

To: Members of the House Committee

From: Table Office

Date: 22 January 2003

CROSS PARTY GROUPS

1. At a previous meeting the Committee asked officials to consider a scheme for the registration of cross-party groups. This paper describes the arrangements in Scotland and Westminster and invites the Committee to consider how it would like to proceed.

2. At present the National Assembly has very simple rules on all-party groups (Annex A). Because these groups are not recognised by Standing Orders there is no attempt to regulate them and they do not receive any support from the Assembly in terms of staffing or budget.

3. In Scotland there are elaborate and stringent rules to regulate the establishment and operation of cross party groups (Annex B). These include strict restrictions on the use of Parliamentary resources and a requirement for groups to meet in public. The system is regulated by the Standards Committee. This policy of complete openness arose because these groups might be seen to gain some influence within the Parliament. Therefore it was felt to be imperative that the groups operate with good practice and that their activities are transparent. The Standards Committee is currently undertaking a review of the operation of the system following concerns that some of the groups are being driven increasingly by outside interest groups and that some have received significant amounts of financial sponsorship.

4. At Westminster all-party groups are regulated in two ways:

- a Register to record which groups are recognised by the House, who their officers are and what assistance they receive from outside Parliament; and
- an Approved List of those groups which are allowed to use the House's facilities and status.

The administration of the Register is overseen by the Committee on Standards and Privileges whereas the Administration Committee (which advises the House of Commons Commission) oversees the Approved List. In practice both the Register and the Approved List are compiled and maintained by the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

5. It would be possible to establish a register of cross party groups in the Assembly so that their membership and funding are transparent, and to control the groups' use of Assembly facilities and status. The first step would be to establish a clear definition of cross party groups and rules for how they

should conduct their activities. The Committee will wish to consider whether it would prefer to include the definition and rules on cross party groups within Standing Orders or to rely on guidance endorsed by an Assembly Resolution. The Committee may also wish to consult the Standards Committee if it proposes to make compliance with the registration and other arrangements for cross party groups subject to the Assembly's standards regime.

6. The introduction of a system of registration will inevitably bring with it increases in staff and other costs but which we can't quantify at present. However, it is almost certain that the additional workload could not be accommodated within existing Presiding Office staff resources.

Recommendation

7. The Committee is invited to consider whether or not they would like officials to undertake further work and to produce estimated costings and more detailed proposals for a registration scheme.