

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 April 2004
(Afternoon)

Session 2

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

*Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind)

*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:

Paul Chitnis (Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland)

Mr Petr Krill (Committee for European Integration, Parliament of the Czech Republic)

Ishbel McFarlane (Flanders Investment and Trade)

Molly McGavigan (Christian Aid Scotland)

Mr Oldřich Nĕmec (Committee for European Integration, Parliament of the Czech Republic)

Mr Josef Šenfeld (Committee for European Integration, Parliament of the Czech Republic)

Mr Pavel Svoboda (Committee for European Integration, Parliament of the Czech Republic)

Mr Nic Vandermarliere (Embassy of Belgium in the United Kingdom)

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Oxfam in Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Nick Hawthorne

David Simpson

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 27 April 2004

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:10*]

Promoting Scotland Worldwide Inquiry

The Convener (Richard Lochhead): I extend a warm welcome to the committee as we return after our recent recess and I welcome members to the ninth meeting of the European and External Relations Committee this year. The clerk tells me that Dennis Canavan has conveyed his apologies; no committee substitutes are attending. We have a long meeting ahead of us, but it is a special meeting, and I warmly welcome our friends from the Parliament of the Czech Republic's Committee for European Integration.

Under the first item on today's agenda, we continue to take evidence for our inquiry into promoting Scotland worldwide. As members may be aware, the Czech Republic's Committee for European Integration is in Scotland this week at the invitation of the Scottish Parliament. I understand that its members have been here since Monday and that they will leave on Friday. We are keen to take this opportunity to invite them to give evidence for our inquiry.

Enlargement of the European Union takes place on Saturday 1 May, and it is an honour for the Parliament to welcome to Scotland representatives of one of the countries that will join the European Union on that day. [*Applause.*] Saturday is an historic day for Europe and it is significant that the Czech Parliament's committee has chosen to spend time in Scotland during the final week in which the Czech Republic is not an EU member. We understand why its members wish to leave on Friday to spend Saturday in Prague in the Czech Republic to celebrate EU enlargement. As a country, Scotland looks forward to welcoming with open arms the Czech Republic and the other countries from eastern and central Europe that are preparing to join the EU. After many turbulent experiences in the 20th century, we look forward to welcoming you back into the European fold; we hope that you will find stability and prosperity as part of the EU in the 21st century.

Before I move on to introductions, I check that all members have their headphones on. There will be a simultaneous translation throughout the first

evidence-taking session, which will last for about 40 minutes. Because of the interpretation arrangements, I ask members to ensure that they speak through the chair.

I invite the members of the Czech Parliament to introduce themselves. To save time, we do not usually allow opening speeches, but as this is a special occasion, I invite the convener of the Committee for European Integration, Pavel Svoboda, to say a few words after we have had a brief introduction from each member. I also extend a warm welcome to the committee's colleagues, including the clerks, who are here from the Czech Republic, and the honorary consul, our friend Paul Millar. I understand that the UK ambassador from the Czech Republic, Mr Štefan Füle, will arrive shortly, so we will welcome him in due course.

Mr Pavel Svoboda (Committee for European Integration, Parliament of the Czech Republic): (*simultaneous interpretation*) Thank you for your kind words of introduction and your warm welcome to your beautiful country—I will dwell on that issue later. My name is Pavel Svoboda and I am the chairman of the Committee for European Integration. I was elected in the electoral district of Prague and I am in my second term, or sixth year.

Mr Petr Krill (Committee for European Integration, Parliament of the Czech Republic): (*simultaneous interpretation*) I have been in the Chamber of Deputies for some time as a representative of the civic democratic party for the central Moravian region. This is my first term in the chamber; previously, I was mayor of a district capital in Moravia.

14:15

Mr Oldřich Němec (Committee for European Integration, Parliament of the Czech Republic): (*simultaneous interpretation*) My town is Liberec and I represent the Czech social democratic party. For your information, Liberec and its region are situated in the north of Bohemia; it is the second smallest region in the country. I was second on my party list—eight deputies represent my region in the Chamber of Deputies. This is my first term in office. I work on the Committee for European Integration, the Agricultural Committee and the Mandate and Immunity Committee. I also work on two sub-committees and am a member of the permanent delegation to the assembly of the Western European Union.

Mr Josef Šenfeld (Committee for European Integration, Parliament of the Czech Republic): (*simultaneous interpretation*) I am from the region of Ústí in the north of Bohemia. I represent the communist party of Bohemia and Moravia and I am a farmer by profession.

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) I will

say a few words about our committee by way of introduction. These are key times for the Czech Republic and for our committee. We are undergoing a modification from a committee on European integration to a committee on European affairs. In future, we shall have a slightly different remit and powers. We followed and monitored closely the negotiations on accession. We also supervised the legislative process in the Czech Republic and compared it constantly with EU laws to look for discrepancies. Our committee's new mission will be slightly different: we shall monitor our Government's work in Brussels and try to influence it. There will be a direct link from the Chamber of Deputies to the Government, as well as, we hope, a direct link from our committee on European affairs, which is what it will be called from 1 May onwards.

As the convener said, this is the final week prior to accession. We wanted to test the Scottish officials by seeing whether we simply had to display our identification cards, or whether we needed our passports. We found that passports are still very much needed, although from Saturday, our ID cards will probably be sufficient. That was a small test, which your officials passed.

The Convener: To clarify what I said earlier, we are expecting the Czech ambassador to the UK; my clerk tells me that I called him the UK ambassador. He should be with us shortly.

This is the third time that I have met the convener of the Committee for European Integration. I was part of a Scottish delegation to the Czech Republic a couple of years ago that was led by the Presiding Officer. We also met informally during the summer when I was over there on holiday. It is great to meet up again.

As the convener said, there are many existing links between our two countries in connection with the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union. Members have lots of questions to ask so that we can learn from how the Czech Republic promotes itself. We also want to find out what you think of Scotland and how you think we can best promote Scotland in the Czech Republic.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): If I may, I will preface my remarks by saying that, in Christmas 1989, I remember crossing the Charles bridge in Prague and going up to the castle to hear President Václav Havel make his first speech as president, just after his inauguration. That was a great honour and privilege. It is a delight to see you here today and it will be a delight to welcome you back into the heart of the European family on Saturday.

What have your Government and Parliament done in advance of accession, particularly with existing members of the EU, through trade

missions and so on, to work on the links that will become a reality when you join the EU on Saturday?

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) A long time ago, back in 1989, the then Czechoslovakia made it clear that it wanted to join the European Community, which, at that time, had only 12 members. We were silently hoping that it would not take as long to join as it has. However, life is not easy; not everything can be planned on paper. From 1998, the Czech Republic started intensive accession negotiations with the European Union. We started to exert pressure to promote the case for the Czech Republic being in the EU. That involved our Parliament and our committee. One of our roles was to promote and lobby.

We have also had homework to do—especially on legislation. Over the past five years or so, we have dealt with some 500 different key bills; we have implemented or approved some 500 different pieces of legislation that have influenced life in the Czech Republic considerably. Most of that legislation went through our committee. We were concerned to ensure harmonisation and we did our homework.

When asked whether we are 100 per cent ready for the European Union, I always answer, "No, but neither is the European Union 100 per cent ready for us." We often wonder whether the European Union is ready for us.

Mr Raffan: When promoting yourselves with the existing members of the European Union over the past three or four years, have you sent trade missions to those countries? If so, who led those missions? What about cultural aspects and civic aspects such as city twinning and links between hospitals in your country and hospitals in the EU? All such links can form a kind of zip, if you see what I mean. I am asking what you have done, in the hope that we can learn some good things from you and can copy you.

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) Some of my colleagues have municipal experience; they have been mayors and can definitely have an input on such matters. There are many partnership links between Czech towns and communities and towns and communities not only in the European Union but elsewhere. Such links have been going quite well and are getting more and more numerous.

Committee members should understand that 70 per cent of our trade is with the member states of the European Union. The figure will go up to 85 per cent after 1 May. In trade, we have been integrated for some time already. Having so much of our trade with the EU means that we are, in a sense, in the Community already. Such trade links

are the blood and oxygen, if you will, of the relationship. We are therefore quite ready for increased trade links.

Mr Raffan asked about trade missions. Obviously, the business community sends representatives on official missions to accompany the Prime Minister or other ministers. The Czech Republic's trade with EU member states has been growing steadily. We have noticed that for some time and the missions have been successful. Usually they are led by ministers or by the Prime Minister. The President also has business representation on his missions.

Mr Krill: (*simultaneous interpretation*) I would like to tell the committee of my experiences in the municipal sphere. Most Czech cities have partnership agreements with towns all over the European continent. I had the honour of being the mayor of my town for eight years. We had five partnership cities, including one in Germany, one in the Netherlands and one in Slovakia. Those towns have been co-operating for quite some time. For example, next week I will be in Germany to participate in the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the signing of our agreement of co-operation.

Those partnerships are by no means formal; they have created concrete co-operative links between hospitals, schools, universities, chambers of commerce at district and regional level and so on. They have all brought about considerable tangible results. We have had exchanges of grammar school students—we sent Czech students to Germany and the Germans came over to us. A better knowledge of languages was not the only result; we also got to know each other better, which is important.

Mr Němec: (*simultaneous interpretation*) I, too, can offer a few examples from the municipal level. Over the past 10 years, I have been active at both municipal and district level. For 10 years, the town of Liberec, which has 10,000 inhabitants, has had co-operative links with a Dutch city, and Chrastava, where I live, has a partnership with Eichstätt in Bavaria. The Liberec region already has representation in Brussels.

It is interesting that in some parts of the triangle between Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic, trilateral co-operation has been going on for some time—perhaps members have heard about it, as it has been quite successful. I must boast a little about our activities, because on Saturday 1 May, the three Prime Ministers will meet on the border between Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic.

The Convener: Thank you. I ask the deputy convener of the European and External Relations Committee, Irene Oldfather, to ask the next

question.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I begin by extending a warm welcome from the communities of Scotland to the communities of the Czech Republic. I thank the members of the Committee for European Integration for coming here in the week before enlargement.

As I listen to you, it occurs to me that one of the Czech Republic's real success stories before it has even joined the European Union is tourism in the city of Prague. I wonder whether you will share your thoughts on that. In that respect, it is clear that links between airports are very important—new links between Scotland and Prague will be important to you and to us. How do you think that we could promote Scotland through those links and work together to encourage people from each of our countries to visit the other?

I would also like to know whether you agree with me on the importance of building a Europe from the bottom up and, in doing so, harnessing the enthusiasm and motivation of our young people. I listened carefully to what one of you said about school links. Prague is one of your clear success stories but, in future, we might need to do more exchanges between our universities and schools. We in Scotland have excellent links with many schools in the western side of Europe. Given the approaching enlargement, it will be important for us to extend those links to schools in the east.

14:30

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) I will start, if I may. This morning, I have already had the opportunity to invite the convener, together with his committee, to pay us a visit in Prague. It would also be a pleasure to organise a visit to one of the regions, because one never gets a complete picture of a country when one visits its capital. That is true of the Czech Republic and of Scotland. The capital is always a slightly exotic place.

Prague is definitely the richest region in central and eastern Europe and is richer than some of the regions of the EU. At present, its gross domestic product per capita is 132 per cent of the average in the EU, and the difference between Prague and other regions is growing. We are happy that the city is getting richer and many tourists are coming over, but other parts of the country are lagging behind in their development and evolution and are at present at 53 per cent of the average EU GDP per capita.

With the exception of transport problems, which remain a weak spot, Prague has almost nothing to improve. It is an exclusive part of Europe—being an elected representative of Prague, I cannot say otherwise—and I highly recommend that other

parts of the Czech Republic undergo similar renovation and improvement so that tourists have other destinations. Prague cannot absorb a much bigger number, and we need to spread the tourists around. By historical coincidence, Scotland and the Czech Republic are fortunate in that we have inherited many historic sites. I am a great fan of ruins and castles, and Scotland is a paradise for tourists of my kind, but in the Czech lands, we have a similar paradise. We have hundreds, if not thousands, of monasteries, castles and palaces.

The direct connection between Edinburgh and Prague has been extremely important. It has definitely made things easier for tourists. Tourists—and people in general—are rather lazy. They do not want to wait around for hours to get connecting flights; they want to have an easy life. I am happy that the decision to establish a direct route was made, and I am also happy that the decision was made to have an honorary consul here because that consul has helped to establish the link. I hope that a link will soon connect other towns in Scotland with Prague, because it takes time to get here by car, and not many tourists will bring a car to Scotland. Because plane fares are not as expensive as they used to be, the establishment of the link is an important step.

By the way, Czechs are rather curious and investigative people who like to travel. I do not know whether they can be compared to any other central or eastern European nation in that regard. We are, I think, the biggest travellers in our part of the world, so there are still untapped resources in that. What is more, Czechs have seen the classic sites and are trying to explore new destinations. They want to look at other places, and I believe that Scotland is a good place to come to visit and to explore, as has been the case with Croatia, France or Italy in the past.

We perceive Scotland through some typical features, which I would like it to keep and treasure. Perhaps something more can be added on top, but those classic features should not be disregarded. We will not do away with some things that make us different from the Poles or the Hungarians, for instance, so the lakes, castles and historic sites of Scotland should be preserved.

The second feature is your hospitality. I do not only mean your traditional drink, whisky. Czechs are not snobs. They do not like the posh restaurants; they like your pubs. Perhaps Scots come to Prague and the Czech Republic because we have a similar pub culture, so please keep it. Please do not turn these beautiful pubs with their folk music into uniform posh restaurants.

We also cherish some Scottish symbols. I am not speaking only of Sean Connery, although I must mention him. I know that some of you disapprove of him, but he is very much respected

in the Czech Republic. Prophets are without honour in their own country and perhaps the same is true for Scotland. As a great sports fan, I know that David Coulthard is another good example of someone who acts as a sort of ambassador through whom the Czech Republic perceives Scotland.

Indeed, such people are also very useful to the Czech Republic. I do not know whether any of the committee members like sport, but I am sure that some of you have heard of Pavel Nedvěd, the best footballer in Europe, who plays for Juventus in Turin. Those people achieve better results in promoting our country than 20 politicians put together. As a result, I am very much in favour of using such symbols and—if you like—exploiting such people.

The Convener: We will continue the argument about the best footballer in Europe later on.

Irene Oldfather: Your response was very interesting, Mr Svoboda, and we certainly appreciate your kind comments about Scotland and whisky. However, you forgot to mention Becherovka. We look forward to sampling that when we visit Prague and the regions.

The Convener: Margaret Ewing has a question.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): Actually I have two questions, the first of which follows on from Irene Oldfather's question and Pavel Svoboda's lovely response. On the issue of tourism, we very much look to our Irish colleagues. One of the Irish Tourist Board's great tourism successes has been its promotion of sporting weekends, which mostly involve golf, but can include horse riding and so on. Fortunately, those activities cross the boundaries. Do you have direct sports links with Scotland? After all, both countries could promote such facilities. For example, when I spoke to members of Aberdeen ice hockey club yesterday, I learned that the Czechs are very good at that sport. Are you promoting it?

In response to Keith Raffan, you said that in preparation for joining the European Union, your committee had to deal with 500 bills stretching back to 1998. How did you involve the citizens of the Czech Republic in that process? Moreover, how significant is the legislation? European Parliament elections will be held in June and we are all finding it hard to involve the citizens of Scotland in the process. I should say that every committee member cares passionately about Europe.

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) I will try to respond, particularly to the second part of your question.

As you might imagine, if there are only five years between beginning accession talks and signing

the treaty, you face a very difficult situation. For example, we had to absorb the 80,000 or so pages of the *acquis communautaire*. Because we did not have much time, it was impossible to consult citizens on every piece of legislation, and every decision was the result of compromise or a fight among the political parties. Of course, the EU also made certain recommendations. Quite simply, we had to adopt the *acquis communautaire*. As a result, we were caught in a legislative tornado and there was no time to discuss anything with the citizens of the republic. I do not recommend that anyone repeats that exercise.

People also had the opportunity to discuss matters before the referendum on the accession. I believe that the Czech Republic was one of the few countries—if not the only country—among the accession countries that had the courage to adopt a referendum act that made it impossible for the Parliament to rectify the public's decision. In other words, we would not accede to the EU if our citizens said no in the referendum. If Poles or Slovaks had said no in a referendum, their respective Parliaments could, by law, have rectified the citizens' decision. We put our trust in the citizens without there being any possibility that their decision could be remedied. They were unequivocal and there was a landslide victory in favour of accession.

The campaign prior to the referendum offered space to discuss issues with the citizens, but there was no time to discuss laws or bills with them—I believe that it was impossible to do that even in the old member states. However, it was possible to discuss with them whether we should accede and what they could expect on the first day and in a week, a year and 10 years after accession. It was possible to discuss whether the EU had any sex appeal, if I may use those words, and whether it was attractive enough for different reasons.

The results of the referendum made it clear that the citizens considered the EU to be attractive. We must acknowledge that there is slightly less enthusiasm now, but that is partly because we have started to discuss issues such as increased prices for some foodstuffs. Despite that, there is a considerable and important majority in favour of being in the EU, which is a good sign.

As politicians, we should not promise more than can reasonably be expected. I do not expect the EU to bring out something on a silver platter, but I see the EU as a huge opportunity. We have been given the chance to join what I am convinced is the most civilised club and the issue is not only about higher wages and salaries; it is about quality of life and so on.

We are probably the best-off of the accession countries. We have invested huge amounts—more than anybody else—in water treatment plants,

waste management equipment, desulphurisation installations and so on. Such moneys will have to be invested by the other newly acceding countries, but we have already invested. Our situation was rather catastrophic back in 1989. Heavy industry had a tremendously bad impact on the environment, but we are now better off than some of the old member states in that respect.

The Convener: Thank you. We have only 10 or 15 minutes left, so members and visitors should keep what they say a little shorter so that we can fit in more questions.

I have a brief question. What steps are other countries and private businesses taking to set up operations and representation in the Czech Republic to promote themselves? One issue that the committee is interested in is how Scotland should promote itself in the accession countries. Can you give us examples of what other countries are doing in the Czech Republic?

Mr Krill: (simultaneous interpretation) I will try to be brief. I will give a concrete example. When I was mayor of the town of Šumperk, which has 30,000 inhabitants, one of the problems that resulted from the transformation of industry was unemployment, which was growing. We badly needed an investor. It is not enough simply to talk about things; conditions must be created for potential investors and appropriate investors must be sought. The search is probably the most difficult part of the exercise, but there are many capable people who have personal contacts abroad or who have friends with personal contacts abroad.

Thanks to my personal contacts from my previous professional life in industry, we managed to secure German and Japanese allies. They invested in the construction of a modern plant with sophisticated technology, using local labour. You might know that we have a quite well-educated and well-performing labour force. Twelve months after the memorandum of understanding was signed, the plant existed. Today it is the biggest producer in Europe of passive electronic devices, and it has several hundred employees. There are several such practical examples. The issue is one not only for central Government. People have to be enthusiastic and committed at a local level.

14:45

Mr Svoboda: (simultaneous interpretation) I believe that it would be good if Scotland had a representative in the Czech Republic, perhaps a liaison officer. It is crucial to be informed in time because the sooner one gets there, the better one is served. The Czech Republic is well placed geographically and it is a middle-sized country. A Scotland house or Scotland centre might be well

placed in the Czech Republic. Business people and others would be able to knock on the door and get cultural, trade and other information. That would be good because, with all due respect to the UK ambassador in Prague—I love her very much—it is impossible for her to carry out all that by herself. Such an institution would be very welcome.

We also have different trade missions and cultural centres. For example, CzechTrade deals with trade exchanges and CzechInvest is another institution that looks abroad for potential investors who are ready to invest in the Czech Republic. The institution's efforts over a year resulted in \$7 billion. Other countries are taking inspiration from that. For example, CzechInvest is now giving its know-how to the Japanese, who are eager to learn from us how to attract investors. We have experience.

Mr Němec: (*simultaneous interpretation*) In 1990, after the velvet revolution, industrial zones began to be set up in bigger towns and cities and I have two examples. We have a Japanese manufacturing company in Liberec and, on 17 May, the plant will open and will offer 800 jobs. In the town of Chrastava, an old textile equipment plant now contains a Spanish company that employs 500 people.

The Convener: Thank you. That was helpful and interesting.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): You have mentioned various countries as being sources of investment in the Czech Republic, but sadly you have not mentioned any Scottish companies. What is the image of Scotland in the Czech Republic? Do you see it as a tourism destination for people coming from the Czech Republic, or do you see it as a place of excellence in education and construction and a place for investment? What are the benefits of Scotland? I am thinking of financial services, for example.

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) At present, the average Czech citizen perceives Scotland as a top, attractive tourist destination. That is definitely the first perception. The average Czech would not perceive Scotland as being an investment opportunity. However, the consul has just told me that 80 or so Scottish companies are active in Czech territory. That means that Scottish business is not undeveloped in the Czech Republic. I believe that you have asked about the image of Scotland because you are wondering whether you should change it in some way. The situation is as I described it in my first answer. Scotland is a country in which the Czechs enjoy themselves tremendously and visit lovely sites. It is a highly attractive tourist destination. In my opinion, that is not a bad thing. There are many countries and regions in Europe and the world that

are perceived by Czechs as being places to which they would never go and in which they would never spend money. It is a good thing if our Czech tourists spend money here.

Of course, I could also talk about the student exchanges. I have been out of university life for some time but I know that there are dozens of Scottish students studying at attractive colleges and universities in the Czech Republic. That sort of thing will become much easier after the accession and there will be more Czechs studying in Scotland. Partly, that is because of the lack of tuition fees in Scotland, unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Němec: (*simultaneous interpretation*) Many of you might not know that the Czech Republic—I am speaking particularly about the Liberec region—has many castles and palaces. Every year, in September, Sychrov castle organises Scottish days. Many of our citizens take an enthusiastic interest in your folklore and historical traditions. When they think of Scotland, they think of soldiers, kilts and the like.

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) I often go to fairs in the Czech Republic—there is an extremely good travel trade fair. It would be good if Scotland could present itself independently at such fairs, which is not the rule at present. I would welcome Scotland's representation at the annual Prague travel trade fair, which is the biggest in central and eastern Europe. Scotland is an important and authentic region and appearing at that trade fair would enhance the image of Scotland and strengthen Czechs' perception of it as a highly attractive destination.

Irene Oldfather: The Deputy First Minister, Jim Wallace, is planning a trade mission to the Czech Republic next month. I hope that he will become aware of the wider issues that you mention and come back to us with some ideas on them.

Phil Gallie: Mr Svoboda, I think that you picked up on the point that I was trying to move towards. Do you think that tartan, the kilt, bagpipes and Scottish country dance music are extremely important to the image of Scotland in the Czech Republic?

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) Although it might sound a little banal, such elements are extremely important for the Czechs' perception of Scotland. I tried to make an allusion to that in my last answer. Of course, I want the Czech Republic to be perceived as a highly hospitable country with castles and so on, too. Scotland should cultivate its image and perhaps add something on top of all the kilts, soldiers, knights, castles, tartan, abbeys, monasteries and the military. We should allow Europeans to perceive Scotland through its tradition, which is a

fantastic asset. A country without tradition is a poor country, is it not?

The Convener: We have only two minutes left, but Keith Raffan wants to ask a question.

Mr Raffan: On accession, billions of euros will come to the Czech Republic in the form of structural funds and regional development funds—you hope.

Mr Svoboda: I am not sure.

Mr Raffan: Well, we hope so. We will ensure that it is so. Obviously, you will undertake a large number of infrastructure projects, as have other countries that have entered the EU, for which there will be a considerable amount of funding. What is your process for dealing with that? Will those projects be open to tender from existing EU countries? Will companies in the United Kingdom be able to tender for such projects? What kind of rules do you have in place?

Mr Krill: (*simultaneous interpretation*) There are rules in place, and I believe that the Czech Republic is well equipped and ready for the number and quality of projects that are required to absorb the moneys from the European Union. Moreover, we also have good experience from programmes of the pre-accession period—the special accession programme for agriculture and rural development and the Phare programme—and there have been structural pilot projects in three regions in our republic, one of which was in my region. In many projects, we have been highly successful. We have been able to test ourselves as we have got ready, and it is now up to us to produce a sufficient number of quality projects. The terms and conditions are set.

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) I have a few sentences to add. We are the most efficient country in relation to pre-structural funds to secure infrastructure and transport projects, for instance the instrument for structural policies for pre-accession, and have absorbed the greatest amount of funds of all the central and eastern European countries. We prepared the biggest number of viable projects; therefore, we are in no way afraid of not having enough projects. Of course, we will have competitors, including the Poles, the Hungarians, the Slovenians, the Slovaks, the Portuguese and the Greeks and others from the current member states. The tenders will be open to all companies in EU countries, but there is a distinction between local projects and regional or national projects. It is hard to imagine that a small Scottish construction company would come to the Czech Republic and participate in a local project of only several hundred thousand euros. However, in larger-scale, more ambitious projects—for motorways and transcontinental rail or road links, which will be

priorities for the Czech Republic—there is scope for unhindered participation by companies from Scotland and elsewhere.

The Convener: Thank you very much. As ever, we have been beaten by the clock and we must move on to our next panel of witnesses. Today has been important. I hope that it is another example of the continuing links that are being built between our two countries. It has been fantastic to have you take part in a formal meeting of our committee.

You referred—as did members of the committee—to the direct air links between our two countries. The link between Edinburgh and Prague has taken off and there is going to be a new link between Glasgow and Prague. No doubt that will play a major role in reinforcing the ties between our two countries. We have now met on several occasions and I hope that our two committees can play a central role in building links between our countries when the Czech Republic becomes a member of the EU, in a few days' time. I am sure that we have lots to learn from each other to the mutual benefit of both our peoples.

We will see each other again tonight at the reception. I hope that you enjoy the rest of your trip to Scotland. You have talked about tartan, the Highlands, whisky, castles and so on. When you go to the Highlands, you will have ample opportunity to experience those things at first hand. Margaret Ewing represents a part of the Highlands that is known as whisky country. I do not know whether you will visit her neck of the woods, but that industry is certainly represented on the committee. I thank you for taking the trouble to give evidence as part of our inquiry and I wish you the best for the rest of your trip. Many of us will see you later this evening. [*Applause.*]

15:00

Mr Svoboda: (*simultaneous interpretation*) On behalf of our delegation, I thank you for your warm welcome. We have had interesting meetings today and yesterday. As I said before, we invite your committee to make an official visit to the Czech Republic. You will need only your ID cards—no passports, which is an advantage—and you will be warmly welcomed any time. Let us know the best time for you and we will make the invitation official.

The Convener: Thank you for that invitation, which I should have referred to. I have no doubt that the committee will be keen to accept it if we can agree a suitable date. My colleague, Irene Oldfather, has got her diary out already.

Irene Oldfather: No; it is my passport.

The Convener: And her passport. Before we close, I thank our interpreter, Irena Koutska, who

travelled with the delegation from the Czech Republic. She has done an excellent job over the past hour, although her job is not finished—she has a few days left. [*Applause.*]

We will take a two-minute break while we change witnesses.

15:02

Meeting suspended.

15:11

On resuming—

The Convener: I extend a warm welcome to the Flemish witnesses who are with us today. That continues the international flavour of the meeting, following on from the Czech parliamentary committee witnesses.

I welcome Nic Vandermarliere, the representative of the Flemish Government at the Embassy of Belgium in the United Kingdom, and Ishbel McFarlane, who is not Flemish but Scottish and who is a trade commissioner with Flanders Investment and Trade here in Edinburgh. We do not really have time for opening speeches or long statements, but I offer our witnesses the opportunity to introduce themselves by saying a little about their organisations and their roles.

Mr Nic Vandermarliere (Embassy of Belgium in the United Kingdom): Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me. For me, coming to Edinburgh is always a little bit like coming home, as Flanders has had a treaty of eternal friendship with Scotland since the 13th century—I hope that that will not change this afternoon. That treaty indicates the long-standing relationship between Flanders and Scotland.

I am the official representative of the Flemish Government in the Belgian embassy in the United Kingdom. I operate under the aegis of the Belgian embassy, but there is no functional relationship between the Belgian ambassador and me, as there is no hierarchy between the Flemish Government and the Belgian federal Government. We operate under the same aegis, but I have full diplomatic status. Flanders House operates under the aegis of the Belgian embassy, but we have our own diplomatic representation, with full diplomatic status granted by Jack Straw last year. We are two birds of a feather; we each have our own Government. I am the official diplomatic representative of the Flemish Government.

Ishbel McFarlane (Flanders Investment and Trade): I am the trade commissioner for Flanders in Scotland and my primary role is to promote trade between Flanders and Scotland and to look for opportunities for investment into Flanders by

Scottish companies. Trade promotion is my primary role, but I also have a representational role. If there is a cultural, political or arts event at which it would be useful for Flanders to have some kind of representation, I go along as a representative. My role is also generally to inform and educate people about what Flanders is about—where it is, what it does and what it is good at—and generally to promote Flanders.

The Convener: Thank you for your interesting written evidence. I read it this morning on the train, which broke down, so I had plenty of time. It is worth reiterating that the committee plans to visit Flanders in the next month or two as part of our inquiry. Without further ado, I invite members to ask questions. I have a question, but I will call Keith Raffan, who I think wants to come in at this point.

15:15

Mr Raffan: I have a question for Mr Vandermarliere. On reading your submission and your brochure, “Representatives of Flanders Abroad”, I was struck by the comprehensive nature of your representation. You seem to have representatives virtually everywhere—even in Lesotho and Swaziland, albeit that those representatives are based in Pretoria, which I can understand. What is the arrangement in the Flemish Government—or in Belgium—for representation at your embassies and for ensuring a balance? Is having a Flemish representative in each embassy automatic?

Mr Vandermarliere: The answer is no. We have several representatives. The policy of the Flemish Government is that all the representatives are housed in their own Flemish representation accommodation, although, as I said, Flemish representation operates under the aegis of Belgian diplomatic status.

We have diplomatic representation, trade commissioners—Flanders Investment and Trade—agricultural councillors and the tourist office, Tourism Flanders-Brussels. For instance, in Flanders House in London, we have my services, the services of Flanders Investment and Trade and the office of Tourism Flanders-Brussels. All those representatives are grouped together in one building in London. The situation is the same in The Hague and in Paris. A diplomatic or agricultural representative or a trade commissioner is located in almost every embassy.

Wallonia has only the trade commissioners, Agence wallonne à l'Exportation—AWEX—in the embassy; they have no diplomatic representative. That is all to do with policy. Our policy is to have diplomatic representations in our neighbouring countries. That is the case in The Hague, Berlin

and Vienna. I also have diplomatic colleagues in Paris, at the EU Committee of Permanent Representatives, in Washington DC and in Pretoria. We have far more trade commissioners and agricultural councillors all over the world than we have representatives operating in Belgian embassies. There is an enormous network of commissioners and councillors all over the world.

Mr Raffan: That is a costly process. Does it mean that, for example, in the United Kingdom you will move from Eaton Square—which is expensive enough—to somewhere else?

Mr Vandermarliere: Yes. We bought our own premises last year in Cavendish Square—which is a very nice name.

Mr Raffan: Yes, and very expensive, too.

Mr Vandermarliere: Yes, but we have bought the place. Outside the building, you would find the name “Belgian Embassy, Flemish Representation”, because that is the policy of the Flemish Government. We form an integral part of the Belgian embassy in London, along with the Belgian ambassador’s residence in Belgrave Square and the Belgian embassy in Eaton Square, where the federal diplomats, the Walloon trade commissioner and the Brussels trade commissioner are based. All the Flemings are in Flanders House in Cavendish Square, which is the official diplomatic representation for Flanders in the United Kingdom.

Mr Raffan: I want to be clear about the position, which is interesting from our perspective in Scotland. The Flemish Government pays for the separate set-up for Flanders House. In the case of the trade commissioners within the Belgian embassies, does the Flemish Government also pay for those?

Mr Vandermarliere: We also pay for them.

Mr Raffan: Is that how it works out?

Mr Vandermarliere: Yes, it works out like that because foreign trade is a devolved competence. Ishbel McFarlane might want to say something on the matter.

Ishbel McFarlane: Yes. The Flemish Government’s budget for trade promotion services for 2004 is €40 million.

Mr Raffan: Your informative submission, for which I am grateful, mentions a number of key cities, which you referred to in your answer to the question about representation. However, you leave to Wallonia the former colonies in Africa and so on. The submission refers to the fact that

“Wallonia still has close links to the French-speaking former Belgian colonies in Central Africa”—

the Congo and so on.

Ishbel McFarlane: Yes. Because trade is a devolved competence, each region can decide where it wants to put its representatives. For example, the French-speaking Walloons have a connection to the former Belgian colonies that the Dutch speakers in Belgium do not have. Each region can put its representative where it is most appropriate for the region.

Mr Raffan: Do you, in turn, lean more towards the former Dutch colonies, such as Indonesia?

Ishbel McFarlane: Not specifically. There is a representative in Indonesia. We go where the trade is or, as Nic Vandermarliere says, where the money is. The Flemish Government is not embarrassed to say that.

Mr Vandermarliere: One must be frank about it, because that is Flemish foreign policy. Flanders already has general treaties with all 10 new EU member states. One of the last to be signed was with the Czech Republic. We have full treaty-making power in Flanders.

You must understand the Belgian constitution, which is not like the unwritten British constitution. In our constitution, there are two important principles. There is no hierarchy at all between the Governments—the federal, Flemish and Walloon Governments—there is only juxtaposition; their competences are exclusive. That also means that we have the principle “in foro interno, in foro externo”, which means that, if we have full constitutional power within the nation, we also have full diplomatic status outside it. That is why Flanders already has treaties on education and co-operation with the former Soviet Union—with Russia—that are more than 10 years old.

Last year, Belgium had to be the depositor of a new European treaty on the environment. As that is a devolved competence and Flanders has official diplomatic representation in Britain, the other regions in Belgium asked Flanders to deposit the new treaty in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on behalf of the Kingdom of Belgium. When Belgium held the presidency of the European Union, Flemish, Walloon and Brussels ministers chaired the European Council of Ministers on behalf of the Kingdom of Belgium. That would be like a Scottish minister presiding on behalf of the United Kingdom when the UK next holds the presidency of the EU.

The Convener: I am bowled over by how ambitious your set-up is. The objective of your various representations around the world is not only trade; you promote other things as well. Will you say a few words about that? Do you promote other things under the auspices of trade? How does the system work?

Mr Vandermarliere: In general, we promote Flanders, its image and its interests. That has to

do not only with trade, but our language and culture. Our devolution process and constitutional reform were triggered by the fact that we had to fight to be acknowledged as a people with our own culture and language in the artificial state of Belgium that was created in 1832. Flanders is much older than Belgium, of course; our culture is much older than the Belgian culture. However, we had to fight for our language and culture within the Belgian state, so the prime goal of the representations is to plant the flag all over the world, especially in the most important countries around us in Europe and those with which we have a cultural connection. For example, we are in Pretoria because of Afrikaans, Flemish and Dutch.

In the past year, Ishbel McFarlane and I have networked in Scotland. The Minister-President, Bart Somers, has been here and has met the First Minister several times. We have networked on several issues and hope to move on to an agreement between Flanders and Scotland about co-operation in education and transport. As members know, we have successful co-operation between Rosyth and Zeebrugge. We want to increase co-operation between Flanders and Scotland.

We have been asked how Scotland is perceived in Flanders. Last year, 60,000 people attended our Scottish weekend in Alden Biesen. We had 1,500 pipers for the European pipe band championship. Some thought that it was heartwarming and others thought it bone chilling when they all played at once. Scotland is very well known and well liked in Flanders. We have a relationship that has continued for the best part of 700 years. That has not changed.

Mrs Ewing: It is lovely to meet friends from Flanders again. My mother-in-law is a freewoman of one of your cities, because some of her colleagues from Flanders worked in the same group as her in the European Parliament. I will ask brief questions. Ishbel, did you refer to £40 million per annum?

Ishbel McFarlane: I said €40 million.

Mrs Ewing: That is the foreign trade representatives' funding for next year and it is staggering. Does any private funding go into trade representation through individual companies spending additional money?

The Nordic Council is important for us. We in the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body have just completed a report on the council, which foresees developments that will involve Scotland, Ireland, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and others. How could that develop to our mutual benefit?

A common defence policy in Europe is possible and you have spoken about exclusive

competences. How would you fit into negotiations for a common defence policy?

Ishbel McFarlane: The vast majority of the budget comes from the Flemish Government. My figures say that €30.26 million of the €40 million comes directly from the Flemish Government. Some money comes from revenues that are raised directly from companies when overseas trade promotions and trade missions are undertaken. Some loans and advances have also been taken, but they need to be repaid. The vast majority is for promotion from the Flemish Government.

I am sorry, but I cannot remember your second question. I have written down "role of the chambers".

Mrs Ewing: My second question was about the Nordic Council.

Ishbel McFarlane: I wanted to cover something else that you asked about before that.

The Convener: That is okay; we will return to that.

Mrs Ewing: Do not worry about it—I have forgotten what I asked. I just wanted to find out whether private sector funding was provided.

Ishbel McFarlane: There is a little private funding, but the vast majority is Government funding.

Mr Vandermarliere: The reason for that relates to our export ratio. We have an open economy and our export ratio is 111 per cent of our gross regional product. That is the reason why we must invest in exports.

Defence is an exclusive federal competence. However, only a few months ago, we had a little present from the federal Government, as weapon export licensing was devolved to the regions.

The Convener: How do you quantify what you get back for the €40 million a year that you invest in the project? Have you analysed that?

15:30

Ishbel McFarlane: Our head office undertakes regular reviews and there is an annual revision of offices that are opened and closed. As Nic Vandermarliere said, international trade, both importing and exporting, is hugely important to the Flemish economy. Flanders is an important centre for distribution and warehousing even for North American or South American companies that distribute in Europe. Because Flanders is so well placed, companies can redistribute from there to Spain, Italy or Germany. The large markets with which Flanders deals are in what are called the neighbouring countries: Germany, the Netherlands, France and the UK, but specifically

England. There is a revision of the figures and a steering group. The relevant minister is also involved.

Mr Vandermarliere: The UK is the fourth largest export partner for Flanders and I believe that Flanders is the sixth largest export partner for the UK, which is enormous. The main products are diamonds and petrochemicals. The car and transport industries and the ports of Antwerp and Zeebrugge are also important.

Mrs Ewing: That is interesting. You have not answered the question about the Nordic Council.

Ishbel McFarlane: I am not sure that I understand the Nordic Council's function.

The Convener: We may return to that issue later.

Irene Oldfather: I am interested in what you say about the major industries in Flanders. I see distinct parallels between Scotland and Flanders. Like us, you have a small domestic market and are dependent on exporting. Like us, you have a major city that acts as a big attraction or magnet. As I come from Ayrshire on the west coast, I am interested in how we move people who come to Edinburgh out to the rest of Scotland. How much of the traffic that goes into Brussels goes out to the rest of Flanders? How much does having that city assist you?

Of course, one major difference is that you have a federal system, whereas we are a unitary state. The other thing that strikes me is your emphasis on the heavy manufacturing industry that you have maintained. Scotland traditionally had a lot of heavy manufacturing such as shipbuilding and the car industry, but we have undergone a transition to industries such as electronics. Does heavy manufacturing continue to be a large part of your economy?

Mr Vandermarliere: No. On the contrary, we have very much a tertiary or service economy. We moved from heavy industry a long time ago.

The main point is that we do not have only one capital, like Edinburgh in Scotland; we have many. Brussels is not so much a trade element as an administrative, European and public business venue. Antwerp is the main international trade centre, together with Zeebrugge. We have other cities with specific characteristics, such as Ghent, which is the biotechnology capital. Flanders is only a small patch, but we have more inhabitants than Scotland has, so we are more cramped together. It is much easier for the major cities in each region to flourish by themselves because there are only 40km or 50km between them. Scotland has a vastness that Flanders does not have.

Just as we were the battlefield of Europe for armies in the past, we are now the crossroads for

all the economic armies trying to do business together. We are turning that to our advantage: transport is very important.

Ishbel McFarlane: Although Brussels focuses more on administration, it is important in putting Flanders on the map. The fact that Brussels is the capital of Flanders, Belgium and Europe has drawn in a large number of multinational companies, which has been of benefit to Flanders and to Belgium.

Phil Gallie: Mr Vandermarliere referred to the treaties with the 10 accession countries. Do those principally address trade issues or do they go wider than that?

Mr Vandermarliere: The treaties go much further. They include elements of education, cultural co-operation and many specific projects.

An example is the treaty with Russia. The Russians wanted new school books to teach their schoolchildren French as non-native speakers. They did not ask the French to supply them, because the French would have made school books for native speakers of French. They asked us, the Flemings, because we had 100 or more years' experience of having to learn French as a second language from the age of six. The Russians asked us to provide the school books and we set up a project to exchange expertise. We shipped our experts to Russia and vice versa. The experts started to work on the school books and after a few years we delivered them to the Russian minister of education. The books are now being used in every Russian school.

Before we co-operated with Russia, there was a great difficulty with the provision for autistic children in the Russian education system. We had the expertise, so we sent our experts over there and established concrete projects. These may not be proper words to use in Parliament, but there was no la-di-da and no fiddlesticks or whatever; the projects were concrete schemes with a timescale and funding. We told each other what we wanted and when we wanted it.

Those are the sort of treaties that we make. We do not have to go to the federal Government; the treaties are made by our own Flemish Parliament. When the minister comes back, he signs an agreement and the Parliament ratifies it. In general, our treaties go much further than a general declaration and include specific projects.

Phil Gallie: First, you referred to a treaty with Scotland. What would you want to put into that? Secondly, the European Commission recently made a decision on Charleroi airport. I recognise that that does not fall under your direct interest, but what potential is there for low-cost flights within your areas of interest?

Mr Vandermarliere: We are looking towards having general agreements. Whether those agreements are treaties will be up to the Scottish Executive and the Westminster Government, as the UK has a different system. As Irene Oldfather pointed out, we are a federal state and the UK is still a unitary state.

We look forward to specific co-operation. We had an interesting discussion at the Flanders district of creativity conference that we organised in February. Scotland was one of the regions that participated. An immediate result of our networking at the conference will be the creation, next month if everything is okay, of a Scottish-Flemish chamber of commerce.

We also network with other areas. The west midlands, including Birmingham and Coventry, are interested in Interreg co-operation with Flanders and I went to see Rhodri Morgan, the Prif Weinidog in Caerdydd, before Easter.

We are also starting to consider co-operation in education. We know that Scotland has an interesting and important system of general inspection of education standards. Flanders is interested in that expertise. We also know that Scotland has a great interest in the general standard of education in Flanders, especially with regard to education about the European institutions and so on. We have had discussions about developing specific projects in relation to the interests that we have. Whether we have a general agreement or embark on specific projects is to be discussed in the future. We are moving forward together.

Ishbel McFarlane: I can give you an example of the way in which I have helped to promote Flanders in Scotland in relation to travel connections. As soon as I heard that the Scottish Executive was promoting the air route development fund, I contacted the independent airlines in Flanders to see whether they would be interested in running routes out of Brussels into Scotland. Discussions are still on-going.

The Convener: What more could Scotland do to promote itself in Flanders? That is one of the key issues in our inquiry and it would be useful to know whether you have any strong views on it.

Mr Vandermarliere: Scotland does not have to do anything to promote itself in Flanders. Scotland is well known. We know all about Scotland and look to it as one of our neighbouring countries. Enormous numbers of tourists move between Scotland and Flanders. People know about the history of Scotland and so on. Furthermore, we co-operate in an important way in the group of regions with legislative power—Regleg.

It is up to the Parliament and the Executive to decide what they do to promote Scotland's image.

On image marketing, Scotland has an enormous advantage that we do not have. I will be straightforward about it. You have talked about marketing products as traditional products and using an *idée fixe* about your country. The Dutch have their clogs, windmills and tulips and the French and the Italians have other national symbols. We Flemish people do not have such symbols. Of course, we have a Flemish culture. We have our Flemish primitives, our great painters, our great tapestries and so on. We have an enormous and old culture, but we are not strong on marketing. Our problem is that we have a mentality of always striving to achieve the top quality in everything—you could say that that is the Flemish creed—but we expect everyone to find out about that quality by themselves. The next Flemish Government will consider our image and our marketing.

We are already present in many places because of our institutions. Scotland has the image but not the institutions. We have the institutions, but we still have to find an image that sells.

Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab): Your answer was diplomatic. I understand that you are, in effect, saying that it is not for you to tell us what to do. However, if you tell us what to do, you will not offend us. You pointed out that Scotland has an image. That is right: we have all the things that create Scotland's image. That is not—indeed, it never can be—a bad thing, but it can make us rely on that image. You have observed how we operate in Brussels and Flanders, but what might we do better? It is nice of you to say that we have the image, but how might we better utilise it?

15:45

Mr Vandermarliere: Perhaps your institutions focus more on the European institutions than on the bilateral relationship with Flanders. The Scottish presence in Brussels works hard, but I think that perhaps it directs its efforts much more towards the supranational level, by which I mean the European Union, than towards the Flemish regional Government. Perhaps Scotland might enhance those efforts.

Gordon Jackson: How might we do that?

Mr Vandermarliere: Rather than promoting Scotland in the EU, you could do much more to promote Scotland as a partner for other Governments, through bilateral relationships. You could do more to catch the public eye in Flanders. We know about Scotland's image, but not about its institutions. The fact that Scotland has its own Parliament and Government is not yet well known.

Gordon Jackson: I want to be sure that I have understood you. Are you saying that we do not do

enough locally and that we should focus more on the local level than on the big picture?

Mr Vandermarliere: Yes. A country's neighbours are important. Flemish foreign policy has clearly been to start with our neighbours and then to make a strategic choice about where outside Europe we develop our foreign policy. Flanders is a midget on the map of the world, but the UK is its fourth most important trading partner. The statistics clearly show that a country's closest neighbours are its most important foreign trade partners.

Gordon Jackson: If we took your advice and focused more on Flanders than on the big picture, which Flanders institutions could we latch on to? Obviously, you and Ishbel McFarlane are here to represent those institutions.

Mr Vandermarliere: Yes.

The Convener: You make an interesting point. Scottish Development International has only 21 offices around the world, but the submission from Flanders Investment and Trade says that the organisation has 77 such offices. I think that I am right in saying that only two or three of SDI's 21 offices are in the EU—in England, Germany and somewhere else. I presume that there are no Scottish institutions in Flanders.

Ishbel McFarlane: There is Scotland Europa.

Mr Vandermarliere: Yes: that is why I said that Scotland's offices in Europe focus very much on the relationship with the EU. Of course, that is important and Mr Calder and his team in Brussels are doing a good job.

Mr Jackson asks what more Scotland can do: it can do more to develop bilateral relationships with its neighbours. When the movement to bring 10 new states into the EU started, we immediately got on top of the situation and sent bilateral missions from the Flemish Government to the Governments of the proposed accession states, so that we would be ahead from the start.

Scotland could be more assertive—I do not use the word "aggressive", which would be a little ominous in the context of foreign relationships. Our approach in Flanders has been to be assertive, but of course we have the institutions, as I said.

The Convener: I want to move on to another question, but I was trying to make the point that more of the 21 offices should be located in countries that are closer.

Mr Raffan: You have partly answered my point, Mr Vandermarliere, although some of us might have used the phrases "more drive" and "more energy". You said that you were in with the accession countries right at the beginning. When

did you start? Were the 10 treaties that you signed made within the past year, two years, or four years? I notice that you have Belgian overseas economic missions and regional trade missions, so you are having two bites at the cherry, as we say. When did you start sending trade missions?

I have a final point. One end of the Rosyth to Zeebrugge ferry route is situated in the region that I represent. We have had some concerns about freight, although the tourism figures have not been so bad. I have the distinct feeling that you are promoting the ferry much more than we are. Do you have comments on that?

Mr Vandermarliere: The UK is now our number 1 partner for hotel reservations in Flanders. Our trade and tourist offices are integrated in a diplomatic mission for Flemish representation. They have a specific mission. They are not selling destinations and they are not there for individuals just to call on for a prospectus on Bruges, for example—that is not their job. They exist for the tour operators and they liaise between British tour operators and the Flemish tourism industry. They are integrated with our Flemish representatives.

Mr Raffan: Could you answer my point about the accession countries? When were the treaties signed? How long have you been sending trade missions to those countries?

Mr Vandermarliere: Flemish foreign policy is young—it is only 11 years old. We started sending trade missions during our previous Government, which was probably six or seven years ago. However, the mission to Russia that I mentioned started in 1993, so it is 11 years old. Once we got permission, we went for it.

Mr Raffan: I do not know what you are doing to my colleagues, but you are depressing me, because we are so far behind you.

Mr Vandermarliere: I did not come here to do that.

The Convener: It is okay. I became depressed when I read your written evidence and have been depressed all afternoon while listening to your oral evidence.

Ishbel McFarlane: I was just going to tell Mr Raffan to relax—everything is going well with the ferry. It might interest you to know that international trade is very important for Flanders and that my colleagues in Zeebrugge were expecting that all the trade would come Scotland's way. In fact, there is a 55:45 split—55 per cent of trade is going out, and 45 per cent is coming in.

There were a few difficulties at the beginning of this year, when one of the boats, I think, was taken out of service—the conference facilities were taken out and more cabins were added, because tourism was going so well. The boats have been

upgraded and are back in service. The general trend for the ferry service is still upwards.

Mr Raffan: I am glad to hear that, but do you know what level freight occupancy is at? I know that, two years ago, it was pretty low during the winter.

Ishbel McFarlane: I am not here to speak for Scotland, but it was unfortunate that the ferry started running when there was a big slump in Scottish exports. Within that two-year period, Scottish electronics exports reduced by approximately 30 per cent. That was not an auspicious start for a new ferry service. I suggest that you contact Joe Noble, the head of Scottish Enterprise Fife, who has all those figures.

Mr Raffan: Superfast Ferries will have them as well.

Ishbel McFarlane: Yes.

The Convener: In your promotional strategy for Flanders, do you make use of Flemish expatriates around the world or just the official representatives of your country?

Ishbel McFarlane: In this case, I can answer in relation to Scotland. The work is perhaps a bit more difficult for me, in the sense that many of my colleagues work out of embassies and have a political or cultural representative.

The Convener: They would come across more expats.

Ishbel McFarlane: Yes, and they have the resources to set up clubs. "Vlamingen in de Wereld" is a magazine for Flemings all round the world, which is one way of co-ordinating expats.

The Convener: Who publishes that?

Ishbel McFarlane: I am not sure.

Mr Vandermarliere: The magazine is an organisation in itself, although it is also sponsored. It promotes expats all over the world and provides a connection among them.

Ishbel McFarlane: Voting is compulsory in Belgium, so most of the embassies keep lists of people who are resident in their countries.

Mr Vandermarliere: Many thousands of people voted in the embassy during the most recent Belgian election. We keep track of them.

The Convener: Very good.

Ishbel McFarlane: The other representatives will have access to a good database.

Mr Vandermarliere: Remember that we have identity cards.

The Convener: I bring this session to a close by thanking Mr Vandermarliere and Ishbel McFarlane

very much. Your written and oral evidence were illuminating and fascinating. We will not get too depressed. We will just have to act on what we have heard.

Committee members who are part of the delegation that is going to Flanders during the next couple of months will be taking the ferry. I understand that there is talk of holding a surgery on board to find out what the travellers think.

It is worth mentioning that SDI has told the committee that it has no plans to open offices in the accession states. It was interesting to hear about your treaties, especially the fact that they have been in place for several years. The committee has learned a lot and we might be back in touch. Of course, we will be in direct touch with your counterparts in Flanders. Thank you very much for coming.

Ishbel McFarlane: Thank you for inviting us.

Mr Vandermarliere: Thank you.

The Convener: We will have a quick break of no more than two minutes before the next part of the meeting.

15:56

Meeting suspended.

16:01

On resuming—

The Convener: I kick off by welcoming our next panel of witnesses—thank you for waiting so patiently. We hope that the session will last no longer than half an hour, if that is okay.

I inform committee members that the Rev Walter Dunlop, who was to be here to represent Action of Churches Together in Scotland, cannot make it; however, I am delighted to welcome the witnesses who could make it. There is no time for opening statements as such but, if you do not mind, I would like you all briefly to introduce yourselves and your organisations.

Paul Chitnis (Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland): I am the chief executive of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, an international development agency that is based in Glasgow and works entirely from Scotland. I am here to represent the Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland—NIDOS. I should say that I was asked to do so at relatively short notice.

Molly McGavigan (Christian Aid Scotland): I am a formal education worker with Christian Aid, which means that I work mainly with teachers and student teachers, particularly in the area of global

citizenship. Most of my work is done through the International Development Education Association of Scotland, which works as a network of educators.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Oxfam in Scotland): I am policy and public affairs co-ordinator for Oxfam in Scotland. I thank the committee for the opportunity to give evidence today.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We value your being here today. We were very keen for our inquiry to have an international development dimension to it, because that is an important part of the Government's external relations strategy, which we are anxious to explore. Margaret Ewing wishes to ask the first question.

Mrs Ewing: My question is really for Eilidh Whiteford, but other witnesses might want to comment on it. In your submission, you say that Oxfam in Scotland wants to

"foster an outward looking Scotland by integrating an international perspective into the Scottish Executive's policy and practice across the range of its activities"

and to

"consider Scotland's relationships with people in poorer countries, and avoid the promotion of Scottish interests at the expense or exploitation of people in the developing world".

Will you expand on that and say whether Oxfam has direct contacts with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, as Keith Raffan and I do? This year, we will probably visit sub-Saharan Africa, although our trip has still to be approved by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. I invite you to say a bit more about how you think that that international dimension could come into the promotion of Scotland abroad in a way that would not exploit people in the developing world.

Dr Whiteford: I will answer the specific part of your question first. As far as I know, there are no links with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association at the moment, but I could find out more about that.

On the more general question, the most important thing to say about promoting Scotland abroad—which we want to emphasise to the committee—is that it should not just be about promoting a very narrowly defined economic self-interest. Such promotion should be balanced by the promotion of Scottish values abroad. Examples of those values might be Scotland's internationalism, social justice and equality.

I turn to how we might go about doing that. In its partnership agreement, the Scottish Executive has already made commitments to support the work of the international development sector in Scotland. So far, that has very much been about supporting the sector's infrastructure. It would be great if the

committee could consider how that process might be progressed and put on a more sustainable footing so that not only the infrastructure is supported. The committee could think about how Scotland could promote programmatic work in the same way that other regions in Europe do. Tuscany in Italy and the Basque Country in Spain are examples of parts of Europe that have found ways of doing that within the framework of devolved settlements or state politics. There is a lot that the Scottish Parliament could do to meet the expectations and aspirations that civic society has of it to reflect the country's international values.

Mrs Ewing: If you were First Minister, is there a specific magic wand that you would like to wave, which you think could change the promotion of Scotland in the context of what you have just spoken about?

Dr Whiteford: I do not think that there is a specific wand that I would like to wave, because there is a wide range of difficult problems to tackle. Colleagues might have thoughts on how to progress matters.

In the evidence that we submitted to the committee, we indicated that there are certain principles that should underpin any strategy, one of which is partnership. It is not just a question of the First Minister waving a magic wand; to determine the way forward, a collective process will be necessary, not just one that is appropriate for Scotland. It is fundamental that such a process be based on the needs of the recipients of any aid or support that Scotland could offer.

Paul Chitnis: I will add to what Eilidh Whiteford said. The answer is not to wave a particular magic wand. The thrust of what we are saying is that there must be an international perspective. It is self-evident that that must be gained through an external relations strategy, but such a strategy must go beyond trade and the promotion of Scotland per se.

I think that NIDOS organisations feel that the Scottish Executive should be a little less timid in dealing with some of the issues involved. Although the fact that 1.2 billion people live on less than \$1 a day is well known, it bears repeating as often as possible. That is something that should be of concern to all of us, regardless of where we live, and not just to some of us. It is morally right for such issues to be part of the external relations strategy.

My second point is that we have much to learn from engaging with other countries and, in particular, with those in the poorer parts of the world—in other words, in the south. I am sure that you know that, by that, I mean countries in the southern hemisphere. The more we can engage

with them in a globalising economy, the better things will be for us and for them.

Molly McGavigan: I feel that we in Scotland already have very good relationships with many countries. When the Czech delegation was here, Irene Oldfather mentioned that there are many good partnerships between schools in Scotland and schools in Europe, which we hope to extend further east. The fact that we are beginning to extend the partnership process to the south is to be greatly encouraged. However, we must be careful to ensure that, as we do so, such partnership does not become an opportunity to underline the stereotyping that has often gone on in the past, whereby Scotland, as a country from the north, was seen as being able to provide for the south. A great deal of learning can be done by listening and acting in partnership, and it is important to start with youngsters.

The Convener: When the Scottish Executive puts together its external relations strategy, do you get a warm invitation to participate and to submit your views?

Paul Chitnis: No.

Dr Whiteford: No.

Mr Raffan: Thank you for your written evidence, but I had a slight problem with all of it. I am following in Margaret Ewing's tracks and trying to pin you down. On Oxfam in Scotland's submission, it is all very well saying nice, worthy things—I am not trying to be sarcastic; I hope that I am not being sarcastic—but you say that we have to go beyond public relations and marketing. You use the wonderful sentence:

"We would welcome a strategic, coherent, co-ordinated and transparent approach to external relations."

What does that mean, within the limitations of foreign affairs and international development's being reserved matters? Do not get me wrong; I am on your side, but I am playing devil's advocate. We need more case studies and we need to pin you down. The phrases that you use are worthy, but they do not get us anywhere. It is difficult for us to say them to the Executive, because it will ask, "What do you mean by that?"

You come up with examples. For example, paragraph vii of section 2 of the NIDOS submission refers to links between Clackmannanshire education department and Gauteng. I know that there are links between Fife education department and Malawi, and between Lothian NHS Board and Zambia. I am trying to pin you down. How can we do what you ask, with limited resources? We need more case studies from you. I would love to correspond with all three of you on this, rather than go on at length now, but

you will understand my point. Could you respond to it?

I hope that I have not been too critical. I am trying to be helpful, so that we can put things to the Executive that it cannot wriggle out of. We need more specifics.

The Convener: Are you looking for specific answers?

Mr Raffan: I think that all three witnesses would like to comment, particularly Mr Chitnis and Dr Whiteford.

Molly McGavigan: Neither of whom is me, but I would like to start. One of the reasons why I lodged a submission on behalf of Christian Aid Scotland was that in the call for evidence that I received by e-mail, a section jumped out at me and was of immediate interest. It mentioned

"links with the Eastern Cape region of South Africa and how

"it is unclear how these links have been furthered."

I am concerned about that.

I know that we do not have all the money in the world and, as a development education worker, it is sometimes only by chance that I hear about things that are being done. There is no co-ordination—that may be viewed as a woolly word. The link with the Eastern Cape region is a good one, but it is not being furthered. We all need to take responsibility for that and we all need to ask why that is the case, especially on this day of all days—27 April 2004—which is 10 years after South African people gained their freedom.

Paul Chitnis: I have a suspicion that on our side we are a little constrained in our thinking, because of the nature of the settlement. We might be a little less constrained if we thought outside the political boxes. That may account for why the submission is presented in the way it is.

A lot of things are happening, but they are not in our submission because we were unable to include them. Mr Raffan spoke in the debate a couple of weeks ago on the millennium development goals. If I may speak for SCIAF rather than NIDOS, one of SCIAF's suggestions was that there should be an annual debate in the Parliament on international development and the millennium development goals. That would be a practical measure.

The cross-party international development group of the Scottish Parliament—particularly under its present convener, Des McNulty—has brought some interesting people to talk in Scotland. The practical work of Scottish development organisations in developing countries, which is not really referred to in the evidence, is testament to

what is already happening and could be built on. Many things are happening, but that may not be clear from the evidence.

16:15

Mr Raffan: Some of it is clear, and I invite you to be less constrained: throw constraint to the wind because that is what this Parliament is about. It is about trying to do things differently, by experimenting, by taking risks, by failing and by keeping on trying.

I mean no disrespect to Dr Whiteford. It is great that you suggest what you would like us to consider, but you must tell us how. You are much more expert in the matter than is the committee. We look to you for ideas—I do, anyway—and for specific examples of ways in which we can progress matters. I am excited by the general thrust of what you say, but I am concerned about how we can carry it forward.

Dr Whiteford: Perhaps I can talk about how we might integrate thinking about international development into mainstream agendas of the Scottish Parliament. For example, the sustainable development agenda is a big one for the Scottish Executive. However, while we consider those issues at international level, we must remember that they are really global issues and that there is an awful lot that we could do in Scotland if we were to take risks, perhaps by resourcing non-governmental organisations to do the work. If the Scottish Executive cannot do something itself, why does not it work in partnership with people who can, and who have the networks to enable that?

I was fortunate enough to meet a researcher at the European University Institute in Florence recently. His name is Carlos Hernández and he has been looking at how regional authorities across Europe finance international development work, even though they do not necessarily have much more power than the Scottish Parliament has—in some cases, they have less. It is very much about consolidating the cultural values of those regions. Why should not Scotland be a bit more ambitious in how it commits to international development?

Another issue that is of particular concern to Oxfam is the potentially detrimental impact that enlargement of the European Union could have on aid to developing countries. That is obviously quite a complicated issue, but the EU's becoming larger means in essence that much of the aid agenda is likely just to fall off the list of talking points. In that respect, there could be severe consequences. We might also see a change in political priorities.

Scotland has a voice in Europe. It might not necessarily reflect the aspirations of everyone in Scotland and it might not be as big a voice as

people would like, but there is power there, nevertheless. There is a lever on Westminster and there is a direct lever on Europe. Why are we using that only to promote a narrow agenda when we could be playing a more active role as global citizens?

Irene Oldfather: I realise that we will not, in the time that is available to us today, be able to explore the issue to the extent we might want. I am certainly sympathetic to the points that Keith Raffan made about how we can work in partnership with the organisations that are represented here today while respecting the context of the devolution settlement. Perhaps today might be construed as the beginning of something as opposed to as an end in itself, and perhaps we should consider how to take some of those arguments forward.

Like Keith Raffan, I am willing, but I am looking to you, as well. You are striking a few chords with us, and we should try to explore them—not all today, but perhaps in the future. One of the things that spring to mind from reading your submissions and from our discussion is the common agricultural policy. I have worked hard on the issue of tobacco subsidies and I know how important that issue is to the developing world, which is being flooded with poor quality tobacco and cigarettes. I am sensitive to that issue and I wonder about the importance of fair trade goods in Scotland and whether we are doing enough to promote fair trade. It is certainly something that we have tried to do in Parliament, but perhaps we could do more in some areas.

I listened carefully to what you said about international values and, in particular, about the role that Tuscany has played. The President of Tuscany, Claudio Martini, is a very good friend of mine and I know that he is interested in taking those issues forward. Perhaps we can learn from those experiences. The consulate for Malawi is in my constituency, so I am keen to work with you. My question is really on the same matter that Keith Raffan spoke about. I can see that there are opportunities, but how can we work together further in order to explore them?

Dr Whiteford: That the dialogue has been opened is most important because things are new for everybody. It is not only the devolution settlement that is new, but the context in which we are working is, too. In the past five to 10 years, there has been a big change in the UK's approach to international issues, so we are now working in a different global climate. Therefore, a lot of learning must be done on all sides in the process. However, it is important to build on a partnership approach and on partnerships between civic society in the broadest sense and elected representatives.

On the CAP, a couple of weeks or so ago, Oxfam in Scotland gave evidence to the Environment and Rural Development Committee on CAP reform and requested that Scottish ministers do much more to promote fair trade rules and to end the injustices of CAP and its detrimental effect on people throughout the developing world.

The Convener: I want to ask all the witnesses questions on that theme. Since Jack McConnell returned from the sustainable development summit in South Africa in 2002, what interaction has there been between your organisations and the Executive? Is there a forum? Are there regular meetings? Are action plans produced? What interaction has there been to progress the ideas that you are talking about?

Paul Chitnis: I am not aware of any meetings that have involved SCIAF. Perhaps other NIDOS member organisations have been involved, as they have more of an environmental slant to their work. Could I come back at some point on specifics?

The Convener: Sure.

Molly McGavigan: Do you want me to give an answer?

The Convener: Okay—we will then come back to Paul Chitnis.

Molly McGavigan: I do not know the answers to the questions, either, but I am an educationist and will ask Christian Aid whether it is aware of anything in the bigger picture at Christian Aid.

The Convener: The issue is crucial so it would be helpful if you could do so for us.

Dr Whiteford: The Scottish Executive has supported NIDOS financially and with secondees. That is what I was referring to earlier when I spoke about supporting the infrastructure. Nevertheless, that is quite a small level of support if one considers what can be done with one employee. It is important and valuable, but we are saying that we should put things on a more long-term, sustainable footing and that we should resource things more effectively in order to achieve more and to move into more programmatic work. That is why the Oxfam in Scotland submission welcomes some of the debate that others have initiated about the possibility of a lottery funding stream that might be available for international development work. We would certainly like to see a more robust, sustainable and co-ordinated, and less ad hoc, approach to working with the sector.

Mr Raffan: I want to give a specific example. NIDOS is an umbrella organisation. Its submission states:

“Jack McConnell’s presidency of the RegLeg provides a

key opportunity for Scotland to engage with the global sustainable development agenda.”

That caught my eye. Did you write to him about that? Did you ask for a meeting? Did you have a meeting with him? The idea is exciting and is on the agenda for later in the meeting. How did you interact? Did you wait to be asked or were you proactive?

The Convener: Are those questions to Eilidh Whiteford?

Mr Raffan: They are to all the witnesses.

The Convener: I invite Mr Chitnis to reply briefly to them.

Paul Chitnis: Many issues were raised in the questions.

Mr Raffan: I am sorry.

The Convener: I am trying to keep some order in the questions. You could answer them and add any other points that you want to make.

Paul Chitnis: I cannot answer the questions because I do not have the details of what went on between the secretariat of NIDOS and Jack McConnell’s office. Perhaps Eilidh Whiteford could answer them. I misunderstood the earlier question. I should, incidentally, say that NIDOS has had five secondments over the past year, thanks to the Scottish Executive, so there has been some excellent support from the Executive.

Dr Whiteford: I cannot speak for NIDOS and do not know what it has done. I know that it has contact with the Scotland Office and with certain people, but that is not my area of expertise. I know that Oxfam has approached Jack McConnell vis-à-vis the sustainability agenda but, obviously, we thought that responding to the committee’s consultation would be a key opportunity and that working through the Parliament in a cross-party way would be more effective. That is the way in which we would like to work in Scotland. We would hope that MSPs from across the political spectrum would be in a good position to act as advocates for international development.

The Convener: Before I invite Paul Chitnis to make any other points that he wishes to make, I remind the witnesses that they can write to the committee if they do not have the answers to hand just now. That would be perfectly legitimate and we would encourage it.

Paul Chitnis: I want to suggest five practical things that could be done.

The Convener: Briefly?

Paul Chitnis: Yes. First, the common agricultural policy is a moral outrage. The Scottish Executive should use its position within Europe to speak up and make that point whenever and

wherever it can. Secondly, the Scottish Executive could perhaps make some funding available to promote fair trade, just as it promotes things such as the campaign on racism. Forgive me; I forget the name of that campaign.

There are three other practical things that the Executive could do. Next year, Scotland hosts the G8 summit. CHOGM—the Commonwealth heads of Government meeting—was held in Edinburgh a few years ago and did a great deal to raise awareness of international issues, especially in relation to Africa. Along the same lines, something practical could be organised around the G8 summit.

Why could not the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament talk more about the millennium development goals and raise awareness of them? I accept that Parliament and the Executive do not have direct responsibility for those goals, but simply raising awareness of such issues among the general Scottish populace would be very valuable.

Lastly, I would like to tell committee members of a practical example from overseas. Last year, I took John McFall MP to visit Zambia, where we had conversations with ministers and others. As members will know, Zambia is one of the poorest countries in the world. It has great problems in managing its budget, most of which comes from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. On our visit, we were struck by the fact that that country simply needed help in compiling a budget and, crucially, in monitoring expenditure. Surely the expertise that exists here in Scotland could be shared with countries such as Zambia.

The Convener: “Capacity building” is, I think, the official term that is used for such projects. It also relates to the accession countries to the European Union. There is expertise that can work internationally.

Phil Gallie: My question will be brief because it has been partly answered by Eilidh Whiteford; it concerns EU enlargement and the target figures for gross national income that will apply across Europe. In real terms, how will those figures affect money that is to be spent on overseas development? Because of the expansion of the European Union, the actual level of GNI is dropping. If we consider GNI collectively, the amount that is raised—which is 0.33 per cent of GNI—actually falls. Have you given any thought to that?

Dr Whiteford: As I have already said, one of our chief concerns is that development issues will not be prioritised in the same way.

We have another fear. Rather than untied aid's being focused on the least developed countries—that is, the poorest countries, most of which are in

the south and many of which are in Africa—untied aid will, increasingly, be focused on near neighbours because of foreign policy or other strategic objectives of the EU. We are keen to avoid that; the argument has been going on for a long time.

There are serious poverty problems in some of the accession countries. Although they have inherited the Monterrey commitment to 0.33 per cent of GNI for millennium development goals, we are really looking for commitment, post-2006, to reach 0.7 per cent. That is the internationally agreed target for the millennium development goals. We are very concerned that that target will not be reached. Five current EU member states still do not have a timetable to reach 0.33 per cent. If that target is missed, how on earth will we ever reach 0.7 per cent?

I do not know whether I have answered Mr Gallie's question, but I hope that I have laid out some of our concerns. There are a lot of opportunities with European enlargement, but there are, for developing countries, risks that have still to be fully explored.

16:30

Phil Gallie: You have answered this in part but, overall, are you aware of requirements that the Lisbon agenda set on the EU with respect to economic growth, outputs and other aspects?

Dr Whiteford: I am sorry—I do not quite understand your question.

Phil Gallie: It seems to me that, given some of the objectives that have been set for the enlarged EU, particularly if we adhere to the Lisbon strategies, areas such as overseas aid will inevitably suffer. You have made the point that five major countries in the EU are not even attempting to come up to internationally agreed target levels. Do you feel that the expansion of the EU and the existing requirements for economic growth and so on will adversely affect the objectives that you have set?

Dr Whiteford: Expansion has a huge potential to affect those objectives adversely, which is why we need strong advocates in Europe who will say that those are important issues and that we have a global responsibility to one another. Europe's long-term stability and security will depend on stability in other parts of the world. We all have a stake not only in creating prosperity in the rich countries in the north but in creating sustainable livelihoods in the south.

Paul Chitnis: The target of 0.7 per cent of GNI is not a European target, but a United Nations target, which was set 30 years ago. Britain has never achieved it, yet many smaller countries have

not only achieved but exceeded it. I am sure that the debate that took place here a few weeks ago, about setting a timetable for the British Government to achieve the 0.7 per cent target, was noticed.

The Convener: The NIDOS submission says that

“there seems to be little relationship between British High Commissions abroad and the Scottish Parliament.”

I can identify with that, but I would like to know why you say that. If you cannot tell us now, you could perhaps write back to us with the answer.

Paul Chitnis: No—I can tell you why that comment was inserted into our submission. One of the member organisations of NIDOS had experience of travelling overseas: a former Westminster politician found that Westminster MPs found it easy to enter the doors of embassies and high commissions; I am told that that was much less easy for an MSP, if not impossible.

The Convener: Many MSPs can confirm that experience and validate that comment.

Mr Raffan: I add, however, that we see quite a lot of other countries’ high commissioners.

My questions are for Paul Chitnis. Who is the current chairman of NIDOS? I see that you gave the position up and, to an extent, we are holding you accountable for written evidence that you probably did not write. What staffing does NIDOS have, and is the staffing level adequate? Do you view it as an effective umbrella organisation to represent relief and development organisations in Scotland?

The Convener: I think that there were four or five questions there. Paul Chitnis should feel free to write to us with the information.

Mr Raffan: They were short, sharp questions, convener.

Paul Chitnis: The current chair is Mhairi Hearle, of Oxfam in Scotland. There is one full-time—or pretty much full-time—co-ordinator. I believe that a secondment from the Scottish Executive will start fairly soon, I think for a year. Is that sufficient? No—nothing in life is ever sufficient.

Mr Raffan: I did not say “sufficient”; I think that I said “effective”—I was asking you for an opinion.

Paul Chitnis: Is NIDOS effective? As someone who was instrumental in setting it up, I would say yes, it is extremely effective.

Mr Raffan: Why had I not heard about NIDOS until I got the information that is in front of me now?

Paul Chitnis: I cannot answer for what you read or do not read.

The Convener: I think that Keith Raffan has had his fair share of short, sharp questions, but he made some fair points.

Thank you very much for coming along today to give us your oral evidence and for having previously submitted written evidence, which was very useful.

I note such ideas as:

“Scotland should have a body equivalent to the Westminster Foundation for Democracy”.

New links have been established with that body in the past couple of months and some MSPs are now participating in its work and have visited south-eastern Europe. No doubt they will go to other countries as well and get involved in the issues. That is something that is worth exploring.

There is also a lot of sympathy on the committee for your objectives and, as you can see, members are keen to explore them further. The issues are relatively new and I hope that we have given you something to think about. Please feel free to write back to us on any of the issues and take them further. Please also engage the committee in your various agendas, because you will find that there is a lot of sympathy for them among members.

Intergovernmental Conference

16:35

The Convener: I will take the committee quickly through the rest of the agenda. I hope that it will take only the next 25 minutes. I do not want to go beyond that, if members are agreeable.

Irene Oldfather: Less than that, please.

The Convener: It is in members' hands to go more quickly than that.

The next item on the agenda is the update on the intergovernmental conference. We can touch briefly on it today and come back to it later, but we do not have time to discuss it fully now.

As before, we have a short briefing paper on where we are. The agenda has clearly moved on with the UK Government's promise of a referendum on the EU constitution, which is something that I am sure the committee will want to look into in further detail and get involved in. Today is not the time to explore that in detail, but I will take initial comments on the paper.

Irene Oldfather: It looks as though we will have two and a half to three hours in the chamber to discuss the issues on Thursday, so I have nothing to say other than to note the paper and thank the clerks for updating us.

Phil Gallie: I go along with that. I hesitate to pursue an argument that we will debate on Thursday, but what is meant in the third-last paragraph of the paper by the treaty on the European constitution being

"tempered and scrutinised in the House of Commons"?

I understand "scrutinised", but I cannot quite understand what "tempered" means.

I make the point that "tempered" suggests that the finally agreed constitution could be amended by the House of Commons, but it obviously cannot. It is a take-it-or-leave-it document. Is that the intended interpretation of the word "tempered"? If so, I suggest that we should remove it from the document and say "scrutinised in the House of Commons".

The Convener: I will pass that to Stephen Imrie, who wants to say a quick word.

Stephen Imrie (Clerk): The language used in that document, particularly the word "tempered", is not the clerks' language; it is taken directly from the statement that the Prime Minister made in the House of Commons, which was then published on 10 Downing Street's website.

Phil Gallie: As far as I am aware, 10 Downing Street later refuted the idea that the constitution

could be changed. To that degree, perhaps the paper is out of date, and we should simply say that the House of Commons can scrutinise the constitution.

The Convener: That was helpful, Phil. Your comments have put the matter in context.

I call Phil Raffan.

Mr Raffan: Oh God, that's all we need. Even I would have a job absorbing that.

The Convener: Sorry. I call Keith Raffan. You and Phil Gallie are so alike that I get you mixed up.

Mr Raffan: The note from the presidency to the European Council is a model of clarity. The presidency ought to be congratulated on those two pages, which sum up the outstanding issues and where we are on them. The note is so clear that I would say that it is one of the best short summaries that I have seen.

We should not all start running a marathon as if it were 100yd. I draw attention to the fact that the negotiation on the constitutional treaty might not be concluded at the European Council of 17 to 18 June, simply because, as the paper says,

"the formation of new governments in several current and future member states might make this difficult."

With the changes and the more hopeful atmosphere that have been brought about by the change of Government in Spain, we need to monitor the matter much more closely in the next few months, because things are drawing to a conclusion.

The Convener: That is why the matter is back on the agenda, and I am certainly of a mind to put more time aside at a future meeting. Once our regional development inquiry is out of the way, we will have a bit more space to consider it. Are members happy with that?

Members indicated agreement.

Convener's Report

16:39

The Convener: We move on to consider the convener's report, the first item on which is the reply that we have received from the Executive in response to our inquiry about the First Minister's role as president of Regleg. The response gives the dates of some forthcoming events. Regleg is, of course, the group of regions with legislative power—I say that for the *Official Report*, so that we do not use too many acronyms. As we all know, the First Minister became president of the group last November and since then the committee has been seeking an update on what is happening and what is planned.

Mr Raffan: I will qualify what I would like to say—I will try to be diplomatic for once—but I found the response disappointing. I would have liked far more detail on what is going on and a copy of the First Minister's speech of 23 March. We are about halfway through the presidency and I would like to know what Regleg is getting up to. I also want to know how it envisages the network of regional parliamentary European committees—NORPEC—fitting in, and more about the Regleg co-ordination committee. Does it have an office and administrative back-up, or is that up to the individual presidency? I think that it is the latter.

I wonder how on earth the First Minister is meant to represent the views of the regions with legislative power in relevant Commission initiatives and how that process is undertaken. We know that he has visited a number of regions, but how does he gather the work together? When a Commission initiative comes out, how long does he take to respond? Does he take as long as some ministers take to reply to our correspondence?

The Convener: I remind members that we invited the First Minister to address the committee on Regleg. I ask the clerk to confirm that we have not had a response.

Stephen Imrie: I confirm that the committee has not had a response.

The Convener: Do I have the committee's permission to chase that up? There are a lot of outstanding questions.

Phil Gallie: Perhaps we should send Keith Raffan's comments to the First Minister. Keith has perhaps spoken for the committee.

Mr Raffan: There is not much point in the First Minister coming before us unless we get more substantial written evidence to work on in advance.

The Convener: If he accepts the invitation, we will make sure that some briefing is available.

Mr Raffan: It would be worth while to ask him for a bit more detail now.

Irene Oldfather: I would be happy to have a bit more detail.

On a positive note, the fifth annual conference of the presidents of Regleg is to be held on 29 November. It would be useful if the committee could organise a joint event, seminar or reception so that it can be involved in some way. I am happy for us to task the clerks to work with the special advisers or the Executive's external affairs division to investigate positive involvement in that conference.

Mr Raffan: I agree with the point that Irene Oldfather makes, but would it be possible to organise a simultaneous NORPEC event? After all, the two things are not unconnected.

The Convener: I am trying to remember when our NORPEC event is planned. Is it September?

Stephen Imrie: There is no definite date, but when the committee was in Barcelona, it agreed that the event should be held in the autumn, so the suggestion that has been made might be a possibility if the committee is so minded.

Mr Raffan: That would make sense.

The Convener: We should take into account the fact that such an event might be overshadowed by the Regleg meeting.

Mr Raffan: We might overshadow Regleg.

The Convener: That might be more easily accomplished.

Mr Raffan: I take your point.

The Convener: We can discuss those issues later.

Irene Oldfather: Last week I was at the Committee of the Regions in Brussels. The Saxony-Anhalt delegation asked me about the next meeting of NORPEC, to which it has been invited. I checked with the clerks and I understand that the meeting will be in November. Of course, the difference is that NORPEC has about five or six members whereas Regleg includes about 70 regions, so I do not think that it would be a good idea to hold the events simultaneously. However, we should consider trying to take up the opportunity to meet the presidents of regions with legislative powers while they are in Scotland—obviously, that would be subject to the willingness of the First Minister, but I hope that we can arrange that.

The Convener: I suggest that, as a compromise, we write back to the Executive, seeking more information specifically about the events in November and asking whether the

Parliament—through this committee—can be involved. We will also remind the First Minister of the standing invitation to come to the committee. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

16:45

Irene Oldfather: I am not too exercised about whether the First Minister comes before the committee. I am sure that he is very busy.

The Convener: Well, it is a standing invitation.

Irene Oldfather: I would quite like some further information, however. If the First Minister is able to attend the committee before November, I am sure that we will be happy to see him.

Phil Gallie: Are there any minutes of these Regleg activities? Why the hell—sorry, that is unparliamentary language. Why the heck can we not just get a copy of the minutes?

The Convener: As the Executive's letter points out, we are supposed to check the website for those minutes; the letter also gives the website address. However, we can ask for more information when we write to the First Minister.

The next item on the convener's report is the monthly report on external relations and inward and outward visits. The clerk has reminded me that, given that the Parliament was represented at tartan day, we should perhaps request a copy of the delegation's report. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Mr Raffan: I want to raise a very brief point. The report refers to

"a conference organised by the Scottish Palestinian Forum & Churches House at Dunblane"

that was held on 17 March. I know that the conference in question was on the Palestine issue, but Churches House carries out a lot of very good work on international development and conflict resolution issues. It might be useful to keep in touch with the centre, find out about its programme and ask it to feed in stuff from time to time.

The Convener: Okay.

Annual Report

16:46

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is consideration of the committee's draft annual report. Do members have any initial comments? We might have to bring this item back to a future meeting, because I have not really had time to look at it.

Mr Raffan: I think that the word "extremely" has been omitted from the second sentence of the introduction. It should read "members of the committee have been kept extremely hard at work."

The Convener: I invite members to e-mail their comments to the clerk.

Mr Raffan: The report is fine. Why do we have to do anything more to it?

The Convener: I do not want to discuss the issue just now, but in future we will have to talk about the fact that so far all our meetings have been held in Edinburgh. We might have an opportunity to stick to the Parliament's founding principles and take the committee elsewhere.

Irene Oldfather: Can I recommend that the committee come to Ayrshire?

Phil Gallie: I second that.

The Convener: How did I know that you were going to say that, Irene? Sometimes you do not surprise me.

Mr Raffan: Irene, you have been voted down by three votes to two.

Scottish Executive (Scrutiny)

16:47

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is pre and post-council scrutiny. I have no specific items to raise. If members have no comments, I suggest that we note the paper and move to the final item on the agenda.

Mr Raffan: Did we receive correspondence as well?

The Convener: I apologise. We received some correspondence that we can discuss under this item if anyone so wishes. Does anything jump out?

Members: No.

Sift

16:48

The Convener: We now move on to the final item on the agenda, which is consideration of the sift paper. I do not have any points to raise. Do members have any comments?

Mr Raffan: I had a very brief comment, but I can follow it up separately. In fact, it is not unrelated to the evidence session that we have just had and centres on the CAP and agreements with developing countries over cane sugar, fishing off certain countries and so on. I found that issue quite interesting.

The Convener: Before I close the meeting, I remind the committee that tomorrow's private meeting to discuss the final draft of the report into regional development funding will take place at 10.30 on the fifth floor of Parliament headquarters.

Finally, it is very important that members attend the reception at 6 pm this evening at the Scottish Council for Development and Industry's offices in Chester Street to mark the visit of the Czech Parliament's Committee for European Integration. The committee and consular corps in Edinburgh are invited, so we need a good turnout from members. The next meeting will take place on 11 May, so I will see everyone then.

Meeting closed at 16:49.

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