

Email correspondence to the SPPA Committee regarding the remit of the EHRC Committee

From: Rebecca Marek

Sent: 29 June 2016 12:13

To: SPPA Committee

Subject: Concerns regarding the expansion of the remit of the Equal Opportunities Committee

Dear Mr. Wands,

Proposed Extension of the Remit of the Equal Opportunities Committee

We are writing to you as clerk of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee on behalf of our respective equalities organisations in regards to proposals to extend the remit of the Equal Opportunities Committee to include human rights, as suggested by the Presiding Officer, and to change the name of the Equal Opportunities Committee to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, as suggested by the Convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee.

While we are entirely supportive of the proposed replacement of 'equal opportunities' with 'equalities,' we have significant concerns about the proposal to add human rights to the remit of the Equal Opportunities Committee. Matters relating to human rights are substantive and far-reaching and are likely to include topics such as the Human Rights Act and the current debate on replacing this with a British Bill of Rights, issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees, and Scotland's relationship to international human rights bodies and treaties. While we fully acknowledge and appreciate the importance of these and other human rights issues, we believe that the Equal Opportunities Committee would simply not have enough time to offer proper consideration to both equalities and human rights issues.

Indeed, we believe that, despite the best intentions of previous Equal Opportunities Committees, there has often not been adequate time to conduct in-depth inquiries related to every protected characteristic due to time constraints and parliamentary timetables. Any expansion of the committee's remit, in our mind, would risk having equalities issues further superseded and not given appropriate time and consideration. This is a critical time for equalities and we want to ensure that the primary focus of the Equal Opportunities Committee remains robust domestic scrutiny of equalities issues.

We are further concerned that this significant change is being proposed without any consultation with equality groups. For many organisations, including ours, engagement with this committee is the primary avenue through which we raise and address equalities issues within the Scottish Parliament. It is worrying that many equalities groups are unaware of this proposal and its potential effects.

Equalities and human rights are related but distinct issues and we would hesitate to promote further conflation of the two, though we fully recognise and support the need to have a formal structure in which human rights issues can be discussed and debated within the Scottish Parliament.

Consideration should be given to the creation of a new committee to focus solely on human rights, to appointing human rights rapporteurs to existing parliamentary committees, or to engaging other relevant committees in the deliberation of human rights issues. Given the

significant concern surrounding the Human Rights Act, it may even be appropriate to create a time-limited committee dedicated solely to this matter.

If, despite our very real concerns, the proposal to expand the remit of the Equal Opportunities Committee is still to go ahead, we would ask that the frequency of meetings and the clerking support for the committee be increased to allow for appropriate consideration of equalities and human rights matters. Furthermore, we would also call for a review of the changes within a year to determine whether there has been a negative impact on consideration of equalities issues.

We hope this letter has called to your attention several concerns regarding the expansion of the remit for the Equal Opportunities Committee and would be extremely grateful if you would consider meaningful consultation with equalities organisations before a final decision is taken. Furthermore, we would be happy to meet with you to discuss these issues in further detail.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Jatin Haria, **Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights**

Colin Lee, **CEMVO Scotland**

Emma Ritch, **Engender**

Anna Ritchie Allan, **Close the Gap**

Sandra Deslandes-Clark, **SEMPERscotland**

Rebecca Marek

Policy and Parliamentary Officer
Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights