



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Thursday 13 June 2013

Session 4

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11th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP)

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)

*Jamie McGigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Thursday 13 June 2013

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

“Brussels Bulletin”

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning, and welcome to the 11th meeting in 2013 of the European and External Relations Committee. I make the usual request that all mobile phones be switched off, as they interfere with the broadcasting system.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of the latest edition of the “Brussels Bulletin”, which committee members have in front of them. Our other agenda items will be in private. Do people have any comments, questions or requests for follow-up information?

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I have a brief comment that very significant progress has been made in relation to the common fisheries policy. It is certainly a step in the right direction, in particular in relation to discards. I was pleased to see the comments of the European Parliament in relation to that.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): My attention was drawn to the section on country-specific recommendations on page 2. At first sight, I wondered what it was, but it is really about the blueprint documents for countries to move towards recovery and so on.

Every time I read such documents, I always see a clause that says that the United Kingdom is not obliged to do something—there is always an exception for the UK. Further on, the bulletin says:

“the UK is not obliged to avoid excessive general government deficits”,

but one of the key purposes of the country-specific recommendations is to bring down fiscal debt. I would not say that I am entirely in agreement with how the UK is approaching that issue, since it seems to be targeting the people who are most in need in order to meet the recommendations.

There is also a section on tackling youth unemployment—the news from yesterday is that Scotland has made further strides in reducing youth unemployment and that levels now stand among the lowest in Europe. What do we do with something like that? How is a member state of the European Union held to account for such things?

I am conscious that they are just recommendations, but I presume that at some stage someone within the EU will look at the performance of any particular member state against those indicators and give some kind of statement—annual or otherwise. It would be interesting for us—if only as a watching brief—to keep an eye on progress because, from the criteria that are given, Scotland appears to be making good progress on a number of the indicators, which is encouraging for us in Scotland.

The Convener: Thank you for that. I will give a wee bit of feedback. The clerk is in the process of trying to organise a briefing on that issue from the European Commission, so I hope that we might get some feedback that will give us an opportunity to dig a bit deeper.

You raise a pertinent issue about youth unemployment. I have asked Iain McIver in the Scottish Parliament information centre to look at the youth guarantee so that we can question the UK Minister for Europe on it when he is at our next meeting on 27 June. We should perhaps explore with the UK minister the fact that the UK has not signed up to the youth guarantee as far as employment opportunities go.

We are getting a briefing on a number of areas that we can explore with the minister when he comes, including the youth guarantee.

Willie Coffey: Thanks, convener.

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I want to highlight the fact that we now have a partial reprieve on fisheries. In relation to our demand to the EU to support us in the quest to safeguard the industry in Scotland, we have met with some success. That goes to show that, if we make the effort and engage with the EU, it can pay dividends. We can continue to make that effort in relation to this area. Just because we have had a partial success, that does not mean that we can say, “Okay, job done.”

We have a long way to go but, nevertheless, we have succeeded in something quite substantial by making our mark through advising and supporting the EU in making decisions in the right way. I hope that it will continue to do so in future, and I want this committee to play as full a role in that support to ensure that the EU protects our fishing industry for the future.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Scotland has worked really hard on youth unemployment, which is of huge concern across Europe, especially in Portugal, Spain and Greece and some of the other countries that are really suffering. I am glad to see that our minister was speaking at the conference, that Scotland is being seen as taking a lead in the area, and that we are continuing to do that with the youth jobs funding

for local authorities that was announced yesterday. We continue to be a leader in the area, and that is to be welcomed.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As far as I can see, there is nothing in the bulletin about the situation in Iceland and the Faroes regarding mackerel and herring. That is an extraordinary omission from the bulletin, considering the fact that the EU has been talking about it the whole time. The committee should ask whether there are going to be sanctions. The EU has said that there will be sanctions, but it has not said how or when they will be imposed. The issue is frightfully important for Scottish fishermen, and as a parliamentary committee we ought to be asking questions about it.

The Convener: You have done that so effectively that Iain McIver is putting together a SPICe briefing on that very issue. When we get that from SPICe, the committee could perhaps follow the issue up with Scotland Europa.

For the committee's information, the next meeting will have a bumper issue of the "Brussels Bulletin" that will contain a horizon-scanning forecast of what will be happening during the summer. Perhaps we should make sure that Scotland Europa includes Jamie McGrigor's issues in its next report.

Jamie McGrigor: Thank you very much.

Roderick Campbell: I have a couple of additional points. First, I was interested to see in the section on higher education:

"The European Commission may publish a Communication later in June on the Internationalisation of Higher Education."

The section does not in any way touch on vexed issues such as tuition fees across Europe, but it does talk about the mobility of students and the uneven distribution of international students across EU countries. We might have to wait for the publication of that communication, but I am interested to know what views there are about the charging of tuition fees for students who study in different European Union countries. That might be something that Scotland Europa would want to look at before the bumper issue.

Secondly, I am also interested in the suggestion that the EU will be drafting rules for shale gas production by the end of 2013. I imagine that that will be quite controversial. Again, if there is any further background information on what is intended, it might be useful for Scotland Europa to consider it.

The Convener: I agree. I was going to bring up the point about shale gas production myself, but you have done it far more eloquently than I could have.

Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): When I was reading the "Business Bulletin", one of the thoughts that occurred to me was that it is full of really interesting information, but I think that it is produced with the view that this committee's role is passive and that we should just absorb the information that is sent to us. Could we request a bit more horizon scanning on the directives that are coming down the line?

When we set up the office in Europe, it was envisaged that there would be more horizon scanning, which would allow the parliamentary committees to have early input into what is happening. I congratulate the officials on the information that they have given to us so far, but I feel that the bulletin is light on information on the directives that are coming down the line at us.

The Convener: You have made a relevant point, Helen, but one of the things that we do in the autumn when we look at our priorities and the European strategy is look at the directives that are coming down the line. Hundreds of them come in, and the clerks do a good job of horizon scanning and finding the ones that are relevant to us. However, you might have a point about information on what is coming up pretty soon in Brussels that we should have an influence on. You are absolutely right.

Jamie McGrigor: I think that we are missing Ian Duncan's input on that.

The Convener: Yes, because he could tell us a bit about the politics of what is happening.

Jamie McGrigor: He had a handle on that, and I wonder whether we ought to be employing someone directly to do that. I am just making the point.

The Convener: It is a point well made and noted.

Jamie McGrigor: We are having to deal with something that is a lesser document than it was before, which is not good for the committee.

The Convener: I agree with you.

As there are no other comments and questions on the "Brussels Bulletin", can we agree to make sure that it goes to the relevant committees? Some of the issues that we have highlighted should be brought to their attention. I suspect that the information about the shale gas situation should go to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee.

Members indicated agreement.

09:11

Meeting continued in private until 11:31.

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