

PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 September 2005

Session 2

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PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

10th Meeting 2005, Session 2

CONVENER

*Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green)

*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Mr Bruce McFee (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

Murray Tosh (West of Scotland) (Con)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Andrew Mylne

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Jane McEwan

ASSISTANT CLERK

Jonathan Elliott

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Procedures Committee

Tuesday 13 September 2005

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:15*]

Interests

The Convener (Iain Smith): Good morning, colleagues, and welcome to the 10th meeting of the Procedures Committee in 2005 and the first meeting after the recess. I hope that you all got a break during the recess and have come back refreshed. Personally, I am emotionally drained after following the Ashes series. I do not know how I will cope with the next few weeks; I may have withdrawal symptoms.

I welcome Chris Ballance and Alex Johnstone to their first meeting of the committee. I also wish to put on record our appreciation of Jamie McGrigor's contribution to the committee over the past two years. We wanted to put our thanks on record, as at the last meeting he said that he would be leaving the committee. I ask Chris and Alex whether they have any relevant interests to declare.

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): I am not sure whether it is relevant, but the register of interests shows that I am a playwright, not earning this year, and a partner in a second-hand bookshop, earning a grand total of £1 this year.

The Convener: That may be of interest if you are selling second-hand copies of our reports. Alex?

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Thank you very much, convener. Having studied my entry in the register of members' interests, I consider that nothing that appears in it is relevant to my membership of the committee. Should that change, I will make you aware of that and make the relevant announcement at the time.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Convener, may I put on record the committee's thanks to you? I believe that you are moving on to pastures new. I do not understand how you could possibly want to do that, but you have made the decision. It has been a pleasure working with you and I wish you the very best as convener of the Education Committee, a position that I previously held.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that, Karen. I was going to advise the committee before we went into private session that this will probably be my last meeting of the Procedures Committee. I expect to be replaced as the Liberal Democrat member on the committee shortly.

I wish to place on record my appreciation to all committee members for their support and for the sometimes interesting debates that we have had over the past two years. In particular, I give my thanks to members of the clerking team for the excellent job that they have done in keeping us right. Without their support, no one could do the job of convening the Procedures Committee.

Oral Questions

10:18

The Convener: We agreed at our last meeting that we would take items 3 and 4, which are on draft reports, in private. Therefore, the only item to discuss in public today is item 2, which concerns a note from the clerk on a request from the Parliamentary Bureau to look again at question time. I am looking for comments from committee members before I make my own comments on the matter.

Karen Gillon: I am not convinced by the case, to be honest. In First Minister's question time, the Presiding Officer has the discretion to call a member after either of the first two questions on any subject. If a member has a pressing supplementary question that was not going to be asked in questions 3, 4, 5 or 6, the Presiding Officer has the discretion to call that member after either the leader of the Opposition or the leader of the Conservative party, as things stand at the moment. It is unnecessary to change the rules to accommodate what can already happen.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I agree with Karen Gillon. I am not aware of the information that the Presiding Officer has that prompted him to make this request. We have had an extensive review of how First Minister's question time and question time generally operate. Had the matter that has been raised been an issue at the time, I am sure that the committee would have considered it. From time to time there may be emergencies and members may be unable to attend. However, as Karen Gillon said, the Presiding Officer has adequate discretion to deal with such situations. A change is unnecessary.

Mr Bruce McFee (West of Scotland) (SNP): I wonder what the background to the request is. Why, all of a sudden, has the matter become an issue? I was not aware of any specific instances that would make it necessary to change rule 13.7.4. If the request was triggered by specific instances, we should know what those instances were and when they happened.

Frankly, given that the committee has just held a review of question time, I wonder why the matter was not brought to our attention if it was such a burning issue. To agree to a request to revisit an issue—and there seems to be no evidence that it is an issue—would probably be a waste of everybody's time.

The Convener: As far as I am aware, the only information that we have received is the letter from the Presiding Officer asking us to look at the matter. We have not received any other information about why the request has been made.

Do members have any other comments? Perhaps that is unfair on Alex Johnstone and Chris Ballance—they are new members and the committee has a great history on this issue.

Chris Ballance: If we write to the Presiding Officer to say that we feel that there is no need to attend to the issue, perhaps we could refer to our understanding that he has the discretion to call members to ask supplementary questions instead of the member who lodged the main question.

Alex Johnstone: Any view expressed by the Presiding Officer should have particular relevance to the committee and to the whole Parliament. However, having looked briefly at the note that the committee received, I do not see a great deal of evidence to support the desire to change the rule. Nonetheless, out of respect for the Presiding Officer, we should include any additional support and remarks that we have on the matter in our communication with him.

The Convener: Cathie Craigie and Karen Gillon have expressed my view on the matter fairly clearly—although I expressed it in somewhat fruitier language when the clerk raised the matter with me initially. Frankly, the committee has spent considerable time on oral questions over the past two years. The present arrangements for First Minister's question time have been in place for the best part of two years. There was adequate opportunity for suggested changes when we carried out our final review in the early part of 2005. I would be unwilling to reopen the matter unless there was very strong evidence for the need for change. The bureau or the Presiding Officer may in future write to the committee with such evidence, but at this stage I recommend to the committee that we do not add changing rule 13.7.4 to our work programme. Do members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

10:23

Meeting continued in private until 12:34.

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