

FINANCE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 5 December 2006

Session 2

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FINANCE COMMITTEE

31st Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

*Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green)

*Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con)

*Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green)

Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

John Scott (Ayr) (Con)

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Susan Duffy

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Rosalind Wheeler

ASSISTANT CLERK

Kristin Mitchell

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Finance Committee

Tuesday 5 December 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:04*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ms Wendy Alexander): Good morning. I welcome the press and public to the meeting. I would be grateful if all pagers and mobile phones were turned off. It seems to me that the conveners' brief should be updated to include BlackBerrys because at least three colleagues are using their BlackBerrys—although I say that as a neanderthal in relation to BlackBerrys. We have received apologies from Jim Mather.

The first item on our agenda is to decide whether to consider item 3, on our future work programme, in private, as we usually do. I want to stick to past practice because we will have a slightly delicate discussion about the remit of the committee and other committees and about what the nature of our engagement with them should be in the future. It would be more courteous to discuss that in private. Obviously, as soon as we have agreed our work programme, it will be posted in full on the Parliament's website. Do members agree to discuss item 3 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Statistics and Registration Services Bill

10:05

The Convener: Item 2 is the Statistics and Registration Services Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation. We have a legislative consent memorandum—they were previously known as Sewel motions—to consider, which is attached to the bill. Members have copies of the memorandum, which was lodged only this morning. They will also have received from the clerks a note setting out a proposed approach.

As members can see, the schedule is incredibly tight because of Christmas and the new year, but we will want to take ministerial evidence on the matter. Given that the Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform is scheduled to give evidence to us next week, it seems that it would be efficient use of time to ask him and appropriate officials to give evidence on the legislative consent memorandum at the same time. There is very limited time in which we can take more oral evidence, but we might want to come back to that in a moment.

We should write by the end of the week to the most relevant of the formal consultees, asking for written evidence. If we write to them this week, they will have to get written evidence to us by 6 January, which will allow the clerks to circulate a draft report to us by 11 January. That will enable us to discuss the matter at our meeting on 16 January and again, if there is any final tidying up to be done, on 29 January. It will thereafter be possible to lodge the memorandum in time for Parliament to meet its timetable and debate it on or around 5 February.

All we are looking for today is agreement on whom the deputy convener and I should ask for written evidence later this week, and agreement that the minister be asked to give evidence on the Statistics and Registration Services Bill at our meeting next Tuesday. I am open to suggestions as to whether we would be able to squeeze in some additional oral evidence next week if members want that. However, I am anxious to avoid a meeting on Tuesday 19 December because—as members know—we will have two parliamentary debates that week: the debate on our inquiry into accountability and governance on Wednesday 20 December and the debate on the budget on Thursday 21 December.

I say, in passing, that it is a great pity that Jim Mather is not here. He has been diligent beyond the rest of us in asking questions on the matter.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I would be happy for the committee to take evidence from the minister next week. Given the timescale, even if we asked people this afternoon to come and give oral evidence next Tuesday, that would be logistically difficult and, except in extremis, inappropriate. I am happy for us to take oral evidence from the minister next week and to invite from others written evidence on which we can reflect in the new year.

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): There is in the explanatory notes to the bill a reference to the national statistician. As I have not followed the issue quite as diligently as Jim Mather has, I think that it would be good to get some background on the current set-up of the functions, especially given our general concerns about non-departmental public bodies and the like being set up to replace existing functions. I do not know quite where such evidence would come from. Perhaps we could get some evidence on what is currently done with Scottish statistics. Some evidence on the relationship between Scottish statistics and the national statistician would be good background for the committee.

The Convener: It would be helpful if the clerks could prepare a background paper for next week's discussion. We can liaise with them about drawing out the official position. There is also an advisory group of academics, which advises statisticians in Scotland. Perhaps we can consult that group informally to ensure that our lines of questioning are appropriate and that our understanding of the formal position is correct. If the clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre could take on that additional responsibility for next week, that would be very helpful.

We move to agenda item 3—our work programme—which we have agreed to consider in private.

10:10

Meeting continued in private until 11:29.

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