

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 25 January 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2000 (Committee Room 1)

CONVENER:

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER:

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

*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

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK:

DAVID MCLAREN

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Alistair Fleming

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Tuesday 25 January 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:04*]

Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): The first item on the agenda is the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill, which members will know was launched on Thursday last week. We must suggest a timetable for taking evidence—which I will take to the Parliamentary Bureau at 2.30 pm—that recommends how we should proceed. Members have had an indication from the committee clerk of what the timetable could be. I received an e-mail from Nicola Sturgeon, in which she suggests that we should take oral evidence over three weeks. Are there any other comments on the suggested timetable?

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): It is a tight, but practical timetable. We have a deadline, and we want to get the bill through Parliament.

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): I support Nicola. Two weeks is not enough time in which to take oral evidence.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Three weeks would allow us to complete our work on schedule and would not make a difference at the other end of that schedule.

The Convener: I agree. We must ensure that we have time to take the evidence that we feel is necessary.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Might I suggest that we go in reverse, and that we decide what evidence we want to take and then come back to this issue? There might be an argument in favour of taking oral evidence over three weeks, but we should decide who we want to see, then decide whether we require that time. If we need it, we should take three weeks.

The Convener: Nicola, do you wish to say something?

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): Karen is

right. I have read the papers that we have received, and I agree with Gillian Baxendine's proposals about the further evidence that we could take. If one agrees with those proposals, it becomes clear that two weeks will not be sufficient time. I understand from Gillian that an extra week will not make a difference to the timetable for passage of the bill, but getting the bill right is more important than finishing dead on schedule. The committee should set its own timetable and see how that fits in with the Executive's timetable.

The Convener: Yes. Obviously, the most useful way to proceed is to consider whom we should meet. I stress that while we would like an idea of who members think should be witnesses, that does not preclude inviting others to give evidence. We can also take evidence at stage 2, if necessary.

Nicola Sturgeon: On the proposal for possible witnesses, which Gillian circulated, we should take evidence from children and young people, and we probably should use Save the Children for that. Taking evidence from children is an important part of the process. We have not done much work on that aspect, and it might take up a whole meeting to do it properly. HM inspectorate of schools, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities all have things to say that we wish to hear. It would be good to hear from a panel of representatives from trade unions and we could hear representations from the main parents organisations. Even if no one is added to the list that Gillian gave us, two weeks is unrealistic.

The Convener: Can we consider the suggestions for witnesses? Are we happy that we should hear from children and young people?

Mr Macintosh: Absolutely. I agree with Nicola. Taking evidence from children and young people might take some time, because I suspect that we will have to go to a school to do it properly. It would be difficult to get the children here, and I imagine that the forum of the committee would not be conducive to carrying out proper consultation with them.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): It is important that we speak to children. It might be good to have kids in Parliament, but the structure would have to allow young people to say what they want to say. A row of young people sitting before the committee might not be the best way to do that. We need a system that allows young people to participate and to put forward their views.

Fiona McLeod: I would like to reiterate that. I know that Save the Children got the contract to set up focus groups. Perhaps it can advise us on the best way that the committee could approach the

task. I do not want to make this merely a photo opportunity. We must achieve something.

Nicola Sturgeon: The clerks should take advice from Save the Children.

TAG Theatre Company recently used the chamber for a theatre event that included children. Perhaps that setting would be more conducive to getting kids to talk to us.

The Convener: They did not seem to be put off by being in the chamber, did they?

Fiona McLeod: Perhaps we should ask TAG theatre to help.

The Convener: We will let Gillian Baxendine consider the matter, taking on board the suggestions that have been made.

We put off talking to the GTC last week because we wanted to wait until the bill was published. I assume that the committee is happy with that. We will talk to HMI, COSLA, the trade unions and parents organisations. Some trade unions and parents organisations are mentioned in our papers—is the list comprehensive?

Fiona McLeod: I suggest that we invite the Scottish Library Information Council to give its reasons for wanting school libraries to be a statutory provision. Although we have had a written submission from it, no reference is made to the matter in the bill. We should hear why the council thinks that such provision is important for improving standards in schools.

The Convener: The council has made a written submission. I am not sure whether we would question representatives from the council only on that matter. Are there other areas that we could investigate with them?

Fiona McLeod: We have to hear from them. Is the committee convinced by the written submission?

Mr Macintosh: No.

Karen Gillon: I am not necessarily convinced.

Fiona McLeod: That is why we need to invite the council to set out its arguments.

Mr Macintosh: I am not, in principle, against hearing them. I am aware, however, that the list of witnesses is getting huge and that it might be too much, even for three meetings. Would anything be added that is not in the written evidence? If not, we could simply consider the submission again.

The Convener: I must make it clear that, at stage 1 of the bill, we should be thinking about the general principles of the bill, rather than specifics. Perhaps we could hear evidence from the Scottish Library Information Council at a later stage. We will not come to a conclusion on the matter yet.

Nicola Sturgeon: Karen Gillon is right. We should decide what evidence we want to take and then work out how long it will take to hear it.

Karen Gillon: It is crucial that we examine the issues relating to the Scottish Joint Negotiating Committee. Perhaps we should even take up a full morning doing so. Consultation has been lacking on the matter and we should hear evidence from the unions and from COSLA. We have to be clear about whether we support that committee or not.

14:15

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It will be difficult to hear from all of the consumers in education. There are the children who are taught and their parents to hear from, but we should also hear from those who employ people when they leave school.

There are perhaps four or five employers organisations that we could talk to and we simply do not have the time. It would be useful to talk to at least one of them, such as the Scottish Chambers of Commerce or the Scottish Confederation of British Industry. The list we have does not feature any employers organisations, but it is important that children are equipped with the necessary qualifications to be employed.

The Convener: I have a difficulty with that.

Cathy Peattie: So do I. I think that that is the job of another committee. This committee is about the value of education for children. Obviously, we want children to have the skills that they need to get jobs, but we are talking about our educational structures. I would rather make room for librarians than for the CBI.

Mr Monteith: I think that employers would probably disagree with your outlook.

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree with Cathy—this committee has to come at the bill from the perspective of the child—but I understand Brian's point. I know that the Equal Opportunities Committee is the only other committee that has, so far, taken an interest in the education bill. Perhaps it would be possible for us to ask the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee for input on the matter that Brian mentioned.

Mr Monteith: I would be happy with that.

Gillian Baxendine (Committee Clerk): It is possible for us to ask that committee. Whether it will consider the bill depends on its schedule.

Mr Monteith: That would deal with the possible problem that Kenneth Macintosh mentioned—that we might end up taking evidence from too many people.

The Convener: If we decide that we want to

consider evidence from other organisations and people, we might arrange additional meetings.

Karen Gillon: I would like to suggest a timetable for witnesses. I hope that it seems logical.

It would make sense to have the GTC and HMI in first. I would like to have an overview of the issue before I hear the trade unions' views. On the second day, we could hear from COSLA and the trade unions—probably COSLA first, then the trade unions. On that day, we can consider the GTC and HMI and also the SJNC. On the third day—in order to give Save the Children the longest possible time to organise things—we could consult parents and young people. That part of the business might take up more time than we have allowed.

The Convener: Is that acceptable to the committee?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Mr Macintosh: What about the library issue?

Karen Gillon: I assumed that the library issue would be dealt with at stage 2.

Fiona McLeod: Would it be possible to take oral evidence when we consider the bill line by line?

The Convener: My understanding is that we can.

Fiona McLeod: That would be fine.

Nicola Sturgeon: We will talk to the unions about the SJNC. Will their role be limited to giving evidence on only one part of the bill?

The Convener: No.

Karen Gillon: I thought that we could talk specifically about the SJNC. However, there are general areas that we should address.

The Convener: We will take evidence on 2, 9 and 16 February and we will have an initial discussion about our report after the meeting on 16 February. The report will be circulated for the following week's meeting. We will discuss the draft report on 1 March and—I hope—reach an agreement on the report by 7 March.

I appreciate that that is a tight schedule, but we must be ambitious in terms of getting through the committee's work. If things become difficult, we will make room to ensure that members are happy at each stage before we progress.

I do not have to specify the timetable for the stage 2 consideration at the Parliamentary Bureau meeting today. I need only a rough idea of how long things will take.

Committee Business (Update)

The Convener: I am not aware of any updates. If any member wants to be updated on anything, he or she should say so now.

Ian Jenkins: Margaret Smith mentioned to me that she wanted to make a submission in relation to Brian Monteith's inquiry into the Cramond issue but that she had not been formally asked to do so until last week.

Mr Monteith: There is still time for her to do so.

The Convener: She can liaise with Brian Monteith on the matter.

We agreed that we would discuss item 3 on the agenda, the national arts company inquiry, in private.

14:21

Meeting continued in private until 15:54.

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