

# **FINANCE COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 10 June 2003  
*(Morning)*

Session 2

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## **FINANCE COMMITTEE**

### **1<sup>st</sup> Meeting 2003, Session 2**

#### **OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER**

\*John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)

#### **COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)  
\*Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
\*Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)  
\*Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab)  
\*Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)  
\*Mr Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
\*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)  
\*Mr Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

\*attended

#### **CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

David McGill

#### **SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK**

Jane Sutherland

#### **ASSISTANT CLERK**

Emma Berry

#### **LOCATION**

Committee Room 1



# Scottish Parliament

## Finance Committee

*Tuesday 10 June 2003*

*(Morning)*

[THE OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER *opened the meeting at 10:32*]

**John Swinburne (Oldest Committee Member):** Good morning all and welcome to the first meeting of the Finance Committee in the second session of the Scottish Parliament. I am sitting in the chair because I happen to be the oldest member present and that worries me, because some of you look pretty worried and old.

## Interests

**John Swinburne:** For the first item of business, all members have to give a declaration of their interests.

**Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I do not believe that I have any interests to declare, other than those that have been declared in the register of members' interests.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP):** My position is exactly the same as Ted Brocklebank's.

**Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab):** I have no registrable interests but I am a member of the T&G, which donated £750 to my election campaign.

**Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab):** I am in the same position as Kate Maclean. The General Municipal and Boilermakers trade union donated £500 to my election campaign. Otherwise, my interests are as declared in the register of members' interests.

**John Swinburne:** I refer to the register of members' interests; I have no other interests to declare.

**Mr Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** I refer to the register of members' interests; I have nothing further to declare.

**Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab):** I have no interests to declare that are specifically relevant to the committee, other than that I am a member of the Transport and General Workers Union, which contributed £500 to my election expenses.

**Mr Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):** I have no relevant interests to declare.

## Convener

**John Swinburne:** I now call for nominations for the position of convener of the committee.

**Kate Maclean:** I nominate Des McNulty.

**Dr Murray:** I second that nomination.

*Des McNulty was chosen as convener.*

**The Convener (Des McNulty):** I thank Kate Maclean for nominating me. I think that I am the only person in this room who has previously been a member of the Finance Committee, and I hope that I can assist members over the coming months in highlighting the pattern of work that we might take up. I look forward not only to the work, but to working with all members of the committee in taking forward our responsibilities, which are considerable. Ours is one of the most important committees of the Scottish Parliament and we will have a lot of work to do, particularly with regard to budget issues.

## Deputy Convener

**The Convener:** Agenda item 3 concerns the choice of our deputy convener. The Parliament has agreed that members of the Scottish National Party are eligible for nomination as deputy convener. I therefore seek nominations from members of that party.

**Mr Mather:** I would like to nominate Fergus Ewing.

*Fergus Ewing was chosen as deputy convener.*

## Work Programme

**The Convener:** Agenda item 4 is consideration of our work programme. Members should have before them the relevant paper from the clerk.

The first issue that is raised in the paper concerns the annual budget process. It is important for members to be aware that, due to the election in May, the normal cycle of budgetary consideration has been suspended for this year. As the paper sets out, that means, in effect, that the stage 1 process has been forgone and that scrutiny of next year's spending decisions will not begin until publication of the draft budget, which is expected to be in August. The clerks will prepare briefings for us as soon as possible after that and I would hope that the committee would be in a position to issue guidance to the Scottish Parliament's subject committees on what their approach to their examination of the spending proposals should be.

Do members have any questions?

**Mr Purvis:** Will this situation arise every four years because of the fixed period of our parliamentary sessions? If that is the case, what could we suggest to the Parliament to ensure that there would be a more regularised system of budget review for every year in which there is an election?

**The Convener:** To be blunt, given the pattern of elections to the Scottish Parliament, the initial cycle of examination of the budget—stage 1 of the budget process—which takes place between March and June, will be overtaken by the election process every four years.

In the previous committee, I initiated a review of the financial scrutiny process and members have a copy of the report that was produced as a result. There was some concern within the previous committee that the three-stage budget process was, perhaps, over-onerous and that we needed to find ways of streamlining the process to ensure that we were not repeating ourselves and that we had time to get into the figures and decisions in more depth.

The position is complicated by the fact that, not only do we have to contend with the four-yearly election cycle, but we have to deal with the Westminster spending rounds. In a sense, every other year differs from what we would think of as the normal process. Over the next few months, I would like us to consult the Executive to agree on an effective cycle of budgetary review that takes account of the variations. That would allow us to channel our energies in the most effective way. The clerk, the committee's previous adviser and the Executive have been in on-going discussions on the matter and I think that we are close to

concluding that process. I hope that proposals can be brought to the committee for discussion relatively soon.

**Fergus Ewing:** I do not want to talk about the budget process, but about another subject that I think we should incorporate in our work programme. Would it be in order for me to make that suggestion at this point?

**The Convener:** Before you do, I would like to say one more thing in relation to the financial scrutiny process. We should consider having a committee away day to give us an opportunity to consider the budget process. It would be useful to have that after the recess, in late August or early September. If members are agreeable to that, I suggest that the clerks contact members to identify a suitable date and venue and prepare an initial agenda.

**Dr Murray:** That is a good idea. The documentation that we have received is helpful, especially in relation to the terminology that is used in this area, but I would appreciate having an opportunity to discuss the matter at length and remind myself of the detail of resource accounting and budgeting and so on. It would be good if we were able to question someone about areas that we might feel that we should know more about.

**The Convener:** The detail of the budget process is quite complicated. Most members of the previous committee found an intensive briefing from experts in the field to be particularly useful to the committee's work. With so many new members on the committee, it would be useful to have such a briefing. Are we agreed that the clerks should take that suggestion forward?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**Fergus Ewing:** The committee's remit includes a duty

"to consider and report on ... any other matter relating to or affecting the expenditure of the Scottish Administration".

The Finance Committee's third report 2003 includes a section about cross-cutting reviews and a recommendation in paragraph 11, which says:

"We recommend to our successor committee that similar reviews are undertaken in future"

and that such reviews may be carried out on specific policy or budget areas or institutions.

I suggest that, over the next four years, the committee should consider the expenditure and operation of quangos, as it seems to me that that is an area that, although it was not entirely neglected in the first session, has not been the subject of specific focus. In particular, I suggest that one specific quango should be the subject of an inquiry by the committee—namely, Scottish Water. It has recently been the subject of huge

controversy because water prices have risen by 94 per cent over the past 10 years, because the cost to consumers in Scotland is substantially more than that to consumers in England and because jobs are in danger because of a 500 per cent rise in some business water bills. Of course, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Forum of Private Business have both expressed their concerns and made detailed representations.

My view is that it may well be found in the course of an inquiry that we could make substantial savings in Scottish Water's budget and divert them into the money that is spent on senior citizens, our health service and our education. Perhaps that is where our priorities should lie.

I understand from recent publicity that Scottish Water's boss and the water industry commissioner, Mr Sutherland, have been at daggers drawn. They have been blaming each other in public. That is unseemly and an indication that we require an in-depth analysis of the sector. Even if it means that we have to meet weekly, rather than fortnightly as formerly, we should get our sleeves rolled up and find out what is happening at Scottish Water, whether the water industry commissioner is carrying out a useful function, whether we are getting value for money for his approximately £2 million annual costs and what we can do to try to find savings in the sector that could be put to far better use.

10:45

**Kate Maclean:** I would not disagree with some of the things that Fergus Ewing has just said, but I thought that we would be discussing our future work programme in more detail at our away day. Fergus Ewing has not just raised an issue, but has started debating it. I am sure that other committee members would like to put in lots of bids for items that they would wish to be included in a future work programme. Are we to start putting in bids and going into detailed discussion about our programme today, or will we discuss it at a future meeting?

**The Convener:** The issues will be discussed at a future meeting. I anticipate that we will have a preliminary discussion at our next meeting. That will cover our receipt of the paper that was passed on to us by our predecessor committee, which makes some recommendations about the kind of cross-cutting review that it might be appropriate for us to undertake. It will be for the committee to make its decisions based on a series of options. That is the pattern that the committee has adopted in the past.

I remind Fergus Ewing that the management of Scottish Water comes under the remit of the Minister for Environment and Rural Development,

Ross Finnie. By implication, scrutiny in that area would, in the first instance, be a matter for the Environment and Rural Development Committee. We should be careful not to encroach directly on the affairs of another committee. Having said that, I am not hostile to examining infrastructure issues. Those could include Scottish Water in a cross-cutting way. However, the time for a discussion on that is once we have a paper in front of us suggesting options and alternatives. That is how I intend to take things forward.

**Dr Murray:** I, too, am not hostile to the suggestion that we examine the operation of quangos. I would draw the committee's attention to the suggestion about the financial memoranda of bills and to a criticism that members made in the previous session, that the Parliament had not considered financial memoranda sufficiently seriously. I imagine that we need some information from the Executive about the likely time scale around the production of financial memoranda, so that we can plan our important work of scrutinising proposed legislation.

**The Convener:** In its last year, the predecessor committee adopted a practice of selectively considering financial memoranda in some detail. The criticism that was applied to the previous process, under which the Finance Committee did not consider the memoranda in sufficient detail, did not apply in the last year of the previous session, when the committee subjected a number of bills to detailed criticism and went on to make recommendations at stage 1.

**Dr Murray:** I was not so much speaking about that criticism as pointing out that, as we will be required to scrutinise financial memoranda again, we need to find out from the Executive the likely time scale for the work involved.

**The Convener:** We will work with the Executive to establish such a timetable.

Do we agree to consider the future work programme as an agenda item at our next meeting? Any suggestions that members may have for topics for the committee to investigate can be forwarded to the clerk. We will discuss them at our next meeting and perhaps at our away day if we deem that necessary. Is that agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** One further issue that I would like to raise is the Holyrood building project. I have written to the Presiding Officer, alerting him to the committee's interest and role in relation to the project, and I have received an indication from him that a written report will be made available to the committee. Members might still wish to take evidence from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body at the next meeting. Does the committee agree to contact the Presiding Officer,

asking that members of the SPCB make themselves available on that basis?

**Fergus Ewing:** That certainly comes under the role and function of the Finance Committee. Over the past four years, when I sometimes attended the committee as a non-member, representatives of the corporate body regularly appeared before us. We obtained an assurance, I think in March this year, that the costs of the project were going to be £338 million.

I believe that the First Minister indicated during the election period that he is to promote an inquiry into the project. We have heard that the matter has exercised the First Minister considerably over the past few days.

Given the fact that it is the legal responsibility of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body to deal with the Holyrood project, and being mindful that it is our parliamentary duty and job to scrutinise the role of the corporate body, I suggest that we write to the First Minister, inviting him to specify his plans. First, what is the remit of the inquiry into the Holyrood project that he proposes? Secondly, by whom, in his opinion, should such an inquiry be carried out? Thirdly, will the inquiry have untrammelled, open and complete access to all the documents, so that the First Minister can fulfil the pledge that he made before the election, that no questions shall remain unanswered?

Can we obtain from the First Minister a detailed exposition of precisely what his plans are in relation to this important matter, which I am sure is of concern to all MSPs? The First Minister has no legal responsibility in this regard, but we do. Therefore, as I presume the clerk will confirm, and as the convener said to me before the meeting began, we have an obligation of scrutiny on this matter. I assume that we will take the matter very seriously, and that we will write to the First Minister, asking him to give full clarification on all these matters. I suggest that we secure that clarification before we have members of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body before us as witnesses next week, so that we are absolutely clear about what the First Minister is proposing.

**Kate Maclean:** Can I get clarification of the committee's legal responsibility, to which Mr Ewing referred?

**The Convener:** My understanding is that the legal responsibility in relation to the Holyrood project lies with the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body; it is responsible to the Parliament. The agreement that was reached at an earlier stage in the project was that the committee would receive quarterly reports that focused specifically on budgetary issues. It would be appropriate for us to seek clarification from the First Minister. We could perhaps remind him of the

committee's role in the process and gather information about the process, conduct and timing of an independent inquiry.

**Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab):** I should declare what may be a relevant interest, which is that I am a visiting professor in the business school at Strathclyde. That is a generic declaration of interest.

The complexities of the Holyrood project are not lost on any of us. We should focus on what there is unanimity about: that the procurement process has not been optimal and the specification process has not been optimal but has changed through time, as has responsibility for the project. In process terms we must take into account the role of the SPCB and understand the role of the Executive. The inquiries that have been the most, shall I say, revelatory in another context have not been assisted by having three parallel inquiries. It is typical for important lessons to be learned by means of an authoritative investigation.

I am not clear whether scrutiny by the SPCB or the investigation that the First Minister has proposed will provide that focus. Before we delve into any detail, it might be helpful to try and understand the respective roles of the SPCB and the First Minister. It would also be helpful if the clerk could provide a paper that detailed how the First Minister's inquiry would proceed, the decisions that the SPCB will no doubt make later today on how it intends to pursue the matter and any implications that such processes would have for the committee's scrutiny role.

Although I am not suggesting that we have no role in this matter, I think that the only way forward for us in an issue that will clearly be of public interest over the next year is to understand our role in the inquiries that will be pursued by the First Minister and the SPCB. It would be excellent if the clerk could provide some clarification on process by the next meeting; however, our foremost duty is to clarify our role in the two parallel inquiry processes. If that requires two meetings, so be it. The danger is that, instead of providing some depth to one of the two inquiries that are already under way, we might create the impression that there will be a third parallel inquiry.

**Fergus Ewing:** Convener, I presume that a letter will be sent to the First Minister along the lines that you have suggested. I hope that some of the points that Wendy Alexander and I have raised will be incorporated in it. I agree with Wendy's comment that the procurement and specification processes in the contract have not been optimal, although I might use a slightly different word in that respect. There is common ground as far as that matter is concerned. However, it might equally be said that reaching such conclusions might prejudice the outcome of any inquiry. In order to



find some consensus on this issue, I think that the committee would welcome the First Minister's early clarification of aspects that the convener has mentioned such as the remit, scope and process of the inquiry and who will carry it out. If we send a letter to the First Minister along the lines that the convener has suggested and make it clear that we would appreciate a very early response, we could build a consensus around such an approach.

**The Convener:** I have proposed to write to the First Minister to signal the committee's role, to highlight our specific remit and to seek information from him on his announcement of an independent inquiry. I presume that he will respond appropriately; his response might even cover all the issues that have been raised. However, it is not up to me to give him a shopping list of information that he should provide. After all, he is accountable to Parliament for what he does as First Minister. We are responsible for scrutinising the SPCB's activities, and we also seek some clarification about the inquiry that the First Minister has proposed.

**John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):** Although I recognise that the First Minister has set the wheels in motion for an inquiry into the Holyrood fiasco, I think that it would be remiss of the committee if it did not get its shoulder behind the matter and come at it from as many different angles as possible in order to attack the incompetents who have made a laughing stock of politicians in Scotland. We inherited this situation from Westminster, and it was two years on the go before this Parliament got a grip of it. However, we cannot sit here and do nothing about open-ended contracts that allow incompetent people who do not do their jobs properly to get paid overtime in order to catch up. Such a situation costs more and means that the people who underwrite the contracts end up in a better financial position than they were in before. In the real world, those people would be taken out and summarily fired. As I have said, as members of a committee that looks after the country's financial affairs, we would be more than remiss if the committee did not attack the matter as hard as possible.

**The Convener:** We will carry out our role in that regard. Obviously, the Audit Committee also has a role in examining the more retrospective aspects of the issue. Our focus is on budgetary issues and on holding the corporate body to account over its financial proposals.

We seem to have reached agreement. I will write to the First Minister and the Presiding Officer in the terms that I have suggested and we will discuss those issues at our next meeting.

**Mr Brocklebank:** For clarification, does the committee have responsibility for considering the costs of whatever inquiry might be held? An

inquiry should not be allowed to hold up the project still further. Equally, we should be considering the costs of an inquiry, because that will mean yet more money—some might say that it would be good money thrown after bad.

11:00

**The Convener:** Any budgetary matter or expenditure issue is within the committee's remit. It is therefore open to the committee to consider that aspect in the same way as it considers any other.

**Fergus Ewing:** I agree with John Swinburne that heads should roll, but with the caveat that there should be a fair trial first—call me old-fashioned. The issue is complex and I am sure that John Swinburne would agree that, before we line anyone up against the wall and carry out a summary execution, there should be some kind of investigation into what happened. Some of us might feel that we know what happened in relation to various aspects of the project, but that is another matter.

I also share John Swinburne's sense of urgency. The project has been a complete fiasco and the Scottish people would endorse what has been said about the sense of anger that was felt during the election. Convener, could we ask the First Minister to reply to the committee promptly, certainly before our next meeting?

I believe that we have a job of work to do; we should be prepared to meet weekly, not fortnightly, so that we can do that job. That is particularly important if we are to be serious about inquiring into how quangos spend their money. I notice that no one opposed that idea, so I hope that it will be supported. The *Sunday Mail* certainly believes that such an inquiry should be carried out, as does the SNP. However, if we are going to do that, we must have a weekly cycle of meetings. Convener, can you confirm that the next meeting will be next week and that, prior to that meeting, we will invite the First Minister to make clear his plans and his response to the sense of urgency that committee members have rightly expressed?

**The Convener:** I can confirm that the proposed next meeting of the committee is on 24 June. On the Holyrood issue, it is perfectly reasonable that we give George Reid—who, I understand, is seeking answers from the contractors—sufficient time to gather information and present us with a written report, which in turn we must have time to consider. Therefore, I do not think that there is an argument for holding an additional meeting before 24 June. I will certainly include in the letter to the First Minister a request for a response well in advance of 24 June so that we are clear about the terms of the independent inquiry that the First Minister has proposed.

**Mr Mather:** There might be some merit in having a working session in which we make formal input into the inquiry process, defining the questions that we want answered and specifying the data that we want to be made public and the format in which we would like it. Perhaps we could also encourage the production of long-term guidelines on the management of budgets. We are reviewing the early part of the budget process, but we have an intrinsic interest in ensuring that the budget outcome is as optimal as possible.

**The Convener:** That is fair. Once we have received a response from the First Minister, members will be able to consider what input they want to put into the process.

**Fergus Ewing:** I want to pursue the issue and try to find some sort of consensus. You have quite rightly said that we need to know what George Reid and the corporate body say. We must have that before us before we can move on. We need to be able to analyse the information that they gleaned from today's important meeting with the Holyrood project team and the consultants—particularly the cost consultants, who have some explaining to do—as well as Bovis Lend Lease Ltd.

I remind members that we were promised that the report would be made available to the Finance Committee today or tomorrow. My understanding, from press reports and other advice, is that the information will be made available very soon, although the clerk may have other information for the committee. However, waiting for the report is not a reason for delaying our consideration of the matter. I am sure that none of us would want to be seen to be kicking the issue into touch.

I am not suggesting that we decide today that the work load of the committee dictates that we should have a weekly rather than a fortnightly schedule of meetings. However, in view of the anger that is felt on the Holyrood issue, I suggest that we meet next week to discuss the matter. We will have the corporate body's report long before our scheduled meeting. I also suggest that we ask the First Minister for an answer next week. The issue is whether we have a meeting next week, rather than leave the matter for a fortnight, and I am prepared to push that to a vote.

We should show Scotland that we are taking the issue seriously and that we are trying to push on before the summer recess. We are all aware that the matter could quite easily not be finalised until after the summer recess. If that were to happen, it would be most unfortunate. We should be ready to put our shoulder to the plough.

**Ms Alexander:** I hope that we can avoid having a vote on the issue. I want to propose a way forward. The discussion has focused on the First

Minister's inquiry and on its remit and role. It is clear that the focus of that inquiry will be retrospective, as it will examine what happened in the past.

The members of the corporate body are now responsible for stewarding the project, but part of their discussions today will look backwards to matters that overlap with those that are the subject of the First Minister's inquiry. More important is the fact that the corporate body will look forwards. As Fergus Ewing hinted, the Finance Committee might need the appropriate resources to fulfil its role, too, of looking forwards. The Audit Committee has a role to scrutinise the First Minister's inquiry into what happened in the past and the Presiding Officer's investigations.

I seek to uphold the stewardship role of Parliament, the Presiding Officer and the corporate body. Although I am not opposed to having a meeting next week, if it is felt that that is appropriate, I believe that the Presiding Officer and the conveners of the Finance Committee and the Audit Committee have to have time to sit down together to establish the process.

As Fergus Ewing said, the report might be published tomorrow. We might find that there are no difficulties of overlap between the Finance Committee, the Audit Committee and the corporate body; if that is the case, that is fine. However, it is not in anyone's interest to compel the Finance Committee to hold a meeting next week, when the Presiding Officer and the two conveners might not have had a chance to establish the respective roles of the two committees. I ask Fergus Ewing to agree to leave the matter to the discretion of our convener, who will discuss our respective roles, responsibilities and the process for taking the matter forward with the Presiding Officer and the convener of the Audit Committee this week.

**The Convener:** That is a welcome suggestion. The other issue is that the corporate body might wish to hold further discussions at its meeting next Tuesday. The information that is made available today might not be the final information that we will receive—the corporate body might find that it has other questions to ask.

There is no lack of urgency in the route that I have proposed. I want to ensure that the Finance Committee receives all the information that it needs to enable us to have a full and frank discussion. From our point of view, there is no sense in starting out with only partial information. I would rather that we followed the normal procedures, which are that the clerks receive information and circulate it several days in advance of our meetings. I want the committee to have as much of the information as possible.

Members can be as searching as they want to be, but their questioning and debate needs to be based on the information that they receive. I urge Fergus Ewing to accept that we will have a thorough discussion and progress the issues with the corporate body and the First Minister's inquiry. Members will have the appropriate opportunity to raise and thoroughly discuss all the issues at our meeting on 24 June.

**Fergus Ewing:** I have listened carefully to what the convener and Wendy Alexander said about waiting two weeks so that we have the full information. However, given that we have waited four years but still do not have the full information, there is no guarantee that it will be available in two weeks' time.

Press reports and advice that I have received privately suggest that we will have a report from the corporate body within 24 hours. The effect of postponing our next meeting until 24 June would be to deny ourselves a role in the First Minister's inquiry until after the recess. I am sorry if other members feel that the matter can wait 14 days; I feel that it is a priority. The spiralling cost of Holyrood is scandalous. We are paying nearly £400 million for a building that was supposed to cost £40 million. I think that we should have a meeting next week and I am prepared to push the matter to a vote if members do not agree.

I would be happy to meet you, convener, along with the convener and deputy convener of the Audit Committee and the Presiding Officer. I will make myself available in that regard during the next few days. We should give total priority to the issue. It demands nothing less.

**Kate Maclean:** I support the convener. Fergus Ewing is being misleading when he says that we are waiting for only one report. As Wendy Alexander said, to ensure that there is some value in this and other committees examining the matter, it is important that the correct committee or group of people examines the correct information.

Fergus Ewing might say that there is a danger of the public thinking that the issue has been kicked into the long grass, but there is also a danger that people might think that he wants to rush ahead with the issue so that he can be presented in the banner headlines as the person who is trying to sort it out. However, he certainly does not have a monopoly of concern. During the election, prior to the election and since the election, the Parliament building has been the issue that has been raised most with me at every public or group meeting that I have attended in my constituency, so I am extremely concerned to get to the bottom of it as well. However, I do not want us to rush off at a tangent and not achieve anything. It is important that the correct information comes out of any inquiry that is held. The best way of ensuring that

that happens is to discuss the process to make sure that it is correct, even if that takes an extra couple of weeks. That will deliver the best outcome for the people of Scotland and the Parliament.

**Dr Murray:** It is a mistake to get hung up on how often the committee meets. I am sure that, like every committee in the previous session, this committee will meet as often as is necessary, whether that is weekly or, if the work load is heavy, at least once a week. It is not fair to suggest that people are being lazy simply because they do not want to rush into an inquiry in a hot-headed fashion. As Wendy Alexander said, no one is saying that we should not meet next week; we are saying we have to take a considered approach to our role.

The experience of the past four years shows that, when committees are focused, their reports are much more relevant and useful. Those of us who were involved in committees at the beginning of the previous session will remember that we tended to rush into huge, wide-ranging inquiries that got increasingly bogged down and did not lead to a focused conclusion.

I echo what Kate Maclean has said: the Parliament building was the biggest issue during and before the election. If we are to play a role in an inquiry into the matter, we have to ensure that our examination is as focused, logical and useful as possible. That might mean that we need to take a little time to reflect on how best to conduct the inquiry.

**John Swinburne:** I am almost at a loss for words. Dr Murray, you are basically saying that, for the past four years, the committee has not been focused because, even though it has taken a long look at the affair, we are now in the position of having the project's costs approach £400 million, when they started at £40 million. That is totally unacceptable.

**Dr Murray:** You have completely misinterpreted my point, Mr Swinburne.

**John Swinburne:** This committee—probably the most important committee in the Parliament, as we control the financial incomings and outgoings of the Parliament—cannot afford to step aside for a fortnight at a time when the country is clamouring for answers. We have to meet in the meantime, even if it is only to make ourselves available to the country and to try to pose some questions that need answered.

11:15

**Mr Brocklebank:** I have every sympathy with the position that John Swinburne and Fergus Ewing have taken. The report on the way in which

the cost of the project spiralled upwards during the past four years was my saddest piece of reading over the weekend.

The public perception is that the project has got totally out of hand. Rightly or wrongly, the public think that the Scottish Parliament has not tackled the issue as efficiently as it might have done. I believe that the Finance Committee should react to that perception and make itself available for the sake of the public, whether our next meeting be in seven or 10 days. We should not simply say, "Well, we have another meeting on 24 June, by which time everything will have come together." We should show that we are prepared to act as quickly as is necessary and get down to scrutinising the matter as soon as we can.

**Ms Alexander:** I want to be clear about what I am proposing and why. I am not saying that we should meet in two weeks. I am saying that the public correctly perceive that there is a lack of accountability in relation to the project. They want clear lines of accountability from now on. Accountability consists of at least three dimensions. First, who stewards the project operationally through to its completion? Secondly, who makes the decisions about additional expenditure that might be required? Thirdly, who exercises the backward scrutiny, in relation to the moneys that have been spent so far and the nature of the contracts entered into? If we are to have accountability from now on, our moral obligation to our colleagues is to clarify those matters of accountability before we plunge into the melting pot as the fifth body examining the project.

As I said, there are a variety of different forms of accountability, even in relation to the future progress of the project. We have to invite the Presiding Officer to sit down with the conveners of the Audit Committee and the Finance Committee to try to reach agreement about accountabilities—no doubt, that will include an agreement about who will scrutinise the Executive's actions. At that point, I would expect the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Audit Committee and the Finance Committee to sign up to those accountabilities.

I simply do not believe that it is possible for us to make decisions about accountabilities in isolation from those two other arms of the parliamentary process and to meet next week to do so would be disrespectful to our colleagues. There is genuinely no desire to cause a delay. I believe that our convener will expedite the process that I have described, as I cannot believe that those sentiments are not shared by the Presiding Officer and the convener of the Audit Committee.

**The Convener:** I would like to make a suggestion that ties together the various strands of the discussion. The date of the next meeting is

partially dependent on information that we do not have at this point. I suggest that we get in touch with the Presiding Officer to point out that members of the committee expressed an interest in getting the information from him and having an opportunity to question members of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body as soon as possible. We could ask him what the earliest date for that might be, consistent with our having as much information as possible. If it were possible to have that information before our meeting next week, that would be fine. If the Presiding Officer judges that it would be better to have that meeting on 24 June or at a later date, we would follow his advice. The important consideration must be that we have the information that will enable us to do the job properly.

Wendy Alexander suggested that I should speak to the Presiding Officer and the convener of the Audit Committee. I could speak to the clerks to the two committees to clarify the situation and then bring back a statement of the respective roles of the committees. There have been a number of misunderstandings and it is important that we are clear about our remit and about the remit of others.

The new element in the equation is the independent inquiry that the First Minister is proposing. We will obviously need information about how that will impinge on our role and on the roles of other people. That needs to be fed into the process, so I shall write to the First Minister and ask for that information as well.

**Mr Purvis:** That is a fair suggestion. If the committee is to be effective in carrying out its duties, we must ensure that we are confident that we are asking the right questions of the right people. I do not think that we are equipped to do that today, because we do not know what the remit of the independent inquiry will be or what information will be provided to the corporate body. It is not acceptable for the committee to make decisions on the basis of press reports anticipating other reports that might be published. We should deal in the facts that are presented to us, so I support everything that the convener has said about getting in touch with the convener of the Audit Committee, the Presiding Officer and the First Minister.

**Mr Mather:** The Finance Committee, with its new personnel, has a responsibility to contribute to the independent inquiry into the Holyrood project. We have a golden opportunity to put down a marker and to inject into that inquiry the questions that we want answered. That is the right thing to do and it is an important marker, which should register with every budget holder who presents a budget in future. It will say that the committee is serious, that we will go through the budget

presentation process with substantial rigour and that, should things go wrong, we will be able to inject key questions into an inquiry. That will create a virtuous circle in which those questions that we are asking after the event this time can be asked before the event in future budget reviews.

**Fergus Ewing:** I would like to respond to one or two of the points that have been made. I appreciate that we are all trying to find a solution, but I remind members that all that I am suggesting is that we should meet next week. That seems to me to be a remarkably modest proposal.

I would like to respond to some of the specific points that have been made, particularly by Wendy Alexander, who argued that there is a need for clarity about the process. Having read the Auditor General's report of September 2000, the Spencely report and the Auditor General's report on the Flour City fiasco, I feel that there is total clarity. Wendy Alexander asked who is responsible for stewardship. Under the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and the Presiding Officer leading it have the legal responsibility for stewardship. They are the paymasters—there is absolutely no lack of clarity about that.

This committee has a prospective function and the Audit Committee, as is in the nature of audit, has a retrospective function. There is no lack of clarity in that. We can have a paper on those matters by all means, but those of us who have been very much involved in trying to hold those responsible for the Holyrood fiasco to account over the past four years have a perfect grasp of the process. I do not think that that is a reason to delay.

Jeremy Purvis has said that we do not want to rush into a decision. I am not suggesting that next week we determine a remit of the inquiry. I am suggesting that we exercise our scrutiny function, which, as the convener confirmed to me before the meeting began, is our role. We should schedule a meeting next week and the Holyrood project should be an agenda item for that meeting. I am inclined to push that to a vote. I am sorry if I cannot take all members with me, but the matter is important, as Mr Brocklebank and Mr Swinburne, as well as the SNP members, have argued.

**The Convener:** There is no question but that it is an important matter; the issue concerns the practicalities of the situation. Fergus Ewing is arguing that we should schedule a meeting for next Tuesday. My suggestion is that I liaise with the Presiding Officer to determine whether a meeting next Tuesday would be appropriate or whether it would be appropriate to have a meeting by 24 June at the latest.

The objective is to ensure the fullest possible scrutiny. The committee must have the fullest

possible information before it does the work. It is also crucial to establish that the witnesses are available.

**Mr Purvis:** If we schedule a meeting today and something emerges tomorrow from the discussions that you have said you intend to have, we would look rather foolish. I would be happy to leave the matter to your discretion.

**The Convener:** I think that Fergus Ewing is still keen to propose that we meet next week.

**Fergus Ewing:** It is not a question of still being keen. I have been keen from the outset to ensure that we make progress. Frankly, I am a wee bit amazed that members are not willing to meet next week to take the matter forward.

**The Convener:** That is absolute rubbish. We are absolutely clear that we wish to take the matter forward. However, I am concerned to ensure that we do so in the most sensible way, with all the information in front of us. If it is appropriate to have a meeting next week, bearing in mind what members have said about the urgency of the issue, I am happy to facilitate that. My suggestion is that, if a meeting next week is not appropriate—if we would simply be wasting our time and dealing with the matter partially or inadequately—the meeting should be deferred to the next suitable date. The important point is for the committee to deal with the matter properly. I would like to find out whether members agree with that proposition.

**Kate Maclean:** If I suggest that we have a meeting this afternoon to discuss the matter, would that show that I am more concerned and keener to demonstrate my concern to the public? If so, I would be happy to propose that we have a meeting in an hour to discuss the matter.

**Fergus Ewing:** The serious point is that we have already been promised that there will be a report from the SPCB within 24 hours. Kate Maclean's point is therefore irrelevant and I propose that we schedule a meeting for 17 June at which the Holyrood project is on the agenda for discussion by all members.

**John Swinburne:** I second that.

**The Convener:** The question is, that we agree to meet next week. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Convener:** There will be a division.

**FOR**

Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)  
Mather, Mr Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)

**AGAINST**

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)  
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)  
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)  
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)  
 Purvis, Mr Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale)  
 (LD)

**The Convener:** The result of the division is: For 4, Against 5, Abstentions 0. That is a majority against meeting next week.

My intention is to speak to the Presiding Officer to ensure that we get the earliest possible date for a suitable meeting.

**Fergus Ewing:** Am I right in thinking that your feeling is that, if the information is made available, the meeting should be next week?

**The Convener:** If we can secure all the information that is required, we will have a meeting next week.

**Budget Adviser**

**The Convener:** Item 5 concerns the appointment of a budget adviser. Again, we have a paper from the clerk. As members will see, the previous committee appointed a standing adviser. The arrangement was extremely beneficial to the committee and the Parliament. As the clerk's paper points out, the Procedures Committee recognised the value to the Parliament of a standing budget adviser and has recommended that we appoint someone to carry out that role in this session.

I strongly recommend to the committee that we continue to have a standing adviser, not least because of the point that I made about the revision of the budget arrangements and the flow of information to the committee. It would make sense to ensure that that revision is completed at an early stage.

**Fergus Ewing:** We certainly need an adviser and I do not necessarily disagree with what you say, but I will make some general points. We agreed that we would not determine our work programme today and that members can make suggestions on the work programme. I have made one suggestion and will confirm details of it in writing following the meeting.

It seems to me that, without having first determined our work programme, we do not know from which areas of expertise we may wish to draw. I see that Dr Murray looks puzzled, but perhaps I can remove that puzzlement. If we decide to go along with my suggestion that there should be an inquiry into the finances of Scottish Water and the water industry commissioner—

**The Convener:** Can I—

**Fergus Ewing:** May I continue, or am I going to be interrupted?

**The Convener:** I will clarify the position, Fergus. If we appoint a standing budget adviser, that does not impinge on the appointment of advisers for other inquiries that the committee may want to pursue. That was the procedure that the Finance Committee followed in the first session.

11:30

**Fergus Ewing:** I was planning to address that point before you spoke, convener. It is obvious that we can have more than one adviser; however, if we do, we must pay for more than one adviser. We should not rush into a decision today, because to do so would be foolhardy. We should first determine our work programme, which might be substantially different from the work programmes of the previous Finance Committee. For example, we may decide that we want to scrutinise the

budgets of Scottish Natural Heritage, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, as well as that of Scottish Water, to find out where all the money in the quangos is going, and we might want to divert that money into other areas. My point is that the thrust of our work might not be the same as it was in the past and we might need to consider horses for courses; that is, advisers who have appropriate expertise in particular areas.

I am sure that Dr Murray will have a chance to speak later—she is champing at the bit. However, I have heard of and met some of the suggested advisers—

**The Convener:** We are not discussing names at this point.

**Fergus Ewing:** I do not intend to mention names.

**The Convener:** I was just cautioning the member.

**Fergus Ewing:** I am trying to make another general point. Having decided that our approach to the work programme should be “*Festina lente*”, we should take the same approach to the selection of an adviser. I do not know enough about any of the individuals who have been suggested and whom I will not name, but I would like to know more about them. There might be a case for having a discussion—formal or informal—with some of the proposed candidates. However, we should not be rushed into picking an adviser today when we do not know what the task is and when we do not know enough about the individuals who have been listed. I hope that members will agree that we need to do a great deal more work on the issue before we can take a decision.

**Dr Murray:** I was under the impression that an adviser would be appointed specifically in connection with the work that the committee must do on the Scottish Executive’s budget, rather than as a general budget adviser to work on the budgets of organisations such as SNH and Scottish Water, although I might have misunderstood the proposal. We know that that exercise will have to hit the ground running, because we have not been able to conduct stage 1 scrutiny of the budget. We know that a report will be made in the middle of August. We may be able to put off a decision until next week or the week after, but we must get an adviser in place if we are to make significant progress on that work at the beginning of the next term. It is therefore urgent that we get an adviser in place before the recess. Apart from work relating to the Holyrood project, that will probably be the first substantive piece of work that we need to do.

**Mr Brocklebank:** When we meet in private, will we be advised on the backgrounds of the

suggested advisers? Is it intended that we do that today? I see that there are about six names on the list. Fergus Ewing might have a point when he says that it is expecting a bit much of members who have no idea who the candidates are to make such an important decision in closed session at the end of this meeting.

**The Convener:** We need only decide in principle whether we should appoint a standing adviser. It is for the committee to decide whether we wish also to discuss candidates for the position. That is a separate issue that can be dealt with today or at a later date.

**Mr Mather:** Have all the proposed candidates indicated that they would be available?

**The Convener:** No. The people who have been identified are regarded as having relevant expertise and as being in a position to take on the role of adviser, although none has been approached.

**Mr Mather:** If we approached someone, would we go beyond a short synopsis of their curriculum vitae and seek a statement of the skills, experience and attributes that they would bring and the contribution that they would make to the work of the committee?

**The Convener:** I ask the clerk to respond to that question.

**David McGill (Clerk):** There exists the facility that provision of a full CV be specified as part of the contract award system once we have made a direct approach to an individual.

**Mr Mather:** Beyond their CV, can we seek a direct statement from the proposed adviser indicating what they would bring to the party; that is, what they would contribute to the work that we are charged with?

**David McGill:** If the committee wants it, we could ensure that such a statement was provided.

**The Convener:** I caution members that there is only a small pool of people who have the relevant skills and expertise. In the past, some of the people whom we have approached have for their own reasons been unavailable to take on what is an onerous set of responsibilities.

I joined the previous Finance Committee when a standing adviser was brought to the committee for the first time. The view of all members of the committee was that having a standing adviser for the budget scrutiny process was incredibly valuable. It is difficult for ordinary members of the committee to have at their disposal the detailed technical information that allows them to understand the various parameters of the budget. To do our work competently, we require expert assistance, which the previous standing adviser

provided. I recommend strongly that members agree in principle to the appointment of a standing adviser to deal with the budget process, because we will otherwise not be able to do our job effectively. The standing adviser enhanced significantly the quality of the previous Finance Committee's work and its ability to scrutinise the different dimensions and shifts within the budget. Although it is up to the committee to decide what questions to ask a standing adviser and to pick and choose the bits of information that direct the line of scrutiny, technical advice is essential for the committee to do its work effectively.

**Fergus Ewing:** I repeat that I am not disagreeing with that; I just think that we cannot take the decision today.

I would like clarification. You said that there is a small pool of big economic adviser fish, so who suggested the potential candidates?

**David McGill:** The paper was drawn up by researchers in the Scottish Parliament information centre, who referred to the database of advisers that was set up last year. All the people who are mentioned on the list have registered with the Parliament and are interested in becoming advisers. In producing their list of people who best fit our draft specification, SPICe researchers consulted the database of advisers.

**Fergus Ewing:** Although we are grateful for the information that SPICe has provided, the committee—not SPICe—makes the decision. I presume that if other individuals were to come to mind as having potentially impressive credentials in relation to performing the role, it would be open to members to have those people's names added to the list. In that way, people would not be disenfranchised from offering themselves as potential advisers.

**The Convener:** That would be possible.

**Kate Maclean:** I can provide some clarification on the database. The previous Equal Opportunities Committee discussed the way in which advisers were appointed. In the very early days, SPICe drew up lists only of people of whom it had heard, which meant that a huge pool of people who might have been able to become committee advisers was left out. That was not good equal opportunities practice, so the Parliament advertised for people who wanted to put forward their names. Those people had to meet certain criteria. I hope that any new people who wanted to put forward their names would have to go through the same process that the people who applied to be on the database initially had to go through. Any necessary criteria should be met.

**The Convener:** That is right. I re-emphasise that the person whom we choose must be a public

finance expert who is knowledgeable about the Scottish budget process. That means that there is a limited pool.

**Ms Alexander:** It is appropriate that members have the opportunity to suggest people whom they think are missing. That should be done as quickly as possible and I would very much like us to make the decision at our next meeting. I say that because, although it might be valuable to spend half of our away day on the work programme, the committee's credibility will rest on the diligence with which we steward or scrutinise the Executive's budget. I accept that the media and others are interested in quangos, but my experience is that, although failures can occur, the obligations of corporate governance mean that quangos have more transparency, which is perhaps why they get the media coverage. It is easier to see the mistakes that are made by quangos than it is to see those in the £15 billion plus that does not go via quangos and which is the responsibility of the Executive. The committee's primary stewardship function is over that money.

I was vastly impressed by the extensive recommendations in the financial scrutiny review that are included in the clerk's paper. Given how pressed people are for time, I hope that something of the order of two thirds, or perhaps half, of the away day can be devoted to the financial scrutiny review recommendations. That would enable the committee to reach consensus on what our ambitions are for stewarding the budget over the next year. It would be good if that could be facilitated by the standing adviser.

There are advantages in having a standing adviser. I am not against our having additional advisers, but my experience of other committees is that committee members do not get to know the adviser if the adviser appears only for one bill at a time. To be frank, the adviser then becomes the property of the clerks and the convener. If the standing adviser could spend the away day with the committee, every committee member would have the potential to develop a relationship with the adviser; we would be able to get to know the adviser and be able to consult the adviser on the issues that are of interest to us. Just as relationships between committee members are strengthened by away days, it would be hugely beneficial if the adviser, whoever that might be, could join us for that event.

I agree that it is appropriate not to make a decision today so that other names can be proposed, but I am anxious that we make the decision before the summer recess. That would give us the opportunity to get to know the adviser at the away day and to alert the adviser as to what our individual interests are.



**The Convener:** I will take up Wendy Alexander's suggestion. There are two decisions to be taken: the first is to agree whether we will have a standing adviser to help us through the budget process and the second is to agree to consider names at our next meeting. It will be open to members to propose individuals for consideration, but that will need to be done relatively quickly—within the next 48 hours—so that the appropriate information on all potential candidates can be gathered.

**Mr Purvis:** I agree, but I want to make two quick points. As a new member of the committee, I would value knowing what resources are available to us so that we can avoid the confusion that Fergus Ewing outlined about what the adviser will actually do. I see from the notes that we are also asked to approve the specification for the adviser. We have not really touched on that, although I am satisfied with the specification, which states clearly what the adviser's responsibilities would be. However, it would be useful to have some guidance on what resources will be available to the committee to carry out our duties on more thematic inquiries.

**The Convener:** It might well be proper to discuss that issue at the away day—the committee might have a view about what resources it would wish to be provided with.

Do members agree to my proposal that we agree in principle to the appointment of a standing adviser and that we consider names at our next meeting?

**Fergus Ewing:** I want to make just one point that arises from this useful discussion. Can we ask the clerks to look at the specification for the adviser to see whether it might incorporate advising on inquiries on which the committee might decide to embark at a future date? That might mean that we could do without a special adviser—although, as Wendy Alexander said, we could reserve the right to have a special adviser. However, I am thinking about the public purse. Unless it was absolutely necessary, we would not want to have a plethora of advisers when one might do.

**The Convener:** In the clerk's paper, the fifth bullet point under the heading "Technical adviser to the Finance Committee", is a catch-all, because it refers to project work. In my view, what happens will depend on the nature of an inquiry. If our standing adviser feels competent to advise us on a specific inquiry, we might use the standing adviser for that. If, on the other hand, the standing adviser feels that he or she is not well enough equipped to do that, the committee might wish to look for an additional adviser. It really depends on what our work profile is, on the subjects that we choose, and on the breadth of expertise of the adviser that

we appoint. To answer Fergus Ewing's question, the remit provides us with the capacity to do what he suggests.

11:45

**Fergus Ewing:** To pick up Jim Mather's point, will an invitation be made to all potential candidates—whether they are on the current list or are added to it—to submit a more detailed curriculum vitae, including their full work history, experience, involvement and any special interests of the sort that we are required to declare? We need to be fully aware of the skills and expertise of the candidates, and of the areas of public life in which they have been involved or connected with in the past.

**The Convener:** It is not really a question of candidates in that sense. SPICe has helped us to identify the people who have the relevant expertise. If members wish to factor into the equation other people who have not been identified by SPICe, that can be done. We will make an approach to a person only once the committee has agreed whom to approach. In that context, we might be able to ask for some of the information that Fergus Ewing has suggested, but we cannot treat the matter as if we had a series of applicants for a job in the way that Fergus Ewing has suggested—a balance needs to be struck.

**Fergus Ewing:** Like Ted Brocklebank, I feel that we do not have enough information to enable us to make a decision on whom to approach. I would like to have more information along the lines that I have suggested. The adviser role is very important and, barring the unforeseen, I presume that it will be effective for the next four years. I would like to know a lot more than what is asked for in the paper. Given the fact that a job is being conferred, it is correct—and it is good procedure—that we know more about the successful candidate whom we select. To be frank, I think that we should approach each candidate and ask them for the information that I have suggested.

**Kate Maclean:** How did the committee appoint the previous advisers? Was the process that was used different from this one?

**David McGill:** The process was similar. I think that the only difference was that the adviser database had not been set up at that point. I think that the last standing adviser was appointed in September or October 2001. Other than the fact that we did not have a database to interrogate, I think that the process was the same.

**Kate Maclean:** So there was no more information then than we have now.

**David McGill:** Yes.

**The Convener:** I suggest that we ask SPICe to gather as much information as possible about the available candidates, and that we agree in principle that we will appoint a standing adviser. The information that is available can be brought to the next committee meeting, where we can make our selection on that basis.

**Mr Purvis:** I am not sure how the database operates and whether the information is available to all members. Does anything prevent individual members of the committee from speaking to anyone whose name is on that database?

**David McGill:** I am not entirely sure, but I can find out and get back to you.

**Mr Purvis:** Individual members might be able to raise any points that they wish to raise with anyone whose name is on that database.

**The Convener:** I have already invited members to put forward the names of anyone whom they think merits consideration, but I ask them to do so soon, if they wish to do that.

Is it agreed that that is how we will proceed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

*Meeting closed at 11:48.*

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