

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 11 January 2000
(*Morning*)

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 11 January 2000

	Col.
DEPUTY CONVENER	449
COMMITTEE BUSINESS	449
SCOTTISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION	450
HAMPDEN PARK	452

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE 1st Meeting 2000 (Committee Room 2)

CONVENER:

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)
*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
*Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Gillian Baxendine

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Alistair Fleming

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Tuesday 11 January 2000

(Morning)

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

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): Good morning, everyone. I wish you all a happy new year.

Deputy Convener

The Convener: The first item on the agenda is the choice of a deputy convener. I understand that the bureau has recommended that the deputy convener should be from the Labour party. Do we have any nominations?

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I nominate Karen Gillon.

The Convener: Are there any other nominations?

Members: No.

The Convener: Are members agreed that Karen Gillon should take up the lucky position of deputy convener?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I hope that this will not limit Karen's ability to speak out on the issues that she holds dear.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Brian had better believe it.

The Convener: You know better than that, Brian.

Before I move on to item 2, does the committee agree to take items 5 and 6—the appointment of an adviser for the special educational needs inquiry and the deliberations on the national arts companies inquiry—in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Committee Business

The Convener: The second item on the agenda is an update on committee business. Members will remember that we agreed to include this item on every agenda to update members on previous items of committee business that are not individual

agenda items. Do members want to be updated on any business that is not on the agenda?

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I thought that we were circulating reports of visits.

The Convener: Yes, we were indeed. I saw my reports sitting on the desk today, which probably means that they have not been circulated.

You are right, Mike—those reports were supposed to be circulated via e-mail. I do not know whether other committee members have done so; as I see many guilty faces around the table, I will assume that people were overrun before the recess. Will committee members please circulate those reports?

Michael Russell: As my colleagues on my left are criticising me for having raised the point, I think that I will just withdraw it.

The Convener: I take it, Mike, that you are the only member who has circulated his report.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): Please, miss, I have been a good boy.

The Convener: I suppose that there is a first time for everything.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): My dog ate my report.

Karen Gillon: Mike must have had a very sad Christmas.

Mr Monteith: As the matter is not on the agenda, it might be useful to mention responses to the inquiry into the Roman remains at Cramond. Although we have received a number of responses, we still await one from Historic Scotland, and until that arrives, it would be too soon to report back on the matter.

Ian Jenkins: It has been drawn to my attention that the constituency MSP for Cramond was not told that people were going to crawl all over her patch. I wonder whether that is something of which we should be mindful.

The Convener: I am quite happy to inform constituency MSPs about what is going on.

Mr Monteith: A letter will be sent to the constituency MSP and the local councillor for Cramond to ask for their views on the matter.

The Convener: They used to be the same person.

Mr Monteith: Used to be, but are no longer.

The Convener: We will ensure that that is done.

Scottish Football Association

The Convener: Item 3 is a report from the

Scottish Football Association in response to our request for a letter detailing the events surrounding the ticket sales for the Euro 2000 fixture. As committee members have had a chance to read the letter, do they wish to comment on it?

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): In the final paragraphs of the SFA's response, the chief executive David Taylor talks about proposals for future ticket allocations. He finishes the letter by saying that "appropriate S.F.A. committees" will examine those proposals over the next few months. It would be appropriate for this committee to be kept informed of those deliberations, because we might have suggestions that might be worth feeding into that decision-making process.

The Convener: I agree. It would be useful for the committee to have such contact during those deliberations.

Nicola Sturgeon: A report from Glasgow City Council is mentioned in the final three paragraphs of the SFA letter. We should ask for a copy of that report when it is completed.

The Convener: I am quite happy to do that. Although I am not sure whether we can take any action on the matter at this stage, we need to maintain our involvement in the issue.

Mr Monteith: I have one further observation to make. Early on, the decision was taken to use a system that relied on credit and debit card sales, which meant that transactions had to be made by telephone. The system probably seemed more of an easy option, but led to the disaster that the ticket sales became. One might say that, with hindsight, one should have looked back to previous occasions; however, such knowledge was already available. When matches at Murrayfield stadium were continually oversubscribed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the tickets that were left were sold through shops. People knew that they could queue up for tickets in advance, so such sales did not create the outrage that was caused by the Euro 2000 fixture. Perhaps there was too much reliance on computers, software and telephones when tickets could have been made available to the public through retail outlets.

The Convener: Although I have some sympathy with that, the letter makes it clear that the telephone sales system was chosen to ensure that there was a record of where sales had been made. Perhaps committees will examine the availability and usefulness of such information. However, Brian's point is well made and we will pass it on.

Karen Gillon: A point that the letter does not address is that there are other examples of good practice. For example, when Celtic and Rangers

play each other, segregation and security are very much needed when tickets are being sold; perhaps the SFA could take that on board. In the 1970s and 1980s, rugby did not have the same fan problems that football matches between England and Scotland sadly seemed to attract. There are other examples, from which expertise could be gained, which we might want to feed back to the SFA, in particular how the old firm sell tickets for old firm games.

The Convener: The final paragraph of the letter alludes to the fact that the SFA is consulting other football clubs about how they handle ticket sales. Perhaps the organisation could learn some lessons from the Celtic-Rangers situation.

Fiona McLeod: Perhaps we should ask the SFA to amplify that final paragraph to find out the reasoning behind the choices that have been made and those that are being considered, instead of waiting for the organisation to tell us what it has decided to do.

The Convener: That might be helpful.

Hampden Park

The Convener: The committee will be aware that, prior to the Christmas recess, Mr Sam Galbraith made a statement that indicated that a package to finance the Hampden Park project was being put together. Yesterday evening's reports suggest that that package is no longer on the table. Unfortunately, the minister is unable to be with us this morning, but he has indicated that that is partly because he is trying to have further discussions with those involved in the deal to find out why negotiations have collapsed at this point, given that, at this time yesterday, it was assumed that the deal was about to be signed and sealed.

The minister is unable to attend this meeting, so we cannot ask him any questions, but he has promised to make a statement on the matter to Parliament, either tomorrow or first thing on Thursday. All MSPs will then be able to question him about the present state of the Hampden package. Although I am happy to try to answer any questions that members may have, I have to be honest and say that I have no further information. However, if members wish to register questions, we can forward them to the minister, who may pick them up in his statement.

Fiona McLeod: First, I am pleased to hear that the minister will make a statement in Parliament. His statement on 16 December was very much a non-statement, as it gave only hints about what the Executive hoped would happen. Obviously, those hopes have turned out not to be the reality.

Given that the committee did not get its

promised pre-briefing before the previous statement, have you received assurances from the minister that we will have a pre-briefing this time?

09:45

The Convener: I think that that is very unlikely. The reasoning behind the decision not to hold a pre-briefing last time was that discussions were on-going right up until the preparation of the statement. It was judged better to make the statement to Parliament than to lay it, brief the committee and perhaps not have an opportunity to make the statement to Parliament at all because of the pressure of time—we were about to go into recess. On this occasion, it is unlikely that there will be any information until immediately before the statement, because the situation has arisen out of the blue. I think that the Executive will want to make a statement as soon as the information is available.

If members still have questions that they want to pursue once the statement has been made, it is open to the committee to invite the minister for questioning.

Nicola Sturgeon: The situation is very fluid and at times it seems that the Executive—in particular the minister—is running to catch up. There is a danger that the situation will change further during the week. In light of the statement before the recess, it is important that the Parliament—either through the committee or preferably at a meeting of the whole Parliament—is updated this week, whatever the situation. Whatever the state of affairs, the Parliament must be briefed on the latest situation by Wednesday or Thursday, even if the minister is not in a position to say that matters have been resolved. We have a right to know exactly what is going on.

The Convener: I want to be very clear on two points. First, until yesterday lunchtime, the minister and everyone else involved in creating the package were assured that the deal would go ahead and would be signed and sealed yesterday. That did not happen, as Queen's Park took other action. Secondly, the minister will definitely make a statement to Parliament; the uncertainty surrounding the timing of the statement is down to the Presiding Officer, who is trying to find a space on the agenda. There will be a statement to Parliament, regardless of how much further on we are.

Karen Gillon: I support Fiona McLeod's comments. The situation is extremely regrettable. Before Christmas, we all thought that the stadium had been saved, that the future was secure and that a package was in place. A great deal has to be asked of Queen's Park Football Club about why it found itself in such a situation yesterday,

but did not feel the need to inform anyone yesterday morning, even though we believed that the deal was to be signed in the afternoon. I hope that those questions are being asked as we speak. Once we have some answers, the committee will be in a better position to take a view on the further detail of what is happening.

Mr Monteith: Thank you for that information, convener. It strikes me that two ministers are responsible for the matter. While I appreciate that the senior minister may be otherwise engaged, it might have been possible for the junior minister, Rhona Brankin, to attend. It is disappointing that there is no one for us to question on such an important issue.

I have heard from media reports—I do not know how much currency this has—that the difference between the two parties is some £100,000. Perhaps you could take that matter up in advance of any statement, convener.

I welcome the statement—I called for it—and I think that it is proper that it be made before the whole Parliament. However, the briefing is a separate issue. We asked for a briefing because there is a consultants' report, which we have been told is confidential because of commercial aspects, but it is important that we are able to speak to the minister to obtain details that, understandably, he is not willing to give out publicly. Why are we still unable to get a briefing that will give us detailed knowledge of the background? Like the public, we are left surmising, guessing and trying to work out what has happened—that is not good enough. Although I welcome the statement, the minister or junior minister should give us a briefing on the background at our next committee meeting.

The Convener: I am happy to ask for that. It is extremely relevant that the committee wanted additional information that might not be made available publicly. I will follow that up and speak to the minister.

There would not have been much point in having the junior minister here while the minister was involved in discussions—I do not think that she would have been able to throw any more light on the matter. I am assured that no disrespect was intended to the committee—it was simply a case of wanting to get the information as quickly as possible to resolve the situation.

Michael Russell: At this committee, the junior minister has a record of not throwing light on the matter—I seem to remember that she stonewalled us for more than an hour. The constant message from the Executive was, "Trust us, we know what we are doing." My colleague Fiona McLeod questioned that message in August and the committee questioned it in September, again in

October and again in November—it has been running since last August and each time we have questioned the Executive, we have been told that everything will be fine.

We can draw a lesson from this. When the committee and members of the Parliament request information, the Executive should be open and transparent; it must come and talk to people. What we have now is spin and counter-spin—allegations about the deal and allegations that Queen's Park is involved in some kind of brinkmanship. We do not know whether that is true. In privacy and darkness, such allegations can flourish. We should have had an open account from ministers at the very beginning. The price that is being paid for the failure to provide such an account is the mess that we are now in.

I hope that the committee will reflect on that, follow the suggestions made by Fiona McLeod and Brian Monteith and interrogate the minister about the matter. We must drive home the need for openness and transparency, which should be the keystone of our new democracy in Scotland, but seems to be turning into a millstone round the neck of the Executive.

The Convener: It is clear that everyone hopes that a deal can be put together to ensure that Hampden Park flourishes as the national stadium. I do not share your view, Mike, that there has been a lack of information—a statement was made to Parliament and members had the opportunity to question the minister then. However, we now have a completely different situation, which arose only yesterday afternoon. I am more than happy to ensure that the minister comes back to the committee to answer any outstanding questions.

Michael Russell: We need to reassess the entire story in the light of what has happened. Despite the minister's assurances, the deal was not done and that has led to this potential crisis. It seems that £65 million may have been spent on a national stadium that we may not have.

The Convener: We will all be unhappy if a deal cannot be struck. We must give the minister the opportunity to make a statement on the matter.

Fiona McLeod: Following what Mike Russell and Brian Monteith have said, we must go one step further than asking the ministers to come to the committee to explain what has happened. It is too important—we are talking about £65 million and our national stadium. We held an excellent inquiry on the national arts companies; we asked questions and got answers that people did not necessarily want to give. We will produce a report that will be useful to the future of those companies. The committee must take on responsibility for Hampden—we must begin our own inquiry to find out what is happening.

Ian Jenkins: I hope that we can look for the light. I agree with the drift of what is being said, but I do not want to start blaming people until we understand the situation. Light can be thrown on the matter when the minister makes his statement—let us hope that we get the light before we get the heat.

Karen Gillon: I suggest that we revisit the matter after the statement. We should put it on the agenda for our next meeting. Once we know where we are, the committee can make a decision on how to proceed.

The Convener: Members will be aware that we have a full agenda for our next meeting. However, given the importance that we attach to this matter, I am happy to include it on next week's agenda.

Mr Monteith: I am happy to agree with Karen's suggestion, but it does not detract from my other point, which is that we should have a briefing.

The Convener: Yes. That concludes item 4.

09:56

Meeting continued in private until 11:35.

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