



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Thursday 30 October 2014

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
19th Meeting 2014, 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)

*Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Thursday 30 October 2014

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning, and welcome to the 19th meeting in 2014 of the European and External Relations Committee.

We have a slightly different format for the “Brussels Bulletin” this morning, so I am hoping for members’ feedback on that, once we get to that item.

I make the usual request that mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched off.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking items 3 and 4 in private. Is the committee content to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

“Brussels Bulletin”

10:01

The Convener: Item 2 is the “Brussels Bulletin”. As I mentioned, the bulletin’s format has changed. The template was quite unstable, which was becoming a real problem. The new format is much more accessible—indeed, it meets the Scottish Parliament’s standards as far as accessible documents go.

Perhaps we can talk about the format of the bulletin after we have dealt with its content. Do members have any questions or comments?

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): Do you want us to comment on the layout now?

The Convener: Okay, we can do that quickly.

Hanzala Malik: Can we not use as much colour? The new format is not eco-friendly.

The Convener: Okay.

Hanzala Malik: Black and white is simple and would be fine. We can be all dazzling and colourful in our reports, but I do not want so much ink to be wasted just for committee papers.

The Convener: Yes, that is fine.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The bulletin looks okay and it is as readable as the previous version—in fact, I find it to be quite an easy read.

My only comment is that some of the graphics are a wee bit difficult to read. For example, it is quite hard to see the graphic on the European Commission in the appendix. If we are to have graphics, perhaps we should ask for them to be on a full page, so that we can read the text. Otherwise, it is a nice, readable and attractively presented piece of information for us.

The Convener: Katy Orr, the clerk, has just informed me that the format and size of the graphics are copyrighted. Perhaps, we just need to use the information to create a different—

Willie Coffey: Just make it bigger.

The Convener: Apparently everything, including the size, is copyrighted, which is a bit strange.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have to say that I do not like it.

The Convener: You do not like it—I didnae think that you would, Jamie.

Jamie McGrigor: I far preferred how we had the bulletin before. Why the change?

The Convener: The bulletin template became really unstable and the text was jumping all over the page.

Jamie McGrigor: I have to say that the original bulletin was far more concise, far less wordy and far better. In the past year or so, the bulletin has become wordier, with more flannel.

The Convener: That might be our fault, to be honest, because we keep asking for additional information.

Jamie McGrigor: Right, okay.

The Convener: We keep asking for more details on issues, so as much of that is being packed into the bulletin as possible.

Jamie McGrigor: It seems as though 30 words are used when only two are needed. That is my feeling. As I say, it is too wordy.

The Convener: Okay.

Jamie McGrigor: That is only my opinion.

The Convener: What about the content? Has anyone got anything to say about that?

Jamie McGrigor: On the Russian ban on imports, I had a conversation yesterday with the chap who is the head of the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation. When I asked whether the ban was hurting the sector, he said, "Not really, because we send our exports to Belarus." Therefore, other countries are picking up the slack.

The Convener: That is interesting.

Jamie McGrigor: The sector does not seem to be losing any business over the ban; the businesses seem to get in through other doors. I was rather interested by that.

The Convener: They have shifted the supply chain.

Jamie McGrigor: Yes.

Hanzala Malik: That is a good thing, because we have opened up another avenue to export more goods. One market has been closed, but we are gaining another; gaining a market is welcome, while losing one is not welcome.

Jamie McGrigor: The ban has been quite a blow to the white-fish and pelagic industries, because the general price of fish has dropped, but the industries seem to be soldiering on.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I have a couple of comments—rather than anything else—to make.

I noticed with interest the comments made on the transatlantic trade and investment partnership and the disagreement with Jean-Claude Juncker.

TTIP remains an interesting subject, and if the committee is to embark on an inquiry we will, I hope, have a much better idea about that issue by the end of our evidence sessions.

The other issue that I thought was of interest is migration into the European Union; indeed, I read the section on migrants on page 13 with some interest. I was filled with a great deal of confidence that the European Parliament and the European Union are on top of the issues.

The Convener: There is a lot of negative rhetoric emerging about the issue, too.

Roderick Campbell: Yes.

The Convener: We will have our MEPs in front of the committee in a few weeks' time, so we can garner any questions that we may have to put to them.

Willie Coffey: I bring to the committee's attention the creative industries item on page 3. Members will see that the European Commission is interested in the preservation of cultural assets, including old films, through digital media.

As you probably know, convener, we have in Scotland two bodies that have substantial and long-standing experience in this area: the first is the Scottish screen archive; the other is the Scan Trust—the Scottish cultural resources access network—which provides digital resources, principally for schools. I simply draw that to members' attention, although I ask that we pass on the briefing to those two organisations, to see whether there might be an opportunity for them to do some work in a European context and to deploy their long-standing expertise in the field.

The Convener: That is an excellent idea.

Hanzala Malik: That is a good point. Glasgow City Council has a film section in its development and regeneration services department, and I am sure that copying the information to it would not go amiss. It has been dealing with Bollywood and Hollywood, as well as various other film industries in Glasgow, so there might also be an opportunity for it.

Willie Coffey: I would be surprised if this was the first such initiative in Europe. Indeed, there must be initiatives under way, so I am interested in knowing what is new about this one. I cannot for a moment imagine that all our European colleagues have just begun to think about the process of digitising their own cultural assets and so on.

If there is any further information on exactly what is behind the work, that would be appreciated, too.

Jamie McGrigor: I refer members to page 18. I do not know whether anyone understands what is meant by this part. It states:

"Taking on board criticisms expressed by MEPs, Mr Juncker ... said that he could agree to the proposals to delete to word 'negotiations' in the title of the enlargement portfolio"—

"portfolio" is spelt wrong—

"as this would mean deluding the EU candidate countries."

What does that mean?

The Convener: You are referring to a Commission press release.

Jamie McGrigor: Yes, but the information has no significance whatsoever. It seems to come out of the blue; it does not inform me about anything. Where did the information come from? Who provides the bulletin?

The Convener: Scotland Europa

Jamie McGrigor: Scotland Europa. It is all very well to put information such as that in, but there is no explanation of what is being talked about.

The Convener: We can give you an off-the-record explanation.

Jamie McGrigor: Oh—you know what the reference means.

The Convener: Yes.

Jamie McGrigor: Right; okay.

The Convener: We will have a wee chat afterwards.

Jamie McGrigor: Okay.

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Willie Coffey: I have a little comment to make about the section on digital skills, which is on page 10. A European Commission report found

"poor digital skills among school pupils".

I would be quite surprised if that is the case. Is there more information that we can get to tell us what the thinking is there? I would imagine that the digital skill level of our youngsters—and certainly in Scotland—is pretty high. Where is the Commission coming from and where does it propose to go on the issue?

The Convener: Perhaps it is an EU-wide measure.

Willie Coffey: I am interested in finding out what the thinking is there, because I do not think that what the report found is the case in Scotland.

The Convener: No.

Hanzala Malik: It might be an idea to seek clarification on which countries are behind and whether we are judged as being behind, too, and, if we are, on what basis. We can then address the issues if need be.

Willie Coffey: Yes.

Hanzala Malik: It is a good point to pick up.

The Convener: Yes, we could investigate that.

I see that no one has any other comments on the bulletin. I want to pick up one issue, which is under the justice and home affairs section on page 12. There is a febrile debate going on at Westminster about opt-ins and opt-outs and what the UK Government will opt back in to. I can provide a wee bit of feedback on a seminar held by the Scottish Parliament during recess—was it a seminar?

Roderick Campbell: It was a summit.

The Convener: That is the word that I was looking for.

Rod and I attended the summit, which was on human trafficking. Its purpose was to create a co-ordinated approach with all the justice officials from across the whole of the UK in order to deal with human trafficking. It was really interesting and an excellent way forward with regard to working together.

A key theme that came out of the summit on the justice and home affairs opt-ins and opt-outs is the impact that any changes to the European arrest warrant would have. Rod, you are probably in a much better position to explain that than I would ever be.

Roderick Campbell: Prosecutors across the board—from the Crown Prosecution Service in England and Wales, the Lord Advocate and representatives from the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland—were all strongly opposed to any suggestion that we should not opt back in to the European arrest warrant.

The other interesting thing about the summit was that representatives from the prosecution service in the Republic of Ireland were present, so it was a British isles event. On issues such as these, you need to look behind just technical boundaries.

The Convener: Indeed.

That was all that I wanted to raise. Alex, do you have any matters to raise?

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I am fine.

The Convener: Okay. Are members happy to direct the bulletin to the relevant committees and to deal with the points that have been raised?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Excellent. We move on to agenda item 3, which we agreed to take in private. I ask that our public gallery is cleared.

10:13

Meeting continued in private until 10:43.

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