



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

ECONOMY, ENERGY AND TOURISM COMMITTEE

Wednesday 19 May 2010

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ECONOMY, ENERGY AND TOURISM COMMITTEE
16th Meeting 2010, Session 3

CONVENER

*Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)

*Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con)

*Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

*Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)

*Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee

Wednesday 19 May 2010

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:01]

European Commission (Work Programme)

The Convener (Iain Smith): We can now start the 16th meeting in 2010 of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee. I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones, BlackBerrys and so on. I welcome Dave Whitton, who is substituting for Lewis Macdonald. As he is an occasional visitor to our committee, I do not think that I need to ask him the usual question about interests.

The first of the two items on today's agenda is the European Commission's work programme, on which a paper has been prepared by the clerks. The Commission has published its work programme and the European and External Relations Committee has asked us to look at it to see whether there are any issues that we are interested in pursuing. The paper by the clerks outlines the issues that might be of relevance to us. Do members have any comments?

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): I am interested in two matters, neither of which seems to appear in our paper on the work programme. I do not know whether that is because they are no longer happening or because they were simply not captured in our paper. The solvency II directive and the hedge fund directive were mentioned in evidence during our banking inquiry. In my view, as a committee, we should keep a close eye on both of those. I could not see them mentioned in the paper—I may have missed them, of course—but I wonder whether we could ask to be kept abreast of progress on those two directives.

The Convener: I am slightly surprised that they are not mentioned, because I am sure that the full work programme, which was debated in the chamber last week, refers to financial services regulation. That does not appear to have been picked up by our paper.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Is it the case that the hedge fund directive will be proceeded with extremely quickly? In other words, it is not really part of the Commission's plans; it is part of its action. It has been in the news this week that Mr Osborne is less than chuffed about the speed with which the European Union is proceeding with that directive.

I agree that we should keep a watching brief on the solvency II directive as well.

The Convener: I suggest that we ask the European officer to provide us with an update on progress on those issues fairly urgently, particularly as the debate on our banking inquiry report will probably be held in the next few weeks. We would like to know what is happening before then.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I am particularly interested in the agenda for new skills and jobs. Particularly in light of some of the announcements that have been made at Westminster, it is important that we ask the European and External Relations Committee to look at that issue.

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP): There are a few issues on which it would be interesting to keep a watching brief, the first of which is the revision of the working time directive, which has been controversial in recent years. Secondly, I am interested in Erasmus for entrepreneurs. I benefited from the Erasmus scheme when I was at university, so I know how beneficial the experience can be. We want to encourage young entrepreneurs, in particular, to set up businesses and create employment and wealth, so I am keen to keep an eye on the scheme. Thirdly, given the committee's remit, it would be interesting to keep up to speed on the renewed EU tourism policy framework. Fourthly, the regulatory framework on smart grids is of interest to the committee.

Rob Gibson: We have a major watching brief in relation to the whole, huge area of energy and, as we follow up our inquiry into energy, I hope that we can pick up on, for example, the "Towards a new Energy Strategy for Europe 2011-2020" consultation, submissions to which must be made by 2 July. We might well provide some distillation of our thoughts in that direction. The communication on the preparation of a blueprint for offshore grids in the northern seas of Europe is a pointer in that regard, as is the review of guidelines on the trans-European energy networks, which we might be able to bring to bear in relation to fair access to transmission for renewables that are produced in Scotland.

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): That links up with the research and innovation plan—as the communication says explicitly, Europe does not seem to be going anywhere on that. There is a need to ensure that, in particular, the laboratory to first series production stages are factored in, because that will involve collaboration between different actors in Europe.

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): I agree with Rob Gibson that we have taken a big interest in energy over the Parliament's four-year time horizon. We should probably round that out at some point next year by having a discussion on energy with the European officer.

It is clear that what is sought in the paper is a pretty formulaic response to the European and External Relations Committee, and I do not doubt that our clerks can provide that. During the current four-year time horizon—I will have been a member of this committee for only three of the four years—we may not have found a way to scrutinise European legislation as rigorously as we should. Our approach has been rather episodic, in the sense that people have drawn matters to our attention. We have allowed there to be a Government-to-Government process, rather than one of huge parliamentary scrutiny.

At one level, the paper illustrates why that is. The depth and complexity of the issues are such that it is difficult to provide rigorous scrutiny. It might therefore be helpful if we found an opportunity in our work programme towards the end of the year to discuss with the European officer issues to do with European scrutiny and what meaningful value a parliamentary committee can add. When we talked to the European officer in Brussels, I was struck that there are issues to do with how processes have evolved during the past three years—indeed, during the past decade. We might want to say something about that in our final report, which we will produce in March. A one-off session with the European officer in autumn might be helpful in that regard.

The Convener: We can consider that point for our legacy report. The Parliament needs to address how we get involved with Westminster in relation to the requirements under the Lisbon treaty to involve subnational legislatures—I think that that is the official phrase—in the scrutiny process.

Rob Gibson: My observation is that, with regard to Europe, we have been tied up in process for the past 10 years and not in scrutiny of the actual activities, as Wendy Alexander says. If subject committees such as this one could take part in scrutiny, that would help enormously.

The Convener: As there are no other points, and on the assumption that no one is opposed to any of the suggestions, do members agree that the clerks should respond to the European and External Relations Committee along the lines that we have suggested?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Before I conclude the public part of our business, I remind members that our next meeting is on Monday in Aberdeen, when we

will hear further evidence to our international trade inquiry from two panels of witnesses. Panel 1 will be from the oil and gas industry and panel 2 will be from organisations in the food and drink sector. I hope that we will also make visits to relevant companies while we are there.

10:10

Meeting continued in private until 11:15.

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