

PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 8 October 2002
(*Morning*)

Session 1

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PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

12th Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)

*Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)

*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Mr George Reid MSP (Conveners Liaison Group)

Elizabeth Watson (Scottish Parliament Directorate of Clerking and Reporting)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

John Patterson

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark MacPherson

ASSISTANT CLERK

Lewis McNaughton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Procedures Committee

Tuesday 8 October 2002

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Standing Orders (Conveners Group)

The Convener (Mr Murray Tosh): Good morning, everybody. As it is 9.30, we will make a start. I will not tempt fate by commenting at all on the length of the agenda. We have two items to deal with. The first is a presentation of sorts by the conveners liaison group. Perhaps it is not fair to call it a presentation; it is more of a report.

The committee is aware that we have been in discussion about proposed changes to standing orders concerning the conveners liaison group. The proposal is to make that group official as the conveners group. We now have an agreed position. I invite George Reid from the conveners liaison group to report on that position.

Mr George Reid MSP (Conveners Liaison Group): The consultative steering group was keen on conveners. It viewed the committees as the work force of the Parliament and considered, when drafting standing orders, whether to write in a body such as the conveners liaison group. We decided not to because we did not want to box the Parliament in and because we assumed that such a body would emerge in due course, as indeed it did.

As early as September 1999, with the agreement of the Parliamentary Bureau and the conveners, a paper came to the Procedures Committee and went off to the lawyers. That took a bit of time because drafting changes to standing orders was quite tricky. The paper came back to the conveners liaison group, where it went round the circuit once again, and back to the Parliamentary Bureau. The Parliamentary Bureau had one or two queries, but we now have a paper that is more or less signed off.

In my judgment, having convened the conveners liaison group since its start, its most important function is that in proposed rule 6A.2.1(a):

“to consider and make recommendations in connection with the operation of committees”.

That allows something of a common view to emerge from among the conveners. It allows the

conveners to share experience. It would write the right of referral into standing orders. It is a matter of influence, not of the power of decision making.

I will deal with the other salient points briefly. The membership of the conveners group comprises the conveners of the mandatory and the subject committees, but not the consolidation or the private bill committees. Deputy conveners can attend in place of conveners. The Presiding Officer will convene the group, but in reality that means that one of the Deputy Presiding Officers can deputise for him. The group will continue its current role of prioritising committee research and travel, and committee business in the chamber. It will continue to share experience and discuss good practice. It will have a formal role in decisions on committee travel and on appointing lead committees. It will need a quorum of five from at least three parties and will continue to operate consensually.

I commend the proposed revisions of the standing orders to the Procedures Committee.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): One or two of the proposed revisions say that matters will be decided jointly by the conveners group and the Parliamentary Bureau and that members can appeal to the full Parliament. I am all for having a properly organised conveners group, but would it not be better to say that, if there is disagreement, either the conveners group wins or the Parliamentary Bureau wins? I am all for consensus, but it does not always happen.

Mr Reid: Joint decisions relate specifically to committee travel and to members' travel outside the United Kingdom. Such matters will be batted backwards and forwards. I anticipate that there would normally be agreement, but in the event of disagreement, the matter would go to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. That was the joint view of the conveners and the bureau. I ask Elizabeth Watson to add to that.

Elizabeth Watson (Scottish Parliament Directorate of Clerking and Reporting): The way that the proposed standing orders are drafted reflects the present informal practice. In connection with travel requests for the location of committee meetings and travel outside the UK, the conveners liaison group—as it is called just now—forms a view and reports it to the Parliamentary Bureau to allow the bureau to carry out its formal role under standing orders.

The way in which that has been formalised recognises that under standing orders the conveners group will act consensually. If the group is unable to take a decision or it is taking too long to do so, the bureau can apply a time limit and require the group to report back. In the event that there is no consensus between the conveners

group and the bureau, the matter can go to the SPCB for a final decision. That would be exceptionally rare, given that it has not happened in the entire time during which we have been operating informally.

Donald Gorrie: I have another question that is more philosophical, if that is the right word. For whom do the conveners attending the conveners group speak? Do they speak for themselves, to give their personal view? Do they speak formally for their committee, or is there party influence? I ask about the party influence, because the quorum rule says that members from three parties must be present. That suggests that party allegiance enters the equation.

Mr Reid: That is a good question. I think that conveners would speak for their committees. That has largely been our experience.

The position on a quorum is written in, because there could be an informal situation in which five or six members from only one group could take a view. We require a quorum in order to get a balanced view across the piece. Elizabeth Watson has been an observer for some time.

Elizabeth Watson: My experience of the group is that it tries to work consensually. It is useful to have a spread of views from the parties, particularly when the conveners are discussing guidance on the operation of committees.

Mr Reid: It is not unusual—in fact it is probably more common in the group—for points to be pursued on a cross-party basis if there is disagreement.

The Convener: I should of course have welcomed Elizabeth Watson to the committee—it was an oversight that I did not. Elizabeth is with us so often that it is natural to take her for granted.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I was not at the meeting in September 2000 when we discussed this matter and I do not necessarily want to unpick the agreements that have been put in place. I agree that there is a need for the conveners group. Given the way that the Parliament goes about its business, the conveners reflect more of a back-bench or parliamentary role, as opposed to an Executive role.

I am slightly unclear about the nature of the conveners group and I am uneasy. I can see that in practice the group has been consensual and has evolved successfully in the current session. We are putting down procedures and rules to govern what will be in place in different circumstances and with different people in the group. I am not sure that I can see coherence.

The group is not a committee and it meets in private. I have reservations about the fact that we are stating in the standing orders that the group

should always meet in private. I can understand why it should meet in private in certain situations. However, if the conveners group always meets in private we will have less information about what it is discussing than we have about the bureau, which at least publishes its minutes and is accountable to members through the business managers and party groups. As far as I am aware, conveners as a rule—at least the conveners of the committees on which I serve—tend not to report back to committee members about what has been discussed at the conveners liaison group. We might need to build some form of accountability in to the conveners group because that does not exist at present.

The conveners liaison group is there to be consulted. I thoroughly admire the fact that it works consensually, that no votes are taken and that matters proceed only with the group's agreement. However, in some cases the group seems to be on a par with the Parliamentary Bureau, in some cases it is a body that the Parliamentary Bureau can consult and in other cases it can be consulted by the SPCB. Under proposed rule 6A.2, the function of the group will be

“to report to and be consulted by the Parliamentary Bureau”,

but also

“to decide with the Parliamentary Bureau”

in certain situations. Why is the group's function to be consulted in some situations and to decide in other situations? Is there further work to be done on clarifying the role?

Mr Reid: I am grateful that you are not starting the process of unpicking. That has gone on for a substantial period. As you have conceded, the group has worked consensually from the start. One question that the convener has asked is why the group should be constituted at all. The answer is that otherwise the group would have to come together for reasons of resources and would do everything for everyone all the time. There must be clarity about the purpose of the group.

There is a clear role for the group in relation to resources. One issue that we consider is how resources should be proportioned among committees. There is also a clear role in the occasional turf war over who does what. With quiet diplomacy in the conveners liaison group, such issues can often be eased out of the way. On travel, participation and research, conveners must find out what other conveners are doing and share practice.

I said earlier that the group is not about power; it is not another leg of the parliamentary institution. It is about influence. The conveners group has the right to be consulted and the right to advise. Given

that the committees are the workhorses or the engine room of the Parliament, it is right that the Parliament should encourage the sharing of experience and that it should allow the group to consider travel, research and participation and come to a common view. The most significant point, which bodes well for the future, is that the group has never failed to come to a common view.

The Convener: What is your view on the publication of a minute, as per the SPCB, or a résumé of decisions, as per the Parliamentary Bureau?

Mr Reid: I have three points on that. The first is that the Parliamentary Bureau meets in private and much of the business with which the conveners liaison group deals relates to bureau business. There is a degree of reciprocity. Number 2, if we are seeking consensus, it is far better for people to work together informally. If the group's reporting and decision-making structures became totally formalised, the group might become polarised. Number 3, the group publishes a list of its decisions on the website.

Mr Macintosh: Why is it that in some situations the group reports to and is consulted on, when in others it decides? Why should it not just report and be consulted on? That is perhaps what I was straining to get at earlier.

Mr Reid: I ask Elizabeth Watson to answer that because the question relates to specific issues about standing orders.

Elizabeth Watson: I am thinking back to the discussions in the bureau and the conveners liaison group when the joint reference was formulated, at which I was present. The situations in which the bureau consults the group relate principally to business management, such as which should be the lead committee on a certain matter. The bureau is responsible for business management and takes the final decision, but it consults the conveners group. Business management considerations weigh heavily in decisions about which committee should take the lead. That is not in connection with the allocation of bills, only with inquiries. The bureau felt strongly—and the conveners group recognised—that it was appropriate for the decision-making power to remain with the bureau in such situations.

There is joint decision making on travel and the location of committee meetings. In those cases, it was recognised that the conveners liaison group had much more of a decision-making interest, particularly when the group was able to take an overview of the resources available to committees—not only financial resources for travelling, but support service resources. The group would be able to consider the overall

committee meeting pattern and judge how any travelling would fit in. That was why both bodies considered that it was appropriate for there to be a joint decision-making function.

09:45

Mr Reid: I can give an example of the ways in which consensual work and diplomacy can be advantageous to the Parliament. About a month ago, we had as many as nine bids for committee half days in the chamber. That could have been quite fraught, with various conveners wanting their business given priority. However, by working consensually through the group, we came up with an agreed timetable. Such a process can only be good for the Parliament.

Mr Macintosh: I acknowledge that and applaud the record of the conveners liaison group. However, that leaves unanswered the question of whether the conveners liaison group should be deciding on such matters. If a consensual decision is made, that recommendation will carry a huge amount of weight. However, the conveners liaison group is not an accountable body, whereas the other bodies in the Parliament have more accountable mechanisms, even if they are flawed. I do not see the advantage in creating another decision-making body, but I can see the advantage in having the conveners liaison group as a consultative body that makes recommendations.

At present, does responsibility lie with the SPCB or the Parliamentary Bureau for decisions relating to travel and meetings around Scotland?

Elizabeth Watson: That responsibility lies with the Parliamentary Bureau.

Mr Macintosh: Why would we want to change that? Why not simply make a recommendation on the understanding that the conveners liaison group should be consulted and that its view will carry huge weight?

Mr Reid: It is not about decision making. It is perfectly clear that in any organisation like a Parliament, there can be only one centre of decision making. Our standing orders say that that should be either the Parliamentary Bureau or the SPCB, as appropriate. The conveners liaison group plays a similar role to that played by the Queen in Westminster: it has the right to be consulted and to advise. The information that is brought by the conveners liaison group to the Parliamentary Bureau informs its decisions. The chairman of the group has a key role in that he can act as tic-tac man and pass information to the Parliamentary Bureau or the SPCB. That is how institutions function.

Mr Macintosh: The strongest argument for the

conveners liaison group is that it has worked and continues to work. I am concerned about what might happen in the future. As I said, there appears to be no logic and no coherence to what we are doing. We are setting up a committee that has no parallel that I can see. There is logic in having a group that is there to allow all conveners to come to a common position. That would be an influential body, but it would not be a decision-making body.

I have concerns about the suggested rule 8.13.A, which is headed "Motions on competence" and deals with ways in which disputes can be resolved. Those ways seem rather restrictive:

"any one member of the Parliamentary Bureau or Conveners' Group against the motion may speak in a motion mentioned in Rule 6.13.2, and each speaker may speak for no more than 5 minutes."

That procedure seems cumbersome and I am not sure why we are writing it in, especially as we have never had a procedure like it before. If we were to leave the decision-making process as it is, but set up the conveners liaison group as a consultative body, that might make more sense.

The proposed rule 6A.3 is about the Presiding Officer chairing meetings of the conveners group. My concern relates to a situation in which a convener is also a Deputy Presiding Officer. I do not know what would happen in that situation. Perhaps you could tell me what happens at the moment and whether you think that that might cause problems.

The Convener: At the moment, if I remember, I invite you to go to the meeting if I am not going.

There is a bit of a premium on my going, because I attend the CLG usually when it needs to discuss a Procedures Committee issue, such as the recent suggestion of a code or standing order on committee reports, or more probably, when we are a party short, and I am hustled up the stairs to create a third-party presence at the meeting. That happens because the conveners liaison group tends to meet when the Rural Development Committee meets, which takes out the other Conservative convener and one Liberal Democrat convener. Therefore, I tend to be present only when that is necessary for the party-political balance.

In theory, I could convene the conveners liaison group. Nothing prevents that, but that would not necessarily be good practice. However, that position could arise if both Deputy Presiding Officers were committee conveners.

Mr Reid: The committee must be absolutely clear about the proposals. The Presiding Officer has the right to occupy the chair. When Mr Tosh or I deputise in that function, we become Sir David Steel. An act of transubstantiation takes place. In

the chair, we are obliged to be neutral and impartial. That is probably better than the proposal that conveners should elect their own chair. If that happened, the biggest group would probably determine the chairmanship, which would take the group reasonably down the road towards being politicised.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I repeat that I am a member of the Parliamentary Bureau and have seen the paper as part of my bureau membership. Having been a bureau member for the past 14 months or so, I know that the paper has evolved and gone backwards and forwards between the bureau and the CLG. I am struck that the paper has evolved to its present state with agreement from the CLG and the bureau.

It might help us to approve the paper if we clarified annexe A, which is about two years old and is probably confusing. It may give the impression that we are giving the CLG more decision-making powers over business management, which is not the case, as Elizabeth Watson said. The decision-making issues to which Ken Macintosh referred tend to involve commonsense matters such as resource management, visits and research.

My plea is that, if we approve the paper, we should update annexe A to reflect standing orders. For example, the annexe deals with possible disputes over the creation of sub-committees, but the CLG and the bureau no longer consider that point relevant. Donald Gorrie asked what would happen if a dispute arose and referred to a recommendation that no longer exists.

Either we do not recognise the CLG or we do. The evolution so far suggests that we recognise the CLG. We do not intend to unpick the principle of it. If a body is meeting and making important recommendations and decisions—as opposed to being something that has evolved, which we could have got away with for a year, 18 months or two years—it is incumbent on us to ensure that that body exists in standing orders. That will go some way towards giving the body the accountability to which Ken Macintosh referred.

If people have disputes about what the CLG does on our behalf, they should be able to raise them under standing orders with the Presiding Officer, who ultimately has control and power, beneath the Parliament.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I have a simple question for George Reid. What would be the impact of our not approving the paper?

Mr Reid: I do not know. It would be up to the conveners, in an inchoate and anarchic way, to decide whether to meet informally. If we go all the way back to the beginning, we can see that

nothing stops people from meeting informally. The conveners could talk about anything that they wanted to and go down the route of talking about anything and everything all the time.

This is a modest little proposal. As Fiona Hyslop said, it provides accountability. As Ken Macintosh said, the group has been praised for reaching consensus and for its work, flexibility and diplomacy. That is far better than returning to stage 1 and starting to unpick.

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I apologise for missing the beginning of the discussion. I was not a member of the committee when the issue was first discussed and members will be pleased to hear that I do not want to start unpicking everything that has gone before. On the basis of what I have read and heard, I am content with the broad thrust of what is proposed. I am also instinctively attracted to mechanisms that can help to oil the wheels of the Parliament in the least bureaucratic and resource-intensive way possible.

The conveners liaison group has evolved and added value to the operation of the Parliament. Let us look ahead to how it might evolve further and how we might share some of the learning experience that is taking place in that group. My questions are tangentially related to the substance of this morning's discussion and are, if anything, related more closely to our next agenda item. First, what mechanisms exist to capture what the group has done at the end of a year? I am not talking about a minute of a meeting or a record of decisions, but about a stocktake or a mini-annual report that would serve the interests of transparency. It is appropriate that meetings of the conveners liaison group take place in private, for the reasons that have been outlined, but that could be countered by something that draws the group's work together at the end of the year. I am not sure what exists, in that regard, at present.

Secondly, what mechanisms—if any—are in place to capture learning and share good practice in a more structured way, particularly in relation to some of the points that are raised in annexe A about developing

"innovative ways of engaging with civic society"

and so on? We have stumbled on some of those during our CSG inquiry, but I have never seen anything that addresses that issue comprehensively. The conveners liaison group has played an important role in that regard and could play a greater role in helping to inform the debate as the Parliament continues to evolve.

Mr Reid: We have put together a good practice guide for conveners, which is full of practical, hands-on stuff. That is growing all the time and is available to all conveners and committee

members, and it will be a pretty useful document when the Parliament meets in the new session. There are also papers on civic participation, which contain a good pull-together of what people have done, from sitting in Gypsy Traveller caravans to the big set pieces in the Parliament. It would not be impossible to produce a resource paper to go with that, and I would like to see that done.

The issues that you have raised have been raised in the conveners liaison group. Perhaps we are a bit short on institutional memory of the first session. Between now and March, we will try to identify what did and did not work and what might be done. It is not a question of insisting that those things be done, but of writing down our collective experiences of what came out of the first session's committees and making that available to the bureau, the corporate body and the incoming conveners in the new session.

Donald Gorrie: I want to pursue the point that Ken Macintosh raised, about there being a debate in the Parliament, with two speakers each given five minutes, if there is a dispute. I questioned that when the matter arose before. Mike Russell said how stupid I was, and the convener seemed to agree with him.

The Convener: Not on that, Donald.

Donald Gorrie: Given the consensus that exists among members, a dispute must be fairly serious if it goes before the Parliament. At the moment, the debate is limited to a spokesman for the bureau or the corporate body saying something and one person from the aggrieved conveners liaison group speaking against that. The whole outside world is kept out of it. The debate is like a medieval joust: we are allowed only to watch it, not to take part. It is not a big deal and I would not vote against the proposals as a whole, but I share Ken Macintosh's concerns.

The Convener: That is more akin to the debate that we sometimes have on a business motion. One would expect a business motion to have been resolved in the bureau and to be agreed by the Parliament, but sometimes there is disagreement and we have a debate. That is limited because it is intended to be a way of placing the issues on the record and reaching a decision on them quickly.

The conveners group operates on the basis of seeking to agree everything. If it cannot agree on a line, a decision is not taken. However, because a decision must be taken on the issues that are covered here, the rules must specify a mechanism for arriving at a decision. No one wants that to be a weekly feature of plenary debate in the Parliament: it is a weapon of last resort.

10:00

Mr Reid: I agree completely. This is not a great constitutional battle or theory. It is highly unlikely that we will ever be faced with the situation that has been described. Lawyers like things to be tickety-boo. This is one of the issues that delayed completion of the proposals after they were sent to our lawyers, who advised strongly that we should include in the proposals the provision that has been outlined. However, I do not envisage its ever being needed.

Mr Macintosh: I hope that not agreeing the proposals today would not mean unpicking three years of work. That would be a horrific prospect. I have concerns about the accountability of the CLG and the transparency of its operation. We need to consider whether the group will make decisions on resource management issues or whether it will just be consulted on those. I can see that there is a difference between decisions on resource management issues and other decisions. However, what is the difference between the CLG making a recommendation and its making a decision? If the group is a consensual body and there has been little disagreement between it and the bureau, surely one would expect every recommendation it makes to be approved by the bureau. The lines of accountability would then be much clearer.

I suggest that further work needs to be done on accountability mechanisms, such as an annual report. Before we proceed to amend standing orders, we need to know how the CLG will publish notes or minutes of its meetings.

The Convener: Do you want to deal with the first point?

Mr Reid: Susan Deacon was right to say that this is not a great bureaucratic or power exercise. In any institution it is good to have fluid bodies that oil the wheels. That is what the conveners liaison group does. It has done so consensually and with some success.

The Convener: I have not yet attempted to steer the discussion and have given members an opportunity to have their say. I will now offer my tuppence worth.

I will have difficulty persuading George Reid that I did not speak to Kenneth Macintosh about this issue. Some of the views that he has expressed reflect the attitude that I took to the proposal that the conveners liaison group be enshrined in standing orders. The overwhelming majority of conveners at the time—and in all subsequent discussions—argued that the group should be enshrined in standing orders. It is fair and proper that I should put that on the record.

We now need to reach a decision on this matter.

The group exists and functions on an informal and private basis. Given that it has a role, it is preferable that its existence should be acknowledged and that the existing reporting mechanism should be enshrined in standing orders. I am prepared to accept that there may be deficiencies in what has been proposed: the reporting mechanism may need to be beefed up. However, there is no good argument for not proceeding to recommend the changes to standing orders that have been negotiated over a long period and that have been adjusted to accommodate the desires of the conveners group with the bureau's natural concern to retain overall responsibility for business management. The committee should agree to recommend that the Parliament approve the changes to standing orders that are set out in annexe B of the paper.

I am happy to continue to debate this matter. I do not want to stifle the discussion—we have all morning. I say that not as a threat but as an opportunity. I must collect some views on whether we should proceed or whether we should do further strengthening work on the areas about which Ken Macintosh has concerns. The committee might not want to proceed at all. We should test matters, to find out what the committee's decision will be.

Mr Paterson: By and large, I support what you said, convener. It strikes me that all the information and recommendations we have suggest that everything is fine, but that some bits and pieces need to be put in place to obtain recognition. I have often mentioned the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and the Parliamentary Bureau. I am not a shrinking violet in requesting the production of minutes and agendas. That is my standpoint. Ken Macintosh's fears concern something that might happen. Until it does, I would be more than satisfied with what has been suggested. One or two questions have already been answered, so I did not need to ask George Reid about them. I am happy to proceed.

Susan Deacon: I am happy to proceed. In reflecting on how we have operated as an institution in the early years, we must note our tendency to get stuck in a loop on some issues. I think that we are ready to move on.

Fiona Hyslop: I agree with Susan Deacon.

Donald Gorrie: I support agreeing our proposals. Perhaps some of the points that have been raised in our annual report could be adopted as well. If practice shows that some of the proposals—five-minute speeches, for example—do not work effectively, we will be able to put things right. People have done a great deal of work and if the participants are agreed, we should give it a shot.

Mr Macintosh: Although I have stated my concerns, I will show that I am a consensual politician by not standing in the way.

The Convener: The conveners liaison group would be wise to consider some of the points that Mr Macintosh raised. Now that the CLG will achieve the legitimacy in standing orders that it has sought, it ought to reflect on its accountability and the reporting back mechanisms. George Reid indicated that there is some work to do on that.

I invite members to approve the standing orders that are set out in annexe B of the report. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank Mr Reid and Mrs Watson for their attendance.

Consultative Steering Group Inquiry

The Convener: Item 2 deals with the consultative steering group inquiry. Another period of parliamentary time has passed—we are about to hit another recess. We are conscious of not having updated the committee on the progress of the CSG inquiry. John Patterson will bring us up to date on progress towards finalising the report.

John Patterson (Clerk): I have just a few words to say. We are finishing the text of the first draft, which is about 50,000 words long at the moment. By the time we finish it, it will probably be about 55,000 words long. We are almost there. The draft report has no status at the moment—it simply represents the clerks' cut at the issue. The report has not gone anywhere else.

I indicated in correspondence that I hope the report will be circulated later this month or early next month. It is up to the committee to decide how to proceed with the process. I will point out the relative shortness of time that remains in this parliamentary session. There will be great pressure on chamber time from the beginning of February. That impacts on the notion that, in moving from an interim report to a final report, we might allow enough time between those stages for a reasonable response period from the outside world.

Fiona Hyslop: I also give my apologies, as I will have to leave in a few minutes. I am concerned about the pace at which the report is developing. I am aware of the good work that the clerks are doing to prepare the report. It has been some time since we last met and discussed it all. I am keen that we should have an opportunity to reflect not so much on the substance of the report as on the key recommendations and agree them. We should ensure that we are all speaking with one voice and understand the key issues.

I am conscious that we have a responsibility to get as much of this as we can through and implemented in time for the next session of Parliament. I agree with John Patterson that the parliamentary timetable is congested, should we want to present the report and make any recommendations on standing orders and so on before the dissolution of Parliament. I am more interested in having the main arguments and recommendations agreed. It is essential that we have the opportunity to take the matter to the chamber, debate it and, I hope, agree it before dissolution.

The Convener: We had a seminar to discuss the direction that the report might take. Do members want another meeting of that nature,

perhaps a week or so after we receive a draft of the report, so that we have the basis for a discussion?

Donald Gorrie: An informal meeting over a coffee would be very helpful. If the full report is not available it would be helpful, to take up the point that Fiona Hyslop raised, to have a sheet with bullet points. If there is consensus around some of the main possible recommendations, that would be helpful to the future discussion. Each of us has bees in our bonnet, so if we were talking about a whole document we could easily discuss paragraph 215 at great length and miss the full picture.

The Convener: That is an important point.

Susan Deacon: I echo the comments that Fiona Hyslop and Donald Gorrie made. Timing is of the essence. I am more than happy for there to be a further informal meeting. I share the view that the emphasis of the meeting, and of any papers that we consider, ought to be on the recommendations and the action that we see flowing from the report. The sooner we can do that, the better.

The Convener: Professor McCrone assisted us when we held the previous seminar and in our work at that stage. He is no longer contracted to us. Do you want him to be involved in the seminar?

Mr Paterson: If he does it for nothing.

Donald Gorrie: He made a very good contribution.

The Convener: I think that he would probably be happy to come along and be involved at this stage, but I wanted to put that to the committee for its agreement.

Mr Macintosh: I suggest that a paper be produced on the timing options that are available to us. We are slightly out of sync with the timetable that we originally anticipated.

The Convener: It would be helpful to spell out for the benefit of us all the amount of committee time that is still agreed to be available; it is now all after Christmas. I understand that the Executive may be reluctant to make additional committee time available for the good reason that it has a considerable number of bills that it needs to finalise before the end of March. We may have a relatively short window in January and early February when we can get parliamentary time. We must hit that target. That will require the agreement of the conveners group, which agrees the allocation of committee time. Our bid is on the record. The conveners group knows that it is coming and there is a lot of interest in the report from other committees and other conveners. I am optimistic that we can get the time, so long as we are in a position to move within a time frame that

the business bureau can accommodate.

We will get all that written up. We cannot arrange or announce anything at this stage, because we do not have the draft report, but when the draft report is ready we will have a seminar and we will discuss the presentation of the report, the production of the interim report, the timing of everything and the opportunity that we said we would provide for further consultation.

Susan Deacon: What is the time scale for holding that meeting? I am worried that if we wait for the draft report before we have that meeting, we could lose further weeks.

The Convener: The meeting has to be held when we have something to discuss. John Patterson has stated when he hopes to have the draft report available. In a sense, I am at the committee's disposal. Do members want a day's notice or a week's notice? The report will be substantial, but it will contain the principal recommendations, so it might be possible to assimilate that information quickly and proceed relatively quickly to the seminar.

Susan Deacon: That is what I was alluding to. That is consistent with other members' comments. We appreciate that getting the full report to the draft stage is a gargantuan task. Several of us have commented that if a summary document could be completed, that would be sufficient to enable us to have a meaningful seminar or discussion.

John Patterson: My intention is that a summary of recommendations and conclusions will be incorporated in whatever is sent to members, against the sort of time scale that has been discussed.

Donald Gorrie: Could we have a weekend to read the report and have a meeting the next week?

The Convener: That is the sort of time scale that we would consider.

That is all agreed. I thank members for their attendance.

Meeting closed at 10:15.

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