



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 9 June 2022

Session 6



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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
14th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 9 June 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Martin Whitfield): Good morning, and welcome to the 14th meeting in 2022 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take in private item 7, which is consideration of correspondence relating to the inquiry on future parliamentary procedures and practices. Are members happy to take that item in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Interests

The Convener: Under our second item, we welcome the return of Alexander Stewart MSP and give him the opportunity to declare any relevant interests.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have no interests to declare, convener. I am delighted to return to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. I look forward to working with you all again.

The Convener: Excellent. It is good to welcome back our boomerang member.

Alexander replaces Tess White MSP. I put formally on the record our thanks for her extensive work on the committee over a relatively short period of time. I hope that the committee will agree to my writing to thank her for her service.

Members indicated agreement.

Cross-Party Group

09:16

The Convener: For our next item, I welcome Katy Clark MSP, who is the potential convener of the proposed cross-party group on Europe. Good morning, Katy. Will you explain the purposes of the group?

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): First, I apologise that I was not in attendance at the previous meeting; I had transportation issues. I am sorry for the inconvenience that that would have caused. I am delighted to be here today, and I hope to persuade you that a cross-party group on Europe should be established. I believe that there is interest in such a group among members and that there is very much the space for the kinds of discussion that it would take part in.

Obviously, on occasion, there would be overlap with other cross-party groups, and I suspect that we may wish to have joint events. However, many of the issues that a cross-party group on Europe would cover—for example, post-Brexit issues and our relationship with the European Union specifically and Europe more generally—will not be covered by other cross-party groups. There is an appetite for the group, and many discussions could take place in it that would be of use and that would not necessarily take place in other cross-party groups.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. Your apology is noted.

Alexander Stewart: As you have indicated in your registration form, there is no doubt that there is a potential need for the group. However, you have also indicated that a number of other groups are in place. Some of those have been there for some time and have created a niche market—for example, those on Germany, colleges and universities, and Poland. On what level do you think you would have co-operation with and support from those other cross-party groups? They may do things that you want to do in a larger area, but their experience and knowledge may be of great use to you as a new group that is trying to establish a remit across Europe as a whole.

Katy Clark: That is an extremely helpful question. The answer will depend partly on the appetite of the cross-party groups in question. Among those people who are currently involved in the work to establish the proposed cross-party group, there is very much a willingness and a desire to work with existing cross-party groups.

To use the example that has been given—education—Erasmus is a massive issue, and the organisations that are already involved in the

proposed cross-party group are disproportionately in the education sector. So, in the early days, that would be a big issue on which we would need to work with other cross-party groups. We would attempt to be very sensitive to the work that is already taking place and to work collaboratively. If another cross-party group was already leading on an issue, that would be an argument that perhaps we should focus on another area.

The post-Brexit issues are potentially massive, and I have no doubt that there will be a continuing debate about those. For example, some people are arguing that there should be a softer form of Brexit and that we should rejoin the single market. Those debates might or might not become big debates over time, and I would hope that there would be a range of views within the proposed cross-party group—there should not be a presumption that there would be one view. I suspect that we would want to have a range of views and to have that discussion. That is the nature of a cross-party group, and I hope that that is how the proposed group would develop.

The Convener: I want to pursue that point with you, Katy, with regard to the other, more country-specific CPGs. Is the intention that the proposed group would offer a more pan-European view of problems that could perhaps feed in to and assist those other CPGs, instead of acting as a stand-alone group? You mentioned Erasmus, which, in a sense, lends itself to a pan-European view. Therefore, instead of being the interfering expert on a country, you intend to offer room for European expertise to come together to feed into that work.

Katy Clark: Yes, that is correct. For example, the cross-party group on Poland is quite active, including on the rights of EU citizens. Clearly, that is an issue for a number of cross-party groups, particularly the specific European country groups. I hope that the proposed CPG on Europe might bring some of that work together. I do not think that it would undermine any of the work that is being done by any specific group. The cross-party group on Poland will be very focused on the Polish community, whereas the cross-party group on Europe would look at issues on a pan-European basis, as you say. However, the issues are basically the same or very similar in relation to every country. There are also a number of countries for which there is no cross-party group, and the proposed cross-party group on Europe might pick up some issues for specific communities that are not covered by any of the stand-alone European country groups.

I suspect that, like most cross-party groups, we will react to events. The agenda will be dictated by the issues on which we think there is a desire and an appetite for a debate. From my perspective

and, I think, from the perspective of all the members listed as having attended meetings so far, there is very much a wish to work collaboratively and to look at ways of doing that. Sometimes, the problem is that we do not know that somebody else is already doing work on a particular matter, but it is our job to find out exactly what is happening and to ensure that we do not undermine the work of any other group.

The Convener: That is helpful. Thank you.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Hi, Katy. The membership of the proposed group does not include a representative from the Conservative Party. Is there a particular reason for that?

Katy Clark: No, there is no particular reason for that. We would welcome representation from that party. As I said, it is important that there is an understanding and recognition of the fact that there might be a range of views within the group. I suspect that there is probably already a range of views on many issues among the members who are listed, and that range might expand. It is a case of grappling with the issues and having the discussion in a way that is less heated than might be the case in the chamber—a genuine exchange of ideas and information. I hope that the group will be a forum in which that can happen.

Some members of the proposed group are very keen that we use it as a vehicle to find out more about what is happening in the European Union and to foster direct relations with European politicians and parts of the various European structures—not just the European Union—to find out more about what they are doing with regard to guest speakers and other events that would provide information and a better understanding of what is happening in other parts of Europe.

The group's focus will be partly determined by what the members of the group want to do and the events that they want, but the group will be pan-European rather than focused on any specific issue. If a lot of work was already happening in the Parliament or in another cross-party group on one particular area, that would be an argument for our focusing on something different. I imagine that that would be how it would develop. We might well have some joint events, which I hope would be successful.

The Convener: I note that the number of MSPs who have indicated an intention to join the group meets the requirement for a cross-party group.

There are no further questions. I will refrain from asking the primary school teacher's question of, "How are you defining Europe?"

The committee will consider whether to accord recognition to the proposed group in the next

agenda item, and the clerks will notify you of the outcome in due course. Thank you for attending today.

Katy Clark: I am very grateful. Thank you.

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is consideration of whether to accord recognition to the proposed cross-party group on Europe. Do members have any comments?

Sue Webber wants to speak. Before she does, I am appalled at myself for forgetting that Edward Mountain sent his apologies because other parliamentary duties are taking up his time today. I welcome Sue as his substitute and apologise for not doing that before greeting Alexander Stewart.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con) (Committee Substitute): That is okay. It almost feels as though I am a permanent member.

I have a serious concern about overlap. I know that some of the content that was mentioned, such as what Erasmus+ might be, will be forthcoming. I am concerned about whether there is a legitimate need for the group, given that it might overlap with other cross-party groups whose themes are the same. I have real concerns about that.

The Convener: Thank you. Are there any other comments?

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): It is reasonable for Sue Webber to mention the possibility of overlap. I listened to Ms Clark's exchange with members, and I took from it that a cross-party group on Europe could take a more strategic or thematic approach than those taken by cross-party groups on individual countries. It is important that the cross-party group on Europe is aware of that, and I think that it is—that is what I took from the exchange.

That could be beneficial to the Parliament. I would be concerned if the group sought to duplicate or overlap with the work of specific, discrete cross-party groups on individual countries. There seems to be a strategic fit for a more pan-European group, which I think was your line of questioning, convener.

It is right that Sue Webber raises those concerns, but I think that it would, on balance, be right to approve the cross-party group.

Alexander Stewart: I acknowledge the fact that there will be overlap, but I do not think that that precludes the group from progressing, because I think that it will find its way and its opportunity.

Depending on the role that group members see for themselves, the overlap might happen but they might wish to take a wider view because other groups are country specific. An issue in Germany or Poland could be taken further in looking at

Nordic areas or the south of Europe, and that might provide opportunities to bring in experts. I think that there is a role for the group.

The EU itself also has a role. The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee and others have meetings and discussions with the European Commission, as do consuls general. There is a much stronger link to all of that, so I am sympathetic to the view that there may be an opportunity for a group of this nature to get some kind of support mechanism.

As Katy Clark says, the membership would be wide and varied, and I have no doubt that, if the group comes to pass, a Conservative member may wish to participate in it. I am sympathetic to the role of the group and can see an opportunity for it, as long as the definitions are strict as to what it would do and how it would be managed.

09:30

The Convener: That is helpful. Do members have any other comments? My only comment is that it is not the place of the committee to be the arbiter or referee between CPGs, but I share Bob Doris's view and was reassured by Katy Clark's assurances of the intention to find out about and work collegiately with other CPGs. I was also taken by the fact that some countries in Europe, however you define it, do not have a specific CPG. There is also the question of the EU, as Alexander Stewart said.

Are we content to grant recognition to the proposed CPG?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Sue Webber: I am not content, convener. I wonder whether that can be noted.

The Convener: I absolutely respect that position, Sue, and the *Official Report* will show that. I am grateful for that.

I presume that the clerks will pass the message on to the now-approved CPG. It is now my intention to move the—

Bob Doris: My apologies, convener, but this might be the most appropriate time to put this on the record. There has been a pattern of cross-party groups coming to the committee—almost like a conveyor belt—and being approved. It is helpful for the committee if there is a degree of challenge and discussion in relation to the approval of cross-party groups. I want to put that on the record, because I have sat on the committee long enough to know that it seems like a procession of cross-party groups, although there has always been concern over their proliferation in the Parliament. Sue Webber and I might have a different perspective on this particular group, but it does the

committee a service to be a bit more robust and challenging on the fit of cross-party groups more generally in the Parliament.

The Convener: That is very helpful. Bob Doris is right to say that one of the intentions of our workstream from the start was to review the number of CPGs and related processes once we were aware of how it was panning out in this parliamentary session. We will probably be heading to that stage soon after the recess.

I am grateful to Bob for putting that on the record, but I have never known CPGs to be nodded through without investigation. It is absolutely Sue Webber's right to express concern, and she has exercised that right; it then becomes a committee decision. I do not know whether that is a warning to potential CPG conveners out there, but it is not a foregone conclusion that one person's good idea, even with cross-party support, will get through without proper and judicious investigation of the group's intentions.

With that, I move the meeting into private.

09:33

Meeting continued in private until 11:00.

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