

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 December 2004

Session 2

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

21st Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

*Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (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)

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Paul Brady (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department)

Rt hon Robin Cook MP

Mr Tom McCabe (Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform)

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick

Louise MacDonald (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department)

Mr Jim Wallace (Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Nick Hawthorne

David Simpson

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 7 December 2004

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

Promoting Scotland Worldwide Inquiry

The Convener (Mr John Swinney): Welcome to the 21st meeting in 2004 of the European and External Relations Committee. We have a long agenda this afternoon, involving discussion with our panel of witnesses followed by a couple of Government ministers.

We have apologies from Dennis Canavan, who has constituency commitments this afternoon.

The first item on our agenda is a continuation of our promoting Scotland worldwide inquiry, which is an examination of the external relations policy, strategy and activities of the Scottish Executive.

I welcome to the committee the right hon Robin Cook, the member of Parliament for Livingston and former Foreign Secretary, and Professor Sir Neil MacCormick, a member of the European Parliament between 1999 and 2004 who has now returned to the University of Edinburgh, whence he came. Gentlemen, it is a real pleasure to have you here today to contribute to our inquiry. In the interests of party balance, we extended invitations to Sir Malcolm Rifkind and Sir Menzies Campbell but, due to diary commitments, they were unable to join us.

I offer you both the opportunity to say a few words of introduction to, or explanation of, some of the issues that relate to the inquiry. I point out that, a day or so ago, Neil MacCormick submitted a short paper, which has been distributed to members today.

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: I will quickly run through the points in my submission because, as you point out, no one has had much of a chance to read it.

It starts out anecdotally. One of the things that has stuck with me from the period that I spent working in Brussels was a visit I paid to the Flanders Association, which is a civic society that is aimed at promoting the identity of Flanders and advancing things Flemish in general. Flanders has remarkable powers, even compared with Scotland. One of my colleagues remarked that Belgium is now a kingdom comprising two republics. For

example, both Flanders and Wallonia have treaty-making powers and full external relations powers. However, my Flemish colleagues would say, "You Scots don't know how lucky you are. You've got worldwide recognition, international football and rugby teams, pipe bands, Scotch whisky, salmon and so on." They did not use the phrase, but they were obviously talking about what we think of as Scotland the brand. They were saying that Scotland's brand identity is extremely powerful—unlike Flanders, Catalunya and Galicia, we do not have to persuade people that we exist; indeed, we are famous for existing—but we need to use it better. That is a useful point to remember. From time to time, we get involved in discussions of modernising our identity and so on. Of course, there are many aspects of modernity and post-modernity in Scotland—including this building—that we rejoice about, but it would be a great mistake to walk away from the internationally recognised symbols.

The second point in my submission relates to representing Scotland abroad. The recent referendum in the north-east of England has had a significant effect. If that part of England will not vote for a regional assembly, no other region in England will. That means that the United Kingdom will not end up in the next few years looking like Spain, where, after the historic national regions of Catalunya, Galicia and Euskadi got autonomous self-government following the adoption of the new constitution, there was a roll-out of constitutional change affecting Murcia, Andalusia and so on. That kind of roll-out will not happen in the UK, apparently, because there is no demand for it. That means that the external perception of the UK will be of the four old kingdoms of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That should be properly represented in the external relationships of the UK. I was on one of the committees of the British Council for a number of years and know that, now, it is very good at that. It has greatly changed its line with regard to what is involved in representing British cultures abroad. It would be important to try to ensure that the external representation of the UK adequately represents the internal diversity of the UK. I would suggest that culture and trade are the two most important aspects of that from a Scottish point of view, but there might be others.

The next point in my submission relates to civil society. It is worth remembering the enormous international linkages that many public civic entities in Scotland already have, such as the bar, the Law Society of Scotland, the Institute of Chartered Accountants, the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, Universities Scotland, the Scottish Football Association, the Scottish

Rugby Union and so on. There is a huge list of bodies that already operate in an international way and are recognised as speaking for Scotland. Obviously, it is important that they do not become limbs of Government. They should not be incorporated by the Executive but, nevertheless, the Executive should try to add value to and gain added value from that range of external representation.

On the European Union, it seems to me that, increasingly, we have to stop thinking of relations with countries in the EU as being external relations. In that regard, I note that the name of this committee is the European and External Relations Committee. Europe makes laws for Scotland, among other places. In Government terms, the UK speaks with one voice in the Council of Ministers but, in the Parliament, Scotland is a constituency and has seven members. It is already the case that we get a great deal of synergy from those members working together and that is likely to increase. It is probably easier for the Parliament to work with the MEPs than it is for the Executive to do so. Obviously, a proportion of those MEPs will be from parties other than the parties that make up the Executive but that is not a factor for the Parliament's committees, as the representation of parties in our European delegation is broadly the same as the representation of parties in the Scottish Parliament. That is a useful interface that should be used as much as possible.

I wonder whether we use the Scottish diaspora as well as we might. There is a huge pool of Scottish graduates abroad. We tend to be a bit over-impressed with the relationship with the United States of America. It is important and I would not belittle it but I would point out that Canada is hugely laden with Scottish associations, as are Australia and New Zealand. Further, in South Africa, both in terms of the majority and, in part, the minority, there is a great connection to Scotland.

I worked in the University of Oxford for a number of years. Oxford gets a huge boost from Rhodes scholarships, which bring people from the Commonwealth and America to Oxford for postgraduate study. Nothing parallels such scholarships in Scotland, which is a great shame, as the history of the United Kingdom that people in Australia, Canada, South Africa and even New Zealand—although less so there—learn is very anglocentric. The UK is still known as England in those countries. Indeed, Scottish Canadians are known as English Canadians in contrast to French Canadians. Not nearly enough postgraduates and academics look to Scotland as one of the home bases or countries with which they can link up. If there is ever an accidental surplus at the end of the year, the Minister for Finance and Public

Service Reform might think about creating an endowment to set up Scottish Commonwealth scholarships—they could be called McConnell scholarships rather than Rhodes scholarships. To be serious, however, we need some way of fertilising such things.

Finally, why do not you have a Commonwealth premiers conference at some point? After all, there are many representations at the Uttar Pradesh, Victoria, Ontario and Scotland level in all the Commonwealth countries, except New Zealand.

The Convener: Thank you. Perhaps we will put your point to the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform when he appears later this afternoon.

I invite Robin Cook to say a few words of introduction.

Robin Cook MP: I welcome the committee's inquiry. In the political world that we now inhabit, the reality is that we cannot neatly compartmentalise and say, "Over there you have international affairs and over here you have domestic affairs." The two are now unavoidably and inextricably interconnected. The best way of viewing the modern world in which we live is to view things as interdependent.

I begin with a health warning about my experience at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office: I left it three years ago. However, I can say that we set out to ensure that at the start, we had the fullest possible co-operation with the Scottish Parliament and that we put institutional links in place. At the time, it was possibly fortunate that the Foreign Office had a Scottish member of Parliament as the Foreign Secretary and a Glasgow graduate—Sir John Kerr—as the permanent secretary. Between us, we got off to a good start with the institution. John Kerr developed a code of practice on how the Foreign Office would relate to the devolved bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which was firmly drummed into the Foreign Office. I was pleased to have the opportunity to open the Scottish Executive EU office in Brussels, which is next door to the office of the United Kingdom permanent representation to the EU. The two work closely together.

The Foreign Office is now culturally attuned to working with departments and political organisations outside its own premises because, as a result of the increasing Europeanisation of British public life, it has become a clearing house for all the Whitehall departments. Whitehall departments—with very few exceptions—now spend around 20 to 30 per cent of their time dealing with the European angle of their business. That means that people are constantly shuttling to and from Brussels—and, indeed, sometimes to

and from other European capitals; they often also have contacts with capitals in the wider world outside Europe. Nowadays, the Foreign Office is very much the holding company, if you like, and host for departmental emissaries on one kind of business or another. The Foreign Office provides real added value. It knows the local areas and the local people and it has the linguistic skills, but it has increasingly seen itself as a body that facilitates, assists, co-ordinates and collaborates with other departments in Whitehall. It therefore took naturally to the idea that it should collaborate and co-operate with the devolved bodies, which has worked quite well. We all have things to learn and things will no doubt get better over time, but we got off to a good institutional start in that respect.

I do not disagree with Neil MacCormick's Belgian interlocutor's point that Scotland has the best of all possible worlds. Our identity is clearly recognised, but, more important, we now have a democratic institution to speak and provide a central focus for Scotland. At the same time, we still have access to one of the strongest and largest networks of overseas representation through the United Kingdom. That unique combination is important. The point is not only that Scotland can benefit from the links with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the United Kingdom, but that the United Kingdom can benefit from the devolved bodies in Scotland and elsewhere.

I was still in the Cabinet when links were formed with some of the regional bodies from throughout Europe. One should remember that, before devolution, the high degree of centralisation in Britain was unusual in Europe. Indeed, England—by which I mean specifically England—is still a centralised political entity, which in Europe is an aberration. Apart from France, pretty well all the other countries in Europe have a highly devolved system of government, notably Spain and Germany. It is slightly odd that we have not gone further down the German road; after all, we wrote the constitution for Germany when we were still in charge of it, but, when we came home, we forgot the lessons that we had applied there. In the continental countries, the regional bodies are becoming increasingly more assertive. In Germany, there is a political tussle about whether the Bundeskanzler or the Länder should be the main speaker for Germany in European debates.

I declined to be drawn by those who felt that we should be apprehensive about the Scottish Executive becoming part of a network of regional bodies throughout the continent. It is in the interests of the whole of Britain that we have a body in that network to provide British input—albeit from a specific Scottish perspective—and to

keep us in touch. Both sides can only benefit from that.

14:15

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their contributions to the discussion. I will pursue some questions on the points that they made.

Robin Cook mentioned the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's role in, and welcome for, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. A couple of weeks ago, we took evidence from Henry McLeish, whose written evidence stated:

"Initially, attempts to increase Scotland's role in Europe met with difficulties at Westminster and Whitehall where it was regarded as 'forbidden territory'."

In oral evidence, he talked specifically about the Flanders agreement, an issue that Robin Cook also raised. Henry McLeish said:

"On that occasion, I spoke to the then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who was absolutely excellent."—[*Official Report, European and External Relations Committee*, 23 November 2004; c 916.]

Praise indeed from Mr McLeish. Will you elaborate a bit more on that presentation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as viewing the Scottish Executive's involvement in any form of external relations as "forbidden territory"? To what extent does that view represent the reality of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at the time, or today?

Robin Cook: In view of Henry McLeish's generous reference to me, I shall pick my words with care and try to find a consensual outcome. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was anxious—"concerned" would be the wrong word—to ensure that we achieved a constructive working relationship with the devolved bodies. John Kerr deserves credit for taking the initiative and saying that a written protocol was needed. He set about preparing the code of practice and went to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast to speak to those who were steering through the devolved bodies to ensure that all bodies were involved in the process. It is important that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has a good working relationship with the devolved bodies because, at the end of the day, it is the United Kingdom that signs up to commitments. That means that we have to ensure that when we sign up to those commitments, Scotland is comfortable with them, because Scotland is going to have to implement them. We were keen to get that right.

I would be the first to say that in any large institution, as well as getting the rules right one has to overcome cultural resistance to anything that is new, novel or innovative. I would not exclude the possibility of there being ad hominem cases where things did not work perfectly, but I am sceptical about the claim that anybody in the

Foreign Office said that Scotland's participation in external relations was forbidden. We were keen to impress on the Scottish people and the Foreign Office the fact that the Scottish Executive would take part in European negotiations; indeed, it has done so. I am not aware of that having caused any great friction or difficulty over the past half dozen years. This morning I took the precaution of speaking to the official in charge of our European desk in Whitehall. He assured me that he was not aware of problems and that the current relationship was working well.

I also know from going around the world, beyond Europe, that ambassadors in major posts, such as in Washington, where I was last week, are aware of the Scottish dimension and work hard to ensure that it is reflected fully. Neil MacCormick mentioned the diaspora of Scots. Ambassadors in countries where there are large diaspora communities are keen to tap into them, because they are a source of access and strength.

The Convener: I want to follow up the point that you made latterly in relation to representation at a European level. Perhaps Neil MacCormick could comment on this, too. Could you reflect on your comments on the differences between our model and the German Länder model in relation to who is represented and involved in discussions? There are interesting models, particularly in Belgium, of rotating representation among different institutions. Do you have any reflections that you think would help the committee's inquiry in relation to how we can maximise the degree of Scottish input into European decision making? What can we learn from the models that other European countries seem to deploy with great ease?

Robin Cook: First, it is useful that the Flanders agreement was made. I recommend strongly that the Executive pursues contacts and gives us at Westminster feedback on them so that we can ensure that there is two-way traffic.

You have to be careful about simply importing lessons from quite different political structures. I am perhaps slightly more doubtful about the success of the Belgian model than is Neil MacCormick. Belgium is in effect two countries yoked in a single state. I am not sure that it helps Belgium's interface with the rest of Europe, never mind the world, to have such a distinction. Belgium is usually the last country to ratify all European treaties. That seems rather odd, given that Brussels is supposed to be at the forefront of European integration, but it is precisely because of the delay and difficulty in going round all the houses of regional government to get agreement that it takes so long for any treaty to be ratified. I am not sure that that is helpful to the nation or to Europe as a whole.

The German situation works well. The Länder have a lot of status. There is a connection between Länder politics and national politics. Gerhard Schröder became the Chancellor from a base in a Land, in the same way that American politicians can become president on the basis of what they have done at state level rather than in Washington. That works because there are Länder everywhere in Germany. They all have a common, strong status in the German constitution.

Scotland is always going to have to be imaginative in finding its own way forward and its own unique perspective on how to handle its position. Neil MacCormick is right that in the foreseeable future you are not going to have anything like a network of parallel bodies throughout Great Britain.

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: I think we are of one view on that. Germany and Belgium, whatever the strengths and weaknesses of their constitutional arrangements, have a kind of constitutional synergy, whereas we have variable geometry. All the Länder are represented in the Bundesrat. If we get to the stage at which the member state Parliaments are given the opportunity to comment formally on draft European legislation under the protocol on subsidiarity, the Bundesrat will cast one of the German votes automatically as the vote of the Länder, and the Bundestag will cast the vote of the Bund—the federation.

The situation is similar in respect of Wallonia and Flanders, although in a different way, as they are more or less the same size, whereas Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland together form a small fraction of the total population—although not of the total land area—of the UK. Therefore, getting symmetry of representation in the UK is very difficult under the current constitution. It is necessary to work with variable geometry and find ways of ensuring that representation is effective.

There are some very important issues. Obviously, Gordon Jackson will know that on justice and home affairs matters it is crucial to recognise that the UK has three criminal justice systems, which, although they have a lot in common, work differently and have different traditions. Representation of the UK in justice and home affairs matters must take account of the three legal systems. That also goes for civil and commercial law and the single market stuff.

In some specific areas—I hardly need mention fishing—the UK interest does not entirely coincide with the Scottish interest. The lion's share of the UK's fishing concerns are Scottish concerns. That is also the case on one or two other issues that have been mentioned. It is crucial that Scotland is effectively represented, but it cannot be represented by a Bundesrat on such matters

because we do not have such a body. Robin Cook will know more about this than I do, but perhaps reform of the House of Lords will create some way of organising parliamentary representation of the kingdoms of the United Kingdom. However, for the time being we must work with variable geometry.

Robin Cook: I will respond on that point. When I was Leader of the House of Commons and tried—I regret to say without ultimate success—to get a more modern second chamber, I was quite keen on the idea that a portion of the reformed second chamber should consist of people who were sent there by the devolved bodies, although they would not need to be members of the devolved bodies. The important point is that, having been chosen by a devolved body, they would be accountable to it.

I ran into two difficulties. One was that there was resistance in Westminster for the logical reason, which I could not disprove, that the devolved bodies covered only a small—although quite significant—part of the overall United Kingdom. If we add together Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and London, we are talking about 30 per cent of the electorate, which is nevertheless a minority, and there is no immediate prospect of the rest of the electorate being covered by devolved bodies. The second difficulty is that, to be honest, we did not get much resonance for the idea from the Scottish Parliament or from the other devolved bodies. Personally, I still think that there is a strong case for a second chamber that includes, as part of its overall representation, the devolved bodies within Britain.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): You touched on Henry McLeish's no-go-area theme—the suggestion that the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament should not engage in external affairs. I was puzzled by that suggestion, because my experience as the Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs in the first year of the Administration, when I represented Scotland as part of the UK delegation in Europe, was that it was the other way round. UKRep was clearly geared up to take account of what we wanted and what we needed—perhaps that was Robin Cook's doing. Notwithstanding the fact that some people back home wanted to portray us as being weak in the European Council, the fact was that we were in quite a strong position in the European Council. It was useful to have more votes than nominally independent countries.

That obviously works all right when the leadership in the Scottish Executive and at Westminster comes from the same party. I admit that it appears that it will be a hell of a long time before there is cohabitation between different parties, but it may happen one day. How will the arrangement work when a Scottish minister is part of a British delegation to the European Union but

is politically incompatible with the lead member of that delegation?

14:30

Robin Cook: The short answer to that question is that it would be a major calamity if Labour left office either at Westminster or in Edinburgh.

Mr Home Robertson: It will not happen any time soon.

The Convener: Now that we have got that out of the road—

Robin Cook: I admit to a degree of bias in my answer.

Mr Home Robertson: I share that bias.

Robin Cook: There is a point to the member's question. The interface between the devolved institutions and Westminster has worked very well over the past half dozen years. That is true in the case of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. As I indicated, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is accustomed culturally to being the interface between the United Kingdom and the rest of the world. It accepts instructions from and facilitates efforts by other departments and bodies to make the best case for their patch of Britain or their speciality. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has taken naturally to working with the devolved bodies.

I am sure that what John Home Robertson says about his experience as a fisheries minister is correct. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and others involved in those negotiations would want someone with expertise and authority to speak for them. They would not be over-proprietary about who did the speaking. However, it is fair to say that the real test of the robustness of the arrangements and of the institutional agreements will come when there are different political colours at the two ends of the relationship. We have yet to reach that stage, and it is no part of my business to hasten its arrival.

There is another advantage at present, while the arrangements are still new and young. One can see that around this table and I have seen it in the past hour, as I went round the building. One of our strengths in making the new arrangements work is that a large number of people who have experience at Westminster are now in the Scottish Parliament. Their faces are well known to those of us who are still at Westminster. That has been helpful in getting the arrangements off to a better start.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I am not certain that parliamentary bureaucracy necessarily takes the same view of former Westminster MPs. I am sure that it was just a slip

of the tongue on Mr Cook's part when he said that Labour was in power in Edinburgh. Of course, cohabitation with another party is working well here.

How do Robin Cook and Sir Neil MacCormick see the role of Scotland developing? Mr Cook said that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had become attuned to dealing with other departments. Do both witnesses believe that the Scottish Executive is similarly attuned? We now have six ministers with varying degrees of responsibility for external relations. The minister responsible for co-ordinating them has a very heavy workload, because he is the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform. To return to the consultative steering group report, would it be helpful to have one minister co-ordinating the external relations role?

Robin Cook: I would not have the impertinence to suggest what arrangements the Scottish Executive should make. However, I will talk about the general principle, because I am familiar with the debate. I believe that it would be a major error to subcontract all external affairs to one body. We have had this debate in Whitehall and Westminster—not recently, but it was live five or 10 years ago, when people argued that we should have one ministry for Europe to handle all the European interfaces. I always thought that that would be a mistake. As I said in my opening remarks, one cannot now separate a domestic policy from its international dimension. It is not helpful culturally or psychologically to suggest to any department that it can subcontract external relations to someone else. It is important that every department mainstreams its European and external dimensions and recognises that it is operating in an interdependent world.

It is necessary to have a body that specialises in external relations, which knows who to contact, where to go and how to work the system, and which has the linguistic skills. Those are the assets that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office brings to the table. However, there should not be in Westminster or in Edinburgh a single body that tries to handle the international dimension of all the work, because the international dimension will grow in each department and should be encouraged to do so.

Mr Raffan: I recognise that the role of a minister with exclusive responsibility for external relations would be to co-ordinate parts of the Executive. My worry is that the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform has a heavy workload and does not have the time to deal with external relations and to undertake that important co-ordinating role.

Robin Cook: I would not regard myself as competent to express with authority a view on that.

I know Tom McCabe personally and I am sure that he will be diligent and assiduous in his role.

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: I am not au fait with the inward workings of the Executive, so I can no more comment on that in detail than can Robin Cook. I agree very much that most of the committees of the Scottish Parliament and the ministries in the Executive have important external linkages, with Europe in particular—we have only to consider the extent to which European legislation impinges on the work of committees of the Scottish Parliament, as members of the European and External Relations Committee well know. It certainly follows that Executive ministers should and will be concerned daily with Scotland's external links. I agree strongly with Keith Raffan that it would be good to have strong and effective co-ordination. I do not know and it would be impertinent of me to claim to know with what other portfolio that responsibility might be combined.

Mr Raffan: There is a danger that our discussion is focusing too much on Europe and the United States. I want to return to Sir Neil MacCormick's interesting suggestion that we establish Scottish Commonwealth scholarships along the lines of the Rhodes scholarships. Perhaps Mr Cook will also comment on that. Of course, as a sub-state Parliament, the Scottish Parliament is not a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, but Margaret Ewing and I are both on the executive committee of the active Scotland branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and I am regional representative on the CPA's executive committee. Sir Neil's interesting suggestion should be followed up, as should Scotland's potential international development role through the Executive, which has already been embarked upon. For example, Scotland could have a role in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with which we have a long-standing historical connection and which are currently facing major problems, not least because of HIV and AIDS.

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: There is an important and urgent opportunity for the Scottish Parliament and Executive to be as connected as possible to the Commonwealth. There are, indeed, enormously significant historical links. Those connections should be made as well as and not at the expense of connections with Europe and the United States. The universities, the royal colleges, such as the Royal College of Nursing, and the churches already have big links with sub-Saharan Africa, and we should strengthen those links and become as effective a force for good as possible. Of course, we cannot be everywhere all the time and there must be a degree of focus and specialisation. However, I very much agree with you.

Mr Raffan: At the international AIDS conference, I met a representative from Médecins Sans Frontières, from Western Cape Province in South Africa. I asked what we could do to help, to which he replied, "Stop poaching our nurses." It might be an idea to send retired nurses and doctors to help, because the infrastructure that is needed to distribute antiretrovirals is lacking.

Robin Cook: It is undeniably true that Scotland has a long history of being culturally interconnected with the rest of the world. That is something to be proud of. We have only to read the magnificent book "How the Scots Invented the Modern World" to understand the depth and range of Scotland's international contacts, which are an asset for us all, and which we should, indeed, seek to extend beyond the European and Anglo-Saxon world. Some 3,000 of my constituents are employed by Japanese firms, which is an obvious reason for the Scottish Executive to nurture contacts with and Scotland's identity and image in Japan.

The strength of our higher education is an immense asset to which I hope that both the Parliament and the Executive will give all possible encouragement, as I know that they are committed to doing. It is world class and well developed. I know from my experience of travelling the world as Foreign Secretary that, once somebody has been here as an undergraduate or postgraduate and has gained a favourable impression, that is an asset on which we can build for the rest of their life. That is one of the reasons why it is so important for us to encourage those from developing and industrialised nations to come here as students. We never know where they will end up in the future, and that could be a real asset to us.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I am sure that Robin Cook will take no exception to my referring back to his comment about Labour being in control in both places—

The Convener: Can we focus on the agenda to hand, please?

Phil Gallie: Does he mean Labour or new Labour? That apart, given his vast experience of other countries through his involvement with the Foreign Office, does he feel that Scotland gets good value out of its system of embassies? He referred to the major ambassadors being very much aware of Scotland, the new Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive. What about the lesser lights?

Robin Cook: When people think of the Foreign Office and embassies, they tend to think of Washington, Paris or Madrid. Some of those embassies are spectacular. We still have the best palace in Paris, because Wellington got there in

1814 and said that he was having that one and, in 1814, there were not many people around in France to say, "No, you cannot have it," although we have had to be slightly hopeful that he got the title deeds right at the time.

Those embassies are the aberrations—they are not typical. The majority of our foreign posts abroad have four or fewer UK personnel in them and some of them are run almost single-handedly. When I was at the Foreign Office, our post in Yerevan had only one UK person working there. The embassies do a magnificent job and, although the UK's diplomatic service is smaller than those of Germany and France by about a half or a third, it matches in quality the output of the French and German foreign services. I am sure that all the posts where there is a Scottish dimension will want to be alive to that and to deliver on that; however, one must be realistic about what can be achieved in the circumstances.

The Convener: Will those embassies be on the receiving end of a specific brief from either the Foreign Office or the Scottish Executive on live Scottish issues?

Robin Cook: Oh, yes. Daily universal mailings go out to all 201 posts. I was startled to discover, after a year in post, that every time I took off from any airport in the world, a telegram went to 201 posts saying, "Foreign Secretary in the air." I must confess that I found that slightly surreal.

The Convener: It was a helpful reminder to you.

Robin Cook: Common mailings routinely come out of embassies' machines. Things such as the code of practice or anything to do with work in the Scottish Executive will go around them all.

The Convener: Would an issue such as the fresh talent initiative, which is central to the Government's priorities here, be communicated in that fashion?

Robin Cook: I could not say categorically that there has been a universal mailing on that specific initiative; however, the facilities exist for that to happen, if it was thought appropriate. Not just in the context of the Scottish Executive, important though that dimension is, especially for this study, we are trying to encourage people to come to the UK generally to fill posts that require a high level of skill and to participate in higher education.

Phil Gallie: I have two final questions for Sir Neil MacCormick. First, given the comments that he made about the Commonwealth and his vast experience of European matters, does he believe that there are any blocks in the European single-market legislation that would prevent his aspirations in respect of the Commonwealth from being fulfilled?

Secondly, will he comment on his statement that "the quantity of Scottish input into the Commission's Directorates General is diminishing"?

14:45

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: I am glad that you asked about that point, because I forgot to mention it in my introduction.

European Union students at our universities enjoy the advantage of being deemed to be home students, which means that they pay the same fees as UK students do. That puts them at a considerable advantage over students from the Commonwealth, Japan, Taiwan or wherever, who pay the overseas fee rate, which makes them advantageous students to capture for a university's finance officer. The differential between European Union students and overseas students is not to our universities' advantage in trying to recruit from further afield, but they still do that and recruit many good students.

As I have said, it would be good to create an atmosphere in Australia, South Africa and India in which obtaining an award to go to a Scottish university was of high prestige. If we scratched somebody in Melbourne and asked them what they thought it would be great to have, they would probably mention a Rhodes scholarship to go to the University of Oxford. They would probably not say that they would love to go to the University of Edinburgh. We do not have that magnet. The Rhodes scholarship is just one; Commonwealth scholarships and such stuff already exist. Finding better ways to raise the prestige of coming to study in Scotland—although prestige is already high for some purposes—would be good.

As for your second question, I am well aware that Kenny Munro, Roderick Skinner, Maurice Mackenzie and James Currie are back in Scotland. They represent a senior generation of European civil servants who were in at the beginning with George Thomson. They worked their way through and have now retired. They did a huge job. I do not know the facts, but I do not have the impression that an upcoming generation will replace them or that a good share of bright young graduates of our universities or bright young people from industry are making their way into working in the directorates-general in Brussels. That is bad. The number of Irish people in Brussels is about 10 times the number of Scots and we should worry about that.

I will mention a connected worry. The tables from the Scottish Qualifications Authority on people offering foreign languages at higher are outrageous. That is a crisis and a national scandal about which we seem to be unable to do anything.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I will make two points, although I would like to make many comments on what has been said. My first point follows what Neil MacCormick said about the presence of Scots in Europe but is more about the Scottish Parliament's presence in Europe and the Scottish Executive's representative there. When you worked in Europe, was that presence helpful? Could it be expanded? Can we learn lessons from the early stages of that office?

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: I was not unusual in having extremely cordial relationships with the Executive's representation in Scotland House and with Scotland Europa. Of course Executive civil servants must keep a distance from MEPs, because they are servants of the Executive rather than of MEPs. On the other hand, on many pieces of legislation that were of interest and concern to the Executive, MEPs had a similar view. That applied to the bathing water directive, the stuff about water for whisky plants and a huge number of things. The MacBrayne's ferries are another good example—I should say Caledonian MacBrayne ferries; the other name is at least two generations out of date.

We can do much good work together. Scotland House worked well. As he is now retired, I mention with affection George Calder, who did his job splendidly. I very much appreciated working with him, as I did with Donald MacInnes and his team at Scotland Europa. That is good. Although it is important that MEPs are independent representatives of their constituencies and their political parties, one can respect that and still do an awful lot of effective work together. That set of relationships might say something about the possibilities for different cohabitations in future situations. The topic was raised earlier.

Robin Cook: My impression is that the representatives of Scotland and of the UK work closely and well together. After all, that was the logic behind putting Scotland House just round the corner from the UK office. I do not think that it is sensible to consider in isolation how many Scots are in Scotland House; it is more important to ensure that they are exploiting the added strength of the UK representation and the base that it can provide for influence.

On MEPs, we have a senior diplomat in the UK office whose sole job is to liaise with the European Parliament, which is important for supporting and keeping in touch with our MEPs. It is also important for the interests of the British Government, because the European Parliament has increasing power to wield on matters such as European directives and the budget.

Mrs Ewing: My second point is on the broader international sphere. The G8 summit is coming to Gleneagles next year. How will that project on to

the wider world stage and not just in the eight countries that are most directly involved? It seems to me that there is an opportunity there that must be considered; thought must also be given to how we can build on what will presumably be a declaration of Gleneagles.

Robin Cook: There is an obvious opportunity for branding, if I can put it in those terms. The meeting not only will be in Scotland but will be in a part of Scotland that can be used to back up Scotland's attraction as a centre for tourism, sport and luxury goods, as well as all the other things that one might associate with Gleneagles—he said with care.

However, I would not want people to think purely in terms of the G8 countries. The G8 countries are overwhelmingly in Europe, North America and Japan, but it is likely that other countries will come to the meeting to hold dialogues. For example, on the margins of the meeting—on the days before it, for example—it is normal for third-world countries such as African countries to come. There will certainly be African countries there this time, given that the Prime Minister has said that Africa will be one of the two major focuses of his presidency. If Prime Ministers are coming from such countries, one has to think about the opportunities to ensure that the good things are projected back home with them.

I want to pick up one point that Neil MacCormick made when he was talking about encouraging students to come here from places with long historical Scottish links. I am all for that; the idea of floating some scholarships might be a good one. However, I would not neglect the new and growing industrial giants of the world such as Brazil and China, with whom we might not have historical connections but with whom we will need to make connections in the future. To its credit, Heriot-Watt University has quite a lot of Chinese students. Perhaps we should consider more ways in which we can maintain contact with those countries and see whether we can build on some of the networks started by those who have been there. In the next generation, the big and dominant economies will not be the current G8 countries; they will be countries such as Brazil, China and India.

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab): Having Neil MacCormick and Robin Cook here has been a useful way of punctuating our evidence-taking sessions on the promotion of Scotland. My first question is to Robin Cook who, by sharing his experiences in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, has helped to debunk some of the myths that are perpetuated that the FCO and other Whitehall organisations are blundering around, are insensitive to our needs and have yet to learn about the existence of the Scottish Parliament. How can the very fruitful

relationship between the Scottish Executive and Whitehall, particularly the FCO, be further improved, entrenched, developed, enhanced—call it what you will?

Robin Cook: I thought about that question this morning on the way to the Parliament, as I knew that it might arise. I am also conscious that there is no greater sin in politics than the sin of complacency. However, I can think of no recommendation for institutional or structural change that would improve the relationship. That said, I am sure that any system, no matter how good its structures or institutions are, can be improved by working at it with the benefit of experience and constant practice. I am sure that the relationship will improve over time. People will become more familiar with arrangements and will develop a culture and habit of working together. However, I fear that I have come to committee without a recommendation for structural or institutional change.

Mr Morrison: I have a question for Sir Neil MacCormick. I agree with his assessment of the importance of the Scottish diaspora, particularly in North America. I also agree that too much emphasis is placed on the United States of America. However, I do not share his analysis in respect of Canadian Scots describing themselves as English Canadians—that is not my experience.

On the views and perceptions of Scotland that exist in places such as the United States, I think that everyone appreciates that the Canadians' appreciation of Scotland is a little more sophisticated than that of their cousins across the Canadian-American border. How can we help to debunk some of the myths about Scotland that exist in the United States? Some Americans are obsessed with battles that took place in Scotland in the 14th century. How can we move people on from those dark ages?

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: Your guess is as good as mine. As Robin Cook mentioned, the United States has seen a great flowering in the study of the Scottish enlightenment. Indeed, around the time of the bicentenary of the American constitution, the Smithsonian ran a project, in which I took part, to celebrate the roots of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton's thinking in the Scottish enlightenment and the relationship with Wilson and Witherspoon. Relationships like that are important.

To some extent, the question relates to changes in popular culture. I remember reading an article in the *American Political Science Review* of about 1935. It was written by Harold Laski on the subject of the political significance of the disruption. If one went down Princes Street today and stopped people to ask, "What is the political significance of

the disruption?", I am sure that the answer would be, "What disruption did you have in mind?"

In some ways, because cultures have changed, the tokens that people took for granted—and perhaps still do in Stornoway, for all I know—have passed. Nevertheless, as Alasdair Morrison says, it is important that people have a stronger and better sense of the real history of Scotland.

The point that I made was not that Scots Canadians are unconscious of their Scottish heritage, but that they are Canadians first and foremost and that, partly because of the clash between French-Canadian and English-Canadian culture—between the Francophone and the Anglophone—the two identities get rolled up together.

As I said, the conception of the political history of these islands that is held even in Canada but also in Australia and New Zealand is quite vague. It is particularly noticeable in relation to the law, as English common law has taken root throughout the English-speaking Commonwealth—and to some extent in India too, via Victorian qualifications. Some of the links are missing, but we could build better on our cultural links.

Three of the most brilliant recent graduates of my department at the University of Edinburgh have been from Chile, Brazil and Argentina. Those links also matter. I have strong personal academic links with Japan and Korea, although not with China, as it so happens, but I know that the Royal Society of Edinburgh is building links with the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Although we have to try to be everywhere, we should notice the shadows that lie over some bits of the globe. Indeed, there is a bit of a shadow over the Commonwealth at the moment.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab):

Alasdair Morrison has stolen some of my points to some extent, but I will follow up on the role for bilateral agreements.

Both panellists have unique experience of the European dimension. Do you feel that there is a place for bilateral, interregional co-operation? Members will probably be aware that the Executive has signed up to cultural and language agreements with Catalonia and Tuscany. From your independent perspectives, do you think that that assists the promotion of Scotland?

15:00

Robin Cook: I am all for developing links at regional as well as governmental and state level. Given increased mobility and better communications in the modern world, diplomacy cannot be confined to communications between Governments, as it used to be; it must be

extended to communications between people. The greater the multiplicity of official communications between regions, through town twinning for example, the better. I am all for such links, as they can provide added strength.

There is another point that I regret not having made earlier. We tend to talk about European lobbying in the context of Brussels. In fact, if there is a big issue for which Britain is campaigning, 50 per cent of the Foreign Office effort will go into lobbying the European capitals, to try to influence the position that they take when they get to Brussels.

The Convener: Would you encourage the Executive to take up that piece of advice?

Robin Cook: Absolutely. I was about to say that, if one is working to promote a perspective on an issue that is of particular importance to Scotland or perhaps even to Britain more generally, it is helpful if that perspective can be implanted through regional networks and can feed up through countries' political and media circles, because most of the time, by the time countries get to Brussels, they have a prepared position. That is perfectly proper, but the more one can influence the position before it is adopted, the better.

Irene Oldfather: Sir Neil MacCormick spoke about the synergy of Scottish MEPs, but neither panellist has mentioned the European Committee of the Regions. I know that Robin Cook was president of the European socialist group. Does the Committee of the Regions present opportunities that we should be exploiting? How could we do that to a greater extent? That question is for both panellists.

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: You have much more experience than I have of the workings of the Committee of the Regions. When I was an MEP, I found that it was a body with which I was not often in close contact. That might well be my fault—*mea culpa*. My friend and colleague Keith Brown is now the leader of the European alliance group on the Committee of the Regions. We used to meet and discuss things at the Scottish National Party's European group, which met about four times a year.

Bluntly, I think that the impact that the COR has had has been a bit of a disappointment in comparison with the hopes with which it was launched. For what it is worth, my analysis of that is that, for a committee of the regions, it is far too much a committee of the states. Representation on the COR is based on the same proportionalities as is representation in the European Parliament. I made a point about that the last time that I appeared before the committee, when we were discussing people from the network of regional

parliamentary European committees. The COR's composition should be adjusted so that it reflects slightly more the composition of the regions of Europe. It is madness that Malta has more members on the COR than Wales and—I think—Scotland have. God knows what relations are like between Malta and Gozo these days.

Robin Cook: I know what Professor MacCormick means and I do not disagree with him, but I think that it is unfair to blame the COR for the sense of disappointment, because the European institutions have been reluctant to give the COR any real powers or influence to exert. However, there is a bit of confusion about whether the COR is a committee of local government—which, although it is a tremendously important and vibrant part of any democracy, is not regional government—or a voice of the regions.

The COR was quite active in making pronouncements under the dynamic leadership of Albert Bore, who is a successful, well-established and long-experienced local government leader.

Irene Oldfather: And a Scot.

Robin Cook: Yes. I hope that I will not be misquoted in the west midlands press but, although a city the size of Birmingham is a place of great significance, it is not in itself a region. Frankly, the way forward in providing a regional voice within Europe lies in the networks of regional governments that are building up, which will speak for places that are established as regional centres of decision making. That is not to do down the Committee of the Regions—far from it. I rather wish that it had been given a greater role within the European institutions.

The Convener: I am afraid that I must bring matters to a conclusion; however, I have one final question. In the course of the past few years, the image of Scotland in the minds of many people has been very much associated with a major international conflict of which the United Kingdom has been a part. What are the implications for Scotland's image abroad of our involvement in the war in Iraq?

Robin Cook: You said that you were going to try to close the session, so it is ill advised of you to put a question such as that.

Irene Oldfather: There was a whole discussion on the Committee of the Regions that I wanted us to have.

Robin Cook: In brief, one of the reasons why I resigned was because I did not believe that it made sense for us to become involved in a military intervention for which there was not international support. I was concerned about the international price that Britain as a whole would pay and we have, undoubtedly, paid that price—if you travel

the world and talk privately to those who represent us throughout the world, you will find that there is a price to be paid by us for our association with an adventure of the American Administration that has also damaged America's standing in much of the world. Ultimately, the world will do business with America because it has no alternative but to do so, as America is such a hyper-power. Britain is not a hyper-power; we also need good will and a good standing, which we need to work at.

I am not aware of anybody taking a distinctive animus against Scotland although, as part of Britain, we are paying the price that Britain, as a whole, is paying. One of our assets is the fact that, in most of the world, there is a clear grasp of the distinction between Scotland and England. In the first few months for which I was Foreign Secretary, all the other foreign secretaries gave up referring to me as the Foreign Secretary of England because I always corrected them and they did not care for the constant interruptions as I put them right. In my years at the Foreign Office and in European politics, I found it quite an asset to be able to say to countries such as Portugal, Belgium and Denmark that I was familiar with how they felt because I came from Scotland, which was a small country with a long history of living next to a large country. There is a lot of good will towards Scotland, which has not been dented by the war in Iraq; however, Britain, as a whole, has suffered.

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: I very much agree. A report was quoted in the papers at the weekend, which was apparently prepared in and for the Pentagon, on the loss of hearts and minds. I recall both the convener and Robin Cook saying that that would happen, when the adventure—the invasion—started. It was a terrible pity. I was at the European convention at the time, and the chill that entered the atmosphere—for example, during the discussion of common foreign security policy in Europe—was palpable. I have to say that I think that a wrong thing was done, which has damaged our collective interest. I also agree with Robin Cook that abroad—although hardly at all now in these islands—people still talk about the United Kingdom as England; they do not think that Scotland is part of it, hence we get away with it.

The Convener: On behalf of the committee, I thank Robin Cook and Neil MacCormick very much for their contribution to the committee today. We appreciate the time that you have spent here and the evidence that you have given to the committee's inquiry.

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick: Thank you for the honour of inviting me.

Robin Cook: Thank you. I look forward to your report.

The Convener: I hope that it will be published in January.

15:09

Meeting suspended.

15:15

On resuming—

The Convener: In item 2 we continue our promoting Scotland worldwide inquiry. I am pleased to welcome to the meeting the right hon Jim Wallace, the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, and his colleagues. I invite Mr Wallace to introduce his colleagues and to make an opening statement.

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): I am delighted to do so. I am accompanied by Ann McVie, from the higher education division of the Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department, and by Julia Amour, of Scottish Development International.

Supporting the global development of Scottish businesses and our education institutions is an important reason for supporting and promoting Scotland overseas. I am pleased to be here to answer questions that the committee may have on my areas of responsibility. Mr McCabe, who has overall responsibility for the Executive's international strategy, will address the broader issues when he gives evidence later. Committee members will want to cover many areas, but to set the scene I will highlight three key aspects of the work of Scottish Development International, which members will be aware is a joint venture under the ownership of the Scottish Executive and Scottish Enterprise. I will comment first on SDI's role and focus.

The Executive's top priority is growing the economy and we have given SDI the task of contributing to that by supporting the growing number of Scottish-based businesses that wish to internationalise and by attracting continued inward investment. Bringing knowledge into Scotland will help to stimulate enterprise and increase productivity, and it remains an important part of our recently refreshed "A Smart, Successful Scotland" strategy. Globalisation poses many challenges to Scotland and SDI has an important role to play in helping us meet such challenges, particularly by promoting Scotland overseas as an excellent place in which to do business. SDI's programmes need to contribute to the achievement of the goals of "A Smart, Successful Scotland" and need to be aligned with our wide aspirations, as set out in the Executive's recently published international strategy. As chair of the

SDI's supervisory board, I am keen that SDI should now update its business plans to take account of those strategies and I have approved the work on which it is embarking in that regard.

Secondly, it is important to be clear about the specific contribution that SDI makes towards promoting Scotland overseas, which is to position Scotland as an excellent business location and a confident country with a global outlook, world-class universities, a modern infrastructure and a highly skilled and flexible workforce. I know that the committee is particularly interested in ensuring that SDI's message reinforces and complements the wider promotion of contemporary Scotland. I strongly endorse that. Ministers have therefore been taking the lead in developing appropriate, high-level messages on which each agency that is involved in promoting Scotland abroad can build, according to its own specific role.

We are sowing in fertile ground. Scotland's strength as a place in which to do business has recently received high-profile, independent recognition through the European region of the future award from "fDi" magazine, which is a title in the *Financial Times* stable. We will seek to make the most of that accolade in the coming year in SDI's marketing to key global business audiences and more generally. Ministerial engagements overseas will provide a high-profile platform and I will promote the achievement of the award during my week-long visit to China in January next year.

We must constantly strive to find the most effective ways of reaching global audiences. As members will undoubtedly have heard from many witnesses, Scotland is a small country and the potential market worldwide is huge. The resources available to us are not limitless, so we must prioritise carefully to ensure that we do not spread our efforts too thinly. SDI is already considering its overseas representation and its sales and marketing approaches in seeking to realise even more business benefits for Scotland.

It is also vital to share information and co-ordinate activity so that we can find the opportunities to combine forces. There has been a lot of praise for the Scotland House model of shared representation in Brussels. I see merit in that approach wherever there are locations that are suitable bases for a range of Scottish agencies. SDI already has a standing agreement with VisitScotland to make space available in any of SDI's overseas offices, as required.

My introductory remarks have focused on the promotion of Scotland's business interests overseas. I understand that the committee wishes to spend some time on that area today. However, it would be wrong for me to close without acknowledging the great international asset that Scotland has in our further and higher education

sectors. That is demonstrated by the significant increase in the number of international students who are coming to study at our universities—up by some 50 per cent in the five years to 2002-03, to more than 15,000 students. As well as bringing direct economic benefits, that creates an important pool of potential fresh talent and future ambassadors for Scotland. The Executive supports a range of activities to promote the international student agenda. We also encourage Scottish educational bodies to participate in the wider promotion of Scotland, through events such as tartan day and ministerial programmes.

Scotland's devolved Government is committed to a long-term approach to promoting Scotland overseas with the aim of securing lasting benefit. I have outlined some of the ways in which the enterprise and lifelong learning portfolio contributes to that agenda. I look forward to answering the committee's questions.

The Convener: You mentioned that ministers have been involved at a high level in formulating strategic messages about contemporary Scotland. To what extent are those messages uniformly presented to a wider audience by the different agencies of government? I ask that question because during our evidence taking I have been struck by the fact that a multiplicity of organisations are involved in some way, either big or small, in the promotion of Scotland abroad. If we are to maximise the effect of that work, it is important that we adhere to your central point: the message needs to be cohesive, uniform and universal. To what extent is that the case? Do ministers accept that there is a job of work to be done to secure that?

Mr Wallace: There is a job of work to be done to improve it, but over recent months things have got much better. An international strategy has been published and the Parliament has an opportunity to debate it. The strategy identified some of the key building blocks of the coherent message that we want to put out. Obviously, the emphasis will differ between agencies. It should not be surprising that in SDI there will be a stronger business and enterprise dimension to the message. Increasing coherence and consistency in the message has built up in recent times. I would be the first to accept that there is always scope to improve that. However, we have a better handle on the message.

Scotland must build on its traditional strengths. When I visited Catalonia last year, one of the Catalans whom we met said to me very forcefully that they thought that it was a tremendous advantage that Scotland had readily identifiable aspects such as whisky and tartan, to name but two. Sean Connery was mentioned as a third. We should not lose those. The Catalans bemoaned

the fact that most British tourists who land in Catalonia say that they are going on holiday in Spain, whereas many Spaniards who land here say that they are going to Scotland. That is an advantage of which we should not lose sight and on which we should build.

The other strong strand of the message that we want to come through is that this is a very modern country that is involved in cutting-edge technology, has a lively cultural scene and can contribute to international architecture with buildings such as this.

Mr Morrison: I am sure that you will be pleased to hear that much that you said in your introductory remarks was said by no less a figure than Robin Cook in the previous evidence-taking session. In particular, he referred to our excellent universities and our further and higher education sectors.

You mentioned the importance of trying to reach global audiences. Clearly, the Executive has outlined its priorities, which include the promotion of Scotland in all parts of the world. How limited would the Executive's efforts be without the advantage of having embassies and consulates right around the world?

Mr Wallace: My view and the view of my colleagues is that we benefit greatly from being part of the UK and having access to that network of consulates and embassies. From my personal experience, having engaged in a number of foreign visits on which we have been assisted by the relevant consulate, embassy or high commission, I can say that those establishments go out of their way to be helpful and supportive and to give good advice. That is an undoubted advantage. SDI works with UK Trade and Investment and its parent departments, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. On a daily basis, SDI provides input on Scottish strengths with regard to the inward investment group and is consulted—along with ministers—by UKTI, the DTI and the FCO on the relevant policies to ensure that the Scottish dimension is taken into account.

Mr Morrison: You mentioned the importance of building on our traditional strengths, industries and the perceptions about Scotland that people across the world have. While recognising the importance of all that, how do we move towards a position in which we can promote Scotland, grow business and make Scotland a hugely important place to locate? How do we get that message across?

Mr Wallace: The areas for which I have departmental responsibility are very much the kind of industries with which SDI is engaged in trying to get that message across.

When I went to the USA in October, I visited Microsoft in Seattle and spent time in San Jose, meeting people in the electronics industry, identifying Scotland's role in that industry and talking to companies that have a long history of inward investment in Scotland and which spoke highly of the talent pool for their operations in Scotland. Much of that work in the electronics industry relates to cutting-edge technology. Next month's visit to China will involve a number of companies that are engaged in the life sciences sector, which is one in which Scotland has considerable strengths. That plays into the other part of my portfolio, which is education and lifelong learning, because of the importance of the quality of universities. Often, when you go abroad, you hear your country's praises sung more loudly than they are at home but, when I was in Japan and the USA, what I heard said about the excellence of Scotland's universities was reassuring. That is undoubtedly an asset. We must continue to push that message and ensure that our universities, SDI and ministers put it across consistently.

Phil Gallie: You said that your key responsibility was growing the economy. Recently, Edinburgh hosted a meeting of the group of regions with legislative power—Regleg. In relation to growing the economy, what did Scotland gain from hosting that so-called prestigious conference? What was your input into that conference?

15:30

Mr Wallace: I suppose that someone could do an economic analysis to determine the precise benefit of having many people spending money in Edinburgh. Far more important, however, is the fact that we are engaging with other nations and regions in Europe that have legislative powers but which are not full member states. Engaging at that level was never open to the United Kingdom prior to devolution. It gives us another level at which we can operate in Europe, to make our voice heard and to create strategic partnerships.

I think that it was Neil MacCormick who talked about the importance of focusing attention not only on Brussels but on the work that can be done in many other places. That is a particular benefit of Regleg, because it has given us the opportunity to engage with a number of areas and Governments in the European Union to take forward common issues, for example a common agenda on deregulation. We also worked to ensure that in the debate on the European constitution the regional dimension was understood and recognised within the European Union, which was of particular importance.

I was involved in the collective planning of the arrangements for the conference, but I would not claim any direct involvement, for the simple reason

that on the first day I was in Brussels meeting the internal market commissioner to discuss deregulation, not least in respect of the financial services industry, and on the second day—St Andrew's day—I was in Paris to sign an education co-operation agreement with the French Government and to attend a St Andrew's day reception hosted by the British ambassador at the British embassy. I note that that was not picked up in an SNP press release, which thought that the British ambassador did nothing. I am happy to put the record straight.

The Convener: I think that it took you 14 minutes, Mr Wallace, to get that into the debate. You are slipping—you would have been much quicker in the old days.

Phil Gallie: There are points in your response that I could take up, Mr Wallace, but I will not waste the committee's time. I will pick up on another issue. You talked about Scotland's highly skilled and flexible workforce and its ability to attract inward investment, but from the First Minister we understand that there is a significant shortage of highly skilled and flexible workers, and that we are looking outside our borders to bring them in. Why is a highly skilled and flexible workforce a selling point for Scotland?

Mr Wallace: Mr Gallie may be confusing two things. With the fresh talent initiative, which the First Minister has highlighted and pushed forward, we recognise that the demographic trend is for Scotland's population to decline, and for the profile of that population to comprise more older people and fewer people of working age. That poses particular challenges for us, which is why we need to put a lot of enthusiasm, weight and effort behind the fresh talent initiative. However, that is different from recognising our current strength of a pool of talent, particularly in electronics, financial services and the life sciences.

Companies have said to me that one of the reasons why they located to and invested in Scotland is the quality and flexibility of employees. There is no contradiction. We recognise that in a number of key industries in which we have a track record and in which there is considerable scope for further development, we have employees with a reputation for quality. That does not contradict or detract from the efforts that we have to make, given that demographics are not on our side. Scotland's population trend is falling and we must address that.

Irene Oldfather: I have two questions. First, you talked about the British embassy network and the partnership opportunities that it presents, but do you think that we make enough use of the consulates, particularly in the United States? I presume that they are strategically placed, but is that within a UK context and does that marry with

Scottish Enterprise's priorities? When Mr McLeish gave evidence to the committee, he mentioned the importance of the oil industry in Houston. I believe that we have a consulate there. Will the minister explain a little bit about that?

My second question is on the extension of Scottish offices throughout the globe. You mentioned the Scotland House model and how effectively that works, with the Executive and Scotland Europa being co-located. In the United States we have SDI in Boston and a first secretary who works from the British embassy. How do you envisage our presence in China rolling out and will it be different from the other two models?

Mr Wallace: I said earlier in answer to Alasdair Morrison's question that both embassies and consulates have important roles to play. They take seriously their responsibility to promote business, commerce and trade. In the United States, I have had contact and involvement with the consulates in Boston, Houston and San Francisco through visits that I have made. We are pushing at an open door and there is a willingness to help. Those are the three cities—San Francisco and San Jose are close to each other—in which SDI has major operations. I think that Mr Raffan and the convener visited its Boston office recently. To be fair, the consul-general in San Francisco was appointed very recently, but in Houston and Boston I got the impression that there is a good working relationship with SDI officers.

On the question about shared offices, I think that co-location can work well. If there are possible co-tenants who could help to make an impact, we should consider them. In the United States, it is a question of horses for courses. In terms of political influence and involvement, it makes sense for the first secretary to be based in Washington, but that is not the place to be for economic activity. Therefore, after a considerable amount of work and analysis, the decision was made to locate the main SDI presence on the eastern seaboard of the United States in Boston. That makes sense, given our connections with the life sciences industry there and our formal relationship with the Massachusetts Office of International Trade & Investment.

On China, nothing is fixed, but I suspect that because the country is so vast there is an advantage in having a strong presence in both Beijing and Shanghai. China is a huge market; I will be there next month and, subject to the final decision, I think that we can maintain a strong presence in both cities.

Irene Oldfather: I put to you a point that we heard during our evidence taking on the United States and which will, I think, be included in our report. We have the huge globalscot network, but I wonder whether we use it enough. We took

evidence from a whisky company that had had no contact whatsoever with SDI, and the person involved was a globalscot member. How can we get the message across? How can we make sure that we use Scots to their full potential in vast countries such as China and the United States?

Mr Wallace: That is a fair question. Globalscot has recruited almost 800 members, which indicates that SDI has not been slouching around when it comes to recruitment. It is in the nature of the work that the time that people can offer will vary. People might not be in a position to undertake very much, but we must try to ensure that contacts are kept fresh so that if their circumstances change and they are in a position to make a bigger contribution, we can tap into that.

In the past year, more than 30 per cent of globalscot members have been actively involved in helping to boost Scotland's economy, which has resulted in 450 contributions. Those include making senior contacts and introductions, business mentoring, assisting with negotiations and, in some cases, acting as non-executive directors. Those who contribute make a worthwhile contribution, but one issue is how we keep fresh the contacts with people who may not have been as active in the recent past and do not lose sight of them. We are considering that issue.

Mr Raffan: You corrected my exaggeration that seven ministers are involved in external relations—you said that there are only six. We have those six ministers; the external relations and the promotion of Scotland divisions and the EU office in the Executive, which have a combined staff of 48; SDI, which has 20 overseas offices and 175 staff; the Scottish affairs office in Washington; VisitScotland; VisitBritain; Scottish Networks International; the globalscot network; Friends of Scotland; and, of course, tartan day—the list goes on. I am concerned about the apparent fragmentation. A multiplicity of people, organisations and initiatives are involved in promoting Scotland overseas. Are too many cooks spoiling the broth? Is the co-ordination working?

Mr Wallace: We need to consider what is appropriate for particular issues. You mention that six ministers are involved; it is important that we mainstream the promotion of Scotland. I corrected your suggestion that seven ministers are involved but, arguably, 20 of us have that responsibility, one way or another. For example, Colin Boyd, the Lord Advocate, engages regularly in international conferences for prosecutors and, given our separate jurisdiction, he adds a distinctive Scottish dimension. All ministers have a responsibility for ensuring that, where our portfolios have an international dimension, we are alert to it and seize it as an opportunity to promote Scotland.

My portfolio makes huge sense. I am involved directly in the work of SDI and in considering how to take advantage of the strengths of our higher and further education sectors by encouraging foreign students to come to Scotland and encouraging Scottish universities to engage in partnerships with bodies outwith Scotland. Patricia Ferguson, the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, has clear responsibilities. The committee will hear later from Tom McCabe, who has responsibility for co-ordination. Tartan day is a specific issue. Obviously, the first secretary in the Washington embassy has an important role in that, but we try to ensure that SDI picks up the opportunities for business and we have asked universities to take advantage of the coming tartan day. It is a fair point that a number of bodies exist and that we must co-ordinate, but as I said in answer to the convener, the co-ordination is improving.

Mr Raffan: The job of co-ordination is massive, which is what I was trying to say. Can you mention any ways in which you think co-ordination could be improved, or are you leaving that up to Mr McCabe?

Mr Wallace: It is important that all parts of the Executive talk to one another. Our international strategy brings many of the strands together and supplements our European strategy, which was published earlier this year. The international strategy was brought to the Cabinet and has the buy-in of all ministers; it lays out the framework within which a number of initiatives operate. It would not make sense to submerge the focus of SDI's work on promoting enterprise by pretending that it should be taken in-house into a completely different department.

15:45

Mr Raffan: Moving on to your other responsibility, on the higher education and research side, we heard a suggestion from Sir Neil MacCormick about a range of Commonwealth scholarships along the same lines as the Rhodes scholarships. I would be interested in your comments on that. We need to know how well Universities Scotland is promoting education and research links in overseas markets and whether we have something to learn from universities elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The University of Nottingham has recently set up a campus overseas, and that is something that a lot of Australian universities, with their proximity to south-east Asia, have done. It is also something that American universities have done. Is that something that we should consider doing under the umbrella of Universities Scotland? It would not simply be about attracting postgraduates and undergraduates here, but it would involve setting

up campuses overseas under the Scottish higher education brand.

Mr Wallace: The answer that I have given before—and one that bears a lot of truth—is that there is always scope to do better. Let me give a good example. The University of Edinburgh has links with Stanford University in the science of language. The Executive has backed that and the quality of the research work that is being done in the partnership between those two universities is of a very high level. We know that the Royal Society of Edinburgh has links with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and our universities have a number of individual contacts.

In addition, as you will be aware, the SQA is working to promote our education system in China, which represents a considerable opportunity for Scottish education. The aim is primarily to promote Scottish education overseas, rather than necessarily to generate income, but I have no doubt that the initiative can also be revenue generating. There is an opportunity for SQA to brand and market its qualifications, particularly with regard to the higher national diploma. That promotion has a double purpose, as it takes Scottish education and a Scottish brand into a huge market, but the Chinese side sees it as a stepping stone that will allow its students to get the kind of qualification that will give them easier access to degree courses in the United Kingdom. It is a two-way process. We are taking our education system out there and we have the opportunity to bring Chinese scholars back to Scotland.

With specific regard to the scholarships that were mentioned, we contribute to the FCO British Chevening and Marshall scholarship schemes. In fact, we have just increased our contribution to the Chevening scholarship. It has also been announced that, as part of the fresh talent initiative, the Scottish international scholarship programme for overseas students will be operational by October next year and will provide the opportunity for 22 overseas graduates to combine a year of postgraduate study with a year of work experience. The breakdown will be as follows: nine places for China; six for India; two for Australia; one for New Zealand; two for South Africa; and two for Singapore.

Mr Raffan: Do you agree that a command of modern languages is very important for current and future generations of Scots and for our commercial and business success across the world? Do you agree with Sir Neil MacCormick that there is currently a crisis in modern languages? What will the Executive do to reverse the decline that was recently confirmed by two emeritus professors, one of French and one of

German, in a study of modern languages in Scotland?

Mr Wallace: I share your view that modern languages are important. One should not always embrace someone else's phraseology and confirm a crisis, so I shall stop short of doing that. Mr Peacock is more directly responsible for what goes on in schools, but I can say that we recognise the importance of modern languages, and programmes to promote them, in schools. I think that one of your papers mentioned the mobility of Scottish students and made the point that not many Scottish students take the opportunity to study abroad and that, when they do, they often go to the old Commonwealth countries, where language is easier. Perhaps that underlines the need for us to ensure that the importance of learning foreign languages is recognised.

Mr Home Robertson: You might have heard Neil MacCormick refer to the value to Scotland of good will from people who have been students here or who have had good experiences here in their youth. It might be worth exploring that in the much more open, mobile world in which we are living. In common with many young people, my son is just coming back from a long time in Australia, and I suspect that he will have been rubbing shoulders or drinking beer—whatever students do—with people from all over the planet, including future movers and shakers who will always have good will towards Australia. Does the Executive intend to actively encourage young people from around the world to spend some of their time here? You referred to a fairly small number of scholarships for students, but there is a limit to how far that can go. Let us have as many people studying in Scotland as possible but, in addition to that, how about promoting Scotland as a destination for gap months or years? Do you find the idea of building on that culture attractive and could we do it?

Mr Wallace: Very much so. The number of scholarships is admittedly small but, as I indicated in my opening remarks, the total number of students from non-EU countries studying in Scotland has increased significantly. In 1997-98, it was just over 10,000, but in 2002-03 it was almost 15,400, which is a significant increase. The work that the SQA is doing in China will, if it can be taken through to completion, provide an opportunity for more students to come to Scotland. The interactive university's work is also reaching out into markets that could provide opportunities for young people to come to Scotland as part of the learning experience.

More generally, I also accept—and it is part of our promotion of Scotland—that Scotland is a

good place to which to come to study, do business, work or have a good time.

Mr Home Robertson: Scotland is a good place to have a good time? Surely not!

Mr Wallace: We have considerable assets that no one can take away from us. For example, very close to our cities, where people can study, are remarkable recreational areas.

Mr Home Robertson: Such as East Lothian. Thank you very much—you are doing well.

Mr Wallace: Yes, the golf courses of East Lothian are highly marketable; that is a serious point. We also have a vibrant cultural scene. It depends on one's tastes, but many tastes are catered for at a high level of quality.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr Wallace. We look forward to the Executive's response to our committee inquiry, the report of which will be published in January, I suspect. We hope that it will contribute to the further development of international strategy and related matters.

I suspend the committee until 4 o'clock to allow us to change over witnesses.

15:53

Meeting suspended.

15:59

On resuming—

Promoting Scotland Worldwide Inquiry and Scottish Executive International Strategy

The Convener: I welcome Tom McCabe, the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, to the committee for agenda items 3, 4 and 5. I invite Mr McCabe to introduce his colleagues and to make an opening statement on the promotion of Scotland. When we move to questions, I suspect that we will stray into item 4, which is on the international strategy, because there is some common ground between the headings. However, I want to keep items 3 and 4 distinct from item 5 on the EU presidency and the G8 summit, because there are quite specific issues to discuss on that.

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): Thank you, convener. Good afternoon, everyone. I am accompanied by Paul Brady, John Henderson and Louise MacDonald from the international group and by John Brown from our tourism section. I appreciate the opportunity to come along to the committee this afternoon to speak about a range of important subjects and I look forward to my further engagement with the committee during the months to come.

As you said, convener, we are beginning with the promotion of Scotland, but all our international activity plays a part in promoting Scotland around the world. It is important to stress that Scotland has some important advantages in international work. We are well known for a country of our size and I think that we are well liked. We have a history of global engagement and we have been the subject of genuine international interest in recent years because of our political renewal. We are part of the United Kingdom, which is one of the world's most globally engaged and influential countries. That is our starting point.

It is now up to us in Scotland to make the most of those advantages in the service of Scotland's interests. Devolution has given us an unprecedented opportunity to focus on what is good for Scotland and how we can pursue it. Since devolution, our work has been characterised by increasing overseas activity in the service of Scotland and increasing focus on the strategic fundamentals—the why, where and how of promoting Scotland internationally. I hope that that was demonstrated in the evidence that the Executive submitted to the committee's inquiry last year, but we have since gone a stage further, with

the publication of the Executive's international strategy.

We stress that, in our view, the strategy is an important step forward. It provides a solid base on which to build the full range of our international work. The strategy shows that the work that we do internationally is done not for its own sake but because it serves the aims that we have set out in the Executive's 2003 partnership agreement.

During this parliamentary session, the Executive has taken a number of top-line initiatives to promote Scotland. The publication of the international strategy is one step, but we have also launched the fresh talent initiative to attract new Scots to live, work and study in Scotland. Under the initiative, we want to attract people from outside Scotland to come here to live and work and to contribute to Scotland's economy.

The document "New Scots: Attracting Fresh Talent to Meet the Challenge of Growth" sets out a range of proposals to implement the initiative, including the establishment of a relocation advisory service. We have made substantial progress on our fresh talent commitments. The relocation advisory service is now fully operational as a one-stop shop for information and assistance for anyone considering moving to Scotland. Although we still have to hold an official launch, the services provided have already enjoyed strong interest. We will ensure that we raise awareness of the service overseas by carrying on with the work on Scotland's international image.

As you heard a few moments ago from the Deputy First Minister, the First Minister has launched the Scottish international scholarship programme, which provides 22 scholarships for people from six countries to come and study in Scotland. Moreover, the fresh talent Scotland scheme, which will be in operation from the summer of 2005, will allow international students from Scottish institutions to remain and work in Scotland for up to two years after graduation. Those initiatives will combine to raise Scotland's profile as a premier destination for people to live and work.

During the summer, the First Minister launched a new initiative to promote Scotland's international image. He emphasised that, while embracing our history and heritage and other positive perceptions about Scotland, we need to bring Scotland's international image up to date and showcase the many facets of contemporary Scotland that make this a great small country. In our view, we need to position today's Scotland as being relevant to the 21st century world.

In the initial stage, we have undertaken a considerable amount of proactive work to position Scotland internationally. That has included the

development of a new website—scotlandistheplace.com—and familiarisation visits for journalists and feature writers, from 10 countries currently, to help them to see Scotland in a different light. The work involves re-energising our international network, including FCO posts around the world. It also helps us to make the most of events such as the festival fringe and Edinburgh's hogmanay.

Promoting Scotland is a high priority for the Executive, but it is clearly not something that the Executive could or should do on its own. Success depends on many agencies, as well as on the Executive. The strategy emphasises that partnership approach. We work with bodies not only in Scotland, including the Parliament and this committee, but in the UK and worldwide.

Whatever else the strategy is, it must not be a tick-box exercise. We recognise that the promotion of Scotland will never be complete and that there is no textbook way of promoting a country's interests. We recognise that we need to learn from what other countries have done, but Scotland is its own country and, inevitably, it is breaking new ground in its new constitutional arrangements. We are determined to be open about what works and are equally determined to be realistic and open, as a result of experience, about what has been less useful.

The committee's inquiry is part of an overall process. I know that the inquiry has gone on for a considerable time, but I hope that, when it finishes, you will be able to provide the Executive with insights that contribute positively to the overall effort of promoting Scotland around the world.

The Convener: I am sure that the committee will endeavour to do exactly that.

Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab): I have a slight bee in my bonnet, minister. The one conclusion that I have come to since I have been a member of the committee is that you have too many jobs. I know that, coming from me, that might sound a bit rich, but never mind. I am not talking about you personally. I discussed the issue with your predecessor, too, who had some sympathy with what I am saying. He said that there was no problem with policy, as there are lots of capable officials who can produce the papers and so on, but that there was a problem with the personal side, which involves getting to places, meeting people and doing the kind of networking that is needed to ensure that Scotland can take its place in the system.

I appreciate that your role is to co-ordinate the work and that each minister has to mainstream their department's work into a wider or European dimension, but I cannot help but come to the conclusion that, given that you have finances and

public services to run, you will face difficulties in relation to your ability physically to do what needs to be done with regard to the external relations portfolio. Obviously, you cannot answer that except by saying that everything is okay, but do you see any problem such as the one that I have outlined? If so, how could we deal with it? My view is that we should have someone who is much more focused on that one issue, but you might have another idea.

Mr McCabe: You made reference to your situation and, from what I read in the papers, you are quite good at negotiating rates of pay. If you can give me any advice in that regard, I would be more than happy.

You are right to point out that the portfolio is wide. I am in the early stages of my post and I think that, over time, I will form views on the basis of experience and will make recommendations to the First Minister if I have any to make. However, my first impressions are that the functions contained in the portfolio are doable. I have a co-ordinating role with regard to international activity.

There is a limit to the amount of time that any minister can spend engaging with people either in this country or abroad and there is a strength in having more than one minister focusing on these activities. In a previous evidence-taking session, Mr Raffan referred to the fact that a number of ministers are involved. That helps to attain a level of engagement in various countries of the world and with people throughout the UK. However, it is important that we retain within one portfolio the ability to take an overarching look at all those activities and to assess the total sum of that activity. In the same way that it is important to try to ensure that, in our expenditure, we apply cross-cutting principles to ensure that we gain the maximum return on any expenditure, it is important that someone should take a wider view of the range of activities to ensure that those activities are properly co-ordinated and that their total sum gives us an adequate return.

Gordon Jackson: I am encouraged to hear you say that if, after you have held the portfolio for longer, you believe that the current arrangements do not offer the best approach, you will be prepared to say so. Some of us have real reservations about the matter—I just share that with you.

Mr McCabe: I appreciate the way in which you make the point. Of course, there is a dilemma, because some members of the Parliament say that there are already too many Executive ministers. The more we subdivide, the more we will be criticised. Perhaps as the current constitutional arrangements mature, the standard of debate will mature, too.

I have been Minister for Parliament and Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care and I have held my current portfolio for nearly three months. When I consider the volume of work with which ministers must deal, I honestly wonder how, in the set-up prior to 1999, three or four ministers could have had any effective political control over major decisions. Of course, the new constitutional arrangements give us the opportunity to focus on areas that we consider to be important to Scotland and that perhaps did not receive the proper attention under the previous arrangement.

The Convener: We will deal with the point that Mr Jackson raised before moving on. I will allow a question from Keith Raffan, if it covers the same ground.

Mr Raffan: It follows from Gordon Jackson's point. I know that you can give only a rough estimate, minister, but what proportion of your time is spent on your co-ordinating role and responsibilities in external relations?

Mr McCabe: It is difficult to give a precise answer when I am under three months into the post.

Mr Raffan: Can you give a rough indication?

Mr McCabe: During the past three months, I visited Prague and spoke to a global summit on public-private partnerships. We are discussing a useful spin-off from that visit. I think that I have been to London three times since taking on the post, to take part in the meetings of the joint ministerial committee on Europe, which are held sometimes in the House of Commons and sometimes elsewhere in London. There has been a fair degree of involvement. However, that must be considered in context: when I took over the portfolio, we were involved in the launch of the major strategy on efficient government and we are currently heavily focused on the local government settlement and the announcement of non-domestic rates. Time-specific issues need to be resolved. After the turn of the year, I might be able to take a better view on how my time will be split across different parts of the portfolio.

Mr Raffan: The Scottish Executive's written submission indicates that you meet officials from

"the three Executive Divisions most closely involved in"

external relations. It says that you have

"fortnightly meetings with officials to review progress."

Do those meetings happen regularly on the morning or afternoon of the same day of the week?

Mr McCabe: The meetings are regular at the moment. However, I am still working to a diary that is dictated by inherited commitments; after the turn of the year, I want my meetings schedule to be

determined by my priorities. To be blunt, I also want my diary to permit me to have a proper balance in my life—that should be the case for all ministers.

The Convener: You are preaching to the converted.

Mr Raffan: Are the fortnightly meetings sufficient?

Mr McCabe: Up to now they have been sufficient for the level of involvement, but I do not know whether I will conclude in the months to come that that pattern should be maintained. The jury is out on that.

Mr Raffan: I have a further point. In your opening statement, you mentioned the relocation advisory service—

The Convener: I will bring you in later if you want to ask about that, but can we stick with the point about the minister's portfolio just now?

16:15

Mr Morrison: My point follows from the point that Gordon Jackson raised and I should say at the outset that I do not agree with him. Robin Cook shared his experience of the debate in London in the past decade, in which Westminster rapidly moved away from the idea of a single department for Europe.

Both Robin Cook and Jim Wallace used the word "mainstreaming". To cite an example from the past few months, the previous Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development took it upon himself to go around the European capitals campaigning on behalf of the salmon industry. He and his officials did a good bit of work before the relevant ministers and officials got to Brussels, where decisions were ultimately taken.

Minister, you have given a commitment to Gordon Jackson to evaluate the workload and how it might best be divvied up, but could you also give a commitment to examine the issue of mainstreaming? If you further embed mainstreaming and, by definition, lessen your burden so that you can spend more time on strategic issues, how will you be able to promote the issue of ministers taking upon themselves responsibilities relating to education, justice, the environment and so on in the external relations context?

Mr McCabe: For that to happen, someone—perhaps me—would have to take a view on the total sum of our activities and to examine what ministers are doing, by holding regular bilateral meetings with portfolio colleagues, which will happen in any event in a number of areas. We will

need to consider whether we are satisfied that our activity is sufficient to service our overall aims.

Irene Oldfather: There is a certain irony in this debate. We spend a great deal of our time saying that Europe is not about foreign affairs but about domestic policy and refer many of our committee papers to other committees of this Parliament. If that is the case—and I return to Alasdair Morrison's point about mainstreaming—surely it is almost a necessary evil that we will have ministers across the board involved in European policy. However, the separate issue, which Keith Raffan and Gordon Jackson are raising, relates to the need to ensure that there is time for the co-ordinating role. We have talked, in the past, about having six or seven ministers involved. However, it seems to me that we are always going to have six or seven ministers involved. I invite the minister to comment on that.

Mr McCabe: I hope that I did not say anything different from that. If we are to engage seriously at the proper level, it is important that a range of ministers is involved. I am not particularly keen on making analogies with Westminster, but I point out that the FCO does not do everything in terms of engagement with other parts of the EU and the rest of the world. That would be impossible. In the totality of the ministerial effort, there will always be work that contributes to the overall effort. It is only common sense that that should be the case.

The Convener: What duties do you carry out in relation to external affairs that are distinct from those carried out by the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport?

Mr McCabe: Do you mean specifically with regard to Europe?

The Convener: I am interested in the division of ministerial responsibilities. The Executive's structure chart says that you have a responsibility for external affairs and that the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport also has a responsibility for external affairs. I am interested to know what you do and what she does.

Mr McCabe: There are distinct differences. For example, the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport might represent Scotland at a Commonwealth games event that was held abroad and I would not get particularly involved in that. Conversely, as I mentioned a few moments ago, I recently attended a global PPP summit in Prague and spoke about the Executive's wider efforts across a number of portfolios to improve investment in our infrastructure. I would have an engagement in such areas. I would also, on behalf of the Executive, attend joint ministerial committee meetings in London and get involved in a range of other issues in a way that would complement or add value to the activities of other ministers.

The Convener: I have a fair idea of what you do, but what does the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport do in relation to external affairs?

Mr McCabe: As the number of visitors to Scotland increases and as foreign Governments send representatives over, she will play a part in assisting me and meeting some of those people. She will play a part in the hospitality that goes with that and in the diplomatic effort that goes into ensuring that people feel that they have been made welcome in Scotland and that their presence is relevant. She assists in the overall effort to promote Scotland to the countries that show an interest in our new constitutional arrangements.

The Convener: Thanks for that. I asked a parliamentary question about that on 12 October but I have yet to get an answer from the Executive. You might want to reflect on that point and ensure that the question is answered, given that it has been outstanding for a number of weeks.

Mr Raffan: Minister, were you involved in any of the meetings or functions relating to the important Regleg conference at the beginning of last week?

Mr McCabe: I discussed that with the First Minister. There was a clash on the day of the conference, which was when we launched the efficient government document.

Mr Raffan: The conference was over two days—the Monday and the Tuesday.

Mr McCabe: Yes, I know. There was also a joint ministerial committee meeting in London on the same day. I was pretty busy. The First Minister would, naturally, take the lead on such matters, but I discussed the initiative with him.

Mr Raffan: Has he reported back to you, so that you are informed in your co-ordinating role?

Mr McCabe: We have not had much time to talk, given the activities in which we were both involved last week, but I am sure that we will discuss the matter when time allows.

The Convener: How often do you meet the First Minister to discuss external affairs issues?

Mr McCabe: I meet the First Minister on average once every 10 days for a specific discussion, not only on external affairs—

The Convener: On your remit?

Mr McCabe: Yes.

The Convener: How many of those meetings involve a discussion about external affairs? You have a number of responsibilities.

Mr McCabe: The meetings will involve such a discussion when it is required. If we required to discuss external affairs on every occasion, we

would do so, but you would not want me to waste precious Government time discussing subjects when that was not required.

The Convener: I am sure that you would never do that, Mr McCabe.

Phil Gallie: You referred to the fresh talent policy and the many positive actions that you have taken to drive it along. With the expansion of the European Union, we have many more European citizens. I am advised that 91,000 of them have come to the UK between May and September. Can you tell me how many of those individuals have come to live and work in Scotland?

Mr McCabe: I cannot tell you at the moment. I do not have an overall figure for that. We have received in excess of 500 inquiries about the relocation advisory service—that is before the launch. I do not know whether we would be in a position to collate the figure that you are after, but I will certainly make inquiries about how much of that information we can provide. I will do my best to pass on whatever information we have.

Phil Gallie: I would be grateful for that. It seems that there is a massive pool on which we can draw.

Earlier, Sir Neil MacCormick suggested that, within the European Union, we seem to be losing the Scottish voice that was heard previously among the senior civil servants who supported the directors general. That must be an area in which Scotland's influence could be significant. I assume that Scotland has played such a part in the past. What can be done now to ensure that our voice is maintained?

Mr McCabe: It is important that our voice in the European Union is not only maintained but strengthened. In some of the initiatives in which the First Minister has been involved, such as the Regleg conference, we are being recognised increasingly as one of the important legislative regions in Europe. The new constitutional treaty has more regard to legislative regions than was ever the case before. Through such initiatives, we will do all that we can to ensure that Scotland's voice, and indeed that of legislative regions within member states, is heard more loudly in the European Union. That is the rationale behind our approach to Europe, which is to ensure that through our new constitutional arrangements, as a major legislative region, we are far more able to have a say on and influence the development of European policy.

Phil Gallie: It is a pity that you did not manage to get along to the Regleg meetings. One of the impressions that I picked up was that there were concerns right across the board by regional members that the new constitution will mean a loss of devolved roles and greater centralisation.

Will you consider the outcomes of, and the attitudes that were expressed at, the meetings and rethink the answer that you have just given?

Mr McCabe: I do not know whether I will rethink my answer, as I think that it was right.

I will pick up on the point that you made about attendance at the Regleg meetings and a point that I made earlier. Last Monday, I had a 19-and-a-half-hour day—

Phil Gallie: I am not criticising you for that.

Mr McCabe: Attending a joint ministerial committee meeting in London was part of the day's activities. We should not expect anyone to be in two places at one time. If there is First Minister representation at an event, he is more than able to cope with Scotland's interests. He does not need me at his back.

Irene Oldfather: Phil Gallie and I must have been at different Regleg meetings, as my perception was that some people did not think that the constitution goes far enough. I am sure that he and I will have that debate on another day.

Minister, thank you for the submission, which is comprehensive and explanatory. Page 4 mentions sharing information with other devolved Administrations and sometimes representing them at meetings in "London or elsewhere", as those interests are sometimes similar. Will you expand on that comment a little? I am not sure exactly what the comment means, particularly its reference to "London or elsewhere".

While you are thinking about that, I will ask about another matter. Page 2 of the submission states:

"Three Divisions within the Executive are dedicated to external relations work".

You have pretty well covered your view of the ministerial situation, which you are going to look into. However, the three divisions include the external relations division, which has an EU and international relations branch, and the EU office in Brussels. How do those two divisions work together? What is the partnership between them? Structurally in the civil service, is there any reporting between them? Is there a direct management structure or are the divisions entirely separate? Might you also review that matter?

Mr McCabe: I will ask Paul Brady to say a few words about that. You have me at a loss with respect to page 4.

The Convener: Can we have the reference again for Mr McCabe?

Irene Oldfather: I was referring to the paragraph on page 4 that begins

"In pursuing its external relations objectives".

The end of that paragraph says:

"We also keep in close touch with colleagues in other Devolved Administrations, who often have similar concerns and are keen to share their experiences with us. We also share information with them and sometimes represent them at meetings in London or elsewhere".

I wondered whether the minister could expand on that a little.

The Convener: By the time we have found the reference, I suspect that we will have shared the entire document with you, Mr McCabe.

Mr McCabe: I can only apologise for the fact that my photographic memory has not remembered that specific paragraph.

Irene Oldfather: The document is very detailed, but I thought that the area was of interest. I would be interested to hear a little more about the matter.

Mr McCabe: Mr Brady will deal with the second issue.

Paul Brady (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department): I have been head of the international group for around six to eight months and have reviewed organisation. Having addressed some issues that have been raised—particularly the interconnection between the Brussels operation and the Edinburgh EU group—I decided, in consultation with Mr McCabe's predecessor, to have a joint head of the European operation in Brussels and Edinburgh, although, for obvious operational reasons, that person would spend the majority of their time in Brussels. Most of the action is in Brussels. That decision addresses the less-than-ideal interaction between the two teams, which was a weakness in the structure.

We have also rearranged other parts of the group since evidence was given to take account of the international image project, which the First Minister announced in July. Louise MacDonald is the head of that new team. John Henderson is the head of the international division, which deals with all other international promotion matters. Quite a lot of change has taken place. If the committee would find it helpful, I could offer written documentation on that.

16:30

The Convener: It would help to have an up-to-date description. Could you put that in the context of how it fits into the Finance and Central Services Department?

Paul Brady: I shall do that. The teams are part of Mr McCabe's department.

Irene Oldfather: That linking is eminently sensible and will much improve matters.

The Convener: Mr McCabe will answer the first question.

Mr McCabe: I refer again to the example of the joint ministerial committee on Europe. We and the other devolved Administrations have a dialogue. People will understand that we try to gather as much support as we can for our position. If another Administration could not attend a joint ministerial committee meeting and wished us to express a view on its behalf or to say that we had its support for a view, we would co-ordinate with each other so that we could say that with justification. On-going dialogue takes place.

Irene Oldfather: You have collaborative partnership on common interests.

Mr McCabe: Yes. Sometimes, before a joint ministerial committee meeting, I meet my counterparts in the other devolved Administrations for a conversation. That happens as a matter of course.

Mrs Ewing: You are also the minister responsible for finance. I am interested in how the money that is allocated to external relations matters is prioritised in the various departments. At times, conflicts must arise over whether money should be spent on tourism or on the fresh talent initiative, for example. Does a mechanism exist for deciding how to spend money?

Mr McCabe: Each Executive department has a budget, but I also control a central budget from my department. I oversee and co-ordinate some expenditure in other departments. Through the bilateral contact that I mentioned, I ensure that expenditure by each department contributes to our overall aims. As I said, the budget that I control in my department provides the ability to direct activities.

Mrs Ewing: Can you give us an idea of how much was spent last year?

Mr McCabe: I do not know last year's figure. From this year onwards, I believe that the figure is just over £4 million.

Mrs Ewing: I know that you have been in your post for only three months, but are you satisfied that value for money is being achieved?

Mr McCabe: At this point, I cannot say honestly that I know the answer. I will assess that over time. We may well expand our external relations activities. As with any public expenditure area that we expand, we have an obligation to ensure the right return for the money that we invest.

The Convener: Is the £4 million spent on external affairs?

Mr McCabe: That money is spent on promoting Scotland.

The Convener: So it is not the sum total for the organogram that you will give us of the teams that you talked about, such as the external relations division. Is that figure just for the promotion of Scotland division?

Mr McCabe: No. The figure is the total sum.

The Convener: Does the figure include the promotion of Scotland division, the EU office and the external relations division?

Mr McCabe: Yes.

Mrs Ewing: That is helpful.

In your introduction, you referred to the relocation advisory service. You said in response to Phil Gallie that 500 inquiries had been made. Will you give us an idea of where inquiries have come from?

Mr McCabe: Many came from Poland.

Louise MacDonald (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department): The highest number has come from the States, followed by India and Poland. About 650 individuals have contacted the service.

Mr Raffan: You said that the service has not been formally launched yet. When will it be formally launched and how are you marketing it?

Louise MacDonald: If truth be told, we have probably been a bit low key over the past few weeks because the staff only moved into post at the beginning of October. We had to give them time to bed in.

Mr Raffan: How many staff are there and where is the service based?

Louise MacDonald: The service is based at Meridian Court in Glasgow and has a staff of six, two of whom are immigration specialists. We plan to launch the service later this month. The marketing has been very low key. We sent out some brochures on fresh talent to all our Foreign and Commonwealth Office offices early on. The brochures had a little reply coupon, and some inquiries are coming through that means. As we have not been marketing the service it is very encouraging that people are finding their way to us.

Mr Raffan: The six members of staff must be pretty overwhelmed, having received 650 inquiries. No wonder your marketing is low key. Will you increase the number of staff?

Louise MacDonald: We already have plans for an additional member of staff. That person will give specific help and advice to Scottish employers that are looking to recruit people from overseas. Most of the inquiries will come over the web. The advantage of that is that it gives us the

chance to look for areas of commonality across questions so that we can more readily package answers. That gives us flexibility because of the way in which the inquiries are coming in.

Mr Raffan: Can you ensure that the same information is available to us as is available to embassies, high commissions and so on?

Louise MacDonald: Certainly.

Mr Raffan: It would be helpful if that information were made available to all members. I know of one or two people who would like to contact the service.

Louise MacDonald: A point was well made earlier about communication. The brochures that have gone out to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are for its use and distribution. That is part of the chain of communication that is required. Staff who process visas in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will need substantively more detailed information than staff in other offices. We will certainly tailor the information to particular people.

The Convener: I have a further question about how the Executive effectively beds the fresh talent initiative into the whole range of Government activities. Louise MacDonald has given us an example of the importance of staff within the immigration service having a superior knowledge of some of the detail. In a range of different sectors of the economy—such as universities and housing organisations—a need to buy into the fresh talent initiative will be essential if the initiative is to succeed. To what extent has that work been undertaken by the team that is based in Meridian Court, or is there a cross-cutting Government effort to ensure that the initiative beds in well and is part of the general outlook of Scottish Government?

Mr McCabe: The initiative is a large and important piece of work. We would not expect the team as it is currently constructed—it is a team of six people, although it will increase to a degree as the months pass—to take on the totality of that work. It is important that different ministerial portfolios support the overall effort on fresh talent. For example, on housing, we would look to the communities portfolio to give assistance in that area and we would look to other portfolios to see what contribution they can make.

The Convener: So the work would be led from a ministerial level.

Mr McCabe: Yes. It would have to be.

Mr Raffan: I dread to use the phrase “waiting time”, as it can be a little ominous for the Executive in other spheres. Nevertheless, what waiting time do the 650 applicants face before they receive a response? The waiting time must

be quite considerable if there are six people dealing with the inquiries.

Louise MacDonald: Most inquiries are dealt with within a day or, at most, two days. Sometimes the length of the wait will be influenced by the time difference, depending on when an inquiry comes in. The turnaround is pretty fast and we are getting some very positive feedback from the customers to whom we have responded.

Mr Raffan: It sounds as if people are working 19-and-a-half-hour days.

Louise MacDonald: Some long days have been known.

Mr McCabe: There is, of course, the advantage of technology.

It is important that we do not overstretch ourselves and diminish the regard in which the service is held by going too far, too fast and disappointing people. It is important that we move this along at the proper pace. That is why we have not yet held the official launch. We want to ensure that the systems are bedded in properly and that any difficulties with those systems have been revealed before we step up the pace. For instance, rather than require people to come to the service, members of staff might be able to hold surgeries in places such as universities. There are ways in which we can maximise their time and effort.

Mr Raffan: So surgeries might be held in Edinburgh, for example.

Mr McCabe: Yes.

Phil Gallie: I do not mean to move us off target, but I am surprised that the national sources for the applications are the USA, India and Poland. Given that Poland seems to be the only EU country from which any applications have been submitted, let me repeat my earlier question. Why are we not attracting people from the enlarged European Union?

Mr McCabe: Poland is not necessarily the only EU country from which applications have been received. We listed Poland as an example of one of the major countries, but other European countries are involved. We are as keen as anyone to attract people from the accession states and we already see the value of engaging with them. That was one reason for my visit to Prague a few weeks ago, where I spoke about Scotland's experience of public-private partnerships. Many accession states are eager to improve their infrastructure at some pace, so they are keen to learn the lessons that we have already learned and import some of our experience. We were keen to be involved in that in Prague and we are keen to be similarly involved in other accession states too.

Louise MacDonald: I can clarify that inquiries have been received from more than 70 countries, but the third highest number came from Poland.

Phil Gallie: Thank you for that helpful clarification.

The Convener: We have talked a great deal about the need for a co-ordinating role—which, if my understanding is correct, is Mr McCabe's responsibility—to oversee the many organisations such as VisitScotland and SDI that are involved in the promotion of Scotland overseas. However, in the course of our inquiry we have heard criticism to the effect that too many organisations are involved, co-ordination is not as strong as it should be and the Scottish international forum is too unwieldy an organisation to deliver what is needed. What are the Executive's future priorities for the Scottish international forum? How does the concept relate to the involvement of other departments?

Also, will the minister share with us how potential conflicts between the tourism lobby and the economic development lobby will be resolved if there are competing priorities on the message that should be formulated to promote Scotland and on the mechanisms that will be used for doing that?

Mr McCabe: The Scottish international forum is clearly important. I have not necessarily heard that it is unwieldy. The forum promotes communication among the different bodies and it helps them to understand the different objectives that we are pursuing. Clearly, there is a great diversity of effort among those different organisations, but that may be a strength. Earlier, I heard a range of different organisations being listed—by Mr Raffan, I think—but that range at least shows the amount of effort that we are putting in. We need to reassure ourselves that all that effort is contributing to the same aim.

The Convener: That is absolutely my point. I do not dispute the fact that a lot of effort is being put in, but does it have any cohesion? Given your responsibilities as Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, can you guarantee that we are receiving maximum value for money from the involvement of so many organisations?

Mr McCabe: As part of our work, we need a horizon-scanning exercise to look for any occasion on which there is a contradiction or conflict. Quite frankly, through ministerial direction where that is appropriate, we must make it clear that those who focus on their own area without regard to the greater good must mend their ways.

The Convener: So you can foresee a situation in which ministerial direction might be utilised to keep people on message, as it were.

Mr McCabe: I do not know that we are talking about keeping people on message, but I certainly agree that ministerial direction could be appropriate on occasion. For instance, if there were clear evidence that our promotion of tourism in some way inhibited our economic development initiatives—although I cannot imagine how that would happen—there would be a clear case for me, given my portfolio, to have a pretty frank discussion with the other ministers to examine why that was happening and how we could fix it. That is just an example. Off the top of my head, I cannot think how tourism activities would act as an inhibitor to economic development. As long as no one becomes unnecessarily precious about the activities in their portfolio, if a body is not making its proper contribution, we would have responsibility to consider that and, where appropriate, take action. That is why we seek ministerial positions.

16:45

The Convener: Will you share with the committee some of the future priorities for the forum?

Mr McCabe: One of my priorities is to confirm that the communication links are appropriate. I want to extract from the organisations that are represented on the forum how they feel about their involvement; whether they believe that they could make a greater contribution through the activities that their organisations promote; and whether they feel that the Executive takes proper account of their work. I also want to ensure that their work complements our wider strategy properly.

The Convener: Given that the international strategy is a fairly general document that contains strategic priorities, is it translated into an operational guide for the various bodies? We can read the international strategy, but what practical measures come out of it? I suppose that I am asking whether there is a plan.

Mr McCabe: The strategy provides the foundation on which we can build; its aim is to put in place a three or four-year direction for our international activities and to establish the reasons why we carry out those activities. It is a broad document, but we must remember that we are at the beginning of the process. We decided deliberately to keep the strategy broad to allow us to learn from experience. Then we will hone down the strategy so that it relates to much more specific activities in our international work. Under the new constitutional arrangements, we sometimes have a tendency to seek all the answers all at once. That is well intentioned, but it cannot be done. We will find our answers by establishing a base, learning from experience and refining our aims. I hope that we will make progress in that way.

Irene Oldfather: The information that the Executive submitted to the committee included a paper from Susan Stewart, the first secretary for Scottish affairs at the British embassy in Washington DC. In her paper, she identified a priority of her office as being interaction with United States state legislators, as resources permit. Does the minister envisage the Scottish Executive being involved in that process? Is that a long, medium or short-term goal? Given that there are a number of states, how will the office identify which legislatures to contact and how to roll out the programme?

Mr McCabe: I envisage ministerial involvement at some level, but I will be realistic about the programme, particularly in the early stages. Given that the United States is huge, it makes sense to focus our work in that country, but we have still to consider in depth what the right focus is. Tartan day was mentioned earlier. I am keen to establish exactly what we get back from tartan day. It is well intentioned and was started for specific reasons—the United States Senate decided to celebrate Scottish links on a certain day. The activities have been extended, but we need to satisfy ourselves that we are focusing in a way that gives us an identifiable return that adds up to more than good will. I do not underestimate the value of good will—it is important—but we all have ambitions to take a step further than that by increasing our profile in the United States and perhaps thereby increasing the opportunities in the United States for individuals and companies from our country.

Irene Oldfather: My perception of tartan day is that it has become very much an east-coast thing. If we want to capitalise on doing business in the United States we need to widen out our work into the west. Does the minister share that perspective?

Mr McCabe: We are talking about the world's most successful economy. The way ahead may be to focus on particular sectors. In that regard, we can see why there has been a focus on the east coast, because of the university connections. There may be other sectors that are relevant to other geographical areas in the United States. However, it is important that we do not take a scatter-gun approach, but instead focus on specific sectors and try to improve our performance.

The Convener: The final question on this area is from Mr Raffan.

Mr Raffan: I have two brief points. First, we do not want to lengthen the minister's already long day, but will he examine how the Executive can work with the Parliament to improve and strengthen links with the National Conference of State Legislatures, with which a number of us have connections? Will he also bear in mind the

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, a strong branch of which we have here?

Secondly, my main point is on something that Sir Neil MacCormick raises at the end of his written evidence and which we have not touched on today. He states:

“Scotland is also a Nordic country in many respects.”

He also talks about our connection with the Nordic Council. The first delegation to this Parliament was from Norway, and one of the first conferences, in 1999 or 2000, was a successful meeting of the Nordic Council, yet the Executive took the decision not to get involved. Why? Is the Executive going to develop those links and, if so, how?

Mr McCabe: The short answer to the second question is that I do not know, because I was not involved in that decision.

Mr Raffan: Could you look into it?

Mr McCabe: Yes.

Mr Raffan: It is important. It was a great pity, given that we had such a focus on that first non-parliamentary event in the old chamber.

Mr McCabe: I will come back to you on that.

On your first point, I am more than happy to work with the committee. I believe—you would expect me to say nothing else—that if the Executive takes the view that it alone can find the answers, we will lose before we start. The work has to be done in conjunction with the Parliament, in which there is a lot of experience. It is important that we work with you. If at any time you do not think that that is happening sufficiently in my portfolio, I will be more than willing to engage in a discussion with the committee to see how we can improve things.

The Convener: That is appreciated.

Mr Raffan: We had a good debate on October 7, prior to the official opening of the Parliament, which revolved around a potential international development role for the Executive, which is touched on in the international strategy. How does the minister view that role and how does he envisage it developing? Will the Executive encourage such a role? My questions relate to points that we will touch on later when we discuss the G8 summit, which is another aspect of promoting Scotland's reputation overseas.

Mr McCabe: An important part of that will be the exchange of skills and experience with countries that are far more challenged than our own. A £3 million fund has been established. Through the resources that are available, we can use those skills and that experience to best effect in the interests of people in other countries. We are very much at the start of that work. I sincerely hope that

that area will develop and that we will be able to spend time sharing the advantages that we have in our country with people who are considerably more disadvantaged than we are.

The Convener: How far away is the further information on what the Government intends to do on its international development role? Is it months away from being made public?

Mr McCabe: I would have thought that further information would be available by spring.

United Kingdom Presidencies (Council of the European Union and G8)

16:53

The Convener: Item 5 is the involvement of the Scottish Executive in activities during the UK Government's presidency of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2005 and in the G8 summit. I invite Mr McCabe to make an opening statement on those points, then we will move to questioning.

Mr McCabe: With your permission, I will deal with both subjects.

The Convener: Please deal with them together.

Mr McCabe: I am delighted to say that Scotland will be actively assisting the overall effort in delivering a successful United Kingdom presidency of the Council of the European Union next year. The presidency represents an excellent opportunity to showcase Scotland and Scottish expertise to a wider audience in the European Union and the wider world.

We will be hosting a wide variety of events in Scotland during the presidency: some 26 events are planned to take place and the list is growing. Delegates from throughout the European Union will visit Scotland for those meetings, which represent an excellent opportunity to show visitors how welcoming and vibrant Scotland is while contributing positively to the development of European Union policy initiatives. Some of the events, which include the Asia-Europe meeting of customs director generals, the world youth congress and the European social services conference, are high profile and will include delegates from outwith the European Union as well as senior officials from European Union institutions.

We always look for opportunities to assist in the overall United Kingdom effort that is involved in the presidency. I made that clear to the Foreign Secretary last week when I attended the joint ministerial committee on Europe in London.

It is likely that the Parliament will be of huge interest to many of the delegates visiting Scotland to attend presidency events. I am sure that members will join me in expressing the hope that any requests for meetings or receptions in the Parliament building will be accommodated where possible.

The Convener: I am sure that the minister would not want me to venture into so sensitive an area as the catering arrangements. Wars have

started over less than that, Mr McCabe, but we echo your sentiments.

Mr McCabe: That is exactly why I was trying to pass it over to you, convener.

The Convener: I have just come out of the trouble zone and I have no intention of going back into it.

Mr McCabe: We are clearly delighted that the United Kingdom Government has chosen the Gleneagles Hotel as the venue for the G8 summit in July 2005. As most of us would concur, it is a venue that would say positive things about any country in the world.

This will be a key international moment for Scotland. Worldwide public and media attention will be on us. It is a chance to demonstrate our capacity to host international events at the highest level and an unmissable opportunity to promote a modern Scotland. We are developing plans that will be launched early next year to ensure that participants, journalists and guests see the best of Scotland. We see it as an excellent opportunity to promote Scotland as a world-class destination for business tourism, reinforcing the work that is being done on Scotland's international image.

We seek to maximise the one-off economic benefits that will arise from servicing the needs of the summit and we will try to maximise the impact from the 2,000 staff and up to 3,000 media representatives who will come to Scotland to support and report on the meeting. We also intend to do all that we can to maximise the long-term economic and other benefits that the publicity associated with the meeting will generate.

As I indicated earlier, this is an opportunity for the people of Scotland to engage even further with some of the major issues to be discussed at the summit, for example third-world development issues in Africa and climate change. We are working closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, police, local government and others to ensure that the event plays out with maximum benefit to the local area, and to Scotland, with minimum disruption to local residents.

Early in the new year, we will make announcements about G8-related events that are to take place in Scotland. However, I can tell members now that we intend to host a major reception at Edinburgh Castle that will involve representatives from a wide variety of non-governmental organisations that can assist us in maximising the impact of the summit, help us to portray Scotland as a friendly and welcoming venue and ensure that the benefits of the event are felt in Scotland for many years to come.

Mr Raffan: I will follow on from my earlier point about international development. You rightly said that one of the two centrepieces of the G8 summit will be the Prime Minister's commission on Africa, which is potentially important and which could tie in with the kind of international development role that we foresee for Scotland, in particular in relation to sub-Saharan Africa and the countries with which we have a long-standing historical connection. Is the Executive making any submission to that commission? How will it get some reflected limelight on our international development role in the weeks leading up to the very short period of the G8 summit before the caravan moves on?

Mr McCabe: The formal invitations to the G8 summit have not yet been issued by the FCO, but we intend to hook up with leaders of some of the countries that will be invited, in particular those that are not G8 countries such as some of the African countries. We intend to investigate how we can engage with them with a view to furthering the international development work to which you have alluded.

17:00

Mr Raffan: You mentioned the reception for non-governmental organisations at the castle. At the tail end of our delegation's visit to the States, I was at a small conference in Washington, because I am on the board of the Global Aids Alliance. Representatives of 40 to 50 American NGOs were around the table, and within the first 15 minutes, six of them had mentioned the G8. They said that it was in England but I corrected them. I even told them that it is in Perthshire in my region.

Perth and Kinross Council has a website for the G8 summit. Will you have a website so that you can help some of the NGOs who want to be represented at the G8 and who want to have facilities in Edinburgh, where most of the journalists will be based?

Mr McCabe: I understand that we are establishing a website. I would have been very surprised if we did not; it is the obvious way to promote any major event.

Mr Raffan: When will it be up and running? Perth and Kinross Council's site was up and running about four or five months ago.

Mr McCabe: My understanding is that it will be up early in the new year. I am told that it will be soon and the new year is soon, so I must be right.

Mr Raffan: Could you look at that because—

The Convener: Soon is a much over-used word.

Mr McCabe: That was not a civil service "soon"; it means soon.

Mr Raffan: I have a final point. I understand from the parliamentary external liaison unit that between 7,000 and 7,300 journalists will be coming to cover the G8 summit. Two hundred are coming from Japan alone. Many—probably most—of them will be based in accommodation in Edinburgh. Will you look into giving a reception for some of the journalists as well, because it is important that we make good contacts with such a multitude of journalists from all over the world?

Mr McCabe: I would expect you to be severely disappointed in the work of the Executive if we did not capitalise on such a unique opportunity to have that number of foreign journalists go away with a good impression of this country. I am sure that if that happens, we will reap the benefits for many years to come. However, we will be placing particular emphasis on proper, useful and positive engagement with the media representatives that come for the summit. I had not heard that the figure was as high as 7,000, but I hope that you are right.

Irene Oldfather: I welcome the minister's comments on the G8 and the fact that he will be using Edinburgh Castle. It was used for the Regleg dinner and those who attended will agree that it was successful and very much appreciated by all who visited. It did Scotland proud.

I do not want to pre-empt the publication of the minister's programme in January, but will he assure us that all Scotland, and not just the west of Scotland, will be included in one way or another in next year's events so that we can all go home to our constituencies and welcome the attention that the G8 summit will bring?

Mr McCabe: We are liaising with local government throughout Scotland. For example, we are looking at standardising the banners, which would allow the stamp of a local area to be put on a standard banner promoting the G8 summit. It is important that we send a consistent message from across Scotland. It is also important that we encourage people to get involved in the activities and to explain to their local communities how they can take advantage of the many visitors that will be here and that we allow those visitors to go to different parts of Scotland to explain their perspectives on life, particularly those from some of the developing countries where they face far more challenging situations than our own.

I said earlier that I think that this is a unique opportunity. It is up to us to be imaginative in maximising the benefits. However, it cannot all be down to the Executive. I am quite sure that among the people we invite to the reception at Edinburgh Castle will be a body of enthusiastic people—

unsung heroes—who work away without any recognition, month after month, in the interests of people who are more challenged than ourselves.

We must also say to our democratic colleagues in local government that this is an opportunity for them to engage their local communities in the promotion of their area and to do work to bring to the attention of our citizens the fact that we have an opportunity to make ourselves feel a bit more humble—despite all our difficulties, there are many people in the world who exist in circumstances far worse than our own.

Irene Oldfather: It is a little-known fact that the consular office for Malawi is in Irvine in my constituency in the west of Scotland. I certainly look forward to feeding information about that into the process.

Mr McCabe: Yes, and Dr Livingstone made the mistake of leaving my constituency to visit that country. Of course, he did not know who his MSP was going to be.

The Convener: That was long before you delivered quality representation to the people of Blantyre, Mr McCabe.

As you have probably deduced, international development interests a great number of members. Is the Executive taking the view that the G8 summit offers an opportunity for policy initiatives on international development to be launched or showcased? I appreciate that those issues have come to the top of the Government's list of priorities only recently, but do you have any idea of what form of initiatives the Government might use to pursue the international strategy's contents in relation to development?

Mr McCabe: Conversations on the Prime Minister's African initiative will take place with representatives of some of the third-world countries that are being invited and we have established the £3 million fund that I have mentioned. We see ourselves as having a role in international development, but I would hate for that role to become dictatorial or for us to hand down suggestions to people about how they can improve themselves. We must engage with those who will attend the summit to find out from them how we can best assist. That is extremely important. I would not like to give other nations—particularly African nations—that suffer enormous challenges the impression that we have all the answers. To be blunt, if we had not tried to apply some of our answers in the past, Africa might be in a healthier state today.

The Convener: That is a fair comment.

Is the Executive seizing the opportunity of the UK Government's having extended invitations to countries from the developing world or is it

establishing particular contacts whom it wants to invite in relation to future programmes?

Mr McCabe: We are discussing the situation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The summit is a United Kingdom event, but we are explaining how we want to assist the Prime Minister's African initiative and how that can complement some of the things that we want to do on international development. That is how we are approaching the matter at the moment. I understand that the list of invitees has not yet been finalised. Once the list is better known, we will be able to assess how the kind of engagement that we want fits.

The Convener: Do you have input to that process already through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office?

Mr McCabe: Yes.

The Convener: Will you say a little about the priorities that the Executive is passing on to the UK Government as issues and policy areas on which it wants the UK presidency of the EU to concentrate?

Mr McCabe: The Executive has made known its strong view that, as one of the leading legislative regions in Europe, Scotland wants greater input to the development of European policy and would like legislative regions to have a greater say and be more able to influence the position that member states take. I hope that, during the UK presidency, that will be alluded to more or expanded upon.

The Convener: The First Minister announced in connection with Regleg that the Scottish Executive is to be involved in a pilot project with the European Commission on the involvement of legislative regions in decision-making processes in the EU. Are you in a position to share with the committee any further details on that?

Mr McCabe: That is certainly something that the First Minister has promoted. As you know, we intended to make progress on some of those discussions last week but, unfortunately, Commissioner Wallström was not able to attend.

The First Minister regards the matter as an extremely important part of the future development of the constitutional arrangements and of improving Scotland's standing and the regard that other countries have for our informed position in Europe. We will certainly progress the matter, which is an important part of our European work. I give the committee an assurance that we have no intention of stepping back from the initiative.

Mr Raffan: Those of us who sat through two days of Regleg meetings can perhaps feed back to you on them. One of the most important matters that arose was the need to safeguard and

maximise an enhanced role for the regions in the constitution. I hope that you will pay close attention to that. There is concern about the matter. Regleg was formed in part in reaction to the fact that the Committee of the Regions is a mixture of everything, in which ministers president of Länder sit alongside city mayors. Do you agree that Regleg is potentially an important organisation?

Mr McCabe: I absolutely agree. As I said, as our constitutional arrangements settle down and mature and we are able to focus on the areas to which we attach particular importance, our voice in Regleg will be important. How we make our voice heard will become increasingly important as populations throughout Europe alter their view of what they expect from the European Union. It will be increasingly important to take the initiative in a way that is meaningful for people in Scotland and so increases the relevance of the European Union to people in Scotland.

Mr Raffan: To what extent are ministers and officials working with colleagues in Wales on preparations for the UK presidency of the Council of the European Union?

Mrs Ewing: And colleagues in Northern Ireland.

Mr Raffan: And officials in Northern Ireland, because the Northern Ireland Assembly is not yet reconstituted.

Mr McCabe: That is part of the work that takes place at the joint ministerial committee on Europe, on which the devolved Administrations are represented. The forthcoming UK presidency is on the agenda for meetings of the committee, at which each Administration puts its view. As I said, I made it clear to the Foreign Secretary at our most recent meeting that given that there will be substantial obligations on UK ministers, we will be available to help to take the strain, perhaps by chairing meetings or taking over the running of events, if UK ministers are unable to fulfil their obligations on any occasion.

Mr Raffan: Will you give us an update on the events that will take place in Scotland during the UK presidency? Early in October you kindly sent us a list of such events, seven or eight of which, such as the fresh talent conference, were still to be confirmed. In particular, will you tell us what input the Executive will have into the world youth congress, which will take place at the end of July? Other ministers have mentioned the potential importance of the event.

Mr McCabe: I will be happy to make that information available. I mentioned that 26 events are already planned, but the list is growing. We hope that it will grow substantially, because the more involvement there is in Scotland, the more opportunities there will be to confirm to people our

earnest resolve in relation to the EU and to showcase the country to other member states.

You will expect me to say that the world youth congress is important. All of us who are involved in public life know that it is difficult to engage with young people and that young people are perhaps signing off from the political process. We think that our way of doing things is relevant, but members of the public, in particular young members of the public, do not necessarily agree with us. It is important that young people throughout Europe have a voice and I hope that the fact that the congress is taking place in Scotland will send a signal to young people in Scotland who demonstrate their interest in public life and politics in many other activities. I think that there is evidence of growing interest in attending demonstrations and joining pressure groups, but that interest does not necessarily manifest itself in direct engagement with the political process at the ballot box.

Mr Raffan: What will be the Scottish Executive's input to the congress?

17:15

Mr McCabe: Obviously we will have an input, because the event will take place in Scotland. Representatives from the Scottish Youth Parliament will attend the congress, although I am not sure of the exact mechanism whereby they will link into the event. We will be extremely keen to increase the event's profile in any way that we can. We will consider ways of doing that and we will work when we can with other member states that send delegations to the congress, to ensure that the event is successful.

The Convener: Thank you for your evidence on a number of different topics. You talked about a constructive engagement with the European and External Relations Committee and we look forward to that. We intend to publish our report on our inquiry into the promotion of Scotland worldwide in January. I hope that it will make a constructive contribution to the Executive's priorities in the area.

Mr McCabe: We will do our best to respond to the report as soon as we can.

The Convener: Thank you. There are no further items on the agenda.

Meeting closed at 17:16.

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