



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

Thursday 19 December 2013

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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
17th 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:

Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Gillian Baxendine

Alison Walker

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 19 December 2013

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Cross-party Group

The Convener (Stewart Stevenson): I invite members to switch off mobile phones. Welcome to the 17th meeting in 2013 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

Our first item today is correspondence from Alex Johnstone on the proposed cross-party group on Japan. At its meeting on 5 December the committee considered an application from the proposed CPG on Japan, and members agreed that they wished Alex Johnstone to provide more information on the costs of a reception that was mentioned on the registration form. The clerks wrote to Alex Johnstone on behalf of the committee to ask for further information; the response is available at annexe B of paper SPPA/S4/13/17/1.

Do members wish to comment?

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am still not entirely happy with the answer that we have received. In his letter, Alex Johnstone refers to the example of what happened the last time they had a reception, and that sake and sushi were donated by the consulate general of Japan. However, that had a cost, which he has to specify.

Our committee will, in the future, be considering lobbying and transparency. We have worked really hard on the registration forms for cross-party groups so that everything is as open and transparent as possible, and I do not think that what we have received meets that standard.

The Convener: I wonder whether one of the tests that we ought to consider in this context is whether cross-party groups are required to advise us what their expenditure might be before they incur it, or whether the standard is met if there is proper reporting after it has been incurred. Do you have a view on that?

Fiona McLeod: Yes, I do. In his letter, Alex Johnstone says that if the expenditure for the reception is more than £500 the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee will capture that when the cross-party group puts in its annual report.

I am talking not about that, but about the actual form that is used to register a cross-party group. It says quite clearly on it:

“FINANCIAL BENEFITS OR OTHER BENEFITS”.

We need people to take that bit seriously and fill it in as part of the registration process because it is about transparency and is there to show that a cross-party group is open, accessible and not there for one particular individual or organisation's purposes.

The Convener: Anyone else?

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): I think that the Japanese will provide sake and sushi because that is the way they do things. Having been to Japan a lot, I know that the Japanese are very generous. Do we really need to find out exactly the cost if it is not going to be a cost to the Parliament? The Japanese consulate and embassies have funds to spend on entertaining; I cannot see why it concerns us if they spend their own money on a reception for us. Perhaps it is a bit like lobbying.

The Convener: If I may say so, I think that it is necessary for us to have an estimate of the costs that others have incurred, as opposed to costs that we incur directly. However, it need not be an issue; it is up to the group to make a judgment and to propose a figure for what it believes has been spent.

Cameron Buchanan: May I ask why you think that that is necessary, convener?

The Convener: I am referring to the rules of Parliament rather than expressing a view. Others may, if they wish, lead me to the conclusion that I am misinterpreting the rules, but I seem to be getting a clear steer that that is not the case.

The committee is clearly minded to accept that the proposed group has a proper purpose for a cross-party group. Our concern is specifically about transparency and the paperwork that is necessary to deliver that transparency. We have discussed it a couple of times and we are clear that we require the form that is submitted, registered and published to contain an estimate of what a putative meeting will cost. I suggest that the committee delegate to the convener the authority to approve the CPG subject to our receiving that, rather than having the committee return to the issue. I am, however, in members' hands.

Mistress McLeod, are you happy with that or do you wish the committee to return to the issue? I want us to be unanimous on this.

Fiona McLeod: My concern is not about the cross-party group on Japan. We have worked really hard on the registration forms for CPGs in

order to ensure absolute transparency of all cross-party groups and how they work.

To answer some of Cameron Buchanan's points, my issue is not that there will be a cost to Parliament, but that there would be a cost to another organisation that could be seen to be influencing the proposed cross-party group. That is about transparency.

I will go with the consensus, but I am trying to get on the record that all future members who fill in a cross-party group registration form should take the section on financial benefits and other benefits as seriously as we as a committee take it because it is about transparency for registration.

The Convener: It has just been drawn to my attention that a figure has been provided in the letter, although it has not been put on the registration form.

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): I just want to confirm that a figure needs to be declared only if it exceeds £500.

The Convener: That is correct.

I go back to my suggestion. Alex Johnstone's letter says that the costs are not expected to exceed £500. Subject to the CPG or Mr Johnstone providing the information on the form for publication, is the committee happy to delegate to the convener? I am getting a nod from Fiona McLeod. I do not want to railroad this through, so is everyone happy?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Cameron Buchanan: Have we agreed to the CPG, then?

The Convener: Yes we have—subject to the form's being completed in the terms as described. I will take responsibility for seeing that that happens, after which the group will be approved.

Cameron Buchanan: That is fine. Thank you.

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

10:07

Meeting continued in private until 10:30.

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