all-party Scottish sports group in the House of Commons, we heard evidence from Tony Higgins of the Scottish Professional Footballers Association about the ruling. The SPFA seemed to be arguing for some kind of derogation for sport—almost an amendment of the Treaty of Rome—which would be difficult to achieve. It may not be impossible, but it would certainly be very ambitious.

It now looks as if there is a possibility of agreement between the Commission and FIFA, although, under European law, it would be open to any individual player to go to the European Court of Justice to challenge even that agreement. I am surprised that, post-Bosman, no player has gone as far as that yet. It is a complex legal matter as well as a constitutional matter, and it affects sport in Scotland and everywhere else.

I agree wholeheartedly that this is an important item for us to consider, and I am pleased that you have put it on the agenda, albeit at short notice. I hope that we can manage to get evidence from the SFA as the governing body, as well as from the Scottish Premier League and from the players union—from Tony Higgins or one of his colleagues. It might be possible for us to feed in our findings directly to the Commission, as the view of the European Committee of the Scottish Parliament. Time is of the essence and it looks as if there might be a decision later in the month. If we were to go through the whole rigmarole of feeding through the Executive or the Westminster

Government, we would probably get nowhere. It would probably be better to feed our views directly to the Commission.

The Convener: We should also get the views of clubs in the lower reaches of the game.

Dennis Canavan: Yes, we should ask members of the Scottish Football League for their views.

Allan Wilson: I agree with Dennis. When I first saw this item on the agenda, I immediately asked what exactly it had to do with us. I had always viewed employment law, quite properly, as a reserved matter, and I do not think that it would suit the interests of Scottish workers to have a different employment regime on either side of the border.

However, there is a Scottish dimension to this issue, not least because of the agreement that exists between the Executive and the clubs. It is a progressive agreement on the creation of youth soccer academies, and the Commission's proposals could jeopardise the deal that was struck with that agreement. If clubs are denied income from transfers arising out of the investment that they have made in soccer academies, it calls into question the whole future of Scottish football academies and the partnership deal. In turn, that jeopardises the future of Scottish player development and the representation of Scotland on the international football stage.

The committee should pursue the specific Scottish dimensions of the matter. There is unanimity of opinion among the players, the clubs and, I suspect, the fans. It might be worth while to get the perspective of Martin Rose of the Scottish supporters association. There is a Scottish question, and we have a legitimate interest in this matter for that reason.

Bruce Crawford: I speak as a supporter as well as an MSP, as I am a season ticket holder at one of the premier league clubs—I shall not say which one, in case someone takes the mickey out of me in the future.

I have spoken to several clubs about this issue. I spoke to Stirling Albion, St Johnstone and Dunfermline Athletic, and discovered that there are different views, even among the provincial clubs, about what the best way forward would be. St Johnstone's reaction was to replicate some of what Allan Wilson said earlier. For instance, the club is investing about £100,000 a year in youth football development and its soccer academy for the future. It would say that that whole process of youth development would be in jeopardy if this rule change was brought to bear.

Although Stirling Albion is not investing the same resources, the club takes a similar view and is concerned about what the rule change would

mean to it—surviving on transfer fees coming in to keep the banks at bay. Dunfermline Athletic takes a more positive view of the change but would like some negotiation around the edges—and I believe that there is still room for negotiation around the edges. For example, although a player is over the age of 24, is it possible that they would have to give a period of notice before quitting a club? If that period of notice was long enough, it might give the clubs an opportunity to come to some rationalisation of their situation.

A separate body should also be set up to agree the transfer fee for players under 24. It becomes much more difficult to keep the big clubs, in particular, at bay if there is not some body involved in those negotiations. If we can get a deal that ensures the introduction of the rule change over a longer period, that might allow some of the clubs to start to deal with some of the serious banking issues such as the overdrafts and loans that some of them have. Those loans are taken on the basis of the prospect of big transfer fees coming in the future, which will keep the banks at bay. If those big transfer fees are not going to be there, perhaps the banks will not be kept at bay as long and some of the smaller clubs might find themselves going out of business earlier than might have been expected.

In the light of the employment legislation, I understand why the change will have to come at some stage. However, I fear that, if this rule is introduced, it will give more spending power to the big clubs and will allow them to increase the size of their pools and pay even bigger wages. The prospect of players earning £100,000 a week is not far away. In those circumstances, the gulf between the position of the Rangers and Celtics of this world and that of the other clubs will be widened, undermining the viability of Scottish football in the longer term.

I agree with Dennis Canavan's and Allan Wilson's suggestions about who we need to talk to, but, as well as talking to the big players, we must make a special effort to find out what the provincial clubs think. By provincial clubs, I mean clubs such as St Johnstone, Dunfermline Athletic and, for Dennis's sake, Falkirk. We should also ask the smaller clubs, such as Cowdenbeath, East Fife and Stranraer, how they feel about this situation, as they are the ones that are really going to feel the pinch.

Cathy Jamieson: Most folk know where my footballing allegiances lie, so I will not mention them. There are far too many clubs in the junior league in Ayrshire to name them all.

It is useful to have football on the agenda, as it is opening up a wider debate about the money-making process in sport. If we are going to speak to different organisations about this, it is important

that we hear from the representatives of the players. One of the fundamental issues is whether clubs are investing in their youth academies and sporting facilities to bring on players to play for them or whether they are investing that money to satisfy their shareholders, at some later stage, with the clubs' performance. There are some fundamental issues in that.

I welcome Allan Wilson's suggestion that we look to bring in representatives of the supporters organisations as well. This debate should not be just about the people who ultimately might make a profit out of the change, but about the people whose livelihoods are going to be affected. In many cases, those are not the players at the big premier league clubs, who command high salaries, but those who make a living out of part-time football or the junior leagues. We must find out how the change will affect those people.

Bruce Crawford was right to suggest that there is a difference of opinion even among the premier league clubs. I have heard the views of a couple of managers, and the chief executive of Kilmarnock takes a different view from that of some others of the way in which the change would affect clubs. If the system were changed, opportunities might be opened up for some of the clubs that cannot compete in the transfer market. I have an open mind on the issue and feel that it is important for us to get more information and consider what would be best for football in Scotland, not just for the people who make money out of it.

The Convener: We must stay tightly focused in this discussion. We are not beginning a wide-ranging investigation into the state of Scottish football. Dennis Canavan is right in saying that this decision, which comes from Europe, follows on from the Bosman ruling, and we should consider what the knock-on effects of it will be in that European context, which is the locus of this committee.

On the one hand, Europe is trying to encourage progressive legislation, giving workers rights; on the other hand, there are unforeseen consequences for football. We are not talking about workers in the way that we would normally understand the term. At the top end of the scale, we are not talking about people who are disadvantaged and struggling to make ends meet; we are talking about people who potentially stand to gain huge amounts of money. There are, however, players at the lower end of the scale whose very livelihoods could be threatened if we do not get this right. We must therefore stay focused and clear about the remit that gives us a legitimate right to consider the matter.

David Mundell: I agree that there is a much wider debate to be had. Donald Gorrie instigated a debate in the Parliament, which Cathy Jamieson

and Dennis Canavan spoke in, about the financing of football clubs. It is clear that there is no unanimity among clubs concerning the way forward. That debate will have to take place at some point, especially in the context of the proposal for Rangers and Celtic to leave the Scottish Premier League.

Our locus is the timing of the change. Having taken evidence, we should be able to say whether it will have a significant impact in Scotland, even if we do not get unanimity from the people who come here. Either the decision should be influenced in a particular way or, if it is inevitably going ahead, the timing of it should be changed, so that discussion can go ahead without individuals and clubs being prejudiced. We have a locus and do not need to get unanimity from the people who come to speak to us to be able to feed something useful into the Commission.

Ms MacDonald: I have read the latest proposals that were put forward by FIFA. Do we not have any direct contact with the likes of the Netherlands—that is where Rangers buys all its players from—and the cut-price countries where the club that has my allegiance tends to buy its players? Should we not consider the view that is taken in one or two countries such as ours?

One thing that I have in common with you, convener, is that I am not concerned about taking up this committee's time working out whether the players who play in the Scottish Premier League are earning £50,000 a week or £60,000 a week. I am concerned about the general structure of football. It might be interesting to find out about the situation in the Netherlands, Denmark and Portugal. Is there any way in which we can find out what their football associations have said about this? Their football structure may be similar to ours. There would be no need to find out about Sporting Lisbon, but the team that plays in Beja might be a wee bit like Hamilton Accies.

The Convener: Perhaps we can solicit that information from whomever we manage to get to give evidence to the committee.

14:45

Allan Wilson: I have a point that you raised earlier, convener, and to which Dennis Canavan alluded when we were discussing the employment law aspects. As I understand it, there is a special protocol under which certain industries and trades can be excluded from the employment law considerations of particular directives. I am thinking of broadcasting in particular.

Ms MacDonald: That is also entertainment and that is where there is a criss-cross with football.

Allan Wilson: That is right. Perhaps we could

get some information on the practicalities of that.

The Convener: I suppose that it depends on which football club one watches as to whether it can be counted as entertainment.

Dr Ewing: I am in a state of ignorance on this matter, but as a lawyer I am intrigued by some of the statements. For example, the EC believes that

"the system of transfer fees for players moving between clubs illegally restricts a footballer"

and it wants sports stars to have the same right to leave after giving a set period of notice.

I need more information about what happens in such cases. If a transfer fee is paid, does the footballer get any of the money?

The Convener: It depends on how good their agent is.

Dr Ewing: Does that then restrict the footballer to a fixed period of work at the club that pays for the transfer? It suggests that players are restricted in a different way to people who have ordinary fixed contracts of employment. I do not understand all this, because I do not follow football. It is important that we understand these phrases if we are to pontificate on them.

Irene Oldfather: It is important that we take a practical approach to what we can realistically achieve within the time scale that the convener suggested at the beginning of the meeting. Are we talking about the submission of written evidence, or are we going to line up a list of people to give oral evidence to the committee? If the time scale is tight and there are differences of opinion, we must stick to a very tight remit and a limited number of oral submissions.

The Convener: We might make use of both oral and written submissions. Stephen Imrie is trying to find out whether there has been any change to the timetable. Currently, we are working to a deadline of 20 September, although there is some suggestion that that might slip.

We have contacted the SFA, the Scottish Professional Footballers Association and the Scottish Premier League, but we have not yet contacted the lower division clubs. To some extent, how we proceed will depend on the way in which those groups respond. If they are available, I suggest that we invite them to an early meeting. Perhaps we can leave the discussion of the timing of that to the agenda item on timetabling. However, if they are not available, we must take whatever written evidence we can. Such evidence will not be in depth, because of the time scale. However, it is important that we make comment on the matter. As Margo MacDonald said, it is important that we demonstrate the relevance that the committee brings to European issues.

Bruce Crawford: We might want to consider how we involve our MEPs in such a discussion and the way in which the committee could be involved in influencing the process at that level. I am not sure whether the MEPs have a view yet, although I have spoken to the two SNP MEPs. There is a wider issue about their role and the understanding and assistance they can give us in this process.

The Convener: We are attempting to bring the largest and widest body of opinion to bear on the issues, so that we can demonstrate that the issue is not straightforward, there are concerns and the EC needs to be alive to the consequences of its decisions. The more people who make some comment at this stage the better.

Do we agree that, if necessary, we should hold a special meeting to bring in some of the representatives of the organisations that we have mentioned? Failing that, we will request written evidence and try to reach a conclusion as soon as possible. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Ms MacDonald: Can we get Martin O'Neill in? I have never seen him.

The Convener: I will not respond to that.

Unfortunately, neither Ben Wallace nor Tavish Scott has arrived at the meeting, so we will have to defer their reports.

The next item is the inquiry into the European structural funds. Do members agree to take that item in private, as agreed at our previous meeting?

Members indicated agreement.

14:50

Meeting continued in private until 16:15.

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