

RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 14 December 1999
(*Afternoon*)

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body 1999.

Applications for reproduction should be made in writing to the Copyright Unit,
Her Majesty's Stationery Office, St Clements House, 2-16 Colegate, Norwich NR3 1BQ
Fax 01603 723000, which is administering the copyright on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate
Body.

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by The
Stationery Office Ltd.

Her Majesty's Stationery Office is independent of and separate from the company now
trading as The Stationery Office Ltd, which is responsible for printing and publishing
Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body publications.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 14 December 1999

	Col.
EUROPEAN DOCUMENT	297
AGRICULTURE INQUIRY	298
FUTURE BUSINESS	305

RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE 11th Meeting

CONVENER :

*Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

*Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
*Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
*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 14 December 1999

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:07*]

The Convener (Alex Johnstone): We are a few bodies short. We have received apologies from Mike Rumbles and I see that we are also missing Alex Fergusson, although I cannot account for that. Who else is missing?

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): John Farquhar Munro.

The Convener: Has anybody heard from John Farquhar Munro?

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): He was in the building this morning.

The Convener: So was Alex Fergusson.

European Document

The Convener: I think that we have given members more than adequate time to arrive, so we will move to the first item on our agenda, which is the European document on control of fish diseases. It proposes amendments to an existing directive that deals with measures to control infectious salmon anaemia. The amendments have been initiated by the UK Government and are designed to provide more flexibility than the current arrangements. Specifically, the proposals would remove the need for immediate withdrawal of fish from affected farms—that means destruction of old fish on those farms—and allow the use of vaccines under plans that are to be drawn up by member states.

The Scottish Executive rural affairs department advises that the industry has been advocating greater flexibility on those rules for some time and that the proposal has industry support, although the industry remains understandably anxious about how the arrangement will work in practice. According to SERAD, the arrangements will be determined on a case-by-case basis. The European Committee has requested that we forward any views to it by 17 December.

Does anybody have views to express on this issue?

Lewis Macdonald: The proposals are very welcome and should go forward with our full support. They will assist the industry to deal with

the crisis that it is facing and help to make it clear that this is a different problem from those that are faced by parts of the agriculture sector. That is very important.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I welcome what can only be described as belated proposals, given that many people in the industry are wondering why they have taken so long to appear and why, for example, the Norwegian approach was not adopted in the first place. However, better late than never. The committee should support the proposals.

The Convener: If there are no further comments, I will put the question. Does the committee support the proposals?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Does the committee want to forward any further comments on the matter to the European Committee?

Members: No.

The Convener: I have a note from the clerk that says that the issue of ISA was originally put on the agenda by Richard Lochhead. The committee has requested a detailed written brief from SERAD. Production of that brief has been delayed, pending a ministerial announcement on infectious salmon anaemia, which will take place tomorrow at 12 noon. A full briefing paper is expected to be available for the first committee meeting of the new year.

Agriculture Inquiry

The Convener: Item 2 relates to the proposed structure of our planned inquiry into agriculture. A paper was circulated inviting comments, and I do not think that any were forthcoming. The paper attempts to set out the background to, and a structured programme for, an investigation into the current problems of the farming industry. It also includes a proposed remit for the inquiry, which reads:

“To assess the contribution of Scottish agriculture and public policy in support of Scottish agriculture to the full range of rural interests and to seek opportunities for policy changes that might increase this contribution.”

Does anybody have any comments on the paper or the proposed remit?

Lewis Macdonald: I thought that the paper was very useful and helped us to progress by laying out the steps that we would want to follow. However, I would like the committee to consider some changes to the proposed remit, because I have two concerns about the way in which it is phrased. First, I would prefer the committee to concentrate on the overall strategy for dealing with

agriculture, rather than just policy. The phrase that I had in mind to accommodate that point was, "To support the development of strategy and policies".

My other slight concern related to the last three words, "increase this contribution". I am not sure that our objective is necessarily to increase agriculture's contribution to the rural economy and society; it is to make it more effective and productive, whatever that might mean. Instead we might refer to "strategy and policies that contribute to the sustainable development of rural Scotland". That would allow for an increase in some sectors and a reduction in others. I do not need to tell you, convener, that agriculture is an ever-changing marketplace and that it is unwise to assume a constant increase in any sector.

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): What would the revised wording be?

Lewis Macdonald: What I have in front of me is, "To assess the contribution of Scottish agriculture and public policy in support of Scottish agriculture to the full range of rural interests and to support the development of strategy and policies that contribute to the sustainable development of rural Scotland."

The Convener: We will make a decision and circulate a revised version of the paper.

14:15

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): It is important that we have a strategic overview. However, we must ensure that we do not spend all our time considering things that have gone wrong. We should think about ways to improve the situation and take a holistic view.

The Convener: You have hit the nail on the head. When we raised this issue initially, we perceived that we had no structure to deal with problems. We hope that the inquiry will create a structure on which we can hang the work that we have done.

Cathy Peattie: It also impinges on our consideration of rural poverty, on which we can do further work.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): It is important that we do not just bounce from crisis to crisis. I think that we have been doing a bit of that. We need to think about providing a framework to deal with agricultural and rural problems.

The original wording sought to make policy changes, but the Parliament does not have policies on agricultural and rural issues yet. We have inherited some from the UK and from Europe, but we do not have our own. We should

think about policy development and seize the opportunity to do things differently.

The Convener: Are there any other comments on the remit or the rest of the paper?

If there are none, I will ask Richard to read out the version of the remit that he has written down.

Richard Davies (Committee Clerk): What we have now is, "To assess the contribution of Scottish agriculture and public policy in support of Scottish agriculture to the full range of rural interests and to support the development of strategy and policy changes which might increase its contribution to sustainable development."

The Convener: Lewis discussed the word "increase".

Lewis Macdonald: The wording that I suggested was "strategies and policies that contribute to sustainable development."

Richard Davies: In that case, we have, "To assess the contribution of Scottish agriculture and public policy in support of Scottish agriculture to the full range of rural interests and to support the development of strategy and policies which contribute to sustainable development."

The Convener: Are we agreed that that should be the remit of the inquiry?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will take this opportunity to develop a paper proposing how that should be set out. I hope that that will be available for the committee at the earliest opportunity.

Alasdair Morgan: As I said earlier, this might be a suitable opportunity to raise today's crisis.

As members probably know, the French Prime Minister said today that, during earlier negotiations with the UK Government, he had suggested that France could exempt from its ban British cattle that were exclusively grass-fed, such as Scottish Angus beef—that was how he described it. However, the UK Government rejected that offer. He suggested that a partial lifting of the ban along those lines might still be possible. This is an important matter, about which the Parliament needs to know more, since he was offering an exemption for most Scottish beef. Does the committee agree that the convener should write to the Minister for Rural Affairs to ask him to make a statement about the matter to Parliament at the earliest opportunity?

The Convener: I am interested to hear other members' views.

Lewis Macdonald: We are all aware of the difficulties of persuading the French Government to adhere to European law on this matter. Its

refusal to implement the lifting of the ban on British beef will concern every member of this committee. We must treat the explanations that the French Prime Minister has now given for his failure to lift the ban with a healthy dose of scepticism. The French negotiating position has failed to produce a result. While the offer may be worth investigating, we must start from the basis that it amounted to a public statement from a Government that has failed consistently to adhere to the rulings of the European Commission on British beef exports.

The Convener: From a straightforward political point of view, my position is close to yours, Lewis. However, I am not averse to the idea that we ask for more details about what has happened.

Richard Lochhead: Today's revelations put a new light on the French Government's refusal to lift the ban on British beef, as it may no longer ban the Scottish product. The enormous ramifications for the beef industry in Scotland justify an emergency statement from the Minister for Rural Affairs. It would appear that he was unaware of the negotiations that were going on in the background; the Parliament deserves to hear more about the matter.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am concerned about how to identify grass-fed beef. We must be careful not to fall into a trap that would put our farmers through even more hoops, given their complaints about the problems with current BSE legislation. I am not averse to finding out more about the matter, but the industry has a lot to cope with already. Farmers would find it impossible if their cattle had to have yet another passport in order to prove that they have been grass fed. The French Prime Minister's statement may be just a political stance and it may not be possible to force his proposal through in any useful way.

Dr Murray: I have no desire to let the French off the hook. Whatever the French Prime Minister may say, the French attitude has been appalling. I am sure that all members who represent rural constituencies have been appalled by the expedient behaviour of the French. I do not want the committee to be seen to give any comfort to the French Prime Minister.

We may decide that we want a little more information about what was said, but the situation also involves a point of procedure. It would be more appropriate for the convener to write to the minister than for all of us, as individual members, to write to ministers and invite them to take action on behalf of the Rural Affairs Committee. If we act as a committee, it should be done through the convener.

Alasdair Morgan: That is precisely what I was suggesting—that the convener write, with the

committee's sanction, to seek a statement, not to the committee, but to the Parliament. Regardless of the interpretation one puts on Monsieur Jospin's motives for making his statement, and regardless of whether one thinks that the proposition was practical, it was made. If reports are to be believed, the minister did not know about it, and members certainly did not know about it. We deserve a bit more openness than we seem to be getting. A statement would be a good idea, if only to clear the air. We should apply sufficient pressure to ensure that we get one, given that the recess is looming.

Lewis Macdonald: The danger of Alasdair's proposal is that it would give credence to what is simply another episode in French diplomacy. The greatest trick in French diplomacy, as we know, is divide and rule; that is precisely what is going on here. If we walk into this trap with our eyes open, we cannot complain if the French run rings around us internationally. It would be entirely appropriate for the convener to write to the minister and ask for clarification of the story. To write to him seeking an emergency statement, on the basis that we believe what Lionel Jospin says just because he says it, is the wrong way for the committee to go.

The Convener: I find that a compelling argument, but I am still not averse to the idea of asking for a straightforward statement of what has happened.

Richard Lochhead: It is important to bear it in mind that Scotland's beef farmers, as well as the parties, would like a statement to Parliament. They will take a keen interest in today's developments, and the least that the Parliament can do is have its Minister for Rural Affairs make a statement on European negotiations on behalf of the UK over the beef ban.

Alasdair Morgan: It is not a matter of whether we believe Monsieur Jospin, although we should be careful before we call Prime Ministers of other EU states potential liars. We should get a statement on precisely what happened.

The Convener: We are talking about a statement of fact. Regardless of the position in which the minister finds himself, there is a good deal of confusion.

Rhoda Grant: I am concerned about going down that road, as it would appear to give credence to the statement that one sector of our beef industry is safer than the other. We would have to live with the consequences of that. It would play havoc with our overseas market in the long run.

Alasdair Morgan: This is not about getting into that argument. It is about getting a statement from the minister about what happened at the

negotiations and whether he intends to take any further action. Asking for a statement is not equivalent to our making a judgment on the issue at stake. If it were, that could serve as a justification for keeping everything secret.

The Convener: We must remember that it is by no means out of the question that, were Ross Finnie to make such a statement, he might receive a vote of confidence from the Parliament.

Lewis Macdonald: I am still not clear what members expect to achieve by having this statement. I am not accusing anybody of telling lies, but the French Government is saying that this was its position during the negotiations. We are supposed to respond to that by asking whether that is true and throwing up our hands in horror because nobody told us the details of the negotiation. The fact of the matter is that the recommendation was made to the European Commission, and accepted by it, that British beef is safe.

I do not think that we should send out any signals that suggest that some British beef is safe and some is not. That is what Jospin's statement is trying to imply. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of echoing that false division between safe and unsafe beef in Britain.

It is appropriate for the convener to ask the minister about his response to the negotiations. If we demand an emergency statement, it implies that Jospin's account is accurate and that the British Government should have leapt up to receive his offer with great joy. The committee should not send out such a signal.

Irene McGugan: At the moment, the only information that we have about what is alleged to have happened comes from the French Prime Minister—we are trying to establish our response to that. To assess the situation and establish whether the correct action was taken, we also need to establish the minister's response. Until we know the official response from the minister, the situation remains unclear. It would not be responsible of this committee to leave the situation with that degree of uncertainty.

14:30

Dr Murray: I am not uncomfortable about seeking clarification of the facts. However, I agree with Lewis Macdonald that we should put out no messages other than "British beef is safe". We owe it to our farmers to put out that message. There is no such thing as a partial breaking of the law—the French are breaking the law in not allowing British beef into France. We should send out a strong message about the quality and value of British and Scottish products. We must be seen to be supporting our industry. To allow the French

to manipulate us by implying that certain parts of our markets are safe and might be tolerated, whereas others are not, will not help. Even if the French let in small amounts of British beef, how many people will buy it?

Richard Lochhead: Scotland has its own rural affairs minister, who is accountable to the Parliament and to Scotland's agricultural industry. As none of us knows the full facts, surely it is in order for the Minister for Rural Affairs to make a statement to Parliament on the matter. It is as black and white as that.

Alasdair Morgan: I will stick with my original proposal, convener. On behalf of the committee, you should write to the minister, asking him to make a statement to Parliament on the matter. It is up to members whether they support that proposal.

Lewis Macdonald: Since Alasdair has dropped the word "emergency", I am happy with that—it is appropriate.

The Convener: Would you like to review the word "emergency"?

Lewis Macdonald: It is not an emergency—it is a claim by the French Prime Minister. However, it would be appropriate to ask for a statement.

Alasdair Morgan: I am not sufficiently familiar with standing orders to know the difference between an emergency statement and an ordinary one. The point is that I would like the minister to make a statement before the recess.

The Convener: We have a proposal on which it would be appropriate for us to vote. Richard will read out the proposal as he has noted it and perhaps Alasdair can clarify that.

Richard Davies: Alasdair Morgan proposed that the committee should ask the convener to request that the minister make a statement to the Parliament on the recent comments by the French Prime Minister.

Alasdair Morgan: I would like to insert the words "before the recess" at the end.

The Convener: Okay.

Alex Fergusson has just arrived.

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): If you would prefer me not to vote, I will respect that. However, having heard the question, I am prepared to make a decision on the matter.

The Convener: If you are aware of the proposal and of the nature of the division, I am happy for you to take part.

Alex Fergusson: Can I just clarify that the proposal was that the minister be asked to make a statement on the French Prime Minister's

remarks?

The Convener: Yes.

I will read out members' names and take a vote by roll call.

Lewis Macdonald: Convener, I know that you are keen to have a division, but if it would help matters, I should say that I do not intend to vote against the proposal.

The Convener: Does the committee agree to the proposal?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The proposal is supported. With my tongue firmly in my cheek, I must ask members if there are any other issues to be raised under the heading of "Proposed Structure for Agriculture Inquiry". If there are no further issues to be raised under that heading, we will move to the next item on the agenda.

Item 3 is a draft report on the issues surrounding the Highlands and Islands agricultural business improvement scheme. We have agreed to take this item in private. Does that meet with the committee's approval?

Members indicated agreement.

14:36

Meeting continued in private.

15:58

On resuming in public—

Future Business

The Convener: Item 4 on the agenda is future business. If Richard Lochhead wants to raise anything, he can put his hand up now.

Lewis Macdonald: I want to repeat the comments that I made during the private session. During the first few months of the committee I have become concerned that the committee is in danger of becoming a rural affairs fire brigade—called out to deal with every crisis in related industries on a week-by-week basis and with inadequate notice. I would like the convener and the clerk to consider how the agenda of the committee might be controlled to prevent accumulation of items at short notice. That accumulation makes it difficult for the committee to follow a structured approach to its major inquiries into employment in the rural communities, agriculture and its contribution to rural development and the other areas of fisheries and forestry that we intend to examine.

16:00

Agriculture and fisheries are industries in which important issues can arise at short notice. If the committee sees itself as a sounding board for lobbying on those issues and consequently raises financial demands every time it is approached by representatives of a sector of agriculture that is in crisis, it will be difficult to take the strategic approach that should be taken.

The Convener: I understand and agree with many of the points that you have made, Lewis, but I believe that this committee has to be in direct contact with interested groups from rural Scotland and that we have become an alternative means of contacting the Parliament for those groups. We should encourage that.

Dr Murray: The public is confused about the role of the committee and the role of the Executive. People seem to think that the committee can solve their problems and that we have a cheque book. Some of us were saying, in private conversation, that if we had had a cheque book at last week's meeting with the pig farmers, we would have been signing cheques to alleviate the problems. However that is not our role—it is the Executive's. Our role is—as you said, convener—to develop policies, to conduct inquiries and to act as a point of contact between rural Scotland and the Parliament. We should try not to exacerbate the confusion.

Richard Lochhead: At the close of the private session, I mentioned that I wanted to talk about the pig industry. I feel as if I have been ambushed, but I will recover from that.

We have successfully conducted short investigations into issues that have arisen during the past six or seven months, while keeping an eye on strategic issues. That is how we will continue to operate.

Last week, we had an informal meeting with around 30 representatives of the pig industry. People's livelihoods are at risk and there is a danger that a key sector of the agriculture industry will disappear. One of the problems that the industry faces is the lack of clarity surrounding state aid, particularly in relation to the so-called BSE tax. There is an urgent need for a statement either from the Scottish Executive or the European Commission on the matter, because the industry and the Executive appear to have different views. The committee should consider whether state aid should be made available by permission of the European Commission.

Rhoda Grant: When we met the pig farmers, they concentrated on state aid. At the pig breakfast last week, Mr Finnie said that he had spoken with EU representatives and had tried to obtain permission for distribution of state aid. He

said that if he drew a blank on that he would not be able to get aid for the farmers. We either believe what he says or we do not, but I am inclined to believe him, because he would not have said such a thing if he had not gone to Europe to make inquiries.

There are other things that the committee or the Executive could do to help farmers. One option would be to start a campaign on marketing. The farmers said that they did not approve of the labelling proposal because it would take too long to implement. I feel strongly that the committee could run a campaign on marketing: as members of the committee could go around supermarkets to address the issue.

Another problem which was highlighted and which we should examine is the issue of meat and bone meal, which, as I understand it, can be sold abroad. Some of the pig farmers suggested highlighting that, and that that did not represent an added cost.

I do not see how we can get blood out of a stone: if the Minister for Rural Affairs says that he has gone to the EU and cannot get the money—

Richard Lochhead: Did the minister say that?

Rhoda Grant: I am certain that he said that at the pig breakfast last week.

Richard Lochhead: He never said that.

Rhoda Grant: He used words to that effect.

Richard Lochhead: I would like to clarify this, convener. To my recollection the minister—I will stand corrected if anyone wishes to intervene—said that it would be very difficult to get state aid distributed by permission of the European Commission. We do not know whether that is possible. All we know is that it might be very difficult and that, to me, suggests that it is not impossible. The statement is vague, however. What the industry wants is a black-and-white statement on whether there is, under European rules, a legal possibility of state aid being offered to assist the industry in covering the BSE tax.

Lewis Macdonald: The minister expressed a view that state aid would not be considered and that the industry would not be eligible. The industry is looking for assistance. Whether it would be helpful at this point to seek a clear statement is a tactical matter. If the black-and-white statement says that it is a question of state aid and that nothing can be done, that is clearly not helpful.

I think that this committee can and should highlight the issue. It would be good if any member could propose something that would help us to highlight it. The great majority of consumers are unaware of the difference between animal welfare standards and pig production standards in

this country and the standards in our main competitor countries. Awareness of that would make an immediate and significant difference to the market, given the sensitivity of supermarket retailers to public opinion on such matters. I would be interested if members had any proposals to highlight the differences, as that may well be the key to the market and to the survival of the pig industry in Scotland.

Rhoda Grant: *The Press and Journal* carried a good article at the weekend—unfortunately it was in the farming pages. Unless one is a farmer, and already knows the information, one will tend not to read the farming pages. We really want such articles to be on the front pages.

Richard Lochhead: I happen to know that 78 per cent of *The Press and Journal's* readers read the farming pages.

Rhoda Grant: I disagree with that.

The Convener: It appears that one of our number has rehashed the item and had it press-released in his own name on the front page today.

Alex Fergusson: I agree with a great deal of what Lewis Macdonald has just said, but the other day the pig farming lobby made it very obvious to us that they do not have much time left. I have no reason—none of us has—to disbelieve that. The pig industry in Scotland will not survive for long—it is as simple as that. I am not convinced—on this I agree with Richard Lochhead—that the minister said that he was turned down when seeking assistance for the pig industry from Europe.

One of the circulars that came to us was from the Ulster Farmers Union and it suggested that Franz Fischler would by no means be unsympathetic towards examining the matter. We must ascertain more certainly whether—as I put in my question to him yesterday—the minister has actually tried to get some aid out of Europe in this case.

The Convener: We are talking not about getting aid from Europe in this case, but about getting permission from Europe to provide aid.

Alex Fergusson: I stand corrected.

The Convener: Although I am confident that Ross Finnie's statement at the pig breakfast was accurate, his words were carefully chosen. I, too, have doubts about whether an approach was made for a judgment on whether assistance to the pig industry would constitute illegal state aid. I am therefore sympathetic to the idea that we need a straight answer to a straight question.

Dr Murray: Because I had problems getting to Edinburgh from far afield for quarter to 8 in the morning, I do not know what Ross Finnie said at the pig breakfast and cannot pass comment on

what was said. It might be that there is some confusion and that a more specific question would elicit a clearer response from the minister.

As I said before, the committees are not just about bidding for money. We should also consider how else the industry could be supported in the longer term. Although aid might stave off some of the immediate problems, the pig industry, like many other agricultural sectors, needs a strategy for survival in the future. As I have said in Parliament, we must consider aggressive promotion of the animal welfare angle. The public—as Lewis says—are not aware of the conditions in which animals are raised.

The Convener: We must keep in mind that the pig industry is in an incredibly precarious situation. Lewis Macdonald suggested that, if the straight answer to the straight question is negative, that could damage the industry. Having spoken to a number of farmers, including one in Easter Ross with whom I spent a lot of time yesterday, I disagree. Those farmers' view is that if nothing is to be done for the pig industry, those who are involved in it will need to initiate a controlled collapse now, because there is no point continuing under current market conditions. The farmers need to minimise their losses. A straight answer to a straight question, whatever the answer happens to be, will therefore give them a direction.

Lewis Macdonald: I echo that sentiment. A lot of pig processing takes place in the Aberdeen area, so I am aware of the situation. Scheduling a discussion for four or five weeks from now would not be particularly useful. If you, as convener, were to write to the minister to ask him a direct question, you should get a reply that could be used in whatever way is most helpful.

The Convener: Should that letter be written in the name of the committee?

Lewis Macdonald: Yes.

Richard Lochhead: I concur with that. It is exactly what I was going to propose. However, we should also consider the other issues that face the industry. Those issues are well documented and have been aired in Parliament. Most members of the committee, and the clerks, were at last week's informal briefing from the pig industry and at previous briefings. Would it be useful for the clerks to produce a list of recommendations, based on the other concerns that were mentioned, that we could consider at our first meeting after the new year?

Alex Fergusson: Many such concerns were mentioned at the informal briefing last week and were not minuted. The clerks were present, but in an informal capacity.

Richard Lochhead: The alternative would be to

conduct an investigation, and there might not be time in our agenda for that. I suggest that the clerks compile a list of the main issues, such as labelling, that are on parliamentary records, or were discussed in formal or informal briefings. If they can collate them, we can consider those matters at our next meeting. That should not take too long.

Lewis Macdonald: What would be the committee's purpose in considering those issues?

16:15

Richard Lochhead: The committee would be able to keep those items on its agenda and give views on them.

Dr Murray: We might wish to consider what other action we could take to support the industry further.

The Convener: At this stage, the issue might be far enough up the political agenda to be driven by the whole parliamentary structure. I would be glad to have this on the agenda at the next committee meeting, so that we can review progress. Tracey Hawe has rough notes on the general views that have been expressed—those notes can be used to put together a report.

Alex Fergusson: Rural affairs fire brigade or not, I would welcome that on the agenda for our next meeting—I will bring my hard hat.

The Convener: We will put the item on the agenda and include a report that will be put together from the notes available. I will write in the name of the committee to the minister, asking for clarification on whether support for the pig industry would constitute illegal state aid. Are there any other comments on that?

Lewis Macdonald: Could you indicate in that letter to the minister that we are considering this as a matter of urgency and that we seek an urgent response?

The Convener: Yes.

Members have before them a note about the progress that has been made on a number of issues. It includes a graph that Richard Davies has put together. It is, effectively, a guess at the potential timing of business that the committee might need to address. We began with a statement about what we have done, but this gives us an indication of what we might find ourselves doing. Are there any further comments about what we have done and what issues we should address?

Dr Murray: I am not going to make one of my cracks about the grass-fed beef again. The hunting bill is down for discussion by this committee—is it certain that that bill will come to

us?

Richard Davies: There is a question mark about that—it is up to the Parliament.

The Convener: Even if we were not the lead committee, it is extremely likely that we would like to become involved in scrutiny of that bill.

Dr Murray: It would be appropriate.

The Convener: The issues that appear on the graph with a question mark are conjectural. However, the graph mentions the inquiry into the impact of employment change, which is at a more advanced stage, and the agriculture inquiry, which we have begun to discuss. Richard Davies has said that there might be room for another inquiry at the end of the year. He suggested that that would be an ideal time to consider the problems associated with the deep-sea fishing industry, given that that is the lead-up to the negotiations that usually take place in December. It also falls roughly two years before the complete renegotiation of the common fisheries policy. We might wish, therefore, to use that opportunity to consider in greater depth what is going on in the fishing industry.

Lewis Macdonald: I agree—it would be a good time for us to consider not only what will happen in 2002 with the renegotiation of common fisheries policy, but the wider question of this country's fisheries strategy in the next century.

The Convener: That almost mirrors our experience with agriculture; we began with a few fire-fighting operations but we need now to consider something more structured. I know that we have put the cart before the horse on a number of occasions, but we are getting there.

Lewis Macdonald: I welcome the proposal as a structure within which the committee can work. I have experience from the Audit Committee of dealing with parts of a bill over the past couple of months and I am aware that it is very difficult to do that alongside another half a dozen agenda items. The fact that we might soon have bills before us re-emphasises the point that structure is required.

The Convener: I know that, at times, the length of our agendas is shocking, but it is in the nature of the committee's work that there will be a number of small agenda items, such as statutory instruments or other papers that we need to consider. Our experience at the previous full meeting—at which we discussed one subject for two hours and then got through the rest of the agenda in about thirty minutes—indicated that such small agenda items need not take much time, provided that we have all read the papers and know what we are talking about. It is a matter of approving papers as they pass by us.

Are there any comments on the progress report,

which is, in effect, a list of subjects and what we have done about them?

Rhoda Grant: Is housing in rural areas included in the inquiry into employment?

The Convener: Yes. That is because the headings on the left-hand side of the page are the original headings for which we voted. We agreed to include housing in rural areas in the top item.

Cathy Peattie: Am I right in thinking that the whole issue was to be tied into an examination of rural poverty? It is important to say that the emphasis will be on rural poverty.

Irene McGugan: Although employment has taken precedence, the issue of rural poverty is still covered.

Rhoda Grant: Can we have a short interim report on anything that has come up on housing, bearing in mind that we will discuss that in the new year? Wendy Alexander said in her statement that Parliament would debate housing.

The Convener: Preparations to appoint an adviser for this report are at a fairly advanced stage. When an adviser is in place, we can easily push housing up his agenda to fit in with our time scale.

Rhoda Grant: It might be useful to have a report that will inform the debate on housing in rural areas, so that that subject does not get lost.

The Convener: When is the subject likely to come up?

Rhoda Grant: I am not sure. As far as I can remember, Wendy Alexander said that it would be in the new year.

The Convener: We can certainly prioritise issues. We hope that the longer investigation will be able to produce interim reports at various stages so that we can keep the public—as well as other members of the Parliament—fully informed about progress, and that it will produce a final rounding-up report.

Are there any other issues?

Members: No.

The Convener: A number of other issues that were not among our priorities but have been covered in some way are listed in the documents.

We need to consider items in the list on the left, which members might feel have assumed a higher priority in the intervening period. Members might want to consider one or two items that have crept into the work that we have done.

Lewis Macdonald: Can we have some guidance on whether there are items that are listed for discussion that will not be covered by

one of the three inquiries or by one of the bills that are detailed on the sheet? Some are obviously not directly involved, but might be covered in part.

The Convener: This list contains all the subjects that were thrown up in the committee's initial discussion. Many of those will be covered in part by action that we are likely to take, and some will be covered in full. That is a good indication that the original polling threw up the issues that are likely to be the committee's priorities. It remains my priority that the committee should never miss an opportunity to include something that is completely different, if that is appropriate. Part of the purpose of today's discussion is to ensure that we have a rough idea of how and on which issues we want to proceed, from the huge range of issues that we must cover.

The other suggestion that has been made by Richard Davies is that it might be appropriate for us to have a round-up meeting at some point. Members will remember that we had an informal briefing, which the minister attended. We all sat round the table and had a good chat about each other's aims and objectives and where we wanted to go. That was an important meeting, which helped to build a successful relationship between the committee and the minister. In spite of the fact that, occasionally, we may not have seen eye to eye, that relationship continues in good heart.

Does the committee think that it would be appropriate to organise a similar meeting in the new year—when we can arrange a suitable time—so that we can sit round the table again to take stock of what we have done and on which issues we want to proceed?

Lewis Macdonald: Would that meeting be with both ministers from the department?

The Convener: Yes. We also need to have a slightly more formal session to plan forthcoming business so that we can establish a structure. We should, perhaps, leave that until after we have spoken to the minister.

Lewis Macdonald: Would it be possible for you to produce a draft proposal that ties matters to dates fairly specifically, and which gives us a fairly clear indication of what will be dealt with and when?

The Convener: Richard Davies, Richard Walsh and I visited London to meet the chairman of the Agriculture Committee at Westminster. We also sat in on one of that committee's meetings. Our impression was that that committee has a more relaxed attitude towards business than we do and that, as a result, it is able to put together formal inquiries that last for a considerable length of time.

How much help that meeting was is questionable, as that committee does not have the same range of responsibilities as we do. However, there was much to be learned from the way in which that committee structured its inquiries, which might guide us in scheduling our inquiries. Richard Davies has already put that to good use, in the way in which he has distributed the interests of our major inquiries, which are listed at the top of his graph.

It might be difficult to schedule business, as we do not know when certain bills will arrive for the committee's scrutiny. In the meantime, however, we should consider our main inquiries and our day-to-day business, rather than smaller agenda items. We should also try to ensure that we do not clutter the agendas too much, so that we will have the flexibility to fit in bills when necessary. I take it that the committee agrees that we should arrange a meeting with the ministers—an informal briefing session, such as we had before—and then try to agree a more formal structure for the way in which we will proceed in the new year.

Irene McGugan: Is it confirmed that we will consider the forest strategy on 18 January?

Richard Davies: That depends on whether we get it in time. We expect to get the strategy in January, but I do not know whether we will get it in time for that meeting; it might have to wait until the next one.

The Convener: As members have no further points to raise, I close this meeting and thank members for their assistance.

Meeting closed at 16:30.

Members who would like a printed copy of the Official Report to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

Members who would like a copy of the bound volume should also give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

No proofs of the *Official Report* can be supplied. Members who want to suggest corrections for the bound volume should mark them clearly in the daily edition, and send it to the Official Report, Parliamentary Headquarters, George IV Bridge, Edinburgh EH99 1SP. Suggested corrections in any other form cannot be accepted.

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 30 December 1999

Members who want reprints of their speeches (within one month of the date of publication) may obtain request forms and further details from the Central Distribution Office, the Document Supply Centre or the Official Report.

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

DAILY EDITIONS

Single copies: £5

Annual subscriptions: £640

BOUND VOLUMES OF DEBATES are issued periodically during the session.

Single copies: £70

Standing orders will be accepted at the Document Supply Centre.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT, compiled by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, contains details of past and forthcoming business and of the work of committees and gives general information on legislation and other parliamentary activity.

Single copies: £2.50

Special issue price: £5

Annual subscriptions: £82.50

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £2.50

Annual subscriptions: £80

Published in Edinburgh by The Stationery Office Limited and available from:

The Stationery Office Bookshop
71 Lothian Road
Edinburgh EH3 9AZ
0131 228 4181 Fax 0131 622 7017

The Stationery Office Bookshops at:
123 Kingsway, London WC2B 6PQ
Tel 0171 242 6393 Fax 0171 242 6394
68-69 Bull Street, Birmingham B4 6AD
Tel 0121 236 9696 Fax 0121 236 9699
33 Wine Street, Bristol BS1 2BQ
Tel 01179 264306 Fax 01179 294515
9-21 Princess Street, Manchester M60 8AS
Tel 0161 834 7201 Fax 0161 833 0634
16 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GD
Tel 01232 238451 Fax 01232 235401
The Stationery Office Oriol Bookshop,
18-19 High Street, Cardiff CF1 2BZ
Tel 01222 395548 Fax 01222 384347

The Stationery Office Scottish Parliament Documentation
Helpline may be able to assist with additional information
on publications of or about the Scottish Parliament,
their availability and cost:

Telephone orders and inquiries
0870 606 5566

Fax orders
0870 606 5588

The Scottish Parliament Shop
George IV Bridge
EH99 1SP
Telephone orders 0131 348 5412

sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Accredited Agents
(see Yellow Pages)

and through good booksellers