

# **PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 19 June 2007

Session 3

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## PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

1<sup>st</sup> Meeting 2007, Session 3

### OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER

\*John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Bashir Ahmad (Glasgow) (SNP)  
\*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
\*Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP)  
\*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)  
\*Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP)  
\*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)  
\*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

### COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

\*attended

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Peter McGrath

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Hough

### LOCATION

Committee Room 2



# Scottish Parliament

## Public Petitions Committee

*Tuesday 19 June 2007*

[THE OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER *opened the meeting at 14:02*]

### Interests

**John Farquhar Munro (Oldest Committee Member):** Good afternoon, folks, and welcome to the first meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in the third session of the Scottish Parliament. Members may find it strange that I am sitting where I am, but there is a reason for that, which does not please me. I am the oldest member of the committee and consequently have to start our proceedings. Another thing that I have discovered is that, for some strange reason, I am the father of the house. I could do without that.

I ask everybody who has their mobile phone turned on to switch it off please, so that proceedings are not interrupted. We have received one apology only, from Robin Harper.

The register of members' interests has been circulated to all members—I take it that all members have already signed it. I ask those with any further interests to declare to do so now.

**Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP):** I have no relevant interests to declare, but I may find that when we consider petitions, I have an interest to declare that is not apparent to me right now.

**Bashir Ahmad (Glasgow) (SNP):** I, too, have nothing to declare.

**Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP):** I have nothing to declare in addition to my entry in the register of members' interests. However, given that the committee's remit is rather wide, I want to state something for the record. I have been a social worker—my field of practice was mental health; I worked with mentally disordered offenders—and a local government councillor. There is no obvious conflict of interest at the moment, but I may have to declare an interest in the future.

**John Farquhar Munro:** Members will use their discretion when the committee is debating subjects.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I have no interests to declare, but I may need to point out an interest if I think that a conflict of interests could arise.

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I have no interests to declare.

**Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):** I have no interests to declare that are relevant to the committee's work. However, I will, obviously, use my discretion if I think that I need to declare an interest in an issue.

**John Farquhar Munro:** I am in the same position. I have declared my interests and signed the register; I have no further interests to declare at this stage.

**Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab):** My interests will appear in the register of members' interests. Like other members, I will provide notification if an issue arises in subsequent meetings.

## Convener

14:06

**John Farquhar Munro:** Agenda item 2 is the choice of the committee's convener. Members are aware that the Parliament has agreed that only members of the Labour Party are eligible to be nominated as convener of the committee. That being the case, I seek nominations for the position.

**Rhoda Grant:** I nominate Frank McAveety.

**Claire Baker:** I second that nomination.

*Mr Frank McAveety was chosen as convener.*

**John Farquhar Munro:** I demit office and pass over to our illustrious convener.

**The Convener (Mr Frank McAveety):** I thank John Farquhar Munro for his sterling work and members for their support.

## Deputy Convener

14:07

**The Convener:** Agenda item 3 is the choice of the committee's deputy convener. Members have a note from the clerk that sets out the selection procedure. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish Liberal Democrats are eligible to be chosen as the committee's deputy convener. That being the case, I invite nominations for the position.

**Tricia Marwick:** With pleasure, I nominate John Farquhar Munro.

**Bashir Ahmad:** I second that nomination.

*John Farquhar Munro was chosen as deputy convener.*

**The Convener:** Welcome aboard, John.

**John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD):** I thank members.

**The Convener:** An interesting double act has been chosen. Let us see what the future holds for both of us.

## Work Programme

14:08

**The Convener:** Agenda item 4 is consideration of the committee's approach to developing a work programme. I am conscious that members have other commitments this afternoon, but I want us to be clear about how far we want to project for future committee meetings.

The clerks have produced a paper on the work programme for the next period. Several issues relating to that programme have implications for committee members. A number of petitions have built up from before the Parliament was dissolved, and there are several issues that we must address. We should work through the key points in paper PE/S3/07/1/3, on workload issues, as quickly as possible; we will then have a clear picture of our work programme for the next few months or the next year.

**Nanette Milne:** Having read the papers, I would be happy if the committee met on a weekly basis to clear the backlog. I am not suggesting that we should meet every week permanently, but we could do so to try to catch up with our work. That is the third suggestion on the final page of the paper.

**The Convener:** I ask the clerks to give their views. There are many petitions that require to be dealt with by the committee—is our time being used as effectively as possible in doing that? Could things be rejigged? I am concerned that there will be implications for members if we have weekly meetings. Perhaps we could have weekly meetings for a short time, but we would need to be self-contained. We should consider how petitions can be dealt with. I am concerned that we have not yet been able to deal with a number of petitions in the system, and would prefer the committee to spend its time trying to get through as many of those petitions as possible without our necessarily having the burden of big evidence sessions in the short to medium term.

**Peter McGrath (Clerk):** With respect, that raises a wide question about the best way of conducting business. It is probably best if I do not give an answer to your questions off the cuff. The committee could chew over the matter.

**The Convener:** But the committee has the right to explore the boundaries of the options.

**Peter McGrath:** It certainly does.

**The Convener:** Okay. That is what I am trying to establish.

**Tricia Marwick:** I am reluctant to move to weekly meetings. If we start doing that, despite our

best hopes now we will quickly find that weekly meetings are the norm rather than the exception.

I acknowledge that there is a backlog that needs to be dealt with, but I wondered whether, rather than our taking evidence on all the outstanding petitions, we could, for example, do an initial sift to see whether they could be referred to the subject committees. The difference between the previous session and this session, in terms of the subject committees' ability to deal with petitions, is that the subject committees do not have a heavy, or indeed any, legislative programme at this point. We would probably be looking to take evidence after the recess, but we cannot do an initial sift to try to get a lot of the petitions moved on to a subject committee and take evidence at the same time. We will simply not be able to deal with the amount of work involved.

**Rhoda Grant:** There is merit in that; there may also be merit in our not taking initial oral evidence when we are dealing with petitions, and in trying to group petitions, many of which must have similar subject areas. I agree that the subject committees probably do not have a huge workload at the moment. We may need to put something in place early on to deal with the number of petitions that are waiting to be dealt with, but that would not necessarily mean that we would pass them on to subject committees in the future.

**Nanette Milne:** I accept the comments about the subject committees, but having been a member of the previous Health Committee, which had to meet weekly to cope with its workload, I know that it was particularly difficult when petitions came to us. However, I accept that at this stage in the session it is probably okay, so I can go along with members' suggestions.

**Angela Constance:** My initial concern, having read the paper that was prepared by the clerks, is that if, having done little preparation or background work, we send petitions to the subject committees, those petitions that are admissible and which may or may not have a credible way forward may be poorly served. If we refer petitions automatically to subject committees without at least doing some examination, we may be doing them a disservice.

14:15

**The Convener:** There are two immediate issues. I am conscious of the volume of petitions but, because of the burdens on folk, I do not want the committee to have to meet weekly. At one stage I served on three committees, and I know how pulverising that is for members. Therefore, we could meet weekly for a short period in order to reduce the number of petitions as quickly as possible and then revert to fortnightly meetings.

That might deal with Tricia Marwick's legitimate concerns about time management.

Members have mentioned the quality of work that the Public Petitions Committee does in assisting petitions through the process and determining whether they end up being dealt with by a subject committee or by this committee. There are a few issues that we could discuss in that regard. The paper suggests that we could have an away day near the tail end of the recess. The committee should explore that. I would like to get a wee bit of guidance from members on how strongly they feel about these issues and whether we can deal with some of the concerns that have been raised.

**Rhoda Grant:** Rather than saying that we will have weekly meetings until the backlog is dealt with, we could set a strict time limit. We could say that we will meet every week between week X and week Y and that that will be an end to it. That might give members some comfort that weekly meetings will not become the norm. I have seen such situations arising and I do not think that they help anyone.

**Tricia Marwick:** We have only one week left before the recess and, with the best will in the world, there is a limit to what we can consider next week. Our priority is to try to deal with the backlog. Next week, we should make an initial consideration of the petitions that we have inherited and try to move them to the subject committees. I understand exactly what Angela Constance is saying but, with the best will in the world, the committee cannot examine all the issues that are raised by the petitions in the backlog, never mind the issues that will arise in the new ones that we will receive. Over the next week or so, our priority must be to deal with what we have inherited as opposed to what the committee has generated in its own time.

Come September, the subject committees will be a lot quieter than they have been for a long time. They are not carrying a backlog in the same way that this committee is, because there is no legislative work in the initial wee while. The committees might welcome the opportunity to consider petitions in a way that it is not open to us to do. Further, it is not necessarily the role of the Public Petitions Committee to examine in detail every petition that comes in. We are a sorting house; we consider petitions initially before sending them on to the most appropriate place, whether that is the Scottish Executive or a committee. The only way in which we will be able to deal with the petitions in our backlog is if we consider them with an eye to moving them on to the relevant subject committee as quickly as possible. That might mean that, come September,

we have got our feet clear and can consider how we want to deal with petitions in the future.

**John Farquhar Munro:** As Tricia Marwick says, we have only one week left before recess. If we could agree to meet for a full day next Tuesday, we could sift through the backlog and weed out—

**The Convener:** You can start the meeting, John, but you will be on your own.

Next week, we have a scheduled committee meeting at which it was intended that we would hear from petitioners. Have the petitioners been notified of that expectation?

**Peter McGrath:** Yes.

**The Convener:** So it is not as if we can move back from that position.

**Peter McGrath:** It would be within your power to move back from that position, but the petitioners have been notified that they will be able to attend the meeting.

**The Convener:** We will need to think about that carefully, if people have been notified.

**Rhoda Grant:** If people have been notified, it would be hugely disappointing for them to be told not to come. However, from now on, we should cease to take oral evidence from people until we have sifted through the petitions and decided what to do with the backlog. It takes more time to deal with a petition if we take oral evidence on it. There is a lot of merit in Tricia Marwick's suggestion. If we do a sift with an eye to deciding what can be sent to a subject committee and what can be sent to the Executive and carry out that process properly, no one need feel that their petition has not been dealt with properly as we will have ensured that people do not have to wait any longer for responses. It is not only the petitions that we have inherited that will require responses, but the new ones. There will be an expectation that the Parliament will deal with things quickly in the new session.

Our priority must be to sort out the backlog as soon as possible. We do not want to let people down, but we certainly do not want to build up an expectation that, in the near future, people will be able to give oral evidence.

**The Convener:** We want to come up with a sifting process that we can use to identify the petitions that can be referred quickly to other committees or to the Executive. It would be useful if the convener and the deputy convener could work with the clerks in that regard and bring a proposal to the committee.

Rather than haggling too much about the issues now, it would be better if we could agree to have an away day at the end of August. At that event, we could decide whether it would be appropriate

to meet weekly for a strictly time-limited period or do something else, depending on what has happened as a result of the filtering process that Tricia Marwick talked about.

I agree that we should not let down people who have been invited to speak to us next week. However, we should agree, as a principled position, that our priority is to deal with the volume of petitions. The way in which we do that might include dealing only with petitions rather than with petitioners at the committee meetings.

**Rhoda Grant:** Would it be too much work for the clerks to sift through the petitions between now and next week and bring us a paper to suggest the petitions that could be referred immediately to the subject committees? That would enable those petitioners to be called to give evidence to the subject committees immediately after the recess, when those committees probably will not have a lot to do. Perhaps the first meeting of the subject committees in September could deal with those petitions.

**The Convener:** The clerks have indicated to me that they could produce such a paper, so I suggest that they should. The approach might not necessarily make us popular at the next meeting of the Conveners Group, but that is life.

**Rhoda Grant:** You will have to deal with that.

**The Convener:** Exactly. Thanks for that burden of office.

Do members agree that we should have an away day near the end of August?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We will notify members of a suggested date as quickly as possible so that we can ensure that it does not conflict with family commitments or whatever else people need to do.

We will try to navigate our way through the concerns that members have raised. The message that we should send is that our priority is to deal with the volume of petitions and that we will try to put in place a structure that will ensure that, when we come back in September, we will be able to deal with that.

I am conscious that petitioners are used to dealing with the Public Petitions Committee in a certain way and that those who have observed the work of the committee will have certain expectations. Therefore, it is important that we manage the message that we send out in a way that ensures that there is no suggestion that we are trying to avoid engaging with the public. Indeed, I would argue that we are trying to maximise the engagement with the public in the way in which we deal with petitions. That is the core issue that people are concerned about.



I thank members for their attendance. Let us hope that the burden of this committee will not be as great as the burden of other committees.

*Meeting closed at 14:24.*



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