

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 29 April 2008

Session 3

£5.00

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2008, Session 3

CONVENER

*Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

*John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

*Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP)

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

*Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP)

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con)

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Mary Craig (Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland)

Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

Allan Gawani (Thyolo Secondary School, Malawi)

Ewan Hunter (The Hunter Foundation)

Daniel Kleinberg (Scottish Government Europe, External Affairs and Culture Directorate)

Sydney Nachuma (Thyolo Secondary School, Malawi)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Dr Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Ian Cox

Lucy Scharbert

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 29 April 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:03*]

Scottish Government's International Framework

The Convener (Malcolm Chisholm): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the ninth meeting this year of the European and External Relations Committee. In particular, I welcome to the public gallery Angela Orthner, President of the Parliament of Upper Austria, and members of that Parliament's European committee. I—and, I am sure, other members—look forward to having discussions with them later on.

We have received apologies from Iain Smith and Alasdair Morgan. However, we welcome to the meeting Keith Brown as Mr Morgan's substitute.

The first item on our very busy agenda is evidence on the Scottish Government's international framework from the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture, Linda Fabiani, who is accompanied by Deborah Smith, head of the Scottish Government's international division, and Daniel Kleinberg, who is from the international strategy and co-ordination branch.

I invite the minister to make a short opening statement.

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to return to the committee to discuss the international framework, which was published last week. I first came to the committee to discuss the external affairs part of my portfolio in October last year, when I set out the flavour of our approach in the then new political landscape.

Today, I will say a few words about how that approach informs the Scottish Government's thinking as set out in the framework. The last time that I spoke to the committee, I stressed the continuity of our approach. The pursuit of trade, tourism and inward investment remains at the heart of what we do. Our reasons for having Scottish affairs offices in North America and China—chasing tourism, trade and inward investment—all, of course, persist. That work entails positioning Scotland as a great place to live, learn, visit, work and remain.

Part of that involves demonstrating the values that Scotland holds, which are:

“Creating the conditions for talented people to live, learn, visit, work and remain in Scotland—so that Scottish population growth matches EU average;

Bringing a sharp economic growth focus to the promotion of Scotland abroad—so that the Scottish GDP growth rate matches the UK's by 2011; and

Managing Scotland's reputation as a distinctive global identity, an independent minded and responsible nation at home and abroad and confident of its place in the world.”

A marked difference from the previous Scottish Executive international strategy is that the framework document does not seek to list all the internationalised work that is going on throughout the Scottish Government. That is deliberate, and it builds on the comments that have been received in evidence sessions in this committee and in discussions that we have had with our partners and stakeholders. Our stakeholders want Government to be strategic and to get involved when there is good reason for it to do so. They do not want Government to be active for its own sake. The work of Government is to provide the conditions for exchange, and nothing that we do should risk hindering our stakeholders as they seek to make the civic, Scottish, United Kingdom, European Union or global partnerships that are the platform for their success.

Generally speaking, we should be ambitious for Scotland but modest about the role of Government in our approach to relations with others. The facts of globalisation demand perspective. Scotland's population is just over one third of 1 per cent of that of China. There are approximately twice as many residents of India in higher education as there are people in Scotland. If there was such a thing as an average country, it would have a population of 34 million and nearly 10 times the land area of Scotland.

Our scope to take part in international affairs is, of course, constrained by the current devolution settlement, but we have offices in Brussels and officials in UK embassies in Beijing and Washington who work solely on Scottish affairs. Alongside them, we have around 80 staff working in offices abroad for Scottish Development International—the arm of the Government that promotes international trade and inward investment. However, there are in total fewer than 100 people who are working professionally for us outside Scotland.

The key message is the need for flexible pragmatism. Our stakeholders look to Government for strategic direction; they want Government to be able to identify key points of leverage and to respond swiftly. The framework is, therefore, focused on aligning the actions and policies of the Scottish Government and other public sector actors to maximise their role in contributing to that performance. The last time that I gave evidence to

the committee, I spoke about the new arrangements in our North America office, an early dividend of which was a focused and efficient Scotland week earlier this month.

Adopting a fleet-footed, agile approach does not mean that we are ceasing to work closely with our existing partners; it means that we have not sought to cement relationships with wide-ranging co-operation agreements. The cross-Government, cross-public sector approach paid dividends with last month's successful visit to China by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning.

One area in which I am particularly interested is culture. I am convinced that the strength of Scotland's contemporary culture is that although it embraces the traditional, it is also modern and vibrant; it is a living tradition that can tell the world in a powerful way that Scotland is a nation that is technologically advanced and innovative. Our culture provides us with the means to surprise and impress; it is a unique and special asset. Through creative Scotland, I am hopeful that we can capitalise more on that asset at home and in our contacts overseas.

An approach that is based on being more responsive requires the Scottish Government to work in an integrated way across the public sector. It also requires us to find new, agile ways of reaching out to civic society more widely to share information.

It is important, of course, that we continue to monitor and track the impacts of our activities. There will, therefore, be action plans on, in the first instance, international development policy, China and European engagement. In those action plans, we will continue to set out our detailed aims and targets for our key policies. Our stakeholders have told us repeatedly, however, that they want us to devote our energy to ensuring that there is a more responsive and cohesive approach, rather than one that focuses on a multiplicity of targets.

In summary, I point to the following parts of our approach as being new: an alignment of our resources around the Government's economic strategy targets; a focus on areas in which Scotland is genuinely excellent; a strategic, targeted and more business-focused and efficient Scotland week; more money for the international development fund; a willingness to challenge the UK line to ensure that Scotland's voice is heard, accompanied by a recognition that we should be proactive in using the UK resources that are at our disposal; and a confidence about focusing on Scotland's reputation as a nation, not a region.

Some of those changes are already under way and apparent—the coverage of the more focused Scotland week is a good start. Others will take a

little longer, as we take the time to work across and beyond Government. I will, of course, happily keep the committee informed of progress.

The Convener: I will start the question-and-answer session by making a comment on the action plan on European engagement. The committee welcomes the Scottish Government's proposals for engagement with the committee, in particular, through identification of the European Union priorities and through subsequent monitoring and evaluation. However, from her appearance before the committee on 11 March, the minister will be aware that the committee has real concerns about our ability to carry out effective scrutiny of the Scottish Government's role throughout the European legislative process. There is a need to develop formal processes that address that issue and we therefore welcome the minister's willingness to meet me and the deputy convener to take those matters forward in the first instance.

I will now move on to questions on the international framework.

In developing the international framework, has the Scottish Government examined strategies that have been produced by comparator countries or, indeed, regions?

Linda Fabiani: Work was carried out on that throughout the previous session as well as during this one. In session 2, the European and External Relations Committee carried out comparative work on the economy and how it is possible to specialise in particular aspects. I will ask Daniel Kleinberg to go into the detail of the work that is being done at official level in that regard. First, however, I will say that Scotland is a very specific nation that has certain great advantages over other nations, and we have to capitalise on those advantages. We have to focus on what makes Scotland special and on what we are excellent at.

Daniel Kleinberg (Scottish Government Europe, External Affairs and Culture Directorate): I back up what the minister says about Scotland's unique position. Recently, I have been talking to the Flemish Government, which is undertaking a review of its external affairs. Its independent academic consultants spoke to us about the approach that we had taken with our framework and in our previous work. The most obvious thing that emerged from that conversation was the specific circumstances that the Flemish Government and the Belgian Government are placed in with regard to the nature of their international work due to their constitutions. The conclusion of that conversation is that there is a great difference between our situation and theirs. Although there are some similarities, such as the importance of trade and inward investment and

the work of Export Vlaanderen, it is difficult to draw direct comparisons.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Before I ask my question, I should declare an interest, as I am the deputy convener of the new cross-party group on China. At our inaugural meeting, I was pleasantly surprised by the number of people who turned up and the various areas of expertise of many of those people.

Minister, could you say something about the Scottish Government's China plan?

10:15

Linda Fabiani: Of course. Our China plan will come under the overarching international framework. I am interested in what you said about there being a good turnout at the inaugural meeting of the cross-party group on China. I suspect that many of the people who turned up at that meeting also informed much of our thinking. People across sectors are doing great work in China.

The China plan is almost complete, but I was keen to ensure that it was informed by the experiences of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop, from her recent visit to China. Those experiences will be reflected in small changes that I am making to the plan. I hope that the plan will be published very soon, and I would be more than happy to discuss it with the cross-party group on China at some point.

Gil Paterson: I am grateful for that.

The Convener: For the sake of completeness, minister, when will the international development plan, which is the other major plan, be published?

Linda Fabiani: I expect it to be published very soon. I am aware that I will discuss it with the committee.

The Convener: So it will be published before you come to the committee in May.

Linda Fabiani: Yes.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am interested in what you said about seeing a distinctive Scotland and reflecting our Scottishness overseas. Have you made up your mind yet about whether you see Scotland as having a specific brand or a number of different brands? Branding is important. During the recent trip to the United States and Canada—we all have our views on whether that trip worked—we seemed to be confused about whether we wanted to promote tartan, for example, or Scotland. What are your thoughts on that?

Linda Fabiani: I will talk about Scotland week first. There was absolutely no confusion in our

minds about what was being promoted during that week. Tartan day stands, of course, because it was set in North America, and we wanted to build on the success of that day with Scotland week. There is no denying the fact that we have great regard for Scotland's wonderful heritage and history and for many of the things that attract tourists to Scotland, but we also wanted to show Scotland as the successful and vibrant modern nation that it is in respect of its culture and its business and educational opportunities. We were not confused at all about what we were doing during Scotland week.

On branding, we are aware from what different sectors have told us that sometimes we must be specific in niche marketing. For example, VisitScotland may take an approach in China that differs from its approach in Canada. That said, it is crucial that there is an overarching team Scotland approach, certainly across all the publicly funded bodies, that we all talk to one another, that we are all aware of the strategic objectives, and that everything that we do feeds into those objectives. If such an approach is taken, Scotland can be strongly branded, and it will be a place that people will recognise and will want to come to for the reasons with which we try to attract them.

Ted Brocklebank: The confusion may have been more among our American and Canadian cousins, who saw tartan as a strong brand. The Scottish Register of Tartans Bill has been introduced in the Parliament. At one level, we seem to value tartan, but when we were on the other side of the Atlantic this year, the Government seemed to be pulling back a little from promoting it.

Linda Fabiani: That is interesting. I met representatives of Scottish heritage groups in the United States and Canada, and I do not deny that some people expressed concerns. I think that this is the 10th year in which there has been a tartan day. The previous Administration built a tartan week around the day in the past couple of years—the tradition has therefore not existed for decades. In the engagement with the people whom I spent time with, it was recognised that, despite some negative publicity—wherever that came from—it was not the Government's intent to pull back from promoting tartan.

I like to think that we made relationships and that people recognised that we are moving Scotland forward, with tartan as an inherent part of Scotland's heritage. I hope that the dialogue will be kept up. I have no doubt at all that, for next year's Scotland week in North America, we will have built up a relationship with people that will allow us to advance both causes properly.

Ted Brocklebank: Can you announce the results of the recent visit to the United States and

Canada yet? Will you publish a document that details those results?

Linda Fabiani: The First Minister made a statement on the visit. I could reiterate all the things that he said about the good media coverage, in print and broadcasting. An evaluation is going on and the final costs are being brought together. At present, it looks as though the cost will be about half of the amount that the previous Administration spent on tartan week, as it was called, in 2007. I believe that, with that hugely focused approach, we got much better value for half the money.

Ted Brocklebank: Will we have a tangible evaluation in due course?

Linda Fabiani: Yes. I give a commitment to send the evaluation to the committee for its interest, when we have finished it.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): Page 14 of the "Action Plan on European Engagement" states:

"Scottish Ministers will seek to attend Council meetings".

That is all part of the Government's approach to standing up for Scotland. The minister will be aware that, since the Government took office, more than 60 European council meetings have been held, covering a wide range of policy issues, including education, enterprise, fisheries and agriculture. How many of those 60 meetings have ministers attended?

Linda Fabiani: I will not pretend that I can give the exact figure off the top of my head. However, I can say that we wish to take our place at council meetings. Because we are a minority Government, that can be difficult when council meetings are held on days when ministers have to be in the Scottish Parliament to vote as part of our parliamentary group. That can cause problems. Generally, we have good reactions from ministers at Westminster to our attendance at council meetings. For example, Richard Lochhead worked closely with the fisheries minister at Westminster during the recent main round of talks. Some of the suggestions that our cabinet secretary made were taken on board. We achieved a fairly good result for Scotland through direct input into council meetings. The Lord Advocate has attended a few councils, as has the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. If you wish to have the figures and the justification for ministers' attendance, I can let you have that—I am sure that Daniel Kleinberg, Deborah Smith and their colleagues have them.

One interesting issue that I have raised with my counterpart in Westminster is that of the differing reactions of ministers there as to whether it is acceptable in their eyes for our ministers to attend council meetings. We need a much more standard

procedure at Westminster than has been apparent so far.

Irene Oldfather: A theme that runs through the action plan is that of ensuring that Scotland's voice is heard and influences the United Kingdom agenda on various policy matters. That is not really about attending meetings; it is about ensuring that there is influence over the policy agenda. I accept that the minister may not be able to give us the figures off the top of her head, but it would be helpful if she could provide the committee with an indication of how many council meetings ministers have attended.

Linda Fabiani: Attendance at council meetings is not the only way in which we make progress on Scotland's agenda. There is constant dialogue between ministers in Edinburgh and London on issues that relate to our priorities, of which the committee is aware.

Irene Oldfather: I understand that. I asked about the council meetings because attending them is mentioned as an objective on page 14 of the action plan.

In the action plan, you say that you want to improve how the joint ministerial committee on Europe runs. We have talked in the past about how the European and External Relations Committee could be involved in that agenda and how we might know what points you think are important enough to be raised at the JMCE. I do not think that the committee knows how often or when the JMCE meets. May we have a list of the dates of meetings? Are you willing to come to this committee before and after JMCE meetings, so that we can open up the black box, if you like, and there can be parliamentary scrutiny?

Linda Fabiani: If Westminster gave us enough notice of meetings and took account of parliamentary work in Scotland I could let you have dates, but such information is not forthcoming. I wrote to David Miliband just before the most recent JMCE meeting—I received an answer at the meeting—to express discontent about the lack of organisation of JMCE meetings and to suggest that meetings be much more tailored to the devolved Administrations' activities. The Northern Ireland Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government also expressed discontent.

Arrangements chop and change by the day. Just yesterday I received notice that the date of the June meeting has been unilaterally changed, probably for the fourth or fifth time. Much work needs to be done in that regard. The Foreign Secretary assured me in writing that he takes on board my criticisms and suggestions, so I hope that we will at least be able to let the committee know the dates of future meetings. I assure you that the problem is not at our end.

Minutes of JMCE meetings are confidential. We have won the right—I think for the first time—to put items on the agenda, as opposed to having to speak about matters under “any other business”. That is an advance. I think that a concordat between the Scottish Government and Westminster, which was set up many years ago, governs the terms of meetings and deals with confidentiality.

Irene Oldfather: You have indicated that you want to be open with the committee. How can there be parliamentary scrutiny in relation to the JMCE and other matters? In the action plan you talk about wanting to improve the transposition process and engage early with the European Commission. The committee has often indicated to you that it wants to be involved in parliamentary scrutiny of such activity. How do you intend to inform the committee about what the Government is doing, so that we can decide which issues to take up and what action to take to hold the Government to account?

Linda Fabiani: The action plan and the Government’s priorities are set out in detail, so the committee can hold me to account in that regard. I have said that I will meet the convener and the deputy convener to discuss the issues—I presume that that is an initiative of the committee so that we can see how we can deal with the stuff that you talked about. I am happy to have the meeting and the committee can then discuss a way forward.

The JMCE is a Government-to-Government organisation, the purpose of which is to achieve objectives. You must take on board that how such bodies operate is governed by concordats that were set up not by me but by the previous Administration.

Gil Paterson: This line of questioning is important, because when we took evidence I was struck by the number of organisations and institutions in Scotland that have great difficulty engaging in Europe. There is frustration that there is no protocol between the Scottish Government and the UK Government and that Scotland has no right of access on the issues. As you highlighted, whether and how engagement happens almost depends on who is in charge of the relevant portfolio in Westminster.

The Scottish Government must take that matter seriously and find a mechanism to deal with it. Scotland is the only devolved country in Europe with separate laws; other devolved areas in Europe lie within the confines of their nation states, although rights and responsibilities are devolved. We have distinct laws, but I do not think that anyone pays attention to that. The questions that were raised should be addressed, and some beef should be put into that. Can you respond to that?

10:30

Linda Fabiani: There is a frustration, which is why this Government has been more open, transparent and consultative on our European action plan than has ever happened before. We give the committee far more detail than was given before. There is much more flexibility, for example, in relation to people suggesting matters that they think should be our priorities. Rather than write to the committee after the meeting, I take this opportunity to let the committee know that I have just agreed that a further priority on our Government’s EU list should be the state-aid support investigation into Scottish ferry services, which the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change requested.

We are engaging much more and are much more open. I hope that our series of stakeholder events throughout the summer will reflect some of that; we will take on board what we are told. I have been in office for less than a year, but I am giving evidence to the committee for the fifth time. I have given out much more information than has ever been given out before and there has been much more engagement. In addition, I am bound by rules that were set by a previous Administration and, for eight years, many people did not bother kicking against them.

Given all that, I must say that I find certain comments strange. I assure the committee that it is our priority to give it as much information as possible about our European engagement. I will continue to do that in the way that I have been doing it.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I want to ask mainly about Scottish Development International, but I have two points to make about where I disagree with Irene Oldfather. First, we have loads of information to use in deciding where we want to focus our scrutiny of the Government with regard to the European and external affairs portfolio; in fact, if anything, there is potential overload. As I have said before, we wasted six months on the transposition inquiry. Looking back, I would not have made that a top priority.

Secondly, a clear distinction must be made between our role in scrutinising the Government, which is entirely legitimate and to which all members of the committee are obviously committed, and our role with regard to Government-to-Government relationships. I would not expect a minister of any political colour to come to the committee to tell us their negotiating position prior to a joint ministerial committee meeting with the UK Government or, indeed, with any other Government. However, after such meetings have taken place, the minister should come back to Parliament, as the minister has already done, and report on any substantive

issues that the committee and Parliament need to be informed about. I certainly do not share Irene Oldfather's view that the minister should come to us and discuss the agenda for the joint ministerial committee before its meeting takes place. At the end of the day, much of what happens in the JMC is negotiation, and the last thing I want anyone in the Scottish Government to do is disclose their hand publicly before dealing with people at Westminster.

I want to ask the minister about Scottish Development International. As you will know, SDI has an impressive track record in many respects. Obviously, there has been public comment, particularly in *The Scotsman*, that a successor director to Martin Togneri has not been appointed, although he has been away for a fair time now. There are rumours, which appear mainly in *The Scotsman*, about the future of SDI and about its getting a wider role and so on. Can you clarify the current position, please?

Linda Fabiani: The recruitment process continues. The position of director has a high profile and the successful candidate will play a huge part in promoting Scotland overseas and supporting the internationalisation of Scottish companies, so having absolutely the right candidate for the job is in everyone's interests. Lena Wilson, who is Scottish Enterprise's chief operating officer, is SDI's acting chief executive.

Alex Neil: Will SDI's role be widened? One newspaper suggested last week that SDI's role and remit were being reviewed.

Linda Fabiani: As with public bodies in general, we are looking for better co-ordination and alignment of SDI's activities with our international framework, so that we work together to achieve more of the team Scotland approach that I mentioned. If you have detailed questions about Scottish Enterprise or SDI, I can relay them to the appropriate cabinet secretary.

Alex Neil: I just wanted to clarify the position, because speculation has appeared in the newspapers, but what you have said is what the Government has put in the public domain already.

Linda Fabiani: We work across portfolios on all such issues—for example, I met Lena Wilson and some of her colleagues the other day to discuss how we are doing with the much closer alignment under the international framework. The committee knows how, in North America, Robin Naysmith has pulled together the activities of VisitScotland and SDI in Scotland's office in Washington.

The Convener: You mentioned co-operation agreements with regions in Europe. What is the agreements' status? I think Scotland also has a co-operation agreement with Victoria in Australia. What is the future for that agreement?

Linda Fabiani: From the start, we have made it clear that we do not necessarily believe that that co-operation model offers the best way to work with our partners, but that does not mean that we do not have on-going activities with some of those partners. I presume that the previous Administration made co-operation agreements because some work was worth progressing together. For example, the Victoria state agreement covers discussion—which continues—to learn from Victoria's experience of the Commonwealth games. We also have continuing dialogue with Catalonia on various issues. At a Bavarian event last summer, we had quite a big part to play, because of the agreement between us.

We do not, however, want to tie ourselves down to working only with some countries or regions. We want the pragmatism to which I referred, which will allow us to take the best advantage for Scotland wherever we may find it. Work continues under the agreement with Shandong, for example, but that should not stop us dealing with other parts of China, perhaps on a thematic basis, when to do so would be worth our while.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I apologise for arriving late, which has meant that I missed the minister's introduction.

You talked about Scottish ministers taking the lead and representing the UK at Council negotiations, perhaps on fisheries. In looking ahead to the Scottish Government's EU priorities in the coming months, do you see other subjects on which the Scottish Government could take the lead? If so, have you discussed with other parties in Parliament issues in respect of releasing ministers? You highlighted problems that that might pose, given that you have a minority Government.

Linda Fabiani: I make it clear that Richard Lochhead did not take the lead in the negotiations, but he was there with the UK minister and was able to inform the UK's position fairly successfully.

Gil Paterson pointed out that this country has a distinct justice system, so it is always important to have engagement on justice issues.

As I have said, we have constant dialogue with our ministerial counterparts in Westminster, which is generally good. Most of the time, there is co-operation, which people do not hear about, but there is a stumbling block every so often, which—of course—everyone talks about. That will continue.

It is not for me to discuss some kind of pairing arrangement with other parties. I presume that that is what John Park is talking about. That would be for the Minister for Parliamentary Business to discuss with his business manager counterparts.

John Park: I presume that you have fed that idea into your own structures.

Linda Fabiani: We always work closely together. Everything that we do as a Government crosses the borders. For example, all the cabinet secretaries had an input on the European action plan, as did the Minister for Parliamentary Business, who needs to know about it because he deals with the Committee of the Regions. There is great awareness of the matter.

John Park: Is there no specific issue on the horizon on which you envisage a Scottish minister taking the lead on EU priorities?

Linda Fabiani: We think that we should always take the lead on fisheries. Because of Scotland's agricultural base in proportion to the rest of the UK, agriculture is another issue that it would be important to lead on. Every so often, things come up. Justice is a crucial issue as well.

The Convener: When we had our round-table discussion on the international strategy, the importance of foreign language teaching emerged as a strong theme. The framework does not address that directly, but does the Government have a view on whether more foreign language teaching in Scotland would help Scots to operate more effectively on the international stage? If so, does it have any action in mind to deal with that?

Linda Fabiani: That issue has been current for a long time. I am surprised that you raised it, convener, rather than Irene Oldfather, who has had a huge interest in the matter over the years.

The curriculum for excellence, which is part of Maureen Watt's schools portfolio, addresses foreign language teaching. Great cross-party interest in language teaching was shown in last week's debate on international education. Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, has talked about a Scottish baccalaureate for science and language. It is recognised that language teaching has to be developed. Part of the China plan that I can talk about—because it is a carry-over from the previous Administration—is the wish to have many more children in Scotland learning Mandarin to enable us to tap into the huge Chinese market. Language teaching is an issue of which we are aware. Of course, under our education system, it is up to local authorities to consider what is best for their areas through the curriculum for excellence, but language learning is encouraged, as it has been for some time.

Ted Brocklebank: The new Migration Advisory Committee has been set up and will have responsibility for compiling shortage occupation lists that might reflect Scotland's distinct demographic needs. Can you give us any more details of how the Scottish shortage occupation list

will work, and can you also update us on how talks with the MAC have progressed?

Linda Fabiani: I am sorry, but I am not able to give you the level of update that I think you want. I am more than happy to update you further from the letter on the fresh talent initiative that I sent to the committee in, I think, March. For a long time, there has been discussion about the difference that the UK is implementing in its points system. We were also worried that the unique advantage that the fresh talent initiative gave Scotland would be eroded, and there was lots of dialogue about that. We have lost the special year advantage, but we were glad that, after our representations, the concession was made that those graduating with higher national diplomas would be considered for the initiative and that a two-year period has been maintained—for all that it applies all over the UK—as opposed to the suggested one year.

I did not expect that the occupation list would be raised at the committee. As I said in Parliament recently, we can always rely on Ted Brocklebank to ask something that no one expected.

Ted Brocklebank: Will you be able to come back to us on the matter?

Linda Fabiani: Yes, I certainly will.

10:45

Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP): I must be as eccentric as Ted Brocklebank, given that my question is similar to his—

Linda Fabiani: Oh, no.

Keith Brown: You said that you cannot say too much on the matter at the moment, minister, but my question is on the Government's general approach to the Scottish shortage occupation list. Will the Government try to influence things so that Scotland has a longer list? I am thinking of the enrichment that inward migration has brought to Scotland and our need for further inward migration in key areas. Is the Government trying to influence things in that way or do you not know enough about the UK Government list to say anything on the subject at present?

Linda Fabiani: I am not willing to talk about the matter in great detail as yet, largely because I have not yet pulled together the views of my Cabinet colleagues, including on the effects on their portfolios. When the information is brought together—I refer specifically to John Swinney's portfolio—I will be able to report to the committee.

The Convener: I should have asked this question at the outset, as it is on the development of the strategy. What level of consultation was held on the strategy? For example, did the Government set up a steering group or was the consultation done internally?

Linda Fabiani: This committee held an interesting stakeholder event, the evidence from which we took on board. We also held a fairly high-level event in March with people from right across the sectors. I attended part of the event. I hold on-going discussions with various sectors of society, as do my colleagues, including the cabinet secretaries. All those daily or weekly discussions were fed into the development of the strategy. That is how we formulated the overarching framework.

Of course, as members of the committee know, underneath that strategic level, the draft European action plan is published and further consultation will be undertaken. On the China plan, an event was held with people who have worked in China for many years so that we could take advantage of their knowledge. There is also consultation of non-governmental organisations and the other representative groups in international development.

The Convener: How will the Government judge the success of the framework? You were critical of the previous target-based approach.

Linda Fabiani: Again, everything that we do is driven by the economic strategy. It sets the headline targets against which our success will be measured. On the first page of the international framework document, we highlight three ways in which we will do that: by ensuring that

“Scottish population growth matches EU average”;

that

“the Scottish GDP growth rate matches the UK’s by 2011”;

and by managing

“Scotland’s reputation as a distinctive global identity, an independent minded and responsible nation at home”

taking

“its place in the world.”

Everything we do feeds into the economic strategy. Obviously, lower-level targets lie beneath that, each of which is monitored. However, today we are looking at the bigger picture. The international framework fits into the Government’s economic strategy and everything goes towards achieving the targets that have been set under its headline indicators.

Irene Oldfather: I have a couple of points, the first of which relates to EU budgets and co-operation agreements. In the papers, I find no mention of partnerships between schools in Scotland and those in, for example, Catalonia and Tuscany. Such education partnerships are a good way for people to understand the benefits of Europe. For example, a secondary school in my constituency twinned with an art college in Pisa. Young people from a very deprived area went to

Pisa to learn art, language and so on. I am a little bit disappointed that the minister made no mention of that.

The minister gave the committee an update on co-operation agreements in the letter, but I am not clear where the Government is going with them. It is important that we do not lose some of the good initiatives under those bilateral agreements. Will you say something about that, minister? I will put my second point, but I will first let the minister answer that one.

Linda Fabiani: As I said in my introductory comments, one of the differences in the framework is that we are not mapping everything that the Government does internationally. The framework is to be used as a strategic document so that other work can feed into it. For example, school engagements are going on in Fiona Hyslop’s department and will be monitored and mapped there. There is also Maureen Watt’s internet national education strategy. Those are important developments.

On co-operation agreements, there is no intention to throw the baby out with the bath water. As I said, we have engaged with Catalonia and Bavaria. We have also had regular contact with the German consul general in respect of North Rhine-Westphalia. Such contacts are on-going. I cannot remember off the top of my head, but I think that one of the agreements comes up for renewal in 2009. We will not cut people off; we will work with our partners under co-operation agreements to establish where both sides can get maximum advantage. For example, in the agreement with the state of Victoria, we recognised that we can get mutual benefit in respect of sport and culture. We will keep those relationships up, but we do not necessarily believe that it would be right for either partner—it is done in co-operation—to again sign up to a formal agreement.

Irene Oldfather: Does not the minister envisage something such as that being included within political priorities and objectives? You mentioned that work is on-going in the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning’s department, but obviously the political objectives cover a broad range of policy areas.

Linda Fabiani: The matter is important in the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning’s portfolio, and that is where it will be mapped. My international framework overarches the work of Government so that others can feed into it; it is a headline approach.

Irene Oldfather: I have another question about the Scottish Government’s long-term EU political objectives, and I would like a yes or no answer. I am a little confused by the statements on pages 6

and 7 of the action plan on European engagement. Page 6 refers to withdrawal from the common fisheries policy. Is it the Government's policy to withdraw from the common fisheries policy? I am sure that Ted Brocklebank wants to know the answer to that question as much as I do.

Alex Neil: He has been consistent throughout.

Ted Brocklebank: I know what I want.

Linda Fabiani: We believe that the CFP works against the interests of Scottish fishermen. We have always been up front about that.

Irene Oldfather: So the policy is to withdraw from the CFP rather than to reform it.

Linda Fabiani: We will, of course, push for reform. We have said previously that the CFP does not act in the interests of Scotland and others believe the same. We have always said that we think that the CFP should not be there, but we will work for reforms within the system to the benefit of Scotland. We will do what is best for Scotland by taking a pragmatic approach and asking, "What can we do to make the CFP better for Scotland?"

The action plan on European engagement is a draft to inform the consultation process. I hope that we will get lots of ideas and views from people, but we believe that the CFP should be radically reformed. We have never said otherwise.

Irene Oldfather: Should the CFP be reformed or should Scotland withdraw from it?

Linda Fabiani: Irene Oldfather would be the first to point out that Scotland cannot withdraw from the CFP because it is part of the UK and so is not a member state. Such a discussion would be pointless.

Irene Oldfather: What is the minister's policy position? Should Scotland, in the Scottish Government's view, withdraw from the CFP?

Linda Fabiani: Scotland cannot withdraw from the CFP. When Scotland is an independent nation in Europe, the decision will be taken according to what is best for Scotland. What else can I say?

The Convener: That is a good point on which to end.

Linda Fabiani: I thought so.

The Convener: I thank the minister and her officials for coming to answer our questions. I suspend the meeting for five minutes to allow for a change of witnesses.

10:54

Meeting suspended.

10:58

On resuming—

International Development Inquiry

The Convener: Item 2 is the fifth evidence session in our inquiry into international development. The first panel of witnesses represent the philanthropic foundations that engage in development work. I welcome Ewan Hunter, from the Hunter Foundation, and Mary Craig, the chief executive of the Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland. Each of them will make a short opening statement.

Ewan Hunter (The Hunter Foundation): Thank you for inviting us here. By way of clarification, I should say that I am not related to Tom Hunter. He is the one with no hair and lots of money; I am the one with the hair—just in case there is any confusion.

Alex Neil: And you have no money.

Ewan Hunter: I have a little bit, but not much compared to him.

Gil Paterson: I just lost a bet.

Ewan Hunter: Did you? Send the money to Malawi.

I am not quite sure what you want by way of a statement. Our introduction to international development in Africa came in 2005, when we had the most expensive lunch that I have ever attended with Richard Curtis, the screenwriter. He convinced us that, given that 30,000 children were dying daily of preventable diseases, we should pony up £1 million to fund the make poverty history campaign, which we duly did. We took an active role in that. Then Bob Geldof phoned us and asked whether we would mind underwriting Live 8, which we duly did. Thankfully, the sponsors arrived so we did not pay a penny for that.

11:00

Tom Hunter and I then took a view on how to develop our international investments. For us, the keys were sustainability, scalability and partnership. We analysed which countries we would work in. We wanted to work in particularly tough circumstances, in an effort to prove that a holistic model of development could and should be deliverable. As a consequence, we teamed up with former President Clinton and formed the Clinton Hunter development initiative, which will invest \$100 million in development over 10 years. We signed a partnership agreement with the Governments of Rwanda and Malawi to assess how their vision of what they wanted for their countries could be delivered. Our belief is that it is

not for us but for African countries themselves to decide what they need. Our role is to help them to fulfil that vision.

As well as working in both those countries, we are helping 250,000 people in northern Uganda who have been catastrophically impacted by the actions of the Lord's Resistance Army. In northern Mozambique, we are funding about 350 health clinics.

Our philosophy is about how we develop a sustainable impact through investment in health, education and economic development. We think that investment in all three of those areas is necessary if we are to deliver sustainable economic empowerment in Africa. We have engaged experts in each of those fields to advise us and to help us to deliver on behalf of the Governments of both countries. Nobel peace prize winner Mohammad Yunus advises us on economic development, as does former President Clinton, among others. The Harvard professors Jim Kim and Paul Farmer of Partners in Health advise us on health. On education, we are helped by former First Minister Jack McConnell and Vartan Gregorian, who is the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

We believe that it is possible to deliver sustainable investment in health and education, and we are on the cusp of delivering sustainable investment in economic development. This week, we will sign a deal to build a food oil plant in Rwanda, which will engage 25,000 rural farmers to grow for it.

As regards advice on the Government's investment in international affairs, our view is that it should, as Carnegie said, put all its eggs in one basket and watch the basket. The money should be invested heavily in one country and there should be a focus on one or two issues. The scale of the budget is such that if it were spread across a range of territories, it would have only a very light impact. Fundamentally, that is our view. I will shut up now.

Mary Craig (Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland): Thank you for the invitation to attend.

Many United Kingdom foundations have been in a bit of dilemma about whether to fund work in developing countries. On the one hand, the potential benefits and the needs are unquestionably great and modest grants can have a major impact. On the other hand, funding internationally can involve moving into unfamiliar territory, which can require the development of new infrastructures. Larger foundations that spend a large proportion of their money overseas can justify the necessary investment in that, but it is not usually an option for foundations such as mine, which fund on a much smaller scale.

As the committee probably knows, relatively few foundations have programmes for international development. The number of foundations in Scotland that have such programmes is extremely small.

Grant seekers recognise the advantages that funding from foundations brings. Foundations are considered to be flexible and able to respond quickly to changing needs; they will often fund unpopular issues; and they are amenable to trying out new ideas and new projects. In addition, non-governmental organisations regard the independence of foundations as being helpful.

Foundations contribute internationally for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is about the founder's desires. All foundations are conscious that their money goes a lot further. In other words, small amounts of money have the potential to make a difference to people's lives.

In 2001, the Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland decided to pilot an overseas programme. We did so with the aid of the Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland, which itself was only newly established. The pilot involved the members of NIDOS. There were 19 members at the time, and 13 were funded. We had a budget of £400,000. Our reason for getting involved was our desire to do something and to respond to need. We felt that we had the ability to make a difference.

Choosing what to fund in the large and complex international arena was an issue but, with advice from NIDOS, we concentrated our support on capacity building. We decided to route our support through Scottish charities that were working in partnership with NGOs overseas, so that the charities had some kind of hand in the work and were not simply raising money to send overseas.

We questioned our ability to make a difference and we questioned whether our budget could be better spent here in Scotland. However, after we interviewed the majority of the organisations that we funded in the pilot, we realised how important our contribution was. We recommended £1.2 million over three years to our trustees. They agreed it and have since renewed a second three-year programme. We are in the final year of that second programme now.

Since 2001, we have made 123 awards. Of those, 38 per cent have been multiyear awards—that is, they have been for more than one year. We have spent and committed £2.6 million or thereabouts. In the main, our applicants are small to medium-sized organisations—Scottish charities that are working to improve people's lives in terms of education and health. We fund some volunteering, and capacity building is, of course, the overall theme of the programme. Funding has

been given in support of organisations in Africa, India, Bangladesh, eastern Europe and South America. We are currently reviewing our programme and will make recommendations to our trustees in June as to what we do with the programme next.

The Convener: In evidence to the committee, Jack McConnell said:

"I know that some reservations have been expressed about the range of education, health, economic development and governance issues that are covered in the co-operation agreement. However, I think that it would be hard to exclude any of those four areas."—[*Official Report, European and External Relations Committee*, 15 April 2008; c 569.]

Should the Scottish Government's international development policy have a specific thematic priority, or should it cover all of the four areas or more?

Ewan Hunter: If we were talking about Scotland and not Malawi, and if we had a budget of £4 million to cover all the issues, would we spread our work across the whole of Scotland? I do not think that we would. I think that we would say, "Let's focus on one area and prove that we can make this work." After building a sustainable model, we could then spread the work across the whole country.

In the grand scheme of things, we have a modest budget. The Governments of Rwanda and Malawi asked us to work in one particular district to see whether we could build a model that was scalable against their health and education budgets, although not in economic development terms. So we said, "Right, we will try to build a health system and an education system that—forgetting the millennium development goals—you can afford on your current budgets." We took on the challenge and we think that we are close to delivering an answer. If they had said to us, "Go and do whatever you want in Rwanda and Malawi," where would the focus have been? What would we have delivered and how? How would we have measured that? Our view has been that it is better to focus on one district of a country and to apply the budget against the four themes, trying to deliver something in partnership with the Government. All that we do is to build the Government's infrastructure in both countries—we are not building our own health clinics, hospitals or schools. Our view is that you need a focus.

Mary Craig: Ewan Hunter talked about a strategic approach, which is necessary, but we approach the matter from a different perspective—from the grass roots. Both approaches can be effective. We tend to respond to what the sector comes and asks us for. The millennium development goals cover the spectrum of issues that you mentioned.

Ted Brocklebank: As you know, we have been taking evidence from a range of stakeholders for some weeks. One would need the wisdom of Solomon to decide how best to spend the relatively small sum of money that Scotland has to invest.

At the weekend, I read the rich list in *The Sunday Times*—I was hoping that I could pick up some tips—

Alex Neil: You were on it, Ted.

Ted Brocklebank: I was not on it. I keep looking to see whether I am.

I was interested to note that Nicky Oppenheimer of the De Beers diamond firm was quoted as saying that the problem with Africa is that it is suffering from "donation fatigue". That is a fairly critical statement. I think that the point that he was trying to make—obviously, his business is in Africa—is that so many people are trying to work out so many different ways of putting funding into Africa that we are missing the targets and not spending the money as effectively and efficiently as we should be. Given that the sum of money that we have available is very small, will you comment on that view?

Ewan Hunter: I have an example of aid that is badly done. We did an analysis of a Government agency—I will not say which, but it is not a UK one. The agency said that it was putting in \$100 million to tackle HIV/AIDS in a particular country, but instead of being spent on treatment, some \$70 million of that money stayed in the country of origin and paid for NGOs, charities and headquarters infrastructure. The net result was that only a third of the aid was spent on treating those with HIV/AIDS. That is ridiculous and appalling.

Oppenheimer's view is interesting. One of the issues that we have with the myriad of charities that try to do such work—it is great work; we are not going to criticise it—is that they create a drain on Governments. The Malawian Government is resource poor, but it has to fend off all the charities that knock on its door day in, day out, saying that they are going to do this and that. That is not constructive.

One thing that the Scottish Government and the Parliament could do is to provide a funnel that focuses Scottish effort from the charitable sector and other sectors in a way that maximises the impact of the effort and minimises the impact on the Malawian Government, which is struggling with the burden of people who want to help. That is a great burden to have, but it debilitates the country's ability to get on with its business.

Ted Brocklebank: There are two sides to the argument. One approach is that we should bundle

up the money, hand it over and leave it to the people in developing countries to decide how to spend it. They will know best how to spend it. We have also heard a lot of evidence about the other approach, which is that our work with Malawi is a partnership or a twinning between Scotland and that country and we are involved in the nuts and bolts of what happens to our aid. Will you comment on those two approaches?

Ewan Hunter: If you ask President Mutharika or indeed President Kagame of Rwanda what they want, it will be clear that they do not want handouts. They want to deliver on their vision of what their country needs. We have a partnership with both Governments and we meet them occasionally, but they set the framework under which they would like us to work. That is helpful because we know what they want us to do.

I have seen at first hand the sort of partnership that the Scottish Government has. A myriad of Government officials pop out to Malawi regularly, which drains the Malawian Government's resources. The Malawian people are probably the nicest people in the world—along with the Rwandans, just in case President Kagame is listening—and it is difficult for them to say no. We have too many people bouncing in and out of Malawi. Every single penny of our funding stays in Malawi; not one penny is spent in Scotland. I do not want to preach, but there is a lesson in that. The money that we are putting into Malawi should stay there and should not be funding people here. If you want to help to build and sustain Malawi, the money should stay there.

11:15

Alex Neil: There are three strategic issues, two of which you have talked about. One is about the focus on two countries—and certain districts within those countries. The second is about the focus on health, education and economic development. The third issue, which is perhaps more an issue for Government than for private sector organisations, is how to strike a balance between development and relief. I am referring both to what you do and to what you think that we should do. Although we think that the budget from the Scottish Government is small, it is not insignificant for Malawi, whose GDP is less than the current budget of Scottish Enterprise. If we rolled up the Scottish Government budget over 10 years, it would be roughly double that of the Clinton Hunter development initiative. In that context, it is a significant amount of money, although it is perhaps not so significant in comparison with the UK or US contribution. What do your two organisations do in relation to development and relief? What do you think that the Scottish Government should do to strike the right balance between the two?

Ewan Hunter: I will give you an example that best demonstrates our view on the balance between relief and development. The other key to our investment in both countries is partnership with the Department for International Development. We speak to DFID about what it is investing in and how we could work in partnership with it. We have partnership agreements with DFID, whose model we follow to a degree.

Last year, we planted 5 million cassava cuttings in order to provide a stable food supply for the district in Rwanda in which we are working. Had that cassava not grown, we would have gone back in with humanitarian aid. We are not going to start helping people to help themselves but leave them to it when the crop fails because of bad weather. You need to adopt a tactical strategy. President Mutharika put it really well. Tom Hunter said to him, "Let's give the man a fishing rod and teach him how to fish and he will be on the road to sustainability." Mutharika added that we must also feed the man while he is learning to fish, which is a good point. We need to take a tactical approach to getting people on the road to sustainability. If the weather fails—sometimes in Africa it simply does not rain—we plough in with humanitarian aid.

Mary Craig: If your budget is small, ours is minuscule. However, we still think that it makes a difference. On the focus of funding in Malawi, it has come to our notice that organisations that would normally have worked in other places in the world are finding things to do in Malawi, because there is money there. That is skewing the picture slightly.

Alex Neil: One of the points that you both made, which Jack McConnell also made, was about trying to relieve the pressure on the Government of Malawi, which is not well resourced—no doubt that applies to Rwanda, too—and doing our bit by trying to better co-ordinate the work that everybody from Scotland, or representing Scotland, is doing. Jack McConnell rightly suggested starting with a database of everybody who is involved. How would that best be done? Would it be done through the embassy in Lilongwe? I would not have thought that it would require a huge resource; there could be just one person in Lilongwe acting as a contact point for everybody from Scotland, no matter what sector they were in.

Ewan Hunter: I guess that the future high commissioner might have a better answer to that question. What you suggest would be a straightforward co-ordination role, which would be a simple task that would require only one person. It is a question of how you maximise the bang for your buck in all the different things that are going on. We have to consider whether there is a better way to focus that effort to make more impact. You

made the point about your budget being small. Our budget is tiny in the grand scheme of things. The question, then, is how we corral all the willing participants into a more effective support model for Malawi. The fact is that Scotland has the opportunity to lead the world in finding far more efficient ways of delivering charitable support to a particular country.

Mary Craig: I am not sure that I can add very much to that, because we do not work at that sort of strategic level. As I said, the foundation's ethos is very much about working at grass-roots level in Scotland. Our reports and reviews of the various Scottish organisations that work overseas highlight very good examples of how the very small amount of money that we provide has been used to help people. In fact, last week, we took some soundings from Scottish organisations that work overseas and from NIDOS about whether we should still be involved in this activity and, indeed, whether our involvement actually makes a difference. The overwhelming response was that, although we provide only £400,000, that money still makes a difference.

John Park: In this inquiry, we have heard a lot about the importance of international development education. Indeed, Ewan Hunter mentioned underwriting events as part of the make poverty history campaign. What are you doing to develop international development education in the UK?

Mary Craig: We usually provide support to some Scottish organisations in raising awareness in schools or to organisations that send volunteers overseas. Of course, the benefits of such support might be felt not necessarily by the organisation itself but by those who go overseas. Those people come back changed. Indeed, last year, I was fortunate enough to have an overseas visit, and I know the difference that it made to me.

Ewan Hunter: We invest all our money directly in the country, so we do not really support anything over here. During the make poverty history campaign, we raised some money to build schools in the Dedza district, and we are now rolling that school building programme over into the Neno district.

Gil Paterson: The evidence that we have received suggests that, with a very small amount of money, the previous Executive was still able to reach out to the Scottish public on these matters. Have you had the same effect? Have people been rallying to the flag, offering financial or other assistance or promoting various schemes?

Mary Craig: The foundation does not tend to take money from the public, although in 2005 the Executive put £1 million into our pot for distribution. However, the number of organisations seeking funding from us is growing year on year.

Raising awareness has sparked people's interest in coming to us for support.

Ewan Hunter: As I said, we have raised some money for education. We also partnered STV in its appeal for money to build the new Ethel Mutharika maternity hospital in Lilongwe. I have to say that the current situation is abhorrent; there are only two doctors to deal with 12,000 births. As part of the appeal, we matched every pound that the public gave, and one or two other people have co-invested with us to ensure that, right now, the new hospital is being built in Lilongwe.

The Scottish people are enormously generous, and are even more generous if a specific opportunity presents itself. Like the Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland, we do not take money from external sources. However, we ring fence funding for particular projects. We have been inundated by people wanting to help, both financially and in practical ways.

Gil Paterson: Have such offers come from outwith Scotland?

Ewan Hunter: People south of the border have certainly helped—although I am not sure that that is what you were asking. Sir Peter Burt might not like me saying this but, for example, HBOS is helping a bank in Malawi not by providing it with cash but by giving it advice on its infrastructure and ways of delivering a better, more efficient banking system. Countless other companies are also trying to help. We need to decide how we can corral that help in the most efficient way for Malawi, or any other country, for that matter.

Gil Paterson: Ewan Hunter answered my earlier question, but I do not think that Mary Craig did. One of the questions about the new moneys that the Scottish Government is putting into the pot is whether we should spend it in Malawi or consider reaching out to an adjacent country in the hope of replicating what we have achieved in Malawi. Could our efforts be repeated elsewhere in a way that would give us a big benefit for a small investment?

Mary Craig: Ultimately, it depends on what you want to do. I am sure that you are getting a lot of conflicting evidence and I take my hat off to you for even attempting to deal with the issue.

Around 40 per cent of the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day, which tells you that there is a lot of need everywhere. We feel that concentrating money on one place reduces the opportunities for other organisations to get support from the Government to work overseas.

The international reconstructive plastic surgery (Ghana) project was funded by ourselves and the Scottish Government. We provided it with a small amount of money—just £30,000—to bring a

surgeon over here for some training. The guy was trained in the Canniesburn plastic surgery unit in Glasgow royal infirmary. The funding enabled the man to stay in Scotland for two years, learning a lot about new microplastic surgery techniques. The money that we gave paid for his salary and the money that the Scottish Government gave helped to build a centre in Accra. The doctor was supported to go through his training and pass his fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons exams. He has now gone back to his country and we are told that he is the best-qualified plastic surgeon in west Africa. That is an incredible achievement for such a small amount of money.

A further achievement was that our investment enabled money to be levered out of the Government of Ghana, which set up a separate building to house a plastic surgery teaching centre that specialises in burns and the effects of certain terrible tropical diseases. I do not think that that would have happened if there had been no input from ourselves and the Scottish Government.

Ewan Hunter: If you want to look at economic evidence around the question of what you should or should not do, I should point you in the direction of Professor Paul Collier, who wrote "The Bottom Billion". He has been studying development in Africa for 30 or 40 years—I should declare an interest, in that he acts as an adviser to us. He would tell you that the evidence shows that, if you are going to invest in another country, you should invest in a country that is proximate to the country that you are already investing in, as that helps to build a corridor of development and will give you the biggest bang for your buck, from an economic development point of view. One would imagine that, given that investment is being made in Malawi, the next country to receive investment would be Mozambique.

11:30

Keith Brown: I am not as well versed in the Malawian situation as some of my colleagues, but it strikes me that the burden that falls on the Malawian Government in dealing with all those different actors is like the problem that was faced by the eastern European accession states, which did not have the infrastructure to deal with regional development funding when they came into the EU. Given that the number of actors involved puts a burden on the Malawian Government, and given that lack of efficiency on this side results in agencies not always being able to transfer all the money to Malawi, is there a role—in addition to the point that Alex Neil made about the need for one person over there to co-ordinate matters—for our Government to do what Governments do by helping with the governance of the situation by acting as a sort of honest broker? Could our

Government provide some kind of affirmation, such as a kitemark, that money has been spent in the best way possible and according to the priorities of the indigenous Government? If that was possible, would the different agencies and foundations go along with that?

Ewan Hunter: It is incumbent on anyone who is trying to make a difference in Africa to adhere to the appropriate policies of the Government of the country being helped. Absolutely, I think that it would be a step forward if the Government here tried to manage the process in the most efficient way.

The Malawian Government would benefit from having people who were out in Malawi for the long term rather than—one of the many mistakes that we have also suffered from—just short-term volunteers. Frankly, short-term volunteers are a pain in the neck. They take up too much resource for a very short-term impact. That should be understood within reason, as certain caveats apply to that broad statement. However, having long-term volunteers who can help out would be a step forward; the benefits of short-term volunteering are questionable.

Mary Craig: That would certainly be quite a task. Trusts and foundations that send funding overseas are mainly based in the UK. It must be said that trusts and foundations do not have a record of working in partnership, so I do not know how successful that proposal would be.

Irene Oldfather: In practical terms, do you use non-governmental organisations, such as the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund and Oxfam, that have worked in the field for some time, or do you have sufficient infrastructure within your own organisations—for example, the Hunter Foundation's partnership with the Malawian Government—to bypass those and work directly with the people?

Secondly, Ewan Hunter mentioned that the Hunter Foundation works with DFID. We have previously discussed the DFID project that supports doctors' salaries in Malawi, but witnesses have had different viewpoints on that. Are such projects a good way forward? To go back to the analogy of training the fisherman to use a fishing rod, are such projects sustainable? I am interested in hearing about the experiences of both witnesses. I am concerned about what will happen if the funding for that project comes to an end at some point.

Ewan Hunter: In both Rwanda and Malawi we have one ex-pat who acts as our country director, but the bulk of our staff are all either Rwandan or Malawian or from elsewhere in the continent. Basically, we build hospitals that we hand over to the Government. Similarly with education, we are

talking to both Governments about initial teacher training to tackle the shortage of 20,000-plus teachers. Essentially, our philosophy is build, operate and transfer. We will build education and health infrastructure that we hand over to the Government and then go on to the next thing that the Government would like us to do.

In building the new maternity hospital we also face the issue of the lack of doctors and nurses. We could put an advert in the Malawian newspaper—I cannot remember what it is called—and rob nurses from another hospital. The fact is that Malawi and Rwanda do not have enough doctors and nurses. We need to intervene in a manner that is as sustainable as possible but, ultimately, we will not watch children die just because we are slightly on the cusp of being able to sustain a doctor's salary.

One of the big things that the Scottish Government could do is facilitate a programme where young doctors and nurses can go out there and work for two-year stints. We have tried to push the idea on a UK level because we think that most of the nurses trained in Malawi end up working either here or in Australia and Germany, which are the worst offenders. There are UK policy issues about recruiting people to run our health service but debilitating someone else's in doing so.

Mary Craig: We work with small organisations that have small amounts of money and we prefer to deal directly with the projects. Our caveat is that they have to be Scotland-based organisations because that is where the accountability for the money is. As our history shows, Scots are inventive and get all over the world. For instance, we fund the Vine Trust, with which some members might be familiar. It is an excellent model of sustainability given the relatively small amounts of money needed to start a project.

The Vine Trust works with Scripture Union Peru. It does a lot of work with street boys and has built a number of residential accommodations. Every time that the trust opens one of those houses, it tries to set up a microbusiness around it—a social enterprise—that makes money. In Lima, they run a bakery whose profits are ploughed into the local centre. Not only does it provide sustainability for the centre, it provides job opportunities for some of the young boys.

If representatives of the Vine Trust were here, they would tell you that as a result of money coming from Scotland and of people going there—the trust encourages work parties to go and everybody pays their own expenses—the projects are catching the eye of local government. The trust has started to interact with local government and say to it, "We are providing a lot of stuff from Scotland, what are you guys doing?" The trust is

also getting more involved with businesses. For example, more businesses are coming on stream to provide some training initiatives for the young boys coming through the system.

Members might be familiar with another of the trust's projects—it runs two ships called Amazon Hope that travel up and down the Amazon and go into the jungle communities to provide medical care. Trying to build a business around that project to make it sustainable is difficult, but the trust has managed to get some of the businesses in the area to contribute. Medicine as well as fuel is donated. The trust encourages work parties to come from Scotland and the United States. The project manages itself with that infrastructure and support.

Gil Paterson: Ewan Hunter mentioned in his introduction putting together an initiative to assist farmers. Will you give us more detail about that? Alternatively, I would be grateful for any information that you could send the committee.

Ewan Hunter: I can certainly do that. We run that initiative in a variety of places. It is about enabling and supporting co-operatives in those countries. We do not give them anything; we are lending them seed and so on and they pay us back when the season is finished. The initiative has worked. I am happy to send you information about it.

In development terms, we are looking at import substitution and export enablement. In a couple of months we will launch our own coffee from Rwanda. Rwandan farmers will own the business—we will not have a stake in it at all. We will cut out something like 15 different margin takers in the process so that Rwandan farmers can sell their coffee directly to a supermarket near you. Those are the sorts of things that we are doing to enable people to help themselves out of poverty.

Mary Craig: We do not work with farmers per se, but we have funded one or two projects; for instance, a project to train some of the women who live in conflict areas and whose husbands have been killed in the conflicts to work the land and make a living for their families. Another project that we fund is about milking goats, and that has helped some of those people to feed their families by selling on the products and making other things out of the milk.

The Convener: Thank you both very much; this session has been extremely useful in giving us the benefit of your experience.

11:40

Meeting suspended.

11:44

On resuming—

The Convener: For our second panel of witnesses, we are privileged and pleased to have two Malawian teachers from Thyolo secondary school, Allan Gawani and Sydreck Nachuma, who are visiting Penicuik high school. Thank you for coming along. I ask either or both of you to give a brief opening statement, if you would like, after which we will ask questions.

Sydreck Nachuma (Thyolo Secondary School, Malawi): Thank you very much. There is a partnership between Thyolo secondary school of Malawi and Penicuik high school of Scotland. I believe that that is in line with the Scotland-Malawi partnership agreement that was signed in 2005. The partnership between the schools was facilitated by Mrs Hazel Manda, who is the education division manageress for the Shire Highlands region in Malawi. The partnership exists to extend friendship throughout the two school communities and beyond into the wider communities in Scotland and Malawi.

Among others, the partnership has the following aims: to promote cultural exchange through sharing cultural activities in the creative arts and other areas; to share curricular activities with a global dimension, such as those involved in the healthy schools programme and the John Muir Trust award in geography, with regular exchange on current progress to enrich students' knowledge in both countries; to share knowledge of life skills and HIV/AIDS through considering cultural activities in both countries; and to learn together by sharing knowledge through teacher-teacher and pupil-pupil interactions via e-mails and pen-pal letters. We also aim to initiate sustainable enterprise ventures—for example, making and selling Malawian items and holding dances and activities that say much of Malawian and Scottish societies—and to enhance sporting activities by sharing local games in each others' schools.

We intend to develop the partnership sustainably through reciprocal visits of staff and students, regular e-mail contacts and pen-pal letters and setting up student businesses in each school. The partnership recognises the importance of affirming the value of Malawian and Scottish people's skills and qualities; affirming that the people of Malawi and Scotland are their countries' best resource; helping our young people find their voice as citizens of Malawi and Scotland; and offering a long-term commitment. The partnership will be reviewed and evaluated annually by a steering team in each school and findings will be shared with both communities. We will assess what we have done and what impact it has had in the schools and decide what the next steps will be.

The Convener: Do you want to say something, Allan?

Allan Gawani (Thyolo Secondary School, Malawi): Not much—just that I am honoured to be here. When we were asked to be witnesses, we did not know what we were to be witnesses on, but we are here and maybe you will lead us through.

The Convener: We will start with questions on school partnerships. A few people have told us about the school partnerships that have built up—we are considering that aspect of our international development strategy. What are the advantages of the partnerships and are there any problems? Can some partnerships be done badly? What makes a good partnership and what are some of the problems that might arise?

Allan Gawani: One problem is that we are trying to be equal partners, but one cannot run away from the inequalities that exist. For example, our school did not have any internet connections, so when our partner school was trying to communicate with us through e-mail or the internet, that was difficult. The partner school in Scotland did something to bring us up to the level whereby we have an internet connection, so that it was easier for us to participate in the partnership. That is the sort of problem that the partnership can face. We try to think about mutuality, but that is the sort of problem that I have seen.

Alex Neil: I would like to ask about two things. First, how long have you been in Penicuik? Have your experiences been productive? What have you done since you have been here? What will happen when you go back to Malawi?

Secondly, you heard the evidence that was given this morning, from which it is clear that education is a high priority for Malawi. From your experience and perspective, how can Scotland best help to develop Malawi's education system?

Allan Gawani: We have been here for two weeks. We will remain here for a week and go on Tuesday next week, I think.

In the past two weeks, we have learned a lot that has been productive for our teaching profession and for me as an individual. The first thing that occurred to me at the school that we are visiting was the very good pupil to teacher ratio. There were perhaps 20 to 25 students in most of the classes that we observed. The situation in our school is very different; there, a person is lucky if they have 60 students. There are 70 to 75 students in most classes—classes are very big—which makes it difficult for us to teach effectively and give fast feedback to students. I learned a lot about pupil to teacher ratios.

I have also learned a lot about how teachers use information and communication technology in classes, how students participate in the use of that technology and about age ranges in classes. Most of the first years are around 14, but in our setting, students in form 1 can be aged from 14 to 20. If somebody starts standard 1 in the primary sector when he or she is six years old and does not pass the class, they have to repeat it; they can repeat the class for two or three years. If a person repeats a number of classes up to standard 8, they may be 15, 16 or 17 in form 1. I have seen the impact on students' discipline of having pupils of the same age in the same class. One reason for their discipline is that the age of the students is the same in each class, so it is easy for teachers to handle problems psychologically. Age differences result in problems. Our students are not as disciplined because of the age ranges in our classes. A 14-year-old can be dealt with in a way that is different from the way in which an 18-year-old can be dealt with. There is always teasing and bullying in our classes because of the age differences. I have seen many indiscipline cases involving our children because of the age range in our classes.

There are some things that we did not know and could not even imagine. We have never been out of Africa before—this is our first time. We have been surprised by many things in the curriculum here. I have been interested in learning support. If a student likes only one or two things, or if she or he is a slow learner, they are taken on by a learning support team. Yesterday, for example, we observed a lesson involving a teacher with only one student, who was failing to spell words. The teacher had a whole hour with that one student. To me, that was a surprise. For us, when somebody does not know how to read, there is nothing that we can do about it. In classes of 17 and 18-year-olds, there is no time to deal with that. We do not provide the sort of individual care that we saw in Penicuik. We have learned a lot.

Sydreck Nachuma: We have indeed learned a lot during our two weeks at Penicuik high school. There has been interaction between subject teachers. I am a geography teacher and I was able to interact with several other geography teachers. We have shared our curricula and have discussed the geography topics that are offered in Malawi and here in Scotland—most of the topics are quite similar—and we have shared our experiences.

I had the chance to attend a workshop on conflict resolution at the Braid Hills hotel, where a project was being launched. We thought that, as a partner school, we could take that up as a joint project: whatever happens in Penicuik will also happen at Thyolo secondary school, which will be very good.

The other question was about what can be done in Malawi. We need more teaching and learning resources, both material and human. We have a problem with teachers. My colleague talked about a teacher pupil ratio of 1:70 or 1:80. That problem exists simply because of a lack of teachers. On infrastructure, the classes are overcrowded because we do not have enough classrooms in the school. If that could be addressed, it would be very helpful.

I would recommend visits such as the one that we have undertaken, as they provide support. When teachers and students travel, they interact and learn, as we have done.

Ted Brocklebank: I want to question you on the second point that Mr Nachuma was discussing, about how we in Scotland can help you with your teacher shortages and to reduce the number of pupils in each school class. I was in Malawi and I saw the huge number of pupils who were handled in each class. You mentioned the shortage of classrooms. When the rain came on, pupils simply had to go home, as they were taught outdoors for a large part of the time.

I want to get some idea of how we in Scotland could direct aid. Should young people from Scotland go out to assist with teaching? Should we concentrate teacher training funding in particular areas? Perhaps you have some ideas about what we in Scotland could do to improve the ratios and to improve the education of Malawian children.

Sydreck Nachuma: I would recommend support for the training of more Malawian teachers. If possible, teachers could also come from Scotland to Malawi. However, the problem would still be there, as teachers might stay for only a year or two before going back. If more support could be given to teacher training in Malawi, that would improve the situation.

12:00

Allan Gawani: During our visit in Penicuik we have seen that the community around Penicuik is trying to be supportive of education in Malawi following the establishment of our partnership in 2006. A representative from Penicuik came to Malawi and saw the problems there. When she came back, she sensitised the school and then the community to those problems. As a result, a lot of clothes were sent to Malawi last year. The community is ready to help in one way or another, but the problem is transportation of the gifts to Malawi. The people in Penicuik asked us, "If we give you books, how will you carry them?"

Somebody wanted to give us a wind turbine because we have a problem with water pressure. We have a water tank, but it is not just for the

school—it is for the whole community. The tank is very small and water never stays in it; so, the water pressure in the school's supply is low. The flush toilets are never used, so we dug some pit toilets. When the representative from Penicuik came, she saw that and asked what the problem was. We told her about the low pressure of the water supply and one individual in Penicuik wanted to give us a wind turbine so that we could have a borehole with a pump. Fortunately, somebody in Malawi has also offered to give us a 10,000-litre tank, which will be good. So, we will have the pump, the borehole and the power from the wind turbine.

The problem is that I do not know how we can carry the wind turbine to Malawi. It can perhaps be carried in a container, but that kind of transportation constitutes a hiccup. If the Government could provide free transportation from Scotland for gifts that will go directly to schools, that would be better.

The Convener: It is useful for us to hear from you. You can have some influence. However, to what extent do you feel that the people of Malawi have any influence on the development of our policies towards Malawi? How could you have more influence? People realise that that would be the best way forward—you may have heard the previous witnesses say that.

Allan Gawani: People in Malawi—for example, in Thyolo district—know about what is happening in Scotland. I do not really know how to answer that question. I will pass it on to my friend.

Sydrek Nachuma: Sorry—could you repeat the question, please?

The Convener: We think that it would be a good idea if the people of Malawi had more influence on the development of our policy towards Malawi. Do you feel that you have any influence? If you do not, how could you influence our policy? It is useful that you have been able to come here to talk to us today. However, we want to be able to make recommendations on how the people of Malawi could be more involved in decisions, such as how the money is to be spent.

Sydrek Nachuma: The people of Malawi can have an influence on the development of policy in several ways—for example, through our coming here to Scotland and through the partnership between Penicuik high school and Thyolo secondary school. The Scottish students of Penicuik high school have benefited in a lot of ways. For example, they are aware of Malawi as a country and of the life of its citizens. Through the partnership, the citizens of Scotland have learned how people out there live. When policies are formulated here, that could be taken on board. People could say, “This is happening out there, so

if we do A, B and C, this will mean something else.” There could be an influence, because people here know how life is out there and what our needs are.

The Convener: So the more links, the better. Would you therefore say that the more schools have links with Malawi, the better?

Sydrek Nachuma: Yes. I recommend more school partnerships, which would make Malawi known even more.

Irene Oldfather: My area has a link with St Peter's school in Mzuzu, so I support what you say about the importance of school partnerships.

When Malawian children come to Scotland, I am struck by their good command of languages. Can we learn something about language teaching from you? When very young people from Malawi come here, they speak English fluently. Are languages taught at an early age in Malawi? Is instruction in Chichewa or English? How do you manage the development of young people's language skills?

Allan Gawani: English is a second language. The Government's policy these days is to start teaching in English from standard 4 in primary school for four years. That policy changed just a few years ago—at first, English teaching started from standard 1. In secondary school, the main language that is used throughout is English. The local language is used only when Chichewa language is taught as a subject. Some private primary schools are really good—they start teaching in English from standard 1, whereas most Government schools teach in English from standard 4 to standard 8, after which children go to secondary school.

Irene Oldfather: Perhaps we have something to learn from that.

Do most children in Malawi have to travel long distances to school? I know that children at St Peter's often have to do that.

You spoke about the age range in classes. What is the gender balance? Are girls encouraged into the education system more nowadays?

Allan Gawani: Most Government schools are boarding schools, so students stay at school for three months for the first term, then have a holiday of two weeks, after which they return. Travelling a long distance is not a problem with boarding schools. However, community day secondary schools, which are also Government schools, are attended by students from very far away.

That is why the Government has been thinking of making all schools boarding schools, which would make attendance easy for students, particularly girls, who have problems walking very long distances. Schools knock off at about 4

o'clock in the evening and reaching home can take two hours—if not two and a half hours—of walking, which is difficult for a girl. We have seen that here, the sun can go down around 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock and it is still light, but that is not the case in our area: at around 5 o'clock it is already dark, therefore the Government is thinking of making all day secondary schools boarding schools, although that is tough.

On encouraging girls to go to school, there was some cultural bias—I do not know where it started—whereby boys were encouraged to go to school, but not girls. Most parents are not educated, so they say that they do not have to waste money on a girl because she will get married. They put all the effort into the boy, because when he marries he will be the breadwinner, so he has to find a job.

With that kind of attitude, we mostly have a bigger number of boys than girls in schools, but we have started encouraging girls, even if they have children at home. We are going into the villages and sensitising them to the idea that, if they are not married, they can leave their children and come up to school. As teachers and stakeholders, we have some bursaries to enable women who cannot pay school fees to come back to school—we fund their education. It looks as if, even though they may have children at home, most girls are coming back to school.

Gil Paterson: What are the teachers at Penicuik high school saying about the attitude of the Scottish children in their engagement with the children from Malawi?

Sydreck Nachuma: From what we have seen and from our contacts with the teachers, there is not much difference in the way the students engage among themselves and with the teachers. There is a good relationship anyway: the students and teachers are able to interact and the students are able to assist other students, which also happens in Malawi.

There are differences in a few areas, some of which my colleague has highlighted. Here, there is much support for students with learning difficulties. Perhaps because of the large groups of students that we have in class, we are slightly behind in that area. We do not have enough time to provide individual help to all the 80 students in one class within a period of 40 minutes, but there is a good relationship.

Gil Paterson: Are the Scottish children benefiting from being directly in touch with children in Malawi through penpalling and the internet?

Sydreck Nachuma: Yes, that is what we feel. The Scottish students get to know the Malawian culture and are able to relate whether there are any differences or similarities. They know how

Malawian youths live and the Malawian youths are able to find out how their Scottish partners live, which brings a bit of an understanding of the two groups' cultures.

Gil Paterson: You raised a question about connecting with Penicuik on the internet. I take it that you can put the equipment to broader use in Malawi, rather than just engaging with Scotland.

Allan Gawani: Yes, that is true. The community also benefits from it.

Gil Paterson: Thank you very much.

12:15

The Convener: Obviously, you have given the committee quite a lot of information on your school. You also spoke about boarding schools. Is your school a boarding school? What is the age range of your pupils?

Allan Gawani: Our school has an age range of, I think, 14 to 21. Secondary school lasts for four years. Students within that age range can be found in any class—a 21 year-old can be found in form 1, for example.

The Convener: And is your school mainly a boarding school?

Allan Gawani: It is.

The Convener: How many students are in the school?

Allan Gawani: This year, we have 571 students, and around 193 are girls.

The Convener: How many teachers are there?

Sydreck Nachuma: As of now, we have 31 teachers in the various departments. One department has more teachers than the others, which is a problem. I am a geography teacher; I cannot teach mathematics.

Earlier, we spoke about encouraging girls. We can encourage more girls to attend school, but our problem is how to accommodate them. We have two hostels for girls and three for boys. The lack of accommodation for girls is a limiting factor. We need to do something to balance the accommodation.

Irene Oldfather: That sounds good.

The Convener: As we have no further questions, I thank our witnesses for coming to the Scottish Parliament today. I hope that you enjoy the rest of your stay in Penicuik.

Sydreck Nachuma: Thank you.

Allan Gawani: It was a pleasure.

Brussels Bulletin

12:17

The Convener: The next item is the *Brussels Bulletin*. Does any member wish to comment on any of the issues?

Irene Oldfather: My comment is on the maritime policy. I understand that the European Commission will hold a conference on 20 May on the subject, and that it is encouraging contributions and attendance from as wide a field as possible. I am fairly certain that the Scottish Government will send a representative, but perhaps we should highlight the event to the relevant parliamentary committee. A member of this committee might also wish to participate.

Alex Neil: We should send Ted Brocklebank. He is our expert on maritime policy.

Ted Brocklebank: I would have enjoyed going to the conference, but I have a feeling that I am in Belfast for two days that week.

The Convener: Perhaps we can ask whether the Parliament's European officer plans to attend. Do you have another suggestion, Irene?

Irene Oldfather: No. I think that the paper mentions a decision and a plenary meeting, but I am interested in the wider maritime policy issues that will be discussed at the conference.

The Convener: Perhaps we should ask the European officer to attend and report back to us, in the *Brussels Bulletin* or elsewhere.

Irene Oldfather: That would be fine.

Alex Neil: I have a couple of points, convener. Obviously, we are seeing rising food prices. People might use the food crisis as an excuse to suspend targets on biofuels. Clearly, the big debate is whether biofuels make a net contribution to the environment in terms of climate change or whether they are a liability. One of the reasons for making the *Brussels Bulletin* an agenda item was to look at forthcoming directives early doors. The renewables directive and the fuel quality directive are under discussion. We have a responsibility to keep a close eye on renewables.

Perhaps we should draw the renewables directive to the attention of the appropriate committee—which I take it would be the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee—and ask it whether it intends to do anything. If it replies that it does not, we could consider doing something ourselves—especially if we are going to agree, under our next agenda item, to go to Brussels anyway.

The Convener: That seems a good suggestion. You left the issue of biofuels hanging in the air. People will have different views on it. We will need to keep an eye on this, but there seems to be a disagreement between the European Environment Agency and the Commission. That is interesting, and we could have a debate about it, but this is probably not the place for it—at the moment, anyway.

Alex Neil: No, but perhaps we should highlight what is going on in Europe to the relevant committee.

The Convener: Yes, which would be the committee that you mentioned, but the committee that has already been to Brussels on these matters is the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, which obviously is taking an interest.

Irene Oldfather: I see in the *Brussels Bulletin* that there is a health consultation, with a deadline of 20 May, on minimising

“harm to patients from adverse events in their health systems”.

Given the Scottish Government's and the Parliament's considerable interest in addressing hospital-acquired infections and so on, we should highlight the consultation to the Health and Sport Committee, which might wish to make a submission.

The Convener: That is a good idea.

Alex Neil: Another idea is that we send a message to the Irish people, asking them to vote against the Lisbon treaty.

The Convener: I do not think that you would get a majority on the committee for that—although you might.

Gil Paterson: Are you going to press that to a vote, Alex?

The Convener: You would not do that when we were one Liberal Democrat short, would you?

Alex Neil: No, I would never do that.

Gil Paterson: He would wait until we were two short.

John Park: It would be interesting to know where people stand.

The Convener: I do not think that we will go there at the moment, John. I think that we know the answer.

Presidency of the European Council

12:22

The Convener: The final item on our agenda is a paper from the clerk on the presidency of the European Council. The key point is the recommendation that we should appoint one or more committee reporters to meet representatives of the EU French presidency. If we agree to do that, we would have to submit a bid for the visits.

Alex Neil: It would be logical to have one reporter from each party.

Irene Oldfather: The recommendation is sensible and it follows on from the kind of discussions that we have been having. The clerk's paper mentions "Paris and/or Brussels". The committee used to make an annual trip to Brussels. I am not making a plea for that, because now that Keith Brown and I are both back on the Committee of the Regions we get opportunities to go to Brussels monthly at least.

The recommendation in the paper is sensible and complementary. Brussels is obviously about the European Commission and the European institutions, and the recommendation is about the French presidency of the European Council.

Alex Neil: Why do we not try to kill two or three birds with one stone? If we are going to pursue the renewables directive while we are in Brussels, we could also consider the presidency issue and other issues.

The Convener: We could, although I presume that there will be time limitations because of this Parliament's sitting times. I do not imagine that any of us can be off on Wednesdays or Thursdays. We would be talking about Mondays and Tuesdays.

Dr Jim Johnston (Clerk): The idea, Alex, was to consider whether it would be useful for the committee to engage more readily with the presidency, since it is the member state of the President that tends to drive the agenda.

We could return to Irene Oldfather's point in the autumn. If the committee wishes to continue with annual visits, we could come back with a proposal.

The Convener: This is a new idea for a visit that is focused specifically on the new presidency. Should we say that, as a maximum, we will have one reporter from each party? If any party does not want to take up that offer, the total could be fewer than four. Four would be the maximum, but it could be three or two, if that is what people want. We will leave it up to the individual parties to sort that out.

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We have done well, finishing at 12.24 with such a busy agenda. We have covered a lot of ground. I thank everyone very much indeed for attending.

Meeting closed at 12:24.

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