

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 March 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
*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

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Gillian Baxendine

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

David McLaren

ASSISTANT CLERK

Alistair Fleming

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Tuesday 7 March 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:03*]

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): Good afternoon. I suggest that we take the final item of the meeting in private. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I remind members that tomorrow's meeting—if it goes ahead—will be in private. I would also like to suggest that we take item 2 on the agenda first, to accommodate Mike Russell who wants to discuss this item, but who has to attend a Parliamentary Bureau meeting later. After item 2, we will go back to item 1, on committee business.

Petition (Gaelic-medium Education)

The Convener: We have received a petition—PE82—on Gaelic-medium education. Are there any questions or comments before I suggest how we proceed?

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Thank you for taking this item first, convener—I wanted to address this matter in particular. The topic of the petition was aired to some extent during last week's Gaelic debate. It is fair to say that most members are aware that the parents want to establish Gaelic-medium education and are concerned that there is no particular provision. However, we must also consider the principle of mentioning Gaelic in the first education bill ever to come before a Scottish Parliament.

I am grateful to Gillian Baxendine for the note that she has attached to the petition, because it lays out our options clearly. We could debate the subject here and now, but I think that that would neither do justice to the subject nor bring us to a resolution on the matter. There is a place for debate, but as members will be aware, discussions are taking place in Gaelic organisations about whether this is the right approach to take. It might be better to hold the debate during stage 2 of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill.

I suggest that we note the petition and resolve to take evidence during stage 2, which we had

already agreed to do in principle. It should not take us too long—a morning or so—but I know of a number of bodies that would like to give evidence. I suggest that we have the debate at that stage, when we are discussing amendments to the bill.

In the Gaelic debate last week, I said that I was minded to lodge an amendment. However, that will depend a great deal on what consultation takes place between now and then and what the organisations themselves suggest. We should appreciate the petition—it has the right aims; however, the debate to achieve action on it can be held during stage 2, when we will come to a definitive conclusion.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): I support that suggestion—it is an important issue, and an area in which there is continuing discussion. One way forward is to lodge an amendment to the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill, while another is that this issue should be part of a wider Gaelic language legislative initiative; that debate will continue. We should note the petition and recognise that this is an issue that we need to discuss more fully.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I am one of the few present who was not able to impress you with my knowledge of Gaelic in the debate last week. Mike Russell's Gaelic was very good. A whole speech in Gaelic—I was impressed. I spent a week practising a sentence.

Mike's is a good idea; we will have a chance to debate the matter further at stage 2. I support what Lewis Macdonald said about a Gaelic language act, as securing the status of Gaelic is an aim of the Gaelic community. There might be a more appropriate mechanism, but we can discuss that at a later stage.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I warmly support that, especially given the area that I represent. Mike Russell is quite right to say that we can debate Gaelic at stage 2. That would send a clear signal to the Gàidhealtachd, the western isles, and councils such as Sutherland and Ross and Cromarty, that we will seriously consider the matter.

We said that the learning of Gaelic can assist education in the broadest sense in the debate, but we should say it again. It is an inflected language, which can help children to learn German. In my town, Tain, Gaelic-medium education has been a great success and has led to improved attainment in other subjects. Good for them.

The Convener: We seem to have agreement on that.

Michael Russell: Are we agreed that we will take evidence at that stage?

The Convener: Yes.

Michael Russell: Will we ask Comann nam Pàrant (Nàiseanta) to talk to us at that stage, and consider other organisations from which to take evidence?

The Convener: We will make arrangements for that.

Mr Stone: At what stage will we take evidence?

Michael Russell: Stage 2.

Mr Stone: Are we including a Gaelic-medium unit—one that delivers at the sharp end—in this?

Michael Russell: No. Let us be clear. The issue on which we will take evidence is whether there should be a statutory right to Gaelic education. On that issue, we should take evidence both from Comann nam Pàrant (Nàiseanta) and from other bodies. At that stage, we should decide whether—as I hope—the Executive might introduce its own amendment or whether a member of the committee will lodge an amendment.

The Convener: Is Jamie happy with that?

Mr Macintosh: I warn you that there are almost as many Gaelic organisations as there are Gaelic speakers.

Michael Russell: I am sure that the cream will rise, as they say.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Jamie's brother is a cheesemaker.

Michael Russell: We all know that now.

Mr Stone: I will declare my interest in German next time.

Committee Business

The Convener: We return to item 1, which is an update on committee business that will not be further discussed this afternoon.

The committee previously agreed to take evidence from young people on the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc (Scotland) Bill. We asked Gillian Baxendine to consider the practicalities; she has several suggestions.

Gillian Baxendine (Clerk Team Leader): We approached Children in Scotland, which has consulted its children's policy network, to find people who were either already collecting—or were willing to collect—views from young people on the issue. Children in Scotland has told us that on 20 March, ChildLine is holding a major conference involving 50 schools on topics including sex and bullying. ChildLine is happy to give us feedback on that and has invited the convener to attend the session.

The Aberdeen students forum has also indicated an interest in feeding back views. There are a few other organisations in the policy network that would like to come back to us with views from young people. That seemed to be quite a good way of getting a wide range of views.

The Convener: That would be useful, because those young people are already in situations where they are able to express their views. It might have been difficult to organise a session similar to the one that we already have had with young people. It is often more useful to allow people to give their views in their own context. Are there any other suggestions?

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): That is a good way forward.

The Convener: Are members happy with that approach?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I will attend the ChildLine conference and report back to the committee. I am sure that ChildLine will also provide a written report.

The other matter on which we should have an update is rural schools. Would Jamie Stone like to comment on that?

Mr Stone: The good news is that yesterday, I visited Dumfries and Galloway. I can assure members that it was a most useful visit and I must thank Dumfries and Galloway Council, which was very helpful. There are some interesting ideas coming forward.

I am due to visit three councils—possibly more,

if time permits. We are teed up to visit Highland Council on 22 March. We were going to visit Moray Council today, but there is a problem. It is rather unfortunate, but Moray has said that it is not very happy about our visit. I know that Gillian Baxendine, her team and my research assistant all explained that I was not wearing my party political hat, but was visiting as a representative of the committee and of the Parliament. The council was still unhappy about the situation.

I am in the hands of other members. I am in a slight quandary about what to do next. We know that the committee received a petition relating to Moray, but whether that has something to do with the council's attitude is a moot point. I would appreciate the advice of the clerks, the convener and committee members. Apart from that, the inquiry is on track.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I understand why Moray Council is rather sensitive about the matter, because of the situation surrounding Boharm primary school. I assume that the inquiry has been explained clearly to the council. Perhaps we could emphasise the fact that the inquiry was not prompted by that particular case, but was decided on before the Boharm issue came to light. Furthermore, the committee is visiting not to criticise local authorities, but to see whether the existing procedures are adequate to protect rural schools. We must make it clear that our purpose is not to produce a damning report on any local authority or on local authorities in general.

The Convener: Having received the petition, we were keen to ensure that Jamie Stone was able to consider the circumstances in Moray—not to be judgmental, but to take account of the situations that have arisen. It would be useful if Jamie was still able to visit Moray Council. To that end, I have made some inquiries and am awaiting a reply. If Jamie is agreeable, we shall leave that on the table for the moment and see what progress we can make. We should explain the situation without making people feel threatened in any way; we should allow people to give us their views and opinions so that we can learn from them.

14:15

Mr Stone: I agree with your sentiments, and I hope that what you suggest will work. However, David McLaren sent a letter to Moray Council more than a week ago, suggesting a friendly fact-finding mission. The answer was an absolutely firm refusal.

The Convener: We shall leave it on the table at this stage and I shall report back to the committee if there are any difficulties. We have a meeting tomorrow, so I shall try to deal with it before then.

Nicola Sturgeon: I hope that we can make some progress. It is important that we go to Moray. However, if the council is not prepared to speak to Jamie Stone at an official level, other avenues could be explored, such as talking to individual councillors on the education committee. We do not want to undermine what the council is doing, but it is important to get a picture of what the council is dealing with, and we should be supportive as much as anything else.

The Convener: I hope that we shall get a more positive response. We are meeting tomorrow and I shall update members then, but I do not want to delay things too much.

Are there any other items that are not on the agenda, which members would like to bring up at this stage?

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): Have we received any information back from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body about who the adviser to the special educational needs inquiry will be?

The Convener: Yes, we have, but I cannot remember her name.

Gillian Baxendine: It is Dr Julie Allan of the University of Stirling.

The Convener: That is right. We have moved the meeting on 29 March to Tuesday 28 March to accommodate Julie. Members will be able to meet her then if they have not done so already.

Lewis Macdonald: I wanted to mention our discussion with Grampian Television and Scottish Media Group last week. There were a number of questions that the representatives were reluctant to answer, and they referred us to the Independent Television Commission. Today's newspapers indicate that the ITC is pursuing further inquiries with Scottish Media Group. I suggest that we continue that item until the ITC has come to its conclusions, before deciding what further evidence we want to hear.

The Convener: I sense that, partly because we did not have a lot of time, committee members felt that we did not get to the bottom of the issues that we wanted to address last week. It would be sensible to await the outcome of the ITC report; witnesses could not then respond to our questions by telling us to wait for the report to be published. We could get some more detailed answers from Grampian Television. If the committee is agreeable, we shall keep that on the go.

I hate to remind members of this, but I do not know where we would be able to fit that into our timetable. However, we shall try to deal with it as soon as we can.

Our timetable for future weeks and months has

now been circulated to all members, and shows the time scale for stage 2 of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill. Are there any comments on that? We have tried to include two meetings a week at times, but the timetable will depend on how swiftly we progress once we have begun to review the bill. I know that it will mean a lot of juggling, but that is the nature of the thing. If members have any specific difficulties, the earlier they let us know about them, the easier it will be to accommodate them.

Karen Gillon: While the Parliament is in Glasgow, will the committees still be meeting in Edinburgh?

Gillian Baxendine: Discussions are still going on about that.

The Convener: It would be useful if members were informed about that as soon as possible, as they will have to make arrangements for other meetings.

Lewis Macdonald: I suggested to Gillian that the morning of 28 March would suit me better than the afternoon. I do not know whether it is possible to accommodate that.

Gillian Baxendine: Unfortunately, there was no room available in the morning.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I support the idea of having some committee meetings in Glasgow. The budget for regional committee meetings is constrained but, if we are in Glasgow for meetings of the Parliament, we should use the opportunity to hold committee meetings there. I live in Edinburgh, but I would be happy to make the effort to travel to Glasgow—and even try to be on time.

The Convener: I shall resist the temptation to comment on that. I take your point.

Fiona McLeod: Now that we have the timetable for when we are meeting for stage 2, when will we draw up our timetable for taking evidence?

The Convener: Members should tell Gillian now who they think we should hear evidence from, and we will consider the matter during the next week or so. However, the situation is fluid and things might change.

Nicola Sturgeon: Are we constrained at stage 2 to taking evidence only on points that are the subject of amendments?

Gillian Baxendine: The committee can take evidence on anything that it wants to within its remit.

The Convener: Is that helpful?

Nicola Sturgeon: Could we take evidence on a section of the bill, even if nobody has lodged an

amendment to it?

Gillian Baxendine: Yes.

Consultation (Children and Young People)

The Convener: I invite Fiona McLeod to introduce her report on consultation with children and young people.

Fiona McLeod: I take it that everyone has received a copy of my report. On the final page, I state that I will produce an extended bibliography, but I must apologise as I am afraid that I keep finding more stuff, so I do not yet have the definitive bibliography. However, I intend to produce it, as I think that members will find it useful. Links to websites will be especially helpful in allowing people to surf through the information that is available.

The report itself is fairly self-explanatory and I hope that it meets with people's approval. It was an interesting report to produce, and that is perhaps why I did not meet my deadline in January. As one gets into the subject, one realises that Scotland is just beginning the process of taking children's views seriously and building them into decisions about their lives. Other countries went down that route five or 10 years ago, so much research has been done.

The research shows that it is perfectly feasible to implement article 12 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, allowing young people the right to have their voice heard and giving it equal weight when decisions are made about their lives. The literature also shows that we must be aware that the standard forms of consultation are, in most cases, completely inappropriate for finding out young people's views.

I cannot make hard and fast recommendations. The committee must decide whether it wants consultation with children to be part and parcel of the process of government. We might consider appointing an adviser or setting up an inquiry into producing a template that other organisations could implement.

Convener, when we were talking about the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc (Scotland) Bill, you said that it would not have been appropriate for us to have met Save the Children as we would have been unable to get the information that we wanted. In that situation, I think that it might be right to ask the experts to get information for us and to present it to us in a way that they think fit.

Scotland, like the rest of the world, should implement article 12 of the convention. This committee, which deals with children specifically, should take the lead on the matter and, in the way in which we conduct our business, provide a model for the Parliament.

We are knocking at an open door. In the past few months, we have seen that the appropriate departments in the Scottish Executive have already started to consult young people. I do not think that anyone should reinvent the wheel. Our job should be to ensure that all the work that is being done in that area is brought together and presented as the way in which consultation should be carried out. The Government has opened up consultation to young people on a number of occasions but, as my report notes, it has done so only after it has been reminded that that must be done. I hope that the committee will appoint an adviser to help with the mainstreaming of consultation with young people.

The references that appear in the report are the sources from which I have quoted and are worth reading. I will produce a bibliography soon. I am not the only person to find the subject fascinating: the Scottish Parliament information centre has been incredibly helpful and members of its staff have shown enthusiasm in finding material.

Consultation with young people is possible and is already happening, but we have to ensure that we set up the correct procedures. Perhaps more important, there has to be a weighting mechanism for the views of young people. Eliciting their views will be pointless if those views carry no weight.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I thank Fiona McLeod for producing the report. She has been relentless in pushing the matter forward.

Fiona McLeod: I will not stop.

Ian Jenkins: I know, and I commend you for that. You have done us a great service. With the help of SPICe, you have shown that research has been done on consultation with young people and that there is good practice on which we can build.

Cathy Peattie: I echo Ian Jenkins's comments. There is a steep learning curve. As Fiona McLeod said, it is important that we examine the process of engaging children, but I must remind the committee of the answers that we had from HM inspectorate of schools about engaging parents. There is much work to be done on the wider processes of participation and ways in which people can be consulted. I do not think that the current consultation processes for adults, never mind children, are very good. Some agencies, such as the popular education forum, are doing good work and are examining new ways of carrying out consultation and developing that into participation.

14:30

I support the ideas of getting an adviser to consider ways of consulting young people and of

weighting the views of young people. We should also think about ways of consulting children who are involved in special needs education. It is all too easy to speak to the articulate youngsters who have a good support network and good teachers. Brian Monteith and I got a lot of information when we talked to the children in the lovely new school that we visited. It was clear that the teachers were working closely with the kids and were supporting them. We need to think of ways of ensuring that all our kids have that kind of experience at school.

We should come up with a better way of consulting parents than by a questionnaire. The questionnaire that is issued by HMI is appalling and would not elicit the views that I would want to hear from parents.

Mr Monteith: I commend Fiona McLeod on her work. We should have assistance to elicit the views of children not only on education but on culture and sport, the other areas of our remit. I have a particular problem with the Scottish Football Association at the moment in regard to its policy for the under-12s, on which I am pretty certain that children have never been consulted. I suspect that consultation with young people would uncover adult-centred policies in many areas. Fiona has done us a service in pointing that out. If we appoint an adviser, he or she should be able to work in a variety of areas, not just education.

Fiona McLeod: In my report, I did not think only in terms of the bill or education. The point is that young people should be asked for their views on issues in their lives.

This morning, I attended a student council that was discussing the consultation on physical punishment of children in Scotland. At the end of the consultation document are two and a half pages of people and organisations to whom the document has been sent. Only one—YouthLink Scotland—has direct links with young people. We assume that we will discover what young people think about physical punishment in Scotland by talking to councils or the Educational Institute of Scotland, but we will not.

This committee should produce a template—I cannot think of a better word—for how people can elicit the views of young people on any issue that affects them. We politicians think that we are listeners and that we are good at talking to people. When the minister and his deputy were here, I mentioned consultation with young people. They were quick to say that they go to schools and talk to the children, but such methods are often not appropriate.

We might think that we have spoken nicely and that the kids have said something back, but they might not have had a chance to explore fully what they think about an issue and what it means to

them. The games that one can play with young people to address serious matters are amazing.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The recent example of the young people who visited Edinburgh City Council to speak about Gaelic education shows how consultation with young people can be misused. A template would be useful, not just for the Parliament, but for local authorities.

Karen Gillon: My concern is that it is not possible to create a template. If we produce something that appears to be a template, people will tell us that they have done it a different way. There is no one model of how best to consult young people. We might have to consider different mechanisms. Before we go the advisers, we should go back to SPICe and ask the researchers to follow up on how that might be developed. We are rather busy and it might be difficult to fit this into the short-term business of the committee.

The Convener: I would like to congratulate Fiona on an impressive report in which she has raised several issues. The point that is being made is that it is not just about what the Education, Culture and Sport Committee does, but about how we ensure that other parliamentary committees and other public bodies take on board our comments on consultation with children and young people. That is a good starting point, but we must expand on it if we are to be successful in making children feel that their views are important and will be listened to. That will initiate a productive dialogue.

Karen Gillon's point is also relevant. There will never be one particular method of consultation. That is clear from what Fiona has said. The way in which we engage children in consultation will need to be adapted according to the matter that is being discussed and the circumstances of the children—Cathy Peattie mentioned children with special educational needs, for example.

As I am sure Fiona McLeod will know, SPICe is anxious to take the matter further and continue the research project. If SPICe comes back to us with suggestions, that would be a good way of ensuring that we act on Fiona's work, rather than admiring it and then leaving it.

Lewis Macdonald: I support that suggestion. I have a slight concern about the word template because I think that we need to take a dynamic approach. Meaningful consultation with children is now on a different level from that of a few years ago and it will continue to change. The self-confidence of young people is growing and the technology through which people can express their views is developing dramatically.

Fiona McLeod: I understand the problem with a template, but is very difficult to find the right word.

I have written down “checklist”, but that might present the same difficulties.

I have been doing a lot of reading and research, as has SPICe, and we have been enjoying it—we could go on for ever. If we ask SPICe to do some more research, we must have a specific purpose. The work that we have done for this report was designed to ensure that the subject could be tackled—that it was not just my airy-fairy idea. We must give SPICe a firm research title to work towards. We must also have a committee timetable for acting on that research.

The recommendation at the end of the report is:

“That the committee proceeds to a full inquiry on ‘mainstreaming’ consultation with young people in all aspects of legislation.”

I felt that I had to include legislation, because we are a parliamentary committee and our primary purpose is to develop and scrutinise legislation.

If we can produce a statement backed by evidence that shows that it is possible to ascertain young peoples’ views and to give those views weight when considering legislation, it will send out a positive message. If we can do it, it can be done for anything that involves young people. That might be our research aim and it might help to change the seen-and-not-heard attitude that persists in Scotland.

Ian Jenkins: We talk almost as if we could have a really good consultation and end up with one view from children, but we must remember that their views are as complex as ours. The difficulty is getting a balanced view—when we take a decision we are likely to upset some young people, just as we upset some adults when we take decisions.

The Convener: It has always been recognised as an important part of consultation that children and young people get feedback on decisions. They might hold a variety of views. We must consider that in developing a consultation policy. We will consider the remit for the research and a timetable for action.

Hampden Park

The Convener: Members have been circulated with a letter from Sam Galbraith on Hampden Park. I spoke to the minister today to find out whether there is any more news for the committee. The only additional information that I have is that Glasgow City Council has now confirmed that it will make a financial contribution to the package and that the minister hopes to continue with the discussions. He wants to reiterate that he is more than happy to meet the committee as soon as a deal has been reached.

I think that it is important that we invite the minister to attend the committee as soon as we have an opportunity to discuss the matter with him. I suspect that members also want to consider the matter in more detail; there might be advantages in considering an inquiry as soon as we know about the deal. That brings us to timing. There is no reason why the inquiry should happen immediately, but we could take the opportunity to consider how the matter has been handled.

Mr Monteith: I am encouraged by your comments, convener. I have always been supportive of allowing the Executive, as one of the co-funders of the project, the time to try to resolve the problem presented by the national stadium project. I have not been a supporter of the idea that the Parliament could take the job away from the Executive and get a better result.

However, over the past month or so I have come to think, “A plague on all your houses for not being able to resolve this matter more speedily.” I have lodged a parliamentary question, the answer to which may enlighten us further, but the idea that the extra money that has been put in has helped only to line the pockets of lawyers, accountants and consultants, and pay the interest on the project’s debt, has some credibility.

I hope that the Executive, with the other co-funders, such as Glasgow City Council, is able to pull a rabbit out of the hat. I would not want the committee to get in the way of that, but we have reached the point at which we should flag up the fact that we would be doing the Scottish public a disservice if we did not say that, once this issue is resolved—one way or another—we will take it upon ourselves to find out what went wrong. The committee did itself and the Parliament a great service by looking into the funding problems of the national companies, especially Scottish Opera. It would be remiss of us not to investigate the similar problems that have surrounded the national stadium project.

I hope that the committee can agree that, following the resolution of the problems

surrounding the Hampden Park development, we will take on the job of trying to establish the facts about the debt and the rescue package and examining the roles of those involved. We can then report to the Parliament, which can take a view on the matter. That would also allow the public to be made aware of the situation.

14:45

Karen Gillon: My view is similar to Brian Monteith's. Glasgow City Council met at one o'clock and decided to put extra money into the project. The deal is at a very significant point. If we become involved at this stage, we will not add anything to the negotiations.

However, I have serious concerns. Having watched some of the television coverage last week in particular, and having heard some of Mr Reilly's comments about where he thinks things should be going, it is clear to me that there are obstacles to a deal. Something needs to be done. I know that all possible negotiations are taking place, but as soon as this matter is resolved I would like us to invite the Scottish Football Association, Glasgow City Council, the Executive, Mr Reilly and Mr Macdiarmid to appear before this committee. We need to examine the roles of Queen's Park, National Stadium plc, the SFA, Glasgow City Council and the Executive in this affair.

If we fail to do that, we will be failing the people of Scotland, who have invested a significant amount of money in the national stadium. Whether we wanted that stadium to be built in the first place is not at issue—it now exists and I want it to survive. I do not want it to fall into the hands of another company for a small sum of money, which may happen if this deal falls apart. We should make a clear statement that the committee will conduct an investigation once the deal has been concluded, one way or another.

Nicola Sturgeon: I do not disagree with anything Karen has said, but we must be careful not to take on tasks that are beyond our remit and will give us enormous work load headaches. We have a role to play and it would be remiss of us not to look into this affair once it has been resolved, but it strikes me that some aspects of the affair—to do with the use of public money—go beyond our remit. Although the Executive has a role, this project began under the Tory Government.

Mr Monteith: Indeed it did.

Nicola Sturgeon: We must acknowledge that. It could also be argued that monitoring how public money is used is not primarily our role. There is a strong argument for involving the Audit Committee in any investigation. Either this committee or the

Audit Committee could explore the possibility of an Audit Commission report on Hampden and how public money has been used there. I understand that if the Audit Commission, through the Auditor General for Scotland, carried out such an inquiry, the report would, in any case, eventually be submitted to the Audit Committee of this Parliament. I am not quite sure how that would work, but I do not think that we need take on this inquiry entirely on our own. Other committees or agencies may be better equipped to investigate certain aspects of the affair.

Fiona McLeod: You know my position, convener. Sam Galbraith ends his letter by saying that, after matters have been resolved and he has made a further statement to Parliament, he

"would be happy to brief the committee".

How many times are we to be told that the negotiations are at a sensitive stage and that it is D-day? I have counted three occasions so far when the committee has had this discussion but decided to back off. We did not back off from the national arts companies inquiry; we said, "That's a problem, that's a hole, that's £3 million of public money, and we want to know what is happening." The committee must address its responsibilities in this matter.

We are told that there are stumbling blocks. Perhaps things would have been different if we had been able to have an open table on to which ideas could have been thrown, but all we have to go on are press reports. One of the stumbling blocks seems to be the insistence on involving the SFA. What is that a stumbling block to? What is the problem? Why can we not be told about it?

As we understand it, 10 days ago Glasgow City Council offered an alternative rescue package or management plan, which was turned down. The convener is now telling us that at one o'clock this afternoon it agreed to put its money into something that 10 days ago it did not think was the best plan. What has happened in the past 10 days to make Glasgow City Council put council tax payers' money into something that 10 days ago it did not think was the ideal solution?

We are told that this is not the place for an inquiry, but we keep having these discussions and making statements about our preferred options, without formalising what those are. We keep saying that we cannot have a role in the process, but we have discussed our preferred options on at least three occasions. How long can we sit back and say that this is not a matter in which we can get involved? As Brian Monteith pointed out, and as we all know, the debt is continuing to mount all the time.

The Convener: You have galvanised everybody into action—now everyone wants to say

something.

Lewis Macdonald: I am a member of the Audit Committee, which may well have an interest in this matter. I do not think that the initial step should be to refer it to the Audit Committee. I did not infer from what Nicola Sturgeon said that this is not the right committee to conduct an investigation into this affair. I think that she was saying that the Audit Committee could play a supplementary role.

When the Hampden situation is resolved, this committee should carry out an inquiry into it. I do not have close knowledge of the detail of what has gone on, but my main concerns are not about the use of public money or the activities of public agencies—although those are part of it. If something serious has gone wrong, I suspect that it has not been in the public sector. If we find that the problem is partly a public expenditure problem, the Audit Committee will be only too willing to look into it.

Mr Macintosh: I want to echo what Lewis just said. I still think that it is not the role of this committee to get involved in negotiations, but it is our role to investigate any misuse of public money and what use the national stadium will be put to from now on. The longer the saga goes on, the angrier I get—I think that I speak for the whole committee when I say that.

The parallel that I would draw with the national companies is that here, too, some people are playing fast and loose with the Executive's position. They know that the Executive cannot let the national stadium be handed over at a knockdown price for some private company to exploit, and they are taking advantage of that. I do not know whether that is the case, but it is not our role to step in and renegotiate.

We should find out people's motivation and what their roles were in each of the deals, but we have to wait until the deal is completed otherwise there may be no deal at all. We could make matters worse. As it is, as Brian said, hundreds of thousands of pounds may have been wasted on professional fees. Our involvement in negotiations will not improve that, and it could make matters worse.

Cathy Peattie: Most of what I want to say has been said. I agree with Nicola and Lewis. We need to discuss this issue again. Ours might not be the only committee that wishes to discuss it. It is important that we do not draw parallels with the national companies, because the situation is different. The main funding for the national companies comes from the Executive, so we have a role to play. If we revisit the matter after the negotiations are finished, that would be fine.

Mr Monteith: I go along with Lewis. I agree with a lot of what has been said. We are nearing

consensus on this matter. While there have been funding problems, many of which have been concerned with debt, it is clear from what Sam Galbraith has said to us in his letters and in the meetings at which he has addressed us that the problem is not so much the money as the decisions that have been taken.

The decision to hold the cup final at Hampden put a burden on the costs, but it was a political with a small "p"—or perhaps a sporting—decision that was taken somewhere by someone, but we do not know who. The decisions to change the specification were not funding decisions in the sense of the misuse of public funds; they were small "p" political decisions. That is why it is appropriate that this committee asks questions.

If we find that there has been a misuse of public funds, let us refer the case to the Audit Commission or to the Audit Committee, but I suspect that politics is involved in this matter. All the anecdotal evidence—I am aware that committee members have also provided anecdotal evidence—suggests that politics between Queen's Park and the Scottish Football Association is involved, which I suspect the Scottish Executive is trying to resolve. That is why our input is appropriate; it is also why I feel that the timing of our input is not crucial.

It is important that the matter be resolved. Taking into account our work load, we can take a distanced view, ask people to come before us, and ascertain what happened. It does not matter whether it takes another six months because we will be able to say, "This is the truth, in our estimation." I hope that, before then, the matter will have been resolved anyway.

Fiona McLeod: I hope that it will, Brian.

Mr Monteith: Yes, we cannot do any more.

Nicola Sturgeon: I will make a suggestion that I hope will be helpful. There is not much difference between the views that have been expressed. On the one hand is the view that we do not want to get involved in negotiations. Nobody disagrees with that. On the other hand we are all frustrated that the issue has been dragged out. We have been struggling along and told, "Wait until this time, and you might get involved in the process."

I suggest that we follow the minister's deadline of 17 March. My concern is that on that date there will still be no deal and he will come up with an extension or something else. We should set that date as our deadline, and say that after that date, whether there is a deal or not, we will look at timetabling our own investigation and decide which other committees or agencies will be involved. In that way we will set down a time scale and not allow the matter to drift—and we will retain control of our own procedures.

Ian Jenkins: I agree with Nicola and Brian. Brian will remember this, because he is a Hibs supporter.

Karen Gillon: He will not remember Hampden much.

Ian Jenkins: The famous five was led by Last-minute Reilly.

Mr Monteith: He scored the winner at Wembley.

Ian Jenkins: That name takes on a new meaning now. There is a danger that Austin Reilly, the chief executive of The National Stadium plc, will score an own-goal if he is not careful. He is in extra time and the whistle is about to be blown. We need to impose a deadline.

Mr Monteith: As an adjunct to Nicola's helpful suggestion, I propose that we set our deadline for Wednesday 22 March, which is when we next meet after 17 March. If we set that as the deadline, it will give us and the Executive some leeway, because it would not surprise me if, at the 11th hour on 18 March, the matter is resolved. We are programmed to meet on 22 March, so we could say, "OK, the issue has not been resolved. We will commission something."

The Convener: This is not you trying to get out of reporting back on Cramond, is it?

Mr Monteith: No, it is not.

The Convener: That sounds fine. We will give that date further consideration.

Mr Monteith: Why bring Cramond into it?

The Convener: I have the programme in front of me, Brian. I know when you are supposed to be reporting on it.

Mr Monteith: It weighs heavily on me, bloody Cramond.

Karen Gillon: I hope that that is in the *Official Report*. Strike that from the notes.

Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill: Stage 1

15:00

The Convener: The next item is a report on the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill, and we will go into private session.

Meeting continued in private until 16:22.

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