

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 January 2009

Session 3

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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2009, Session 3

CONVENER

*Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

*Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

CLERKS TO THE COMMITTEE

Gillian Baxendine

Alison Walker

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERKS

Mary Dinsdale

Jane Williams

ASSISTANT CLERK

Catherine Fergusson

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Tuesday 13 January 2009

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:15*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Gil Paterson): Welcome, everybody, to the first meeting in 2009 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. I ask everyone to turn off their mobile phones, if they have not already done so.

The first item of business is consideration of whether to take agenda items 3 and 4 in private. Item 3 is initial consideration of written evidence on the Scottish Parliamentary Pensions Bill, and item 4 is consideration of a draft response to a letter from the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee. Our discussion of those two issues today will be our initial consideration, which might not reflect our final views.

Do members agree to take items 3 and 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Cross-party Groups

14:16

The Convener: The second item of business is an update on cross-party groups. Members have received paper SPPA/S3/09/1/1, which contains information about the number of cross-party groups, their meetings and their membership. Are there any comments?

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I would like to make just one small point, although it does not really lead to anything. In the paper, the identification of cross-party groups with committees is a bit misleading. For example, I am a member of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on epilepsy, and although the group certainly covers health issues, it also covers education issues, for example. The cross-party groups do not necessarily fit into categories in the way suggested in the paper. A number of them have links with two or three of the Parliament's committees.

The Convener: Are you making a suggestion?

Robert Brown: No, I am just making an observation.

The Convener: No one seems to want to raise any other points, so are members content to receive another update at the same time next year? If so, would members like the update to contain any additional information, such as the change that Robert Brown has suggested?

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Paragraph 12 of the paper says that an average of four MSPs attend each CPG meeting, which means that significantly fewer than four MSPs attend some meetings. I will be advised if this suggestion is too complicated, but it would be interesting to know the ratio of MSPs to non-MSPs at CPG meetings. If it is easy to obtain that information, it would help us to see the full picture. However, if it is not easy, I will not push the point.

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I imagine that the ratio will vary widely. At some CPG meetings the room is absolutely full of people, but at other meetings only a handful of people attend. An average figure would be misleading.

Peter Peacock: My interest is in the ratio of MSPs to non-MSPs. CPGs are supposed to be about sharing experience, expertise and understanding. My impression—although it would be nice to have facts rather than impressions—is that MSPs are sometimes substantially outnumbered by non-MSPs. That might sometimes be appropriate, but it would be interesting to know the figures.

The Convener: I am a vice-convenor or a member of one or two cross-party groups, and it can be difficult for me to get to some meetings because of other commitments. However, when there is prior notice of a pressing reason to attend, the numbers often creep up. The cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on China is probably the best attended by MSPs. In my experience, far more attend that group than others.

If it is possible, tracking the numbers might be worth while. I am sure that audited minutes of meetings reflect the numbers, so it might be quite simple to obtain the information that Peter Peacock seeks.

Robert Brown: With due respect to Peter Peacock, the numbers are less important than the way in which groups concentrate on the parliamentary aspects of their functions. The thrust of groups should be about not just studying a subject but about focusing on the subject's parliamentary aspects. In my experience, the groups that focus in that way tend to be more effective than the groups that are a bit more discursive, if I may put it that way.

Dave Thompson: By the very nature of CPGs, the way in which they deal with their business varies enormously.

It is slightly surprising to learn from the paper that only 28 out of 64 CPGs—just over a third—submitted annual return forms. Are groups required to return their forms by a particular time?

Gillian Baxendine (Clerk): The rules require groups to submit an annual return but, to be fair, some groups have not existed for a year since being set up.

Dave Thompson: I just wanted to point out that the statistics in the paper are based on a fairly small number of returns.

The Convener: Is a reminder to be diligent in returning their forms sent out to cross-party groups? Might this committee want to do that?

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): To send out a reminder to fill in the forms?

The Convener: Yes, so that the groups comply with the rules.

Aileen Campbell: It might be worth while sending out a wee reminder, so that we can obtain a fuller picture of what is happening.

The Convener: Right, we can look into the suggestions that have been made. If members are content to leave matters with me and the deputy convener, I am sure that the clerks will inform us about measures that we can take.

I thank members of the public for their attendance.

14:21

Meeting continued in private until 15:22.

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