

AUDIT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19 December 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 19 December 2000

	Col.
HOLYROOD.....	453
WORK PROGRAMME	459

AUDIT COMMITTEE

20th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Nick Johnston (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

*Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab)

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

*Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con)

*Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)

*Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP)

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Mr Robert Black (Auditor General for Scotland)

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Callum Thomson

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Anne Peat

ASSISTANT CLERK

Seán Wixted

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Audit Committee

Tuesday 19 December 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

The Deputy Convener (Nick Johnston): Good afternoon and welcome to the 20th meeting in 2000 of the Audit Committee—our final meeting before the recess. I will chair the meeting for items 1 and 2 on our agenda. Andrew Welsh will take over for items 3 and 4. We have received apologies from Lloyd Quinan.

Item 1 on the agenda is to seek the committee's approval for item 4 to be taken in private. Does the committee agree to that suggestion?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Holyrood

The Deputy Convener: Item 2 concerns the new Scottish Parliament building. When we produced our report on the Holyrood project, I asked the clerk whether he would approach the conveners group with the aim of securing a debate on the report in Parliament. He informed me that it is not for me but for the committee to make that decision. I stand suitably corrected. Do members agree to ask the conveners group that the report be debated in Parliament?

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): I have some difficulty with such a request. Are you proposing that the report be debated in Parliament?

The Deputy Convener: Yes.

Paul Martin: I do not support that proposal.

The Deputy Convener: Could you elaborate on why you are opposed to it?

Paul Martin: We have put together an impressive report on the Holyrood project and I do not think that we would benefit from debating it in Parliament. We should give further consideration to this matter, rather than simply referring it to the conveners group.

The Deputy Convener: That is why the issue is on the agenda for today's meeting.

It is the practice of the Parliament for committee reports not to be debated until the Executive has submitted a response. Because the Executive has

a certain amount of time to prepare its response, this report could not in any event be debated until the middle of February. It would then be debated by the Parliament in the same way that other committees' reports have been debated.

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I cannot understand why Paul Martin has reservations about a debate on the report in Parliament. I am quite happy to hear the Executive's view on the report. However, the report belongs to the Parliament. We were asked to do this work. Now that we have completed it—and I know that Paul Martin supports the work that has been done—it is only appropriate that the Parliament should have the opportunity to consider what we have to say, in conjunction with the Executive's response.

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Forgive me if I am wrong, but the other committee on which I serve has waited for the Executive's response before deciding to request a debate in the Parliament. I think that we should do the same.

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): I would like to make one point.

The Deputy Convener: With respect, Margo, could you wait until the members of the committee have had their say? Visitors will be catered for once members have spoken.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): As you know, deputy convener, I was not able to participate in the committee meetings that led to the report. However, I believe that the report was well received and that it is regarded as a good piece of committee work. If the committee is reluctant to have the report debated in Parliament, does that call into question the committee's confidence in the report? I understand that this is an agreed report. There is no doubt that it has attracted significant public interest. MSPs who are not members of the committee may have genuine questions to ask arising from the report. I do not think that the report is controversial. The inquiry was purely a fact-finding one, which reached sensible conclusions.

The Deputy Convener: That was one reason for my suggesting that we request a debate on the report, which is unique. The Audit Committee is not an inquisition; in this case, it was reporting on the Auditor General's findings. I think that it would be useful to have a debate on the report. However, I take the point that Margaret Jamieson made. The only reason for applying now is that if we postpone doing so until the Executive has taken the full time available to it to respond, the debate might not take place until March, April or even May. By then, the report will have receded into the past.

Paul Martin: We should wait until we have received the Executive's response—which will, I hope, be comprehensive—before deciding whether to seek a debate on the report in the Parliament. We should not discount the possibility that we will request such a debate. However, before requesting it, we must ensure that we have received the Executive's response to the points that the report made. If we fail to do that, we may encounter some difficulties.

Brian Adam: I agree with the deputy convener. The Parliamentary Bureau sets aside limited time in the Parliament for debate on committee reports. If we are not properly in the queue, the report may not be debated for some time.

I hope that I have not misunderstood what Paul Martin is saying. I assume that he wants the report to be debated by the Parliament in due course—I hope that we differ on when, rather than if, that should happen. To suggest that the report should not be debated in Parliament if the Executive provides the committee with a satisfactory response is to deny other members of the Parliament an opportunity to say how they feel about it.

The new Parliament building is one of the most important issues that the Parliament has had to face in the short time that it has been in existence. Every member has the right to have their say on the Holyrood building and its development. We have been assigned by the Parliament to investigate the details of the matter. Our report is the result of that work and we have all signed up to it without reservations.

The Deputy Convener: There is no attempt to bury the report—Paul Martin is concerned about timing.

Miss Goldie: Is the Executive under any time constraint in delivering its response? If not, matters will be left in limbo. That would be an untidy conclusion to what has been a solid exercise.

The Deputy Convener: The Executive must respond within two months of the date of publication of the report; that is the timeframe. The Executive has until 5 February to respond, I think—the clerk may correct me on the exact date. We would come back to the issue and discuss it after that date, once we had received the Executive response.

Brian Adam: What would appear before the Parliament? Would Parliament debate our report, the Executive response and our consideration of that response? It is unlikely that there will be many committee days in Parliament before 5 February. If we do not make the bid now, it could be a long time before we secure a slot.

The Deputy Convener: That is the point that I was trying to make. If we do not make the bid now, the debate could be pushed into the summer. Who knows what else will come up that the conveners group might decide was more worthy of debate? We can do no more than make a request for a debate to the conveners group; the conveners group will decide whether the report is put forward for debate.

Margaret Jamieson: If we were to make a request for a debate on the report today, rather than on 5 February, what would be the first committee slot?

The Deputy Convener: The current plan is to assign one committee half sitting day each month. There will be 12 committee half sitting days in the Parliament over the next year. I am concerned that we get the matter on to the conveners group agenda as soon as possible. It is for the conveners group to decide whether to accept the report for debate.

Ms MacDonald: The committee could have it both ways, but it must get in the queue. It would be naive to say that there would not be a little more interest in the report than in many other things that come before Parliament. There is nothing wrong in asking to be put in the queue because it is the Audit Committee's judgment that, even after receiving the Executive's response, the committee will still want to have a full parliamentary debate. If, after receiving a response from the Executive, the committee decided to take all those responsible outside and garrote them, it could then inform the conveners group that it no longer needed the time in Parliament.

Margaret Jamieson: Is that legal?

The Deputy Convener: I propose that we apply to the conveners group for time to debate the report in Parliament, given that, as Margo MacDonald says, we can withdraw our request if, after considering the Executive's response, we decide that a debate is no longer necessary. Is there another proposal?

Brian Adam: I am happy to support your proposal, convener.

Paul Martin: In response to Brian Adam's earlier point, I am not saying that I am sure that we should discuss the report in the Parliament. We can take a decision on that only when we have received the response from the Scottish Executive. When we have received the response, we should decide whether to make use of the time that is available to us in Parliament to debate the report. The committee has discussed other reports, such as the Scottish Ambulance Service report, which members may want to debate in full in the Parliament.

Brian Adam has said that there is absolutely no doubt that the report on the new Parliament building should be discussed in Parliament, but I think that we should decide on that after we receive the response from the Scottish Executive. The Executive may make a satisfactory response, dealing with the issues that have been raised in the report. If the Executive addresses the recommendations that the report makes, the committee may decide that there is no need for the matter to be discussed in Parliament.

The Deputy Convener: That is a possibility. However, I remind members that, if we do not apply for time now, our business is likely to get pushed into the middle of the year.

Paul Martin: My point is that we should make the best use of the limited parliamentary time that is available to the committee. There may be no requirement for a debate on the report once we have received the Scottish Executive response. We might want to use our committee time to discuss the Scottish Ambulance Service report or one of the other reports that we have considered.

The Deputy Convener: As a member of the committee, rather than as the deputy convener, I think that the report, the issues that it raises and the whole project are of vital public interest and I would push strongly for the Audit Committee to request a debate on it.

I have made a proposal. I presume that Paul Martin is proposing that we defer a decision until we receive the response from the Executive.

Paul Martin: That would not discount the possibility of discussing the report in Parliament, but it would allow us to receive a comprehensive response to the issues that the report raises. After we have received what I hope will be a comprehensive response, the committee can decide whether to request a debate.

14:15

The Deputy Convener: We have two proposals: we can apply now to the conveners group for a debate in Parliament or we can wait until we receive the response from the Executive—around the beginning of February—before applying for such a debate.

The question is, that the Audit Committee agrees to defer a decision on whether to seek a debate in the Parliament on its report on the new Scottish Parliament building until it has received the response from the Scottish Executive. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Convener: There will be a division.

FOR

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

AGAINST

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP)
Nick Johnston (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Deputy Convener: The result of the division is: For 3, Against 2, Abstentions 2.

Paul Martin's proposal is agreed to. We will wait until the beginning of February before taking a decision on whether to request a debate.

I will now hand over the convener's chair to Andrew Welsh.

Ms MacDonald: I am not going in a huff—I am just going.

Work Programme

The Convener (Mr Andrew Welsh): The forward work programme is based on discussions between the clerks and Audit Scotland. I notice that the national health service looms large through February and March. I remind the committee that we will receive the Scottish Executive responses to our reports on the Scottish Ambulance Service, skillseekers, the agricultural business improvement scheme and Holyrood, in addition to those reports that are set out in the programme. Perhaps the Auditor General would comment on the proposed work plan.

Mr Robert Black (Auditor General for Scotland): I have little to say, but I thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to comment. We need to plan our work programme a reasonable period ahead. The paper indicates when various pieces of work will be in a fit state for discussion at the Audit Committee between now and Easter. We expect to deliver on that time scale.

Broadly speaking, there are two categories of report. First, there are investigations that arise out of the audit. The two reports in that category are the financial overview report on the NHS and a proposed report on Tayside Health Board, its constituent trusts and the financial problems that they have experienced in the past financial year. Secondly, there are baseline reports. The reports in that category are stocktakes of the current position in waste management and the management of medical equipment. Both those reports are part of a continuing audit, which I shall revisit later in the year.

As you said, convener, there are also the matters arising from earlier reports, which are listed at the bottom of the page. We have a fairly full programme between now and the Easter recess.

The Convener: Are there any comments? Does the committee agree to the future work programme?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the Auditor General.

I notice the investigation into Tayside Health Board. I suggest that it might be appropriate for us to hold a meeting in a town in Tayside to allow members of the public to hear the evidence at first hand and to see the committee at work. If members of the committee agree to that, I suggest that the clerks produce an options paper on possible venues. Is the committee agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Nick Johnston (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I would be extremely agreeable, particularly if we went to Perth.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): What about Kinross?

The Convener: I shall await the options and show no bias.

Margaret Jamieson: Given that the forward work programme has a heavy emphasis on the national health service, I suggest that we ask our colleagues on the Health and Community Care Committee whether they want to be involved.

The Convener: That is a useful suggestion. I am sure that you look forward to that with relish, Margaret.

14:19

Meeting continued in private until 14:41.

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