

# **LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 30 June 1999  
(*Morning*)

Meeting 1

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## THE OLDEST MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE:

\*Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)

## COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

\*Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP)

\*Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

\*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

\*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

\*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

\*Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab)

\*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

\*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

\*attended

## COMMITTEE CLERKS:

Craig Harper

Lynn Tullis



# Scottish Parliament

## Local Government Committee

Wednesday 30 June 1999

(Morning)

[THE OLDEST MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE *opened the meeting at 10:48*]

**Donald Gorrie (Oldest Member of the Committee):** Let us make a start. We have an apology from Keith Harding, who is unable to be here. The other 10 members are present. Until we elect a convener, I take the chair as the oldest member.

**Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP):** Phew!

**Donald Gorrie:** I have told my only joke about that in another committee meeting, so I will not tell it again.

### Interests

**Donald Gorrie:** Getting straight to business, we have to declare any interest that might bias our views on local government. I am sure that most of us have a lot of experience in local government, but I take it that that does not constitute an interest. I get paid as a Westminster MP; although it makes me think how bad Westminster is, I do not think that it should bias my views on local government. Does anyone have an interest to declare?

**Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab):** No.

**Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** At home, I am a member of Tain Community Council.

**Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab):** My wife is a member of the highly successful West Lothian Council.

**Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab):** I am a member of the General, Municipal and Boilermakers trade union group of MSPs, which I should declare because the GMB has members in local government. However, I derive no financial benefit from the position.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):** I have no interest to declare.

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** I am married to a Glasgow Labour councillor and I worked for 20 years in local government, so I have a fairly positive attitude towards it.

**Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** I

run a company that supplies high-tech coatings to a number of councils and police departments. I do not know if that could cause a conflict of interests but, if the issue seems relevant, I will certainly mention it to the committee at the appropriate time.

**Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP):** I am leader of the amalgamated union of former SNP councillors, of which my two colleagues here are also members. My mother is a councillor in Glasgow, so if we do not get things right she will stop my pocket money.

**Colin Campbell:** I am a former councillor, like most of us here, and I have two children who are employed in education in Scottish councils but, apart from that, I have no particular interest to declare.

### Convener

**Donald Gorrie:** The next task is to choose a convener. The Parliament has laid down that the convener is to be a Labour member. May I have a proposal please?

**Mr McMahon:** I nominate Trish Godman.

**Donald Gorrie:** Is anyone otherwise minded?

*Trish Godman was elected convener by acclamation.*

**Donald Gorrie:** After my brief reign, I am very happy to exchange seats with Mrs Godman.

**The Convener (Trish Godman):** Thank you, Donald, and thank you all for your vote of confidence. I hope that I will be saying that at the end of the parliamentary session and at the end of this meeting.

Before I move on to the next part of the agenda, which is the remit of this committee, I want to abuse the role of chair slightly—not by putting forward my position, but by talking generally about the committee and how I think we should move forward. I hope that our deliberations will be constructive and useful; indeed, I am sure that they will be. I also hope that the reports and recommendations that the committee produces will have an impact. By that, I do not mean that we should produce anodyne reports that could have been written by the Executive—that is not what I am about. This is a committee of the Parliament and of the people of Scotland; we are not an extension of the Executive.

### Remit

**The Convener:** The remit of the Local Government Committee is:

“To consider and report on matters relating to local government”.

An addition to the remit says that we should consider and report on the

"administration of the Scottish Administration/Executive".

That is a wide-ranging remit, which, in tandem with our authority to initiate legislation relating to local government, places us in a powerful position to influence the structure and functions of local government into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We should all remember that in our deliberations; membership of this committee is a responsible position. I want the debate to be as wide as possible. I want either to invite all interested parties to come here, or for us to go and speak to them; I want the same to go for ordinary members of the public. In those ways, we can ensure that local authority services are delivered in the most effective way.

Some of us have local authority experience; like me, some have worked in public service and then moved into an elected position. I can say with confidence that round this table there will be 100 per cent commitment to public services through democratically elected local government. We start from that base and we are all together. We will have some heated debates—I hope that we do—but I hope that we will conduct them in a friendly way. I reiterate that we are a committee of this Parliament; we are not an extension of the Executive. We are independent, although sometimes we will, of course, listen to what the Executive has to say.

Before I ask for your comments on the remit, and for your suggestions on the kinds of things that you would like us to discuss, I remind you that on Friday morning there will be a statement from the Executive that will be relevant to this committee. I have no idea what will be in that statement, but we should keep in mind the fact that it is coming.

**Bristow Muldoon:** Some of our agenda over the next few months is already clear: considering the McIntosh commission report will be a major part of our responsibility. I think that we will want early on to examine fully all the recommendations in the report. In considering McIntosh, we have to remember that a lot of very good practice already exists in local government and that a lot of high-quality services are delivered by local authorities throughout Scotland. The media concentrate on some of the errors that have been made in local government, but I think that local government has a very good record. In implementing some of McIntosh's recommendations, we have to build on existing good practice.

It is right that this committee should consider local government finance. I know that there are many different views on that. As a former councillor, I know that the most recent reform of local government, which set up the unitary

authorities, harmed many local authorities because of the changes in the way in which finance was distributed. In particular, a lot of the urban local authorities suffered. The authority of which I was a member suffered from the bad distribution of finance for social work.

Another issue on which we will have to concentrate early on is the way in which we will relate to all the other subject committees; this committee will have to take a view on the way in which local government delivers different services. I give two examples: first, there will be significant developments in housing; and secondly, Glasgow City Council is currently considering an initiative that would lead to a closer working relationship between the health and social work services. We should take a view on those issues and we need to establish appropriate working relationships with the other committees of the Parliament.

I hope that we can arrange, at an early opportunity, some meetings in which we can hear directly from many of the major players in local government, getting their views on how we should advance the committee's agenda. In particular, we should have an early opportunity to hear from Neil McIntosh about his various recommendations. We should listen to what the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has to say and we should also give representatives of each of the local authorities the chance to speak to us directly. I hope that we can allocate time for that when we set the timetable for committee meetings. We may be able to have meetings in different parts of Scotland, to which we could invite either the council leader or a council representative to speak about their vision of the way in which local government should develop.

Finally, we have to allow civic Scotland and all the people of Scotland an opportunity to influence the development of local government. However, at this early stage, it is important to hear what the local authorities think.

**The Convener:** That is a large agenda. What does anybody else think?

**Mr Gibson:** I agree with everything that Bristow said. It is important that we listen to as many views as possible. Because the McIntosh report will form such an overwhelming part of our discussions over the next few months, we may want to consider asking the Parliamentary Bureau whether we should have a sub-committee specifically to examine the report, so that we have time to deal with other issues.

To add to what Bristow said, it is important that we interrelate with as many as possible of the other committees whose work will affect local government. Their work will impinge on what we do, and we do not want to narrow down our work

to what other committees are not discussing. It is important that we discuss issues such as education and housing, which are fundamental parts of the work of local authorities. The Government's ethics legislation will also take up a lot of our time.

In many ways, our agenda—certainly over the first year—is setting itself. It is important that we all work together. Although the other two Scottish National party members and I are huddling together for safety today, I am sure that we will all move around the table as things progress. We want to be as positive as possible; we will not sit here and snipe at the majority party for the sake of it. We want to try to get as much consensus as possible in the committee—as I said before, I agree with everything that Bristow said.

**Johann Lamont:** I am keen that this Local Government Committee should make it clear that we are not sitting in judgment of local government. We should send out positive signals about local government and our relationship with it. One of our main jobs will be to manage that relationship. We must ensure that we see local government and ourselves as equal players, delivering good-quality government at every level. The big challenges for the Scottish Parliament are to ensure that it does not suck up powers to itself and does not have local government stand condemned. Local government, surviving the past 20 years, did its very best by ordinary people who—not to be party political about it—were clearly suffering badly because of political decisions from the centre.

We must reassert our confidence in the idea and purpose of local government. At its democratic base, local government is about being responsive at a local level in a way that it is impossible for us to be. We must have confidence in that; we must look positively at how we can give people in local government the space to do their job properly.

I am keen that we send out a strong signal that we want to work with local government and to manage the relationship positively as something to celebrate. McIntosh talks a lot about that. We have to develop that relationship.

We at this level are on a learning curve about how we should manage ourselves. There is work to be done on that and we will do it. However, the key point—that local services should reflect local priorities—should be at the heart of whatever we discuss, and I will be happy if that happens.

I would be keen, if we have the opportunity, to talk to Neil McIntosh and the other people who were involved in producing the report. Like other members here, I want to talk to people who have a key role in local government. Obviously, we would also like to hear from folk who work or have worked in local government and from users of

local government services.

11:00

**Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD):** There is a great chance that there will be remarkable consensus in this committee. I agree that we want to build up local government. We should identify best practice and encourage people to use it. We should also increase the self-confidence of local government while monitoring what goes wrong.

I was encouraged to hear the convener say that the committee should have its own agenda, which need not necessarily be the same as the Executive's. I suspect that, because of the McIntosh report, the Executive may announce on Friday that it wishes to have consultation on issues A, B and C and that it hopes that we will conduct that consultation. I have no objection to that, but we must have our own agenda, which may not be the same. On finance, there are short-term issues about dividing up the cake, but we should not lose sight of the longer-term issue—McIntosh's recommendation for an all-embracing review of local government finance. That exercise may take several years, but we must look for long-term and short-term gains.

Yesterday, a colleague pointed out that the McIntosh commission had visited his area twice and had had long discussions with the local council. We do not want a third innings of exactly the same thing, but on the other hand we do want to have discussions with councils and others who are involved in the development of McIntosh's recommendations. We will need to carry people with us. Those of us who are enthusiastic about proportional representation—and especially a particular form of PR—must carry people with us and convert them.

I know that some councils are unhappy that employees can become councillors. I am very keen that they should be able to do so, but I know that others are not, so we must persuade them. We have the difficult exercise of trying to carry councils without rehashing all their discussions with McIntosh. We must steer our way with some care in deciding how we consult people. We want to build on the consensus in Scottish local government about powers of general competence and about doing more good work. The outlook is very encouraging, but we must do a lot of hard work.

**Mr McMahon:** It is difficult to anticipate what the Executive will say on Friday, but Donald has mentioned the possibility that some aspects of the local government review will be carried out by independent bodies. We should decide from the outset that, if that is the case, we, too, should take a view on the outcomes of those reviews. We

should look at any aspect of the McIntosh report or of wider local government issues that the Executive wants other bodies to consider. It is important that we set down that marker.

**The Convener:** Does anyone disagree with that? Colin?

**Colin Campbell:** I was going to say something else. Johann made the point that people in local government will be afraid that we in this institution are going to take powers to ourselves. We must make it clear that that is not the ball game. The ball game is to have a good, working local government system which delivers and in which people feel involved. We talked about institutions, organisations and consultation. I put a marker down for community councils, which have had a bumpy passage over the years for a number of reasons. I want to make sure that they are included in all this.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson:** On Colin's point, obviously one of the main things in the McIntosh report is the relationship of the Scottish Parliament with local government. It strikes me that the consultation process that this committee wants to conduct—how we will go out to different areas in Scotland—could blaze a trail for a wider process of linking the Parliament and local government. We must think about the process of addressing the issues in the McIntosh report.

**Mr Stone:** I would like to come in on the back of what Colin said. He mentioned that community councils have had a bumpy ride. I have declared an interest in them. They have had a bumpy ride, but I think that there is potential, which we should use. The village of Alness won the Scotland in Bloom competition; that was done because a proactive community council went out to get additional funding. It did not cost Highland Council very much; in fact, it took a burden from its back. I often think that there is a great future in community councils becoming proactive and getting involved. They can help to relieve hard-pressed budgets, and so I put down that marker.

I would like to look beyond McIntosh. I come from the Highlands—a colossal council area the size of Wales and nearly the size of Belgium. There is a feeling in the more far-flung parts of the Highlands that the reform of local government did not do places such as Caithness any great favours. I put down two markers. First, the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994 required each unitary authority to establish a scheme of decentralisation. I think that this committee should consider decentralisation and review its application in Scotland, trying to identify best practice. There is a feeling in the Highlands that decisions are very often made far away. That is dangerous because ordinary people feel less and less involved in the democratic process and that

bothers me.

Secondly—and you can keep me right on this, convener—all of us who were councillors have had problems with the boundary commissions. Some of their decisions do not make a lot of sense. The geography of the Highlands—where the boundary commissions play a numbers game rather than a space game—causes enormous difficulty. Recently, chunks of Caithness and Ross and Cromarty were moved into the Sutherland administrative area, which is causing enormous local upset. I dare say that similar problems have arisen in the Borders as well.

I would welcome advice from the convener, but I think that we should take a view on that issue if we can. What has happened in the past—particularly in the Highlands—is not right and we should go back and examine it. Secretaries of state did not often exercise their power to review boundary commission proposals. I assume that that power has now come to this Parliament.

**The Convener:** I assume so. We will get a note on that.

I would like to pick up the point—which I endorse—about community councils. I want to broaden the discussion to include community groups, which should also be involved. I was slightly disappointed that the McIntosh report talked particularly about community councils. Although there are good examples of such councils, there are some rather questionable examples in larger cities—some community councils there do not meet, although it would appear on paper that they do. The activists in those communities are the tenants associations, voluntary organisations and others. If we want to speak to civic Scotland, we must include those groups in our agenda.

**Mr Paterson:** I agree with much of what you said, convener. Local government is at the sharp end of anything that is happening. Councillors and council officials get it in the neck all the time. The fact that this committee is setting up now is not only a great opportunity, but it comes at an opportune moment. The McIntosh report has come out and we are going to be extremely busy. Its remit is wide ranging and I agree with much of what has been said.

Over the years, councils' confidence has been eroded. They feel that people do not like them any more, but I do not think that the public feels that way. It sees the local council as the first door of opportunity to get something done. The McIntosh report is going to be fundamental to what we will do over the next few months and I welcome it.

**Mr Gibson:** One of the McIntosh recommendations is that local government boundaries should take natural community



boundaries into account. We all have experience of the boundary commission setting a boundary along some bizarre, zigzag line up and down a street, round a corner and all over the place.

A part of my former ward has been in three different wards and I have had to vote at three different schools over the past three elections. One was up this hill, one was up that hill and one was up another hill. That has had an adverse effect on electoral turnout. The issue is extremely important not only for rural Scotland, but for urban Scotland. People will always want to identify themselves with a specific community. The numbers game has been emphasised far too much.

Colleagues have mentioned community councils. We should also consider tenants associations, and we should not look at community councils as a mass. As we are all aware, some community councils are exceptionally well run and some effectively exist only on paper so—before we pass any responsibilities on to community councils—we must expect them to show that they are working effectively and responsibly and that they have arranged training for their members.

In support of what other members—Johann in particular—have said, it is very important that we accept the issues of subsidiarity and equality in local government. In the run-up to the Parliament, the media said that we would not have much to do. I do not know how they managed to get that idea, but they seem to be continuing in that vein. I do not think that we should be looking to take powers from local government. The SNP would resist that, as would other parties in the Parliament.

**Johann Lamont:** It has already been said that local government reorganisation has not done the Highlands any great service. There is a very strong feeling that local government reorganisation did not do Glasgow any great service either, and as a Glasgow MSP it would be remiss of me not to ensure that that was on the record. If we do not go looking for views in Glasgow—and, I am sure, in other parts of the country—they will be brought to our attention because there is a feeling that burdens are laid unevenly at certain doors. We should be open to that.

Among Glasgow MSPs, there is a strong feeling that a special case should be argued for Glasgow. We will have to address that issue, whether we seek it or it is brought to us. We should examine that because there are areas where quite straightforward recommendations that would make a difference could be made—even if we do not consider revisiting the boundaries issue. There are other things that can be done and I hope that we will find time to examine them at some stage.

**Mr Paterson:** I would hate to see us all become partisan and pitching for Glasgow, or the Highlands or somewhere else. It is recognised that different parts of the country have different needs.

Scotland is such a diverse place—it has four cities and a lot of room in between. We need to look particularly at boundaries and communities. We must home in on the diversity in Scotland and—for the first time, as far as I am concerned—construct a local government system that works for everybody. I would hate to see us all work from our own corners on this issue.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson:** I would like to mention community councils and other community groups. In my area there are quite well-established area forums and an assembly. The assembly is working in a way that is very similar to how we hope the civic forum will work—in parallel with the Scottish Parliament. We should consider how important something like an assembly can be in directing councils to what civic society sees as the issues. That brings in the importance of the diversity that Gil mentioned. There is tremendous potential there, so I would really like that to be examined.

11:15

**Bristow Muldoon:** I want make two points in response to what Kenneth and Johann said. I do not think that members have any desire to take powers away from local government; quite the reverse. Local government has the opportunity to expand its role into areas where it currently has no responsibility. I do not think that that will be an issue.

Earlier, we talked about health, beginning with services to the elderly and the overlap between health and social services. Local government must work closely with the health service on the agenda to improve Scotland's health. We need to explore how that relationship works; it is an area in which local government can increase its influence.

The finance issue has been mentioned by a few members. Local government should be financed on the basis of its needs—that is Johann's point. Glasgow City Council's funding from central Government has probably suffered in recent years on the basis of comparison of social need. We should address that issue.

**Donald Gorrie:** There is another aspect with which we should keep in touch: although the voluntary sector falls under a different committee, it is a major player in local authority activity, providing services, such as those for the elderly and the disabled. Our consultation should take account of that and we should help councils to help the voluntary sector. Twenty years of cuts in council budgets have often meant a disproportionate cut in their support of voluntary

organisations.

**Colin Campbell:** One of the problems is that citizens feel that consultation has been a meaningless exercise—it is something that happens although a decision has already been made. We hear, but do not listen, and then act. If we can do something to get rid of that notion, so that people feel that what they are saying is being heard and that some of it is being acted upon and that they are not being politically manipulated, it will go a long way towards turning around public perception of councils and politicians. It is part of our duty to alter that perception at every level. We must listen to people, hear their views, act on some of them and be seen to act.

**The Convener:** Yes, I agree with that.

We have had a good discussion and I am pleased that we seem to have the same goal, although we have different ways of reaching it. Members have made a few suggestions. Kenny has suggested a sub-committee to consider the McIntosh report. I suggest that we think about that and wait until the statement comes out on Friday.

Donald suggested that we have an agenda when we go out to meet councils and councillors. We should also have an agenda when people give evidence to the committee. There are many groups that I am sure we would be interested to meet, such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Some of us have been councillors and we know that if there is no agenda people can sit for three hours without discussing anything.

This will be a committee with a heavy work load. There is a lot that we must discuss: McIntosh has been mentioned, but there are other matters, as Bristow said, such as links with other committees and investigating their decisions to see how we relate to them. MSPs can attend other committee meetings and, if the convener allows, take part in the debate, although we cannot vote. We might find that that is necessary.

I suggest that we meet in the recess. Given that we are supposed to be a family-friendly Parliament, I understand that the last two weeks in August would be the easiest, as kids would probably be back in school. I am not suggesting that we meet every day for the last two weeks of the recess, but it might be more helpful if we waited until then. I need members' permission to consult the clerks and to send out information about the times and dates of those meetings.

**Mr Paterson:** I will not be here in early August.

**The Convener:** That is bound to be the case for some members; as long as we are quorate we will go with that.

**Johann Lamont:** We are talking about the end of August, not the beginning.

**The Convener:** Yes, we would be starting towards the end of August.

**Mr Paterson:** Good.

**The Convener:** I suggest that we bid for a Wednesday morning slot, if that suits everybody.

**Several Members:** Yes.

**Mr Gibson:** Do you intend the committee to meet weekly or fortnightly?

**The Convener:** I suggest that we meet weekly.

**Mr Gibson:** I think that that is appropriate given the volume of work.

**The Convener:** The clerks tell me that there is a facility to meet if something crops up. Initially, we should try to arrange a Wednesday morning slot at the end of August. If Wednesday morning is not possible, we must consider other times. I understand that we will be in the chamber all day on Thursdays. I am not sure if that means that members can come to a committee meeting if they are not voting.

**Colin Campbell:** I think so.

**The Convener:** We need to clarify that before sending out information.

**Several Members:** We will let you sort that out.

**The Convener:** I will speak to the clerks about it after the meeting.

**Mr Gibson:** I suggest 18 and 25 August for meetings.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson:** The European Committee is meeting on 18 August at 10:30.

**The Convener:** The clerk has advised me that, under normal circumstances, we would meet fortnightly.

**Mr Gibson:** I do not think that that would be adequate, considering the volume of work. Certainly initially, we should meet more often than that.

**Mr McMahon:** Perhaps we can have fortnightly meetings in the long term, but initially we should try to meet weekly.

**Mr Gibson:** We have a lot to get through and many people to speak to.

**Dr Jackson:** I do not want to be awkward about this, but I would like to attend the meeting, so 18 August would not be any good at all if I had to attend another committee at the same time.

**The Convener:** It does not have to be at the same time; we can slot committees in at different times.

I am inclined to stick with weekly meetings at the moment. I know that that might present the clerks

with problems of space and timetabling—there are 16 committees to be fitted in, although some of them will not meet weekly. We should give it our best shot. Already the clerks are looking at me with furious expressions.

**Bristow Muldoon:** One of those meetings might present an opportunity for us to travel outwith Edinburgh. I understand that Sylvia cannot make 18 August, but perhaps on 25 August we could arrange for local authorities to come and speak to us. We will not be committed to coming back to Parliament in the afternoon of 25 August, so then would be a good opportunity to do that.

**The Convener:** Leave that with me. The fact that we do not necessarily need to meet in this building on that day is a good point. We could arrange to be somewhere where representatives of two or three councils could attend.

**Mr Gibson:** Parliament has not yet debated that issue. Do we have the freedom to move around the country at this stage?

**The Convener:** I do not know. I will check that out.

**Mr Gibson:** We would be happy to move around. Obviously, if we met every Wednesday morning it would be difficult for us to move around on a regular basis because we would clash with the Parliament.

**The Convener:** I have just been informed that location needs the approval of the bureau and that we will not get that in the recess—they go off and do not do any work. We cannot move around until after 31 August, but we can have a meeting.

**Bristow Muldoon:** We can raise that with the bureau.

**Mr Gibson:** Yes, but the bureaucracy of the bureau means that it will not be able to take a decision before 2 July.

**Johann Lamont:** Realistically, it would be perfectly reasonable to hold the first couple of meetings here, to get things planned out. We need to know what we are looking for when we go to meet folk elsewhere—that takes planning. We should say that we want to meet weekly because of the volume of work and that we would like to have the opportunity to move outwith Edinburgh.

**Donald Gorrie:** I suggest that we could also use COSLA accommodation if there is a problem here; councillors are used to doing that.

**The Convener:** I need to establish whether these meetings will be informal or formal.

**Mr Gibson:** I think that the first meeting should be informal. There will be many issues and we must decide how we will prioritise and treat them. The first meeting in the recess should be less

formal and we could hold formal meetings after that.

**The Convener:** If we hold a meeting at the end of August—on 18 August, for the sake of argument—it would be an informal discussion on the Executive statement on McIntosh and where we go from there.

We are saying that we need agendas for going out and about, but we also need agendas for ourselves.

**Mr Gibson:** When does the Executive plan to hold meetings of the Parliament between now and Christmas? It will be difficult for the clerks and the committee to consider weekly meetings on a set day if the Parliament meets on different days.

**The Convener:** Committee meetings are currently scheduled for Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Do we agree that the first meeting will be informal—no one will be invited to give evidence—and that we will examine the Executive statement and the wider issues raised by the McIntosh report?

**Dr Sylvia Jackson:** Can we be given background information before that? I am thinking about the research report on proportional representation and other relevant information.

**The Convener:** Yes, that would be sent to members for committee work and members can ask for a briefing on particular parts of McIntosh, such as the section on proportional representation.

**Mr Gibson:** There are about 300 McIntosh submissions on the internet and more are being put on.

**The Convener:** Some of us are still learning how to use the internet.

**Colin Campbell:** Have you cracked it yet?

**The Convener:** I can do e-mail.

**Dr Jackson:** The important ones to consider are the research reports that go with the McIntosh report.

**The Convener:** We have given ourselves a comprehensive work load, but I am sure that we will manage it.

**Colin Campbell:** There are two clerks and two reporters and it would be nice if their names could be displayed.

**The Convener:** I was going to introduce everyone when I was summing up. I do not know whether civil servants are used to that practice, but in the council committees that I attended, everybody was introduced. There is nothing worse than looking at someone who is probably going to

do as much work as we will, if not more, and not knowing their name.

I have been informed that this is an interim arrangement and that the clerks will change, so we will have to get the new clerks to introduce themselves once that has happened. The clerks today are Craig Harper and Lynn Tullis. The official reporters are Polly Mackenzie and Ellen Jackson. Behind them are Elizabeth Watson, head of the committee office, and Jenny Goldsmith, who provides administrative support. Mark Taplin is another official reporter.

11:30

I will reintroduce everyone once we have the new set of staff, whose names will be confirmed by the time we get back.

Are there any other points?

**Mr Stone:** I want to make a plea. McIntosh lies before us and it is an enormous topic—everything it says has implications—but I hope that we will not concentrate only on McIntosh. I am coming at this from the perspective of local government finance; there are other areas that we should consider, such as the section 94 rules on capital consent. I hope that this committee will not be wall-to-wall Neil McIntosh.

**Mr Gibson:** That is why I suggested that we ask the bureau to allow us to establish a sub-committee. Otherwise, we will end up wading in McIntosh. The full committee will want to discuss the report, but we also want to discuss the nitty-gritty in a sub-committee if possible.

**The Convener:** We will discuss McIntosh informally at our next meeting, but part of the discussion will be deciding whether it is appropriate to discuss the report as a full committee, or whether a sub-committee should be formed to examine that area in particular and

come back to us. You are right: we would not be talking about the report if McIntosh had not made his recommendations a couple of weeks ago—we would be talking about different things and saying that we would need to look at McIntosh once the report came out.

It is encouraging that around the room there is an absolute commitment to local government, which will not be challenged. We might challenge some local government working practices and we will need to consider carefully issues such as finance and whether there should be a move to a system of proportional representation, but there is a commitment to democratically elected local people doing the business.

**Mr Stone:** It would be nice if that statement could be publicised, as there is a fear that we are going to pull responsibility for education away from local authorities.

**The Convener:** A statement will be made on Friday, as members know, and the issue will then be opened up for debate. I would be encouraged if as many members of the committee as possible could contribute to that debate to make the kind of comments that we have made today, talking up local government. That would be good.

Thank you for coming along today. If I do not see you before the recess, have a nice holiday and enjoy yourselves tomorrow. I hope that you will all be wearing hats.

*Meeting closed at 11:32.*

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