STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 21 November 2001
(*Morning*)

Session 1

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STANDARDS COMMITTEE
15th Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)
*Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Sam Jones

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Jim Johnston

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Standards Committee

Wednesday 21 November 2001

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:33*]

Lobbying

The Convener (Mr Mike Rumbles): Good morning and welcome to the 15th meeting in 2001 of the Standards Committee.

Our first item of business is consideration of a further issues paper on our lobbying inquiry. Members will recall that, at our meeting on 12 September, we decided that the clerks should produce what I call a not-quite-final paper on lobbying. Members should have that paper in front of them.

Three principal policy issues remain to be resolved in relation to our recommendation to introduce a statutory registration scheme for commercial lobbyists. They are: our definition of commercial lobbyists, the extent of the registration framework and the level of sanctions for failing to register. I propose to address each in turn.

The clerks have proposed a new definition of "commercial lobbyists" at paragraph 8 of the issues paper. I ask members to turn to paragraph 8, which seeks to amalgamate the two previous working definitions into a single definition of the commercial lobbyists that are to be covered by the register. I throw the floor open to comments from members on that new definition.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I have a particular concern about the exclusion of in-house lobbyists. I asked for further information about that because I was not sure what we agreed last time and whether we should make a distinction between commercial in-house lobbyists and other commercial lobbyists.

The Convener: We came to the conclusion that the fundamental issues are openness and transparency and, because we know where in-house lobbyists are coming from, we accepted that we would focus on commercial lobbyists.

Mr Macintosh: I accept that the clerks' paper indicates that the committee has come to that conclusion, but I must tell you that, intellectually, I had not come to the same conclusion. I am trying to work out where I missed the argument. However, I do not want the committee to go back over old ground unnecessarily.

When companies spend large amounts of money lobbying the Parliament, that should be transparent. I am therefore slightly concerned that our definitions do not include in-house lobbyists that spend large amounts of money lobbying the Parliament.

The Convener: You made that point before, Kenneth, and you were in a minority of one. I do not want to go back to a decision that we have already made. We should focus on the new definition of commercial lobbyists in paragraph 8.

Mr Macintosh: Well, I have been consistent at least.

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): Are we confident that our definition is robust enough to address the concern raised in paragraph 7—that we should not damage the voluntary sector? Some of those lobbying on behalf of commercial lobbyists have been quite robust in the past month or two and some of the language used has been colourful. Does our definition make the separation between different kinds of lobbyists clear?

Did any of the commercial lobbyists provide a meaningful definition? It seems that lobbyists have made no attempt to say, "We understand where you are coming from—here's a definition that we think will cover us and that we are comfortable with." It is interesting that they have made no submission—a fact that we should keep in mind if there is any subsequent assault on our policy development.

The Convener: I will ask the clerk to comment because I have not seen every submission that has come in. Most of them come directly to the clerks.

Sam Jones (Clerk): I recollect that the original definitions that we proposed in the consultation paper aroused considerable criticism. The new definition has been developed by the clerks and the legal office to try to address some of the issues raised by the commercial lobbyists that responded to the consultation.

Paragraph 26 mentions Bircham Dyson Bell, which was the only respondent to provide a basis for a definition of lobbying, although it is not reprinted in the paragraph. However, as I say, there was considerable criticism of the earlier definitions. We have not consulted on the new definition.

The Convener: We decided during a previous discussion to make it absolutely clear in our report that the definition of commercial lobbyists will not apply to organisations in the voluntary sector.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): We could go on refining our definition for ever—there have been 18 definitions of

sustainable development, and effective arguments could be made for each of them. In this case, we are giving the Parliament's perspective. Although I suspect that many commercial lobbyists will say that they do not want to go anywhere near MSPs and just want to give advice and guidance to their clients, the definition that we have is correct and appropriate from the parliamentary point of view.

Mr Macintosh: Does the new definition replace the two previous attempts?

The Convener: Yes.

Mr Macintosh: I have made my reservations clear.

Mr McAveety: It would also be useful if the information that I asked about were available. There are two debates. Some people oppose the principle of registering commercial lobbyists. Some commercial lobbyists recognise the need for a framework but are unclear about the language to be used. It is interesting that no one has submitted wording that accommodates our position and that of the lobbyists. If the basis of our work is attacked, that will be a good, defensible line to take, given the ferocity of some of the language that has been used.

The Convener: Point noted.

Are we content with the definition?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: We will move on to the extent of the registration framework. I draw members' attention to paragraphs 22 and 23 of the issues paper. I do not think that there is any doubt about the items in paragraph 22—that is why all the items have been separated into two paragraphs. Paragraph 22 refers to

"• names of lobbying firms

• names of staff engaged in lobbying

• names of companies represented by the commercial lobbying firms".

I think from previous committee discussions that everyone is content with including those items in the framework.

The more controversial or difficult items are the bullet points in paragraph 23. I would like members' views on what should be included in the registration framework. We need to firm up the framework using the bullet points in paragraphs 22 and 23.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: We need not be too prescriptive. If we require the items that are listed in paragraph 22 and a case comes up, we will always have the power to obtain the extra information, should it be necessary. The items that are listed in paragraph 22 may be sufficient.

The Convener: You would be content to use the three bullet points in paragraph 22 and not to move on to paragraph 23.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: We can always obtain further information if we need it.

Mr Macintosh: I agree with Lord James and remind the committee of what I said about in-house lobbying. I hoped that we would establish a scheme that encourages greater transparency about the amount of money that is spent on lobbying. It is difficult to insist that some commercial lobbyists declare the amount they spend on lobbying activities when we do not impose the same restrictions on others. For consistency alone, we should stick with the recommendations in paragraph 22. It is difficult to justify the other levels of information when the requirements are not applied even-handedly.

The Convener: I would like to hear other members' comments. It is a pity that Tricia Marwick is not present, because she was a main proponent of many of the items that paragraph 23 lists.

Mr McAveety: For the items that paragraph 22 lists, how live would the register be? How up to date would it be? When would it be renewed? It is in the nature of that business for some folk to move on. It is a bit like other sectors in which folk move among companies. Do we have a time scale? Will the register be updated annually?

Sam Jones: A few months ago, the committee had some discussion on whether the register should be published annually or should be a live register that might require companies to update their entries within 30 days, for example. A live version of the register would be available on the internet. I recollect that that was the committee's feeling.

Mr McAveety: It would be useful to have clarification on that, because lobbying is a fluid world. Many young folk enter lobbying then move into other jobs quickly.

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): I support Frank McAveety's view. A live register would make sense.

The Convener: Kenneth Macintosh and Lord James Douglas-Hamilton propose that we do not include in the register the items in the six bullet points in paragraph 23 and that we stick with the three bullet points in paragraph 22, which list

"• names of lobbying firms

• names of staff engaged in lobbying

• names of companies represented by the commercial lobbying firms".

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): I think back to our discussions about the points that

are listed in paragraph 23 and to why we had those discussions. I do not want to be too pejorative, but if the information that that paragraph lists is not registered, the register will become less meaningful than we intended it to be. However, I recognise that including all that information would create huge difficulties. There is no point in having an unworkable register.

I wonder whether, in the third bullet point in paragraph 22, it is enough just to say:

"• names of companies represented by the commercial lobbying firms",

as they are not always registered companies. I wonder whether that definition should be extended to "companies and organisations".

The Convener: Or "other entities or individuals". I take your point.

09:45

Patricia Ferguson: Having said that, I accept that paragraph 22 is what we will end up with.

The Convener: Do members have any other comments?

Mr Macintosh: The third bullet point in paragraph 23 mentions

"• details of expenditure in relation to individual lobbying projects".

I regret the fact that we cannot get a firmer definition. To require such details of commercial companies and not of in-house companies is to make an arbitrary distinction, which is not fair. Getting a fair system for declaring expenditure is the most tricky thing to do. At a previous meeting I suggested that we could use something like the threshold that we have for the declaration of interests—and set it at £5,000 or whatever. I am disappointed that we have not followed that suggestion.

The Convener: You position is plain: you feel that some of those details could have been included if they were required across the board but, as the committee has decided to focus on commercial lobbyists, you do not think that requiring such details is appropriate.

Mr Macintosh: That is exactly right.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I presume that all these requirements will be reviewed in the light of experience, in a year or so. This is not the last word on any of them.

The Convener: That is an important point. We are having a first attempt at this, and we are trying to get it right. However, as in anything else, it is right that we should reconsider the register approximately a year after it comes into effect and assess our experiences of it in practice.

To clarify, we will take the three bullet points in paragraph 22:

"• names of lobbying firms

• names of staff engaged in lobbying

• names of companies"—

or organisations, however we phrase that—

"represented by the commercial lobbying firms",

and will not proceed with any of the other bullet points that have been identified. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: We will now focus on the level of sanctions for failing to register. I direct members to paragraph 28, which reads:

"The Committee is, therefore, invited to consider which, if any, of the following sanctions it considers appropriate for failing to register:

• Naming and Shaming;

• A fixed fine;

• A rising scale of fines".

I throw the matter open for comment.

Mr Macintosh: Given what we have just agreed about paragraph 22, it would be disproportionate to take the matter further than naming and shaming. If there were more stringent and rigorous disclosure of information, there should perhaps be more rigorous penalties, but we are not reacting to a perceived problem of corruption or unscrupulous practice; we are trying to introduce more transparency. The penalties that we agree today should reflect the fact that we are trying to encourage transparency, not clamping down on improper activity. At this stage, naming and shaming would be enough of a sanction.

The Convener: I would like to hear all members' views on this issue, as it is very important.

Kay Ullrich: I agree with Ken Macintosh. Naming and shaming is the sanction that we should choose; we should not consider fines. Naming and shaming is the best way forward.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I do not think that there is a problem. As far as I can recall, only one lobbyist has written to me, on behalf of medical interests, and I replied to him that he should ask the constituent to raise the matter with me directly. I never saw him or heard from him again. I do not think that there is a general problem. Organisations such as Scottish Enterprise may lay on lunches for MSPs, but there has been no problem with that. It has all been out in the open. We should proceed with naming and shaming in the first instance, but we can review that in the light of experience.

Mr McAveety: I agree.

Patricia Ferguson: In some ways, it would be more difficult to police the scheme if we included all the other categories of information. We are coming down to a much simpler method of registration. Naming and shaming is proportionate to that kind of scheme.

Mr McAveety: We should add the qualifier, as Lord James suggested, that we will keep the situation under review and monitor how the scheme operates. That would be helpful.

The Convener: Are we content for the clerks to draft the final report on our lobbying inquiry, which we will consider at a meeting in the near future?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Members' Interests Order

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is our work on the Scotland Act 1998 (Transitory and Transitional Provisions) (Members' Interests) Order 1999. Today, we are considering a paper on the declaration of interests.

The first section of the paper examines the situations in which a member must declare his or her interests. The current legislation requires MSPs to declare relevant interests when participating in parliamentary proceedings. The paper asks whether MSPs should also be required to declare relevant interests when communicating with ministers, MSPs or civil servants outwith parliamentary proceedings, for example in correspondence. The rules at Westminster currently provide for that, but the committee may consider that such a measure would be disproportionate. We must also consider whether MSPs should be required to declare a relevant registrable interest to a constituent if the interest could be seen as prejudicing the member's handling of the constituency case.

We will tackle those issues before considering whether an MSP's participation in proceedings directly related to his or her interests should be curtailed. The floor is open to examine those points. I would appreciate hearing members' views.

Mr Macintosh: Do we have to agree on the three bullet points in paragraph 6?

The Convener: Yes.

Mr Macintosh: The issues are not black and white. My inclination is that members should declare their interests. If they declare them in Parliament, they should declare them when they deal with others in writing. I am not clear how onerous the responsibility would be on MSPs, but I think that that is a practicable solution.

I disagree entirely with the idea of banning members from speaking or voting on matters from which they might benefit. There are already restrictions on paid advocacy. We should be against paid advocacy. Trying to define direct benefits could be tricky. The paper states that the Nolan committee of the House of Commons said that we should not discourage members of Parliament from having outside interests. So long as people declare their interests, that is sufficient. If a member feels that they are going to receive a direct benefit and that that benefit might affect their judgment, it is up to them to abstain from proceedings, rather than being banned from voting or participating.

Finally, on declaring relevant interests to constituents, if we declare interests in parliamentary proceedings, we should declare them in all circumstances, although I accept that the issue is tricky.

Mr McAveety: I refer to the narrative before the bullet points in paragraph 6. Partner libraries would allow the public to have access to the information.

The suggestion in the third bullet point is unwieldy. We should not presume that members can declare relevant interests to constituents when dealing with a constituency case because, on first impressions in some cases, there is not an understandable connection. That is not to say that members are withholding anything; they might not see the connection until later. A constituent could say later that a member did not mention something the first time that they met. The suggestion is fraught with so many complexities for everyone concerned—not just the member—that it is just daft.

On the second bullet point, I believe that members should declare their interest in an issue from which they might benefit. That would make proceedings more transparent and would allow members to observe how they argue and how they conduct themselves when discussing that issue.

Local government often discussed whether a councillor who was a tenant should vote on fixing rent increases, as it was demonstrably in their interest not to go for such an increase. The suggestion that those councillors should not vote was a daft scenario. It would have excluded many people from the decision-making process. I therefore oppose the suggestion that members who might benefit from proceedings of Parliament should not participate. There would be an army of lawyers defining potential benefit and there would be an industry making money from that.

I do not have a strong view on whether we should be required to declare interests outwith parliamentary proceedings. I would need to hear more discussions on that, but I have made my case clear on the second and third bullet points in paragraph 6.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: There is a danger in being too prescriptive. I agree with what Frank McAveety said. It would be ludicrous to say that a miner would not be allowed to vote on or talk about mining issues. A miner would know most about that subject. Parliament would be deprived if a miner, farmer, accountant, lawyer or representative of whatever profession were not allowed to contribute.

The Convener: Are we saying that it would be too cumbersome to declare interests outwith parliamentary proceedings?

Mr McAveety: I was trying to argue that if interests are already registered—as the narrative of paragraph 6 states—that is legitimate. Members could fail to declare an interest because of volume of correspondence, carelessness or accidental omission. Someone who is tenacious might then ask why we did not mention it. If we accept the suggestion that we declare interests outwith parliamentary proceedings, the matter would become more of an issue than it should be. The interests are on the public record already.

Kay Ullrich: I am inclined to agree. The suggestion is too cumbersome and it would lay us open to all kinds of problems if we did not mention an interest because we forgot or it did not seem relevant at the time. If the interest is registered, that should be sufficient.

The Convener: I do not think that there is any support for the suggestion that a member be prevented from voting or speaking on a matter from which they could benefit. I think that we should leave it open for people to participate in voting.

Kay Ullrich: We would lose a lot of expertise if we did not allow people to speak on the subject that they knew most about.

The Convener: We move on to paragraph 8, which is on determining a declarable interest. I refer particularly to the bullet points, which ask:

"• Should the Committee's proposals for replacement legislation set out how the test for determining whether a Member has a registrable interest should be applied? Should the requirement to declare be limited by reference to the Member's state of knowledge?

• In determining whether a Member has a declarable interest, how far should the Member be required to research organisations/individuals with which he/she holds a registrable interest?"

We have experience of those issues. I am interested to hear members' comments on those points. Should the test be a test of reasonableness? That is a difficult question.

Mr Macintosh: I am even less clear about this matter than I was about the previous issue, particularly in the light of the case that we have dealt with. Although the member concerned held the view that there was no connection in that case, others may have seen one.

If a member has a declarable interest or an involvement in a company, they should make it their business to know exactly what that company is about. However, many large global companies have interests that extend far and wide and that vary from time to time, and members cannot know about them all. That is a tricky commitment, and yet the defence that a member did not know is not plausible in certain situations. Ignorance is no defence in many cases.

10:00

Mr McAveety: If one were an extensive dabbler in the stock market, how could one know whether one was engaging with certain shareholders? Incidentally, I do not dabble extensively in the stock market.

Kay Ullrich: You disappointment me.

Mr McAveety: One could even pursue an ethical investment strategy that did not turn out the way that one wanted it to. People should declare the companies that they work with, but a company's offshoots could end up being involved in things that the investor did not appreciate that they would be involved in and would not have known about at the outset. Why should the investor be culpable in that context?

It is important that people know whether members who speak on a subject have a declarable interest in that area. Members should be aware that that is the important part of the debate, as opposed to having to go through Companies House to investigate the connections between organisations, which places an unfair burden on members.

Kay Ullrich: I was going to raise the issue of investments. Quite often, people have no idea what they are investing in. For example, unit trusts can involve a range of different investments. It would be impossible to police that.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I agree with Ken Macintosh that the test should be one of reasonableness and common sense.

The Convener: I get the impression from members that they want to stick with the current rules rather than change them.

Mr Macintosh: I suggest that changing the rules would be too difficult. The test is one of using our judgment in relation to each member's circumstances. I would be happy for the adviser, the commissioner or the committee to decide the merits of each individual case and to apply our judgment to such cases.

The Convener: Using a test of reasonableness?

Mr Macintosh: Exactly, rather than trying to define, in a members' interests order, something that is extremely difficult to define. We should leave it at that.

The Convener: Do members have comments on any of the other issues that are raised in paragraphs 7 and 8? Are members content with that section?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: The final section of the paper deals with ceased and future interests and details the recommendations made by a working group of the consultative steering group and the rules at Westminster, Cardiff and Belfast. Should members be required to declare relevant ceased interests? If so, how far back should he or she go? The members' interests order is silent on that point, but the code of conduct suggests that members should consider the issue. Should members be required to declare future or expected interests?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Let us imagine that a member has been asked to become a company director in the private sector—the announcement is about to be made and the member knows that they are going to be appointed. If that member speaks in the chamber in a related debate, an interest should be declared, in my view. However, if they are merely under consideration for such an appointment and have no idea whether an announcement is going to be made, the situation is different. This is a grey area. I think that a member would be wiser not to speak if they knew that they were under immediate consideration for such an appointment. The requirement to make a declaration should apply only to those who know that they are going to be appointed.

Mr Macintosh: When I first read the paper, I thought that the provision was slightly daft, although I am someone who lives in hope, rather than in expectation, of such an appointment.

The Convener: Just like me.

Mr Macintosh: Exactly.

I was quite taken by the quotation in paragraph 11, which comes from the House of Commons code of conduct and refers to the definition of when "reasonable expectation" exists. It makes it clear when a member has a real interest to declare and it is a reasonable test to apply. On that basis, we should declare express interests.

On ceased interests, the 12-month rule—for when an interest comes off the register—is fine. However, proportionality is again an issue. If an interest was major, such as a financial interest, the fact that it expired 12 months ago does not necessarily mean that it is no longer perceived as an interest. Again, members should apply a test to their own interests. If they have a previous declared interest that was major, they should continue to declare it for the duration of the parliamentary session. After that there should be a threshold, after which events and payments that happened years ago should no longer be declared.

Kay Ullrich: The key is the word "relevant" in the phrase "relevant ceased interests". Members should instinctively know what is relevant regardless of how long ago it was. They should know whether an interest will colour their judgment.

Mr McAveety: Do we have examples?

Sam Jones: I suppose that if a member had received a gift, say, 18 months before the occasion from which the interest issue could arise and he or she had taken that entry out of the register, they might want to consider declaring it, if it was a substantial gift. The current rules as expressed in the code basically leave it to the member to consider whether he or she wants to declare a ceased interest.

Mr McAveety: Probably much of this discussion is about grey areas and that is why it is difficult to have a hard and fast rule. However, it is worth sustaining the rule. The phrase "future and expected interests" is right because that is important in terms of consequences.

I love the line in the House of Commons code of conduct that says:

"Where a Member's plans or degree of involvement in a project have passed beyond vague hopes and aspirations and reached the stage where there is a reasonable expectation that a financial benefit will accrue".

That is a lovely way of saying that you are getting paid. If that is the case, we should leave a reasonable test to suggest that.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I support what Frank McAveety has said. My recollection is that, in the House of Commons, most members did not declare relevant ceased interests. However, if the relevant ceased interest was a huge one, it would probably come out because someone would raise it. Generally, most members did not mention minor ceased interests.

Mr McAveety: That is reasonable.

The Convener: Are members content with that?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: We will take on board the issue about future interests. When we next meet to consider the members' interests order we will consider a paper on paid advocacy.

Cross-party Groups

The Convener: We have two applications for cross-party group status to consider. The first is for a group on visual impairment. The committee will note that only MSPs will be entitled to full membership of the proposed group. Although the rules do not specifically prohibit that, the committee might want to consider whether it is appropriate, because this is the first time that full membership is to be restricted to MSPs.

Mr Macintosh: According to the e-mail that comes with the application, there is no particular reason why the group has restricted full membership to MSPs. Lots of other groups that may have been motivated by similar reasons have chosen not to do so. The e-mail says:

"The reason for the distinction between MSPs/non MSPs was both to ensure that the group remained Parliamentary in nature, but also so that no organisation was left out."

That makes it clear that the group is just trying not to put off other organisations. As a result, I see no reason to worry about it.

The Convener: I just thought that I should bring the difference in this application to members' attention. Do members have any other comments?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I think that we can support the application.

The Convener: I will write to the convener of the group to tell her that the application has been approved. Are all members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: The second application is for a cross-party group on Palestine. Do members have any comments on the application?

Mr Macintosh: Before I comment on my concerns, I should declare that I am a member of the cross-party group on international development. I have never been clear on the rules that apply to groups that focus on subjects that might stray beyond the competence of the Parliament.

The Convener: I seek guidance from the clerk on that question.

Sam Jones: The rules state that a cross-party group must be on an issue of genuine public interest. There is no prescription on whether the issue should relate to devolved or reserved matters.

Mr Macintosh: That is what I thought. I am happy to approve the application.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I am a member of the same cross-party group on

international development. This application is a test case, as it is the first that we have had to approve for a cross-party group dealing with foreign affairs. As there is currently a dispute between Palestine and Israel, it is important that we are even-handed. If we were to approve the application, we would have to also agree to a similar application for a cross-party group on Israel, to make it clear that we are not taking a partisan approach to the dispute, which is a reserved matter.

Patricia Ferguson: I am not happy to state as much today, not because I expect that we would take a partisan view and exclude a cross-party group on Israel—because the subject is plainly outwith the Parliament's competence—but because we must take each application on its merits. There is no reason why the application cannot be approved today; it is for other members to decide whether they want to submit an application for a cross-party group on Israel or any other issue.

The Convener: That is a valid comment. The comparison might seem strange, but I should point out that we approved an application for a cross-party group on men's violence against women and children. That does not stop another member setting up a cross-party group on women's violence against men and children.

That said, there is no need to draw comparisons. The application is perfectly acceptable and we should move to approve it.

Mr Macintosh: Indeed, but I am not entirely sure about the comparison that you just drew. I agree far more with Lord James Douglas-Hamilton's comments about being even-handed on this particularly sensitive matter. Having said that, I agree that we should approve the application.

The Convener: Obviously, we have a difference of views. Do members want to make reference to Lord James's comments or not?

Mr McAveety: I do not think that we should refer to them. We are here to approve groups when individual applications are submitted. Individual members have the right to express valid comments about other cross-party groups that could be developed, but it is unfair to Palestine and to Israel to equate them immediately with each other because of what is happening at the moment.

The Convener: That is how I see the situation.

Kay Ullrich: Although the application is fine by me, I am generally concerned by the number of cross-party groups that seem to have sprung up, particularly on flavour-of-the-month issues. What is the attendance at the meetings of these groups? How many times do the members listed in the applications turn up? It is a general point; there are too many groups.

The Convener: When I knew that these applications were coming up, I asked the clerks to draw up a short report for the next agenda. As members have voiced concerns about the issue before, I want to provide an update. We will discuss the paper at the next meeting. For the committee's information, if we approve this application, it will be the 42nd cross-party group.

Patricia Ferguson: Is that all? I thought that there were considerably more than that.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I want to point out that Patricia Ferguson's comments were not in conflict with mine. It is perfectly possible to weigh each case on its merits. However, if we approve the application today, there should be no presumption that we have taken a partisan position. I certainly have not.

The Convener: I want to draw the discussion to a conclusion. Are members content to approve this application and that I write to the convener notifying him of that approval?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of the meeting.

Meeting closed at 10:15.

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