

FINANCE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 9 November 1999
(Morning)

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FINANCE COMMITTEE

7th Meeting

CONVENER :

*Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS :

*Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD)

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

*Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab)

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP)

*Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab)

*Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS ALSO ATTENDED :

Mr Jack McConnell (Minister for Finance)

COMMITTEE CLERK :

Sarah Davidson

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK :

Callum Thomson

ASSISTANT CLERK :

Mark MacPherson

Scottish Parliament

Finance Committee

Tuesday 9 November 1999

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:33*]

The Convener (Mike Watson): I call to order the seventh meeting of the Finance Committee. All mobile phones should be switched off and pagers switched to vibrate. We have received apologies from Richard Simpson and John Swinney. Ken Macintosh has been delayed and may not attend; he has been unfortunate enough to suffer a burglary.

Members have seen the agenda, item 3 of which constitutes the committee's preliminary consideration before the minister's appearance and the debate that he will open. I suggest, therefore, that we take item 3 in closed session. In addition, it may be necessary to suspend the meeting if item 3 is concluded some time before 12 noon. In any case, under the standing orders we have to agree to go into closed session. Is that acceptable?

Members indicated agreement.

Written Agreements

The Convener: Item 1 on the agenda concerns written agreements with the Scottish Executive. The draft agreements have been circulated. I do not want to re-open the debate, but if members feel that anything in the drafts does not reflect their recollection of our discussions, this is their opportunity to raise the matter. Does anyone want to do that?

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): The draft agreement on the budgeting process—under the stage 1 heading on page 2—says

"This document will set out general expenditure".

I would add the words "and income". We discussed this point and, although it is covered elsewhere, it may not be reinforced enough here. We require that detail. An example of that will come up in the documents for discussion later today, which include a listing but not the details. What are your views on that addition?

Sarah Davidson (Committee Clerk): If I may respond, I recall that we wanted to seek information on whether receipts would be included and that, if they were not, we would want to specify such inclusion. The footnote—

unfortunately it has slipped over to the next page in this draft—asks that question. If members want that requirement to be explicit, we can easily change the wording to "This document will set out general expenditure including income" or, "including receipts."

Mr Davidson: An explicit statement would make matters clear for everyone who reads the document in future.

The Convener: The word to be inserted should be "receipts" rather than "income". Is that correct?

Mr Davidson: Yes.

The Convener: Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The wording will be, "This document will set out general expenditure and receipts."

In paragraph 7 on page 3, the draft agreement states:

"Normally the Scottish Ministers will present their proposals to the Parliament by 30 September".

In fact, the standing orders refer to the proposals being laid before Parliament no later than 20 September. We must delete "30 September" and insert "20 September". I do not imagine that that will cause any problems.

Members indicated agreement.

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): We discussed paragraph 16 at some length. Would it be possible, or desirable, to mention timing in that paragraph? One of my main concerns in our previous debate was that the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body's budget should be considered before the Executive's budget process started. That may be covered in the written agreement between the committee and the SPCB, but it is not clear in this text.

Sarah Davidson: It might be helpful if I clarify this point. It is intended that any written agreement between the Parliament—in the form of the SPCB—and the Finance Committee will include timings. We will discuss that later when we talk about supplementary estimates. The SPCB has indicated that it would be happy to include such timings, therefore our agreement with the SPCB—rather than this document—would be the proper document to cover that.

Andrew Wilson: Has the SPCB expressed a view on the timing?

Sarah Davidson: The indication is that it will be a month or so before the start of the Executive's budget process.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Can you clarify this point, in particular the last

sentence in paragraph 16? Who will draft the "separate understanding"—will it be the Finance Committee or the SPCB?

Sarah Davidson: I have drafted it so far. We will probably discuss that later. The agreement will be open for discussion between the SPCB and us; there is no suggestion that it will be imposed on us.

Mr Raffan: Will the SPCB debate the matter then get back to us?

Sarah Davidson: Yes.

Mr Raffan: What is the deadline for that?

Sarah Davidson: That is still open.

Mr Raffan: I would think the sooner the better.

The Convener: Are members prepared to accept the situation on that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Are there any further points?

Mr Davidson: I am a little unhappy about the wording on page 4, paragraph 13, which states:

"Wherever possible, the Parliamentary Bureau will endeavour to timetable a debate".

Can we not simply say, "the Parliamentary Bureau will timetable a debate"? "Wherever possible" is covered elsewhere in the document; I am unhappy, at this early stage, about allowing too much variance when we have not yet seen the roll-out of a year.

The Convener: We do not need "Wherever possible" and "will endeavour"; we could certainly delete one of those expressions. Perhaps we should do that, then see how things roll out, as David put it. If we want to come back to this later—

Mr Davidson: If we did that, we would not apply any pressure. We are establishing a firm time scale for dealing with this exercise in future. If we include times for some items, we ought to be firm throughout the programme so that we do not get into bottlenecks and end up having only two hours to make a decision such as this. A good result could not possibly be produced in that time.

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): The paragraph says clearly that

"the Parliament may not vote on the Budget Bill until 20 days have elapsed from the date it was presented. The Parliament must however vote on the Bill within 30 days of its presentation."

We could add a phrase to say that a debate must take place within that period of time.

Mr Raffan: The point is that we would want the debate as soon as possible after the 20 days.

Elaine Thomson: It does not, however, need to

be tied to a fixed date; rather it could be done as soon as is practicable within that period.

The Convener: Mr Davidson's point is different. His suggestion is that the date be fixed to 14 February. Is that correct?

Mr Davidson: I want it to state that the bureau "will timetable a debate" prior to 14 February, not "will endeavour to timetable a debate".

The Convener: So you want it tied to a date. Elaine's point, however, is that the matter could be accommodated if the document said "as soon as possible".

Elaine Thomson: Yes. The debate would take place between 20 and 30 days after presentation of the budget.

The Convener: Those are two different points of view. Are there any others? Should we tie the date down as tightly as David has suggested?

Mr Raffan: It is pretty tight anyway. Twenty days from 20 January takes us to around 9 February. The debate cannot take place before 9 February and it has to take place by 19 February, unless the budget bill is presented significantly earlier than 20 January. The timing is fairly well tied down. This is a minor issue.

Elaine Thomson: I agree with Keith. A date—20 January—is given in paragraph 12, so the timetable is already defined.

Mr Raffan: Yes. If the bill is presented on 20 January, the debate cannot take place before 9 February.

The Convener: It is not clear what would happen if the bureau, having endeavoured to timetable a debate prior to 14 February, failed to do so; it has only five days.

Mr Raffan: It depends on what day of the week 14 February falls. The bureau has some flexibility—it has four or five days. I am not too fussed about the matter.

The Convener: Should we say that "the Parliamentary Bureau will timetable a debate no later than 19 February"? That would fit in with the time scale.

Mr Raffan: That is already stated in the first two sentences of paragraph 13.

The Convener: In that case, why is the sentence that we are discussing—the third sentence—necessary? Is it included to give the bureau a cushion?

Mr Raffan: It is to allow time for royal assent and

"to give spending bodies as much notice as possible of their spending allocations".

That, rather than royal assent, is the crucial point.

The Convener: I suggest that we delete the words “endeavour to”—on the ground that the debate has to happen in that time scale—but otherwise leave the text as it is.

Mr Raffan: Should the text read “Wherever possible” or “Whenever possible”? “Wherever possible” seems odd; is that a typographical error or just bad English? Never mind, either will do; let us just get on with it.

The Convener: Do we agree to delete “endeavour to”?

Members indicated agreement.

10:45

The Convener: Is there anything else on that? Do members agree that I should write to the minister, following the draft letter that members received with the committee papers?

Members indicated agreement.

Committee Decisions

The Convener: The second item on the agenda is a matter that I discussed with the clerk, Sarah Davidson, and relates to the discussion that we had last week on amendments to the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Bill. When we discussed our view of the bill and the amendments that we might pursue, it was agreed that I would move an amendment on behalf of the committee, relating to the figure of £50 million, which we thought should be uprated annually. It was my understanding—although reading the *Official Report* there is no formal decision—that that was the view of the committee; I would be surprised if members disagree. When I moved the amendment at the next meeting I thought that I was doing so on behalf of the committee. I thought that it was inappropriate for Keith Raffan to move an amendment that sought to do something different. I do not mean to be too hard on you, Keith.

Mr Raffan: Not at all.

The Convener: I also thought that it was inappropriate for Richard Simpson to indicate his support for Keith’s amendment, in preference to the committee’s amendment. I must emphasise that I am not coming in with a heavy stick. We need to clarify where we stand when, in discussing a bill, the committee agrees to pursue an amendment that I, as convener, move on behalf of the committee. In my view, that binds the committee to the decision and individual members should not put alternative views. If members have other views, they should be made clear in the debate. Without spelling it out, I am sure that there

are ways and means of ensuring that an amendment that seeks to do something different from the committee’s decision could be lodged by someone other than a committee member.

There is a second, wider issue. We must consider what happens when parties are unhappy with an amendment that the committee has agreed. Are we, as committee members, bound by a committee decision, even if our parties instruct us to vote against something because it is not in line with party views?

Those are issues that need to be clarified for our work in the future. There was little difficulty last week, but in future we need to be clear where we stand and what the implications of such decisions are. Do members have views on the matter?

Mr Davidson: One way to get round the problem is for us to receive papers in good time, while we are still in the Parliament, and not at the weekend when we have gone our different ways. If that happened, before we arrived at a meeting, we would have an opportunity to speak to the party to clarify any thinking and to ensure that we could agree such decisions.

I agree that, where possible, the committee should be seen to be collectively responsible. However, there will always be occasions when a party manifesto promise or a particular strategy is at odds with the other views on the committee. That is a sensitive area for us to work in. If a member is away from the office, without all the papers, and something that needs to be dealt with arrives during the weekend, it is not always easy to ascertain the party line. That reinforces the need for papers to be released on a Thursday, while members are still at the Parliament. In that case it would be up to individual members to take the opportunity to deal with such party matters as they think fit.

The Convener: To be fair, the papers arrive as soon as the clerking staff can get them out. There have been a number of occasions when information has not been available and they have been waiting for it. I take the point, but if we decide something in a committee meeting, it is sure to be well in advance of the occasion when the amendment is to be moved; there will be an opportunity to take advice on a specific point. If there were some party difficulty, that could be flagged up before the committee dealt with the amendment.

Mr Davidson: I accept that. However, one of the difficulties that we have had is a delay in receiving papers from the Executive. That is not the fault of the clerks, but it may sometimes cause us a problem.

Mr Raffan: The amendment related to a technical point. Admittedly, I should have given a

percentage of 0.3 repeater, rather than 0.5, if the amendment was to reflect directly £50 million at 1999 prices. I was trying to make the amendment less clumsy.

I am against committee amendments. If there is a committee amendment that has a majority, that is fine, and the convener is perfectly entitled to move it, but the minority must still be allowed to propose an alternative. In other words, an amendment can be deemed to be a committee amendment only if it is unanimously supported.

I do not want to undermine your authority, convener, nor was I trying to do so last week. We are trying to get the best possible legislation. We are not in private session, so I had better not say what I was going to. However, I had indications that a percentage would be looked upon favourably. I thought that the calculation required by your figure, convener, would be too long.

David is slightly clouding the issue, which is not really about receiving papers on time. You have raised a specific point, convener.

The Convener: I am not taking that as criticism, nor am I criticising individual members. Nothing had been established and folk were not clear about it. I accept that and attach no criticism. I just thought that it was a bit odd and that we needed to formalise the procedure somehow.

We are now discussing a different issue, which is whether a committee decision carries weight if it is unanimous. In my view, the majority makes a committee decision and once those decisions have been reached, individuals should not speak against them. I think that the committee generally shares that view.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Is there any way that committee members could register their dissent from a committee decision that was taken on a majority vote? Perhaps they could agree not to raise another point against the committee decision in the committee, but would still be free to raise the matter in the Parliament. In the case of a bill, they could lodge a separate amendment.

I am a wee bit concerned that everyone should be totally bound by committee decisions. That is fair enough within the committee, but members need to be able to raise issues in another forum, as members of Parliament.

The Convener: That is a fair point. In that case, even if we reach a decision, it must be made clear that an individual is moving an amendment, rather than me doing it, as convener, on behalf of the committee. That is my point. If I am moving an amendment on behalf of the committee, it is a bit odd for another member of the committee to argue for something different. It is about how we go

about it.

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): Surely every party and every member has the chance to debate the substance of the amendment during the initial committee discussion and before we reach a committee view. Once we have come to a decision, any dissent among committee members will be a matter of public record. Everyone's position will be clear. Once a decision has been formally reached, as convener, you should be in a position to move the amendment unopposed.

If, in a subsequent debate, the issue reaches the floor of the Parliament, everyone is free to put his or her own point of view. In committee, once we have had discussions and reached a conclusion, I think that the convener should be able to move the amendment on the committee's behalf.

The Convener: For the record, I should emphasise that the issue is clouded by the fact that we did not take a formal decision. I simply said "Is that agreed?"; nobody spoke against it and so I took it to be agreed. If we formulate an amendment, it would be appropriate to record that clearly in the *Official Report*. If any member is unhappy, he or she should say so and then it would be put on record.

Andrew Wilson: The downside of George's point is that I could not go to a parliamentary debate and argue against something that, in a committee, I previously voted for, or in respect of which I had not indicated dissent.

I suggest that, in moving a committee amendment, convener, you expose yourself only when the amendment has unanimous backing. If it does not have unanimous backing, it becomes a personal amendment. As convener, you are putting the position on the line by saying, "here is the committee's position." An amendment has more status if it is pushed by you, and we do not want to lose that.

I suggest that dissent should be recorded and that if an amendment is not unanimous there is no point in you, as convener, pushing it forward.

Mr Raffan: I agree with Andrew. We are on new ground. Although last week the matter was relatively technical, in future it could become more serious. It was the first time this committee had undertaken stage 2 consideration of a bill. We are making up procedures as we go along. I am not saying that the committee cannot make a decision on the matter, but I think that it should be referred to the Procedures Committee. It will affect other committees when they consider bills. It is important that committees act uniformly in that respect; we should not have different procedures.

We should refer the matter to Murray Tosh, the convener of the Procedures Committee. I also

agree with Andrew: for the convener to move a committee amendment, it should be agreed unanimously. We must have as open a debate as possible to ensure that legislation is as good as possible.

The Convener: There seems to be some consensus. Would it be fair to say—

Elaine Thomson: I am concerned about Keith's point. If we are coming up with a new procedure, it should be considered in terms of all the committees, not just this one. It is worth consulting on a wider basis.

The Convener: I think that that would be helpful. I agree that there should be uniformity. Would I be right in thinking that members agree that, in future, a committee amendment should be pursued only on the basis of unanimous agreement?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will not get into a discussion about the position of people who happen to be absent when a vote is taken. We will have to come back to that.

I will ask the clerk to refer that matter to the Procedures Committee, indicating that we have agreed this procedure and we think that, as far as possible, it should apply to other committees in similar positions.

We will now move on to item 3, which we have agreed to discuss in private. I ask those people who are not members of the committee or clerking staff to leave the room. If we finish our discussion on item 3 before 12 pm, we will adjourn until that time.

10:57

Meeting continued in private.

12:02

On resuming—

Draft Scotland Act 1998 (Transitory and Transitional Provisions) (Appropriations) Amendment Order 1999

The Convener: I welcome the Minister for Finance, Jack McConnell, and his officials. We are going to deal with the statutory instrument that is before us. Our inquiry will take the form of a debate, which is the first time that such consideration of a statutory instrument has been given within a committee of the Scottish Parliament.

First, I will call the minister to move the motion. I will then open the debate. Committee members have indicated that they would like to go through the estimates section by section, raising issues as they go. The minister has been told about that.

The Minister for Finance (Mr Jack McConnell): Thank you for inviting me here today to debate the autumn supplementaries that I laid before Parliament on 22 October. I intend to read this speech in full, convener, because I believe that this is a serious and worthwhile occasion. Rather than making a number of political points, I want to go through this in detail.

As members are no doubt aware, the autumn supplementaries are the means by which the Executive seeks parliamentary authority for the various changes in expenditure in the current year. The autumn supplementaries embody both changes in expenditure to meet the Government's priorities and a whole series of technical changes concerned with basic in-year budget management, such as transfers between votes in the Scottish Executive and between the Scottish Executive and other Government departments.

There are some classification changes, bringing non-voted moneys into the votes. The pieces of paper in front of you comprise an appropriation order, which is effectively the mechanism by which Parliament will authorise the expenditure, and a booklet which sets out the details of those changes. The booklet will be printed once the order has been finally approved.

I would like to point out that the fact that we are debating these changes is itself a significant departure from previous practice at Westminster. The custom there is that the supplementary estimates are announced by written answer to a parliamentary question and that is the end of the matter. The Scottish Executive is committed to greater openness in financial processes. The in-year adjustments to estimates, while in many cases purely technical, are an important part of those processes. I firmly believe that they should, as a matter of course, be properly debated. Today is the first time that that is happening, and I welcome that.

We will learn, year on year, about the kind of information that should be provided to support a debate such as this—information that will be helpful to the Executive in being accountable and to the Parliament and others who will follow our proceedings. I hope that today's starting point does not prove to be an end and that, through written agreements and learning as we go along, we will improve the information provided. I hope, too, that we will manage to support both technical and policy changes with explanations and introductions. You have those here today, but I think that they might be fuller in future.

This is a transitional year. We are dealing with a budget that was originally agreed by the UK Parliament. To deal with this unique circumstance, it has been necessary to devise some special, one-off arrangements. This order is one of them, and it may be helpful if I say a few words about the overall budget process for this transitional year and how this order fits into that process.

The transitional arrangements were set out in the Scotland Act 1998 (Transitory and Transitional Provisions) Finance Order 1999 (Statutory Instrument 1999 No 441 (S 25)). Under the terms of that order, the main estimates for 1999-2000 were approved before the Scottish Parliament elections. Changes to the main estimates, of which the supplementaries in front of you are an example, must be approved by both the Scottish Parliament and the Privy Council. Under statute, the changes must be approved by the Parliament on 3 December. We will then send them to the Privy Council, which will be asked to approve the changes as an order in council.

As I said, this is an exceptional year. Normally, the Executive will adopt the three-stage budgeting process proposed by the financial issues advisory group and included in the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Bill. The new process will have significant advantages over previous practice. It will provide significant opportunities for Parliament to engage with, contribute to and scrutinise the Executive's budget proposal. It will be an open process, no longer concluded behind closed doors, and it will allow us the opportunity to engage the general public in decisions on how its money is spent.

Once the budget legislation is approved, however, that is not the end of the story. The experience, not just of the UK Government but of legislatures throughout the world, is that there must be scope for some in-year adjustments of budgets. Those adjustments must deal with, for example, new policy requirements that emerge in-year and that need funding; transfers between departments to match spending to priorities; and technical adjustments such as the taking up of underspends from previous years. This is a necessary flexibility within the system that allows better management of available resources.

The supplementaries that we are currently considering are an example of such in-year adjustments. We envisage one more such exercise in this financial year, which would take place next spring. There has been extra pressure this year for adjustments to in-year budgets. As I have said, the Executive inherited spending plans that were drawn up by the Scottish Office and approved under the Westminster system.

The partnership agreement drawn up between Scottish Labour and the Scottish Liberal

Democrats set out a new agenda, and we need to adjust spending plans to reflect that. We set out our priorities initially in the partnership agreement and then in the programme for government, which was published in September. Our priorities range across all areas of Scottish life and reflect our determination to provide a better life for all Scotland's citizens. The delivery of priorities that make improvements in people's lives is the focal point of all this activity.

Our programme sets out key priorities. Top amongst them are, for education, modernising Scottish schools and raising standards and achievements. Priorities for health are to improve the health of people in Scotland and to provide a modern, high-quality, responsive national health service in Scotland.

It is worth repeating that the comprehensive spending review delivered £1.8 billion of additional money for health and £1.3 billion of additional money for education over the current financial year and the two forward years. That is a fundamental demonstration of the importance that we attach to the health of the nation and to the education that our young people receive.

The expenditure reallocation announced on 6 October builds on that foundation and sets out our plans for making resources available to start tackling some of the difficult issues still facing Scotland. These autumn supplementaries start the process, in the current financial year, that will in due course deliver the priorities of the programme for government.

This is just a start, but it is a good start. It will, for example, deliver £4 million of new funding to support higher still; get the drugs enforcement agency up and running with £0.5 million this year and £5 million per annum thereafter; start the vaccination programme against meningitis C with about £14 million this year; begin the process of setting up the food standards agency in Aberdeen; and put new resources—£1.5 million this year—into structural and agri-environmental measures, with further support for agriculture to come in the spring set of supplementary estimates. We will also start implementing our access to the countryside proposals, through £1 million of new spending by Scottish Natural Heritage, and we will start up the warm deal, which will benefit around 25,000 low-income households and pensioners.

Those initiatives are an integral part of the plans that I announced on 6 October, and the autumn supplementary is a necessary stage to ensure that we have the Parliament's authorisation to spend these moneys to deliver improvements in health and education and in the lives of the people of Scotland.

I turn briefly to some of the more technical parts

of this supplementary order. One of its major components is end-year flexibility. For many years, under annual budgeting, the ability of Whitehall departments to carry forward underspending from one year to the next was very limited. As part of his move to three-year budgeting, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has allowed a much greater opportunity to carry forward underspent resources. That is part of the drive to allow more strategic management of programmes. As a result, we have carried forward around £300 million from last year to this year, and underspends this year will be able to be carried forward into the next year, and so on.

That is sensible, avoids end-year spending sprees, and makes for more sound financial planning. I hope that this brief introduction serves to put these proposed budgetary changes into context. I am sure that members of the committee will have comments to make. I will listen carefully to the rest of the debate and, if there are particular points on which I can respond, I will be happy to do so. I would also like to make it clear, convener, that if there are points of detail that cannot be answered in the forum of the committee today, I would like to give a firm commitment that we will attempt to do so by the time of the committee's discussion on next year's financial plans, to ensure that that discussion is as well informed as possible.

The fact that we are debating these changes today is a considerable advance on past practice in terms of openness, and I welcome that. I am sure that the committee does too. The changes themselves, part policy-driven and mostly technical, are sensible, and I am pleased to move the motion that the order be approved.

I move,

That the Parliament Finance Committee in consideration of The Draft Scotland Act 1998 (Transitory and Transitional Provisions) (Appropriations) Amendment Order 1999 recommends that the Order be approved.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. Does any member of the committee want to speak in general on the estimates? Not at this stage, it seems.

In that case, we will consider the supply estimates, which we will take subject by subject.

Andrew Wilson: Before you move to the detail, may I ask a general question?

The Convener: Yes.

Andrew Wilson: This is more a request for information and an explanation than anything else. If I am correct in my summings, this supply estimate announces a difference in the budget of around £470 million. The difference in the budget that was announced in October was around £300 million, which arose, as you said, from the carry-

over. Where does the extra £150 million come from? I am sure that it is a technical matter, but I would appreciate it if you could clarify that for me.

The Convener: If you want to answer that minister, you can, but you are welcome to leave it to the end.

Mr McConnell: I think that it might be helpful to respond, because it raises a point about voted and non-voted expenditures, which I was expecting the committee to want clarified. I have been clarifying that for myself over the past six months.

Traditionally, there have been voted and non-voted parts of the Scottish budget. The non-voted parts relate, in the main, to borrowing consents or to allocations that are not cash going through the consolidated fund. Some of the changes in these supplementary estimates transfer money from non-voted to voted categories. For example, when we come to discuss housing, you will see that there is a sizable amount of money that, in previous years, was allocated through borrowing consents for local authorities and others. We are now proposing to transfer that into cash grants for local authorities and through Scottish Homes. That means that in terms of the descriptions that are used, it transfers from non-voted to voted expenditures. The difference between the figures that were released in October and those that we have in front of us reflects that non-voted amount being transferred into the voted category.

12:15

The Convener: Would any other members like to make a general statement or ask a general question?

Mr Davidson: I welcome the opportunity that the minister affords us today. In your preliminary speech, you mentioned openness in the future. You said that you hoped that the explanations would be fuller in future. I think that is a direct quotation. On that point, if we examine any of the votes, the final comment starts with the words

"Amount that may be applied as appropriations in aid"

followed by a full verbal description.

What we need in future is to have cash amounts shown to go with each of those streams. That would be of great assistance to this committee and the different parties in examining the fund flows through the Parliament. Will the minister consider that?

Mr McConnell: It is intended that next year's estimates will cover that point. I hope that that and a number of other points will be clearly understood between the committee and the Executive when we move into the new system, as outlined in the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Bill

and in the written agreements, which will be finalised over the coming weeks.

We must recognise that the description of figures, the words used and the way that these figures are outlined in many ways reflect the traditional system at Westminster. It reflects, with a consistency that is desirable during a financial year, the way in which the original orders were described and placed at Westminster earlier this year. Under the transitional arrangements we are not able to change that for those supplementary estimates. It is our intention to use the new, clearer procedures, which the Scottish Parliament will expect, in the next financial year and beyond.

The Convener: The committee welcomes that.

Mr Raffan: In regard to the second adjustment in the spring, will it be a regular occurrence that we have two adjustments per year? How do you expect that the chancellor's possible announcements this afternoon will tie in with your spending? You are more privy than we are—we are simply reading the newspaper reports—to the extra money that the chancellor possibly has available for spending throughout the United Kingdom. How will it work, if he decides to spend more in a certain area or allows for extra public spending? What will the arrangement be with you? How will you inform the committee, and what arrangement is in place to enable us to scrutinise and debate that possible extra spending?

Mr McConnell: We expect two sets of supplementary estimates each year. I am being told that there might be three. It is possible that we might have to authorise some moneys in the summer, after the end of the financial year, to clarify authorisations that have taken place towards the end of a financial year. The two main occasions on which supplementary estimates will be produced will be in autumn and in spring, and there may be a tidying-up exercise afterwards, in the summer.

If the chancellor announces anything in today's pre-budget statement that has financial implications for the Scottish Executive in this financial year, that will have to be addressed in any supplementary estimates. We do not know whether he will announce anything that will affect future financial years, never mind this financial year. We are quite close to the end of this financial year, so I am not sure how likely it is, but we will have to wait and see.

The Convener: Do any members have any other comments at this stage?

Members: No.

The Convener: In that case, we will now examine the estimates. I propose that we go through all 12 votes individually. If members wish

to make a comment or seek clarification, please do so at the appropriate time. I do not propose to allow a lot of time on each one as I assume that members, having had the papers, will know whether they want to make a point under a particular heading.

First, we will discuss vote 1, on agriculture, fisheries and environmental services.

Mr Davidson: The minister indicated in his speech that comment might be made in the spring about future spending on agriculture. Will he clarify that?

Mr McConnell: There have been a number of announcements recently on a UK-wide basis; for example, on assistance to the pig industry. If any of those require alterations to estimates, they will appear in the spring supplementary estimates. We expect that some of them will require alterations. Those will probably be the major element of the supplementaries.

The Convener: We will now discuss vote 2, on local government, housing, transport, other environment services and European funds.

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister explain the increase in European structural funding that is shown? Can you explain why that has come through, and how it has come through?

Mr McConnell: That is money allocated to committed European structural fund-supported projects, which was not taken up in the last financial year because of the timetabling of those projects but will be spent by them in this financial year. That is one of the end-year flexibility additions. It is part of the on-going programme of projects that is part of this structural funds round.

Mr Ingram: The major change in this vote is in housing. Is that related to the new housing partnerships?

Mr McConnell: There is a change of £57.76 million in the line relating to new housing partnerships, which is the main transfer from non-voted to voted expenditure. That reflects the fact that previously local authorities undertook expenditure on new housing partnerships, using borrowing consent issued by the department. That led to it being categorised as non-voted expenditure. This transfer will enable payment of new housing partnership grants to local authorities or via Scottish Homes. That is the intention of the department for this money this year, rather than allocating it as borrowing consent to local authorities. I presume that this is an improvement from their point of view, although I am not an expert in that field.

Mr Raffan: I have two points. First, on roads and transport, can you break down those figures

into road building and road maintenance? You will be aware that there is serious concern in some council areas, such as Fife and Perth and Kinross, to name but two, that road maintenance is falling behind. Roads should be renewed every 40 years. In Fife they are being renewed every 276 years.

Secondly, I presume that the social inclusion partnership money is being diverted from the urban programme into social inclusion, as the figures are almost identical.

Mr McConnell: The answer to your second point is yes.

On the first point, road maintenance will, in the main, be in the local authority expenditure headings, rather than under roads and transport. The most significant change in the roads and transport heading, apart from the money—which I am sure many colleagues welcome—that has been allocated to freeze the Skye bridge tolls, and which has been included since the partnership, is £11.6 million, which is the first tranche of money as part of the extra £35 million allocated to the roads budget in the statement on 6 October. Last week, Ms Boyack announced some of the details on expenditure of that money.

Mr Raffan: Is road maintenance up to local authorities? They feel pressured on that at the moment. What is the Executive's response to that crucial issue?

Mr McConnell: That is probably an issue for the Transport and the Environment Committee and the transport department, rather than a straightforward accounting or finance issue. It is a policy matter about the balance in the programme. That is the sort of issue that the Transport and the Environment Committee will examine.

In 1997, the Executive—then the Scottish Office—inherited a decimated roads programme, in terms of maintenance and new road building and road development. The initial priority was to concentrate on increasing the maintenance budget and that has happened, although not yet to a level that anybody would see as ideal.

We have also allocated additional money this year for new road building; otherwise, last week's statement would have been empty. It was important for us to allocate some money to road building. The Executive is well aware of the problem of maintenance throughout Scotland.

Rhoda Grant: On page 12, under the nationalised industries' external finance heading, there is a drop in funding for Highlands and Islands airport. What is the explanation for that?

Mr McConnell: I think that that drop reflects the delay in improvements at Sumburgh. There are decisions outstanding about renewal at the airport.

George Lyon: You have just answered one of the questions that I was going to ask.

The other is about the Caledonian MacBrayne figure under the nationalised industries' external finance heading, which has increased by £765,000. Is that for revenue or capital expenditure?

Mr McConnell: In terms of the accounting, I do not think that it matters too much, but it is revenue. It is funding projects by Caledonian MacBrayne and independent harbour trusts projects that slipped from the previous year. In the main, it is slippage from last year's programme moving into this year. It is money that has been spent, but would have been spent last year if it had been taken up before the end of the financial year.

George Lyon: It is a rollover?

Mr McConnell: Yes.

Andrew Wilson: I congratulate the minister on his explanation of voted and non-voted expenditure, which continues to flummox me. Could he give the committee a note to explain that in detail, because it is not something that I followed? That is the last time that I will say that to you.

Could I ask for an explanation on figures J4 and J5 on the urban programme? How is that accommodated, and where is the funding to replace that coming from?

Mr McConnell: That is additional resources, which we allocated as an Executive to social inclusion partnership action teams. It was a conscious decision to allocate some of the end-year flexibility money to the priorities of the Executive. Some of those supplementaries show money that has stayed in the same departmental budget and has been allocated in this financial year, because it was not spent in the past financial year. Some of the supplementaries reflect new money; for example, the roads budget change is new money in the roads budget; it is not a carry-over from an underspend last year.

This money in the urban programme is also new money. The reason that we were able to do this was that we took a conscious decision not to leave all the EYF money in the budgets from which it had come, partly because much of it was accumulated over a long period of time in many of the departments. Although the departments were able to keep last year's end-year financing, I was not willing to let them keep money that they should have spent four or five years ago.

The Convener: If there is nothing else on this vote, we will move on to vote 3, on education, industry, arts and libraries.

Mr Ingram: On the increase of £32 million on

education, I am not entirely sure what the difference is between education A and education B. Will the minister explain the difference between those? What is the £32 million adjustment for? Is there anything in the figures that accommodates the financial aid package that your colleague Mr Galbraith announced for teachers' pay?

12:30

Mr McConnell: The £32 million comprises three different elements in this financial year. To cover the development of higher still, there is an additional £4 million, which the department and the Executive believed was required. There is a carry-forward of end-year flexibility of just over £28 million to meet a variety of commitments, including the teachers' pay package. There is also a very small amount that had to be included, as an internal transfer from the administration vote, to cover the expenses of the youth parliament, which, under our new arrangements, has been transferred to this department.

Mr Davidson: On page 16 of the supply estimates paper, the figures at E4 and E5 on industry, enterprise and training seem to show a shifting of funds. Will the minister explain what is going where?

Mr McConnell: There are quite a few transfers. There is a transfer from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions of almost £1.5 million, which covers funding for the Energy Saving Trust and the promotion of energy efficiency. To cover the first year of the education maintenance allowance pilot, there are Scottish Executive budget changes of £3 million. There is also £1 million this financial year to cover the first year of the aid for infectious salmon anaemia. There is an allocation of just over £5 million for EYF, which will go to a variety of the department's priorities. I understand that that includes a millennium bug training subsidy, inward investment in the Highlands and Islands, the Borders railway feasibility study, and the expenses of the Cubie committee. Those are the four main issues of interest that are covered, although there will be others.

Mr Davidson: I am sorry, but the question was slightly different. At E4 and E5, one shows an increase and the other a decrease, around the £40 million point. You have highlighted something that comes to about £15 million or £16 million.

Mr McConnell: The figures that I just gave you cover not only E4 and E5 but E2. If one puts those three figures together, that gives a total of just over £10 million. The amounts that I outlined are spread over the three budget lines. After the meeting, I could provide more detail of which amounts come under which budget lines, if you

think that that would be helpful.

Mr Davidson: That would be helpful.

Andrew Wilson: I would like an explanation of figure beside the words LZ Education on page 17. What exactly are the appropriations in aid?

Mr McConnell: Let me be sure that I get this right. The figure gives the reduction in receipts as a result of the postponement of the sale of the student loan debt, which we were expecting to happen earlier. It is being met by an agreed claim on the UK reserve, rather than by a call on something else in the budget.

Andrew Wilson: To clarify, there are fewer receipts coming in from the sale of the student loan debt. The net change is positive. If there is a reduction in the receipts, how is that showing up in the expenditure?

Mr McConnell: If there are fewer receipts, there will be more net expenditure.

Andrew Wilson: Is that being met from a call on the reserve?

Mr McConnell: It is being met from the UK reserve. It is not a call on the Scottish budget. It will be a call on the Scottish budget once it is in, but it has come from the UK budget.

Andrew Wilson: That helps to explain a lot. We have been able to call on £120 million from the UK reserve. When did that negotiation take place?

Mr McConnell: I do not know, but I will find out and let you know.

The Convener: Let us move to vote 4, on hospital, community health, family health, other health services and welfare food.

Mr Raffan: In your statement on 6 October, you announced £10.5 million for the drugs enforcement agency. You also announced a comprehensive audit of all treatment and after-care services connected with drug misuse. I have taken this up with you before, and I wondered whether you were yet in a position to let me know how much that will cost and from whose budget the money will come. Obviously, tackling drug misuse cuts across the ministries, but I presume that it comes under vote 4.

As we are to be blessed with a further supplementary estimate in the spring, will you balance that £10.5 million for the drugs enforcement agency with £10.5 million more for treatment where it is urgently needed?

Mr McConnell: The second question is a matter for my colleagues in the Executive to consider at the appropriate time. The first point is a matter for my colleague Mr MacKay, who is co-ordinating the audit. I imagine that he will inform members in the

near future of his timetable. Officials of all departments are helping with the audit, which is being co-ordinated by the ministerial committee.

Mr Raffan: Audits cost money. Presumably Mr MacKay will have to clear the cost of it with you.

Mr McConnell: Unless the cost was easily accommodated in the existing departmental budget, which, to the best of my knowledge, it is.

I am not quite as much of a control freak as your point suggests. Yet. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Raffan: We will encourage you.

Mr Davidson: Will you expand a little on what appears, on page 20, to be a hit on national health service trusts? I do not doubt that, somewhere in the figures, there are some movements that will explain it. I am especially concerned that, with the removal of general practitioner fundholding, the trusts might have to pick up some of the support that currently comes through GPs. Where will that be funded from?

Mr McConnell: My notes are not entirely clear on that, but I think that it is a transfer from voted to non-voted expenditure. It is a transfer out of the cash accounting of the consolidated fund into borrowing consents. However, before giving that as a definite answer, I would like to clarify it. I will be happy to do so as soon as possible after the committee meeting.

Mr Davidson: I would be grateful for that.

Andrew Wilson: Of paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) on page 19, (c) is interesting but (b) is more important for us. How is the figure of £1,130,000 in paragraph (c) arrived at? How do you decide on how much has to be transferred to treat Scottish residents in English hospitals? Is there a list that gives the cost of each operation? Perhaps, rather than answering now, you could give us a note on that.

Mr McConnell: Rather than my trying to describe that now, we would prefer to provide a note. We would be happy to do so.

Andrew Wilson: That is perfectly reasonable. On page 21, under the sub-heading of "Other expenditure outside Departmental Expenditure Limits", appropriations in aid of £0.5 billion or thereabouts are shown for national insurance contributions. Subsequently there is what appears to be a decrease in expenditure. A note on how that happens would be helpful, because it is new to me.

Mr McConnell: It is a straight calculation by the Inland Revenue. We are notified by it of what the cost to us will be. The figures show a technical change to reflect that.

The Convener: Andrew, does that deal with

your point, or do you want something else in writing?

Andrew Wilson: No, that is all right.

The Convener: We will move to vote 5 on law and order.

Mr Raffan: I might have misheard what you said in your opening statement on the drugs enforcement agency. In your statement on public expenditure on 6 October, you gave a figure of £10.5 million. In your opening statement today, you broke that down into setting-up costs of £0.5 million and £5 million a year subsequently. Could you clarify the on-going expenditure, and help me to bridge the gap between the figure of 6 October and the figure today?

Mr McConnell: I might have made a mistake—did I say £0.5 million in my introductory remarks? And did I say £5 million for future years?

Mr Raffan: I think that you said £5 million for subsequent years, on an annual basis.

Mr McConnell: To clarify: £0.5 million this year, £5 million next year, and £5 million the year after that.

Mr Raffan: Will you tell us the on-going costs of running the agency? The figures that you have just given are presumably the initial £10.5 million. What happens after that?

Mr McConnell: The annual running cost is £5 million. I will be expecting to hear from you from time to time about that.

The Convener: You can count on it.

Mr Ingram: What are the miscellaneous services that are referred to on page 24? An increase of £27.83 million is shown. The word "miscellaneous" can cover a lot of sins.

Mr McConnell: It covers a variety of different elements of funding, including, for example, the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission and police telecommunications expenditure. It reflects moneys allocated for the Scottish parliamentary elections, which, because of the number of candidates and the introduction of the new voting system, were a substantial overspend to which we had to allocate additional money. Although the heading "miscellaneous" is in vote 5, on the police, it covers a multitude of sins. I hope that it allows us to wrap up a number of outstanding matters.

Mr Davidson: The figure for police grants on page 24 seems barely to cover inflation. Have I missed something?

Mr McConnell: The allocation shown is not the annual increase in police grants; it is an additional amount of money. The amount required could not be clear in the spring, but now it is. It will cover the

additional police costs for the millennium period.

Mr Raffan: On page 24, a considerable increase is shown for the running costs of the Scottish Prison Service. Does that reflect the number of prisoners, or is there more to it than that?

Mr McConnell: Again, that is a taking up of end-year flexibility. There was some publicity recently about EYF and the Prison Service. The amount that was quoted related to accumulated EYF from previous years, money that the Prison Service had accumulated and that we were able to disburse. The money shown on page 24 is the EYF from last year, which the Prison Service has been given permission to keep and to spend in full. There might have been some misunderstandings about that during the past two or three weeks, and I am glad to clarify it today.

12:45

The Convener: We will move to vote 6, on administration.

Mr Raffan: A figure is included for the running costs of the Food Standards Agency, but what about the set-up costs?

Mr McConnell: That figure is the set-up cost.

Mr Davidson: Is any of the money shown for administration to be allocated to the Secretary of State for Scotland, or is it all for the Executive to spend?

Mr McConnell: It comes from the Scottish consolidated fund and has nothing to do with the secretary of state.

Andrew Wilson: How much more detail will be available on A1, and to what extent does Mr McConnell think that other figures are required?

Mr McConnell: I will need to consider that. I will do so and let the committee know my answer.

The Convener: Do members have anything to say on vote 7, on the General Register Office for Scotland?

Members indicated disagreement.

The Convener: What about vote 8, on the National Archives of Scotland?

Mr Raffan: That section says that it reflects changes laid out in the programme for government. How does that relate to the archives? Are the collected works of ministers to be stored there? [*Laughter.*]

Mr McConnell: We do not plan to put the coalition in the archive yet, Mr Raffan.

Mr Raffan: Some might.

Mr McConnell: That section relates to a number of changes reflecting mostly running costs of the

National Archives of Scotland and take-up of EYF. I will happily provide more information on that if it would be helpful.

The bulk of the money is for refurbishment of General Register House. It is fairly straightforward. In other words, it has nothing to do with the programme for government.

The Convener: We move to vote 10, on the Forestry Commission (Scotland).

Elaine Thomson: What is happening here? The limit has increased considerably. Could you provide more details?

Mr McConnell: That is a good question, which deserves a good answer. Dr Simpson also raised that question in advance of the meeting.

The change reflects the serious financial difficulties that the commission is experiencing as a result of the worldwide fall in timber prices. We had to work out by how much its budget would be short in this financial year. The committee will hear—when we discuss next year's plans on 24 November—that we have also had to allocate additional money to the commission for next year in anticipation of the same problem. We do not want the Forestry Commission to be in serious financial difficulties.

The Convener: I was hoping not to ask you any questions, but what has happened to vote 9?

Mr McConnell: There were no changes to vote 9.

The Convener: Are there any further points on vote 10?

Mr Davidson: In view of the difficulties that the commission is experiencing as a result of the market, will the money be a grant or will it be treated as a loan?

Mr McConnell: It will be treated as an increase in the commission's financial allocation for this year, and there will be an increase next year. We do not intend to claw that money back if the commercial situation improves.

We have insisted that the Forestry Commission take all possible steps to manage its budget according to the difficulties that it faces. We have not allocated enough to balance the original budget—the commission must manage some of the difficulties, although we are trying to address most of them through additional allocation.

Mr Davidson: Has the Forestry Commission been given additional funding to deal with potential outcomes from the changes in the access rules and the management that that will require?

Mr McConnell: No.

The Convener: We will move to vote 11, on the

Crown Office.

Andrew Wilson: My question is the same as that which I asked about general administration. It would be useful to know why the administration costs are being increased by 89 per cent. That is an unusually large increase.

Mr McConnell: It results from the take-up of end-year finance. It is to be spent mainly on new information and communications technology systems that will link up the headquarters of the Crown Office with other offices around Scotland.

The Convener: We have agreed not to ask you questions on vote 12. We will have the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body before us next week, and we will raise issues with it. As you might know, we will be pursuing a written understanding between the committee and the SPCB.

Mr Raffan: I would like the minister to answer a question on vote 6, which I think will be of help to us when we meet the SPCB. Vote 6 refers to the

"costs associated with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament; costs of providing continuing services to the Scottish Parliament".

Virtually the same headings appear under vote 12. Why?

Mr McConnell: That is the result of costs that were in place before 1 July and costs that were put in place after 1 July, when the corporate body took up its responsibilities. Some of the additional costs have been met by the Executive's budget, which was responsible for all the costs before July, since when they have been the responsibility of the corporate body.

Mr Raffan: I thought initially that it was a pre and post-July division, but under vote 6, the document refers to "continuing services".

Mr McConnell: It refers to the situation before and after 1 July, but there might be some difficulty associated with the wording in the document. If further clarification is required, we will provide it as soon as possible.

George Lyon: I would like some clarification on end-year flexibility. What happened to underspent budgets in previous years? Was the money clawed back by Westminster, or was it rolled over to the next financial year? What has changed now? What has created this flexibility? Is that the result of a negotiation with the Treasury?

Mr McConnell: In essence, it is. There have always been some EYF arrangements, for example, in relation to health boards, the Prison Service in recent years and some other agencies. The comprehensive spending review and the arrangements that were introduced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer have created the

practice of departmental expenditure limits and annually managed expenditures. The efforts to encourage three-year forward planning in the budget process mean that it is important to discourage people as much as possible from rushing to spend at the end of a financial year.

The benefit to us under the devolved arrangements is that—although Whitehall departments can keep more of their end-year flexibility under the arrangements—we are able to keep and to redistribute the money as part of the new Scottish assigned budget each year. Almost certainly, it will mean that each year in the autumn we will need to seek additional authorisation to spend the money in the new financial year, as we are doing now.

I am very keen that the arrangements that we put in place for ministers and for programme managers should encourage corporate responsibility. That will ensure that there is maximum flexibility year on year. We should try to strike a balance between the amount of money that departments in the Executive can keep if they have not spent it before the end of the financial year, and what is pooled centrally for the priorities of the Parliament and of the Executive. The Executive would be doing the Parliament and its committees a disservice if it did not create that kind of flexibility year on year. I intend that it will create that flexibility.

Mr Raffan: I would like to make a general point. I do not—and I am sure that the minister does not—regard the document as user-friendly. Within the next couple of weeks, the minister will be coming forward with a consultation document on how in future we will consult the public on public expenditure. In view of that, it is important that such documents are user-friendly to the public. I am not sure that they are user-friendly to MSPs—they are certainly not user-friendly to the public.

Mr McConnell: I am not sure that they are even user-friendly to the officials, who are among the few who understand them.

It is important that we set our own standards and that we use layout and terms that are accessible. The Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Bill sets us on the road to achieving that, and the written agreements can take us further. The process that we have been through today is important because it is part of a learning process in which we are all involved. It would be good to use today's experience of going through a traditional House of Commons-style document to inform our discussions on the written agreements and the type of documents that we will prepare for next year.

We should learn as we go along. In the spring, we will find out new things about the kind of

information that is available. Although we should have written agreements, they should not be set in tablets of stone—we can improve the documentation year on year. That will benefit not only the committees, but the public who come and listen to these exciting and extraordinary debates.

Mr Raffan: I hope that this afternoon the chancellor will give the minister a further opportunity to practise improving the documents before the spring.

The Convener: If there are no further points that members wish to make, I shall put the question.

The question is, that the motion be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament Finance Committee in consideration of The Draft Scotland Act 1998 (Transitory and Transitional Provisions) (Appropriations) Amendment Order 1999 recommends that the Order be approved.

The Convener: I thank the minister and his officials for their time and for giving full answers to members' questions.

Meeting closed at 12:58.

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