

EUROPEAN COMMITTEE

Tuesday 18 June 2002
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
*Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West)
*Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
*Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)
*Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)

*attended

WITNESS

Mr Jim Wallace (Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

ASSISTANT CLERK

David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

European Committee

Tuesday 18 June 2002

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:04*]

Items in Private

The Convener (Irene Oldfather): Good afternoon. I welcome people to our ninth meeting this year and our last meeting before the summer recess.

I have not received any apologies to date, but I am aware that John Home Robertson, who must attend a meeting of the Holyrood progress group, is trying desperately to be in two places at once. He will come over as soon as he can—hopefully at 3.00 or 3.30.

The first item of business today is to agree to take items 9, 10 and 11 in private, as they concern draft reports and the selection of an adviser. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Future of Europe

The Convener: The next item is to hear evidence from the Deputy First Minister on the Executive's proposals in relation to the future of Europe debate. We have been provided with a paper. We received the paper last night, but some members received it just before the committee meeting. Perhaps the Deputy First Minister will take the opportunity to make some introductory remarks.

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): I thank the committee for the invitation, which follows on from our informal meeting. Given the number of occasions on which we have discussed the future of Europe in this committee and in the chamber, I hope that it will be readily acknowledged that the Executive considers the debate to be of considerable importance to the people of Scotland. After all, the European Union is our largest export market and is vital to our future prosperity.

The future of Europe debate gives all Europe's citizens the opportunity to contribute towards the shaping of a more effective, more transparent and more accountable European Union that can be relevant to our everyday lives. The ambition to reconnect—some might even say connect—the European institutions to the everyday lives of citizens is an important objective, which we share.

I am delighted that the committee was receptive to the outline plan to involve civil society that was proposed at the informal discussion. It is useful to meet again so that I can report back on our discussions and on what we plan to do in the light of those comments. I found the process helpful. Indeed, it was a good example of how sitting down together and adopting a partnership approach can be useful. Later in the year, when we come to draft the position paper that we intend to send to the convention, we could perhaps follow a similar procedure.

The meeting on 30 May threw up some interesting enhancements to the original draft that we put forward. I hope that we have been able to reflect the vast majority of those suggestions in the revised paper. I apologise that the committee did not receive the paper earlier, but I hope that members have had an opportunity to see it, as I will now deal with some specific points.

The overwhelming majority of the points that were raised by individual members have been worked into the paper. Those that have not worked their way through have not necessarily been excluded. For example, Lloyd Quinan suggested that we should trawl academia and engage in discussion of the content of the conference pack, and John Home Robertson

suggested that the Scottish Jean Monnet centre of European excellence should be asked to contribute to the pack. We have not ruled out those suggestions. The content of the conference pack that we intend to send to the smaller and medium-sized non-governmental organisations has not been finalised, so some of those ideas will be helpful when we put the pack together.

Members will note that we propose a joint launch with the committee of the Executive's plans for consultation. We aim to do that once we have had time to reflect on the arrangements for the forum and structured network that should emerge from the meeting of the convention that is to be held next week.

I will confine myself to those introductory remarks and will be pleased to learn of the committee's reaction.

The Convener: On the consultation, does the Executive intend to prepare a white paper or something less formal than that?

Mr Jim Wallace: I have not considered preparing a white paper. We could get into a discussion about the fine distinctions between different colours, but white papers often tend to be the last say in the matter before the introduction of legislation.

I have indicated that we want the opportunity to discuss our final submission with the committee before we present it to the convention. That final position paper may be the equivalent of a white paper. That will not mean that we have been slow in appraising ideas. Our response to the committee, the comments that I made when we had the debate in Parliament and the First Minister's speech in Brussels, earlier this month, have all put forward ideas with the intention of stimulating discussion and debate.

The Convener: Do you intend to submit the paper through the Committee of the Regions, Peter Hain or the national parliamentary representatives on the convention? What is the formal mechanism for submitting the paper?

Mr Jim Wallace: We have not yet decided how we will do it. Two of the routes that you mention are a possibility. I do not know whether we could give the paper directly to the convention—either to the president or to one of the vice chairs. At the moment, getting the content right is more important than how we deliver it.

The Convener: We welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with you on this, so we are picking your brains for ideas.

Mr Jim Wallace: Perhaps we should aim high.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): The Executive's paper contains several good ideas

about involving civic society in the debate on the future of Europe, but I am a bit concerned about the timing of the announcement and the limited amount of time that is left for organisations to arrange conferences and seminars or whatever. The deadline for submitting views to the Executive is mid-September. What has the Executive been doing all this time? Our committee report was published six months ago, when we made some of these suggestions, and it is 18 months since the Treaty of Nice, yet only now, rather belatedly and with a very constrained timetable, is the Executive producing proposals. Will you respond on that, please?

Mr Jim Wallace: It is unfair to say that the Executive has done nothing in the meantime. As you will be aware, a number of ideas have been put forward regarding initiatives that we wish to feed into the convention. In many respects, the constraint on the specific proposal and on consultation with civic Scotland has come from the convention itself. As I said in my opening remarks, the convention will not meet until next week to discuss the involvement of civic Europe and the input that it expects. When I met the committee informally in Aberdeen, I said—as we suggest in the paper—that we will not be able to firm up the proposals for the launch until we know how the convention wants the different member states, and areas and nations within the member states, to feed in the views of their civic bodies. Therefore, in some respects we are slightly ahead of the convention. Once we get the feedback from the convention's meeting of a week today, we will be able to launch the consultation jointly. We have until the autumn to get responses and make a formal submission to the convention.

Dennis Canavan: Is mid-September a strict deadline? Supposing that, due to relative inactivity during the summer months, an organisation found it difficult to finalise its views for submission to the Scottish Executive until later in the year, would its views be given at least some consideration?

Mr Jim Wallace: I certainly would want those views to be considered. We discussed a September deadline at the meeting in Aberdeen.

The Convener: At our informal meeting, we highlighted our concern about the timetable. You said that you would reconsider it.

Dennis Canavan: The Executive's paper states:

"the Executive intends to produce a draft of its position paper to the Convention by the end of October".

Is that why volunteer organisations and so on have to submit their views by mid-September?

Mr Jim Wallace: That is right, if they want their input to be considered. However, that is not a hard-and-fast deadline. We discussed the relative

timing of any conference that the committee might want to sponsor. My recollection is that the committee said that it would prefer such a conference to be held before the deadline. I am agreeable to that, which is why the deadline is not hard-and-fast. We must liaise on when the committee wants to hold its conference. I indicated informally—and will now do so formally—that we will be co-operative and want to ensure that anything that comes out of the committee's conference has an opportunity to be fed into the Executive before we produce our position paper.

14:15

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I have a brief question about the groups that are listed in paragraph 8 of your paper. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is not a non-governmental organisation, but a part of government. The list is extensive, but could we add environmental groups to it? They are very active on the future shape of Europe and have a big stake in ensuring that Europe is able to take environmental issues on board.

Mr Jim Wallace: I have no problem with involving environmental groups in the consultation. The larger groups would be covered by paragraph 8, but the smaller ones might want to seek grant assistance, as outlined in paragraphs 10 to 13 of the paper. I encourage major environmental groups to take part in the formal consultation process.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): In paragraph 3, you indicate that the forum to the future of Europe convention and the involvement of civil society will be discussed at the convention next week. You go on to say:

“Scottish NGOs have been alerted to the possibility of registering with the Forum and of applying to attend that session.”

Do you know whether any Scottish NGOs have registered or intend to register?

Mr Jim Wallace: The most recent information that we have received indicates that only Europe-wide NGOs will be allowed to attend the convention. We flagged up the event to NGOs in Scotland. Although those organisations are not allowed to attend the meeting concerned, it may be a useful precursor to the wider debate that we want to stimulate.

Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP): When we met informally on 30 May, it was not indicated that the First Minister intended to speak at Scotland House. Did you know at the time that that was planned? Was your failure to inform us of the First Minister's speech an oversight, or had the speech not been arranged at the time?

Mr Jim Wallace: Much was happening at the time. The original purpose of the First Minister's visit to Brussels was to inaugurate an exhibition at Scotland House. A number of possible meetings were also considered. At around the time I met the committee—I cannot remember precisely when—it was decided that the First Minister would take the opportunity while he was in Brussels to make more than the usual “I declare this exhibition open” speech. He wanted to make a more thoughtful contribution to the future of Europe debate. The content of the speech was not finalised until much nearer the date on which it took place. I had no intention of being discourteous towards the committee. It simply never crossed my mind to mention the speech.

Colin Campbell: So the First Minister's reason for speaking at Scotland House was not that he was unable to speak at the future of Europe convention.

Mr Jim Wallace: No. People do not produce speeches such as the one that the First Minister gave simply because they did not get to speak at the future of Europe convention.

The Convener: It was a little unfortunate that the committee did not have enough time to discuss the attendance at the afternoon session of the convention. I understand that the arrangements were made at short notice, but it might have been useful for us to discuss our representation at that session.

Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con): I want to follow up on Colin Campbell's point about the First Minister's pronouncement. The point of the forum is to get views and input on the future of Europe from civic society in Scotland. The Scottish Executive and COSLA produced a joint paper about 18 months ago, Tony Blair made a prime ministerial speech in Warsaw and, on 6 June, the First Minister made his announcement in Brussels. All of those involved predetermined views, which had been arrived at without listening to civic society in Scotland—the people whom we are told will be asked for their opinion in the next two months. I do not understand the point of that. Will you listen to civic society?

Did the Cabinet discuss what the First Minister was going to say and his views on the future of Europe? The Executive's policy on the future of Europe seems to change every few months. The Executive does not listen to anybody; it simply pulls ideas out of the sky or from whatever happens to be in the First Minister's mind. What is the point of discussing the civic forum if the Executive will probably ignore it?

Mr Jim Wallace: I cannot accept those points. The Executive has a good record of listening and responding when it consults. Although what the

First Minister said in Brussels was more fleshed out and took the argument further, it did not come totally out of the blue. His speech had a logical link to our discussions on the various groupings of sub-member state Administrations. The committee is familiar with those discussions through the Executive's response to the committee's report. Nothing in what the First Minister said was a major departure.

As the convention has called for ideas, I hope that we will not be inhibited from presenting them. Ideas should be encouraged. As I have said, a position statement will be made at the appropriate point in the latter part of the autumn. I have also said that, if the committee agrees, I am prepared to discuss the contents of the statement informally, in the same way as we discussed the paper on consulting civic society. We are far from being exclusive; we are going some way towards being inclusive.

Dennis Canavan said that we have not done anything. That would have had more force if we had not said anything on the future of Europe before now. The consultations and the encouragement to contribute—which is explicit in the paper that is before the committee—are indicative of good faith. We want ideas. I have never claimed, nor would the First Minister claim, to have a monopoly of wisdom on the issue. I do not doubt that the contribution of civic Scotland can improve our final position paper.

Ben Wallace: Let us talk about the ideas in the debate. Did the First Minister discuss with the Cabinet his announcement in Brussels? He did not go there as an academic or as a member of the Labour party, but as the First Minister. His proposals rejected previous ideas. He completely rejected an elected upper chamber, which Tony Blair talked about in Warsaw, and he completely ruled out direct or privileged referral to the European Court of Justice. Did he discuss those matters with the Cabinet?

Mr Jim Wallace: I cannot say whether the draft text was circulated to all Cabinet members, but it was circulated to members who are interested in the issue, such as myself. I do not accept that the First Minister's speech was a huge departure. The Cabinet has discussed the Executive's general approach.

You said that the First Minister ruled out the Prime Minister's proposal for an upper chamber. I do not think that in any of the evidence that I have given to the committee I have tied my flag to the upper chamber. The approach to the European Court of Justice is consistent with our general approach, on which I recall giving evidence to the committee. I recall that the committee was anxious that I should move on the European Court of Justice. I expressed a number of reservations

about that, not least about the time delay. Having visited the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg last week, I am perhaps even more persuaded that our approach to using it in the first instance to deal with an essentially political issue is along the right lines.

Ben Wallace: Are you saying that you have consistently ruled out privileged access to the European court? I remember that you said that when you appeared before the committee most recently. When we consult the Scottish Civic Forum in the next two months, it might say that it wants privileged access to the European court. However, you have just told us that you will not entertain suggestions other than those that Jack McConnell has made. What is the point in having a civic forum?

Mr Jim Wallace: The Executive is as entitled as anyone else to express a view on privileged access to the European court. Along with the European Committee, the Executive has provided leadership in discussing such issues in Scotland. We would be criticised—legitimately—if we did not indicate what we thought was the right way forward and we have just explained the options. I do not think that there is anything wrong with our saying what we think is the right thing to do, for the reasons that we have given. If the Scottish Civic Forum can produce compelling reasons why we have got it entirely wrong, we would be prepared to listen to them.

Sarah Boyack, who sat on the Cabinet with me, will recall the decision not to include a religious question in the census in 2001. We reversed that decision after we sought the views of civic Scotland, because our position was untenable in the light of the evidence that came in.

We should not get hung up on this. Other sub-member state regions with legislative powers have made their views known collectively in, for example, the Flanders declaration. It would look odd if the Scottish Executive were the one body that did not express views on the matter.

Ben Wallace: Most of the other bodies expressed views nearly 18 months ago, rather than with two months to go.

Mr Jim Wallace: We were involved in the Flanders declaration, which was made 13 months ago.

The Convener: We will have to move on, because we want to cover a number of other issues. We were interested in clarification of some of the arrangements for publicity.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): I will pick up on that point. I agree with a certain amount of what Ben Wallace said. It would be fair for the Deputy First Minister to accept that there is

a very fine line in these circumstances between contributing to the debate and directing the argument. With a two-month consultation period ahead, any Executive involvement in or statement on issues such as preferred access to the European Court of Justice for matters of subsidiarity in effect closes debate in that area.

Mr Jim Wallace: If people want to advance that case with compelling arguments, they will not be deterred from doing so.

Mr Quinan: When we have a two-month, or limited, consultation period, like the consultation periods that we have had on other matters, any statement from the Executive that can be termed a statement of position becomes more than a statement of position; it becomes a direction of position.

Mr Jim Wallace: I would not interpret the situation in that way.

The Convener: The Deputy First Minister has indicated that persuasive arguments would be listened to. I am pleased that he listened to the arguments in our committee report on the upper chamber. I hope that he was persuaded by some of our views. We may yet get round to the question of the courts.

Lloyd Quinan has a question on publicity.

14:30

Mr Quinan: It is on housekeeping stuff, really. Paragraph 11 of the Executive paper on the future of Europe debate refers to publicising conferences locally and in the Parliament's daily bulletin. With whom has the Executive consulted on this initiative? Who will pay for it? How extensive will the signposting of events be in the bulletin?

The paragraph continues:

"Events will normally be confined to half a day in order to reduce costs and to enable more applications for funds to be granted."

That is to be done so that the bulk of the costs are not devoted to catering—which, simply, fails to acknowledge that this debate requires quality not quantity. The minister is suggesting that two, three or four half-day meetings, round the country, will suffice. We well know that events that are scheduled to start at 9 o'clock do not start until 10 o'clock and that they wind down by round about half-past 11. To devote two and a half hours to the contribution of civic society to an issue that affects us all is to head down the road of quantity not quality. The minister must reconsider.

Paragraph 11 seems to be about reducing costs, but we should be talking about the extension of democracy. I think that it was a Liberal who said that the Tories know the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

Ben Wallace: Outrageous.

Mr Quinan: Totally outrageous—I admit it. It might well have been said by a Liberal who used to be a Tory.

Because of the potential effects of this issue on civic society, it is wrong to keep meetings down to half days, using costs and catering as reasons. The impression of quantity is being given, but the meetings will be short—an introductory speech and a little chat before everyone goes home. That will not contribute to the debate, nor will it be proper consultation. The Executive has to consider holding conferences that can properly address all the issues. We have been wrestling with these issues for three years. Do we expect civic society to wrestle with them for three hours and then make a meaningful contribution? This country is at least 18 months behind the debate on civic society in mainland Europe, so this proposal is tokenism in the extreme.

Mr Jim Wallace: I hear what Lloyd Quinan says, but I did not hear him say it on 30 May when one member of the committee suggested that half-day rather than full-day events should be encouraged and that we should advertise the events in post offices and health centres, as well as in the business bulletin. I listened to what was said and took it on board. If I am now being criticised for that, I plead guilty to listening to consultation. I take the point that—

Mr Quinan: Repeating something that was said during an informal meeting is not appropriate.

Mr Jim Wallace: Well, I think—

Mr Quinan: No, I am sorry, it is not appropriate. If it is, I will start quoting from notes that I have of that meeting.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I was at that meeting and it was my suggestion. I was glad to hear that the minister had actually remembered what I said and had noted it. It is not my fault if colleagues were perhaps not at those meetings—

Mr Quinan: Nobody said that it was your fault, Helen. I did not even mention you.

Helen Eadie: You are being unfair.

Mr Jim Wallace: If we try to be co-operative and take on board a suggestion that was made in good faith—and was not, as far as I recall, challenged at the time for having all the shortcomings that Lloyd Quinan now attributes to it—and if we try to incorporate the suggestion, it is unbecoming for us to be criticised for that. We tried to address issues that were raised with us.

I would see Mr Quinan's point if we had stuck with a suggestion that had immediately been shot down by the rest of the committee, but that is not

my recollection of what happened. We have tried to reflect a number of things that were said to us. I plead guilty to that. I am sorry if we have unnecessarily caused further difficulties.

The intention is that we should allow as many people to contribute as possible. I accept that the sum of money that we are allocating is not huge. We are trying to facilitate a debate, in a way that is not yet happening in other parts of the UK. Paragraph 11 of the Executive's paper states that events will

"normally be confined to half a day".

It does not exclude the possibility of—

Mr Quinan: All I said to you, if you were listening to me, was that you should look at it again.

The Convener: Lloyd.

Mr Quinan: If the minister wants to extend what he terms to be criticism by using the notes from an informal meeting in an open public meeting of a parliamentary committee, I think that that is unacceptable.

The Convener: Lloyd, we are going to have to move on. The Deputy First Minister has confirmed the committee's viewpoint at the informal meeting. Other members of the committee agree with that position and we must move on.

Mr Quinan: I am sorry. Wait a minute. Do you, as convener of the committee, think that it is perfectly acceptable to deploy arguments from unminuted, informal meetings? Are you saying that that is the way in which we should proceed from now on?

The Convener: We all agreed to an informal meeting with the Deputy First Minister and we attended that meeting. You were present, I was present and Helen Eadie was present. The Deputy First Minister has confirmed that we had a discussion on what would be the best way to proceed on the matter and whether the events should be full days or half days. The Executive has taken on board the view of the majority of the committee.

Mr Quinan: I am sorry, but I do not remember that. What happened was that Helen Eadie made a suggestion. Nobody criticised it because at the time, in an informal meeting, it was a perfectly correct suggestion, with which I did not disagree in any way.

Helen Eadie: Lloyd Quinan is trying to diminish the value and importance of what has been a genuine and sincere attempt by the minister to be as informal and as helpful as possible to the committee. The minister has time and again said that he is willing to co-operate and willing to take forward not just our agenda as a committee but

the agenda of the people of Scotland. It is shameful that Lloyd Quinan is trying to diminish that.

Mr Quinan: Do you have a point?

Helen Eadie: Whether my suggestion is taken up is not material. It is open to all of us to make suggestions. If they represent the consensus of opinion of members, I will accept that; if they do not, I will also accept that. Lloyd Quinan does not seem to be willing to do that.

Mr Quinan: To be perfectly honest, I do not see what that has got to do with what I said.

The Convener: I always expect members of the committee to treat each other and witnesses courteously. That is very important.

Nora Radcliffe: I have been at some very productive three-hour meetings and some unproductive day meetings. We must bear in mind that for people with caring responsibilities a half-day meeting is often much more accessible than a full-day meeting. There is room for a variety of mechanisms.

I will ask about some of the practical things that we suggested might be done. We suggested using local newspapers to publicise the consultation. What, if anything, has been done to firm up the intentions of the Executive as to how it would carry the process forward?

Mr Jim Wallace: We have not yet systematically considered how we would place advertisements. Dare one say that placing articles might be a better way of getting money to go further than placing formal advertisements? We obviously want to be careful that we are not seen to be pre-empting any discussion. We intend, when a meeting is being held, to ensure that local newspapers have press releases that announce the meeting, try to put it into context and indicate how open the meeting will be to public involvement. If an NGO holds a meeting, it might not be a full public meeting; it might just be for people with that particular interest. We want to take the opportunity to maximise local publicity in a number of ways.

Nora Radcliffe: The question was probably premature, in that you have already said that you are not firming up the proposals until after next week's meeting. I am a bit disappointed about that. I had hoped that we might have got a wee bit further ahead in our own planning prior to that, but that is just an opinion.

Helen Eadie: I have said what I wanted to say.

The Convener: We have gone a little bit over time, minister. We appreciate that you have come in and we appreciate the opportunity for dialogue and partnership. We hope that it will continue.

It is obviously the committee's view that the meetings on the convention—our own meetings and, we hope, your meetings—should be as open and inclusive as possible, and that discussions on the formulation of papers should not take place behind closed doors. We would like the Parliament and the committee to play a role when the papers start to be formulated. In your opening remarks, you said that you want to work with the committee on that. Can we have an assurance from you that you will bring to the committee or the Parliament any submission for discussion and debate before it goes to the convention?

Mr Jim Wallace: I said that, when we have a draft position paper, we will want to discuss that draft with the committee before finalising it. I give the committee that assurance. It is not for me to suggest what parliamentary business will be, but I am sure that, when we have reached a final position, that will merit debate in the Parliament. However, that is a matter for the Parliamentary Bureau to decide.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Mr Quinan: Can we submit questions to which we want answers in written form and have the minister reply in writing?

The Convener: I thought that we had covered most questions.

Mr Quinan: No. The important one, which I was going to ask, was about the joint event with Parliament. Apparently you did not consider it important.

The Convener: Can we submit written questions to you, minister?

Mr Jim Wallace: We are talking about a joint launch of our respective consultation. We must liaise to identify where, when and how best we can do that. If the committee wants an open session in the Parliament involving civic Scotland, the Executive ministers and officials will co-operate with the committee as much as we can to make that event a success and to promote involvement in it.

The Convener: The next two items that we are about to discuss relate to the way in which we will proceed on that. Perhaps we can write to you after the meeting about how we can co-operate on the event.

Item 3 is consideration of a draft paper that was produced by the clerks on the future of Europe debate. Members will know that it is not intended to be a final version of the paper, but a working draft. We should throw in our own views and ideas today. We are not attempting to answer the questions that are posed in the report; we are considering whether those are the broad issues that we want to address over the next few months.

I have a few comments to make, but I am happy to open up the debate to committee members. The paper already addresses the broad issues that we should discuss, although it might be useful to add a couple of things.

Sarah Boyack: I agree with the broad structure that is set out. There are, however, a few gaps where the paper says:

“Members are requested to consider this question and advise the clerk accordingly.”

How do you want us to do that? I presume that that is not required today.

The Convener: I do not think that we need the answers today, but I hope that we can have some suggestions for discussion at our next meeting. It would be helpful if members could let the clerks know the sorts of areas that they are interested in adding to or expanding in the paper. For example, I feel that more attention could be given to the role of local and regional government and to the Committee of the Regions. I would like that issue to be expanded in the paper. Do you have any specific areas that you want to mention today?

Sarah Boyack: No. I want your advice on how we will put those comments in.

The Convener: The clerks will take a note of any comments that members make today. Members are welcome to submit written comments over the recess and a final version of the paper can be brought to the first meeting of the committee after the recess. Would that be okay?

Ben Wallace: That ties in with what I just asked the Deputy First Minister. Given that we hope to hold our conference in September, perhaps the answers to our questions should wait until after we have listened and learned at that conference. Our next meeting is in September and we would be delaying finalisation of the paper for only two weeks, until we had heard what the different organisations had to say. Our position is pretty clear in our original report. Any changes would come from what we learned at the conference. I do not think that our submitting an interim paper between now and then would do any good.

The Convener: My intention was not that the follow-up paper should answer questions. You are right. We should discuss those at the conference. I want to ensure that the questions are the questions that we want to ask. There is a dearth of information and questions about the Committee of the Regions and the role of regional and local authorities, for example, and I would like such information and questions to be added. I am not going to answer such questions, but they should be included in the report for discussion.

Should any other areas be discussed or clarified at the conference?

14:45

Ben Wallace: You are right, convener. There still seem to be black holes in respect of where the Committee of the Regions and the regions will fit in. It is probably right to refocus along the lines that you suggest.

The Convener: Are members agreed that paper EU/02/09/2 be approved? Do members want to add any further points to the paper for consideration?

Dennis Canavan: Is the committee being asked to approve annex A?

The Convener: Yes. However, it should be borne in mind that the paper is a working draft.

Dennis Canavan: The paper states that

“in the UK, surveys showed out our citizens”—

there is a misprint there—

“to be the least supportive of the EU whilst at the same time being the least well-informed of its work.”

To which surveys does the paper refer? Does it refer to the people of Scotland or of the UK as a whole?

The Convener: The clerk will clarify that.

Stephen Imrie (Clerk): The paper refers to the Eurobarometer survey in particular, which, I believe, is undertaken by or on behalf of one of the EU institutions across Europe. Such surveys are done on a national basis—that is, on a member state basis—so the paper refers to citizens of the United Kingdom.

Dennis Canavan: We should therefore explicitly point out that surveys show UK citizens to be least supportive of the EU, otherwise it could be thought that Scotland’s citizens are living in some kind of backwater and, even compared with those who live south of the border, are less supportive of the EU and less informed about its work, which is not necessarily true.

The Convener: Should we add a footnote that says where the information came from?

Dennis Canavan: We could, or we could simply reword the paper to say that surveys show UK citizens or nationals to be the least supportive of the EU.

The Convener: If members think that any other areas should be expanded on or any other questions should be considered at the conference, they could submit comments to the clerks.

Do members approve the paper as a working draft for the conference in September?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The next item for discussion is paper EU/02/09/3, which was prepared by the

clerks, on the plans for the conference. Today, we need to agree the mechanism for the conference. We have discussed the matter and are more or less agreed that it will be held in Edinburgh in the chamber. The paper suggests how we can proceed with the conference.

We have not agreed or confirmed the date of the conference. The paper suggests a number of dates. Do members have a preference? In paragraph 18, the suggested dates are 2 September, 9 September and 23 September. I wonder if the clerk could say why 16 September is not suggested.

Stephen Imrie: I will come back to you on that, convener.

The Convener: The difficulty with 23 September was the holiday weekend, but there is no such difficulty with 16 September and it would allow us to have a committee meeting to discuss final arrangements. Therefore, 16 September might be a good date, although there might be a good reason why it is unsuitable.

Ben Wallace: There might be something on in the chamber.

Mr Quinan: If we chose 2 September, the Edinburgh festival might mean that we could draw in a crowd of people from the rest of Europe and the world. A different press corps would be in town at that time and it would be gone by 16 September.

Ben Wallace: There are probably enough shows full of clowns.

Mr Quinan: We could win a fringe first. I am sure that Helen Eadie would get it.

The Convener: The clerks are checking whether there is a problem with the chamber on 16 September, or another reason for that date not being suggested. Would members prefer 9 or 16 September?

Mr Quinan: What is wrong with 2 September?

Ben Wallace: It is too early.

Mr Quinan: That is a good reason.

Ben Wallace: We would have to organise the convention through correspondence.

The Convener: If the convention were held on 2 September, we could not have a meeting before it. It would help to have the convention when the Parliament is not in recess, so that we can informally, if not formally, have an opportunity to discuss final details.

Ben Wallace: When is our first meeting after the recess?

Stephen Imrie: It is on Tuesday 10 September.

Helen Eadie: A meeting before the convention is crucial, because we need the chance to review last-minute arrangements. It would be nonsense simply to submit comments to Stephen Imrie. We would have no opportunity to meet and agree on the comments that colleagues have fed in.

The Convener: Shall we agree to 16 September, unless there is a reason why that date is unavailable, in which case the fallback would be 9 September?

Members indicated agreement.

Ben Wallace: I do not mean to be controversial, but I have comments about the invitation list. The criticism that is often levelled at the European Union and debates on it is not that they are one-sided, but that they are cosy. We have talked about the usual suspects. I am no friend of the ultra-Eurosceptic organisations, but if we are to have a debate, we need to include people who will put the arguments of such organisations or to involve people who will say, "I'm not interested in this," or "I'm interested in that." I hope that our guest list includes such people.

I will forward to the clerks some suggestions of mainstream Eurosceptic think-tanks or groups. We cannot not invite Eurosceptics. The convener smiles, but the reality is that the public are Eurosceptic. If we do not show that we are having a debate, the public will remain Eurosceptic.

Mr Quinan: It is difficult for all committee members to support an event if its content is not broad based.

Helen Eadie: The committee might like to consider inviting representatives of the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee. The convention is another opportunity to make a link between Scotland and that committee.

The Convener: The list is not definitive. If members have suggestions, they are welcome to submit them to the clerks. I am not convinced that everybody whom we invite will attend. We need a fallback list, too, in case any vacancies emerge at the last minute. I am sure that that will not happen, but you never know.

Do we agree to the paper?

Members indicated agreement.

Ben Wallace: Can we see an invitation list in advance?

The Convener: I will ask the clerks to circulate the list.

Nora Radcliffe: Will people receive travelling expenses for attending the convention? Is there a budget for that?

Stephen Imrie: We have applied to the

parliamentary authorities that deal with the civic participation funds. The conveners liaison group, which normally meets to discuss such funds, was scheduled to meet today, but will instead meet on Tuesday next week. The application contains some paragraphs on travel budgets to enable smaller organisations or members of the public to have some or all of their travel costs repaid. We are attempting to be as inclusive as possible and to operate that arrangement in the same way as the witness expenses scheme, but of course that is all subject to final approval of the budget. It was our intention to make some funds available to cover such costs.

Nora Radcliffe: If we are to be inclusive, that is important. It could be quite expensive for people from further away to attend.

The Convener: I agree. I will make those points at the conveners liaison group meeting.

Representation in the European Union

The Convener: Colleagues, we move to agenda item 5, which is the proposed report from Ben Wallace and Helen Eadie on Scotland's representation in Brussels. We have the draft terms of reference. Ben and Helen can say a few words of introduction and we can then take comments from members.

Ben Wallace: We are still very much at the early stages. I have had a meeting with Stephen Imrie and my researcher has been involved, as has Helen Eadie's researcher, Dan Wynn.

The first step was to consider the scope of the report. My impression is that the topic is so big that the report will be a reference document for people who want to engage or lobby in Europe and get their point across. It might put the lobbying companies out of business if it is a good and simple reference guide. For example, if someone is concerned about trade union rights it could tell them who to go and see other than their MEP and how they can influence the decision-making process.

Therefore, the mention in the draft guidelines of "other sub-national and national offices",

how they are structured and what their roles are, should perhaps be dropped. That would make the scope of the inquiry so big that it might not achieve what it should and it might just bog us down. I am just trying to keep a narrow focus.

I hope that the report will be able to be used by anyone, whether an individual or an organisation, who wishes to get involved in how legislation is produced and to get access to people and put forward their views. It could almost be called an idiot's guide to lobbying in Europe. I sometimes see lobbying companies charging for things that people could find on the internet, so I hope that the inquiry will go some way to helping people access such information.

Colin Campbell: Do you not agree that, given that there are smaller nations or subnational groups than Scotland, something could be learned from the officers of those smaller nations?

Ben Wallace: I agree that there are things to be learned, but the problem is whether we can deal with that in the inquiry. If we were holding a committee inquiry, and had a secretariat that could go out and compare the different actions of some of the smaller countries, I would agree with you. However, just from trying to draw up a list of who has representatives in Brussels, I know that it is difficult.

It is easy to find out that the Trades Union Congress or the Confederation of British Industry have affiliated organisations. However, to map similar affiliations in some of the other European countries might widen the scope of the inquiry to the extent that its point might not be achieved. The work could be done, but we would need a small secretariat to do it.

Helen Eadie: I concur with everything that Ben Wallace said. In many ways, I regard this topic as being as important as the question in the annex to the paper for our previous agenda item—"what is Europe for?" If we can tell people where to go, where to find information, who to lobby and how to do it most effectively, that might be the most important thing that we could do for the people of Scotland. Many people feel helpless in the face of the broader perspective, and if they can find keys to unlocking a lot of the doors, that would help them tremendously. I hope that the committee will agree that the work is correctly focused.

The Convener: I think that the report will be exciting and I look forward to reading the draft.

The Local Government International Bureau, along with COSLA Brussels, provides a service to members of the Committee of the Regions, and I wondered whether it might be added to the list of organisations from which you are seeking written evidence.

Ben Wallace: Helen Eadie and I would be grateful for such information. We sometimes learn about such organisations as we go on, and we often stumble across them because there are so many. If members know of any such organisations, they can just fire the names to us.

The broad range of organisations is one of the problems. For example, the environmental lobby in Brussels is very large. It is easy to think of Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace, for example, but there may also be relevant pan-European organisations. If members have the names of any such organisations—either political or subject-based bodies—I would be very grateful if they passed them on.

Sarah Boyack: There are quite a few environmental organisations and business groups in Brussels that cover a wide area. The last page of the briefing paper lists many organisations from which we might wish to hear. It is important that we are open to inviting a range of people to give us their comments. The Scottish diaspora in Brussels could be defined in a number of ways. The group from which we want to hear is perhaps self-selecting, and we might not be able to narrow down the list at this stage.

We can cope with only a certain number of comments at this stage, but if various groups wish to raise an issue about something—whether their

view is positive or negative—the important thing is that we give them the opportunity to come and give us their comments.

Convener's Report

15:00

The Convener: I have a few items to report on today under agenda item 6.

First, we have received a letter from Ross Finnie, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, on the implementation of EC regulation 2037/2000, on substances that deplete the ozone layer. The minister's letter responds to a letter from the committee, which sought clarification on a number of issues. I think that the minister has answered most of the points that we raised. I would be happy to bring the matter to a close. Do other members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Aileen McLeod of the Scottish Parliament information centre has produced two papers, one on Europe day and the other on the priorities of the Danish presidency of the EU. I recommend that we note the papers and thank Aileen for the work that she has put into them. The paper on the Danish presidency will be helpful to members for our meeting with the Danish ambassador on 26 June. I suggest that we send out the Europe day paper, as was previously discussed. Do members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

Ben Wallace: From the details that I have in front of me, I understand that our meeting with the Danish ambassador will be held in private. Will it still be minuted?

The Convener: I suggest that we take advice from the clerk on that.

Stephen Imrie: I had intended to discuss with the committee the plans for the Danish ambassador after today's meeting. The provisional programme comprises two elements, one of which is a public session with the ambassador. That will be open to the public, the media and other MSPs. The other part of the programme is a private discussion with the ambassador, which will precede the public session. Notes and minutes of what is discussed during the private chat will be taken.

The Convener: Sorry—I was a little bit distracted just now: I have been passed a note saying that South Korea has beaten Italy in extra time with a golden goal.

Ben Wallace: Good old Korea!

The Convener: I am sure that committee members and the public will be pleased to note that. I suppose that it is because this is the

European Committee that we get notes like that.

Dennis Canavan: And the Europeans got beaten by the Asians.

The Convener: It just goes to show that we have no favourites.

The next paper before us fleshes out some of the detail of the planned pan-European network of European affairs committees. Members will recall our discussion of this matter on a number of occasions. It was the subject of our videoconference with members of the Catalan and Flemish Parliaments. The paper provides detailed suggestions of how we might progress the matter.

I ask the committee to note the paper and to task the clerks with making the necessary preparations for that network. As members will recall, we were hoping that members of the Catalan and Flemish European affairs committees would join us at a meeting in the autumn, which is intended to assist us in preparing for the setting up of that network. Do members agree to that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The final point under the convener's report relates to a letter from Maureen Macmillan MSP on the subject of a proposed EC regulation on the welfare of animals while in transit at sea. Neil MacCormick MEP raised that subject when some of us met him at the opening of the European Parliament office in Edinburgh. We also have a copy of a briefing from Shetland Islands Council on the matter.

There is a series of options, from doing nothing to further analysis. I am drawn to the idea of asking the clerk and the legal adviser to work up a case study for us to draw on as we continue to engage on how the European Commission deals with such matters and to engage with the Scottish Executive. How do members feel about that? It would also be useful for us to hear from the Executive on where it stands on the matter.

I would be happy for anyone to take on the matter as a reporter. Otherwise, I suggest that we stick to options C and D for the moment. Is no one desperately keen to take it on?

Ben Wallace: What did the Rural Development Committee say? Has it considered the issue?

The Convener: I am not certain that it has.

Stephen Imrie: My understanding is that the Rural Development Committee has not addressed the issue yet. I do not know whether Maureen Macmillan, Professor Sir Neil MacCormick MEP or Shetland Islands Council have contacted that committee. My reading of the Rural Development Committee's agendas and my understanding of its indicative work programmes is that that committee has not yet picked up the matter. I could be

corrected on that point.

The Convener: There is a clear European dimension to the matter. I would be happy for the committee to deal with it in the way in which the paper suggests.

Nora Radcliffe: The local members in the Scottish Parliament and Westminster have been involved heavily in making representations at European level. The local branch of the National Farmers Union of Scotland and Shetland Islands Council have also been involved. They have made the case forcibly at European level and have had indications that what they have to say is being listened to.

Those organisations have produced evidence from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals about its inspection of animals in transit. In some written material that I have seen—I do not think that it is in the papers—an RSPCA inspector talked about how cattle that were being shipped in a force 9 gale were lying down sleeping and were obviously quite calm and happy. Those who ferry livestock to and from the northern isles are well used to coping with the weather conditions that they encounter and taking cognisance of animal welfare.

Ben Wallace: Has the directive been adopted or is it a draft?

The Convener: It is still a draft directive. We therefore still have time to influence it. I am attracted to a case study. That would allow us to work out the logistics. We could learn from it as well as taking on board a member's concern.

Ben Wallace: Can we get a timetable of when the directive is due to come into force?

The Convener: We will ask the clerk to look into that.

Helen Eadie: I support the convener's view. We all know that Maureen Macmillan always raises cases on which she has already done a lot of background work. She would not go to the extent of bringing the matter to our attention unless she wanted us to favour the route that the convener proposes. I agree that we should have a case study.

The Convener: In that case, we will agree to the case study and thank Shetland Islands Council and Maureen Macmillan for drawing the matter to our attention. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Executive Briefings

The Convener: Item 7 concerns pre and post-Council scrutiny. I am really pleased that we can bring this paper to the committee. It is a welcome step forward. Some of the position statements from the Executive are helpful indeed. I understand that the Scottish Executive environment and rural affairs department has sent supplementary material, which has been circulated this afternoon.

The postponement of our meeting at the start of June because it coincided with a holiday means that we have had a little bit of a time lag in discussing some of the matters. However, I understand that committee members have made comments directly to the clerks.

It will be important for us to receive post-Council reports. I believe that we have the fisheries council report already and that the education and youth council report will be circulated today. Is that correct?

Stephen Imrie: Yes. Those reports should have been circulated. I will ask my colleagues to ensure that they have been.

The Convener: The clerks have prepared a number of recommendations for each of the meetings that we are considering today. I want to find out whether anyone disagrees with any of the clerks' recommendations or whether we can agree the proposals that are contained in the paper.

Sarah Boyack: I take it that we are talking about the briefing paper, because I have not seen the additional papers. I agree with the suggestions, which are quite sensible. One or two submissions that have been selected as good models to follow are quite helpful. Although we do not need an essay on every topic, we still need a reasonably helpful explanation of things. However, one or two councils are missing from the list of those that have provided pre-event information, and we should chase that up. We should also chase up the post-events commentary, which is important if we know that something might not hit an agenda of a particular council meeting but might be included at its next meeting. The dates for the next meetings of the councils will be known now, so it will be useful to get that commentary to ensure that we are able to track matters over the summer.

Ben Wallace: The agenda for the fisheries council meeting on 11 June is outlined on page 16 of the briefing paper. Members will be aware that the Commission has proposed a package of reforms for the common fisheries policy, which is obviously important to Scottish fishermen. However, there is still considerable confusion over

the matter and on Friday I attended a briefing at the European Parliament's new offices in the Tun. Although the Executive's briefing mentions

"three areas of particular significance to Scotland",

as far as fisheries are concerned, it does not say whether the minister attended the meeting. Indeed, the minister's letter does not make that clear, either. The meeting on 11 June was the first to be held after the reforms were proposed, so it is important that we know whether the minister attended. Other countries managed to clarify matters and raised questions that their constituents had asked. In fact, given that we have conducted an inquiry into the CFP, we should ask the minister who has responsibility for fisheries to come before the committee and discuss the proposals.

The Convener: Because proposals for CFP reform are out for consultation—after all, we have prepared a report on the subject—it would be appropriate to do as Ben Wallace suggests. Do other members agree to invite Ross Finnie to a meeting in early September to discuss progress on the matter?

Ben Wallace: The minister's attendance would be helpful because we are faced with a very tight time scale. I think that the Commission is trying to reach preliminary agreement on certain issues by October.

The Convener: We will ask the clerk to liaise with the minister's office to find out whether he can attend a meeting in September. That should give us some time.

Ben Wallace: Thanks.

The Convener: Members will agree that the provision of the information is a welcome step forward and that it should help the committee to be better informed about European issues.

Remit

The Convener: We move on to item 8 on the agenda, which concerns extending the committee's remit into external affairs. Although the matter has been under discussion for some time, the clerks have endeavoured to seek the clarification for which members asked at our previous meeting. Perhaps it will be helpful if we agree today to the proposed changes to the standing orders in this respect. Although it is up to the Procedures Committee to recommend whether we should accept the addition to our remit, we can express our view by agreeing the recommended changes to the standing orders. Do members have any final comments on the matter, or can we simply agree the changes?

Dennis Canavan: On scrutiny of the Parliament's external relations policy, paragraph 13 of the briefing paper states:

"The advice offered to Members is that this is not an appropriate function for the European Committee to undertake this task on behalf of the Parliament."

Where did that advice come from?

The Convener: I think that that was legal advice. However, Stephen Imrie might be able to clarify the matter.

Stephen Imrie: After the previous committee meeting, I sought advice from a number of sources in the Parliament, including the legal office and clerks. It is not appropriate for me to name individuals on the record, but I am happy to discuss the matter with Dennis Canavan afterwards. My name appears at the top of the paper, but the document contains a compilation of the views of those sources, which resulted in the advice that is set out in paragraph 13 and the following paragraphs.

15:15

Dennis Canavan: Was advice received from any members of the Parliament, as distinct from clerks of the Parliament?

Stephen Imrie: I did not ask for advice from members of the Parliament other than members of the European Committee who had previously discussed with me their views on the matter.

Dennis Canavan: You may remember that, at previous committee meetings and at the meeting with Paul Grice, I raised what can only be described as the very secretive behaviour of the external relations unit of the Parliament. Many decisions seem to be taken behind closed doors. Little information is given out before such decisions are taken, and even afterwards many members seem to be unaware of exactly what is

going on. There seems to be a cosy attitude on the part of those who could be politely described as the parliamentary establishment that they do not want to be made accountable in a wider sense to the Parliament as a whole. I do not think that any such body—the external liaison unit, or cosy meetings of the Presiding Officer and his deputies, perhaps with the business managers, or indeed the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body—should be allowed to behave like some kind of secret society. I wish to register my objections to their resistance to the suggestions that were made in this committee and at the meeting that we had with Paul Grice.

I realise that we might be up against strong resistance, but I understand that the convener is invited to attend certain meetings of the Parliament's external liaison unit and meetings with the Presiding Officer and Deputy First Minister, as referred to in paragraph 19. I hope that the convener will report back to the committee what goes on at those meetings. I do not think that I am alone in objecting to the secrecy of much of the work that is being done. The Parliament was supposed to herald a new era of open democracy in Scotland, but the way in which some bodies and some of the individuals involved in them behave cannot be described as open or democratic by any stretch of the imagination.

The Convener: I would like to say two things. First, I am happy to report back to the committee. We in the Parliament always pride ourselves on an open and transparent system; the committee is an integral part of that. I have had only one meeting with the Deputy First Minister and the Presiding Officer on external relations policies and activities. The meeting was about proposed visits and the Committee of the Regions. Whenever such a meeting takes place in future, I will be happy to report back to the committee about it.

Secondly, we have developed an informal link with the external relations unit. We called Paul Grice in and he has also given us a monthly report on the activities of the external liaison unit. That is something that we should continue to ask for. I am certainly happy to develop that procedure so that the committee can continue to scrutinise the external liaison unit—informally, as opposed to on the sort of legal basis that I suspect might be causing the difficulty here.

Ben Wallace: I agree with Dennis Canavan. I cannot stand the secrecy that is involved in decisions of the external liaison unit and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. We are never allowed to know who dishes up what. I know that back benchers of all parties are miffed by the fact that they are never sure why particular announcements and nominations have been made. The Presiding Officer's office does not

seem to have a policy on external relations: it simply emerges that the Presiding Officer was in Barcelona last week, for example.

I would not want to go as far as Dennis Canavan suggests, but we could do more than the convener has suggested. If the Presiding Officer indicates that he wants to go to Belgium, he should be permitted to go only if the visit is for purposes that are set out in guidelines. It is not all right for him to decide to go on a whim, over a cigar. We do not possess open, transparent guidelines that set out the criteria for visits by the Presiding Officer. We need more information. I would have no problem with our extending the committee's remit. Too much is agreed informally and behind closed doors.

The Convener: We raised that issue in informal discussions with Paul Grice. However, this is a matter for the Parliamentary Bureau. Through our business managers and political parties, all members—with the exception of Dennis Canavan—have access to the bureau. I know that Dennis has approached the Presiding Officer directly.

Helen Eadie: The comments of both Ben Wallace and Dennis Canavan are interesting. Some of the arrangements that have evolved recently are the result of our putting pressure on our colleagues. Nominations were invited recently for members to represent the Parliament at meetings of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. One of those meetings was in Malaysia. Decisions about such matters were previously taken within the bureau. Dennis Canavan will agree that we have taken a step in the right direction.

The minutes of meetings of the SPCB might not be full enough, but they are published regularly in the business bulletin. I agree with Ben Wallace that we need clarification of whether there are guidelines that set out when the Presiding Officer should represent the Parliament—regardless of who the Presiding Officer is. In the briefing paper that we have received, the word “represent” is underlined. It is not for David Steel or any other Presiding Officer to make the policy—the Presiding Officer's job is to represent the Parliament. We should seek further clarification of the circumstances in which people are asked to represent the Parliament.

The Convener: Paul Grice's monthly report to the committee is intended to provide that clarification. The report should inform us of visits abroad that the Presiding Officer and Deputy Presiding Officers plan to make, and of the reasons for those visits. We are provided with that information as a courtesy. It is right that we should have access to it, so that we can plan our affairs and activities around it. For example, we might

want to plan visits that complement those of the Presiding Officer.

Members have highlighted problems in the way in which the Parliamentary Bureau and the corporate body work. Today we should deal with the proposed changes to standing orders that are set out on page 6 of paper EU/02/9/8. I recommend that we support those changes.

Dennis Canavan: I want to be helpful. I will not go on about the issue unless I have the support of other committee members. Helen Eadie made a very good point about the welcome change that has been made to the procedure of the Scotland branch of the CPA. That change in procedure came about as a result of a change in the rules of the CPA Scotland branch at the previous annual general meeting. I proposed the change, which was approved unanimously. From now on, every member of the Scottish Parliament is invited to express an interest in participating in all CPA activities—conferences, seminars, outgoing delegations and so on. The CPA executive will consider the various expressions of interest and come to a decision about who can go. That makes the process more open and democratic.

I do not have a business manager, so my only input to the Parliamentary Bureau and the SPCB is through the Presiding Officer. I wrote to the Presiding Officer suggesting that the bureau and the SPCB adopt a similarly open and democratic practice, but I am afraid that I received a negative reply.

By way of compromise, I suggest that—if we cannot get such an approach incorporated through a change in standing orders, and given the probability of our remit's being extended to include external relations—we mention to the Procedures Committee that concern has been expressed in this committee that, when dealing with external relations, the external liaison unit of the Parliament, the bureau, the SPCB and the Presiding Officers should conduct themselves more openly and democratically, rather than in the secretive way in which they currently operate.

The Convener: I am in the hands of the committee. Are there other views?

Nora Radcliffe: Dennis Canavan has articulated more or less the same point that I was going to make. Extending the committee's remit is fine, but we are left with a sort of gap. The Presiding Officer and the SPCB are accountable to the whole Parliament, but what is the mechanism for exercising that accountability? We should refer the matter to the Procedures Committee and ask it to consider a mechanism that would allow the whole Parliament the opportunity to question the Presiding Officer and the SPCB. That is a gap in the checks and balances and total accountability

of the system.

Looking at the front of the papers, I see that we have suddenly had a change of logo. How did that happen? Who decided and was anyone consulted? That sort of thing seems just to happen; nobody knows why it has happened or is consulted about whether it should happen. There is a gap in accountability and we should refer that to the Procedures Committee.

Sarah Boyack: I have three points to make. First, we should crack on and approve the new standing orders changes today. I would like us to get on and have our new remit in place so that we can start acting on it. Secondly, as members have said, things have improved—the process is more open. We are getting e-mails giving us reports and information on potential visits, which gives us slightly more context. Some progress has been made. Thirdly, it would be useful to get the Procedures Committee to cast its eye over the matter. However, I would frame the request diplomatically. I would perhaps excise some of Dennis Canavan's words, although I would keep the spirit of the request in order to hear the Procedures Committee's views. In the meantime, the fact that Irene Oldfather is invited to some of those meetings is a good way for us to put the matter on the committee agenda—it can be reported directly to the committee in the convener's report.

This is part of work in progress and we should give ourselves the chance to move on from where we were. If we approve the standing orders changes, I presume that after today we will become the European and external affairs committee.

The Convener: No. That has to be agreed by the Procedures Committee. That is another reason for trying to move things forward today.

Sarah Boyack: That is a concern. We should address the points on transparency and openness, but we should not do that at the expense of getting our own changes through.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I apologise for arriving at the meeting so late. I have been chairing an unusually timed meeting of the Holyrood progress group at the site. I endorse Sarah Boyack's point, although I understand Dennis Canavan's point, too. There appears to be a lack of accountability in some aspects of the activities of the Presiding Officer and others at that level. Nevertheless, it is important that we move on and extend the remit of the European Committee along the lines that have been suggested. That would not rule out the possibility of further amendments at a later date. It is important that we make progress now.

The Convener: If I read the committee's view

correctly, we want to agree the proposed changes to standing orders today, but along with that report we will highlight the concerns that have been expressed about the accountability gap and we will ask the Procedures Committee to look into that. It would also be worth the committee's while to note the progress that has been made—we now receive a monthly bulletin, which never happened previously, and I am now invited to the meetings, although I have been to only one. However, we can point out that the committee still has some concerns and that we would like the Procedures Committee to consider the matter. Do members agree to that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of the public part of the meeting. I thank the members of the public for attending our meeting and wish them all a good holiday season.

15:31

Meeting continued in private until 16:55.

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