

TRANSPORT AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 June 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 13 June 2000

	Col.
PETITIONS	701

TRANSPORT AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE **15th Meeting 2000, Session 1**

CONVENER

*Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)

*Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)

*Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)

*Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)

*attended

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Shelagh McKinlay

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Transport and the Environment Committee

Tuesday 13 June 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 13:04*]

The Convener (Mr Andy Kerr): I welcome members of the press and public to the 15th meeting this year of the Transport and the Environment Committee. I also welcome Fraser Inch, a school student, who joins me this week to gain experience of what we do in the Parliament. Perhaps we can put questions to Fraser at the end of the week.

We have received apologies from Des McNulty, Cathy Jamieson, Tavish Scott and Linda Fabiani. A number of members are committed to presenting amendments at the Rural Affairs Committee, which has an impact on our agenda. I therefore propose that we defer item 4, on genetically modified organisms, to a future meeting—I hope the next meeting—of the Transport and the Environment Committee. That will allow a fuller discussion of the matter when more members are in attendance and when there is less pressure on us from elsewhere. Usually we take such briefings in private. Can we therefore also agree to take the item in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Petitions

The Convener: I refer members to petition PE96, from Mr Allan Berry, which is accompanied as usual by a committee covering note, TE/00/15/1. Mr Berry is calling on the Parliament to hold an independent and public inquiry into sea cage fish farming. The petition was referred to the Rural Affairs Committee—the lead committee on this—which has asked for our views on the petition. Those views will be taken into account when the Rural Affairs Committee considers the petition.

We must agree how we want to respond to the petition. We should focus our response on the petitioner's specific request. One option is to give an immediate view, with the caveat that the committee will be involved in discussions on the arrangement of an inquiry if that is agreed. We can also suggest that the Rural Affairs Committee seek any additional information required, as long as it is within its remit. That approach would mean

less chance of duplication of work and would make the process clearer for the petitioner and those who want to address the matter. If we decide to consider sea cage fish farming beyond the specific request made in the petition, I suggest that we conclude consideration of the petition by writing to the Rural Affairs Committee with our views. We can then inform the petitioner of our longer-term plan. As members know from the accompanying paper, there are a number of things that we can do. I seek the committee's views on how best to proceed.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Over the past year, I have regularly received information about the problems with fish farming, which I have viewed with increasing concern. If this petition had not been presented to us, I would have asked the Transport and the Environment Committee to consider the issue as a matter of concern within the next couple of months. Scottish Environment LINK has been joined by more than 100 supporters of PE96 in 15 countries. This is not simply a Scottish issue. Norway, Canada and SeaWeb in the USA are all worried about the effects of fish farming, and not just on salmon.

I could go into a lot more detail, but the most important thing is to take an attitude. The Scottish Environment LINK press release says:

"An inquiry is needed to make clear recommendations to ensure the cage fish farming industry has a more sustainable future. The aim of an inquiry must be to secure the long term future, not only for this important Scottish industry, but also for those employed in other sectors dependent on the health of the marine environment, such as inshore fisheries, and for the wealth of wildlife dependent on our seas."

There are also increasing worries, particularly on the west coast, about what is happening to wild salmon, which is disappearing from the rivers. No one is entirely certain why that is, but there are strong suspicions that cage farming may have something to do with it. The petition should be treated as a matter of urgency.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): What we do depends on whether there is a slot in which we can conduct an inquiry. If you feel that there is, convener, I believe that it would be desirable to conduct one. The papers say that there is going to be something like a 73 per cent increase in salmon production in the next three or four years. It is 10 years since the previous inquiry into this topic. The key focus for this committee would have to be the sustainable development of fish farming in future. I support such an inquiry.

The Convener: Are there any other views at this stage?

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): What exactly has the Rural Affairs Committee asked us to do?

The Convener: The petitioner has asked whether there should be an investigation. The Rural Affairs Committee has simply asked for our views on the petition.

Mr Tosh: Not on whether the Rural Affairs Committee should investigate the matter.

The Convener: Correct. We are asked for our views on the petition, which requests that an investigation be conducted.

Mr Tosh: I am happy to consider the petition, but we have already determined our work programme and I gather that the Rural Affairs Committee has arranged its work programme as well. It would help us to come to a decision if you and the convener of that committee considered the forward work programmes of the committees to establish whether such an investigation could be undertaken.

I recognise Robin Harper's point about this being a matter of some urgency, but we agreed to look into GMOs and the water industry urgently. We cannot be diverted from our programme every time a new issue arises. There are 1,001 projects to undertake and investigations to mount and they are all important. I am not playing down the significance of this issue, but I would like more information on whether we could cope with the work load.

Robin Harper: In view of the work load of the two committees, and the number of concerns about the rural environment, would it be possible to subject one of those issues—perhaps either GMOs or salmon farming—to an inquiry along the lines of that undertaken by the Cubie committee? An independent person could be appointed to investigate the issue and funds for their inquiry could be provided by the Executive.

The Convener: The committee is sympathetic to the idea of having an investigation. We will discuss with the Rural Affairs Committee the scope, timetabling and work load of that investigation, and I will return with a suggested draft remit. If both committees are satisfied with that remit and the arrangements for evidence gathering, we can proceed. If members feel that it would impact too much on our previously agreed work programmes, we will have to discuss the matter further.

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): I am not necessarily averse to having a structured debate on the issue, but there are matters of more immediate concern, which need to be prioritised. Examination of the general issue should not preclude dealing with specific problems in the interim. I agree with Murray Tosh that we should establish a solid structure for any inquiry, but that could take six months and some of these matters need to be addressed now. I would prefer an

immediate investigation into some specific aspects of the problem, leaving the general discussion on GMOs between the Rural Affairs Committee and the Transport and the Environment Committee to a future date.

The Convener: Perhaps you misunderstand what we are discussing. We are talking about the petition on salmon farming and cage fish farming.

Mr MacAskill: I would make the same point on that subject, on which we are receiving faxes from various organisations. That issue is primarily for the Rural Affairs Committee, but I would like to know its timetable for dealing with it. I know where Tavish Scott is coming from. We all received his e-mail. I appreciate that jobs and employment are important, but time is of the essence.

The Convener: We are asked whether we want to support the principle of an investigation into sea cage fish farming. Members have indicated that they are in favour of that, but that they want to know the time scale and scope of such an investigation and whether it would impact on our broader work programme on GMOs, the third Scottish renewables order and the water industry.

We should not delay an investigation indefinitely; we should have a brief discussion with the Rural Affairs Committee to determine how it wants to deal with the matter and whether we can work together to produce a report. I would not want to make pronouncements on such matters without carrying out an investigation, as that would devalue any reports that we may release in the future. We must strike a balance.

I shall have a brief meeting with the convener of the Rural Affairs Committee, to discuss the parameters of an investigation and to determine its potential impact on our work programme. I shall then make that information available to the committee within, I hope, the next couple of meetings.

Helen Eadie: That is acceptable, convener. I ask you also to bear in mind the key issue of sustainable development.

Robin Harper: Kenny MacAskill makes the point that certain issues need to be addressed urgently. For instance, in our work on fish farming, we could try to establish the scale of the current threat to the environment independently of our consideration of what can be done in the future. We should have a meeting as early as possible to establish the scale of the problem.

The Convener: All those points are now included in the *Official Report*, and can be passed to the Rural Affairs Committee. Is the committee agreed that we should proceed as I have suggested?

Members indicated agreement.

13:15

The Convener: We now come to petition PE100, from the Shettleston Traders Association, which concerns the proposed bus corridor in Shettleston Road, Glasgow. The Public Petitions Committee has concluded its consideration of the petition, which has been passed to us for noting only. Do we agree to note the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The next petition is PE111, from Mr Frank Harvey, which highlights concerns over road accidents involving the police when they respond to 999 calls. The Public Petitions Committee is considering the issues that are raised in this petition. A UK-wide driver review group has been set up by the Association of Chief Police Officers, which is considering commissioning a report on the training that is provided for police drivers and the possibility of standardised police driving courses. The Public Petitions Committee has written to the Executive, seeking its views on the issues in the petition. We have been given a copy of the petition for noting only. Are we agreed to note it?

Members indicated agreement.

Mr MacAskill: I would have suggested that the Public Petitions Committee send that petition to ACPO. What is the purpose of sending it to this committee, when we will only note it? That is not a criticism of this committee; I am simply asking what the purpose is in sending the petition to us, when it should have been sent to ACPO. We know—and, apparently, the Public Petitions Committee knew at the time—that ACPO is looking into the matter. What is the point of passing all this paper between committees, when that committee knew at the outset that all we were going to do was say “Aye, fine”? I do not mind receiving papers when we can consider them constructively, but this is bureaucracy gone daft.

Helen Eadie: Mr Harvey has submitted numerous petitions to the Parliament, some of which it has been possible to act on and some of which have simply been reports that Mr Harvey has lifted from newspapers. The clerk to the Public Petitions Committee and the committee members have carried out investigations where possible. However, when they feel that it is important just to highlight to a committee what actions have been taken, the petition is passed to that committee for noting, as has been done in this instance. This is here for our information primarily, and we are not required to do anything about it.

The Convener: In future, we may indicate on the agenda that a petition is simply to be noted. If members require any further information, they can receive it through the clerk. That would be a sensible way in which to deal with all the

paperwork.

I sympathise with your comments, Kenny. Some petitions have raised the committee's eyebrows before. I have already spoken to the convener of the Public Petitions Committee. As the clerk team leader of that committee no doubt goes through the *Official Report*, your views will be made known to him.

The next petition is PE123, from the Scottish Warm Homes Campaign, which is concerned with the eradication of fuel poverty; it is accompanied by briefing paper TE/00/15/7. The Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee, which is the lead committee for this petition, seeks our views and will take them into account when considering the petition. That committee has also sought the views of the Health and Community Care Committee. Moreover, it has agreed to consider fuel poverty in its forward work programme and will take the issue into account when considering the Executive's forthcoming housing bill.

The committee should address the petitioner's specific request that the Parliament's committees act to make sure that the Scottish Executive ensures that the domestic sector conforms to its sustainable development policy and its commitment to reduce CO₂ emissions. The petition also asks that the Executive introduces practical measures in the housing bill that will lead to the eradication of fuel poverty, through improvements in energy efficiency, within two sessions of the Scottish Parliament. If members wish, we can request that the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee inform us of any agreement to undertake an inquiry on the issue so that members of this committee can ensure that environmental issues are addressed. Do members wish to comment on the petition?

Robin Harper: The committee will be aware that I used my parliamentary business time to address this problem and suggested seven ideas that the Executive could implement immediately in the development of a warm homes campaign. Most of those ideas were based on work that is already being undertaken. It is not that nothing is being done but that not nearly enough is being done. Everyone knows what needs to be done. Furthermore, I have produced a report that has been given to the Executive for perusal.

I have every sympathy with the petitioners; indeed, it might be sensible for this committee to discuss aspects of the petition, as reducing CO₂ emissions is a matter of bringing homes up to the best possible standard. If houses are brought up only to tolerable standard, people may spend the money that they save on extra heating and there will be no reduction of CO₂ emissions.

Mr MacAskill: What is the current situation with the housing bill? I have to repeat my previous complaints about paper-shuffling and about matters bouncing back and forth between committees. Although I fully support the petition's aims, I am worried that months might go by with the petition bouncing from the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee to the Health and Community Care Committee to this committee without any of us getting a grip on it.

I do not care which is the lead committee, as long as one committee gets a grip on the issue. If pushed, I would have to say that there is more logic in having the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee examine the petition as part of its consideration of the housing bill. The question is whether the committee takes evidence from the campaign during pre-investigation of the bill or includes the petition as part of the general consideration of the bill. Although I am not sure about the best method of doing this, we need to ensure that some committee deals with the petition, instead of allowing it simply to bounce from committee to committee. If the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee wants to appoint a reporter, that is fine.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Is there anything to prevent this committee from lodging an environmental amendment to the housing bill?

The Convener: There is nothing to prevent the committee or individual committee members from doing so.

Helen Eadie: Is it possible for the Scottish Parliament information centre to provide a briefing paper on how all aspects of fuel poverty have been addressed? Although the Scottish Warm Homes Campaign petition sets out the aspects that the campaign feels should be addressed, from what we read in the press and from ministers' answers during question time, considerable progress has been made on many issues. We might simply be reinventing wheels, so it would be good to have a paper that updates us on what progress has been made.

The Convener: I sense that the committee is generally supportive of the petition and that we should have discussions with the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee about whether that committee will have an investigation into the issues that the petition raises or whether it will include the subject as part of the consideration of the housing bill. When we have an idea of how that committee, as the lead committee, is choosing to approach the matter, we can consider our position. If we feel that the lead committee's approach is appropriate, we will build ourselves into that process; if, however, this committee can take other actions independently, we will decide on those at the time.

Mr MacAskill: I do not know how much information the Executive would feel able to give us. This matter is not necessarily that complicated and perhaps does not need much investigation. For example, legislation in Scandinavia ensures that houses are built to a far superior standard than ours are. We might not have to take evidence from all and sundry; the Executive might need only take into account standards that apply in comparable countries.

We could put feelers out to the Executive about whether we should be investigating the issue instead of reacting to it when the housing bill is introduced. However, I am not sure how far the Executive would be prepared to disclose matters.

The Convener: We can certainly seek that information from the Executive. If we receive any advance notice of the contents of the housing bill on this issue, that is all well and good. I am happy to ask that question, because it flavours any future discussion of the matter.

Nora Radcliffe: The matter also feeds into any revision of building standards regulations.

The Convener: I agree with the committee's views. We should examine the matter with the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee and take into account the points that were raised by Kenny MacAskill and Nora Radcliffe about what the bill might or might not contain, and what the Executive can or cannot do. We will consider our position when we receive those responses.

Are members agreed that we will find out the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee's proposals and seek a response from the relevant minister about the points that Kenny and Nora raised on building regulations and standards?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The final petition, PE135, is from Marion Scott. It is accompanied by committee covering note TE/00/15/9. The petition requests that the Parliament addresses a number of issues relating to mobile phone masts. The Public Petitions Committee has requested that we pass the details of our recent inquiry on this subject to the petitioners.

As we are all aware, the committee has investigated the issue of mobile phone masts in considerable detail. We continue to monitor the Executive's detailed response to our report and its actions on the matter, and the report sets out the committee's considered views on the issue. I suggest that we respond by providing a copy of the committee's report to the petitioner, as requested by the Public Petitions Committee; provide a copy of the Executive's interim response

to the report and a copy of the *Official Report* of the Parliament's debate on our report; and inform the petitioner that the Executive will issue a fuller response in due course and that the committee will further consider the issue at that time. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thanks very much. We will now move into private session to discuss approaches to taking evidence on the Transport (Scotland) Bill. I thank members of the public for attending.

13:28

Meeting continued in private until 14:28.

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