

FINANCE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 20 June 2000
(Morning)

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FINANCE COMMITTEE

17th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (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)

*Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Callum Thomson

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Anne Peat

ASSISTANT CLERK

Sean Wixted

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Finance Committee

Tuesday 20 June 2000

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:03*]

The Convener (Mike Watson): I call this meeting of the Finance Committee to order and I issue the usual reminder about mobile phones and pagers.

Apologies have been submitted on behalf of Elaine Thomson. I am not sure whether it is something to do with the committee, but I injured my back a month ago and Elaine has now done the same.

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): It is the weight of office.

The Convener: Elaine Thomson is in some pain, and has had to submit an apology. I am sorry to hear that. Richard Simpson and George Lyon have also given their apologies—I do not know what they have done, but they are not able to be here.

Item in Private

The Convener: I ask for members' agreement that agenda item 4 be taken in private, that being our consideration of the final draft of the budget stage 1 report.

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Elaine Thomson has arrived.

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): Did you come off the same train as I did, and did I leave you behind, Elaine?

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): You should have been carrying my bags, thank you very much, David.

The Convener: For the record, I rescind my earlier comments. Despite her bad back, Elaine Thomson is with us today and she is very welcome.

I thank members for their agreement on agenda item 4.

Draft Agreement

The Convener: We now move to item 2, which is the draft written agreement on the budget process between the committee and the Scottish Commission for Public Audit. Members will recall that we were in a similar position some months ago in relation to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. We reached agreement with the SPCB after returning a draft agreement to it because we thought that the wording in the penultimate paragraph was more cautious than we wished. The paragraph was changed.

The draft that has been circulated with members' papers is an amended version of the agreement for the SCPA, which is based on the original SPCB document, but it is not the final version. Members will note, therefore, that they have a new document in front of them. I understand that the only change that has been made is in paragraph 9. The effect of the change is to bring the SCPA agreement into line with the SPCB agreement. After members have had a chance to read that paragraph, I hope that we can move swiftly to endorsement of the agreement, unless members have any further comments.

Does Keith Raffan, as a member of the SCPA, wish to comment?

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): It does not really worry me, convener, but I draw members' attention to the second sentence of paragraph 9:

"Members of the SCPA may provide information and give evidence to the Committee."

If there were an oral evidence session, convener, you would, I presume, want Audit Scotland to be there as well. We in the SCPA are really just the intermediaries. It seems that if we were to try to get to the bottom of what Audit Scotland was up to regarding spending its budget, it would be equally appropriate to have that organisation's representatives at such an evidence session.

The Convener: I see your point, Keith. Are you saying that you cannot envisage a situation in which the SCPA would give evidence to the committee without Audit Scotland being there?

Mr Raffan: I find that difficult to envisage. I do not think that the SCPA is as well informed as Audit Scotland. It is a bit like ministers coming to committees with officials. We would want Audit Scotland to attend such an evidence session so that we could refer questions to it. I am not sure that the SCPA would be able to answer detailed questions. The SCPA obviously has an overview and we take evidence from Audit Scotland—we

have done so once already.

I do not want to be picky about the matter and I am not unhappy about it, but I would be worried about giving evidence to the committee on behalf of the SCPA. In some ways, members of the SCPA would give a general overview when it might be useful to have detailed questions asked of representatives of Audit Scotland.

The Convener: I take Keith Raffan's point, but I am not sure whether we need to include that in the agreement. If we wanted to invite Audit Scotland, the committee would simply do so. I am certain that that organisation would be happy to comply.

On that basis, does the committee endorse the document?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you. The document will be among the agreements that we put to Parliament for its endorsement a week from tomorrow.

Bail, Judicial Appointments etc (Scotland) Bill

The Convener: We come to the committee's consideration of the financial provisions of the Bail, Judicial Appointments etc (Scotland) Bill, which will be discussed in Parliament on Thursday.

As ever, the explanatory notes to the bill contain the financial memorandum. There seems to be remarkably little in the memorandum in terms of additional costs. Members will note that the replacement of temporary sheriffs by part-time sheriffs will result in little additional cost, even on a forward basis.

Paragraph 55 of the explanatory notes suggests that the cost of fees for part-time sheriffs will normally be about £2 million a year. That cost is not very different from that of temporary sheriffs. Paragraphs 56 and 57 say that there will be no costs on local authorities or other bodies. There does not seem to be a major issue, but does any member wish to comment?

Andrew Wilson: I have one comment that arises from the financial memorandum, but which does not refer to it directly. I was wondering about the statement that the £2 million—which, I assume, will be partly extra money, although I note that £1 million of fees relate to this financial year—

“can be met from current resources within the Justice Programme”.

Can the committee write requesting guidance on that? I wonder how much flexibility there is within current resources. We should perhaps be aware of that—it is certainly not something that I am clear about. Such statements often crop up in such documents and it is not yet clear to me what the Executive's position on the matter is. The committee wrote some time ago about the matter.

The Convener: We did make that request, although I would not say that it was “some time ago”. The committee wrote the letter about a month ago, in relation to one of the bills that we considered recently.

Andrew Wilson: That is a long time in politics.

The Convener: Callum Thomson has reminded me that the committee asked the Executive to specify in the financial memorandum which level 3 heading the costs emanated from. That has not yet been done. We want it to be done when the committee's remit to consider financial memorandums is given to subject committees after the summer recess.

Mr Davidson: Paragraph 60 is on the running down of district courts, which has an implication

for local authorities. In some cases, the authorities might have to dispose of buildings and in others they might have to agree about amalgamation. I do not think that the matter can just be written off. Inevitably, there will be costs relating to winding-down and moving staff out, although those costs cannot be quantified now. I can think of one or two courthouses that would almost certainly need to be totally revamped before the buildings were used for anything else. Should not the committee raise a question about that?

The Convener: I am not clear about the second sentence of that paragraph, which reads:

"The business of the District Courts is said to be falling off".

You used the phrase "running down", David. Do you mean the closure of some district courts?

Mr Davidson: I suspect that that could happen in some cases.

The Convener: The paragraph does not state that. It might—or might not—happen in the future.

Mr Raffan: A few such buildings are in the wrong place and there is also the problem that many are grade 1 or grade 2 listed buildings. Responsibility must be taken for them—they cannot be allowed to crumble.

Mr Davidson: It might be possible to get confirmation from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the matter.

The Convener: I suggest that—bearing in mind the time scale that we face—we ask for that information. The bill has to be discussed in the chamber on Thursday. We should also agree that a financial resolution for the bill is required. We will flag up the matter, although the question of district courts is not an essential part of the bill.

Mr Davidson: I am comfortable with that.

The Convener: On that basis, does the committee agree that the bill requires a financial resolution?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you. That completes agenda item 3. As we have agreed, the committee will now go into private session to consider the final draft of our stage 1 report on the budget for 2001-02.

10:12

Meeting continued in private until 12:26.

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