

RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 22 June 1999
(Afternoon)

Meeting 1

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THE OLDEST MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE:

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

MEMBERS:

*Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con)
*Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)
Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
*Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

*attended

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Richard Davies

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK:

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Tracey Hawe

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs Committee

Tuesday 22 June 1999

(Afternoon)

[THE OLDEST MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE *opened the meeting at 12:00*]

Mr John Munro (Oldest Member of the Committee): Good morning and welcome to the first meeting of the Rural Affairs Committee. It is an important committee with a lot to do. I am sure that many of you have particular interests and aspirations as to what we should debate, discuss and promote.

I am in the chair because I have the distinction of being the oldest member. That description is rather unfair—the most senior member would have been more acceptable. However, for my sins, here I am.

Interests

Mr Munro: Before we elect the convener, I remind you that we were all required to register our relevant interests by 18 June. I am sure that everyone has done that, but before we proceed I must ask whether anyone has any interest to declare that is relevant to this committee.

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): Does that include the interests that we declared when we lodged our statements?

Mr Munro: I understand that if you declared an interest on your statement that is relevant to this committee, we should hear about it; if you are quite happy with what is on your declaration, that is fine.

Alex Fergusson: It is only right that I say in the public forum of this committee that I own and farm some 1,600 acres in the south-west of Scotland. Half of that is tenanted out, so I have a landlord's interest as well as an agricultural and farming interest.

Mr Munro: Given the present difficulties in agriculture, I do not know whether to commiserate with you. Does any other member have an interest to declare?

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): Given that my colleague has declared his involvement in the farming industry, I would like to declare that I, too, am in the farming industry. I own and farm just under 400 acres in the north-east. I am also a member of the National Farmers Union and of the Scottish Landowners Federation.

Mr Munro: I do not aspire to the great acres that you gentlemen have. I am a crofter, with a small acreage in the Highlands. Anyone who knows anything about crofting will realise—and this is a bland statement—that a croft is a small parcel of land surrounded by legislation.

Convener

Mr Munro: Members will appreciate that the Parliament has decided that this committee will be convened by a member of the Conservative party. I invite anyone from that party with aspirations to chair this committee to step forward. We do not have to nominate and second, because the convener's party has already been decided—we need only nominate.

Alex Fergusson: As there are only two members of the Conservative party on the committee, I take pleasure in standing aside for my colleague, Alex Johnstone, who will make a good convener.

Mr Munro: Is everyone agreed?

Alex Johnstone was elected convener by acclamation.

Mr Munro: Thank you. I will now hand over to Mr Johnstone. We will need to change places, Mr Johnstone. You will find that this is a very comfortable chair.

The Convener (Alex Johnstone): I thank John Munro for chairing the first part of the meeting. I agree that this is a comfortable chair—I notice that it is fitted with wheels, which my previous chair did not have.

Remit

The Convener: We must now discuss what this committee will try to achieve during its four-year term. The remit of the committee is item 3 on the agenda. Note 3, which explains the item, reads:

"The Rural Affairs Committee has been established by the Parliament under rule 6.1 of the Standing Orders with the following remit.

To consider and report on matters relating to rural development, agriculture and fisheries and such other matters as fall within the responsibility of the Minister for Rural Affairs."

Of course, that relies on the definition of the responsibility of the Minister for Rural Affairs. At present, that is understood to be:

"Responsibility for policy in relation to rural development including agriculture, fisheries and forestry."

A number of subjects that this committee may wish to consider cross into areas for which other committees have responsibility. For that reason, we must establish what areas we are interested in.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): It is important to establish at the outset that we cover the whole range of rural development. A very helpful list was provided by the clerk in the briefing paper, which covers the four areas of agriculture, fisheries, forestry and other issues affecting rural affairs. If we are planning ahead on a four-year basis, we should consider distributing our attention across those key industries as well as the wider issues affecting rural development.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I am happy with the list of issues, but other issues that affect rural areas fall within the remit of other committees. For example, certain educational initiatives may have particular effects on rural areas. It could be difficult to implement higher still in areas that have small secondary schools. Pre-five legislation has a particular impact and causes particular problems in rural areas. There may be times when we want to make representations to other committees because particular issues have an effect on rural areas or because a rural dimension must be considered. Will we be able to make those representations?

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I concur with the comments that have been made. We may want to prioritise a number of issues, some of which have already come to the Parliament's attention. For example, I draw members' attention to the letter that we received this morning from the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. It outlines the importance of the fishing industry to Scotland, and contains the line:

"I trust that we may look forward to the Committee's interest in such acute issues as the current boundary dispute and, more importantly, the development of a strategic vision for fishing."

It is important that we set priorities, and I would like to discuss them at some point.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): One way of prioritising some of the issues that are not directly related to agriculture, fisheries or forestry is to tease out the remit in more detail. The remit lists global issues—such as transport—with no subheadings. Poverty and rural areas, social inclusion and access to information are all contained under one subheading, whereas each of those categories contains many issues to be considered. One way forward would be to tease out the various issues that might be relevant.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Our remit depends on what is understood to fall within the responsibility of the Minister for Rural Affairs, but it is important to clarify, for the record, that that is qualified by the words "and such other matters". We are not precluded from discussing anything that we think falls under the heading rural development, whether or not it is the minister's responsibility.

As other members have said, rural transport, rural education and rural housing are all very important issues. We certainly do not want to get hemmed in by being simply an agriculture and fisheries committee, which might happen if we are not careful.

The Convener: Would anyone like to comment on some of the issues that relate to the more traditional aspects of the committee's role and the relationship that they should have to the ones that we have just discussed?

Alex Fergusson: Forestry, one of the traditional aspects, will be a fascinating industry in the next 10 years. Output is expected to double during that time and yet it is cheaper at the moment to buy a fencing stob in Latvia than it is to manufacture it in Scotland.

Part of this Parliament's role must be to examine ways in which we can use primary produce from rural areas and use it to added value in the areas in which it is produced. Forestry is just one example of an area in which we will have an important role to play. I do not disagree at all with what other members have said.

Lewis Macdonald: What thoughts have you had about timetabling the procedures of the committee, Mr Johnstone? When do you want to proceed with detailed examination? Do you intend that the committee should meet again before 1 July?

The Convener: It has been suggested that the committee may want to hold a briefing session in the near future. At that session, we could bring in people to advise us and to contribute to the early stages of the committee's development; we could also consider the continuing development of the committee's work. We should do that to clear up anything that we need to learn now and anything that we need to decide at this early stage; that will enable us to start work after the recess.

Mr Macdonald suggested the week of 1 July and similar suggestions were made to me, informally, before this meeting. Do members of the committee consider it appropriate for a briefing session to be organised for the early part of next week?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The clerk suggests that Monday may be the most appropriate day.

Alex Fergusson: Is the clerk suggesting that or telling you that?

The Convener: The clerk says that there are committee meetings on Tuesday.

Lewis Macdonald: May I suggest that, if we are to have an informal briefing meeting, we may not require a room with all the facilities that this room has. I have existing commitments on Monday,

which would make that a difficult day. The same may be true of other members. Is it possible to hold the meeting on Tuesday?

The Convener: Tuesday may be appropriate. Would someone like to suggest a time?

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I suggest 2.30 pm.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Members of the Finance Committee suggested having a day for informal briefings during the recess. It might be useful to have a full day, in an informal setting, having briefings on such issues as the European policies that affect the work of this committee.

The Convener: That is what we hope to initiate in the meeting that is proposed for next Tuesday. We could decide at the end of that meeting exactly how we want to progress thereafter.

Dr Murray: I want to make a rather more general point about where we meet. It seems inappropriate that the Rural Affairs Committee should always meet in Edinburgh, in the centre of a city. If any committee should travel to other parts of Scotland, particularly to the rural areas, this committee should. All members of the committee believe that we should travel around and use alternative venues.

I realise that that would not be very convenient. Three of us are from the south-west of Scotland and almost everybody else is from the north, so we would have to travel from one end of the country to the other. However, it is important that we meet throughout Scotland so that we can consult people in rural communities who might find it difficult to come here.

The Convener: I assume that, at least for next Tuesday's meeting, we want to meet as close to the office as possible. We should find a room in the Parliament complex for our briefing session at 2.30 pm next Tuesday.

12:15

Richard Lochhead: Most members agree with Dr Murray's comments and had planned to mention the subject of committee locations. I understand that the clerks conducted an investigation into locations around Scotland at which committees could meet. It would be useful to have a list of those locations.

The Convener: I have a list in front of me, but I want to clarify what we are going to do next Tuesday before we discuss locations.

If we meet next Tuesday, informally, to plan how we are to deal with the committee's remit in the longer term, is there any person on the staff or any organisation that members would like to conduct

that briefing?

Lewis Macdonald: The rural affairs seminar that was held a number of weeks ago was very useful. It might be worth seeking advice from one or two of the people who were involved in that. There were people representing industrial interests, which is important, but there were also people who were one step removed and had an academic overview of some of the issues affecting agriculture and fisheries, which was very useful.

The Convener: I hope that those people will be available at 2.30 pm next Tuesday. Would it be appropriate for members of the committee to have informal contact with the Minister for Rural Affairs?

Mr Rumbles: I think that it is essential. In fact, we should start the meeting with a briefing from that department. If we are to focus on the role and remit of the department, we need to know from the very beginning exactly how it operates. An initial briefing would be very useful.

The Convener: I entirely agree. It is essential to establish a good working relationship with the minister.

Irene McGugan: When we meet him, perhaps the minister can explain—or perhaps you could explain, Mr Johnstone—the note on the briefing document, immediately below the definition of the remit, which states that

"this remit excludes the co-ordination of executive policy in relation to the Highlands and Islands and Gaelic, responsibility for which is held by the Deputy to the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning."

Where then do the Highlands and Islands, as a region, stand in relation to the Rural Affairs Committee?

The Convener: It may be appropriate to ask for further clarification of that at the earliest opportunity.

Irene McGugan: It is very important, as the Highlands and Islands is such a huge geographical area.

The Convener: It is the role of the Parliamentary Bureau to clarify the position of the Highlands and Islands within the remit of this committee.

Irene McGugan: I suggest that we have clarification at an early stage.

Alex Fergusson: Can we get a ruling on that before next Tuesday?

The Convener: The clerk tells me that the bureau will meet on Tuesday, but we do not yet know at what time.

Alasdair Morgan: We must express our concern about the issue. It would be more than a little ironic if the Rural Affairs Committee were to

be prevented from considering a large number of matters connected with the Highlands and Islands.

The Convener: Some issues will obviously cross over between departments. That is why we need an early ruling on the position of the Highlands and Islands within the remit of this committee. I agree that confusion could result if that region were excluded from our remit.

Lewis Macdonald: I propose that the committee put forward, as our first collective view, the suggestion that rural development should be understood to mean the development of the whole of rural Scotland and that the committee has an interest in development issues that affect the whole of rural Scotland.

The Convener: Is that the general view of the committee?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Would anyone like to raise any other points about the briefing session?

Alasdair Morgan: Will the objective of the briefing session be to compile a list of the first inquiries to be set up?

The Convener: The briefing session will not be a formal meeting of the committee at which we make formal decisions about how to proceed. We want to clarify the committee's terms of reference so that we have a straightforward understanding of how to proceed. We could then, at our subsequent meeting, establish our formal arrangements. It would be unfortunate to make decisions at an informal briefing session where the public could not scrutinise what we were doing. At the briefing session, we will discuss among ourselves how we go about our work; that will enable us to have a smooth transition into a full operational state thereafter.

Alasdair Morgan: Does that mean that we will have another formal meeting before the recess to ensure that preparatory work for our investigations will continue during part of the recess?

The Convener: We will do that if we decide it necessary.

Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): We need to have a clearer understanding of this committee's remit, because rural development encompasses so many of our interests. We understand the present difficulties in the agriculture and fishing industries but, as Mr Fergusson said, there are other issues, such as those concerning the Forestry Commission. There have been tremendous problems in rural Scotland; much of the forestry is in remote parts of the countryside at the end of single-track roads that are founded on peat and are very substandard. Any development, wherever it takes place, has to

depend on good transport links and on good communication between main centres.

We have a remit for rural affairs, but there is an opportunity to have links with the Transport and the Environment Committee. If we discuss transport issues, will we impinge on that committee's work? We have to be clear about the issues that the Rural Affairs Committee will promote. I agree that our remit should be wide enough to consider transport, agriculture, fisheries, forestry and other issues that concern rural communities.

The Convener: Before we started this meeting, the clerk gave me a clear definition of rural affairs. He said that, in its truest sense, rural affairs concerns all that is not urban. In that respect, we have a very broad remit; I would like to think that we can deal with any issue that falls within that remit. We need to plan how we will proceed with the work that pertains to this committee.

Alex Fergusson: We are all agreed on the need for next Tuesday's briefing session, but I think that we would also agree that we need before the recess an idea of where we are heading. We have a slight timing problem because the recess is so soon, so I think that we should meet again next week.

The Convener: Is that the feeling of the committee?

Mr Munro: Does Mr Fergusson mean another meeting after the briefing session?

Alex Fergusson: We need to lay down guidelines about how we proceed before the recess, otherwise it will be September before we meet again.

The Convener: Could we have the briefing session and then move into formal session on the same day?

Alex Fergusson: As long as it is not after 5.30 pm, as I have another meeting.

The Convener: As we will have had the informal briefing session, the formal business should not take long. What would be an appropriate time for the formal meeting?

Richard Lochhead: Four o'clock, which would allow an hour and a half.

The Convener: Before I move on, does anyone have any other points about the briefing session? We will invite the in-house staff and the Minister for Rural Affairs, but do any members want anyone else to be present?

Richard Lochhead: It might be useful to find out what other inquiries on rural affairs are taking place. For example, an inquiry on sea-fishing is being conducted at Westminster. It would be

useful to have an idea of what other inquiries are under way and to get their papers and reports.

The Convener: The research department will be able to do that.

Does anyone want to comment on the suggestion that this committee should move around Scotland? Some groups have expressed the wish that it should and I suspect that members of the committee are probably unanimous on the matter.

Mr Munro: A member at the meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee made the same suggestion for that committee. However, attention focused on the main urban areas, such as Inverness, Aberdeen, Dundee and Perth and south to the Borders and Dumfries. Someone on the committee suggested that there were large areas of the countryside beyond those urban centres and that we should think about going further into the periphery of the country to places such as Wick and Thurso and even to Shetland and the northern isles. If the committee is going to move around—as I think it should—it should move beyond the main urban centres.

The Convener: I have an interim list of approved sites for committee meetings outside Edinburgh. So far, the venues are: the Town and County Hall in Aberdeen; the County Hall in Ayr; the County Buildings in Cupar; Easterbrook Hall in Dumfries; Maryatt Hall in Dundee; Volunteer Hall in Galashiels; the City Chambers banqueting hall in Glasgow; Victoria Hall in Helensburgh; the Town House in Inverness; the City Hall in Perth; and the Albert Halls in Stirling. Does any member have a view about the appropriateness of those sites?

Alasdair Morgan: That list backs up Mr Munro's point. Some of those sites seem fairly urban. If an inquiry is relevant to a particular place, we should go there. Most places have halls that could accommodate a committee and a small audience. I am a member of the Trade and Industry Select Committee at Westminster and that committee managed to fit into Thurso town hall. If a Westminster committee can get to Thurso, an Edinburgh committee should be able to get a damn sight further than that.

Rhoda Grant: It is important that the committee should get to the islands, as they form a huge part of Scotland's rural area. All the islands have councils and the council buildings must have facilities to host a committee of this size.

Lewis Macdonald: As a member for an Aberdeen constituency, I should say that Scottish towns and cities—particularly in the north of Scotland—also have an active and direct interest in rural issues. Although we should take account of John Munro's point, we should not debar

ourselves from centres that are of particular importance to rural economies.

Alex Fergusson: What we are saying is that there should be no no-go areas; we should go wherever we need to go.

The Convener: Is it the feeling of the committee that we should take the committee all over Scotland and wherever rural interests demand that we go?

Richard Lochhead: We should make that clear at the earliest possible opportunity—if any committee should set an example, it should be ours.

The Convener: It is only fair that the Rural Affairs Committee should take a lead in visiting rural areas.

Irene McGugan: The caveat must be that, when we go to those areas, we engage with local people with relevant interests. Those people must have full details of committee meetings; they will then be able to feel part of the meeting. The issue is not just about the committee visiting rural areas, but about our engaging with people there on a particular subject. This matter needs a lot of scene-setting and advance publicity.

12:30

The Convener: Is everyone agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I add the one proviso that, in moving around, we do as little damage to the budget as possible.

Dr Murray: When setting up those meetings, we must be mindful of the amount of time that it could take to reach them by public transport. We should have meetings at which we can arrive on time by public transport. In making arrangements, we should also be mindful of the fact that some of us need to attend meetings of other committees.

The Convener: It is clear that we want this committee to move around. Earlier, I said to the clerk that, if he had any fundamental objections to anything that we said, he should kick me under the table. That has not happened yet so I think that we can assume that the clerk is ready to travel the country as well.

Alex Fergusson: How often will this committee meet? I have not yet come across anything that suggests how regularly we should meet.

The Convener: The projection is every two weeks. Of course, that will depend on our work load; flexibility will be necessary.

We have a very open agenda. Do members feel that anything else should be discussed?

Richard Lochhead: Sub-committees may be worth a few comments as many of the subjects that we will address, such as agriculture and fisheries, are large.

The Convener: Do we think it appropriate to progress to sub-committees at this early stage, or should we wait until we have had some briefing?

Richard Lochhead: I am not suggesting that we discuss exactly what sub-committees should be established but, as some subjects are so unwieldy, it may be wise to agree on the principle that sub-committees would be an important part of our activities.

Mr Rumbles: I am not so sure about that. It is easy to fall into the trap of elevating agriculture, fisheries and forestry to the detriment of all the other issues involved in rural development. At the opening of this meeting, I think that everyone agreed that rural affairs were about transport, education and social inclusion—all of which we discussed with reference to other committees. I take issue with Richard and am not keen to rush into establishing sub-committees until we get our feet under the table and find out exactly what is going on.

Dr Murray: I know that the suggestion refers specifically to sub-committees, but we might find it more appropriate to set up smaller task groups to investigate particular issues over a shorter period and then to report back to this committee.

The Convener: It is almost inevitable that this committee will want to form sub-committees to deal with specific issues. I think that we will feel the pressure to do so in the near future as our remit becomes clearer in our minds. We will take heed of Richard Lochhead's point and of Mike Rumbles's suggestion not to rush into forming sub-committees.

We may want to discuss the appointment of reporters who will deal with specific interests. One suggestion may be of interest to members: where appropriate, those of us who are on another committee may act as reporters for this committee where the work of the other committee is of value to this committee. On one or two matters, there will be pressure for us to build links early on with other committees. Inevitably, European issues will be a high priority and will affect our work on farming and the fishing industry. We are also likely early on to have to consider the effects of the Government's land reform proposals on the areas that fall within our remit. I do not suggest that we need to appoint reporters at this stage, but we may have to fairly early on if the legislation is introduced quickly.

We have set up an early meeting to discuss our remit informally. We have also set up a formal meeting immediately after that so that we can

formalise anything that we wish to proceed with after consulting staff and the minister. I would be delighted to have any late suggestions if members want formally to invite anyone else to the gathering that we have planned for next Tuesday.

I think that, at our formal meeting, we will be able to set out a clear plan of how we should deal with Government plans that affect rural Scotland. We will know what we can do to advance the interests of this committee through the Scottish Parliament and how we can influence what happens to rural Scotland. I hope that we will be able to gauge our priorities and how we will proceed with them.

It has been clear in our discussion that we know all too well that the farming and fishing industries are important to rural Scotland and to Scotland as a whole, but we must not allow ourselves to be sidetracked by their importance; we must not forget that everything that affects Scotland is significant to rural Scotland. The provision of education, health and quality housing will very much fall within the remit of this committee.

I do not wish to prolong this meeting unnecessarily. We have set out where we intend to go in the next week, after which we will be able to set out a clear plan of how we intend to proceed. I thank you all for your attendance. In this committee, I hope that we can proceed in the same friendly and informal way as we have today and that we can achieve something for Scotland's countryside.

Meeting closed at 12:38.

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