

# **PROCEDURES COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 23 January 2001  
*(Morning)*

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## PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

### 1<sup>ST</sup> Meeting 2001, Session 1

#### CONVENER

\*Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

\*Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)

\*Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)

\*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

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

\*attended

#### THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Andrew Slorance (Scottish Parliament Media Relations Office)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

John Patterson

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark MacPherson

#### ASSISTANT CLERK

Katherine Wright

#### LOCATION

Committee Room 4



## Scottish Parliament

### Procedures Committee

*Tuesday 23 January 2001*

*(Morning)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:37*]

### Interests

**The Convener (Mr Murray Tosh):** Good morning and welcome to the first meeting of the Procedures Committee in 2001. I wish you all a belated happy new year and extend a particular welcome to new members who have joined the committee.

The first item on the agenda is a declaration of interests. I invite any of the new members who feel that they have anything relevant to declare to do so now.

**Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab):** I have no interests to declare.

**Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** I have no interests to declare.

**Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab):** I do not know whether I need to declare this, but I should probably do so just to be on the safe side. I am a Deputy Presiding Officer; there may be times when that is helpful, but there may also be other times when it is not. I ask the committee to bear that in mind.

**The Convener:** We shall bear that in mind, but we will not get involved in any esoteric discussion about the helpfulness or otherwise of Deputy Presiding Officers.

Now that Frank McAveety has arrived, all the committee's members are here. If you have any interests to declare, Frank, this is your opportunity to do so.

**Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab):** I am a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland and the Transport and General Workers Union. I am also board director of the Arches Theatre Company.

**The Convener:** I do not think that any of that sounds particularly threatening.

## Deputy Convener

**The Convener:** The deputy convenership of the committee is allocated to the Labour group. I would like to nominate Kenneth Macintosh as deputy convener. Is that agreed?

*Mr Kenneth Macintosh was chosen as deputy convener.*

**The Convener:** Kenneth Macintosh is elected by acclaim, as they say. I think that that implies dancing in the street, probably choreographed by Mr McAveety.

### Item in Private

**The Convener:** The seventh item on the agenda will be an update on the committee's continuing investigation into the consultative steering group principles. We will have to discuss the appointment of a project adviser; therefore I think that that item should be taken in private. Is that agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Committee Operations

**The Convener:** I shall give a little bit of background information for the benefit of members who have joined us today for the first time. The committee has gathered together a considerable range of issues that fall under the general heading of committee operations. The outstanding issues are summarised in the tables in the paper for this item, but members will be delighted to know that we will not discuss them all this morning—they are included simply as background. We carry the issues forward from meeting to meeting and, as the meetings progress, reports come before us and we take the issues off the agenda.

We have only one such report this morning, which is about the timing of committee annual reports. We are invited to agree that the parliamentary year is a suitable break point for the purpose of annual reports and that we do not need to change existing practice. The parliamentary year, as the report explains, ends on 11 May. That is when the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body reports—it is suggested that committee annual reports should be issued in accordance with that time scale.

**Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD):** It is not a world-shattering issue on which I would be prepared to go to the wall, but I must say that I found the arguments in favour of 11 May pretty unconvincing. It is much more logical to see the summer recess as a suitable break; the report quite correctly says that the world does not end at the summer recess and that some committee work goes on. Quite often, committees see the end of June—at the earliest—as the end of a lap, if not the end of the race. They tailor their work plans accordingly.

We must also consider what will happen in the fourth year of the Parliament. By 11 May of that year, there will have been an election and an entirely different bunch of people might have come in. Would there be no report for the last year of a committee, or would there be a report by the new committee after the election? Using the summer break as the year's end would allow a slightly more up-to-date report. My main argument is that the summer recess makes a better terminus than 11 May, which is just a day in the calendar on which we continue to work. If it were up to me, I would go for the summer break, but as I said, it is not a huge issue.

**Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** I would argue along the same lines as Donald Gorrie. I wonder whether there is some administrative reason—perhaps with regard to resources in the Parliament—why 11 May is a better date than the start of the summer recess,

which is a logical conclusion to the year's events. In some respects, 11 May seems to be somewhere in the middle.

**The Convener:** I am not aware that there is a resource argument. Members will be aware that last year's report, which will be based on the situation on 11 May 2000, is not with us yet, so the resource issue might not be strictly relevant.

**Mr Macintosh:** I would like to know who put the subject on the agenda and why we are discussing it. Some committees might have found the suggested timetable difficult. My experience of committee work suggests that there would be no problem with reporting in line with the parliamentary year. That has a certain logic to it, and 11 May is as compelling as any other date. I would also like to know whether it is usual for the Procedures Committee to use the initial submission as a reference point for discussing issues.

When first I read the paper, I assumed that because we were using the parliamentary year, there would be a report in the final year of Parliament and that there would be a report every year. However, I note that rule 12.9 of the standing orders states that a report shall be submitted

“as soon as practicable after the end of each Parliamentary year”.

I am not sure how that would work at the end of the fourth year of a Parliament, when there will have been an election. I assumed that committees would try to report before the election. That is my understanding of the situation, which is why I would stick with the recommended date of 11 May.

**The Convener:** I am unable to say who raised the issue originally. It is item 16 in our series of issues. I could track it back and find out who raised it, but I cannot say categorically who that was. I think that it came from within the clerking and reporting directorate. Was not the paper written by Elizabeth Watson?

**John Patterson (Clerk):** Elizabeth Watson endorsed the paper. The table of issues came about after we canvassed colleagues for views. We discussed it with the head of the committee office and brought the proposal to the Procedures Committee, which endorsed it. I think that the convener is right to say that the issue arose first from clerical concerns.

10:45

**Mark MacPherson (Clerk):** On Kenneth Macintosh's second point, committees are required to report even in a general election year.

**The Convener:** The May date is logic-driven by the termination of the Parliament because, although the election might take place a few days

before that, the committees will do no work between the election and 11 May. That means that we are working back from the terminal date. Although Donald Gorrie suggests that it would be more logical to end the year at the start of the summer recess, that probably could not happen in the fourth year, as we would be spanning an election, two different Parliaments and, perhaps, a completely different committee agenda. It would be competent for us to leave reporting until June or July three times in a session, and to have an earlier report in the fourth year, if that was considered sensible. That is not the recommendation of the clerking and reporting directorate, but that is not particularly significant if the committee feels that it is not the correct decision.

**Mr Macintosh:** I asked where the idea came from because a particular committee might have had a particular problem. From my experience, I have not found 11 May a difficult date. There might be a rush to finish other committee work as we approach the summer recess and I would have thought that the extra burden of compiling a report might get in the way of finishing things before then. That encourages me to suggest that 11 May—the end of the parliamentary year—would be a good time.

**Mark MacPherson:** Although there were some initial concerns that the compiling of reports could disrupt the committees' programmes, the length and non-contentious factual nature of those reports have not presented any problems.

**The Convener:** Two opinions have been expressed; either the parliamentary year ends at the summer recess or on 11 May. The committee has to make a decision one way or the other.

**Donald Gorrie:** I propose the summer date, if that helps. We might as well take the matter to a vote.

**The Convener:** Having a vote is a poor beginning to our new committee, but there we go.

I think that Kenneth Macintosh felt that 11 May was quite acceptable.

**Mr Macintosh:** I merely accept the recommendation of the report.

**The Convener:** Will we need a member to second the motion formally?

**John Patterson:** No.

**The Convener:** The motion is, that the committee prefers June. There is an amendment, to the effect that we should go for 11 May. Can I have a show of hands for the amendment, which is to have committee reports issued by 11 May?

**For**

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)  
Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)  
Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

**The Convener:** Oh dear. I can see how this is going to go. [*Laughter.*] Can I see a show of hands of those who are in favour of the motion, which recommends the start of the summer recess as the date by which committee annual reports must be issued?

**For**

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)  
Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

**The Convener:** Although I did not take a substantive vote, I will exercise a casting vote for the status quo, which is 11 May.

**Mr Macintosh:** The next issue we should discuss is how conveners should cast their votes.

**The Convener:** There is guidance on that matter. Every convener is entitled to a substantive vote if he or she wishes to exercise it; however, in exercising a casting vote, he or she would go for the status quo. I do not know whether that would apply in other circumstances.

## Meetings (Frequency)

The next item on the agenda is consideration of a report on the frequency of meetings, which will simply inform the new committee members. We have been meeting monthly but, from time to time, we have had additional meetings when the pressure of business dictates that that is necessary. Towards the end of the year, there were occasions when we were meeting almost fortnightly. That said, we try to keep to monthly meetings.

If members are happy, I propose that we continue with that arrangement. I understand that a fair number of committee members are also on the Standards Committee, which is also proposing to meet monthly. Therefore, if we require additional meetings, it might be useful to tack any such meeting on to the tail-end of a Standards Committee meeting a fortnight after our meetings. That might minimise disruption to members' diaries and avoid additional commitments.

**Donald Gorrie:** I am a member of the Finance Committee, which meets at the same time as this committee. The clerks have cunningly organised things so that my regular meetings do not clash. Obviously any additional meetings would clash, but I would just have to live with that.

**The Convener:** Indeed. We will juggle things as best we can. Although I hope that we will not have to have too many additional meetings, they cannot

be ruled out.

Do members agree to my suggestion?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Committee Papers (Press Access)

**The Convener:** That takes us to the sixth item on the agenda, which is consideration of a paper on press access to committee papers. Andrew Slorance might like to come to the table to make some comments on this item before the committee discusses it.

**Andrew Slorance (Scottish Parliament Media Relations Office):** I do not have too much to add to the paper that is before the committee. Before coming to the meeting, I spoke to members of the media, in particular members of the Parliamentary Journalists Association, which represents most of the journalists at the media offices on Lawnmarket. They endorse the paper's conclusions that paper copies are extremely useful and are certainly well used in most cases. Unfortunately, the information technology that most members of individual organisations have at Lawnmarket means that it is likely that they will be unable to make much use of electronic provision of documents until we move to Holyrood, when they will probably lobby their own organisations for better IT facilities.

Apart from members of the Parliamentary Journalists Association, the few specialists that attend committee meetings are able to get papers from the web, as they are usually looking for only one set of papers and are based at their headquarters. Furthermore, as no pattern for web input has yet emerged, it is difficult to know when papers will appear. However, that gives journalists the opportunity to decide which committees they will cover.

The committee has discussed the frequency of meetings. However, it is still the case that three or four meetings take place at the same time and, although the agenda gives a fair idea of the content of a meeting, reading the papers for the meeting in detail might just sway a journalist's decision about which committee to attend.

We have managed to reduce the number of newspapers and broadcasters who require hard copies from about 20 to 15. Although I am not overly confident that we can reduce that figure further, we will monitor the situation through surveys and by checking mail in pigeonholes to find out what the uptake of documents is and whether members of the media are picking up their papers. We will also keep at them about whether they want papers for all committees, or

whether there are some committees for which they do not need the papers regularly. Unfortunately, that might mean that the papers for some committees might be sent to a dozen people instead of to 16—although that might be fortunate as far as the clerks are concerned. I invite members to note the paper's conclusion that the system works well for the media and the committees.

**The Convener:** I was struck by paragraph 7 of the paper, which says that the annual cost of the exercise is estimated at about £30,000. In almost any other circumstances, the press would be howling about profligacy. It is certainly a damned sight more expensive than giving annual medals to MSPs or the cost of any of their other popular causes over the past couple of years.

**Mr McAveety:** That will be on the front page.

**The Convener:** Only the Press Association is present at today's meeting—I would not worry about it.

**Mr McAveety:** Famous last words.

**The Convener:** That amounts to a fairly substantial investment by the Parliament in media good will and it reflects our understanding of the level of IT awareness and familiarity among journalists. MSPs are learning fast how to cope with new technology and we hope that, by the time we are in the new Parliament building, the media will be similarly comfortable with those developments and that we might in future be able to dispense with paper copies. The proposal is that we continue to provide paper copies and to keep the matter under review. Are members agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**Mr McAveety:** I have a brief question. Is there a hierarchy of members of the media who have access to IT and new technology? Perhaps we should raise the issue with the media and ask whether that might help them as much as it might cut down the Parliament's costs.

**Andrew Slorance:** I see the point about whether we could lobby on behalf of the journalists to improve their facilities. Every organisation in Lawnmarket has different facilities. For example, some of them have good computers, but do not have Adobe Acrobat, through which they would be able to read committee papers. Others have computers that are two or three years out of date that have been handed down from their headquarters and, although they can get access to committee papers, they cannot print them because the printers are so slow.

Media people really need the papers to be able to follow a committee meeting, which means that they might have a pile of papers that is two or



three inches thick. The situation is therefore something of a mixed bag. With an average of a dozen committees meeting each week, many organisations feel that they need to receive all 12 sets of papers so that they can decide which committees they will attend. Although we have encouraged journalists and broadcasters to ask their organisations to improve their facilities, many of them see the move to Holyrood as the point when they will be able to make progress on the issue. Although the media will still supply their own equipment, the groups that are involved in the move to Holyrood are helping us to ensure that the media have the best facilities, such as ISDN lines, so that they can move on in step with the Parliament.

**Mr McAveety:** It is interesting to read in paragraph 15 of the earlier SPCB paper that was provided with your report that the largest local authority—Glasgow City Council—is trying to put information on-line. A partial lobby system seems to operate in Glasgow City Council, but the journalists' pigeonholes were jam-packed with unread committee reports. Curiously enough, most of the stories from those reports did not emerge. The question is how we make the transition from paper copies to on-line availability more quickly.

**Andrew Slorance:** The paper that you referred to was discussed at a committee meeting last February and I am not sure that Glasgow City Council has moved too much in that direction. However, you mentioned the pigeonholes; we monitor the pigeonholes at Lawnmarket regularly and have found that some are not emptied for two or three weeks. On one or two occasions, we have decided to stop sending committee papers on the basis that, if the media complained, we would review the situation. However, on those occasions, we did not receive any complaints.

**Patricia Ferguson:** I appreciate Andrew Slorance's point that the move to Holyrood will make a difference—I hope that it will—and I understand that these things can prove to be a watershed. It is appropriate to ensure that ISDN links will be up to the required standard when Holyrood opens. However, I wonder whether we can do anything to encourage newspapers and media organisations to provide the necessary equipment for their staff, instead of giving them hand-me-downs. If the cost of providing paper copies is £30,000 a year, it would probably be cheaper for the Parliament to pay for the computers. I hope that there is some way that we can ensure that the press and media organisations will supply that technology when they move into Holyrood.

**Andrew Slorance:** We are raising those issues with a media end-users group and a broadcasters end-user group. Although we cannot guarantee

what will happen, any member who has visited the media offices at Lawnmarket will know that the they are fairly sparse. There is also a security worry about putting in top-of-the-range equipment. The easiest solution now is to give them the computer equipment that is available. However, I hope that the organisations are focusing on the long-term issue of Holyrood—we will keep monitoring that.

**The Convener:** We should reasonably expect the various newspapers and their journalists to invest in good news coverage to complement the public's considerable investment in the provision of the Parliament building. If newspaper journalists are not adequately equipped at the moment, their editors should consider equipping them adequately as a priority for 2002, or whenever things become fully operational at Holyrood.

As we have broadly agreed that issue, that takes us to the end of our public business. I invite members of the public and the press to leave, as we will now discuss confidential business.

11:00

*Meeting continued in private until 11:07.*



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