

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 20 June 2007

Session 3

£5.00

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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2007, Session 3

OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

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

*Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Stefan Tymkewycz (Lothians) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Sarah Robertson

ASSISTANT CLERK

Nick Hawthorne

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 20 June 2007

[THE OLDEST COMMITTEE MEMBER *opened the meeting at 10:44*]

Interests

Rob Gibson (Oldest Committee Member):

Welcome to the first meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee in the third session of the Scottish Parliament. I ask members and others who are present to turn off their mobile phones and pagers.

Are there any apologies?

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): We should record apologies from Christina McKelvie, who is stuck in traffic.

Rob Gibson: Indeed—we note that traffic has held up the start of the meeting.

The first item is declarations of interests. In accordance with section 3 of the “Code of Conduct for Members of the Scottish Parliament”, I invite members to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee’s remit. To start us off, I will make some comments about my registered interests, which include being an author—published by Luath Press—being an unremunerated director of the Highland Livestock Heritage Society and an unremunerated member of the Musicians Union, as well as being a member of other organisations that are not relevant.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I have no registrable interests that are relevant to the committee’s remit.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Neither do I.

Ken Macintosh: I have one registrable gift listed in my register of interests, but nothing that is of relevance to the committee.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): It is probably not a registrable interest, but I want the committee to be aware that I have been chairing the steering group that was set up by the Scottish Arts Council on the creation of a Scottish music industry body

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I would like members to be aware that I was employed at George Watson’s college as a part-time teacher until 24 May, which was

obviously after the election. That will appear in my declaration of interests.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): My register of interests shows that I am an unremunerated director of the Rowan Tree Theatre Company.

Rob Gibson: Thank you. As we said earlier, Christina McKelvie is not here, so she can make her declaration when she arrives.

Convener

10:47

Rob Gibson: Agenda item 2 is to choose a committee convener. Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish Labour Party are eligible for nomination as committee convener. I therefore seek nominations for the position.

Ken Macintosh: I nominate Karen Whitefield.

Karen Whitefield was chosen as convener.

Rob Gibson: Congratulations, Karen—I hope that you can take the chair from this point.

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Thank you for my appointment as committee convener. I also thank Rob Gibson, who was in the dubious position of having to declare himself the oldest committee member to convene the meeting until we appointed a convener.

Deputy Convener

10:48

The Convener: We move to the third item on the agenda. Members will have before them a note from the clerk setting out the procedure for selection of deputy convener. As you will see, it is very similar to that which is used to select a committee convener. Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish National Party are eligible to be chosen as deputy convener. That being the case, I invite nominations for the position.

Aileen Campbell: I nominate Rob Gibson.

Rob Gibson was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: Congratulations on your appointment. I look forward to working with you and with all other committee members.

Work Programme

10:49

The Convener: The fourth agenda item is the committee's approach to developing our work programme. I refer members to the papers that the clerks have circulated and I invite comments. I am particularly keen to hear from members about subjects they think we should consider for inquiries, and issues that we might want to pursue with ministers whose remits cover subjects that will come before the committee.

Ken Macintosh: We are at this stage still not sure what the legislative programme will be. The only piece of legislation that has been hinted at that will fall to us concerns the abolition of endowment fees. I suggest that we write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in time for our away day—I am jumping to the fact that we might have an away day before the end of the summer recess—to ask for a paper. Perhaps the minister and her team would like to come to the away day, even on an informal basis. That has happened before. It would be useful to have a rough outline from the minister of the Executive's legislative programme because it will have a huge bearing on what the committee has room to do.

That said, there are issues in the previous session's Education Committee's legacy paper that I would like the committee to discuss, to see whether we have time for them. There are a number of points in that paper, so I will not go through them all. I am keen to consider post-legislative scrutiny of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, or at least to consider additional support needs to see whether provisions are working effectively. That would be productive.

I also have a matter of more personal interest. I imagine that part of the Executive's programme will include child protection law. A contribution to the debate that the committee could make would be to discuss risk. I am sure that some members share my concern that we in public life do not discuss or handle risk well. A number of bodies are concerned about "cotton-wool kids"—the idea that we overprotect our children from risk, that we assess risks to children out of all proportion to reality, and that we end up not allowing children to develop the resilience to make decisions for themselves. I would like to discuss what sort of contribution the committee could make: for example—as is discussed in the legacy paper—a one-off conference, an inquiry or a paper.

On the remit of the previous session's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, funding for part-

time students is fairly high on the political agenda. In fact, that applies to funding for further and higher education, but I am particularly interested in funding for part-time students because the subject covers widening of access. I am also interested in governance, but I am not sure whether that would be a huge remit.

Finally—I have a big shopping list—there is the issue that my colleague Pauline McNeill referred to, which is Scotland's contemporary music industry. Just before the end of the previous session, the Executive announced a new fund for the industry. I would like this committee to build on that political momentum in some way. That is it, although I could go on.

The Convener: Thank you for your introductory comments. I am sure that all members of the committee will have big shopping lists of subjects in which they are interested. Today is an opportunity to have a preliminary discussion about the issues that we think might be relevant to the committee, to give us an idea of whether we have shared areas of interest. New members may bring up matters that others had not thought of, but that we all agree are worthy of consideration.

Jeremy Purvis: My point follows on from that of Ken Macintosh about getting an understanding of the priorities of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. We have so far heard a number of those priorities in published commitments, Parliament has heard a statement and we will be debating some of the issues this afternoon.

To develop Ken Macintosh's point, I propose that we meet next week and ask the cabinet secretary to come along and outline her priorities. Those priorities are not restricted to legislation. So far, we have only heard about one relevant area in which the Scottish Government intends to legislate—as part of a legislative programme that I would like to understand more clearly.

There are also budgetary issues. We will be coming into the new spending review period, and we have heard already about a number of commitments that will have budgetary implications. It would help us if, before our away day and before we return from the recess in the autumn, we had an opportunity to ask the minister on the record about a number of issues, which would help the committee to formulate its priorities. It would be premature to discuss in detail what the committee's programme might be if that is going to be considerably out of sync with the new Government's priorities.

The role of the new committee will probably be slightly different from its role in the previous session, in that it will have a much closer relationship with the cabinet secretary. It is

important to get an understanding of that next week, before the summer recess. I propose that we proceed with that, and I hope that colleagues agree. That will give us a good indication of possible subjects for a more substantive discussion at our away day. It is important for the sake of clarity and openness to get something on the record first.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

As a new member of the committee, I am interested to note that issues of process have formed much of the substance of our discussions. It is important also to think about some of the contents of education and culture policy. For an early part of our work, could we start to think about some of the contents of the curriculum for excellence, as well as considering a review of what the curriculum contains? I am thinking about elements including our national languages and those of immigrant communities. I believe that this is a useful point at which to pick up current issues. I hope that we can find space to do that.

There is clearly room for post-legislative scrutiny in a number of areas. Ken Macintosh has already mentioned one, and I have no doubt that other members will come up with further suggestions. Staying with the culture part of our remit, I think that we have never really examined the work of Historic Scotland in any detail—that is long overdue. It is a public agency that at times cuts across the private sector's ability to exist in certain areas, as well as duplicating the work of other agencies. I believe that the Government is examining the work of other similar agencies. We ought to be up to speed on that.

I am also interested in considering elements of the proposed culture bill and how that will play out for the new Government.

To follow on from where Jeremy Purvis left off, I recall debates at the beginning of September at which the Government set out its stall for its annual programme. As we have just had an election, and as ministers are sorting out their remits, it seems that it would be most appropriate for us to deal with such matters informally at the away day, but with a minister present. We would get much more value out of doing things that way, leading into the Government making more definitive statements at the beginning of September. The committee would be best placed if it considered some of the issues that members have raised and worked them up for discussion at our away day, rather than attempt to examine any kind of agenda and cross-questioning of a minister when there are still so many balls up in the air.

11:00

Pauline McNeill: It is always important to establish early on any objectives for inquiries;

obviously, it is also important for a committee to pick up on something new or interesting to keep its attention. Members have already made plenty of interesting suggestions, so there will be no shortage in that respect.

We should also spend our time doing something useful to Parliament or, I suppose, the general public, and we must ensure that we do our job of scrutinising what the Executive is doing. For that reason, although I am not averse to meeting next week, I remain unconvinced that doing so would have a point or that, if the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning agreed to come, she would have something to say and would be able to answer our questions in detail. I suppose that the details of the Administration's priorities will unfold but, as they have not yet been made available, I have found it difficult to understand exactly what they are. For example, given what has been said about the school-building programme, I want to know whether the cabinet secretary would be prepared to outline for us the Executive's policy and plans in that regard so that we could take a view on the matter.

I also want to know whether, as Rob Gibson has mentioned, a culture bill will be introduced. I have a strong interest in culture; like Ken Macintosh, I am interested in contemporary music. I certainly want the committee to carry out some work on culture, because it is—I am pleased to note—part of our remit. In response to Jeremy Purvis's suggestion, I think that if we are to pursue a meeting with the cabinet secretary, our letter should make it clear that she will have to provide us with some detail, if she is available to come before us.

Ken Macintosh's suggestion that we examine risks to children is good. I also want to throw in a proposal from the legacy paper, which is that the committee should consider looked-after children. I realise that a lot of work has already been done on that, which might be a factor in a decision to do no more on it. However, it is important.

Elizabeth Smith: Would it be possible to examine funding for teaching in universities and higher education, which is absolutely crucial to this country's future? School discipline is also very much an issue. I note that it has formed part of the remit of previous education committees, and it is certainly important to many people in the teaching profession.

I also agree with Ken Macintosh's comments on risks to children. In extracurricular work, which is where my interest lies, we are reaching a crucial point with regard to how we define risk. Because of the current situation, many people in education are finding it difficult to take on extracurricular activities, which is compromising the opportunities

that are open to our youngsters, particularly in more disadvantaged areas.

Aileen Campbell: I broadly agree with many of the points that have been raised. Having many friends who are involved in education, I wonder whether we can examine the issue of staff morale and find out whether staff are happy in their jobs. We should also bear it in mind that, as we will have to deal with the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture as well as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, it might be a bit early to meet next week to thrash out the various issues that the committee wants to take forward. It might be better to follow Rob Gibson's suggestion and have a more informal discussion with ministers at our away day.

The Convener: After those initial comments, we need to get down to the nitty-gritty of agreeing the committee's direction. As convener, I should set out my stall and tell members what I am interested in. However, I should point out that, although I am convener, I am also just another committee member and my views might not garner any more support than any other member's.

As far as education is concerned, I am quite keen to focus on the school building programme. I will seek answers from the new Government on how it will fund the school building programme that was undertaken by the previous Administration and on whether that programme will continue. There are questions, especially given the cabinet secretary's comments in the news this morning about reductions in class sizes. Many people will welcome that, but it will have a massive impact on school buildings. The committee may want to consider whether schools have the capacity to accommodate reduced class sizes.

Funding for higher and further education is another key theme that a number of members have identified. I hope that we will return to it.

Aileen Campbell and Rob Gibson were right to point out that the committee is responsible not only for education but for cultural matters. We need to remember that we have a cultural focus, although at times we will doubtless struggle to do so, as educational issues will grab the headlines. I am sure that members who have backgrounds in culture will want to ensure that cultural issues are explored. I would like us to examine how EventScotland is operating and whether it is delivering. Is it bringing new events to Scotland, to allow us to promote Scotland as a viable destination for major worldwide events? We may want to consider that, especially given that the new Government has chosen to break up EventScotland and VisitScotland. I know that Linda Fabiani, the new Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture, has responsibility for that area.

Jeremy Purvis's suggestion that the committee meet next week is worthy of consideration, although other members made the point that we need to ensure that there is a focus and a purpose to any such meeting. We need to consider whether it might be better for the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to attend our away day. Although the issue has not been mentioned, all members will agree that an away day would be helpful to the committee. I hope that we will agree that it would be good for us to invite Fiona Hyslop, her deputies and Linda Fabiani to attend the away day, to give them an opportunity to meet us informally and to talk to us a little about where they see their work programmes leading over the next year.

However, it may be worth our meeting the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning next week, especially because it is likely that this is one of the few committees that will have to deal early with legislation. It would be helpful to ask the cabinet secretary next week when we are likely to receive the legislation and what form it will take, because that will affect our discussions about our work programme. If the legislation is not to be introduced for 18 months, there are other things that the committee could constructively do. However, if it is to be introduced immediately, it is pointless to decide at an away day on inquiries into a number of issues, because we will not be able to determine our time. The same could be said of the announcement that has been trailed and is likely to be made today about class sizes, which will also affect our work programme.

Although I recognise the point that other members have made about the need for there to be a purpose to our meeting next week, I think that we could have a purposeful meeting, if the cabinet secretary is able to attend. I am keen to know whether we can reach consensus on the issue.

Jeremy Purvis: I appreciate what Aileen Campbell and Rob Gibson said about the timeframe. By the end of May four years ago, a programme for government had been published in which the priorities for the next session were outlined.

I would prefer to have a briefing to the committee that is on the record and public, rather than an informal briefing at an away day. That would ensure transparency, openness and accountability about the committee's role.

Pauline McNeill: I am happy with both options. We cannot tell in advance what answers we will hear from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning but, if we are to hear from her, the committee needs to make it clear that we would like to invite her to give details that will inform our work programme. The options are not

mutually exclusive. I do not see why we could not do that and have an informal dialogue. That would be good and would be to our advantage, so I favour both options.

Rob Gibson: We cannot invite the cabinet secretary without inviting the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture. To skew how we see the committee from the start is merely window dressing. If we are serious about asking questions, it is more important to ask them across the range of the remit. We shall see whether we have answers that help us on the away day. I press the convener, if she is so minded, to open the invitation to all the ministers who have responsibilities within our remit.

The Convener: I have no objections to inviting Ms Fabiani to attend the meeting. However, her position is slightly different. Since becoming the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop has made several announcements. I welcome the fact that, in making those announcements, she takes her role seriously—although I do not suggest for one minute that Ms Fabiani does not. However, perhaps the issues for which Ms Fabiani is responsible are not as high up the political agenda. It would be relevant to invite Fiona Hyslop and I have no objections to extending the invitation to Ms Fabiani and to having a second panel of witnesses who include her. Do we agree to invite Linda Fabiani and Fiona Hyslop to attend the committee's meeting next Wednesday morning?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I think that we have agreed to have an away day. Do members agree that I should liaise with the clerks about the away day's venue and agenda, and thereafter circulate details to members for their approval?

Members indicated agreement.

Rob Gibson: Can we ensure that the venue is near a public transport route?

The Convener: That suggestion is good. Given my difficulties in arriving on time today, the sooner the Airdrie to Bathgate railway line is opened and I can travel by train, the better. The line will be even better if I get my station at Plains—Mr Purvis knows more about that than most members.

Jeremy Purvis: That is up to the new Government now.

The Convener: With the issue of transport on our agenda, we conclude the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee's first meeting. I thank members for attending.

Meeting closed at 11:14.

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