



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Allegations Arising from a BBC NI
'Spotlight' Programme Aired on 3 July 2013 of
Impropriety or Irregularity Relating to NIHE-managed
Contracts and Consideration of any Resulting Actions:
Briefing from the Minister for Social Development

13 March 2014

Mr McCausland: No, Chairman. I'm quite content that, in your letter, there were two questions that were raised. I'm happy to respond to those, but individually and in response to questions but not — . I have no initial statement to really make.

The Chairperson: OK, thank you, Minister, for that. OK, so if I could just, I mean, bringing all obviously members in to question. Just, I've a couple of questions here initially just to start us off.

You said in the letter to myself on 10 March — this is obviously on behalf of the Committee — that the meeting of 28 June was to discuss your response to the letter received from 'Spotlight' on 27 June 2013 requesting — and this is your words:

"requesting that I consider an on camera interview. The letter ... which I signed and which was issued on the afternoon of 28 June would appear to be the result of that meeting."

The letter — . Could I draw your attention then to the letter in tab A of the inquiry pack? Sorry, I'll give you a minute to get that. Tab A of the inquiry pack.

Mr McCausland: Oh, yes. Right, OK, got that.

The Chairperson: I mean — . I put this because there would be a fair degree of importance attached to the conduct and the content, and so on, of this particular meeting on 28 June. As I said, you had said in your letter that the meeting was to discuss an on-camera interview. I draw to your attention the letter in tab A of the inquiry pack, and could you point out anywhere in that letter where you refer to an on-camera interview? It is a lengthy enough letter, but it does not refer at any time to an on-camera interview.

Mr McCausland: Well, I don't have the letter immediately to hand but I will look that out and then respond accordingly, Chairman. That's the letter of 28 June to 'Spotlight'.

I think it's important to remember, Mr Chairman, this is one of a series of letters that went backwards and forwards between myself and the BBC at that time. The meeting on the 28th was on a Friday afternoon, a day when I would normally be in my constituency office. I must have come into the Department especially for that meeting, although, to be quite honest, it's quite a long time ago now. Nine or 10 months. Thank you. Like many other things that have happened nine or 10 months ago, I can't remember the exact detail of it. I can't even recall the content of the conversation. The presumption is that it was about that matter because they were pressing us at that point about an on-camera interview.

The Chairperson: But, again, I say to you it's a lengthy letter, so it clearly, the meeting discussed more than an on-camera interview, I would suggest, given the response. It is a lengthy letter, so, and, in your response to us, you didn't refer to an on-camera interview, so it seems a bit unusual that you would refer to an on-camera interview when you don't refer to it at all in your letter, which was a lengthy letter back to the BBC.

Mr McCausland: First of all, I have said that I can't recall the detailed nature of that conversation that afternoon when I was in the office. It is 10 months ago. The letter is to the BBC; it is there in front of members: that is as far as I can basically go.

The Chairperson: Could you give any explanation as to why there were no persons in that room, according to the list of attendees, who would be advising on such matters as on-camera interviews?

Mr McCausland: I think it is important also, if members, including yourself, have read the response that I made there, in annex A I do say:

"I understand that the diary entry records as Subject 'Meeting with Officials.'"

So, that was in the diary as the subject of the meeting or the nature of the meeting, rather.

"However, I have now had sight of the documents, forwarded to the Committee on 26 February 2014"

— that is various drafts and so on —

"which appear to indicate that the meeting was to discuss my response to a letter received from Spotlight on 27 June ... requesting that I consider an on camera interview."

You would have the letter of 27 June from the BBC, in which it is stated that they were requesting an on-camera interview. The only conclusion anyone could reach, I think, is that:

"The letter to Spotlight, which I signed and which was issued on the afternoon"

— late on the afternoon —

"of 28 June, would appear to be the result of the meeting."

That is what I said in my response to you.

The Chairperson: I understand that, but it doesn't deal with the question of why there was no reference to an on-camera interview in the letter.

Mr McCausland: Well, I wasn't going to undertake an on-camera interview.

The Chairperson: Could you tell me, Minister — again, we are all around a long time in politics, dealing with media issues — given the importance, and you said yourself, there was a range of letters back and forth between yourself and the BBC or at least the Department and the BBC, according to that list of attendees there was nobody at that meeting who would have been a communications consultant or a PRO or a press person, so, if the meeting was, in your recollection, to deal with an on-camera interview why there would not have been someone there from the Department or your own colleagues for that matter to advise on media issues? It was a media issue in your recollection.

Mr McCausland: All I can say is what I've said in there. As you are aware, I am under affirmation and therefore I want to be very particular and precise, as I would normally be anyway, in what I say. I have been advised that my diary indicates the meeting was to include Will Haire, Jim Wilkinson, Michael Sands and Susan McCarty. Whether or not someone else attended from the press section or popped in or out I couldn't recall. I said that I can't recall the details of the meeting. I would have in the course of a day many meetings, and this was one of many, so we are talking about something nine or 10 months ago.

The Chairperson: That may well be true, but would there be that many meetings that you would be discussing what could be potentially quite a significant and controversial —

Mr McCausland: Well, Chairman, I have said I cannot recall the details of the meeting, and that's as far as I can go.

The Chairperson: I am aware of what you said, and that is why I am probing the question and probing the responses.

Mr McCausland: Well, if you can't recall something, you can't recall it.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Wilson: Chairman, can you remember how many people were at this meeting five months ago when you were the chairman?

The Chairperson: I could actually go back and check before I would make a comment about it, that's what I would suggest. *[Interruption.]* I am going to get back on that. I am sorry, I don't want cross-arguments here. I will bring all the members in, obviously, as they indicate to speak. I have a number already indicated to speak.

Minister, going back to the question of your understanding, as you have repeated here, of the nature of the meeting on 16 April, you had suggested to the BBC that their allegations were "scurrilous accusations", that their information — your sources — you were concerned about their sources and so on and so forth and that you would be taking legal action. Subsequent to, certainly recently, you have

come back to the Committee and basically said that you had inadvertently misled the Committee; I think that is your words. Was there legal action initiated against the BBC?

Mr Wilson: Chairman, can I just ask something before you ask that question? Maybe you would remind us of the terms of reference of this Committee and whether or not we were investigating the glazing contract or whether we're investigating whether or not legal action was taken against the BBC. I can't ever remember the terms of reference mentioning —

The Chairperson: We are not actually —

Mr Wilson: Maybe if you would read out the terms of reference, it would —

The Chairperson: Well, I won't do that.

Mr Wilson: All I'm saying is this. All I'm saying is this: if we are going to have an inquiry, let's make sure that the inquiry sticks to the terms of reference that this Committee has agreed and not because you don't get a result in one line, you decide to add something else in.

The Chairperson: No, we're not doing that at all. In fact —

Mr Wilson: Well, maybe, let's just, before we proceed down this route —

The Chairperson: Well I — sorry Sammy —

Mr Wilson: I don't understand, I don't understand some of the issues — if we can bring in every Tom, Dick and Harry, kitchen-sink stuff, then, we'll just ask him anything. But, if we're going to stick to the terms of the inquiry, let's stick to the terms of the inquiry. That would be helpful.

The Chairperson: Actually, that is what we're doing, actually. We have done that rigidly actually.

Mr Wilson: Well, what part of the terms of the inquiry referred to legal action against the BBC?

The Chairperson: We are dealing with:

"Allegations that the Committee was misled by the Minister for Social Development over his decision to seek a review of the specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing."

We're not investigating any particular contract.

Mr Wilson: So, I assume that the line that you're taking on this is that the Minister said that he would be taking legal action against BBC — whether he has or not, I haven't a clue — but that is not, quite clearly, that is not, from what you read out there, part of the terms of this inquiry.

The Chairperson: It is in the terms —

Mr Wilson: No, Chairman, with all due —

The Chairperson: Sorry, it is, Sammy.

Mr Wilson: Read it out again.

The Chairperson: Excuse me.

Mr Wilson: No, read it out again.

The Chairperson: OK:

"Allegations that the Committee was misled by the Minister for Social Development" —

Mr Wilson: Over what?

The Chairperson:

— *"over his decision to seek a review of the specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing."*

Mr Wilson: Over his review. Exactly.

The Chairperson: There was a lot to the inquiry, Sammy.

Mr Wilson: So, then, stick to that.

The Chairperson: Excuse me.

Mr Wilson: Stick to that.

The Chairperson: Excuse me.

Mr Wilson: Stick to that.

The Chairperson: Excuse me, Mr Wilson. Excuse me. I'm chairing this inquiry.

Mr Wilson: You're not chairing it very well.

The Chairperson: This inquiry has been conducted very fairly —

Mr Wilson: You're not chairing it very well. You're just wandering all around the place looking for something to have a go at.

The Chairperson: Excuse me, Mr Wilson. You will have all the opportunity, like every other member around this table, to ask all of the questions. We are sticking to the terms of the inquiry. We have done so since day one. And, as proof of that, there's not one person who has been a witness in this inquiry has either been making an allegation of unfair treatment. I have rigidly — rigidly — stuck to the procedural fairness principle underpinning this inquiry. Now, there are terms of reference for this inquiry. We're sticking to them. If any witness feels that that is being abused, then they will have the opportunity to challenge that, and that's what they will all have for as long as it takes.

Mr Wilson: No.

The Chairperson: That is the bottom line.

Mr Wilson: We should all rigidly adhere to that. I guarantee that, if I were to ask questions which were outside the terms of reference, you would, as Chairman, bring me to heel about it. I am bringing you to heel about it because of the terms of reference you've read out: whether the Committee was misled in relation to the review of the glazing contract. That's what — well, what are you asking questions then about —

The Chairperson: Sorry —

Mr Wilson: — legal action being taken against the BBC?

The Chairperson: First of all —

Mr Allister: But, Chairman —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Jim. One second.

Mr F McCann: It's part of the evidence.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Fra. Can I have a wee second? First of all, Sammy Wilson, there is nobody in this room taking anybody to heel — nobody — neither me, nor you or anybody else. This inquiry will be conducted under the terms of reference of the inquiry. It will be conducted under the legal remit which allows us to do that and, in fact, compels us to do that. That's what we're doing. These are not easy issues to be dealing with. We all accept that. We all understand it. We're all people who are working together on a regular basis. I did a meeting with the Minister on Monday. I reported that to the members early on. Do I feel comfortable having to do this? No. But it has to be done. We're pursuing — the Minister came here —

Mr Wilson: It has to be done properly.

The Chairperson: And it will be done properly.

Mr Wilson: Well, it's not.

The Chairperson: Any witness to this inquiry will have ample opportunity to challenge, and I hope that they feel free to do that. I have made it very clear to every person who has given evidence to this Committee that they have every opportunity when they finish their evidence, during their evidence, after their evidence has been given, if they feel that I've done wrong, then they will have every opportunity to challenge that. I will stand over my conduct of the chairing of this meeting. So, there is nobody bringing anybody to heel in here. This is a professional Committee doing a statutorily based inquiry. We have a responsibility to probe. There are gaps in evidence. There are gaps in memory. I think it's appropriate that we pursue the questions that, we feel, are appropriate as long as they're within the terms of reference.

Mr Clarke: The difficulty there but, Chair, is: your understanding of the terms of references —

Mr F McCann: I have to say —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Trevor, there's other members —

Mr Clarke: — and our understanding of the terms of reference is entirely different. I have to say from the outset I said that you had a biased opinion. You brought your bias to the very first meeting in terms of this investigation.

The Chairperson: That's, that's —. You've made that allegation.

Mr Clarke: And your bias is continuing today.

The Chairperson: I'm sorry but, if you're going to disrupt the meeting, I will adjourn the meeting.

Mr Allister: Chairman, could I say, it's quite clear that some members — some of the DUP members — have come this morning to be the human shield in respect of the Minister and are raising all sorts of bogus —

Mr Wilson: But we've come, we have come, to make sure you give him a —

The Chairperson: Sammy Wilson —

Mr Wilson: That's what we've come to do.

The Chairperson: Sorry. Sorry. Sorry, gentlemen. Jim, sorry.

Mr Allister: They're raising all sorts of bogus issues to try to be that human shield for the Minister.

Mr Clarke: Look at the halo over Jim's head, like. He's just Mr Perfect there.

The Chairperson: Jim, sorry a wee second, and I appreciate you're trying to — if we don't conduct this inquiry under the guidance of the Chair, I'll adjourn this inquiry this morning.

Mr Clarke: All's we're saying is keep it under the terms of reference.

The Chairperson: We are sticking to the terms of reference, but I'm making the point I will adjourn. Every member here will have the opportunity in order when they request to speak. Every single member. I've said it to you before, Trevor. There are members here who are here now who weren't during the discussions members of this Committee, which agreed the terms of reference. Go back and read the terms of reference. Study the terms of reference.

Mr Wilson: You've just read them out; and doesn't mention BBC.

The Chairperson: That is not all the terms of reference.

Mr Clarke: And I was there at the time of the terms of reference.

The Chairperson: And that's fair enough. Some members weren't.

Mr Clarke: And I remember we disputed it for quite a long time —

The Chairperson: I am making that point, Trevor. I am making a point.

Mr Clarke: — to get an agreement in terms of what the terms of reference were —

The Chairperson: I am making a point.

Mr Clarke: And they are broad enough and you're broadening them even further.

Mr F McCann: This is a distraction.

The Chairperson: Trevor, if people think they're going to here to disrupt the meeting, it's not going to be allowed to happen. It won't happen because I will adjourn this meeting. OK. Mickey Brady.

Mr Brady: Thanks, Chair. I think a bit of objectivity, rather than subjectivity, might be applied here.

Mr Wilson: It would be a good idea.

Mr Brady: And a bit of common sense coming from the members opposite.

The Chairperson: Please, just stick to the questions that people want to ask.

Mr Brady: Minister, a few questions. In her evidence to the Committee on 9 January 2014, Ms McConaghie stated that she assumed the instruction to change the minutes of the meeting of the 16 April came from either the Minister or special adviser since they were under the impression that the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation. In your evidence to the Committee on 12 December, you stated:

"As I, at that time, believed that the attendees were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation, the note was finalised to reflect that position."

In light of this evidence, I would ask you: can you provide any insight as to why Ms McConaghie would have assumed either that you or Mr Brimstone requested these changes? Also, if I could make the point, you, in your previous evidence to the Committee, suggested that you were quite far removed from the private office and indeed from the secretary there or the admin staff there. It seems to me, and as far as I am aware, Ms McConaghie would've worked with you in DCAL and, in fact, requested to move to DSD, so obviously there was a working relationship there. I'm just wondering is there any other ties, because you had said at the time that really you didn't have that much contact at all with the private office or indeed with Ms McConaghie? So, I'm just wondering is there any other, say, church connections, anything like that, with Ms McConaghie, because she —

Mr McCausland: I am absolutely amazed —

The Chairperson: Sorry, a wee second —

Mr Campbell: Chairman, that is out of order.

The Chairperson: Sorry, a wee second. Sorry, before you come in — I don't think it's appropriate to ask the Minister does he have any other associations with the person.

Mr Brady: Now, right. Well —

Mr McCausland: Chairman, could I just say, first of all — and you did say earlier a witness could respond on a point — I think the question is absolutely, totally inappropriate. The answer actually to the question would be no, but it should never have been asked in the first place.

Mr Brady: Sorry, Minister, could I qualify the reason why because, in her evidence, Ms McConaghie stated that, as far as she was aware, there was only probably three people that could have instructed her to change. The three people involved all stated very clearly that they had not asked her to change. She also stated that she did not do it of her own volition, so that's why the question was asked.

Mr McCausland: Mr Chairman, I come back there; just by moving on in the way that the member has done doesn't address the point that I made there. I would ask for your direction. Is it appropriate for that question to be asked?

The Chairperson: I've already said it wasn't.

Mr McCausland: It wasn't.

The Chairperson: I've already said that. I've already told the member it wasn't.

Mr McCausland: Could it then be made clear to members that, I think, that's an example of where the thing can go wrong? It was totally inappropriate that that question should've been asked.

The Chairperson: Well, sorry, I've —

Mr McCausland: But just for the record, I have said the answer is no.

The Chairperson: That's OK.

Mr McCausland: No church connection. No other connection.

Mr Brady: That's fine.

Mr McCausland: As regards the final version of the note of the meeting, I had said in my evidence on 12 December that, as is the usual process, the note was drafted and was then amended to more accurately reflect the discussion. As I at that time believed that the attendees were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation, the note was finalised to reflect that position.

I think if you look at Miss McConaghie's evidence that she gave then in January — I don't have it actually in front of me at the moment — but she did say that she could not recall the full detail of that particular occasion. Her recollection of something that had happened a long time previously. Again, we're talking of something that happened a year and three quarters earlier. She said she could not recall that; it was two years ago almost. She'd no recollection of an instruction but she went on to say that, assuming that the instruction came from — *[Inaudible.]* — that was purely an assumption; an assumption on her part in regard to something that she could not recall. I can't recall it either.

Mr Brady: With respect, what she did say was she could not, and would not, have changed it of her own volition.

Mr McCausland: That's part of what she said. That's correct.

Mr Brady: So, you would have to presume that there was an instruction to change it. That's simply the question that I'm asking.

Mr McCausland: Whether there was a direct/indirect, implicit/explicit, assumption/presumption — there are a whole range of permutations — the answer is, "I can't recall." I said that when I came here in November. If I couldn't remember it in November, I'm not going to remember it now.

Mr Brady: That's fine. Thank you.

Mr Allister: Barbara McConaghie was your private secretary in DCAL, and you moved straight from DCAL to DSD —

Mr McCausland: Yeah.

Mr Allister: — and she came with you. Was that at your request?

Mr McCausland: Mr Chairman, we're getting into an area here again —

Mr Allister: I am not criticising that —

Mr McCausland: No, no, no, I'm just saying it is utterly, in my view, irrelevant, and I just make the point because I think —

Mr Allister: The Chair'll decide that.

Mr McCausland: If the member would actually let me speak.

The Chairperson: Sorry, I am chairing the meeting.

Mr McCausland: Yeah, I'm just making the point —

The Chairperson: I chair the meeting.

Mr McCausland: I'm just saying, Chairman, it's difficult sometimes to speak if you're being interrupted.

The Chairperson: That is OK. I know, I've already asked the member to stop, so —

Mr McCausland: Thank you indeed for so doing. The point was, when I had had a very good — I think the private secretary had done a very good job when I was in DCAL. I indeed — she was happy to move across to my Department, and I was more than happy for that to happen.

Mr Allister: So, it was the product of a mutual desire?

Mr McCausland: Again, Mr Chairman, I would ask for your guidance as to whether this has any relevance as to whether I misled or did not mislead a Committee.

The Chairperson: Jim, could you explain what the relevant point is here?

Mr Allister: Yes, I can. I can probably —

Mr Campbell: If there is one.

Mr Allister: I assure the Committee that there is one.

One of the problems that this Committee has to try and untangle is who and why a direction was given: who gave the direction and why the direction was given as to the changing of the minute. Now, we do have very clear evidence from Miss McConaghie that she didn't do it of her own volition. In consequence, she was directed. She has taken refuge in saying she can't remember who it was. I

want to establish how long the Minister had known Miss McConaghie as his private secretary and to go on to explore with him whether he found her always efficient, good recall of detail and all of that so that we might balance out and see if there is any light to be shed upon the evidence that she has given us. I think it is wholly germane to the inquiry and something that the Minister — I fail to understand why there would be any reticence in telling us that.

The Chairperson: If I could make a point, Minister, that, in your own evidence, you, if memory serves me correctly, and you can check Hansard, but I think you clearly conveyed the impression that your relationship with the private office would have been minuscule. Would have been —

Mr McCausland: That, that —

The Chairperson: Not minuscule — I'm maybe using the wrong word there — but, you know, you really had little or no contact with the private office per se. That might be fair enough.

Mr McCausland: That is; that would be —

The Chairperson: Sorry, before you come in and respond. The difficulty is that we are dealing with narrow ground here in so far as that there were a small number of people who could have given such a direction. Mrs McConaghie was very clear in her evidence that, whatever else she said, some things she couldn't recall. She couldn't recall who instructed her to change it. She was very clear in her evidence that she would not have done it other than by direction. What we have to try and tease out here is, well, maybe someone might remember, but what was the relationship within the Department.

Mr McCausland: First of all, in regard to — because there were a number of points that Mr Allister raised and a number of points that you, Chairman, have raised, so if I miss any, you can draw me back. First of all, in regard to the relationship between a Minister and a private secretary and a private office, I think your description of the nature of that relationship was somewhat inaccurate, in so far as —

The Chairperson: I will correct it. I will correct it.

Mr McCausland: Oh yes, please do.

The Chairperson: It says — in your own evidence, you said:

"I have very few dealings with the internal workings of the private office".

Mr McCausland: That's the point. I have very few dealings with the internal workings. By the internal workings, I meant the details of how the TRIM system works in terms of what's put onto it or what's not. In fact, interestingly enough, it was only during preparation for this inquiry that it became clear to me just the amount of material that's kept on the system. I have no access to that system at all. Ministers don't have access to the TRIM system, so I'd no idea just the amount of material that's kept in there or the internal workings, but the private secretary plays a very important role for any Minister because that's the person who brings correspondence, takes note of a meeting, accompanies you to an event or whatever. So, there is a very strong and important relationship.

There are two people, I think, two people in the room who have been in a Department as a Minister, and they would understand that. It might be helpful some time if other members had an opportunity to explore that and find out about that, but it is a very important working relationship. My reference was very specific and focused. I said I have very little input or connection with the internal workings, so all of the how many copies there are, do they go in triplicate to this person, that person, the other person, I wouldn't have anything to do with that. I've enough on my plate, as any Minister would have, dealing with the business of the Department, dealing with all the issues that are important that you deal with. I don't have time to get into the nitty-gritty of all the paperwork that is kept there.

The second thing was reference was made again to the fact that — people remembering something. A point has been raised by one member of the Committee, Mr Wilson there, where he said about people's ability to remember something that happened six months, a year, two years, whatever, ago. I think most people have difficulty recalling something that happened two years ago because, in the course of a day, there are so many meetings, there are so many events, there are so many things going on that you are going in and out of meetings just constantly throughout the day, so one meeting

almost melds into another. The question was asked also, I think, by Mr Allister, about the — I suppose that he was really — the professional ability —

Mr Allister: I haven't asked it yet.

Mr McCausland: Well, you I think did if we go back —

The Chairperson: OK. Sorry, folks —

Mr Allister: With respect, I would like the Minister to answer questions that I ask him. I was asked to explain where I was going. I explained where I was going, and now he wants to anticipate where I'm going.

The Chairperson: OK. I'll bring you back in in a wee second, Jim.

Mr McCausland: I can't — it is very difficult when Mr Allister — [*Inaudible.*] — questions at the other end, and we are back and forwards.

The Chairperson: You're not getting questions at the other end.

Mr Wilson: It's very obvious the conclusion he's drawn already anyway, so I don't think it really matters.

The Chairperson: I haven't asked any question at the moment, so I'm just trying to moderate this, so Jim was asked to explain the rationale. He did. I tried to clarify it a wee bit. I think we have done, and you have given a fairly lengthy response to that there, so I want to bring Jim back again to ask a question, but if you need a —

Mr Allister: I'm —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Jim, before you do — is there another response you wanted to make?

Mr McCausland: No, apparently I had answered the question so I am waiting for the next question.

Mr Allister: I'm not at all criticising or questioning the fact that there would naturally be a close relationship between a private secretary and a Minister. I'd expect nothing else. I was suggesting to you that, having found that a satisfactory relationship in DCAL, you and she decided that it would be appropriate and helpful if that continued in DSD. Is that a fair assessment? I am not criticising that.

Mr McCausland: If I have found someone doing a job and doing it well, I think it makes good sense to see if that person might transfer across.

Mr Allister: Yes, that's right. Absolutely. So you found her to be a trustworthy, loyal private secretary with whom you could work well.

Mr McCausland: I think that she had all the attributes of a good private secretary.

Mr Allister: And efficient, I think you've said. Could you tell us: did she have a good memory for detail?

Mr McCausland: Do any of us?

Mr Allister: Now, now, just try and answer the question, please.

Mr McCausland: Sorry, well, yes, I know, but it's important to understand a question fully, and if the member would — I am sure, Chairman, you'll want to make sure that I get every opportunity to answer the question in my own words.

In terms of remembering detail, yes, and I repeat again what I've said already: can I remember the full detail of something that happened two years ago, which at the time had very little significance? The answer is probably not.

Mr Allister: Yes, so —

Mr McCausland: The only thing that I do remember very well about the meeting, because it was the one thing that dominated everything else, was the fact that there was the potential to save between £15 million or more in terms of money to the public purse at a time when the projected cost of double-glazing all of the Housing Executive properties looked at one point to be almost prohibitive, and if someone comes along and says not only can we do it for many millions of pounds less, not only can it be done in a way that provides a better service to tenants — and I had seen some examples of poor workmanship in terms of the fitting and disruption to people — it was a matter that was very dear to my heart because, as soon as I came into the Department, it was one of the first initiatives I brought in —

Mr Allister: Minister, I understand you're very anxious to repeat all that but that is nothing to do with my question.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Jim, a wee second. Minister, I accept entirely what you've said in that regard and that's been said before —

Mr Clarke: I didn't think he'd finished.

Mr McCausland: I hadn't actually got a chance to finish.

The Chairperson: Well, I mean, it's not an opportunity to go into a range of — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Wilson: I would've thought the Committee would've been very excited to hear about —

Mr Clarke: I was happy to hear about it.

The Chairperson: Sorry, members, I do not want to go down this road again.

Mr Clarke: — *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson: That, with respect, is not what we're taking issue with. We're not taking issue with that.

Mr McCausland: The point was raised as to what people might remember or not remember.

Mr Allister: No, the point was raised: did you find Miss McConaghie had a good memory for detail? *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, I'm sorry. Just hold on a second.

Mr McCausland: I do find it difficult, Chairman, constantly being interrupted —

Mr Allister: You just want to talk it out.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Mr Allister.

Mr McCausland: Chairman, again —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Mr Allister. Sorry, Minister.

Mr McCausland: Yes.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr McCausland: Chairman, could I ask actually for some direction to the Committee that people do not interrupt?

The Chairperson: I do my best.

Mr McCausland: I know —

The Chairperson: I have already said I will adjourn the meeting if it continues on.

Mr F McCann: Try saying it to your party members.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Fra. Sorry, members.

Mr Clarke: You getting excited?

The Chairperson: I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry for — . Please, people, do not interrupt when others are speaking. I'll do my best to moderate this, and, if it doesn't work, I'll just suspend the meeting. Simple as that.

Nobody's taking issue with that aspect of it whatsoever, so I'm suggesting that we don't need to labour that.

Mr McCausland: All I was simply saying was that there are certain key things that will stick very much in your memory. There are others things that may not.

The Chairperson: I'll bring you in in a second, Jim. OK, thank you for that, Minister.

Mr Allister: Could I return to the actual question: did you find over your years of working with her that Miss McConaghie had a good memory for detail? Either that's a yes or a no.

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mr Allister: Yes, right. The problem you see, Minister, for the Committee is this, that when it comes to this issue about the minute of 16 May 2012, the problem for the Committee is, that this lady with a good memory for detail tells the Committee that she can't remember who instructed her to change the minute but she does refine it down to saying it certainly wasn't herself and it was most likely to have been you as Minister or your special adviser. That's the point the Committee's at. Now, can you help us at all about that, since that evidence came to light that your then private secretary can't remember whether it was you or the SPAD? Have you, for example, carried out any inquiries? Did you ask your SPAD? Have you had a discussion with him about, "Well, let's try and cast our mind back here: who might have said what and what might have happened"? Have you tried to do anything like that to help the Committee?

Mr Clarke: Chairman, part of the question has been left out. What Ms McConaghie said was that the Minister, the special adviser or another senior official —

The Chairperson: I am sorry, Trevor. You will have all the opportunity to come back on that.

Mr Clarke: I am glad you are giving them direction —

The Chairperson: You will have as long — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Clarke: — to take it off on a tangent again in the area that he wishes, but it is clear what —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Trevor *[Interruption.]* Trevor Clarke — *[Interruption..]* I wish you just to stop.

Mr Clarke: I am sure you do.

The Chairperson: I do, and I will insist that members do not continue to interrupt. It is not going to be allowed to continue.

Mr Clarke: Chairman, he is misrepresenting Ms McConaghie's statement. We have a copy of it here. It says that there has possibly been somebody from housing — a senior housing official. *[Interruption.]* Did you forget that bit, Jim?

Mr Wilson: It was convenient not to remember.

The Chairperson: Trevor Clarke, Sammy Wilson, I hereby adjourn this inquiry this morning.

Mr Campbell: For how long, Chairman?

The Chairperson: I will consult with officials.

Mr Clarke: Until Jim gets his memory back.

The meeting was suspended at 10.56 am.