

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 November 2003
(*Afternoon*)

Session 2

£5.00

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body 2003.

Applications for reproduction should be made in writing to the Licensing Division,
Her Majesty's Stationery Office, St Clements House, 2-16 Colegate, Norwich NR3 1BQ
Fax 01603 723000, which is administering the copyright on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate
Body.

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by The
Stationery Office Ltd.

Her Majesty's Stationery Office is independent of and separate from the company now
trading as The Stationery Office Ltd, which is responsible for printing and publishing
Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body publications.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 4 November 2003

Col.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS 2004	157
SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE (SCRUTINY)	189
CONVENER'S REPORT	193
SIFT	196

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2003, Session 2

CONVENER

*Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West)

*Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP)

*Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)

*Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)

Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)

*Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab)

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Sir Neil McIntosh (Electoral Commission)

Bill Miller MEP

Kate Sullivan (Electoral Commission)

Dougie Wands (Electoral Commission)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Nick Hawthorne

David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 4 November 2003

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:06*]

European Parliament Elections 2004

The Convener (Richard Lochhead): Welcome to the sixth meeting this session of the European and External Relations Committee. We have apologies from Keith Raffan, Gordon Jackson and Dennis Canavan. As far as I can see, no substitutes for those MSPs are in attendance at the moment.

Our first item of business is evidence from various organisations and individuals on the proposals relating to the 2004 European Parliament elections, particularly the proposal to make Scotland a pilot region for postal voting and the decision to cut the number of Scotland's members of the European Parliament from eight to seven. A third issue that we will deal with relates to funding that might be available to promote electoral turnout at next year's elections.

We have two sets of witnesses today. Our first witness is Bill Miller, a Scottish Labour MEP. Then we will talk to representatives of the Electoral Commission.

I welcome Bill Miller to the meeting. We are delighted to have one of our MEPs come along to speak to us.

Bill Miller MEP: Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

I will restrict my comments to the proposal for an all-postal ballot rather than deal with the possibility of the reduction in the number of MEPs.

Over the years, there has been a trend in British elections of public disengagement from the election process. The nadir of that trend was the 1999 European Parliament elections, in which fewer than one in four people in Scotland bothered to vote. It is a disgrace that not one of the eight Scottish MEPs can claim to have a democratic mandate to represent the people.

The problem is not unique to European Parliament elections, as the most recent Scottish Parliament elections saw the electorate turn away from the ballot box in greater numbers.

Last year in an attempt to reverse the trend, the Government asked the Electoral Commission to consider three pilot projects for voting in the United Kingdom. The Electoral Commission's aim is to gain public confidence and to encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the UK by modernising the electoral process and promoting public awareness of electoral matters. The commission has therefore issued a consultation document asking for views on which would be the appropriate electoral areas in which to run the pilots.

It could be said that we are tackling the symptoms rather than the problem. I have a lot of sympathy with that argument but no politician has been able to address the problem, and voter numbers in all elections are declining. Therefore, we should address the symptoms as an interim measure.

I turn to the concerns raised about Scotland having an all-postal ballot. The first common concern is about an increase in fraud. The Electoral Commission ran 59 pilot projects on postal balloting in May this year. On the basis of its findings it has recommended to the Government that additional measures be introduced as part of future all-postal and electronic voting pilot schemes, to ensure more effective deterrence and measuring of attempted fraud. However, it is worth reiterating the conclusion to its evaluation of the recent pilot programmes: neither the commission nor the Crown Prosecution Service in England was aware of specific evidence of impersonation in all-postal pilots or of fraud relating to e-voting systems. They are confident that previous pilot schemes have led to little increase in fraud and that extra measures will be put in place in future pilots to reduce further the scope for fraud.

Concerns were also raised about confidentiality. It was suggested that it might be easier to find out how someone voted in an all-postal scheme. That is not so; the appropriate mechanisms have been introduced so that secrecy is maintained, as evinced by all the pilots.

In recent weeks, some political parties have argued that the fact that most people will vote in the first three to four days after receiving their ballot paper will affect the election campaign. It does not take a rocket scientist to realise that if politicians believe that, they will start their campaign earlier. It is ludicrous to suggest that if the majority of people vote in the first few days, that will have a detrimental effect on the outcome of the election. The local authorities that have piloted postal ballots have all benefited. The concern that Scottish and some English and Welsh MEPs might have to start campaigning earlier is nothing new. Most MEPs have been

campaigning for the past four and a half years; the election is not won or lost in the three or even six weeks before polling day.

Concern was raised that the postal service would not be able to cope. I have spoken to the Royal Mail and its submission states that it believes that it can meet the needs. It also believes that Scotland would be an ideal place in which to test a postal pilot.

There will be a cost to the pilot, but democracy comes at a price. However, it will free up public buildings and a large work force on polling day. The number of people who take a day off to look after children on polling day will drop. The Electoral Commission believes that there could be a saving.

People questioned whether the electorate would understand the principle. I was a regional councillor in Strathclyde and I recall that we had an all-postal ballot on the future of water services, to which there was a 78 per cent response. The electorate understood the concept clearly, and that was in the days when Strathclyde Regional Council's resources to publicise the ballot were limited.

Points were raised about there being an out-of-date register. The electoral registers have improved greatly in recent years and there is now a rolling register. We cannot say that an out-of-date register is a problem, because the same register applies to the ballot box and the postal ballot, so there is no difference.

In the Electoral Commission's consultation document, concern is expressed about the size of the electoral area. The problem is envisaged that the returning officers would not be able to meet so regularly to update one another on progress and possible difficulties. Electronic conferencing is not beyond our capabilities, so while the central belt returning officers are able to meet up, those from the Highlands and Islands can keep in touch electronically, as they do in a number of areas at present. That would mean that the electorate in sparsely populated areas would not have to travel to cast their votes.

The concern was raised that people do not want a postal ballot. Let me quote a Scottish example. The Earlston, Gordon and District ward in the Scottish Borders had an all-postal ballot for a by-election in November last year. Turnout in that ward increased as compared with the council elections, whereas the three other by-elections that were held in the Borders on the same day all experienced large falls in turnout, ranging between 13 per cent and 25 per cent. Moreover, the follow-up survey found that the large majority—83.6 per cent—were satisfied with the pilot and only 2 per cent were dissatisfied. Some 93.2 per cent found

the instructions clear and easy to understand. Similar figures could also be quoted for Aberdeen and Stirling.

14:15

Finally, a concern that has been raised latterly is the argument that there should be an all-postal ballot for the UK. The Electoral Commission's document states that it would be too complicated to have a postal ballot in London because of the Greater London Authority, mayoral and European Parliament elections. The commission also ruled out the South West because Gibraltar has recently been added to that European Parliament electoral area. For reasons that do not need to be spelled out, Northern Ireland has also been excluded. That means that there will be nine electoral areas from which the three pilot projects will be chosen. An all-postal ballot for the UK has been ruled out, but there is an opportunity to have a large pilot to determine the shape of elections to come.

The concept of all-postal ballots has been tried and found successful. We live in the 21st century but utilise an outmoded 20th century system. The people who have responded to all-postal ballots have approved them. We should respond to the people—after all, they are the ones whom we are supposed to represent. Mick McGahey once said that there was nothing so hard as the birth of a new idea. Let us not strangle this idea at birth.

The Convener: I thank Bill Miller for his contribution. I am sure that there will be questions in a second, but first I remind the committee that we have also received written submissions from four of the eight MEPs who represent Scotland—John Purvis and Struan Stevenson from the Conservatives, and Ian Hudghton and Neil MacCormick from the Scottish National Party—all of whom are quite critical of the proposals. No doubt, those submissions will spur some questions for Mr Miller.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I thank Bill Miller for his interesting presentation, which certainly made a persuasive case. I have a House of Commons research paper that compares the 2003 postal ballot turnout with the 1999 turnout in 33 electoral areas. Turnout increased in every electoral area and, in some areas, it was twice as high as it was previously. I am very persuaded by many of those arguments.

The criticisms that have been presented to the committee in the written evidence tend to centre on issues such as validation and fraud, which were touched on in Bill Miller's presentation. I am sure that he will agree that it is important that there is public confidence in any system. Can enough be done to deal with issues such as validation and fraud to ensure that we have a robust system that maintains a degree of public confidence?

Bill Miller: Thank you for that question.

Yes, I think that enough can be done. Obviously, the Electoral Commission is best placed to answer that question, as it has hands-on experience of running all-postal ballots. All the documentation that I have read about postal ballots has been positive. People have had concerns prior to adopting postal ballots, but the worries that people have had about fraud and about pressure being put on people to vote certain ways have not materialised in the investigations that have taken place after each postal ballot. I am confident that the measures that will be put in place in the run-up to a large-scale pilot will overcome those fears.

All the people who were contacted after the three experiments that we have had in Scotland responded positively. That positive response was not just from 50 per cent or 60 per cent but from the overwhelming majority. In Aberdeen, something like 93 per cent were more than satisfied with the system. We would be making it easier for people to carry out their democratic duty. All of us should be concerned about that.

The convener raised the point that one or two people who were critical of the proposal have written in to the committee. Some of my colleagues have expressed concerns about postal ballots. However, all four of them agree with the view that it is good to increase turnout. I accept that they have concerns and that we should look at those concerns. However, at the end of the day, if those concerns can be overcome—as I believe that they can—we should go ahead with the pilot.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): We are about to hold another pilot. John Purvis and Struan Stevenson have expressed concerns and asked whether it would not be better, if there is such confidence in the postal system, to include nine regions. You have opted for three regions, perhaps for good reasons, but why not grasp the nettle and go for nine?

Bill Miller: From what I have read, I understand that the Government asked for a pilot project in three regions. So far, all the pilot projects that have been carried out have been based on local authority areas, not European Parliament electoral areas. The pilot projects that we are considering now are a lot larger than pilots have been in the past, but we should walk before we run. Let us try them out in large areas.

We are considering holding pilots in Wales, England and Scotland. If they work, I understand that the Government is considering making elections to the forthcoming regional assemblies all-postal ballots—that would be a great trial run. Let us carry out postal ballots on large pilot areas before we go for the whole country.

Phil Gallie: You stressed that one of the main reasons for postal ballots is to try to increase

participation in elections. In the 1992 and 1997 general elections, we had turnouts in Ayr of more than 80 per cent of the electorate. That is well in excess of any turnout that has been achieved to date with postal votes. Surely there is a failure here that hangs around the necks of those who stand for election to the European Parliament, on the basis that they have allowed the electorate's interest to drop to 25 per cent. Is that not the real problem that we should address?

Bill Miller: I mentioned at the start that there is a problem and that all politicians have a responsibility to face up to it. I stress that no politician has been able so far to reverse the trend of continuing decline in the number of people who engage with the electoral process. We must turn that around. As we have been unable to tackle the problem head on, we must at least take interim measures and tackle the electoral system.

You were elected from the South of Scotland list on a turnout of 52.3 per cent. The Conservatives got 24.2 per cent of those votes—that is not exactly a democratic mandate. I do not exactly have a democratic mandate, either. You want to be able to say that you represent the people of the South of Scotland in the Parliament, but your turnout is not good enough. My turnout, too, is not good enough. We must consider ways in which to increase turnout and, if we can do so through postal votes and start to increase the turnout to 60 per cent or 70 per cent, you will have more legitimacy when you stand up in the Parliament and say that you represent the people of the South of Scotland.

Phil Gallie: I could not agree more, although constituency turnout was well up on the figure that you gave. Will you remind me of the highest turnout in the European Parliament constituencies in the elections before last, which were run on a first-past-the-post basis? Is it not the case that having one all-embracing electoral division for Scotland as a whole has induced a lack of interest among the electorate?

Bill Miller: The first direct elections for MEPs were held in 1979 and the overall turnout in Scotland—I can speak only for Scotland—was, in percentage terms, in the high 20s. Turnout then rose to about 32 or 34 per cent in 1984 and to about 38 per cent in 1989. In 1994, it dropped to about 34 per cent and in 1999 it dropped to 24 per cent. That might be related to the move to a proportional representation system in 1999 and the fact that people found that system confusing.

We have now had two elections to the Scottish Parliament under the PR system, so one would think that people would be used to the system. However, why did turnout fall at the second Scottish Parliament election?

Phil Gallie: Perhaps PR had something to do with that.

Bill Miller: That is the system that we now have.

The Convener: I want to follow up on Phil Gallie's first question. Much of the opposition to, and criticism of, the proposals relates not to the fact that postal voting may increase turnout, but to the concept of pilot postal voting regions. Some people argue that if the Scottish campaign is not in sync with the UK campaign it will be harder to get the media to cover European elections, which is already difficult enough. Analysis suggests that most people return their ballot papers within a day or two of receiving them, so there would be two or three weeks between the European elections elsewhere in the UK and those in Scotland. If there is a postal voting pilot, most people in Scotland will already have voted when the elections take place elsewhere. In that situation, how can there be a European election campaign in Scotland? If the UK media are not covering the European elections while Scottish people are voting, will there be a campaign here at all?

Bill Miller: Local authorities that run postal voting pilots face the same situation, but they do not seem to have been affected. In fact, turnout has increased, even though people in such areas vote within two or three days of the local government election campaign's taking off. It is strange that the convener, as a Scottish nationalist, should rely on a national campaign to boost the SNP's vote.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): Gotcha!

The Convener: I could ask many questions as an SNP member, but I choose to ask questions as convener of the committee. We have the UK media, whether we like it or not, which provide much of the publicity for campaigns, whether we like it or not. That is where I was coming from.

Bill Miller: There are media in Scotland as well. Having talked to members of the Scottish media, I am sure that in advance of ballot papers' being sent out they would be more than willing to prepare campaign programmes that highlight the European elections. The convener need not worry about the issue—he should not lose any sleep over it.

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab): I reinforce the point that Bill Miller made. It is refreshing to see the convener taking a United Kingdom perspective on these important matters.

I come to the issue as a committed supporter of postal ballots. My only direct involvement in a postal ballot was in that relating to the very successful purchase of the North Harris estate. The ballot involved a small constituency—fewer

than 600 people—but the participation rate was 76 per cent. The vote took place in a constituency that secured the highest return at the Scottish Parliament elections—59.4 per cent. That is the only reasonable comparison that I can make from a constituency perspective.

This is an important matter. We should remember that many people already vote by post—a point that is lost on those who criticise postal voting. The system has been refined so that when someone registers for a postal vote they retain that vote until they choose to opt out of the scheme, as it were.

Bill Miller's opening statement answered many of the criticisms that were legitimately made by other members of the European Parliament. He has dealt systematically with the issues of fraud, confidentiality, campaigning, the postal service and so on. To the nearest 100,000—or 10,000, if you like—how many people will be involved in the pilot? There are X million voters in Scotland, but how many will be involved in the other two regions that are selected for the pilot? What proportion of the UK electorate are we talking about?

Bill Miller: That will depend on the Electoral Commission. If Scotland is chosen, 3.8 million people will be involved. The commission may choose Scotland because no other elections are taking place here, which gives it a clear run and enables it to see how the system works. The commission might also consider South East England, which has an electorate of about 6.2 million people, or North East England, where there are about 1.7 million electors.

It will depend on which area the Electoral Commission recommends. Scotland, with about 3.8 million voters, is in population terms in the middle rank of electoral areas. The Electoral Commission might want to choose an area at the lower end, one in the middle and one at the top, but I do not know whether that will be the case. That decision will depend on the submissions that the Electoral Commission receives. It will then make a recommendation to the Government. I hope that it will recommend Scotland, because Scotland offers a unique opportunity in that it would be the only electoral area that has no elections other than the European elections. It would give the returning officers in Scotland a chance to get to grips with the system of all-postal ballots and see how it works.

14:30

Mr Morrison: If the pilot goes ahead along the lines that you have described in Scotland—I sincerely hope that it does—do you have any idea when we would have a declaration?

Bill Miller: I understand that by the end of December we will know which regions have been chosen to pilot all-postal ballots.

Mr Morrison: Sorry—I did not make myself clear. I was asking about the post-election declaration.

Bill Miller: Sorry. The declaration will happen in the same way as it always does in Scotland. As you know, the closing date for votes will be 10 June. The votes will then be counted on the Sunday, apart from the votes that will be counted on the Monday. In Scotland a proportion of our votes are always counted on the Monday for religious reasons, as Alasdair Morrison will know more than well. Our vote would close on 10 June. The votes would be counted on the 13 June or 14 June and we would have a final declaration on Monday 14 June.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I congratulate the convener of the committee on becoming a father for the first time. I am sure that that will be endorsed by everyone in the room—as people will have told you, your life will never be the same.

Before I come on to postal votes, I ask Bill Miller why he does not wish to address the reduction in the numbers of MEPs. I would have thought that as an MEP from Scotland—a hard-working MEP at that; I say that irrespective of our party-political differences—he would have supported the concept of retaining eight MEPs.

Bill Miller: I did not realise that Richard Lochhead had become a father—I offer him my congratulations.

The Convener: I forgive you.

Bill Miller: I now understand why you have bags under your eyes.

I supported the retention of eight seats within Scotland. I wrote several submissions to the Electoral Commission on the retention of eight seats and although I do not think that we can defend the retention of eight seats in terms of population, in terms of geography we have a more-than-strong case for retaining eight seats. If, as one of eight MEPs, one tries to cover the whole of Scotland—as many Scottish MEPs do—it is very difficult. If Richard Lochhead was to become an MEP he would not see his new-born child. You are away for nights on end—and that is when you are back in this country. I argued for the retention of eight seats and will continue to do so.

Unfortunately, if you look at the Electoral Commission's website you will see that it has just posted its recommendations to the Government. I have also made recommendations to the Government on the retention of eight seats; I do not know how that will go down, but I have done it.

The reason why I did not wish to address the reduction in the numbers of MEPs is not that I do not support the retention of eight seats; it is because the decision on the number of seats in Scotland is far further down the line than the decision on postal ballots.

Mrs Ewing: It will happen despite the fact that Denmark will have 16 seats.

Bill Miller: I have always argued that it is not the quantity that counts, but the quality.

Mrs Ewing: That is a fair political answer.

The Convener: Is it an argument for or against?

Mrs Ewing: I wanted to pin Bill Miller down on the issue. It is important because people in Scotland see that Scotland is under-represented in respect of the many decisions that are made by the European Union that impact upon us. I have visited the European Parliament on many occasions so I am aware of the work that is done there. It is sad that we are reducing our numerical representation because that will impact on the psyche of the Scottish people. All the parties have worked hard to ensure the quality of their representatives in the European Union.

Bill Miller: I accept that the UK as a whole has to accept a reduction in the number of seats. I believe in the whole process of enlargement and that the 10 accession countries should come into the EU. In 1995, the European Parliament's submission to the negotiations on the Amsterdam treaty suggested that the Parliament itself should be capped at 700 members. After all, a parliament with more seats than that would become unwieldy. The Parliament capped itself at 700 even though it realised that a number of countries wanted to come in. As the 10 new countries that will join the EU on 1 May next year will all be entitled to have MEPs, the Parliament will have to reduce the number of MEPs for each member state to accommodate them. I supported that approach. The UK will lose nine MEPs, which means that the number of seats will fall from 87 to 78. Those nine MEPs have to come from somewhere. As a democrat and as someone who believes in EU enlargement, I have to accept that those seats will have to come from certain areas in the UK.

Mrs Ewing: Were Spain and Poland given concessions in that respect?

Bill Miller: Spain and Poland are arguing for concessions, but have not yet received any.

Mrs Ewing: Do you think that they will get concessions? After all, you are in the thick of things.

Bill Miller: The intergovernmental conference is meeting at the moment. I hope that they will not receive any concessions.

Mrs Ewing: Do you agree that the issue of voter numbers is more important than issues of peripherality and the rural nature of regions, which are very important in Scotland, or do you think that the matter is simply population-based?

Bill Miller: I think that I have already answered that question. In my submission to the Electoral Commission, I argued my case on a geographical basis. I could not argue on the basis of population because that would mean that the number of Scottish seats would be reduced. However, as far as the geography of Scotland and the representation of its people are concerned, I think that we should still have eight seats.

Mrs Ewing: I want to ask about postal ballots, but I do not want to keep other colleagues out of the questioning.

The Convener: I will bring you back in later, Margaret.

Mr Home Robertson: Margaret Ewing's point about numbers probably highlights the fact that certain other small EU member states such as Denmark, Luxembourg and so on are ridiculously overrepresented in the European Parliament. I do not suppose that you can comment on that, but does that give rise to the arithmetical problem that we are wrestling with?

Bill Miller: Yes, but we have to remember that each member state wants to be represented in the Parliament. It would be nonsense to tell Luxembourg that it can have only one MEP; it needs a fair number of MEPs to ensure that it considers itself to be represented.

The eight Scottish MEPs represent not only Scotland, but the whole of the UK—we are part of a bigger package. In that respect, we might say that 87 MEPs—or 78 MEPs, after the number is reduced—represent Scotland.

Mr Home Robertson: I am aware that we are floating between two very different subjects this afternoon, but I want to return to the issue of postal ballots. I agree with the view that has been expressed around the table that anything that increases turnout must be more democratic and must be good news. I am satisfied that the efficiency of the administration has been well enough tested to ensure that the Post Office and the returning officers can do a good enough job. The postie will simply deliver a ballot paper with an elector's name and address on it and the vote will be returned.

However, the dissemination of campaign material and information by parties and candidates is an important part of the electoral process and is also up to the Post Office. Until fairly recently in my constituency, we labelled everything and sent it to every household. However, the last time

around, we began this business of sending bulk deliveries to everyone. I was alarmed at the Post Office's inefficiency in that process. If we are going to use the postal system, we might be satisfied that the ballot papers will be dealt with, but should we not stipulate that it is important that information and campaign material that is disseminated on behalf of candidates by parties should be sent as promptly and dealt with as efficiently?

Bill Miller: That is a fair point. If we go ahead with an all-postal ballot in Scotland, we will have a fair hold over the Royal Mail, which will deliver the material. We have to sit down with the Royal Mail now and say, "Right. Fine; you've said that you will be able to carry this out. That means that you will make a certain amount of money, which will help your organisation. But you have another duty—you must deliver election material." We have to sit down in the run-up to a postal ballot and get that guarantee.

In the past, there have been difficulties with the delivery of election material. However, I have to question how effective that material is. Sometimes, after it comes through the door, people read it for all of 32.2 seconds before they get to the bin to throw it out. That is a problem, but it should not take away from the Royal Mail's responsibility for delivering the material. We should put that to the Royal Mail if a postal ballot goes ahead.

Mr Home Robertson: I have been concerned about how such deliveries operate in my constituency and I will bore you for a second with my experience. I live in Scotland and I am an elector in Scotland, but the Royal Mail does not think that I live in Scotland. It thinks that I live in Northumberland. At the previous European elections, I did not receive any material from Scottish candidates, but I received all the blurb about the North East England candidates. Similar things may happen elsewhere—I do not know.

Bill Miller: I did not receive any election material last time either, and I live in Glasgow.

Mr Home Robertson: Do not worry about my experience; I voted for your party anyway.

Mrs Ewing: I wanted to pick up on a couple of points that Bill Miller made during earlier questions. In reply to the convener, you spoke about media coverage of the European elections. That is an important issue. You may talk about "national" media but I talk about "state" media—a political definition. You seem to compare local government elections to European elections. I have a great deal of respect for all who work in local government but the impact of what is happening in Europe will be extremely significant—with the constitution, the accession states and all the rest of it. Are you satisfied that, if

a postal ballot goes ahead, enough information will be available to allow people to take clear and deliberate decisions as to whom they cast their vote for?

In reply to Alasdair Morrison, you said that the use of postal voting for the whole of Scotland would give returning officers a chance to get to grips with the system. That sounds to me like a guinea-pig approach to something that is fundamental to democracy.

Will you elaborate on both those points?

Bill Miller: Although I compared local government elections to European elections, local government gets far higher turnouts than we do. That may be because people understand local government more. I have been an MEP for the past 10 years and have found it very difficult to get across in the media the whole concept of what happens in Europe. The trouble is often that the media distort the question of Europe for their own political ends.

If we were in the run-up to an election with a postal ballot, and if the campaign started earlier in Scotland, I would say that that was great. I would welcome that and it might be of benefit. It might give us the chance to get across some of the arguments rather than get caught up in what may become a constitutional issue between the main parties down in Westminster.

Margaret Ewing's second point was about returning officers getting a chance to use the system. It was a fair point, but we have to consider the way that our electoral system is going. Are we serious about modernising our electoral system? Yes, we are. Do postal ballots modernise the system and encourage higher turnout? Yes, they do. Should we therefore consider postal ballots? Yes, we should. Should returning officers in Scotland gain experience in postal ballots? Yes, they should. It would be better to let officers experience the system now, when there is only one election, than to foist it on them when there is more than one election at the same time—local government elections, Scottish Parliament elections, or others. This is an ideal opportunity for returning officers to look at postal ballots and to try them out. If the system works, that will be good and well. If it does not work and has to be modified, let us consider how to do that. This is an ideal opportunity for officers to get to grips with the system.

I understand that the returning officers met last Friday. An overwhelming majority of them said that they wanted to try out a postal ballot in Scotland. They are concerned about one or two areas, about which any responsible returning officer would be concerned, but their overall view was that they would like to try an all-postal ballot in Scotland.

The Convener: I am keen to move on to the next set of witnesses soon. I hope that members have not exhausted all their questions. I bring this part of the meeting to a close. Once more, I thank Bill Miller MEP for coming to the committee and for contributing. I am impressed that you have attracted more than half an hour's worth of questions, Mr Miller—I hope that we have some left.

I add that the committee is keen to develop its working relationship with Scotland's MEPs and to involve them more in our work. I hope that we will be able to do that in the future. If the MEPs have any ideas about that, I invite them to fire them into the committee.

Bill Miller: Thank you, convener.

14:45

The Convener: I invite the next set of witnesses to take their seats. I welcome from the Electoral Commission Sir Neil McIntosh, the commissioner; Dougie Wands, the principal officer; and Kate Sullivan, the assistant director of policy. I welcome you to your first visit to the committee. I know that you have prepared some opening comments. I ask you in particular to indicate the time scale of your decisions and some of the background of your various representatives. That would be most helpful.

Sir Neil McIntosh (Electoral Commission): Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. I am conscious that our time will be best spent by members' posing questions to us, rather than our giving a major presentation. Bill Miller effectively gave a concise résumé of much of the work that the Electoral Commission is doing. I stress that the Electoral Commission is a UK body, appointed by Parliament but independent of Government and the Executive. I am the electoral commissioner for Scotland—there are six of us in all. The work of the commission encompasses regulation and a series of issues that relate to encouraging and maximising turnout and to the development and modernisation of the electoral system where that is beneficial.

We know about the issues that are of prime concern to the committee. In essence, there are three of them: one is the number of MEPs representing Scotland; the second is the question of a postal ballot pilot; and the third is the question of resources and the role of the media in encouraging the public to vote. We have been required by the Government to report on the questions on the number of MEPs and the postal pilot. Our remit is quite specific, which means that on some occasions we cannot deal with issues that are raised in relation to those matters, because they are for Parliament to deal with.

Our remit on the number of MEPs representing Scotland was quite specific. That remit was that we should produce recommendations that take account of two elements. First, there must be a minimum of three MEPs representing any one region in the UK. Secondly, whatever proposition is arrived at should be based on achieving equal distribution. The commission has now produced its proposals on those bases and is recommending that the Saint Laguë method of calculation be used to achieve the most even and fair distribution. The end product will be that Scotland will lose one seat, as would another eight UK regions. Northern Ireland will continue with the same number because it already has the minimum. Inevitably, that calculation will produce the loss of a seat. We make our submission to Government on that basis, according to our remit.

As for the proposal for an electoral pilot, we are bound to recommend to Government pilot areas for postal voting in the UK. Obviously Scotland is one of the regions that is under consideration and the point that has been most regularly raised is that at the time, the country will have only one election—the election to the European Parliament—taking place. That is seen as a strong factor as far as management and development of the pilot and any other benefits are concerned.

The commission does not have a position on the question at the moment. We are taking views and evidence. However, we are interested in other issues, such as returning officers' capacity and ability to deliver a postal vote pilot; any given area's interest in or resistance to pilot activity; and any other points that members of the public or representatives see as relevant and wish to make to ensure that we arrive at the best reasons for conducting a postal vote pilot.

Perhaps I should stop there. My colleagues and I will try to respond to members' questions and expand on the points that I have mentioned.

The Convener: Thanks. I am sure that there will be plenty of questions. Will you clarify the time scale for any decisions on a postal vote pilot?

Sir Neil McIntosh: We are expected to submit our recommendations by 8 December and I expect a decision to be announced almost immediately after that. I stress that time is of the essence in organising any pilot and that any undue delay would not be helpful.

The Convener: Thanks.

Mr Morrison: I want to get a better understanding of the process in which you are involved. Am I right in saying that your submission will be made to the Lord Chancellor?

Sir Neil McIntosh: Yes.

Mr Morrison: You have already said that you have to make the submission by 8 December. On

9 December, the Lord Chancellor might pick up Bill Miller's submission after reading your submission. I take it that the Lord Chancellor is not obliged to accept your recommendations about reducing the number of seats in Scotland to seven. He might think that Bill Miller's argument is far superior, more cogent and better presented and indeed might say, "We'll go with Comrade Miller's submission."

Sir Neil McIntosh: The Lord Chancellor might well do that. However, he would expect our submission to be researched and considered and to present the range of arguments and issues that have been presented to us. I hope that, as a result, the submission will be helpful and authoritative.

Mr Morrison: Basically, we can take it as read that your recommendations will be accepted.

Sir Neil McIntosh: No—at the end of the day, it is not for us but for Parliament to determine these matters. However, it would be fair to say that if we present a reasoned argument, there is a strong prospect that it will be accepted.

Mr Morrison: Roughly what percentage of the UK electorate will be involved in the pilots?

Sir Neil McIntosh: The figure will vary. The percentage that I have before me is about 25 per cent, but that would probably be at the top end. I would say that between 20 and 25 per cent of the electorate will be involved. However, that depends entirely on the regions that will be selected; the number of people in the electorate varies substantially among the regions.

Irene Oldfather: I thank the commissioner for attending the meeting this afternoon. You will recall that the committee made a direct submission to you on this matter. Did you receive many submissions on the number of MEPs in Scotland and on reducing the number of seats? Have they been published? Moreover, what was the balance of views in those submissions? Were people generally arguing in favour of retaining eight MEPs as opposed to reducing the number to seven or six?

Sir Neil McIntosh: I invite Kate Sullivan to respond to that question, because she dealt with the submissions. However, as a reminder to myself, I should say that the committee's submission suggested that eight—or at the very least seven—MEPs should be retained to represent Scottish interests.

Kate Sullivan (Electoral Commission): In our report to the Government, we say that we received 66 substantive submissions and we provide a full list of the people who made them.

Dougie Wands (Electoral Commission): Many of the responses that we received concerned the

methodology that we proposed to use to determine the number of MEPs that should be allocated to each electoral region. Many of the responses from local authorities in Scotland were restricted to comments on the methodology and were not necessarily about the numbers.

However, we received several submissions, including those from Glasgow City Council and East Renfrewshire Council, that argued that Scotland should retain its allocation of eight seats. Those councils and others argued that special circumstances prevail because of Scotland's sparse population and its large geographical area, which means that Scotland should retain its eight MEPs. However, we have made it clear that the European Parliament (Representation) Act 2003 allowed us only two criteria on which to base our recommendation—that each region should have at least three MEPs and that the allocation should be balanced among regions in order to provide the fairest ratio of MEPs to electors throughout the UK.

Irene Oldfather: Of the 66 submissions, how many argued for the number of MEPs to be reduced?

Dougie Wands: I do not think that any responses from Scotland argued directly for the number of MEPs to be reduced.

Sir Neil McIntosh: It is fair to say that the consultation was primarily on the method of calculation. The overlay that came through, predominantly from a Scottish background, was in favour of retaining the number of MEPs for a variety of reasons that did not relate directly to the calculation method.

Irene Oldfather: Sir Neil McIntosh said that the Electoral Commission was looking for the method of calculation to provide an even and fair distribution. Was any account taken of issues such as peripherality, rurality and geography? Did you have no scope for manoeuvre or flexibility? Were those matters not factored in?

Sir Neil McIntosh: They could not be factored in because the remit was specific. To give as balanced a response as possible, I should say that when we compare measures such as the Sainte-Laguë system and the d'Hondt system, which a number of people favoured, the d'Hondt system tends to favour larger groupings in the balancing process, whereas the Sainte-Laguë system provides a more even spread. That was the advice to us, which was the backdrop. Even in the methods of calculation, a test of fairness must be applied to achieve the best result. Issues such as peripherality and representation of the Scottish nation in Europe are matters for the Scottish Parliament and the Westminster Parliament.

Irene Oldfather: Some people might take issue with what is fair.

Sir Neil McIntosh: I accept that, but I am talking about fairness in our remit.

Irene Oldfather: Either there is a numeric calculation or there is not. I understand what you say about having an even spread, but if fairness is factored in, we are entitled to ask what fairness is. The commission received 66 submissions in which nobody recommended reducing the number of MEPs and a significant number—particularly of the weighty submissions that have been described—suggested that peripherality and rurality should be taken into consideration, because people believe that some flexibility should be available and that the calculation should not be a simple numeric one. Given that, the committee might question what “fairness” means.

Sir Neil McIntosh: It would be difficult for us to recommend that the current number of MEPs be retained. The new number for the UK has been given, which means that the number of MEPs for the UK must be reduced. If we went beyond our remit, we would take on improper responsibilities.

The Convener: I ask for clarification, because the situation that we are considering is strange. You suggest that the criteria for the consultation exercise were set so tightly that you could not come up with any recommendation other than that there should be seven MEPs. Will you clarify who set the criteria and how they were set?

15:00

Sir Neil McIntosh: The criteria were set by the Government. The terms of the remit that we were given were quite precise, so we went out to consultation on the issue of how we might arrive at a calculation that best met the remit that we had been given. To go beyond that would take us into entirely different territory, which—I suggest—is parliamentary territory.

Mrs Ewing: Who took the decision to reduce the UK's share of seats from 87 to 78?

Sir Neil McIntosh: Not the Electoral Commission.

Mrs Ewing: Did the UK Government or the European Commission take that decision? Who took it?

Sir Neil McIntosh: It is a consequence of the Nice treaty.

Mrs Ewing: Was it decided as part of that treaty that the reduction would be accepted?

Sir Neil McIntosh: Obviously, I cannot speak for the Government. The Government gave the Electoral Commission a very clear remit for presenting a report; that was where we were and that is what we have had to do.

The Convener: Before I bring in Phil Gallie, I want to ask what the purpose of the consultation exercise was, if there was no room for manoeuvre.

Sir Neil McIntosh: The consultation was to ask for people's views. There is a range of methods of calculating the distribution across the UK. In parts of the UK, the use of the d'Hondt method is the most familiar. The commission set out the range of fields and then proposed two that it thought were the most balanced and best met our remit. As a result of feedback and representations that we received, a third was proposed, which is the method that we have recommended, because it is clearly established that, statistically, that is the best way to arrive at a reasonable result.

The Convener: Are there any other methods of calculation that would have arrived at a figure other than seven MEPs? If so, what would the figure have been?

Sir Neil McIntosh: I will let Kate Sullivan answer on the fine detail. My understanding is that the figures revolved around that in relation to the calculation of the number of MEPs.

Kate Sullivan: As the report will say, we considered various other methods and formulas that could be used. If those other formulas had been applied, none would have resulted in anything other than the move from eight MEPs to seven. The only way in which that could not have been a consequence was if there had been a separate calculation to retain eight MEPs. That would have had two consequences. It would have involved taking a seat from somewhere else and it would have meant that the numerical quotient would not be applied correctly and the calculation would be distorted.

We conducted a discussion and produced a report and a review of methods of calculation; such a method was what we were required to recommend to the Government.

The Convener: If no other calculations would have achieved a figure of eight MEPs, would any other calculations have achieved a figure of fewer than seven MEPs?

Kate Sullivan: I am not sure about that. I can take that on notice.

Phil Gallie: I am not being light-hearted but, given that Irene Oldfather mentioned fairness, I have to say that we are talking about European elections.

On a serious note, I want to return to something that Bill Miller said. He said that one of the Electoral Commission's objectives was to promote interest in electoral matters. Given that the commission is an independent body, I would have thought that, during elections, it would be up to the politicians to promote interest in electoral matters.

Will you comment on Bill Miller's words and on whether I have interpreted them wrongly?

Sir Neil McIntosh: There is probably a distinction between interest in elections and interest in electoral matters. We are anxious to educate and advise people, especially young people, about electoral issues and the opportunities for electing candidates.

As regards the public interest in elections, the prime responsibility for motivating people to come out and vote must inevitably rest with the politicians, the political parties and those who engage in elections. The Electoral Commission has an interest in ensuring that there are no barriers that mean that people who wish to vote are unable to do so, and in exploring and advising on any means of improving the electoral process so that more people choose to turn out and vote. You are right that the Electoral Commission cannot address turnout issues on its own.

Phil Gallie: I am quite happy with that response, but I recognise the complications that could lie behind the issue.

I will pick up on a point that relates to a comment that Bill Miller made in an answer to the convener about staggering people who go out to vote and when they vote. My understanding is that in this country exit polls are not permitted on election days. However, what would in effect be an almighty exit poll could take place in Scotland before the election had taken place in other parts of the UK. Bill Miller suggested that that is not likely to affect the way that people vote, but experience suggests that it would affect the way that people vote, which is why exit polls are banned on election days. Will there be any restriction on what would, in effect, be exit polls in Scotland?

Sir Neil McIntosh: It is necessary to define an exit poll. I presume that "Have you voted yet?" and "How have you voted?" are the questions that would be asked in an exit poll. The questions would try to establish what the trend was in terms of the number of people who have voted. Over a longer time scale that creates an opportunity for political parties to pursue those who have not voted to try to encourage them to come out.

I will touch on some of the issues that Phil Gallie's question raises. One is the question of the availability of a marked register. There is currently no marked register for postal ballots in elections, but the view of the Electoral Commission is that if there is to be a full postal ballot, there should be a marked register. It should not be available prior to the end of voting, so that people could not tell who had voted in the run-up to an election, but it would be a means of maximising anti-fraud measures thereafter. That would make the full postal ballot

the same as other elections. In the normal course of events there is a marked register for an election, so there is no reason why there should not be one for postal ballots.

Such an exit poll would become a poll about how many people have turned out and the nature of their response, and we would take it from there.

Phil Gallie: I am not sure that I agree with that. I would have thought that, given the way that our media work these days, it would not be difficult, using telephone calls and so on, to establish the likely percentage of the electorate that has voted and the way in which they have voted. In that case the Scottish results from the postal vote could be published well before election day.

Sir Neil McIntosh: Yes—I agree that such a perception could be published.

Kate Sullivan: The current draft of the legislation for next year's European Parliament elections would preclude publication of exit polls before the close of the poll in the last member state to vote, which means Sunday, when the votes are counted and declared. Whether there is a postal vote or a conventional ballot, no exit poll from the UK can be reported on until the Sunday night.

Phil Gallie: That is the answer that I want. There is a ban.

There have been a series of wildcat strikes in the Royal Mail. What contingency plans will you put together to address that problem? What would the time scale be for a last-minute reversal to a full normal ballot if such industrial action jeopardised the postal vote?

Sir Neil McIntosh: That issue has come very much into focus in the past week. In pilots to date, and in any future pilots, the expectation is that returning officers would have contingency plans in place. The way in which those would be exercised would vary according to the nature of the problem. Kate Sullivan may want to expand on the detail of the responses to different circumstances.

Kate Sullivan: Much would depend on the scale of the industrial action and at what stage in the electoral process it took place. In previous pilot postal ballots we have made provision for either suspension of the poll—in effect extending the time for the election—or abandonment of the postal channel and going back to polling stations.

It is not clear in regional elections at what stage it would be necessary to abandon the postal option and go back to polling stations. We would also have to take into account the fact that, as you noted, many people might already have posted their ballots. We are considering whether we would count those ballots or whether those people would be allowed to come to the polling station.

We are talking to returning officers about that in the context of regional pilots. If there is a sudden wildcat action, mailboxes can be sealed earlier in the process than we saw in London last week. The Royal Mail has committed to doing that if there was such industrial action.

Because the pilots will go ahead only in certain parts of the country, there exists the ability, if required, to divert mail from affected areas into those that are not affected. There is also the ability to increase the number of delivery points that are in use so that people have an alternative place to take their ballot papers if the ballot papers have been delivered to the voters before strike action starts. The issue is topical and we are in discussions with the Royal Mail and returning officers to see what actions we need to build into our plans and into the statutory instruments that will underlie the pilots, so that any action that we take is transparent and lawful.

Phil Gallie: I agree that all those things have to be done, but I would like to see them down in black and white before the decision is made. I remind you that it is one thing to postpone an election in a local authority, particularly if it is a by-election, but it is another thing to talk about international elections' taking place on a common election day in 25 countries throughout Europe. Serious consideration must be given to that.

Mr Home Robertson: I have a small practical point. I understand that if for some reason someone does not return their postal vote by post, the facility is currently available for them to hand in their ballot at the polling station on polling day. Obviously, if there are no polling stations on polling day, that will not be possible. What facilities can be made available to cover that eventuality?

Sir Neil McIntosh: There is a recommendation that delivery points be made available for that purpose.

Mr Home Robertson: How few and how far between?

Kate Sullivan: The number of delivery points is an issue for regional returning officers in co-ordination with local returning officers. Our recommendation is that there should be one delivery point in every local authority area. That is a bare minimum that will work only in small metropolitan areas such as there are in England.

Mr Home Robertson: So someone in Barra would have to go to Stornoway.

Kate Sullivan: We are not suggesting that one delivery point would be sufficient for the more geographically dispersed areas.

Mr Home Robertson: I am glad about that.

Kate Sullivan: The delivery points would be staffed so that there would be security for the

ballot box and assistance for the voters. There would be access to the tactile ballot template for people with visual impairment. There would be access to information in other languages for voters who require that. People would also be able to get a replacement ballot paper if they could prove that something had happened to the one that was posted to them. Those services would be open until the close of the poll.

Mrs Ewing: There are a lot of interesting issues coming up but I was particularly interested in your response to Phil Gallie about the ban on exit polls. How are you going to enforce that? Does it mean that we are going to have to monitor the media throughout the UK or Europe? How would that be implemented? Who is going to monitor it?

Kate Sullivan: The enforcement of that provision is a matter for the UK Government, not the Electoral Commission.

Mrs Ewing: Your submission mentions a deadline of 8 December. The use of exit polls and how they influence results is a matter of concern to all of us in the UK and elsewhere. If there is to be a ban on exit polls, surely by 8 December at the latest there should be in place firm legislative proposals to ensure that the ban is not broken.

Kate Sullivan: The provision is not new; it already exists in UK electoral law and it has to be slightly changed for the European Parliament to extend it past the close of the poll, which is the normal deadline, to the close of the poll in the final member state. There are already mechanisms in place to ensure that the regulation is not broken. The provision also occurs in other EU countries. France has a very strict ban on that sort of advertising.

Mrs Ewing: It is not something that I have observed in the media of member states during many European elections. An example is when the media were saying that the Liberal Democrats had won the Highlands and Islands, which was not true because my party had won.

I am not convinced that the Electoral Commission has considered the matter seriously in terms of influencing people. If we are moving to a postal ballot, it seems to me that we would have to start the ban at least four weeks in advance. In that month, the regulations would have to provide a total ban on telecanvassing, which Bill Miller mentioned, and other matters. How complex will the regulations be and who will police them?

Sir Neil McIntosh: That is a fair question—we will want to pursue that issue.

Mrs Ewing: Can it be pursued by 8 December?

Sir Neil McIntosh: Our task is to submit a report by 8 December. If, in our report, we find that that issue is a key element, we will pick it up. Margaret

Ewing has raised an important point, but I would like to be satisfied that we have covered it fully and addressed it in our report. That is the proper way in which to deal with the question. I cannot give more detail than that, but we should be capable of answering the question.

15:15

Mrs Ewing: Thank you for that—I feel strongly about that issue.

In Bill Miller's evidence to the committee—I see that he is still here—he said that the returning officers who are, in essence, the chief executives of local authorities, have two strong reservations about the postal ballots. You have referred to the time limit of 8 December. Will you enlighten me on what those two strong reservations are? Can those issues be resolved by 8 December? It is already 4 November and, as all members of the committee are politicians, we know how time flies and how difficult it is to reach solutions.

Given that there have been only three tests of postal balloting, which were in local government wards, is it right to transfer the system to the whole of Scotland for the European elections?

Sir Neil McIntosh: I expect that one of the main concerns of returning officers is about ensuring that the regulations come through in good time. That is always a problem, but with pilots it is an even greater problem. Regulations have been late repeatedly, but thanks to the returning officers' essential skills, they have been implemented. That is a fundamental concern. The second concern is about resourcing. A commitment that the necessary costs will be met is required.

Mrs Ewing: On resourcing, would postal ballots work out cheaper than closing schools for a day?

Sir Neil McIntosh: I can give you only a personal view on that—I do not think that postal ballots would be cheaper. However, one benefit of a major pilot such as the one we are discussing is that it would allow us to establish the cost. The question whether postal ballots would be cheaper per vote cast is different and raises other issues.

Where returning officers are required to carry out a postal ballot, their concern will be that sufficient resources are available. I understand that the Government has said that it will provide additional resources for regions that carry out postal ballots, where it is established that such resources are necessary. That issue is still to be determined.

Mrs Ewing: Are you confident that the regulations will be produced in time?

Sir Neil McIntosh: They have to be produced in time although, in practice, regulations tend not to

come through as quickly as we might wish. I am sure that the Electoral Commission's view is that having the regulations in place is fundamental to running a viable pilot. The regulations will allow the forms to be developed and carried through and they will allow a range of other measures. The time scale would be tight and one factor in that would be how quickly the Government responds in developing the regulations.

Mrs Ewing: How will the views of the Scottish Parliament be fed into the process? Will we have the opportunity to debate the regulations, or will they be debated solely at Westminster?

Kate Sullivan: There is a two-stream track. The regulations that provide for the detailed running of the European Parliament elections are produced by the UK Parliament and were released for public consultation last Friday—you may be interested in them because they contain the exit-poll provisions. Those regulations are out for public consultation until December. Separately, the UK Parliament is considering legislation that would allow pilot schemes to be run next year, because that is not possible under the existing legislation on pilots.

After the legislation receives royal assent, two further regulations will be made as statutory instruments to provide for pilots in the specified regions and for the detailed running of the pilots. Once again, my understanding is that those instruments would be put only to the UK Parliament.

Mrs Ewing: I hate using the word "region" about Scotland, but none of the other regions in the UK that are being considered as pilots has a Parliament. Surely there must be a role for the Scottish Parliament in examining the regulations and the operation of the pilot.

Sir Neil McIntosh: I would rather not declare an opinion on that. There are reserved matters and those matters are handled in various ways, but our task is to submit proposals to the Westminster Parliament. Clearly, however, if there is a need for direct consultation between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster, I am sure that that will take place.

Mrs Ewing: Does that mean that the proposal might be dealt with in a Sewel motion, which might get an hour in the chamber, or an hour and a half if we are lucky? The matter is not only for this committee to consider; it is a matter for the whole Parliament to consider. What is the recommended involvement of the Scottish Parliament in such a major decision?

The Convener: Those are fair questions, but I am not sure that the representatives of the Electoral Commission are best placed to answer them.

Mrs Ewing: Perhaps they will take the points on board. You are a true politician, convener.

Irene Oldfather: Sir Neil said that adequate funding would be available to returning officers to operate the postal ballot. Will that come from the full pot of resources or will additional money be available to increase voter turnout, particularly in European Parliament elections?

Sir Neil McIntosh: Resources are made available to the Electoral Commission to deal with the election across the UK. We would expect additional resources to be made available to those regions in which there will be an all-postal ballot in order to ensure that the public are aware that a new arrangement has been made.

Kate Sullivan: The funding that the returning officer receives to run the pilot scheme will include funding for publicity costs. The Government has been clear that it considers the provision by returning officers of impartial information about the voting methods to be part of the pilot scheme.

In relation to our voter awareness responsibilities under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, we are funded separately to provide information for the various elections. We will run an overarching campaign to encourage people to vote in 2004. In the pilot regions the campaign will be targeted on discussing the new method of voting and the different time scale involved—we do not want people in an all-postal ballot region to be looking for their polling station on 10 June.

Irene Oldfather: Bearing in mind the time scale involved, how do you think that the information that is made available will evolve and what are your plans for making it more widely available?

Dougie Wands: Ahead of the Scottish Parliament elections in May, we commenced a UK-wide campaign, as there were local government elections in England and elections for the National Assembly for Wales on the same day. Starting in February, the campaign initially sought to raise awareness of the need to register to vote. After that, it promoted postal voting for those who might have found that helpful. Following that, there was a call to vote on 1 May.

Ahead of the elections in June 2004, we will run an overarching UK campaign explaining to people that the elections are coming. In relation to registration, we will target groups such as students and others who might have moved house recently to let them know that there is still time for them to register. Again, we will then run a campaign to encourage people to register for a postal vote if they want one, as people outwith the pilot regions will still be able to do so. There will be a different approach in the pilot regions, as Sir Neil and Kate Sullivan have explained. In those regions, we will

direct a lot of resources at the local media to ensure that the electorate in those areas are aware of the changes. We will also support initiatives such as outreach activity to encourage young people to use their vote. There will be a mix of media. We will use television, radio, billboard and other advertising methods and will endeavour to tailor that mix in the pilot areas.

Irene Oldfather: That campaign is welcome. It is important to get information into the public domain. Do you have a figure on how much that will cost? Will that money come from the Government?

Dougie Wands: The money will be made available to the Electoral Commission. We have a budget for that. The budget for the promotion of the European Parliament elections is not absolutely fixed yet, but suffice it to say that it will be several million pounds over this financial year and the next. We will finalise that budget in the next few weeks. The promotion will use a mix of the campaign methods that I described and, once we have established the different media that we will use, we will be able to confirm the budget.

The Convener: I want to round the discussion up by half past, which gives us a few minutes.

Phil Gallie: Irene Oldfather got to the nub of the issue: the cost. You said that the promotion of the European Parliament election will cost several million pounds; what was the cost of, and how much did you have for, the elections in May this year?

Dougie Wands: I do not know the budget figure for the United Kingdom as a whole.

Phil Gallie: Will you provide the committee with those figures?

Dougie Wands: Yes.

Mr Home Robertson: As we are running out of time, I will ask a completely different question. In other parts of the European Union, it is regarded a civic duty to vote, even if it is not obligatory, and there are other parts of the world where it is obligatory to vote. Has any thought been given to making voting obligatory in any part of the European Union or the United Kingdom? Does such an approach work?

Sir Neil McIntosh: It works in countries that have such provisions—the best example is probably Australia, which has a legal requirement to vote—but it depends on the culture and background of the country. The Electoral Commission would not rule that out—we have to be open to all sorts of arguments—but if we can achieve improvements through other means, as we have done, that is what we should probably do as the first stage. Postal voting has demonstrated a capacity to make improvements in by-elections.

In three by-elections in Scotland where that method was used, the turnout was 65 per cent, which is double what it would have been, and we have seen the same pattern throughout the United Kingdom. Piloting is therefore probably the most realistic and immediate way of showing what the effect of postal voting will be on a wider scale. The other issues are obviously there in the background.

Mr Home Robertson: You are like a politician: you answered everything but the question I asked, but never mind.

The Convener: Would it have been more sensible to introduce postal voting across the board rather than go for pilots?

Sir Neil McIntosh: I favour the use of pilots because of the public confidence issue. Concerns have been expressed today, and to move lock, stock and barrel to postal voting across the piece would be a big step to take unless we were satisfied that we had worked through and resolved all the issues. Pilots have been carried out in local government elections, and the view of the commission in England and Wales is that postal voting is ready for use in those elections because of what the pilots have demonstrated. However, the other major elections are a different matter and, although the decision is not ours, we favour piloting. In future, legislation would be necessary to secure antifraud measures to solve wider-scale registration issues and to introduce the proposals on personation outside the polling booth that have been accepted for the pilot, as those matters are not covered in existing legislation.

Mrs Ewing: I have a brief point about administration, which might come up in the regulations. An important right for all candidates and agents, irrespective of political belief, is the right to scrutinise the opening of ballot boxes. If we were to move to full postal ballots in Scotland, would there be provision for scrutiny of ballots, as that is part of the concern about fraud and personation?

Kate Sullivan: Yes. The commission supports your theory. The issue has been addressed in the pilot schemes, and we hope to carry the solution over. Obviously, because of the large quantities, if postal votes were opened only after the close of the poll, people would still be opening them for three days before counting even started. In the pilots, postal votes are pre-verified and opened. Candidates and agents are notified of all such sessions, which are open to them for precisely the sort of scrutiny that you mention. There is no counting; it is purely a verification process, and counting at that stage is unlawful.

15:30

Mr Morrison: With a postal ballot system, is it possible to determine voting trends? With the system that we know, we are able almost to follow the ballot box, so—I am considering this from a party-political point of view—will political parties be able to determine where their weak or strong areas are?

Sir Neil McIntosh: The short answer is no. You will not be able to do that at the opening of the ballot papers. They are not opened so that we can scrutinise how people have voted; they are opened only to do a check.

The Convener: I bring the discussion to a close and thank the witnesses for coming along. The discussion has been informative. As the witnesses have heard, there are a variety of views on the committee, so I have no doubt that we will discuss the matter as soon as the witnesses depart.

I suspend the meeting for three minutes.

Mrs Ewing: Only three?

The Convener: Okay—five minutes maximum. I ask members to be back in their seats for 25 minutes to 4.

15:31

Meeting suspended.

15:39

On resuming—

The Convener: We will now discuss the evidence that we have just heard. It strikes me that we touched on three separate issues. The first is the funding issue, which has been addressed adequately. We have heard that the Electoral Commission will send us information about funding, so perhaps we can leave it at that. The other two issues are the cut in the number of MEPs for Scotland and the proposal to pilot postal voting in Scotland.

I will make a proposal that reflects what we heard and to which members may respond. There was considerable agreement about the proposal to cut the number of MEPs. Perhaps we should simply write to the relevant authorities indicating that we are not happy with the consultation and the conclusion that has been reached. Do members agree to our doing something along those lines?

Irene Oldfather: That is a fair summary of the discussion that we have had today. I want to put on the record that the Treaty of Nice argued for a reduction across the whole European Union, which was fair. If we accept the principle of enlargement, we must accept the principle of

reform. I can see that a case has been made for reducing the number of MEPs from the United Kingdom from 87 to 78. However, in Scotland we must be quite clear about why the decision has been taken in the way in which it has been taken. Today we heard that this appears to be a numerical exercise, but some of us may have understood that it would allow for flexibility. Most people who responded to the consultation asked for the issues of rurality, peripherality and geography in Scotland to be taken into account. Given that the final decision has not yet been made, there is no harm in our reiterating those arguments and saying that today we brought them to the attention of the Electoral Commission.

The Convener: It strikes me that the consultation was a bit of sham and that although tight criteria were set, a different conclusion seemed to be on the agenda for the Electoral Commission.

Mrs Ewing: In answer to a question from Irene Oldfather, it was indicated that 66 responses had been received. That information should appear in any letter that we send. The respondents to the consultation appeared to be unanimous in their views. It seems strange that in a democracy a unanimous decision should be ignored.

Phil Gallie: I put my views on record only because, unusually, I agree with Irene Oldfather.

The Convener: I wonder whether this will be the first and last time that you do.

Mr Home Robertson: Does anyone know whether Denmark's representation has been cut at all? I should have asked about that.

Irene Oldfather: The proposals are contained in a table at the end of the draft constitution, although I cannot recall the details. John Edward from the European Parliament office in Scotland is nodding.

The Convener: I have a feeling that the number of MEPs from Denmark has been cut to 14, but do not quote me on that. The number has definitely been cut.

Do we agree to send a strong letter along the lines that we have discussed?

Phil Gallie: It may be worth registering the fact that before the establishment of the Scottish Parliament special recognition was given in the UK Parliament to the issues that Irene Oldfather mentioned. I do not see why the same considerations should not be carried over to the argument about Scotland's representation in the European Parliament. There might be some advantage if the letter were to reflect that.

The Convener: Those are fair points. We will proceed on that basis.

The remaining item that was central to the discussion was the proposal that Scotland should be one of the three regions in the UK in which postal voting is piloted. I am not sure that the committee is unanimous in its view of the benefits of such a pilot. Given that we have until 8 December to respond on this issue, would it be an idea to invite the clerks and members to reflect on members' comments as recorded in the *Official Report* and to present options for the letter in which we will express our view?

Irene Oldfather: I thought that there was almost a consensus on this issue. I am not sure that any member disagreed with the principle of postal voting. Members simply had a few caveats and wanted to ensure that the timetable was right and that validation took place.

Phil Gallie: Irene Oldfather has put me in a slightly difficult position. Once again, we are tinkering with the electoral system to make up for our—politicians'—inadequacies. In the past we achieved high turnouts, which have gradually diminished as faith in politicians has dropped off. I have some reservations about the proposal.

It seems to me that we are changing the rules on the way in which we vote simply to make up for our own inadequacies. That said, the Electoral Commission has been given a remit by the UK Government. The postal ballot may be conducted in Scotland and, as part of the UK, we have to take our share of the responsibility for such things. If the commission is to go for the pilot, my preference would be for it to do so on a much wider scale. It should go for nine out of the 12 European Parliament electoral regions and not only for three. That would show that it has faith in its own view that the pilots are fine.

Bill Miller made the point that we should go easy on this subject and that we should use a simple example. However, we are talking about piloting a system that will be adopted for future elections. If too simple an approach is taken in the first instance, surely that would undervalue the pilot.

15:45

Mrs Ewing: As politicians, all members of the committee know the importance of postal ballots. Irene Oldfather said that no one was arguing against the principle. That is fair enough. All of us agree that we want a larger turnout.

The caveats that various members of the committee expressed during the course of our discussions with Bill Miller and the Electoral Commission are strong enough to justify further discussions. When I receive the *Official Report* of the meeting, I will take the opportunity to reflect on what was said and return to the subject, possibly at our next meeting. I would rather take a decision at that point than take one today.

The Convener: I would be happy for an options paper to be prepared. There is a lot of agreement among the members on some of the issues. We could incorporate all the proposed options.

Mr Home Robertson: We do not have a lot of time.

The Convener: The Electoral Commission has invited responses by the end of November, but it will not take its decision until early December. I am sure that that gives us time to reach a view at our next meeting and to communicate it to the Electoral Commission. Do members agree on that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Executive (Scrutiny)

15:46

The Convener: We move to the next item, which is pre and post-council scrutiny. Once again, the Executive has helpfully given us a paper that analyses forthcoming agendas. The paper helps us in our scrutiny role. As ever, we have the usual options of noting points and issues, writing to ministers and taking evidence. I invite comments on the paper.

Mrs Ewing: My point is in connection with the forthcoming agriculture and fisheries council. I think that a preliminary meeting is to be held on 17 and 18 November. Perhaps the committee should write to find out exactly what is happening. According to an article in *The Scotsman* today about the Royal Society of Edinburgh's inquiry into the issues underlying the current fishing crisis, the society has revealed that

"its final report will not now be published before next month's crucial meeting of the European fisheries council in Brussels".

On 30 October, we discussed rural development in the chamber. I intervened on Ross Finnie to ask what was happening to the Prime Minister's special strategy unit report, which Ben Bradshaw is heading up. Ross Finnie said that he could not give an undertaking that the report would be available in time for the fisheries council.

It is worrying that two reports are being prepared somewhere down the line and will not be available for the fisheries council. Should we follow up on that point with the Royal Society of Edinburgh and Ben Bradshaw at the House of Commons? A lot of money is being spent on this and we should have something a bit more positive before the council meets.

The Convener: Okay, we could easily send off a letter asking for the time scales and for clarification of what role the reports will have in the Government's thinking. Do members have other issues to raise?

Irene Oldfather: I want to raise something in relation to the previous paper. Given that we are still on the subject of the fisheries council, I welcome the fact that the setting up of regional advisory councils is on the agenda. After all, the committee made that proposal in its report on the common fisheries policy. I know that the Parliament has widely supported the proposal and it is important to see that some of the committee's work is being taken forward. I hope that some progress will be made on the issue, because it will be an important step forward in including stakeholders in decisions.

Mr Home Robertson: The same page of the report mentions an

"amendment to Council Decision 431/2001 on a financial contribution by the Community to Member States' expenditure incurred in implementing the control, inspection and surveillance systems applicable to the CFP".

I am sure that I read somewhere that the Scottish Executive is about to spend some money on replacing two fishery protection vessels. Given that those vessels are enforcing the CFP, it would be nice to think that we could receive European funding to cover some of those costs.

I recall that when I worked in the fisheries division of the Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department one of our fishery protection vessels was working further out into the Atlantic on behalf of the European Union in relation to the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission. At present, there is practically no control in that respect. As far as fisheries conservation is concerned, I agree that we face a difficult job in the North sea and in close waters. However, if the EU is serious about the matter, it must recognise that there is a lot to do out in the Atlantic and that we do not have the wherewithal at the moment. If that issue is on the agenda and if European money might be available to address it, Scotland as a peripheral fisheries nation that is trying to do its bit about enforcement should be looking for some of that funding. I would have thought that it might be worth exploring the matter further.

The Convener: We could easily do so, if members have no objections.

Irene Oldfather: I note that reform of the common agricultural policy, particularly in relation to sugar and tobacco, is on the same agenda. I know that we are about to have a debate on the matter in the chamber.

The Convener: Two debates.

Irene Oldfather: I am happy to note the position that has been set out and hope that there will be opportunities to explore the matter further.

If no one has any other comments about the agriculture and fisheries council, I would like to go to the competitiveness council's agenda of 10 and 11 November, which includes an item on a communication on the aerospace industry. The issue is very dear to Phil Gallie and me because we have particular constituency involvement in it and have received representations about it. The communication is very important indeed and although our pre and post-council scrutiny paper says that there is no distinct Scottish aspect to it, I am aware that 15,000 people and 140 companies in Scotland are involved in the aerospace industry.

People in the aerospace industry will point out that there are skill shortages in other parts of

Europe and that it is important to alert other parts of Europe to Scottish skills in that industry. They also highlight the fact that the uptake and capacity building of companies that are based outwith Scotland could be better. As a result, I note that skill shortages for us are not the same as they are in other centres of aerospace activity in Europe.

People in the industry will also say that they would like European funding to be better targeted and focused. Indeed, supported work force pilot projects have been introduced—I think that there is one in Hamburg—and perhaps they could be examined and rolled out across other member states. I could see a role for the aerospace industry in Scotland in using up some of that money by extending the pilots. We should ask the Executive for more information about the supported work force project in Hamburg and whether we could borrow any aspects of it that might be relevant to the aerospace industry in Scotland, such as simplification and targeting of funding. Much of that industry is centred on Prestwick, which is in the neighbouring constituency to mine. The issue has implications for the whole of Ayrshire and Scotland.

The Convener: The section on the competitiveness council also mentions the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and the Council on insurance against civil liability in respect of the use of motor vehicles. As the briefing states, one extremely contentious article of the proposed directive relates to motorists who are involved in an accident with cyclists or pedestrians. That article would mean that motorists would be liable in virtually 100 per cent of such accidents. It would be worth while to seek an update on the proposed directive to find out whether that is a realistic proposal, because it might be controversial in Scotland.

Point 19 on the competitiveness council relates to a proposal for the chemical products package, which also has relevance to Scotland. The Executive states that it has taken a close interest in the development of those proposals because of the significant manufacturing presence of the chemicals industry in Scotland. We should keep an eye on the outcome to find out whether there are any implications for Scotland.

Phil Gallie: I agree with Irene Oldfather's points on the aerospace industry, and with you, convener, on the point about road vehicles. The briefing emphasises how much intrusion there is from Europe into the Scottish and UK way of life, in the most unexpected ways.

I highlight points 4 and 6 on the competitiveness council, which relate to intellectual property. I understand that changes to the directive involved are being forced through by the major worldwide information technology companies. The directive has already been amended by the European

Parliament to represent the Commission's original proposals. The further changes seem rather antidemocratic and it might be worth while to try to get more information about the matter.

The Convener: I remind members that if they want an issue brought back on to the agenda as a separate item, they should notify the convener. We will look sympathetically on such requests.

The second paper that relates to the agenda item contains correspondence that we have received from ministers on issues that we raised previously. The lengthy and helpful letter from Ross Finnie on a range of issues refers to genetically modified crops, which are a big issue at present in the Parliament. I wonder whether the committee should request that our legal adviser produce some basic advice on the relationship between Europe and the Scottish Parliament on GM crops.

Mr Morrison: I was interested in the letter from Ross Finnie, particularly in the section giving the depressing facts and figures about the tobacco industry. The part of the letter on GM crops is only two paragraphs, which makes it possibly the shortest section in the letter, with the exception of the part on veterinary medicines, but Ross Finnie clarifies the relationship between the Scottish Parliament and Europe and what is expected under the Commission's guidance. I cannot think what Ross Finnie could add to the second paragraph of that section, which is on page 9 of the document.

The Convener: I am interested in Parliament's viewpoint and in ensuring that the committee has the best information available, given the role that Europe will have in the debate. I do not want a big debate on GM crops now, but are there any other views on the matter?

Mr Morrison: I read the paper with interest. It clarifies exactly what the position is and I am not very interested in pressing the issue further. If there are any nuggets of information that we have not received, let us seek them, by all means. However, as John Home Robertson said, I think that Ross Finnie has cogently explained the situation.

Irene Oldfather: I welcome the level of detail in the paper in relation to sugar and tobacco. I will find it useful if I get an opportunity to speak in the CAP debate later this week. It raises a number of interesting points and I welcome its comprehensiveness.

Mr Home Robertson: It is good stuff.

The Convener: I notice that there are two CAP debates on Thursday: one sponsored by the Greens; and one by the Executive. That means that you will have two chances to speak.

Convener's Report

16:00

The Convener: You have before you a paper that gives you a quick update on our work programme and provides a tentative schedule for evidence taking in relation to our inquiries.

Irene Oldfather: We might have a full debate in the chamber on the CFP and the December meeting of the fisheries council. If there is such a debate, there could be a bit of duplication of effort.

Mr Home Robertson: Last week, Ross Finnie said that he intends to hold a full day's debate on the CFP—

Mrs Ewing: If given approval. It is not a 100 per cent commitment. Perhaps we could bring our influence to bear on the business managers.

Mr Home Robertson: The issue is important, but we might be in danger of overkill. If there is going to be a full day's debate in the chamber in which members can ask questions of the minister and provide information that will reinforce his position in the coming negotiations, is it really necessary to trawl over the same territory in this committee?

The Convener: I appreciate your views. I had planned to discuss this issue separately later on, but I am happy to have that discussion at this point, as it relates to our work programme.

I appreciate that the date of the debate in the chamber was not known when we discussed the matter and invited the ministers to the committee. However, the situation is that we have invited the ministers and I am keen to draw a distinction between the role of this committee and that of the chamber, given the differing atmosphere in which scrutiny takes place in the two contexts.

Irene Oldfather: I think that we consulted the Environment and Rural Development Committee in relation to this matter. In the past, the job of scrutinising these matters has fallen to that committee. In the previous session of the Parliament, the European Committee produced a report on the CFP because the Rural Development Committee was weighed down with primary legislation. However, that decision was taken on the basis that we would deal with the matter in exceptional circumstances rather than as a matter of routine.

You make a distinction between this committee's scrutiny of the matter and the chamber's role in that process, but I am not sure that this committee is the best place for that function to be carried out. The Environment and Rural Development

Committee should normally be the place where the CFP is considered.

The Convener: The convener of the Environment and Rural Development Committee, Sarah Boyack, indicated to me that that committee would be unable to fit the matter into its agenda and was keen for us to pursue it.

Mr Morrison: I am a member of that committee and can tell you that we have a heavy legislative burden.

Phil Gallie: In that case, we should go ahead with the planned meeting with the minister. As you say, convener, a committee is able to push the Executive and investigate matters but, often, a debate in the chamber merely gives members of all parties an opportunity to make bland statements that go unchallenged. That cannot happen in a committee, however, as it is an inquisitory forum that can play a valuable role.

Mr Home Robertson: Far be it from me to take any pressure off Ross Finnie—it would be out of character for me to do that—but having been on the ministerial side of this issue I know that ministers have a hell of a busy time in the month before the December fisheries council. The problem is that there is now only one minister with responsibility for fisheries. When I was a minister, responsibility was shared between the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs. I gather that Ross Finnie is now dealing with all fisheries matters himself. He will take part in meetings with fishermen and fishermen's organisations around the country and will be involved in very important negotiations with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in London, both directly and through his officials. If there is to be a debate in the Parliament, is it really in our interest to take another day out of his time at that pressure moment? I am not sure that it is.

The Convener: I appreciate your comments. We are trying to be as flexible as possible. We have a tentative date for the minister to appear before us in early December.

Mrs Ewing: I see no reason why there should not be both an appearance by the minister before the committee and a chamber debate. That happened in September and October 2002 and again at the beginning of this year, when Ross Finnie and Elliot Morley gave evidence to the Rural Development Committee and there was a debate in the chamber on 19 February.

At issue here are the scrutiny rights of the European and External Relations Committee. As Phil Gallie said, members of the committee are often in agreement. We should press for both an appearance by the minister before the committee and a chamber debate. I appreciate that there are

time pressures on ministers, but the arrival of a December fisheries council is not exactly the world's greatest surprise or Christmas gift. I have already indicated that the Ben Bradshaw inquiry will not be able to report until after the fisheries council. One of the main questions that we as elected members should ask is, "Why not?"

The Convener: It is the Tony Blair inquiry.

Mrs Ewing: Yes, but it is headed by Ben Bradshaw.

The Convener: I sense that members are relatively happy to proceed with the proposal, given that we are the only committee that is currently able to take evidence from the minister. Other committees are not in a position to do that.

Mr Morrison: Earlier, you referred to flexibility. If it becomes apparent that we will be retracing our steps, we should not invite the minister to appear before the committee. If such a meeting will add to the process and be of assistance to the minister as well as to us as scrutineers, by all means let us take the belt-and-braces approach. However, if it is simply a matter of retracing steps we should waste neither the minister's nor the committee's time.

The Convener: We accept that we do not want to waste the minister's time. At the moment we have a tentative date on which to take evidence from the minister, which we hope will be okay. If not, we will have to play things by ear.

The next item is the monthly report on the Parliament's external liaison activities.

Mrs Ewing: Before we move on, I draw your attention to point 3 in the convener's report, which relates to the nordic states and institutions.

The Convener: That is a separate item. We are still going through the report.

Do members have any comments on the Parliament's external liaison activities? Once again, I thank members of the committee who have taken part in such activities in recent weeks. Last week, I had to pull out of a couple of events due to personal circumstances, but that was unavoidable.

Mrs Ewing: You were changing nappies.

The Convener: The next item is correspondence with the Executive on the IGC and on links with the nordic states and Nordic Council. I recommend that we thank ministers for their responses and note them. Keith Raffan, who has a specific interest in the Nordic Council, is not here.

Mrs Ewing: I draw the committee's attention to the meeting about two weeks ago of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, which Alasdair Morrison and I attended as members.

Mr Home Robertson: Have you sobered up yet?

Mrs Ewing: Irish hospitality is something else.

The Convener: Let us not go there.

Mrs Ewing: I am a member of Committee B of the BIIPB, which deals with European affairs. The committee is working on a report about relationships between the UK and the Nordic Council. A visit to Oslo is planned for December and an attempt is being made to arrange a meeting with the Baltic Council of Ministers. Although the external liaison unit is dealing with that, it might be helpful for our clerks to have an update on that report, because there is no point in our recycling everything if we can pick up information from that.

The Convener: As members have no more comments on the subject, we will move on.

Sift

16:09

The Convener: The next agenda item is our new and improved sift document. Members will note that documents of special importance have been highlighted and that helpful information about them has been provided. I expect us to return to several of those documents in future discussions on issues such as the CFP and regional funding, so do we agree that action is not required right now?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank members for attending today's helpful meeting and I look forward to seeing them at our next meeting in two weeks' time.

Meeting closed at 16:10.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

No proofs of the *Official Report* can be supplied. Members who want to suggest corrections for the archive edition should mark them clearly in the daily edition, and send it to the Official Report, 375 High Street, Edinburgh EH99 1SP. Suggested corrections in any other form cannot be accepted.

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Friday 14 November 2003

Members who want reprints of their speeches (within one month of the date of publication) may obtain request forms and further details from the Central Distribution Office, the Document Supply Centre or the Official Report.

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

DAILY EDITIONS

Single copies: £5

Meetings of the Parliament annual subscriptions: £350.00

The archive edition of the *Official Report* of meetings of the Parliament, written answers and public meetings of committees will be published on CD-ROM.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT, compiled by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, contains details of past and forthcoming business and of the work of committees and gives general information on legislation and other parliamentary activity.

Single copies: £3.75

Special issue price: £5

Annual subscriptions: £150.00

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £3.75

Annual subscriptions: £150.00

Standing orders will be accepted at the Document Supply Centre.

Published in Edinburgh by The Stationery Office Limited and available from:

The Stationery Office Bookshop
71 Lothian Road
Edinburgh EH3 9AZ
0870 606 5566 Fax 0870 606 5588

The Stationery Office Bookshops at:
123 Kingsway, London WC2B 6PQ
Tel 020 7242 6393 Fax 020 7242 6394
68-69 Bull Street, Birmingham B4 6AD
Tel 0121 236 9696 Fax 0121 236 9699
33 Wine Street, Bristol BS1 2BQ
Tel 01179 264306 Fax 01179 294515
9-21 Princess Street, Manchester M60 8AS
Tel 0161 834 7201 Fax 0161 833 0634
16 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GD
Tel 028 9023 8451 Fax 028 9023 5401
The Stationery Office Oriel Bookshop,
18-19 High Street, Cardiff CF1 2BZ
Tel 029 2039 5548 Fax 029 2038 4347

The Stationery Office Scottish Parliament Documentation
Helpline may be able to assist with additional information
on publications of or about the Scottish Parliament,
their availability and cost:

Telephone orders and inquiries
0870 606 5566

Fax orders
0870 606 5588

The Scottish Parliament Shop
George IV Bridge
EH99 1SP
Telephone orders 0131 348 5412

RNID TYPETALK calls welcome on
18001 0131 348 5412
Textphone 0131 348 3415

sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Accredited Agents
(see Yellow Pages)

and through good booksellers