

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 23 September 2003
(Morning)

Session 2

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STANDARDS COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2003, Session 2

CONVENER

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- *Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
- *Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
- *Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)
- *Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
- *Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

*attended

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

- Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)
- Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
- *Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Sam Jones

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Sarah Robertson

LOCATION

The Hub

Scottish Parliament

Standards Committee

Tuesday 23 September 2003

(Morning)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Cross-party Groups

The Deputy Convener (Mr Kenneth Macintosh): Good morning everyone, and welcome to the sixth meeting of the Standards Committee in this session. We have two items of business today. The second deals with the complaint against Ken MacAskill and Tricia Marwick. At our previous meeting we agreed to take that item in private, as we will be discussing the progress of the committee's investigation.

Our first item is two applications to establish new cross-party groups. Marilyn Livingstone, whose name is on the first application, will not be with us this morning, but members have had a chance to examine the application to register a cross-party group on construction. Do members have any comments on that group?

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am involved with that group. I urge the committee to approve the application, because the construction industry is a much ignored but crucial sector of the Scottish economy. It is also a diffuse industry, in terms of its representation and organisation and its interface with the Parliament. We hope that one of the main benefits of a cross-party group will be to provide a platform for the industry to come together and speak with one voice, which would make life easier for the Parliament. In addition, as members know, the Executive is carrying out a review of various aspects of the industry. I hope that the committee will support the application.

The Deputy Convener: Absolutely. Are there any other comments?

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): The application would seem to be in order, and after Alex Neil's eloquence I do not see how we could possibly turn it down.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): I agree. I could not possibly reject a proposal that had on it the name of my colleague and friend David Mundell. On that ground I am happy for the group to proceed.

The Deputy Convener: It is worth noting in passing the large number of external organisations that are involved with the group, with which I do not have a problem. We will return to that point when we talk about cross-party groups later in the year or early next year. The contrast between the numbers of MSPs and external groups on this application and the numbers on the next application that we will consider is clear and we will need to bear that in mind. However, I certainly do not doubt the usefulness of a cross-party group on construction or its worth to the Parliament.

If we are all agreed, we will approve the application to establish the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on construction.

The second application is for a cross-party group on the Scottish economy. Alex Neil is one of the co-conveners of the group. Do you wish to comment, Alex?

Alex Neil: It may be useful if I outline the background to the group. In the previous session there was a cross-party group on international trade and investment, which was headed up by Annabel Goldie. There was also a cross-party group that was chaired by Robin Harper, which started off as a cross-party group on citizens' income and then widened to include other economic matters. Also, Angus MacKay led a proposal to establish a cross-party group on small and medium-sized enterprises.

A number of us got together and suggested that it was a bit daft having all those separate cross-party groups duplicating one another's work and effort, and that it would be better just to have a cross-party group on the Scottish economy, which could then look into specific issues such as SME development. There was consensus on that proposal. Members can see the number of MSPs who support the establishment of a cross-party group on the Scottish economy, and the number of outside organisations, some of which are very prestigious. The sensible thing to do is to approve the cross-party group, which will mean that we will go from what could have been three cross-party groups to one.

The clerks had a question about whether the group that Robin Harper chaired was happy not to pursue its application. I checked with Robin, I think the clerks checked with Robin, and Robin in turn checked with the other key players in that group. As long as he is satisfied—which he is at the moment—that the cross-party group on the Scottish economy adequately covers the issues that he wants to raise, he is happy for the cross-party group on the Scottish economy to be the cross-party group.

The Deputy Convener: That is good. For clarification, is the cross-party group on

international trade and investment going to continue?

Alex Neil: No. It is terminated.

The Deputy Convener: Are there any other comments?

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Is the other group to which Alex Neil referred the cross-party group on business, economy, environment and society in the Scottish Parliament? I had never heard of that group, but its remit and objectives are similar to the ones that Alex Neil outlined. Although it might be helpful if three cross-party groups were amalgamated into one, I would be a little concerned if we had both the cross-party group on business, economy, environment and society and the cross-party group on the Scottish economy, because they seem to be trying to do the same thing, which leads to duplication.

Alex Neil: My understanding from talking to Robin Harper is that the cross-party group on business, economy, environment and society is deregistering, and that its members will subsume their activity into supporting the cross-party group on the Scottish economy. I think that he has confirmed that to the clerks.

The Deputy Convener: He has actually reregistered his cross-party group on business, economy, environment and society, although he may not wish to continue with it. There are some queries about the group anyway so, if the committee is happy, as convener of the Standards Committee, I will write to Robin Harper, send him a copy of the *Official Report*, and ask whether he is happy for his group to be included in Alex Neil's cross-party group on the Scottish economy or whether he will continue with his group.

Alex Neil: You will notice that the five largest parties are represented in our group.

The Deputy Convener: I was quite taken with the decision of the cross-party group on the Scottish economy, as well as that of the cross-party group on autistic spectrum disorder and other groups, to have co-conveners. I hope that that works. It is to be commended if it does, as it is a good idea. In addition, the list of MSP members of the cross-party group on the Scottish economy is quite impressive. Are there any other comments?

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): The group deserves support. My mind was sharpened up on this issue by being researched by an academic yesterday on my views on cross-party groups. Looking down the list of groups, I think that some could be criticised as being too specific, and possibly Alex Neil's group could be criticised as being too diffuse. A balance has to be struck—

one cannot be all things to all men—but reducing the number of groups is desirable. From what Alex has said, this application may achieve that in the economic world. The group should be supported, but it will have to focus efficiently, or it will just replicate the Scottish Parliament.

The Deputy Convener: Given the comments of the chief executive of HBOS plc recently, I welcome the formation of the group, which reflects members' interest in economic and financial matters in Scotland.

Alex Neil: I have contacted Lord Stevens on and invited him along to a meeting of the group, but so far he cannot find a place in his diary.

The Deputy Convener: Excellent. Does the committee agree to the formation of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on the Scottish economy?

Members indicated agreement.

The Deputy Convener: We shall now move to item 2, which we agreed previously to take in private. I ask members of the public, press, official report and broadcasting to please leave the meeting.

10:09

Meeting continued in private until 11:54.

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