

EDUCATION IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

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The first few months of Scotland's first Parliament in 300 years have seen the establishment of two Education Committees, one for Education, Culture and Sport and one for Enterprise and LifeLong Learning as well as debates on issues affecting schooling and concerns relating to further/higher education.

In terms of schooling, the most pressing issue has been teachers' pay and conditions of service which has seen political parties siding with or wishing to abandon the Scottish Joint Negotiating committee (SJNC) and their proposals. For further and higher education the key issue has been the imminent (October 2000) establishment of the University for Industry (UFI), a development which has led to many MSPs proposing the headquarters should be sited in their constituencies.

TEACHERS' PAY AND CONDITIONS

The debate on Teachers' Pay and Conditions (30.9.1999) was opened for the Opposition by Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) the SNP spokesperson on Education. She drew attention to the rejection by the teaching profession of the offer from the Convention of Local Authorities (COSLA), this 'being without doubt the most serious issue in education at the present ... (as it) ... has the potential to derail every other educational initiative that the Executive has in the pipeline'.(col. 878) She noted that the ministerial statement from the Minister for Children and Education (Sam Galbraith) to establish a Committee of Inquiry into Teachers' Pay and Conditions precluded a parliamentary debate which she had hoped for as part of the 'normal democratic process'.(col. 878) In addition, Ms Sturgeon argued, the reason for an education debate was to draw attention to the legitimacy of the teachers' rejection of the COSLA offer and to the fact that the Executive, the third party - with observer status - at the SJNC has continued to support the COSLA offer and to pressurise the teaching unions into acceptance.(col. 879)

It was noted that the pay offer, £187m to local authorities pay bill for teachers by 2001-2, being 14% over three years, failed to address the 16% decline in teachers' earnings in comparison with other graduates over the past 30 years. Ms Sturgeon argued that 4.7% pa over three years totally failed to match the expected 5% average annual increase in earnings. Further, whilst the pay offer was £187m, the comprehensive spending review provision for teachers' pay over these three years was £120m, leaving a shortfall of £67m, only £51m being made up from efficiency savings resulting from management structure changes, class sizes and diversion of money from the flagship excellence fund, as well as £8m from Executive sources, leaving a funding gap of £8m.(col. 883)

But perhaps the most worrying aspect of the COSLA offer, Ms Sturgeon continued, concerned conditions of service: the management structure in schools, teachers' working hours and class sizes. The proposal to abolish the posts of principal teachers, assistant principal teachers and senior teachers - the middle management of schools - and to create a new post of 'professional leader', a vague, poorly defined and certainly, at 8,000, fewer in number than the 11,000-plus existing posts at these middle management levels, showed little regard for the career prospects of teachers.(col. 882) Further, as Murray Tosh went on to note, the professional leader could be placed in charge of the 5-14 groupings so that he/she would lead curricular

change and cross-curricular teams of collegiate teachers in the preparation of their very diverse subjects - an impossible and unfair task, he suggested.(col. 901)

In addition to the impact of structural changes and extended hours of service, teachers would be required to teach composite class sizes of 30 rather than the current maximum of 25. This, it was suggested, would raise £20m and would affect 100,000 children in Scotland.(col. 882) Indeed, as Fiona McLeod (SNP) noted, currently, there are nearly 3,000 composite classes in primary schools in Scotland (26% of all classes) with between 21 and 25 pupils(col 897) and although the minister asserts that there is no educational reason why composite classes should be any different from non-composite classes (Official Report, Education, Culture and Sport Committee 8 September 1999; c 44) there are others (teachers, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and COSLA) who support a smaller size for composite classes. (col. 898) Ms McLeod suggested that this proposal, having little support from anyone in education, resulting in fewer teachers, producing a saving of £20m, seemed an ill-thought through 'mess'.(col. 898)

However, Mr Sam Galbraith, the Minister for Children and Education, noted that local authorities had budgeted to spend £2,715b on education in 2000-2001, an increase of 8.1% on 1999-2000, with more than half the money found in the comprehensive spending review (£377m) targeted through the excellence fund, and thereby directly contributing to raising standards by providing support and assistance to children and teachers in the classroom and by encouraging ever-greater professionalism - within a flexible system of professional conditions from management and teaching staff. To that end, he announced two forum meetings each year with participants drawn from all levels of teaching staff and from all areas of Scotland.(col. 888) With assistance from the National Education Research Forum (NERF) each forum will review items of current interest, to reach a view about the implications for further policy developments.

In addition to this reappraisal of professionalism, Sam Galbraith announced the end of the SJNC as the statutory authority determining professional conditions of service for Scottish teachers and reaffirmed his commitment to the establishment of an independent committee of inquiry (announced on 22 September) to make recommendations upon teachers pay and conditions. This occurred before the result of the teachers' ballot on COSLA's offer, which as Dennis Canavan (Indp) noted, was rejected by 98% of teachers.(col. 905) [Whereas 33,676 people voted no, only 656 voted yes.(col. 908)] This was met with some consternation by various MSPs, all of whom noted that the composition of the Committee of Inquiry did not include practising teachers, merely two headteachers, whose focus, remit and concerns might be quite different to those of their staff.

The Minister, however, reaffirmed his view that the "need for modern and professional conditions for teachers is clear and widely accepted and is an essential part of our wider strategy of developing Scottish school education so that we can deliver our best for our children, which the existing negotiating machinery cannot deliver."(col. 890)

In discussion, both Brian Monteith and Bill Aitken, Conservatives, noted that the approach of the Government to the teachers' dispute was a model exercise in how not to run employee relations: as the third education minister in two years, he had incited teachers with talk of the end of SJNC and the establishment of the committee of inquiry.(col. 892) Mr Monteith urged the minister to use the 1980 Education (Scotland) Act and act decisively for arbitration, through the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).(col. 895) And Mr Aitken suggested that arbitration, and even an independent pay review, might be a way through the 'chaos' of the present.(col. 919)

This approach was questioned by Mr Jamie Stone, a Liberal Democrat, who

reminded members that Mr Monteith's previous leader, Lady Thatcher, was not noted for her support for ACAS and he wondered why that organisation was now being centred-staged - especially when the teachers he had polled seem to be worried about the remit and composition of the new committee of inquiry.(col. 896)

Members from the Conservative, SNP, Independent, Green and Socialist parties were not alone in recognising the depth of the problem facing Scottish education at this present time. As Sylvia Jackson (Labour) noted, 98% of Scottish teachers voting against the pay offer, did mean that a new approach was needed. But she questioned whether the problem was purely financial as, she argued, the SNP would suggest. Rather, she drew attention to the intense work load produced through the 5-14 programme, higher still development programme, changes in assessment requirements as well as problems which result from limited supplies of materials.(col. 909) Given all these problems for and pressures on teachers, she urged recognition of the need for a new negotiating mechanism so that teachers' long-standing concerns could be properly addressed.

The debate concluded with a recognition by all participants that the situation was urgent. On all issues - pay scales, professionalism, management and structure, conditions of service, composite class sizes and the machinery with which to engage all players (ACAS, committee of inquiry or even the SJNC) - there was a need for the government to move fast to resolve the conflict. As a number of MSPs noted, this is an Executive with education as top priority (Peacock col. 930), committed to negotiation, accommodation and discussion; these are valuable attributes which will have to be seen to come into force in the very near future.

SCOTTISH UNIVERSITY FOR INDUSTRY

The future will also see the establishment of a Scottish University for Industry (UFI), a company limited by guarantee with charitable status, based in the development team of Scottish Enterprise.(col. 154) Nicol Stephen (Deputy Minister for Lifelong Learning) proposed (during a debate on 28.10.99) that such an institution be supported, given the Executive's commitment to the creation of a culture of lifelong learning. He announced a £16million investment over three years for the UFI (col. 156) and noted that 'Scotland's future competitiveness will be governed by our ability to innovate and to use new skills to maximise the potential of the new technology. The development of a knowledge-driven economy requires a shift in our mindset, greater receptiveness to new methods, and flair, determination and commitment to serve ever-changing customer demands.'(col. 152)

He went on to note that with rapid social and economic change, we now see the end of a 'job for life'; instead there are more flexible and fluid career patterns, with individuals, many with no formal qualifications, having to take responsibility for upgrading their own skills and knowledge.(col. 152) The Scottish UFI, he argued, a radical new initiative, will help to create economic benefits for Scotland by connecting people and businesses, to support improvements in skills and training and to offer the learning that people need at the right time and at the right cost. (col. 152)

The UFI will not provide any training or education itself, as a conventional university, but will be a 'broker' or 'gateway' explaining (via the web, in the main) what learning is available in which learning centres, what qualifications can be acquired and how to access such accredited learning materials and courses.

Mr Stephen urged members to recognise that the shape and structure of learning in the future will be very different; IT developments in interactive materials will be at the forefront in the provisions of centres and resources, and will form the base on which accredited providers will communicate with each other and with learners. Importantly, although the Scottish UFI will not own or run any learning centres itself, it will accredit a network operated by a wide range of providers - perhaps 1,000

learning centres throughout Scotland.(col. 154)

In debate, John Swinney (SNP) welcomed the concept of a UFI and noted the commitment of the SNP (col. 156) to the principle of widening access to education and learning, notably through the use of technology, particularly in rural areas and in 'non-traditional locations'.(col. 157) He welcomed, also, the appointment of Frank Pignatelli, with a distinguished record in education and learning, as Chief Executive to lead with energy and dynamism.(col. 158)

However, he wished to record four main points: the need to be more responsive to the demands for learning from the communities of Scotland so that courses already operated through traditional colleges and universities are not replicated; the need to state clearly what provisions will become part of the 'added value' of the UFI; thirdly, the need to explain the funding situation, which appears to be through the national lottery new opportunities fund, a UK-determined programme outwith direct ministerial or Scottish control; and finally, the impact anticipated upon the Scottish economy and the learning environment. (col. 159)

As with the SNP, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats also supported the concept of the UFI. Mr Monteith (Conservative) noted that the UFI is driven less by ideology than by technology and, therefore, may hold hope for those adults unwilling to return to formal education centres.(col. 160) It will also be important, he added, to delineate what the Scottish UFI can do for industry, especially as there is a UFI for the rest of the UK. He was concerned to ensure that there are useful roles for both UFIs.(col. 162)

George Lyon (Lib Dem), while welcoming the development, noted that there needs to be a clear demarcation of financial responsibility especially beyond the start-up money.(col. 163) He was pleased that the small business community was brought into the UFI equation, after all, 98.8% of all businesses in Scotland employ less than 50 people and supply almost 50% of the Scottish work force. Further, he drew attention to a Scottish Enterprise survey which showed that '80% of small businesses recognised the need to invest in training but 42% said that lack of information of how to access that training was a stumbling block'.(col. 163) He, therefore, suggested that one of the roles of the UFI might be to encourage small businesses to invest in people.

The nature of business (large and small), labour, training and education formed the remainder of the debate, with useful contributions from many MSPs. Elaine Thomson (Labour) summarised many issues when she recorded that, 'the knowledge that is in people's heads will add to the value of businesses...The university will give employers and employees a single source from which to identify suitable training and training providers. Today's labour market has changed..(with) people having an average of eight different jobs in their working lives..(which) may be in completely different sectors of the employment market, and require different skill sets.' (col. 164). Similar views were expressed by Duncan McNeil (Labour) when he stated that 'we live and work in an ever-changing global economy. We have rejected the low-pay, low productivity sweat shop vision of the Tories in favour of a high-value knowledge economy. There is broad agreement and common ground between employers and the work force that we must move on.'" (col. 167) Like Elaine Thomson, who concluded by adding that 'lifelong learning is not an optional extra: it is essential'(col. 165), Mr McNeil argued that the success of any company 'increasingly depends on the quality of its human resources .. if they are not learning, they are not earning.'(col. 167)

In that context, it is not surprising that no MSPs disagreed with the establishment of the UFI and only a few noted any contention - and that only with which constituency would be fortunate to house the headquarters of this important innovation.