



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

Thursday 5 December 2013

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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
16th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con)

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Gillian Baxendine

Alison Walker

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 5 December 2013

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stewart Stevenson): Welcome to the 16th meeting in 2013 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. I remind members to turn off their mobile phones.

Do members agree to consider in private at future meetings a draft report on the committee's review of parliamentary reform, and a paper on hybrid bills?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Cross-party Groups

09:31

The Convener: The next agenda item is to take evidence from Alex Johnstone MSP on the proposed cross-party group on Japan, and then from John Mason MSP on the proposed cross-party group on rail. I welcome Alex Johnstone to the meeting and invite him to say a little about his proposed group's purpose.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Thank you, convener. This is not my first time in front of a Parliament standards committee, but it has been a long time, and I have behaved myself a lot better, since my first visit.

The idea of creating a cross-party group on Japan is something that I have been considering for a long time. There are so many cross-party groups and so many eastern countries are already represented that it is perhaps a surprise that nobody else has done it.

I have been working closely with Japan's representatives in the consulate in Edinburgh over a number of years. As early as 2006, I organised a cultural evening here in the Parliament, which was extremely well attended by MSPs, and at which a wide and broad cross-section of Japanese culture was represented. We have also had the opportunity to represent the interests of sporting links with Japan; more recently than 2006 some members may have looked out of their office windows and seen the extraordinary sight of the then consul general of Japan, Mr Tarahara, bowling a cricket ball to my colleague Liz Smith, who whacked it in my direction. I desperately tried to catch it before it broke a window—which I did successfully. Mr Tarahara has now been replaced by a new consul general, Mr Kitaoka, who has arrived in Scotland in the past two months. We were grateful to have him as our guest speaker at the inaugural meeting, which we held just over a month ago. That link is very valuable to us.

Our intention is for the group to be dedicated to promoting trade, culture, education and sporting links with Japan. If the proposal meets the committee's approval, we intend to hold our first meeting in March next year. We hope to have Mr Jun Arima of the Japan External Trade Organisation talking extensively on the economic aspect of the links between Scotland and Japan. We intend to hold an evening later in the year that is similar to the one that we had in 2006, at which we can promote the cultural and economic links with Japan in a more social environment.

With that in mind, we intend to ensure that we have a friendly group—one that promotes positive relations between Scotland and Japan and in

which communication is our priority. I have an advantage in that the secretary of the group, Jim Millar, who works in my office, is currently working hard to learn the Japanese language. Should he ever fall short of his requirements, he has an effective fallback position in that his wife is a fluent speaker.

That said, convener, ladies and gentlemen, I hope that my proposal for a cross-party group on Japan will meet with your approval.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr Johnstone. I hope that your assistant does not learn Japanese from his wife, as I understand that the male and female forms of the language are somewhat different.

Alex Johnstone: Indeed. I have been informed of that.

The Convener: Do colleagues want to ask any questions of Mr Johnstone while we have him before us?

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Thank you for your presentation, Alex. I would like to check something regarding the section of the application on financial or other benefits. We are determined to be completely transparent about the funding of cross-party groups, whether they receive direct funding or funding in kind. How can that section be left empty when, as you have mentioned, you hope to have a reception? I presume that it will cost money.

Alex Johnstone: In 2006, we successfully held a reception that was dealt with entirely in kind—there were no costs associated with it. I am not sure whether that would be possible in the current environment. However, it is our intention to ensure that the cross-party group is not about trying to attract funding but about promoting the interests of those who wish to become members in a much broader sense. It is my aspiration to avoid its becoming simply an organisation that stages events for which it must find funding, because that is an area in which some cross-party groups get rather bogged down.

Fiona McLeod: You say that, in 2006, you managed to hold a reception through gifts and funding in kind. We would still expect such funding to appear in that section of the application. Can you give an idea of what you think the reception would cost?

Alex Johnstone: It would be extremely hard for me to give a figure now, but I could attempt to get one for you.

Fiona McLeod: I think that we would probably want that. Thank you.

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): Having been a frequent visitor to Japan on business, I

know that the Japanese are very generous—more than other people—in giving receptions and things like that. Those things tend to be funded by the consulate and by Japanese companies that are trying to promote their wares. Is that the intention? When you say that the reception will be self-funded, do you hope to get sponsors who want to promote their products—beer, food and so on? I find Japan to be very self-funding; they are very keen to throw money at such things. As Fiona McLeod does, I wonder whether the reception will be sponsored and whether it will be open and transparent.

Alex Johnstone: I assure the committee that everything will be open and transparent. However, I repeat that in setting up the group we are not trying to get money out of people to do things. We want to keep costs down and ensure that our main aim is not simply to attract funding from potential sponsors.

Cameron Buchanan: What is the object of the group? Is it to discuss trade or culture?

Alex Johnstone: We would try to balance trade, culture, education and sporting links, and we have been involved in a number of those areas already. As I said, we had a cultural reception recently, and more recently we were involved in promoting the tour of the Japanese cricket teams when they visited Edinburgh last year. We are keen to ensure that the group is balanced and is not overtaken exclusively by trade as a priority. We do not want to exclude trade, because we know that there are significant trading links between Scotland and Japan, but we want the group to be involved with culture, education and sporting issues in at least equal measure.

The Convener: Thank you for coming, Mr Johnstone. We will have the clerks contact you once the committee has reached a decision.

I now invite John Mason to step forward on behalf of the proposed cross-party group on rail. This is an interesting day to be appearing before a committee on that subject, if I may say so. Would you like to let the committee know something about the proposed group, Mr Mason?

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I thank the committee for agreeing at short notice to hear my proposal. Usually on a Thursday morning I attend the Equal Opportunities Committee, so today is a suitable day because that committee is not meeting. I am glad to say that I came through by train yesterday and stayed overnight in Edinburgh, so I had less of a problem.

To echo some of what Mr Johnstone said, I am also of the view that there are probably too many cross-party groups. I have not been involved in starting one before and have tended to limit my membership to groups that I am seriously

interested in. However, I believe that rail is such a major part of our infrastructure and of our lives that it deserves its own group.

Specifically, I was spurred on by two incidents in recent months. One was that a number of people who are pushing for Glasgow crossrail came to me wanting a cross-party group just on that one item, and the second was the setting up of the cross-party group on aviation. The first proposal made me think that, rather than have a group on one campaign issue, it would be better to have a cross-party group right across rail, which could include all such campaigns, listen to all those people and put forward ideas, and not concentrate specifically on a single small project, which could have led to there being proposals for several cross-party groups. Secondly, it is a good idea to have a group on aviation, but it is a major competitor to rail in many cases, so it seems logical to me that if aviation is to have a strong voice in Parliament, rail should too.

I am keen to have a wide and inclusive group that involves industry, user groups and trades unions, which were well represented at the inaugural meeting. I hope that more people will join. For example, we did not have transport partnerships represented at the first meeting, but I hope that they will want to get involved. It is clear that groups will attend that campaign on single specific issues, but I do not see the cross-party group as existing just to back them; it will be there to take an overview. I have to say that I am encouraged by the interest so far, and if the group is approved I hope that we can build on that.

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): John Mason may remember that I attended his inaugural meeting. I do not see my name on the list as a member, but I would like to declare my interest as a member of that group.

John Mason: I apologise for that. There are one or two omissions from the list, including Allan McLean, who appears on the list as the secretary but not as an individual member, and your colleague Mary Fee, who was also there. We shall go through the list again. My hope is that membership will increase. I apologise for the fact that we seem to have missed out one or two names.

Margaret McDougall: We heard from Alex Johnstone about the costs of his new group; are there likely to be costs associated with the proposed cross-party group on rail?

John Mason: I hope that there will not. I was keen to get a secretary who would be neutral—and perceived as being neutral—and not from one of the rail companies. We will have to continue to look at that, but at the moment we have Allan McLean, who has retired from the rail industry. He

used to be with Virgin and has worked elsewhere and is widely respected. I hope that we will not incur expenses or have receptions. We can look at that in the future, but that is my intention to start with.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Mason. We will let you know of our decision via the clerks.

Agenda item 3 is to discuss the evidence that we have heard from Alex Johnstone on the proposed cross-party group on Japan and from John Mason on the proposed cross-party group on rail. Do members have any comments to make before we come to a decision?

Fiona McLeod: On the cross-party group on Japan, if we agree to record its recognition, I would like that to be conditional on Alex Johnstone's fleshing out the benefits in kind section of the form.

The Convener: Just to be clear about the process, we either approve or do not approve today. Once a group is approved there are requirements on reporting. Do you think that that would meet your need, or are you suggesting that there is a barrier to approval today?

Fiona McLeod: I think that there is a barrier, because we really have to be transparent. As Alex Johnstone said in reply to me, he held a reception before, which covered its own costs through gifts and hospitality. That is exactly what the section on financial or other benefits asks for details of. If he is talking about having another reception, I would have expected him to have gone back to his previous one and put in projected costs.

09:45

The Convener: What I am hearing is that you are suggesting that we cannot approve the group today, but neither will we reject approval.

Cameron Buchanan: The Japanese are well known for sponsoring everything—that is what I was trying to get at—and I am sure that what is proposed will not cost us any money. I agree with Fiona McLeod that transparency is important, but the Japanese are probably the most generous of people for sponsoring. They are very keen on culture and sporting links: there is the Japan Cricket Association, for heaven's sake. That is laudable, but I think that it is more about culture and trade, and the Japanese love Scotland. Therefore, I do not think that there will be a problem with the finance, but we need to be transparent. However, I would not hold that as a barrier. I think that it will be okay.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I agree with Fiona McLeod. I think that Mr Johnstone did not understand her question. It is well and good that there are companies and organisations that will be

involved, but it is important that we have a figure of sorts so that we can say that in the real world, it would cost £X. That is the whole point, and the point that Fiona McLeod made, but Mr Johnstone did not quite pick up on it. Even when Cameron Buchanan tried to press him on it, he still did not pick up on it. Fiona McLeod might have the right idea. It is probably better if we ask Mr Johnstone for a wee bit more detail at this stage.

The Convener: The sense that I am getting from committee colleagues is that we should not approve the proposed group today and that we should require Mr Johnstone to provide the necessary financial information, but our expectation is that we will be able to approve the group at a future meeting. Is that what the committee is saying?

Cameron Buchanan: Absolutely.

Margaret McDougall: That would be consistent with what we have done with previous applications.

Cameron Buchanan: It is important to include a rider to say that we will approve the group.

The Convener: I think that the correct phrase would be that "We are minded to approve the group."

Cameron Buchanan: I do not disagree with that approach. We need to flesh things out a bit. Alex Johnstone was rather vague. A reception that was sponsored by the Japanese has already been held. That is slightly unusual before a group has been approved, is it not? I do not know.

Fiona McLeod: The reception was in 2006.

Cameron Buchanan: Right.

The Convener: Okay. We will not approve the proposed cross-party group on Japan today. We will write to Mr Johnstone, who will be able to read the *Official Report* of the meeting. We are minded to approve the group, but there is a requirement to be met first. We will invite Mr Johnstone to provide that information in very early course so that we do not disrupt plans.

Does anyone wish to make any comments on the proposed cross-party group on rail?

Fiona McLeod: I would normally have asked about the financial benefits not being applicable, but John Mason answered that question in telling us that the secretary is a retired person, so there will not even be anything in kind. The man will do things entirely off his own bat, which is amazing.

Cameron Buchanan: He must be a keen rail man.

The Convener: I know the individual and think that he most certainly is a keen rail man.

Do members agree to accord recognition of the proposed cross-party group on rail?

Fiona McLeod: I am sorry, convener, but I have one small rider. Margaret McDougall picked up that her name was not on the form. We really need the forms to be filled in absolutely correctly.

The Convener: Okay. Are members minded to approve the group.

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That ends the public part of the meeting.

09:49

Meeting continued in private until 09:49.

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