

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 15 September 1999
(*Morning*)

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting

CONVENER :

*Trish Godman (West Renfrew shire) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS :

*Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP)

*Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)

*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 CLERK:

Eugene Windsor

ASSISTANT CLERK

Craig Harper

Scottish Parliament

Local Government Committee

Wednesday 15 September 1999

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 11:42*]

The Convener (Trish Godman): I apologise to the public for the fact that the committee is running late. This morning we had a private meeting with the Accounts Commission for Scotland. As it was interesting, and as there were many questions, we overran our time. We now proceed to the part of the agenda that pertains to the public meeting.

We will examine the recommendations of the McIntosh report, and attempt to put them into categories: the non-contentious ones, if there are any, and the ones about which we think we need more information for debate. We will also discuss how we should go about that. We have 40 minutes, as I think that we should be gathering our bits and pieces by around 12.25. I suspect that we will not manage to discuss the report in its entirety today, but there is a space for it in next week's agenda. We can start with that discussion next week, when we meet in the afternoon.

McIntosh Report

The Convener: All committee members have been provided with the Executive summary of the McIntosh report, at the back of which Eugene Windsor and Craig Harper have kindly provided us with examples.

Let us begin with, "Relations with Parliament and Ministers". The only way to conduct this discussion—and Johann Lamont will kill me for this—is to go through the report line by line. These are McIntosh's recommendations, which is what this committee is about, and we must decide how we will deal with them individually.

The first recommendation is:

"The Parliament and the 32 councils should commit themselves to a joint agreement—which we call a Covenant—setting out the basis of their working relationship."

There is more detail in paragraph 34 of the report. What do members want to say about that?

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): It is a question of who drafts the first draft—whether we do or the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities does, too, and we then compare drafts. We must do something. It is for the Parliament, not the Executive, so it is our baby.

The Convener: Does anybody object to the principle of the agreement? No. We have established the principle, but the question stands: who actually drafts it?

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): In all instances, we should be the first people to whom those issues come for discussion. We should put forward our recommendations thereafter.

The Convener: To the Parliament?

Mr Gibson: Yes.

The Convener: We will continue as we said we would. This is a non-contentious recommendation, but we have a role to play in implementing it. We will stick to calling it non-contentious, but we will have to consider how to play our role—we will come back to that. Kenny suggested that we consider it, make some decisions and put them to the Parliament.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): In the interests of progressing the matter on the basis of equality with local government, we might want to speak to the appropriate people—presumably COSLA—so that we arrive at a consensual view on how to manage the process. I do not want us to take total ownership of developing the ground rules for the covenant, as we are trying to ensure that we work together.

Mr Gibson: That would contradict the purpose of McIntosh.

The Convener: We might have expert advisers, too. Eugene will have to get used to speaking up—he has just whispered in my ear again—but that was what he said. That advice sounded good coming from me, but it came from Eugene and I cannot take any credit for it.

We will ask the clerks to consider how we might make progress on the covenant and how we might introduce COSLA and other relevant expert advisers to it. Is that agreed? It is agreed.

The second recommendation is:

"Parliament and local government should set up a standing Joint Conference to be a place where parliamentarians and local government representatives may hold a dialogue on the basis of equality."

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): Who would select the parliamentarians?

Donald Gorrie: I suggest that, logically, members of the committee would make up the parliamentary half of such a joint conference, although other people could be invited.

The Convener: Are there any objections to that suggestion, although it is extra work?

Johann Lamont: There will not be any objections here, obviously—[*Laughter.*] I would not

want to speak for the whole Parliament.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): On page 15 of the McIntosh report, issues are raised about the role of the Local Government Committee. We might want to come back to the issue. While it might be non-contentious, we might need to consider the parliamentary side and how it is selected.

Mr Gibson: We seem to be tying ourselves in knots. We should consider which recommendations are contentious, which are non-contentious and then decide how to approach them if we agree that there are no political issues. Local government is not just about COSLA—the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, Unison and various other people have an interest.

The Convener: I agree, although it is fair enough for members to comment on how they wish to progress the matter. Colin, did you wish to comment?

Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP): No—that is fine.

The Convener: Questions arise from the second recommendation, such as: who will select the parliamentary side of the joint conference? Will members of the Local Government Committee be chosen, or is it a matter for the Parliament to decide? However, we do not think that the recommendation is contentious.

Is that agreed? It is agreed.

The third recommendation is:

“A formal working agreement should be established between local government and the Scottish Ministers”.

Mr Gibson: As long as we are kept advised about what is going on, before the public are.

The Convener: Therein lies the problem.

Do any members have a problem with that recommendation?

Dr Jackson: There is a slight problem, which was raised earlier. The McIntosh commission did not know whether there was going to be a Local Government Committee when it made the recommendations. Does the third recommendation need to be broadened so that it includes the role of the Local Government Committee, as well as that of ministers?

The Convener: Fair point.

Donald Gorrie: So there is a triangular agreement.

The Convener: We agree in principle. The recommendation should be extended.

The fourth recommendation says:

“Legislation should be introduced to provide councils with a statutory power of general competence.”

Mr Gibson: We obviously believe that that should be the case.

Johann Lamont: The thrust of all the briefings that we received was that that should happen, but the Executive has asked for further consultation. There might be some contention, depending on what members of the committee feel. Remember that we asked to meet the ministers to establish the grounds for their unease; what the Accounts Commission for Scotland said this morning was interesting. There is another side to things. I do not know whether that makes it contentious, but the matter will not be resolved immediately, especially as it has gone out for further consultation. We need to know what the timetable is for that consultation. We could raise that with the minister.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): I agree with that, and I imagine that the committee is generally supportive of the recommendation. One of the points that the Accounts Commission made outside this meeting—as you did, convener—was that part of the way to answer the Executive is to build up the picture of the areas in which local government would want to use those powers. That might be highlighted to the Executive, to reassure it. We should flag that up as an issue around which there might be some debate, and invite specific representations on it. Also, as Johann said, we should raise it with the minister.

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We feel that there is adequate provision in existing legislation to do most of those things anyway. We would like more evidence on what local councils would like to do—what we could expect them to do—before we are convinced.

Colin Campbell: Is this contentious or is it not? I think not.

Mr Harding: Politically it is, in as much as we would not support it.

Colin Campbell: Well, that is all right then; it is contentious. [*Laughter.*] There you are—there's a quick reaction.

The Convener: There are always two sides to a coin. As was said this morning, councils have a lot of power within existing law—they might even have the power for which they are asking. Perhaps it is down to how individual councils use it and how much they are aware of it. It might become a contentious issue because some members of the committee might not support it, but we definitely need more information. One way to get that is by speaking to the minister, but we must also speak to councils. They must give us examples of where, if they had had the power of general competence,

it would have made a difference in the delivery of service.

Therefore, we need more information and the issue might be contentious as we have a dissenter.

Mr Gibson: Local authorities might not have a list of areas in which they would want to be involved if that was implemented—it is almost a chicken-and-egg situation. People might not think about it because they might be concerned that it is ultra vires. Further consultation might be a wise step, although we are in favour of a power of general competence. It would help the debate if people knew in more detail why we were going down this road.

The Convener: Councils might be surprised when they find out just what their powers are at the moment.

Donald Gorrie: Could we invite Mr McIntosh to give us his arguments, as well as COSLA? The commission was obviously convinced of the need.

The Convener: So we would have COSLA, to represent the councils?

Donald Gorrie: Yes. It would move things on if we wrote to both McIntosh and COSLA and asked for arguments on the recommendation.

The Convener: Do you want to write, or do you want to have them in?

Donald Gorrie: Have them in.

The Convener: Any dissent to having them in?

Bristow Muldoon: Certainly not.

The Convener: At this rate, the inquiry will take us five years. *[Laughter.]* Some of us have only four years.

The fifth recommendation in the Executive Summary states:

“An independent inquiry into local government finance should be instituted immediately”.

Johann Lamont: Many people would find that contentious.

Mr Gibson: The Executive might find the proposal contentious, but I know that that view is not shared by members of the committee, by the SOLACE, by COSLA and by Unison. We believe that there should be an immediate review, which would also give the Executive an opportunity to explain in great detail the strictures under which it is working. Perhaps the results of such a review might be more contentious than having the review in the first place.

The Convener: The report recommends an independent inquiry, which it would not be if we were involved.

Dr Jackson: I wonder whether going through the recommendations saying which are contentious and which non-contentious is the best approach. Although we have to know the elements of the report with which we agree, we need more information about certain matters before we can decide on the contentiousness of a recommendation—even though we might be clear in our own minds about that. We are still inviting people to brief us on and provide evidence about such aspects.

The Convener: That is why we need to go through the recommendations line by line, as I said at the beginning. There will not be many areas where we will be able to say, “That’s fine. We can go with that,” without more information. We need to prioritise because the clerks will have to organise committee agendas and invite people to speak to us if we do not want written information.

Dr Jackson: Perhaps a better way to make progress would be to say that local government finance is a big issue for the committee, rather than simply to accept the recommendations.

The Convener: But the committee needs to decide how to deal with McIntosh’s recommendations. I do not think that the Executive would have a problem with the committee investigating all aspects of local government finance. However, McIntosh recommends an independent inquiry, which we would not be.

Dr Jackson: I am trying to say that, by considering the whole area of local government finance, we can return to the question whether an independent inquiry is needed.

The Convener: That might be part of your own recommendations.

Mr Gibson: It is fairly obvious that an independent inquiry is needed, and I have not met anyone in local government who says otherwise. Although there might be a big argument about the outcome, we should instigate such an inquiry, which is what everyone in local government wants us to do. Before today, I did not think that that proposal would be contentious.

Johann Lamont: It is clearly a contentious issue if the Executive has said that it does not want such an inquiry. Although we could agree on a whole range of issues, we might be the only people to do so and organisations and bodies external to the committee might still find such views contentious.

At our previous meeting, we agreed that the first stage of our debate about an independent inquiry should be to establish why the Executive has set its face against it. I would be interested in weighing the conclusions of that discussion

against the heavy evidence, both from the committee and from bodies that briefed us, in favour of an independent inquiry.

12:00

We have agreed that that is the first stage. We have to deal with what we are told after we have had the discussion with the Executive. The committee clearly takes a view. If we had a unanimous view that was different from that of the Executive, it would be contentious, because it would involve the relationship between the committees, the Parliament and the Executive. That is one of the big issues that has come out of the McIntosh report, and people cannot just say, "Och yes, that's nice," when the Executive says one thing and all the other bodies say something different. Our first stage should be to engage in firm dialogue with the Executive and then decide what we will do next. Clearly, it will be one of the big issues for us.

The Convener: I agree.

Colin Campbell: I would hate to predict the outcome of an argument with the Executive. The committee could examine the matter, but the reason for an independent inquiry—rather than anything else—is that McIntosh perceived that the public believe that it is better not to have too many politicians looking at such matters.

Dr Jackson: Johann and I are not ruling out an independent inquiry. We agreed at a previous meeting that we would begin to look at local government finance as a whole. The Minister for Finance, Jack McConnell, will be at our next meeting. As Johann says, the matter is contentious—Jack McConnell is coming because we want to investigate further. It is not to say that we will not have an independent review at some point.

Mr Harding: The matter is certainly contentious, because we agree with the Executive. An independent review would create too much turmoil at present, but the committee should look at finance. An independent review would bring about too many changes in local government after all the turmoil that it has experienced in the past couple of years. At this stage, the Executive's line on the matter is correct.

Bristow Muldoon: I support the committee having a look at the issue. It is a little bizarre that in some cases we complain that too many independent reviews are being set up that are outwith our remit, while in the one area in which one has not been set up, we want to set one up.

We should raise the issues with the Executive first, and ask it to explain why it does not wish to have a review—whether independent or within the

remit of the Parliament. The committee is well able to take evidence from interested parties and, following that, to try to promote a particular point of view.

Mr Gibson: We are saying that it should be an independent review because that will reflect the views of McIntosh and people in local government. We want to represent the views of local government on the issue. That is why we take the view that an independent inquiry should be instituted—if Jack is coming on Tuesday, we should be able to put that to him.

Donald Gorrie: In our discussions with ministers, which might extend to our meeting with Ms Alexander, we should try to persuade them to have an independent review or at least understand their reasons for not having one. They might persuade us that it is not a good idea. If the Executive will not have an independent review, we can discuss what form of review—if any—to set up. It is a three-stage process, but we have to talk to ministers robustly first.

The Convener: That is exactly what I was going to say. You are right—McIntosh recommends an independent inquiry. Arthur Midwinter, the chief executives, the unions and COSLA have all said the same thing to us. However, for parity, we have to listen to what Jack and Wendy say. I do not expect Jack to say, "Don't worry. We're going to do this, this and this and everything will be fine," but at least he will have the opportunity to put his position—and his reason for it—to the committee. The same goes for Wendy.

We will ensure that we look at that specifically in the agenda that follows. We will have a thoroughgoing discussion among ourselves, or with anybody else whom we wish to invite. We can then decide whether to look at the matter in more depth, or to recommend an independent inquiry in our report. We need to give everybody the chance to come and tell us some good news, but do not hold your breath. We are agreed that that is how we will proceed with that recommendation.

The next recommendation is:

"The option of transfer to local government should always be considered in any review of other bodies delivering public services; and likewise where new services are developed, prior consideration should always be given to whether local government should be their vehicle, subject to consideration of efficiency and cost effectiveness."

That is about best value.

Johann Lamont: Efficiency and cost-effectiveness are not neutral terms. We should recognise that we are asking local government to do something quite complex. It would be interesting to consult practitioners who have developed best value, to find out how complex the process is. Achieving cost-effectiveness may go

beyond the remit of local government because the process concerns the well-being of communities. If we have a social inclusion agenda, the process should go beyond crude pound signs.

The Convener: Such points will be raised when we start taking evidence from councils and other bodies. In principle, however, may I take it that we do not have a great problem with this recommendation?

Mr Gibson: My understanding is that this recommendation is designed to ensure that local government is considered as the vehicle for services. If a social inclusion agenda were being considered, we would want to try to ensure that local government is considered as a possible vehicle for that.

Dr Jackson: As there is some concern about the terms efficiency and cost-effectiveness and their effect on communities, could we have it on the record that we will return to this subject? There is a concern that stock transfer, for example, may not depend on efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The community aspect has been raised, too, and perhaps it is not well represented by the terms efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

The Convener: I do not disagree with that.

The next group of recommendations, item 7, concerns electing the council. It begins:

"The rules and arrangements for conduct of local elections should be reviewed, with the general aim of simplifying procedures for the public and improving access (66) and with particular reference to-

- A rolling electoral register
- More accessible polling places
- Wider and easier access to postal voting
- Electronic voting."

Mr McMahon: Having a review of the rules and arrangements is not contentious, but the outcome may be. Should we consider the likely outcomes, or just accept that there should be a review?

Bristow Muldoon: This is a major subject and the committee should get involved in it. There are two sides to this argument and we will be coming to the other one—electoral systems—shortly. When it comes to electing a council and getting more people to take part in local democracy, nobody would object to any drive towards improving turnouts by simplifying the system or improving access to it.

The committee has a strong role to play in examining the various ideas behind which people can unite. There are some ideas that people may be reluctant to consider, but we should take the lead in considering ideas and hearing evidence about which ones are likely to be most beneficial and which ones are likely to be problematic.

We should consider that in conjunction with item 8—the question when and how often council elections should take place. I advocate a move to four-year terms for councils, but the question then arises whether those elections should take place on the same day as the elections for the Scottish Parliament or mid term. There are many views on the issue, but I think that the committee should consider those two items together.

The Convener: Michael McMahon has suggested that there should be a review, and Bristow says that perhaps we should conduct it. Are there any other views?

Donald Gorrie: There certainly should be a review. What I am not sure about is how many of the points are covered by the committee that is chaired by Mr Kerley. We do not want to duplicate his work, so we may want to let that committee get on with it. It is certainly considering a four-year term, but I do not know whether it is dealing with electronic voting.

The Convener: Mr Kerley is examining electoral systems, but not the mechanics of getting more people to vote.

Donald Gorrie: He is dealing with how to get better councillors and the question of four-year terms and whether they should coincide with parliamentary terms. I am not sure whether he would be considering postal voting; perhaps we should clarify that. I am all for having a review, but I do not think that we should duplicate the work of another committee.

Johann Lamont: Item 7 contains many practical suggestions on electing councils. I assume that somebody is beaver away to produce a paper that could be the basis of a review, rather than our having to do everything. If somebody is developing that work, we could comment on it and add to it.

One thing that should be considered in a review is the fact that groups can be disproportionately excluded. There is evidence, for example, that black and ethnic minority communities are more likely to be excluded, as are people in multi-occupancy flats. We need to bear those things in mind when considering the extent of the franchise.

We cannot possibly instigate all these reviews ourselves and write them up. Someone else—a civil servant at the Scottish Executive—must progress the non-contentious recommendations, before we see the results of those reviews and comment on them.

The Convener: Some of those questions will be answered in Wendy Alexander's report on the McIntosh commission later in September.

Mr Gibson: I have no problem at all with item 7. Johann, Michael and Bristow are right in saying that we want to make recommendations, but I do

not believe that there are any real points of contention. We need to discuss how the recommendations can be implemented in practical terms. We certainly want a four-year term, but I agree that the second part of item 8 might be more contentious. However, we accept what the McIntosh report recommends.

The Convener: On 14 September, the *Sunday Herald* reported:

"Scottish ministers will this week announce plans to cancel the next council elections in a bid to ensure that more people do vote when they eventually take place."

That is not very good English, is it? It goes on:

"The executive plans to hold council ballots on the same day as votes for the Scottish parliament, with the next one in May 2003, a year after it was originally planned."

If the reporter has got it right, he must have done the work—or the *Sunday Herald* must have done the work.

12:15

Mr Gibson: We are discussing something that was in the papers three days ago. As I have said, this will end up making the committee a laughing stock. We are getting not the cherry picking, but the dismantling of McIntosh. We will end up with something that is not related to the document that we debated on 2 July.

The Convener: We can certainly take that up with the ministers, Frank McAveety and Wendy Alexander, when they come here. You have a point.

Do members want to comment on items 7 and 8 together or separately?

Mr Harding: We will support anything that will increase the number of people voting. We agree with item 7 but, on item 8, we believe that local elections should be held at a different time to the Scottish Parliament elections; that is contentious, but I think that the SNP agrees.

Mr Gibson: We agree.

Dr Jackson: I could not hear; did you say that elections should be held at separate times?

Mr Harding: Separate times—local elections on local issues.

Dr Jackson: It seems that there is a group act on this question, but I have reservations. The enthusiasm that arose because the elections for councils and for the Scottish Parliament were held on the same day could be compared with the low turnout for the European elections, which were held later. We could find that not as many people turn out if we hold local and Scottish Parliament elections separately.

Mr Gibson: Surely, if we get the issues in item 7

right, the factors under item 8 will not be important. Other countries in Europe that have local elections and national or regional elections on separate days have much higher turnouts than we do even for Westminster elections. As McIntosh suggests, elections should be held midway between parliamentary elections so that people—as Keith rightly said—vote on local government issues, and do not go to vote on something else only to notice another ballot paper or two that they feel duty-bound to fill in.

Dr Jackson: Kenny has made a good point about how items 7, 8, 9 and the others are linked. It is worth exploring this a wee bit further.

Bristow Muldoon: On voting on local government issues, I think that we underestimate people's ability to distinguish between the two sets of elections. I observed at the count after the recent elections that some areas voted for me in the Scottish Parliament elections but voted for an SNP councillor in the council elections. People were able to distinguish between the two sets of elections and to vote for individual candidates. The biggest argument for holding elections on the same day is that it is far more likely to result in a bigger turnout because of the media coverage and the party campaigning.

The Convener: I agree. People seemed to vote how they wished. Voters understood the ballot papers much better than officials knew how to count them.

We have some differing opinions. How do members wish to pursue this? Shall we ask Neil McIntosh to come back to give us the reasons for his recommendation, shall we invite someone else or shall we discuss it ourselves?

Johann Lamont: It would be interesting to consult people within local government and at a Scottish level. Views on this are almost instinctive. My impression was that holding elections on the same day improved local government turnouts because parliamentary elections had a higher profile. People may have been able to focus on the fact that there were different layers of government, but that there was partnership as well. Equally, there may be an argument that holding elections on the same day confused people. Neil McIntosh has stated his view; it would be interesting to know how he came to it, but it would also be interesting to know what other people think.

Mr Gibson: I do not want to re-invent the wheel. We should examine how other countries in Europe achieve high turnouts. The issues that are covered in annexe A of the Executive's summary of the McIntosh report will help us to achieve a higher turnout than we had at the previous local elections.

Having people vote once every four years is not particularly democratic. From the article that I read in the *Sunday Herald*, I know that the Executive thinks that voting more than seven times in 12 years will be onerous for people. However, reducing the number of opportunities to vote is not the way in which to get people to participate in democracy. I do not agree that the public were as informed as folk think. The Scottish Office advertisements did not mention the fact that there was a local government election: two ballots were advertised on television and folk found out that there were three only when they went into the polling station.

Johann Lamont: It is clear that having two ballots together is not a disincentive. The evidence is that it improved the turnout for the local government election. However, we will need to determine whether people were confused about what they were voting on.

We would not vote only every four years, as Kenny suggested. There are also the Westminster and the European elections to be fitted in.

I am open-minded on the issue as I know that there are a variety of views at the local level. There will also be a variety of views in the parties about how they manage their campaigns, but that is a separate issue. We should examine ways of increasing voter turnout and we should improve the scrutiny of those who stand for election. However, the evidence on holding elections on the same day is that the confusion is not as great as we thought.

Mr McMahon: Obviously, the issue is contentious. How do we resolve the contention in this committee? We have agreed to speak to people about electoral reform and we should wait until we have listened to evidence from many more organisations before we continue. We should let it be known that we will deal with the issue soon and that we will be gathering information until then.

Mr Gibson: Does everyone agree that there should be a four-year term?

Mr McMahon: That might come out in discussion.

Mr Gibson: I do not think that anyone favours a three-year term.

Mr McMahon: I do not have a problem with four-year terms, but we might discover problems when we consult people.

Bristow Muldoon: I agree that a four-year term would allow for long-term planning in the local authority. I also agree with Donald Gorrie's comment that we should find out what is within Kerley's remit.

Dr Jackson: In our informal briefing, someone suggested that we should examine the electoral system. One suggestion was that a certain number of councillors would be elected in the middle of the four-year period but would serve for four years. The idea was that that would help continuity. However, it might be worth pursuing the variations on that model.

The Convener: The next section of our discussion is on the electoral system, about which Richard Kerley is concerned. He has e-mailed me to say that he would like to speak to me—I assume that he will accept an invitation to talk to the committee.

I will take a minute to sum up. The issues of the election of the council, the electoral system and how long councils should be elected for are all linked. We seem to be agreed that we need more information. I will discuss that with the clerks and create an agenda.

We will invite the widest range of people that we can and get as much information as possible. Party splits—if I can say that—are involved, as are, in some ways, personal splits. I take Bristow's point that a four-year term for local government might be good for planning and so on. We may agree on some things and not on others.

I suggest that we close today's business slightly early, if we are allowed to do that, and pick it up next week. We are having Jack along next week and we know what we have to ask him—members should come prepared with their questions. I will stick to the same procedure of offering members one question and one supplementary. I want to put a warning shot across members' bows. Some members were asking rather long questions today; I let them off this time, but I will not do so next week. We need to go for the jugular with Jack—do not quote me on that. It should be short and sharp.

Johann Lamont: I am happy with the procedure, but I hope that we can review it. If we are restricted, that may not turn out to be a particularly productive way of pursuing a minister on individual questions. We must all agree a process, but I understand that you want to set a pattern, convener.

The questions are so formalised in Parliament that it is almost like a garrotte. I think that we should see how things work, but we might be happier if members could pursue a line of questioning.

The Convener: I am happy with that. Today, the presentations were slightly longer than I had hoped. We should learn from that. Three people were giving presentations, so we ran out of time. My proposal is intended to allow everyone to contribute. I agree that members should be allowed to pursue an issue. However, I do not

want members to leave the meeting feeling that they did not have the chance to ask their question because a previous questioner had been making a speech.

Mr Gibson: To be fair to those asking the questions, including me, I do not think that we expected the answers to be as long as they were.

The Convener: I will give you that, Kenny. The answers were all in three if not four parts.

Mr Gibson: I take on board what Johann said. I felt that I could have asked a load of questions. Now that we have met representatives of the Accounts Commission, we will know better how long is required. There are some aspects of the Scotland Act 1998 which prevent the Scottish Parliament from examining in detail council tax fraud and housing benefit fraud, for example. I wanted to ask a number of questions on it, but I was restricted to one.

The Convener: As I said, we have the opportunity to ask people to come back. I would be interested in doing that if there were particular issues that members wanted to pursue.

I thank members for their attendance. It has been a productive morning and we will meet again next week.

Meeting closed at 12:28.

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