

PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 29 January 2002
(*Morning*)

Session 1

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PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)

*Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)

*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)

*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :

Alison Coull (Scottish Parliament Directorate of Legal Services)

Professor David McCrone (Adviser)

WITNESSES

Ann Galbraith (Society of Editors (Scotland))

Paul Holleran (National Union of Journalists)

Blair Jenkins (BBC Scotland)

Alasdair MacLeod (BBC Scotland)

John McLellan (Scottish Daily Newspaper Society)

Eric MacLeod (Scottish Parliament Media Relations Office)

J B Raeburn (Scottish Daily Newspaper Society)

Professor Philip Schlesinger (Stirling Media Research Institute)

Janet Seaton (Scottish Parliament Information Centre)

Alan Smart (Scottish Parliament Broadcasting Office)

Brian Taylor (BBC Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

John Patterson

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark MacPherson

LOCATION

Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Procedures Committee

Tuesday 29 January 2002

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Consultative Steering Group Principles Inquiry

The Convener (Mr Murray Tosh): Good morning. Unusually for us, we have managed to start at 9.30 am. I think that everyone whom we are expecting is here. We continue our inquiry into the consultative steering group principles.

I welcome an extensive set of media representatives. It is nice to have the media on the receiving end. Unfortunately, the only written recording of the meeting is likely to be the *Official Report* and we will not necessarily be able to put quite the spin on it that we would like.

We will hear first from John McLellan because, I gather, there is an issue with time. We will take a few minutes for an introductory statement. We have your papers, where papers have been provided, and will, in our questions, pick up on what you have said.

John McLellan (Scottish Daily Newspaper Society): In general, the view of the Scottish Daily Newspaper Society editors committee is that the Parliament is open and accessible and that information is more or less readily to hand. We do not have many complaints about the way in which the Parliament has operated. In fact, from your side of the argument, some would say that it is too open and accessible.

However, we have one or two reservations. The main reservation surrounds the operation of the committees. There is a feeling that committees go into private too often without what we regard as fair justification. I will give you some examples: the Finance Committee meeting today will contain two items in private; the Education, Culture and Sport Committee will discuss three items in private; the Justice 1 Committee will discuss one item in private; the Local Government Committee will discuss three items in private; and the Rural Development Committee will be entirely behind closed doors.

As far as we are aware, none of the above will relate to commercial confidentiality or information from vulnerable witnesses. We submit that it is unhelpful for the committee system to lean any

more heavily towards meeting in private than is already the case.

As far as the public are concerned, a number of matters that have arisen during the life of the Parliament have not helped its image. That image may be some distance from the reality, but more openness would be helpful in, for example, the continuing controversy over the Parliament building costs. That matter, the stories about allowances and remuneration, and the effect of the stories that surrounded the resignation of the previous First Minister—although we accept that that was largely a Westminster issue—have not helped the overall impression of openness and accountability.

I return to a point that we raised at a previous meeting of the committee. We still feel that having decision time at 5 o'clock gives the impression that the system is set up for convenience rather than the execution of democracy. However, our report is, by and large, positive.

The Convener: Does Mr Raeburn have anything to add?

J B Raeburn (Scottish Daily Newspaper Society): I have nothing to add.

The Convener: We have taken evidence on committee privacy from a number of parties. I would like to probe the nature of your objection. In addition to handling sensitive or vulnerable witnesses and commercial confidentiality in private, committees tend to discuss in private their lines of questioning for witnesses. Perhaps it can be debated whether that is always necessary, but some conveners have argued that it is necessary in certain circumstances.

I do not know the specifics of the items from this week's committee meetings that you cited. The principal justification that is given for meeting in private is that committees spend series of meetings or parts of series of meetings discussing draft reports. In the interests of agreeing as consensual and common a report as possible and of maximising the report's impact, committees like to release the final version rather than the draft, in much the same way as, I suppose, newspaper editors prefer to publish a polished and finalised article rather than to run an article over several editions until it is right. What do you make of that line of argument?

John McLellan: It is understandable, but it does not answer the point, which more than one correspondent makes, that those procedures should be more open than they are. The difference between us and the parliamentary committees is that we are not a parliamentary committee. We are not elected; you are. We would like to be able to report on the debates that happen in committees as much as possible. It would be helpful if the

process by which decisions are arrived at were available for public scrutiny.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): If committees opened up so that the discussion process that led to a report being finally agreed was open, would the media report that in a sensible fashion and not merely say, "Row between Susan Deacon and Donald Gorrie. Susan Deacon said X and Donald Gorrie said Y"? That is a slightly rude question. If we got the Parliament to make that big concession, could you react sensibly?

John McLellan: That would depend on how sensible the discussion was.

Donald Gorrie: On a slightly related point, the CSG and many of us hoped that the Parliament would be less yah-booish than Westminster. It is a little less so, but it is still pretty yah-booish. I ask the various media representatives from their different perspectives: if most of us went about seeking consensus more than we do, would that make life difficult for you? Does exciting reporting of Parliament depend on conflict?

John McLellan: Clearly, conflict makes coverage more exciting, but effective coverage of the Parliament does not rely on conflict. If there is conflict, we will report it and do so, no doubt, with some glee. Ultimately, it is the decisions that count and that will be reported.

Donald Gorrie: Do any of the other witnesses want to reply or will each have a shot in turn?

The Convener: If you are happy for now, Donald, I will let Gil Paterson in.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I note that you say:

"The Society feels that the distinction"

between the Parliament and the Executive

"is well understood and consistently portrayed by the media, but is not so well understood by many members of the public."

Do you have any views on why that is? Why does everyone in the media understand the distinction whereas the public do not?

J B Raeburn: Looking at the committee papers, I think that Mr Paterson is quoting from the written submission from the Society of Editors. We are the Scottish Daily Newspaper Society, which is a quite different body. However, we subscribe to the same view. The distinction between the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament is well understood within the media, but not among the public.

Mr Paterson: Have you any views on why that should be the case?

J B Raeburn: I do not think that the situation is

unique to the Scottish Parliament. In relation to the UK Parliament, my impression is that many members of the public equate the Government with the party in power; I am not sure that the average member of the public necessarily sees the difference between the Labour party and the Government.

Mr Paterson: On Donald Gorrie's point, the parliamentarians seem to think that, on the whole, we are doing a good job, whereas there is little doubt that the Parliament or Executive—or the combination—receives a fairly bad press. Is that perhaps because of the simple equation that good news equals bad copy?

John McLellan: I do not necessarily agree that the Parliament gets bad press all the time. There has been a lot to write about over the lifetime of the Parliament and there has been a considerable amount of conflict and many areas of controversy, to which Donald Gorrie referred. It would be strange if we did not mention that. The good things are reported as well.

Mr Paterson: I will ask you a more positive question: is there something that the Parliament should be doing to expose the good things that we do? Most of the submissions that we have received highlight the fact that the committee system seems to be working extremely well and is a good news story. Does the Parliament, as opposed to the Executive, need to employ its own spin doctor?

John McLellan: You mean that you do not already? I do not know what you would term "good news", or how you would project it. It is true that the headline "Committee System Works Well" would not sell many papers, but I believe that the good things that come out of the Parliament are being reported, by and large. The bad things may well be sticking in the public consciousness, but the crises that have been faced over the past few months have been considerable. It is difficult to think of the positive things that could outdo the negativity, but those negative things have come about by nobody's design; they have happened and they have had to be reported. The events of the past few months would have been astonishingly dramatic under any circumstances and are not something that the Parliament itself can be blamed for. The Parliament, however, has to live with the consequences.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): My first question takes up the point about committees meeting in secret—or in private, or however we might want to describe it. Let us take the example of a subject as controversial as the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine. If there are several drafts of a committee report about it and the final draft, following discussion, goes in the opposite direction from that taken in the first draft, do not

you think that the first draft—if the meeting to discuss it was open—would get more publicity and newspaper coverage than the final draft? Would that not give out the wrong signals and information to the public and perhaps be viewed as irresponsible, given that it is the final report that matters in the end and that will get actioned?

John McLellan: That would depend on the difference between the first draft and the last draft; it would depend on what they contained. I cannot throw a blanket over every scenario involving differences between first and last drafts of a report. If a first draft was felt, by and large, to have represented a committee's position but the final draft ended up being dramatically different, the differences would be reported. If the final draft was much the same as the first, there would be nothing new to report.

09:45

Fiona Hyslop: That is the dilemma that we are in and it cuts to the heart of the issues about committees meeting in private. Is what matters the finished result—which, if approved through a motion and debate, will be the will of Parliament—or the deliberations and the nuances of the debate that take place as we go along? From the point of view of the democracy of the people, the final decision is the most important, but the nuances of debate are perhaps more important for interest, copy and coverage. Do you see that dilemma?

John McLellan: I see what you are saying, but I argue that, in the interests of openness and accountability, the process is as important as the end result.

Fiona Hyslop: That is an interesting observation, on which we will reflect in our report.

My second question is a simple one. You referred to the 5 pm deadline as though it was a problem. Perhaps, because we do not follow the arcane procedure of voting at 10 o'clock not having been present to listen to the debate, we have a more participative, involved parliamentary process. From a copy point of view, would you prefer to report on a 10 pm decision time, or would a 5 pm one be more convenient?

John McLellan: Did you say 10 pm?

Fiona Hyslop: I asked whether 5 pm is a more convenient time for copy.

John McLellan: Not if I am wearing my old hat as editor of the *Edinburgh Evening News*.

Fiona Hyslop: There is obviously an issue for evening papers, but what is the general view?

John McLellan: The issue is on-going for evening newspapers and broadcasters. It is less of a problem for morning papers, although the

amount of time that they have to react to unfolding events is reduced. It does not matter for Sunday newspapers.

Fiona Hyslop: There has been some debate about whether we should, on some occasions and for certain issues, have a midday decision time.

John McLellan: The facility exists should the Presiding Officer decide that an earlier vote is necessary, but that does not often happen.

J B Raeburn: We made a presentation to the Procedures Committee on a previous occasion, asking that our message on decision time be reinforced. The occasions on which there has been a lunch-time vote have been few and far between. The vote is held over until 5 o'clock, which is of no value to evening newspapers.

Fiona Hyslop: If we had a 12 noon vote, your argument that, in having a 5 pm vote, we are not working as hard as Westminster defeats itself.

John McLellan: I am sorry—could you say that again?

Fiona Hyslop: You made the point that the fact that we have a 5 pm decision time makes it appear that we were not working the same hours as Westminster.

J B Raeburn: We did not say that; I think that the point was that quite a number of MSPs have been absent from the chamber and have not taken part in the debate, yet have been present for the vote on it at 5 o'clock.

The Convener: Let me break in at this point. We will hear from the BBC Scotland representatives shortly, but I think that it would be appropriate to invite them to comment on the issue now. It has been suggested that the 5 o'clock decision time creates difficulties for the broadcasting media.

Brian Taylor (BBC Scotland) *indicated disagreement.*

The Convener: I see heads shaking: perhaps somebody could give the broadcasting perspective.

Brian Taylor: From the perspective of someone who covers the Parliament regularly, 5 pm is not a fatal problem; we are a 24-hour news broadcaster and will take the result when it comes.

The Convener: So the problem is specific to the evening newspapers. That is understood.

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston (Lab): John, do you think that there is a difference between how the print media have reported the Parliament and how broadcasters have reported it?

John McLellan: I do not know; it is difficult for me to comment on what the broadcasters have done. If you are thinking about the sharp focus on the big issues that you may feel have distracted people from the work of the Parliament, I would answer no—the media in general have shown a fairly united front, applying the same news values.

Mr McAveety: What is the difference between the words “recess” and “holiday”?

John McLellan: Do you want me to give you a definition?

Mr McAveety: I would like the dictionary definition first; your interpretation as a journalist may be helpful as well.

John McLellan: I think that everybody understands that “holiday” means that somebody is off on holiday and that “recess” means that they are doing other work.

Mr McAveety: So why, when the Parliament is in recess, is it reported that we are on holiday, although many of us are at work?

John McLellan: I do not know, I cannot speak for individual—

Mr McAveety: Is it journalistic licence or inaccurate reporting?

John McLellan: That depends on how you want to look at it. Some people might be on holiday and some people might be working—I do not know.

Mr McAveety: Mr Raeburn referred to attendance in the chamber. Have you ever done a percentage analysis of the number of members in the House of Commons chamber during debates and compared that figure to what happens at the Scottish Parliament?

J B Raeburn: I hear what you say, but two wrongs do not make a right, if indeed you are suggesting that one is wrong.

Mr McAveety: I am simply making an observation—you drew that conclusion.

J B Raeburn: I take your point, but it does not follow from what I said that MSPs who are absent from the chamber are not working elsewhere on other duties.

Mr McAveety: On another issue that was raised, do I, as an MSP, receive an income of £100,000 or the standard parliamentary salary?

John McLellan: Off the top of my head, I do not know what you receive.

Mr McAveety: I have read reports in the print media that, as an MSP, I receive £100,000 in personal income. I am interested in that, as I need to explain such things when I go home.

John McLellan: I do not know about those

reports. I do not have a cuttings file on Frank McAveety in front of me.

Mr McAveety: I do not want to be picked out as a result of media interest—you can refer to any MSP.

John McLellan: I cannot think of any of our members who does not strive to be fair and accurate.

Mr McAveety: I have read press cuttings—such allegations have been made in the press in the past two and a half years. I accept that the political narrative of the past few months had to be reported in the way that it was. However, some reporting has not been factual. I do not mind opinions and opinion pages, but I worry about newspapers’ front pages. Your members should be concerned about factual accuracy, too. Do newspaper editors review statements?

John McLellan: I can only repeat what I said: I do not know of any editor who does not strive to be as accurate and fair as possible.

Mr McAveety: If an MSP was concerned and wrote to an editor, what would the editor do? Would they say, as one or two have in the past, “Tough luck—that’s politics. It’s a hard game. Go away and don’t annoy me”?

John McLellan: I am not speaking for editors as individuals. I have a track record of correcting mistakes as they arise. If something is wrong, we will correct it. Individual editors will respond according to the case in front of them.

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Has there been an overemphasis on political journalism—if I can call it that—since the establishment of the Parliament? Is coverage of the Parliament often the preserve of the political correspondent rather than the specialist correspondent?

John McLellan: Not in my experience. Specialists have covered affairs in their specialisms as they have arisen. In the two newspapers with which I have had direct contact, I do not think that coverage has been too ring-fenced. Specialists are involved as much as parliamentary correspondents.

Susan Deacon: I would like to explore that further. When I was Minister for Health and Community Care, I had conversations with health correspondents from a number of publications. Attempts were made to encourage them to attend the chamber and listen to full debates on health. Often, they said that they did not have accreditation or that going to the chamber would not be appropriate, as the political correspondent was the registered journalist with the Parliament. The political journalist would therefore come along. I found that disappointing, as the health

correspondents often had insights into issues that were discussed and did not focus on political knockabout. Is that anecdotal account typical? If so, is there scope for a different approach?

John McLellan: Accreditation is not a problem. Floating accreditations are available. A specialist is more likely to be unable to attend the chamber for practical reasons. They will have other things to do—other stories to write or books to fill—and therefore will not have the time to sit in the chamber. Pressure is on the reporter to produce material on a broad spectrum of issues, not all of which will be related to what is happening in the chamber on a particular day. If a specialist has a particular need to be in the chamber to listen to a debate, that can be arranged. There is no reason why it cannot, other than the practical demands of daily news diaries.

Susan Deacon: Reporters said to me that their paper's practice was for the political correspondent rather than the specialist correspondent to cover such debates, but you are saying that that is their perception and interpretation and that such practices are not laid down at editorial level.

John McLellan: In all probability. It is astonishing how often messages get mixed and reporters think that an edict has been issued from the top when that is not the case.

Susan Deacon: You have clarified that point. Would it make a difference to the coverage of major debates in the Parliament if specialist correspondents, rather than political correspondents, reported them where appropriate? I say that with the greatest respect to political correspondents, who also have an important role. Would that make a difference in specific subject debates?

John McLellan: If a specialist could listen to debates, I am sure that that would help coverage of particular issues, but I do not know whether it would make a difference in a wider sense. It might make a difference to those who are closely involved with the subject, but I am not sure that it would make a big difference to readers.

Susan Deacon: I am grateful for your answers to my questions. I would like to move to an unrelated issue. There is at least a perception—I have seen evidence of this—that in recent years there has been a gradual drift in this country, and in Scotland in particular, towards newspaper reporting that is based on unnamed sources. Sometimes entire news stories and front-page splashes are constructed without any named quotes in them. Of course, politicians as well as journalists comply in that process, but is that a healthy development? Does it give the public meaningful insights into the political process or,

between us, should we attempt to have a more self-denying ordinance and shift away from that practice?

John McLellan: It is inevitable that unnamed sources will be quoted in newspapers no matter what position we agree. There are always ways around systems.

Susan Deacon: I would not demur from that—such quotes are inevitable. However, from an editorial viewpoint, is it good journalism to construct entire stories based on unnamed sources and without named quotes and attributions?

John McLellan: If stories are based on unreliable sources and information, that is bad journalism. It is inevitable that people will seek to protect their positions and not to be exposed as sources of information—that is simply the nature of the game.

Susan Deacon: Am I in injury time yet, convener, or may I ask another question?

The Convener: You may ask another question.

Susan Deacon: I am conscious that we have one opportunity to speak to representatives of the newspaper industry and that other members want to speak.

Colleagues have asked about interim reports. If such reports were discussed in public more often and information was more readily available, would the press focus on reporting the substance of the issues?

In an earlier response, it was said that decisions were and would be reported. I have a couple of examples, although they may be atypical. There has been disproportionate coverage of the process as opposed to the final decisions in respect of certain major pieces of legislation—Fiona Hyslop touched on that issue.

One example, which took place early in life of the Parliament, was the controversial debate about the Noel Ruddle case. I am sure that we all recall the vast amount of column inches on the issue and on the debate that surrounded the issue. I scrutinised the coverage and found very little about the Parliament's final decision when the bill was enacted to close the loophole. That was despite the fact that the bill was the first piece of legislation to be enacted by the Scottish Parliament. Colleagues will have other examples, but I was also involved with the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000. I remember little coverage of the enactment of that legislation. The Scottish print media say that they report the Parliament's decisions. A number of us believe differently. Do you have analysis to substantiate what you say?

10:00

John McLellan: The only thing that I can say is that, after close study of those two issues, Susan Deacon found under-reporting of the decisions. As members know, we are talking about a disparate body of individuals. The newspapers are all different, as are the personalities of the editors. There may be low-key reporting of a decision but, if the newspapers all come up with a common position, a newsworthy issue is at play.

On the Noel Ruddle case, I seem to remember that the closure of the loophole was reported. It might not have been the splash story of the day, but reported it certainly was. Members know as well as I do how different the publications are. I am not suggesting that members trust in editors' individual judgments but, if a common position appears, their consensus is there to be seen.

The Convener: I will round up this session. As Frank McAveety posed his question about his salary, I was thinking that mine is higher than his. The question might be more pertinent in my case. I can see the tabloids running the story under the headline "Numpties Strike Back" or "Revenge of the Numpties".

Mr McAveety: Speak for yourself.

The Convener: We get a lot of that sort of treatment. I suspect that the headline writers feel freer than the journalists to kick the living daylights out of us. Should we care about that? Are we hypersensitive or are we a bit more sensitive because we are newer than are our colleagues in other Parliaments?

John McLellan: Members are entitled to act in whatever way they want and we are entitled to report your actions. The point about headlines is raised time and again. It is difficult to see how a story can be put across in six words in any way other than as a broad summary of the issue.

Members are not any more sensitive than other people. The relationship between the press and the members of the Parliament is pretty healthy. That must be the case, given how often members are quoted in our papers. I do not see any boycotts. If things were that bad, I am sure that members would not talk to us—then again, members need votes.

The Convener: If you think of a six-word headline for this morning's exchanges, you can leave it with one of the security staff. We would be pleased to read it. Thank you for your evidence.

We move on to the presentation from BBC Scotland colleagues Blair Jenkins, Brian Taylor and Alasdair MacLeod. After your initial comments, we will proceed to questions.

Blair Jenkins (BBC Scotland): Thank you for

the opportunity to help the committee's inquiry. As our paper to the committee made clear, we will confine our remarks and observations from a broadcasting perspective to how the Parliament has operated in relation to the principles of openness and accessibility.

As members will have seen in our submission, BBC Scotland's view of how the Parliament has operated so far is broadly positive. We have identified a couple of occasions on which the principles of accessibility and openness were compromised to some extent. No doubt members will wish to talk about those occasions.

We hope that full consultation on the issues will take place and that the same principles will be applied to arrangements at the new Parliament building. Even now, we would welcome the convening of a new working group of broadcasters and parliamentarians to examine in detail issues such as current coverage of the Parliament and future arrangements for openness and accessibility.

We are happy to answer questions.

The Convener: Do either of your colleagues wish to say something?

Brian Taylor: We will leave it at that for now.

The Convener: Your paper states that the broadcasting media rarely get access to briefings—Blair Jenkins alluded to that. However, which event are you referring to? You give one instance, but it is clear that that does not relate to the presentation of a report. It may be that when we examine the event, we will find that it was untypical, but that we should reflect on it. Has that happened on other occasions? Is it a more serious problem than it appears to be from your submission?

Alasdair MacLeod (BBC Scotland): As we set out in our submission, the example was isolated. In any case, formal briefings by the Parliament and its committees are fairly rare events. By and large, they have been open and on camera. We had access to some early briefings on the Holyrood project, which have now become more formal sessions in the chamber.

We accept and understand that in the instance to which the paper refers, which was the report on the MMR vaccine, there was a good deal of sensitivity about the issue under discussion. Our problem was with the in-between nature of the briefing. As it was regarded as being on the record, it was in the currency of our print colleagues. However, apart from the opening statement, the briefing was not on camera. The fact that it was made on the record gave it a formality that put it into the category of a briefing by parliamentarians. If members think back to the

expert panel report, it is clear that briefings should be on the record and on camera.

Brian Taylor: One reason for being so sensitive about what appears to be an isolated incident is that we have a longer-term campaign to get Executive briefings on the record and on camera. At present, those briefings, which are along the lines of the Parliament's twice-daily briefings, are on the record but exclude cameras and broadcasting equipment. As we have campaigned regularly and persistently to have camera access to those briefings, we were concerned to see an apparent derogation from the Parliament's negotiated position of full openness. I am aware that the Procedures Committee cannot instruct or guide the Executive, but we were concerned that a principle that had been hard fought for and won in the case of parliamentary briefings had slipped at an early stage, just as we were trying to extend the principle to the Executive.

The Convener: Thank you. I understand the significance of what is being said. I am not in a position to state why the briefing was held in that way or whether that was done accidentally or deliberately. We can examine that point. Blair Jenkins referred to the establishment of another committee to examine upgrading the rules. Are there other examples of difficulties in working practices that we need to examine quickly, to bring them into line with how things are happening as opposed to how things were envisaged?

Blair Jenkins: I will defer to my colleagues on the detail of that question, as they work in the Parliament daily. In our submission, we highlight examples of dubiety regarding what may or may not be filmed in the public gallery. That is an important point for us.

Alasdair MacLeod: This brings us back to the expert panel's report and the principle of the surrogate gallery, which underlies filming in the chamber. The report suggested that the viewer's experience at home should be similar to the experience of the viewer in the public gallery in the chamber, in so far as that is possible. If something is happening either on the floor of the chamber or in the surrounding galleries, people should be able to see it. The rules of coverage that are appended to the expert panel's report make provision for that. Clearly, there are issues that need to be addressed relating to demonstrations and so on. We have highlighted the case of the Trident demonstration, when we did not have as many pictures as we would have liked as early as we would have liked, although subsequently we had access to some pictures of the incident. I am confident that our use of those pictures was responsible and fell within the original spirit—and, indeed, the letter—of the expert panel's deliberations.

Brian Taylor: I would like to make two points. First, I should point out that we have very good daily relations with both the media relations office and the broadcasting office of the Parliament. We work extremely well with them.

Secondly, I want to stress that the idea of creating a surrogate gallery was not arrived at for the benefit of the BBC—it was not some little gift to us. In its report, the expert panel pointed out that the Westminster rules, which are very tight and narrowly defined,

“arguably made Parliament look somewhat dull and uninteresting”.

Those rules run entirely contrary to the report of the CSG, which stated that it wanted an accountable, visible Parliament, bringing equal opportunities and so on.

When we seek to create a surrogate gallery, which means trying to make everything that we see in the chamber—the reaction of MSPs and of people in the public gallery—available to the viewers at home, we are seeking merely to meet the CSG's original objectives. We are not seeking some special gain for the broadcasters. All we want is that the original aim of creating a surrogate gallery should be retained and that the principle of liberalisation should continue to be upheld in the new building.

The Convener: I ask Alan Smart, who is our head of broadcasting, to comment on the Trident incident in the context of general policy. Obviously, the representatives of the BBC feel that the existing guidelines were not followed in that case. The BBC's submission indicates that, following representations, the line was relaxed a little. It would be helpful for the committee to hear about the process that led to that.

Alan Smart (Scottish Parliament Broadcasting Office): We have a very good relationship with the BBC, but we are involved in a learning process. We have guidelines.

The two cases to which the BBC's submission refers are in some ways quite different. The incident involving representatives of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities was a broadcasting miss that I will not attempt to justify politically. Crudely speaking, I think that it was an off-the-ball incident that we should perhaps have spotted but failed to spot. That is an important point. It is good that we are meeting in the chamber, as that allows members to see that the nine cameras in the chamber have not been positioned with the public gallery in mind—they are focused on MSPs in the chamber. Although they can film incidents in the public gallery, occasionally such incidents are missed.

If the BBC had wanted to be uncharitable to us, it could have listed two or three other incidents that we have missed, such as the time when the Conservatives held up their famous red card. No decision was made not to film that—the cameras were simply not quick enough.

The Trident demonstration is a far more interesting example, as it presented us with a dilemma. We had to balance the precedence of the Presiding Officer and the dignity of the Parliament with our clearly stated right to film the public gallery. There is a healthy tension between the natural expectations of the BBC and other broadcasters, and the expectations of MSPs.

10:15

I am not sure that we need to follow the BBC's recommendation that we establish another formal committee to deal with that issue. That is a matter for members to consider. However, there needs to be dialogue between parliamentarians and broadcasters. We have the most liberal rules of coverage in the world. It is very positive that we can film the public gallery, as doing so shows that we have a live Parliament and that people come to watch its proceedings. One reason why attendance at chamber debates is so high is that people see the public gallery on television. Also, "Holyrood Live" does proportionately better than "Westminster Live" partly because the Scottish Parliament is seen as a live Parliament.

The committee could usefully consider the issue of dialogue with broadcasters. Discussions have already taken place at Presiding Officer level. Although we have inherited from the CSG a very liberal set of rules of coverage, I am not entirely sure that MSPs—irrespective of party and of whether they are back benchers or front benchers—have fully understood or thought through the implications of unrestricted filming of the public gallery. That issue needs to be addressed constantly, either by the Procedures Committee or by another formal or informal committee. It will be of particular concern at the Holyrood Parliament building, where we will be able to reconfigure slightly the cameras to give us better camera angles on the public gallery, should that be a priority. However, it is difficult to ask MSPs to set up a camera configuration that favours the public rather than them.

The Convener: Frank McAveety has suggested that we should consider having our proceedings broadcast by Sky Television, because of its more generous camera provision.

Clearly, there is scope for further thought and clarification. I do not want to encourage verbal ping-pong, but it would be helpful to get on record the BBC's reaction to what Alan Smart has said.

Blair Jenkins: To keep the discussion on a positive note, I would like to add one point. In our submission, we say that the broadcasting arrangements at Westminster have been relaxed in direct response to the more open broadcasting arrangements in this Parliament. That is an important, positive point.

Brian Taylor: Our correspondents, who previously had to stand shivering on the green outside the Palace of Westminster, are now occasionally admitted to the lobbies of the Houses of Parliament.

The rules followed the surrogate gallery principle, which was stressed at the start. The rules governing access to the black and white corridor, for example, were toughly negotiated. We were seeking greater access than those rules provide for and we regard them as a minimum standard. We are not fighting against the rules or demanding instant access to everything. Although we accept that there will be rules and regulations, we do not want there to be any derogation from those rules, particularly in the new building. We seek the establishment not of a formal new media panel, but of some sort of working party that would, as Alan Smart said, promote a dialogue to ensure that the CSG objective of openness is carried forward from the temporary premises to the new Parliament building and that nothing is lost.

Mr Paterson: I would like to pursue that point. Both of the incidents on which the BBC submission comments related to causes that I support politically. The problem is that both incidents took place at question time, which is covered live. Would the net effect of always broadcasting such incidents live not be that every week some sort of demonstration would take place in the chamber, with people throwing themselves off the verandas to bring their cause to the nation's attention? I have already qualified my question by saying that I supported the campaigns behind the two incidents that have been mentioned.

Blair Jenkins: There are two aspects to my reply. First, as yet there is no evidence that the incidents that have taken place so far—which received some coverage—have triggered the kind of response that Gil Paterson anticipates or fears. I have forgotten the other point that I wanted to make.

Brian Taylor: Gallery security is expertly handled by staff in the chamber. It is in their interests to prevent demonstrations and disruption of that nature. There may be others who wish to demonstrate on particular points of view but who have neither felt the need to follow the example of the Trident demonstration nor been permitted to do so. We do not seek circus-style coverage; we want to cover the Parliament. We wish simply to

adhere to the principle of the surrogate gallery—if something happens, we want to be able to show it. There is also a news value aspect. One demonstration is news, but the next is not. We do not seek to turn the Parliament into a show—far from it.

Mr Paterson: I appreciate that. I have been involved in campaigns for 35 years and have considered what would happen if free licence were given. It would mean that a message could be sent quickly throughout the nation. Is it not the case that those two incidents were not broadly—and certainly not instantly—publicised on live television? The net effect was that no publicity about the two incidents ever really materialised. I am concerned that if we give such incidents a bit of oxygen, before we know it we will have a flame.

Brian Taylor: Brief pictures of the Trident demonstration were shown live, after a delay. Following helpful discussion with the broadcasting office, we obtained a tape of the demonstration, a substantial part of which was shown on the 6.30 news. The coverage included a rather charming shot of a policeman helping one woman—a demonstrator—into the van, saying, “Mind your head there.” I thought that that was excellent. There has been no repetition of any sort of that incident, which happened between a year and 18 months ago. I would say, “Just show the things. Publish, publish, publish.”

Blair Jenkins: I thank Brian Taylor for rescuing my second point.

It is right and proper that the Parliament should try to strike the balance between openness and accessibility, and the security and dignity of the chamber. However, as broadcasters, we think that if it happens here, we should be able to show it. The Parliament would not wish to deny the population of Scotland the opportunity to know that something has happened.

Mr Paterson: What was the net effect on the broadcasting media of being excluded from the MMR briefings? Do you feel that you were discriminated against? Did that have an impact on your duty to broadcast?

Alasdair MacLeod: To be fair, I think that we were not hugely disadvantaged. We were able to show pictures from the opening statement of the press conference and, obviously, there were many other elements in our report. However, because the cameras had to leave before the rest of the briefing and the question-and-answer session, we were unable to show any of the subsequent debate in the currency of broadcasting—pictures and sound—whereas our colleagues from the print media were able to report it in their currency, which is the printed word.

Donald Gorrie: I hope that, as we speak, my

secretary is typing a letter to ask for monitors in the public gallery. Supporters of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats can see only the backs of our heads. Despite our lack of handsomeness, it would be nice for our supporters to see our fronts. Westminster does that better—the monitors in the public gallery are very good.

Does the BBC cover the constructive work of the Parliament as well as it covers the controversial aspects? Would it help if the Parliament had more public relations resources? The Executive and the parties have such resources, to which you naturally respond. Party conflict is quite well covered, but the constructive things that the Parliament does are not.

Alasdair MacLeod: I would like to think that we cover the constructive things that the Parliament does. If we consider our total output, beyond the news programmes, there are programmes such as “Holyrood Live”, and “Politics Tonight”, which is on the radio every night, majors on the Parliament and covers the committee work in a degree of depth. It is difficult to cover that work in great depth because of time constraints.

As for the media resources of the Parliament, there is the media relations office. I stress that we have a good relationship with that office. The information flow is good. Over the first two and a half years of the Parliament, we have established communication procedures with the committee clerks, which have been helpful in flagging up forthcoming issues. That allows us to take editorial decisions in good time on what we will cover and, hopefully, makes the quality of that coverage better. Whether the Parliament needs to develop the spin-doctor side is a question for MSPs. The existing operation is extremely effective and works well on the Parliament’s behalf.

Donald Gorrie: As Brian Taylor perhaps sees us more than the rest of you do, I ask him in particular what we should be doing to present ourselves better to the public. On the whole the public hate us. How can we make them love us?

Brian Taylor: I know that you feel that you have endured trial by media for the past two and a half years and it is perhaps understandable that you would seek to turn the tables on us at a session of this nature. However, I am slightly leery of giving guidance to politicians on how to conduct themselves in public. As a neutral, dispassionate journalist, I will take what is coming and report it as it is.

Our output covers the totality of the Parliament’s business. The biggest story in the past year has been the resignation and subsequent replacement of the First Minister. Perhaps the next biggest stories were free personal care, section 28 and the fisheries vote. In all those matters, it could be

argued that the Parliament exerted its influence over an issue that was in the public domain and on which the Executive sought to go a different way. If that is how one interprets “good news” parliamentary stories, I would say that we have covered such stories substantially.

As for how you make yourselves more lovable and attractive to the voters, I will leave that to the politicians.

Mr McAveety: How far should we go with access? We have to bear in mind the role and legitimate activity of the Parliament and the role of the public in understanding and participating in the Parliament’s work. If the Parliament becomes like “Match of the Day” or any event or occasion where people can be on camera, will that not work against the boring day-to-day process of any Parliament dealing with legislation?

Blair Jenkins: That is an interesting question. We will always be in favour of the maximum degree of openness. However, that does not mean that everything and everybody must always operate in a broadcasting environment, which might be rather an intolerable restriction. It is very important for journalists—and perhaps for parliamentarians—to bear it in mind that the electorate is primarily concerned with the outcome of the Parliament’s decisions and the impact on people’s lives. Although the process of political debate and division is of interest and is followed in our programmes, it is not of great significance to the mass of the population or the electorate. People are concerned with the impact on their lives of what the Parliament does. It is important to focus on that, rather than on the minutiae of procedure and process.

Mr McAveety: Perhaps Alan Smart can help. He said that our rules of coverage probably go much further than those of any equivalent legislature. Are they still not enough?

10:30

Brian Taylor: We are not far off the principle of a surrogate gallery that was adduced at the beginning. We are not bleating. Trust me—I am a journalist. The concern is that there might be a move to lodge caveats and to back away from that principle. The initial report of the CSG’s expert panel on media issues said that there would be rules on access to MSPs’ offices in the temporary premises because they were shared and open-plan offices. We could not go in to see one MSP in case we disrupted someone else. However, it was envisaged that those rules would be liberalised in the new building and I hope that that is the case. The initial principle of liberalisation was for improving public access, not to make it sweet for the BBC. It was intended to make the Parliament

seem open and accessible. I hope that that liberalisation of rules is carried through to the new building and that there is no further derogation and no further caveats.

Mr McAveety: Would that mean that you would have the opportunity to buy me lunch for the first time?

Brian Taylor: Absolutely. Take it as a date, Frank.

Mr McAveety: That would be possibly the worst date that I have ever had.

Alasdair MacLeod: In talking about openness within the chamber and committee rooms and, indeed, in the black and white corridor, we take seriously our public service remit to report what goes on in the Parliament as widely as we can—not just the controversies and sensation. At the same time, we have a duty to make that coverage as interesting as possible to the viewer. That is why things like the liberal rules of coverage and the ability to speak live to MSPs immediately outside the chamber on programmes such as “Holyrood Live” are important. Being able to speak to politicians directly while a debate is still going on gives the viewer the feeling that the Parliament is open and accessible.

The Convener: Before Susan Deacon asks her questions, I have another question for Alan Smart about the Holyrood project. Presumably pre-planning is being done for media issues. Could you tell us what is happening? Are or will the media be actively involved in working out practices in the new premises? Perhaps that would be a better question for Eric MacLeod, but whoever is willing may answer.

Alan Smart: Rather than catch Eric on the hop, I will say that my office’s responsibility is for the televising of Parliament along with the BBC. The broader question is about the media relations office. As I have indicated, an area of broadcasting that we are considering proactively is how to make it easier technically to cover the public gallery and other nooks and crannies, although that does not resolve the inherent dilemma.

The second thing we are going to do is televise habitually all committees of the Parliament. That will include all six committee rooms. We are televising three of them at the moment, if you count the chamber as a committee room. That will also create access. I am sure that Eric knows more about broader issues of media access.

Eric MacLeod (Scottish Parliament Media Office): Alan has talked me up slightly. The issue has not arisen as yet, but I was interested in Brian Taylor’s earlier comments that he sees the current arrangements as being the minimum. I agree with that. From my office’s point of view, it is important

that the media have as much access as possible. We have good working arrangements and I would like those to continue at Holyrood. At the moment, there are no plans to meet the media to discuss the issue, but I would happily consider that further with our security staff and the Presiding Officer.

Susan Deacon: I am pleased that a number of people have noted how liberal the broadcasting arrangements in the Parliament are already. Having been seen with a face like fizz in cutaways that would never have been permitted at Westminster on the news on both Scottish networks during not one but two significant First Minister's statements, I testify to that. I do not think that that is necessarily a bad thing.

Bernard Ingham, the former press adviser to Margaret Thatcher, once said that the relationship between politicians and the media

"is essentially cannibalistic. They feed off each other but no-one knows who is next on the menu."

I realise that you do not have two thousand words to discuss that statement today but I am interested in your comments. Has there been a feeding frenzy since devolution? Who has been on the menu? Or is there just an inherent tension that we all have to manage? Could we manage it better?

Blair Jenkins: While my colleagues gather their thoughts on that, it is quite important to say that, as I understand it, the remit of the committee and the evidence that we are giving is primarily concerned with how the Parliament has implemented its principles of openness and accountability. I do not think we want to stray too far into a discussion about how the media have covered the Parliament. I do not think that that is part of the terms of the inquiry.

While it is a fascinating subject and one that we discuss among ourselves often, I am not sure we should intrude into that area too far in an environment that is open and on the record. Having given that health warning, I hope that my colleagues will want to say something.

Brian Taylor: The metaphor that I would use is that the relationship between the media and politicians is like the relationship between the dog and the lamp post. I dissent from that slightly. There should be a healthy, creative tension between the media and the political process. It has been intense in Scotland during the first two and a half years of the post-devolution settlement. That is just a factor of novelty and of substance and because the Parliament is a big league Parliament that has deserved substantial coverage. Like Blair Jenkins, I would draw a line under whether the coverage has been fair or unfair. That is for our viewers and your voters to judge.

Susan Deacon: I am beginning to wonder who the politicians are, given some of the careful

sidestepping of the questions that is going on here.

I have a question for Brian Taylor, in the light of his involvement in the expert panel. Two and a half years on, and with the benefit of hindsight and hard, or even harsh, experience of everything that has gone on since, if you had the time over again, what would you or the panel have said or done differently? Do you think that rose-coloured glasses were being worn at that time and they should now be firmly removed?

Brian Taylor: Looking back to the days of the expert panel and the relatively liberal situation that we have now, it seems as if we had an extraordinary struggle to get the minimum access that we did. The atmosphere then was post-Westminster where television cameras and broadcasting had been admitted on sufferance as a necessary nuisance of the 20th century. When it came to the Scottish Parliament, we had a little residue of that legacy. Television was something to be suffered, endured and allowed to sneak in the back door as an unwelcome guest.

Two and a half years on, it seems bizarre to think that we had to have an endless fight that lasted months to get a camera into the black and white corridor where politicians are interviewed on a daily basis. I am sure that that is welcome because the alternative is standing out in the rain on the Mound. I am sure that no one would welcome that. That contrast seems bizarre. All we are seeking today is to ensure that there is no slippage and that access continues into the new building.

I also want to say to Susan that, with regard to shots of the gallery, when her wee girl shouted out "Mummy", we could have put that on television.

Susan Deacon: That was certainly a missed opportunity.

My final question is about the expert panel. You have said that a recommendation of the initial panel was that a new group should be formed to review broadcasting procedures. Could you elaborate on that and say what that group might look like and who might be in it? I note that the Scottish Parliamentary Journalists Association is not represented today because its members could not agree on their views on such matters. How can we form a consensus in such circumstances?

Blair Jenkins: The kind of group that we envisage would focus purely on broadcasting issues. We would separate that from any other issues that you have in relation to the media. We see it as being a working group that examines the details of the arrangements, what could be improved and how we could make progress, to prevent any misunderstandings and to allow for the most generous interpretation of the

Parliament's principles of openness and accountability, subject to any reservations that members may have. We see it as a practical, sleeves-rolled-up working group, which would deal with issues as and when they come up. We have an open mind as to the exact membership or composition of that group and the frequency with which it should meet. We would be happy to discuss that offline, as it were.

Susan Deacon: In a private briefing?

Blair Jenkins: Indeed. As I said earlier, that would benefit us not only in the current arrangements but, critically, in the way forward.

Alasdair MacLeod: We already have a very useful committee that meets a couple of times a year, which is chaired by Alan Smart. The broadcasters who have a stake in the broadcasting of the Parliament are represented. I sit on the committee, along with representatives of Scottish Media Group and other broadcasters. It is quite helpful to discuss issues beyond the day-to-day operational level, such as changes in the way in which the committees are covered, the introduction of a new camera unit to cover an extra committee room and so on. However, there is no forum at the strategic level where we can exchange views with members as well as with officials and the other broadcasters. We would welcome something at that level. Such a forum was envisaged in the early days, but has never come about. We look forward to being able to have that exchange of views.

Fiona Hyslop: Why has the expert panel not met if that is what the CSG recommended? It makes sense that it should meet. What happened? Did it get lost in the early days of the Parliament?

Alasdair MacLeod: I cannot answer that, except to say that we have the forum that allows us to carry out the week-to-week business. There is no disadvantage to the way things work at that level. Beyond that level, it simply has not happened.

Fiona Hyslop: It is such a sensible idea that it seems strange that it has not happened. It is perhaps a case of making it happen, rather than reflecting on why it has not.

Blair Jenkins said that it was not his job to say here how the Parliament is covered. That was somewhat disingenuous. Brian Taylor made the point that some major issues have centred on the Executive and have focused on decisions made in the chamber. By and large, because of the arithmetic of the Parliament, Labour and the Liberal Democrats drive those decisions. That makes it quite difficult for those in opposition to be part of the coverage, particularly if it is focused on the outcomes rather than the process. Opposition

politicians are more involved in the process, but when it comes to the decision, our view tends to be defeated by other members. The difference between the broadcasters and the editors on that point is interesting.

Holyrood is covered on a Wednesday afternoon and a Thursday. Is there any reason why you do not put more emphasis on committees? Do you see them as being part of the process rather than part of the outcome? Why do you not have more committee-oriented coverage on Tuesdays?

Blair Jenkins: I was not resisting talking about how the BBC covers Parliament. I thought that I was being invited to comment more broadly on how other media conduct themselves in relation to Parliament. It is not my business to get into that area.

I will leave it to Alasdair MacLeod and Brian Taylor to talk about the details of coverage of plenary meetings versus coverage of committees. Clearly, we are interested in both. When I was talking about the importance of outcomes, I was not implying that there ought not to be coverage of process. What has been a reality check for us all is that the vast majority of people are interested in what politicians do and how it impacts on their lives rather than in the intricate details of the process. That is true for the mass of the audience. Undoubtedly, there is a constituency that is keenly interested in the daily detail of the parliamentary process, how politicians go about their business and the various negotiations and political to-ing and fro-ing that occurs. It is important that we also serve that part of the audience. One could argue that "Holyrood Live" primarily attracts that keenly interested political audience. We understand the importance of the committees and we try to include them as often as we can. No doubt we could do more.

10:45

Alasdair MacLeod: There are two reasons why the emphasis in "Holyrood Live" on Wednesdays and Thursdays is on the chamber. First, chamber business is live at that time and the committees are not. Nevertheless, we carry reports from committees fairly regularly in Wednesday's programme. Secondly, there is a practical problem that relates to the grammar of television. The nature of committee business makes it difficult to boil down to a short report whilst maintaining the essence of the discussion. If there were live committees during our transmission time, we would probably carry more.

We have had the opportunity to do that only once. When the Parliament returned from its sojourn in Glasgow and the chamber was not quite ready for business, there was a day of committee meetings on a day that we were broadcasting, so

we carried some committee coverage. We will have an interesting opportunity to do that again in May, when the Parliament moves to Aberdeen. There will be a week of plenary meetings, with a week of committee meetings either side. I anticipate that committees will be meeting on a Wednesday or Thursday afternoon when we are broadcasting and that we will cover some of those meetings.

Fiona Hyslop: Can I ask about your concern about the formal briefing to which you did not have access? Having read the CSG recommendations, one would expect broadcast to be available on that. How often have you attempted to broadcast such briefings, or was it an odd occasion because of the issue under discussion?

Alasdair MacLeod: It was not a live broadcast; it was recorded for news purposes. Such briefings are fairly few and far between. That is the only example that I can think of where broadcasters were excluded.

Fiona Hyslop: Have you asked to cover something similar or was it a one-off?

Brian Taylor: It was a one-off with regard to the Parliament. Our concern relates to the Executive. We are routinely excluded from the briefings that are held in the building by the Executive. The reason we are given for that is that they are not televisual events that lend themselves to coverage. If we did have camera access, we would probably broadcast them relatively infrequently. We might find that they provide elementary back-up knowledge, whereas we have pictures of the events themselves or the debate in the chamber.

We want equivalence of the ideas of "on the record" and "on camera". We do not see why there should be any distinction between the two. It has taken years of toil to move from the pitiful Westminster system of whispers behind the hand and the lobby briefings that "didn't take place" in a little chamber at the top of a tower that I used to attend as a lobby correspondent in the early 1980s. It has taken years to cast aside that attitude and to reach a situation where if someone is speaking for the Executive, they are speaking on the record and their remarks are attributed and can be cast back at them if there are later arguments about what was said.

We say that on the record should mean on camera and on broadcast. I am aware that the Executive and some of our colleagues in the written press do not agree with that. That is the argument that we make and we are taking this opportunity to make the case for on the record being on camera.

Fiona Hyslop: Anything to do with this building is governed by the Parliament rather than by the

Executive. Clearly, it is up to the Executive what it chooses to do at Victoria Quay or St Andrew's House. In the locus of the Parliament, including meeting rooms, parliamentary rules govern rather than Executive rules. I assume that any briefings by the Executive within the environs of the Parliament as controlled by the Presiding Officer—

The Convener: I do not think that that is a sound distinction. The distinction is between the Executive and the Parliament. The Executive's practices exist wherever the Executive is operating. I would not like the discussion to be used to explore a line of attack on the Executive as opposed to exploring issues of the Parliament and the media.

Fiona Hyslop: This would cover the new building at Holyrood as well. Are the rules determined by the physical environs within which you are operating or by the organisation with which you are dealing? From what you have said, it is obvious that the rules are determined by the organisation with which you are dealing—the Executive—as opposed to the physical environs.

Brian Taylor: I make the same point as the convener: that is not a line that I seek to go down. The rules are governed by the Executive, which holds and invites us to the briefings. That is not a line of attack on the Executive.

The Convener: I was not suggesting that you were using a line of attack on the Executive.

Brian Taylor: We have a business-like and cordial relationship with the Executive's news staff. That is on the same basis as the relationship that we have with the broadcasting office, which we were praising happily earlier. I am simply saying that we have argued the point of principle that on the record should mean on camera. We have failed to convince others of that for some time, but we are pressing on undaunted.

Fiona Hyslop: Can I ask another question?

The Convener: Is it a different question?

Fiona Hyslop: I will move off the subject.

I want to pick up on a point that Susan Deacon made earlier on. To what extent do you use specialist correspondents for parliamentary coverage? Susan Deacon explored that question on the basis that newspapers use specialist correspondents when there is a particular story to cover. Brian Taylor provides good coverage from a political perspective, as he is a political correspondent. What editorial issues are involved in inviting specialist correspondents to cover specific key areas?

Alasdair MacLeod: The political correspondents and reporters provide the bulk of our coverage of the Parliament and its business. A

substantial staff is based in the Lawnmarket and Broadcasting House to cover the Parliament specifically.

Having said that, our specialist correspondents visit the Parliament from time to time, some more often than others. Correspondents such as Reevel Alderson, who covers home affairs, Pauline McLean, who covers arts, and Eleanor Bradford, who covers health, come along to committee meetings and debates quite often. The way the coverage breaks down is that Brian Taylor, Kirsten Campbell and Glenn Campbell cover the political elements of a story. The specialist correspondents tend to cover the non-parliamentary aspects of that story. The correspondents come along to debates or committee meetings that are relevant to something that they are doing.

The Convener: The environment correspondent is heavily involved in covering committee work and talking to politicians on camera in a way that perhaps the local government and health correspondents do not. Is that a reflection of individual aptitude? Is it an editorial policy or does it just happen?

Alasdair McLeod: It is probably a matter of convenience if anything. The environment correspondent is based in Edinburgh and it is easier for her to pop along. Some of our other correspondents are based in Glasgow. The correspondents are comfortable with coming along and including parliamentary business in what they do.

Blair Jenkins: We undoubtedly have a strong team of parliamentary journalists based here on behalf of BBC Scotland. Our specialist correspondents are one of our journalistic strengths. As the committee is aware, their specialisms more or less correspond to the devolved responsibilities of the Parliament. A complementary approach is taken whereby, as my colleagues have said, a large part of the parliamentary reporting resides with the political specialists. How that translates into what happens outside this place moves into the domain of those specialist correspondents.

Brian Taylor: Although the correspondent in a specialist area may not have come to the Parliament on a given day, it is common for them to have gone to a hospital or school and asked us to obtain parliamentary input to a story that they are preparing. That is virtually a daily occurrence. Although the correspondent herself may not come here, there will be parliamentary coverage.

The Convener: Thank you. That concludes our interest. I should have said at the beginning that when we review the exchanges, something might come up that we want further information on or clarification of. We might write to sort out one or

two points. Other than that, thank you for your attendance and contribution. I hope that you do not go away feeling that any of the questions have been hostile. They were meant to be exploratory and to show you different sides of what we think about our coverage and your part in it.

I invite Paul Holleran from the National Union of Journalists to give an oral presentation, following which we will ask questions.

Paul Holleran (National Union of Journalists):

Thank you. It was tempting to interrupt some of the questions that the previous guests were asked, to have an input. My view is, perhaps, slightly different from theirs. We have more of an overview of the media. The largest percentage of journalists in Scotland is in the NUJ. We have 100 per cent membership in lots of places, particularly the BBC, *The Herald* and *The Times*.

I would like to concentrate on our members who work in the Executive and, to a degree, the parties in the Parliament. About 70 of our members work as researchers and public relations people in the Executive and the parties. They have helped us and we have helped them to set up training projects, develop briefings and share information. That has raised our awareness of the need to increase the public relations element of the Parliament.

The BBC has a major role to play in reflecting what happens here, but we look also to the provincial newspapers, which are representative of areas throughout Scotland. A number of weekly newspapers in towns throughout Scotland do not reflect what happens here. Work needs to be done in that area and we have a role to play in that.

For a number of years, politicians took advice from consultants who worked in the media. That was heavily criticised, because it seemed as if the politicians were being shown how to handle the press and difficult situations and avoid questions. I am not sure how healthy that is. We would rather educate the politicians as well as the staff in the Parliament about how the media works across the board. That is essential and it is obvious to us that there is a requirement to do so.

I understand that there is going to be an expansion of the public relations element in the Scottish Parliament. We are prepared and keen to be involved in any training of media awareness in that area. The question of understanding how the media works is essential from your point of view. The question is not just about how the media perceives you, but about how you perceive the media. There are some difficult questions, such as how the minds of editors work, which is probably beyond anyone's ability to teach. There is a lot of work to be done on educating people about the day-to-day working of the Parliament, and we are

keen to help.

Fiona Hyslop mentioned the work of the committees. We have been quite impressed by the work of a lot of the committees. Without criticising the media unit in the Parliament, some work needs to be done to humanise the links between the legislation and how it affects people. We are keen to develop that.

We are impressed by the number of groups and organisations that committees have invited to give evidence on, for example, the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill. We have done some work with the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, which has considered matters such as broadcasting and standards in journalism—examining the number of specialists who have left *The Scotsman* in the past 12 months.

11:00

One of our main roles is maintaining standards within the media. We are not just concerned with industrial relations any more. In all the journalistic courses, such as those in Stirling University, Napier University and Cardonald College, we have members who are trying to raise standards in journalism. The CSG recommended that the Parliament link up with schools. I do not know how much progress is being made on that, but I think that it might be helpful for the Parliament to develop links with journalistic courses. That would help both sides understand how the system works.

The Convener: You commented on the needs of the local press. When we listen to the questions that are asked, the speeches that are given and the interventions that are made in the Parliament, we can tell that a huge proportion of what is said is destined for local media coverage. However, I have not given much thought to the needs of the local news media, although our officials might have. Are the local news media adequately served, or are there areas in which improvements could be made, not least in order to validate some of the items that are thrust their way as press releases?

Paul Holleran: I noticed that the Society of Editors raised the issue of press releases in its submission. A lot of blanket press releases end up in the bin. A more strategic approach is needed to target individuals and attach human interest stories to some of the work of the Parliament. That is a basic journalistic method and there is no doubt that work needs to be done in that area.

Susan Deacon: I hope that it is acceptable to quiz a member of the NUJ about a submission from the Society of Editors. The submission says:

“individually elected Members are mostly very active in putting constituency issues ... to Parliament and using the media to report back to the electorate.”

It goes on to say that list members are less effective in that regard. Later, it says:

“Other than some media relations work undertaken by a former Special Adviser to the First Minister, the Parliament appears to have made comparatively little effort outside the capital.”

That strikes me as a false distinction. Surely the work that MSPs are doing to establish links with the local media shows that MSPs are making an effort outside the capital. Given that engaging at a local level is part of MSPs' core business, would not we be barking up the wrong tree if we were to focus unduly on how the collective institution of the Parliament engages at a local level? Where do the responsibilities of MSPs lie as distinct from the responsibilities of the Parliament and its various press and PR operations?

Paul Holleran: I must say that I found some ambiguity and contradiction in the Society of Editors' position. I did not agree with a lot of the submission, particularly what it said about constituency MSPs and list MSPs. Frank McAveety will be well aware of a list MSP in his area who has no trouble getting into the local press because she has a media background.

We should not generalise. Some list MSPs with media backgrounds are capable of getting into the press and some constituency MSPs are almost invisible in their local media. That is probably down to the expertise of the individual member. Perhaps the relationship with the local paper has broken down—we have all seen the high-profile fallouts that have taken place between ministers and newspapers in the past few months. Some recognition of the role of local papers is needed. MSPs should be briefed on how to engage with the local press. I do not know whether MSPs are given training in that basic area when they take up their positions, but I doubt that they are. The question is different in relation to parliamentary staff and an overview needs to be taken of that, but MSPs need support when they handle the press and try to get their message across.

Susan Deacon: Everyone agrees that training and the acquiring of skills are undoubtedly good things. It is almost never a bad thing for people to gain better mutual understanding. I am interested in the work that you said the NUJ has undertaken in this area and I would like you to be more specific, if that is possible. What can be done to ensure that the training and development that is available is taken advantage of by all MSPs and their staff rather than only by those who know about it? How can effective media relations be built into the way in which MSPs and their staff work?

Paul Holleran: I do not know how much more specific I can be. Many of my members would say that we should keep our distance from the

Parliament and should not tell MSPs and staff how to behave. I disagree. The press and the Parliament are both parts of the democratic structure of this country. For both of them to function properly, there must be closer understanding and closer work between them. If we fall out occasionally, we must understand that that is the nature of the game.

Trust must be developed. The representatives of the BBC were asked whether it was responsible to cover a demonstration in the public gallery. Brian Taylor basically said, "Trust me—I'm a journalist." Trust needs to be developed in how the media and the Parliament work. If problems arise in relation to people's relationships or the negativity of certain papers, we need to develop ways of dealing with them. People talk about the Press Complaints Commission, but I think that it is a waste of space. There is no reason why Scotland could not develop an expert panel to examine issues arising from problems of the sort that I mentioned. A more formal approach may be required.

Mr McAveety: Since the Parliament was set up, I have noticed that journalists have moved between papers quite a lot and I have been interested to see how the stories that they write and the way in which they cover certain issues change as they do so. Is that because of the editor or because the journalists are weak?

Paul Holleran: Yes.

Mr McAveety: Both?

Paul Holleran: Yes. There is a clear correlation between the driving down of the unions' influence and the ability of editors to drive through changes in copy and in the direction of papers. The editor has to have the final say, of course, but there is less of an ability among journalists in lots of papers—

Mr McAveety: Are you aware of any examples of the factual accuracy of and the use of phraseology in a story that was written by an NUJ member being less than they should have been?

Paul Holleran: You have to remember that it is possible for a journalist on a paper such as the *Daily Record* to have their story rewritten three times before it appears in the paper. The editor can dictate the angle that the paper is taking. A lot of journalists become nervous about their contacts, because the story that they have been given in good faith might bear no resemblance to the published version. One of the biggest problems that I have to deal with relates to industrial relations between editors and staff, not just to editorial matters. Editors have no management skills and that permeates the way in which they run their newspapers.

Mr McAveety: Have your members raised issues about parliamentary coverage being amended by editors? It would be a shocking revelation if what they alleged was the case.

Paul Holleran: People have constantly raised that issue.

Mr McAveety: That conflicts dramatically with the submission that we received from newspaper editors.

Paul Holleran: That is no surprise.

Mr McAveety: So when editors say that they have reported matters as accurately as possible and that they would be surprised to find inaccuracy—

Paul Holleran: I would believe everything that people such as John McLellan have to say about that. Some newspapers report straight; the stories that they carry reflect that. However, some newspaper editors have their own agenda.

Mr McAveety: Do you believe that, since the creation of the Parliament, there has been an agenda not to report things as fairly or accurately as they should be reported?

Paul Holleran: Absolutely. That is not just true of the reporting of the Parliament. Coverage of issues such as refugees and asylum seekers has been distorted. The public sometimes seem to think that the NUJ is responsible for what appears in the newspapers. Members of the public phone us and complain about editorials. I think that there is a problem, which also reflects standards in journalism.

Mr McAveety: You mentioned that it is important for politicians, the media and the PR media specialists who have proliferated in the past decade to share experience. Has that been healthy? In the past week, there has been an interesting development in which a former employee of the Executive had three days of coverage but did not necessarily reveal anything new or interesting. He is now going to feature as a regular columnist. Is that a healthy two-way process? Should there be a period of modest reflection between leaving one post and taking up another?

Paul Holleran: That is an interesting debate, which has to continue. For example, we are in the process of signing an agreement with the SNP staff group. We have about 50 members—mostly researchers and PR people—and we are finalising a recognition agreement that contains a clause dealing with confidentiality and what someone who leaves their post should do. The issue is delicate and difficult to manage and control. I do not think that someone can be sued for breach of contract under such an agreement. I do not think that Peter McMahon's stuff has caused too much damage.

We are talking about a breach of faith—that is how the issue is put in the SNP agreement. However, any such behaviour does not reflect well on the journalists.

Mr McAveety: I will come back with more questions.

Mr Paterson: I return to a point that you raised earlier and that we covered with previous witnesses. Do you think that there is a requirement to counterbalance the welter of PR in the hands of the Executive and the political parties? As the general view is that the committees seem to be a particularly successful part of the Parliament's work, do you think that there is a need for committees to have PR or should there be PR for the Parliament through the Presiding Officer or another office?

Paul Holleran: The term "PR" has been muddled over the years because of the way in which people see spin doctors. We need to get away from that. A lot of any success in PR comes down to who is recruited, how they are trained and how they interact with the press, but that is a different issue. PR people from all parties will put a spin on things. It is more important that the Scottish Parliament has good public relations and good links with the media that reflect the positive things that are happening.

The BBC covers big issues when reporting decisions that the Executive takes, but there is another tier of news to come out of the Scottish Parliament. That might go to local radio or newspapers. For example, equal opportunities work that is being done in the Parliament does not get a lot of coverage. The human-interest element could be expanded and the benefits that are available could be shown. A number of other areas could be developed.

We need to get away from seeing PR as being about people putting spin and distortion on things. We need to work towards the dissemination and sharing of information. I hope that that answers your question.

11:15

Mr Paterson: Do you think that it would be worth our having someone to sit in Procedures Committee meetings while members are deliberating who would be ready to talk to the media after members came to decisions? Other committees, such as the Local Government Committee and the Equal Opportunities Committee, could have someone—rather than individual MSPs—to do some of the spade work.

Paul Holleran: That comes down to accountability. We are not involved in many disputes these days, but when we are we always pick a spokesperson, so that there is some

consistency. If they say something that is out of line, they are held accountable. That is a reasonably healthy approach to take.

The Convener: I introduce Ann Galbraith to the committee. She is the chairman of the Society of Editors in Scotland. A couple of points about the local press have been raised, although there might be more. One was the adequacy of services to local newspapers—whether enough information is coming through and is presented in the right way and whether you are overly reliant on individual MSPs as opposed to the output of the Parliament. The other point, which has just been made, is that much of the Parliament's work could be made relevant and interesting locally if it were fed in from a human-interest, exemplar point of view rather than as news stories. I invite you to respond to that and to make any other point that you think is pertinent to the experience of the local press.

Ann Galbraith (Society of Editors (Scotland)): Thank you. I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute. I was sitting in the gallery and realised that I could add to what was being said, particularly when Paul Holleran mentioned local newspapers.

Local newspapers are in many ways MSPs' biggest audience. The broadcasters will get out to a large audience, but one has to consider the number of local newspapers and readers. We have a totally different approach; we cover everything. We are not looking for the controversial, although we will cover it if it happens.

Local newspapers will handle the basics of what the committee has been talking about this morning. I am the editor of the *Ayr Advertiser* series, which is on Murray Tosh's home ground. We have a good working relationship with MSPs. Members from the Labour and Conservative parties are in our office all the time; we see John Scott, the Tory, and Cathy Jamieson from Labour, who is now a minister. They feed us stuff and we use it because we have the space. They will give us a wee bit of a spin, but we do not have the same attitudes as the national newspapers.

We want to inform the public. I find that MPs get cross, because I am not carrying as many stories from Westminster. The local newspapers' readership is interested in what is happening in the Scottish Parliament. MSPs could use local newspapers much more successfully. The main tool must continue to be the local MSPs, who should be encouraged to come into the newspaper office. I can assure you that the local newspaper editor will be happy to see them and happy to use what is happening in the Parliament. That is a means of translating anything that is going on into local terms and it reaches a wide readership.

The Convener: Do you get much material provided directly from the Parliament and do you use it?

Ann Galbraith: Yes. We still get the old-fashioned faxes and phone calls, but we are also starting to use the internet. However, that tends to involve general information, on which we have to put a local spin. Again, we rely on local MSPs to tell us what is coming up that is particularly relevant to the local area. We have to keep local guys involved in local newspapers; the process is a two-way thing. We want to carry that information. We want the minutiae that the national press and broadcasters do not want so, in a sense, we offer a better service and should be used. We are being used quite well; a good relationship is building up. To the detriment of Westminster coverage in the local papers, it is the Scottish Parliament that people want to know about.

The Convener: I should say in the interests of balance that Adam Ingram gets a fair amount of coverage, too.

Ann Galbraith: Yes. He is very good. The MSPs for my area are particularly good. Who could ask for a better man for stirring up public interest than Phil Gallie? I have four very good guys in my area who produce stories for me. All local newspapers can offer MSPs the same service. We can provide a bit of education for MSPs. Those who are not using their local newspapers should be encouraged to do so. People from local newspapers could come to Parliament and talk to groups of members about how to use their local media. We may not always give free newspapers the same credit as we do those that we pay for, but those free newspapers also have a readership. Members can use local newspapers to get some of the coverage that they complain about missing out on.

Mr McAveety: Your submission contains fairly strong criticism about the alleged invisibility of members who are not constituency members. However, a number of contributions, including yours, suggest that those members are not so invisible. It strikes me that that depends on the individual member.

Ann Galbraith: That is right. As I said, the MSPs who are not coming forward to their local papers need a bit of education. That would help them, as Paul Holleran said. There is a two-way education process. We obviously cannot come to Edinburgh from our local newspaper offices except for a special occasion, when we might arrange to send a reporter to cover a specific debate. We are limited in our reporting presence, but that does not mean that we are not interested. We need a different means of receiving the information that we want to publish.

Mr McAveety: Has the establishment of the Parliament created a greater interest than existed before? Is there the potential to generate more stories for local papers to cover? A major criticism is that newspapers across the board have diminished their coverage of parliamentary activities and decision making. Paul Holleran talked about humanising stories to link them to localities and to people's experiences. How do we do that? One of our key problems is getting across the message that the Parliament is genuinely for the people of Scotland wherever they are. Local papers should reflect that.

Ann Galbraith: That is where MSPs should be used. They can translate stories for their local offices and get picture opportunities. Newspaper editors will help them. I carry political columns. I started with Cathy Jamieson and John Scott. Unfortunately, I have had to follow up with Sandra Osborne and George Foulkes, because they felt that they were not being represented, so I now carry one column from an MP followed by one from an MSP. Struan Stevenson MEP also gets a look-in occasionally, so I now carry a political column every week. I encourage the contributing members to make their column chatty and not too heavily politicised. That has been quite successful and satisfies a reader interest, so I am now carrying more parliamentary material than I ever did before the Scottish Parliament was established.

If local papers can get the human-interest stories, they will all carry similar columns. I feel that that is a great service to parliamentary coverage and to the image of the Parliament. People do not scoff at what goes into a local paper; they are not as cynical about it as they are about what happens at national level. Members can use that to their advantage.

Fiona Hyslop: I, too, am a member of the Ayrshire Mafia, as I am from Ayr and frequently read the *Ayr Advertiser* when I go down to visit my family.

The Convener: She does not necessarily get a mention this week, however.

Fiona Hyslop: It has been interesting to observe the change that has taken place over the years in the political content of the Ayrshire papers. Your paper and its competitor contain a great deal of coverage of MSPs, including Adam Ingram and the others whom you mentioned. However, the situation is different in other parts of the country. Some local newspapers are very local in focus. The Carrick Street halls petition came from your neck of the woods, but it had an impact here. Petitions are one of the areas in which the Parliament has been able to make a connection with people and to capture the human element that Paul Holleran was talking about. To what

extent is your coverage of petitions derived from MSPs who may be helping the organisations concerned? How much of it comes from the Scottish Parliament media centre? The Parliament's head of media relations may be able to help us with that.

Ann Galbraith: Our information is sourced locally. Because of distance, we do not have much interaction with the media centre. Local newspapers are coming late to using the internet and e-mail, so we have been slow to catch up. Now that we have an e-mail facility, we will probably receive more information from the media centre. However, our starting point tends to be information from local MSPs.

Fiona Hyslop: I want to ask about the idea of public relations for the Parliament. Paul Holleran may also want to comment on that. One could take the view that every MSP is an ambassador for the Parliament as a whole, rather than just for their own political views. To what extent do you think that we need to raise the standards of coverage of this democratic institution, instead of concentrating on popular stories? Has your organisation been involved in seeking to build up a good relationship between local newspapers across Scotland and the Parliament, so that the variability of coverage that I mentioned can be avoided, or has that not happened because people are too busy getting on with producing copy?

Ann Galbraith: People are focused on producing copy. I do not know about PR for the Parliament, but each MSP can carry out PR for his area. If a meeting is taking place between broadcasters and the Parliament, an invitation to local newspaper editors to meet members to discuss the needs of their area might not go amiss. Our needs are different from those of the national media. I understand that the Parliament is focused on the national media and that we are the poor relations. However, the service that we provide is more valuable. I do not know whether that has answered your question.

Fiona Hyslop: Does Paul Holleran see a role for the NUJ as part of an expert panel on broadcasting, the aim of which would be to build up standards of coverage of the Parliament? Does Ann Galbraith think that the local media would like to contribute to the work of such a body?

Paul Holleran: Last night I looked at the list of those who were members of the original expert panel. Apart from colleagues in the BBC, most of the members have moved on to other jobs. The panel should be updated and broadened; its membership was too narrow. Meetings should take place on at least a quarterly basis.

The focus should not simply be on how

broadcasting works or on access to the press. We took a delegation to the Dáil in Dublin to see how our colleagues there and in the Northern Ireland Assembly work. We were looking forward to making some sort of input, but we were denied that option, although I suppose we could have submitted something in writing. We have also explored the relationship between the European Parliament and the press. We would like to contribute our expertise to discussion of the interaction between Parliament and the press, not just on technical issues, but more generally.

The Convener: To wrap up this evidence-taking session, I ask Eric MacLeod to offer the view of the Scottish Parliament media office on the points that have arisen. Can you identify areas of on-going work and initiatives that we might usefully pursue?

Eric MacLeod: We have covered the two main issues, the first of which is the role of MSPs as ambassadors for their local paper. We cannot stress highly enough how important that role is.

We discussed appointing a PR officer, or spin-doctor, to the Parliament, but the Parliament has a media relations office. Our job is to reach out to media organisations and to inform them about what is happening in Parliament. Our key priority has to be local newspapers, as they make up a massive market which, although not completely untapped, is missing out on contact with the Parliament as an institution, with the committees and—by the sounds of it—with individual MSPs.

I am pleased to report that my office is in the process of recruiting more staff. I hope to make progress in reaching out to local papers in the near future—I hope that that will make a difference. Our work with local papers definitely marks an important step forward for media coverage of the Parliament. After the meeting, I will be happy to discuss with any of the witnesses ideas on which they might wish to sound me out. I am looking forward to making a real difference once we have more staff in place. The staff resources that the Parliament has put into the media office have been a key issue over the past two and a half years. As I said, we are now recruiting staff and I hope that members will see a return on that investment.

11:30

The Convener: That was a skilful bid for more resources.

Eric MacLeod: I am pleased to say that the additional staff have been budgeted for already.

The Convener: You said that to deflect hostile press stories about the Parliament's recruitment of more staff.

I thank both Paul Holleran and Ann Galbraith for their useful evidence.

The last evidence that we will take will be from Professor Philip Schlesinger of the Stirling media research institute, who has had a long wait. I hope that you understand our formula, Professor Schlesinger—you give us your thoughts and we ask you questions or make points.

Professor Philip Schlesinger (Stirling Media Research Institute): I will present a short paper. There is a risk of repetition, but anything that has already been said may reinforce the points that I am likely to make. I thank the committee for asking me to give evidence.

The Parliament's founding principles have an important communications dimension. Power sharing is impossible without knowledge of the political process, which depends on accurate information flows. Parliament cannot be accountable to the Scottish people if its activities are not well understood or widely known about. Parliament cannot be accessible and engender participation if its workings are not widely known about beyond the aficionados of Holyrood. Equal opportunities depend on an informed political community.

The Scottish Parliament still has an identity problem as far as the public are concerned. It has a history of often negative media coverage—which was alluded to earlier—with the Holyrood building project and MSPs' finances to the fore. The Parliament is not always distinguished from the Executive by which it tends to be overshadowed. Some of the Parliament's most constructive work in its committees and educational outreach is less well known about than it should be.

At a time of falling electoral participation—witness the UK general election and the European Parliament election—it is imperative to address the question of the political legitimacy of the Scottish Parliament. As an institution, its public credibility is directly connected to the implementation of the CSG's principles.

Last year, Stirling media research institute undertook a communications audit of the Parliament at the request of the Deputy Presiding Officer, George Reid, and the chief executive, Paul Grice. Our broad recommendation was that the Parliament needs a considered communications strategy to achieve the CSG's aspirations. The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body accepted that recommendation and, apparently, more detailed recommendations are being implemented.

We proposed that, among other steps, the approach to media relations should be rethought, proactive and built up. We note from recent advertisements for posts in that area that such a

build-up is now happening. In some media quarters, the communications audit has been interpreted as advocating the use of spin-doctors or the polishing of the Parliament's image. However, that was far from our thinking. We believe that genuine openness and positive relations with the media will be advantageous in promoting awareness of the Parliament's work and in building public trust.

We have stressed the importance of being frank about the difficulties of the Holyrood building project, which will remain on the public agenda for the foreseeable future and will have a decisive impact on the Parliament's image.

We also think that consistent expansion of the reach of media relations beyond political reporting into other specialisms—areas such as health, the environment, crime and social affairs—is important. That has been touched on. We found that, although Scotland's national media are central to any such proactive strategy, some carefully targeted news would be of interest to local media. What has just been said supports that.

The Parliament is, and should be, much more than its mediated presence in Scotland. To show the legislative process at work, open days in Edinburgh—which are an important way of letting the public see their legislature—should occur on days on which the Parliament is sitting. It is also vital to ensure that the Parliament's promotional effort travels around Scotland. One of the best ways of doing that would be to connect that effort to the movement of committees around the country, which should be publicised.

The committees represent perhaps the greatest undersold dimension of the Parliament's contribution as a new institution. Meeting in a variety of locations around Scotland could raise incrementally the Parliament's profile, spread the sense of ownership geographically and achieve beneficial links with the local media.

Educational outreach to schools is not pursued. In colleges and universities, connections need to be made with young adults who are already of voting age, as they are among the most disengaged from the formal political process.

An enhanced website could also improve accessibility. As it stands, much information is made available to the policy community in Scotland. A more user-friendly website, with more easy-to-read, newsworthy content could have wider appeal. Improvements have been made since we reported in August 2001.

Although the Parliament is reported by broadcasting, we are struck by how little of its working activity is being transmitted to the public, other than by highly specialised programmes at

unpopular times. That is not to decry in any way the broadcasters' efforts—without any doubt, the position is an artefact of scheduling. We have noted with interest the webcasting of the Parliament's activity that was announced earlier this month. That is a positive move, which uses coverage of the parliamentary process and exploits the audiovisual archive to promote public knowledge and interest. However, judging by the initial numbers of people who have accessed the Westminster equivalent, I think audiences will probably remain very small.

The Scottish Parliament is continually active in external relations, but relatively little of that activity is known to the public. More thought needs to be given to linking external relations to a broader communications strategy. The same applies to the range of activities that are grouped under participation services. Although in the communication age every institution must market itself effectively, marketing for its own sake is not valuable. Marketing will only be worth while if it addresses the problem of falling political engagement and builds relations with the electorate.

The Convener: Will you develop the point that you made about scheduling? Some live coverage of the Parliament happens during the day, but many of the political programmes are broadcast in late evening slots. Broadcasts that deal with the Parliament seem to come on after the Gaelic programmes—we had complaints about that earlier. Is there a realistic prospect of the television companies moving the relevant programmes to slots that are more attractive and accessible to the public? If the companies did that, would it make a difference and would people watch those programmes? Are you asking for things that cannot happen?

Professor Schlesinger: I was not necessarily asking for that to happen—I was simply noting the time at which such programmes are broadcast. It is for the broadcasters to say what they would do. I come hotfoot from an interesting discussion about political participation broadcasting that was held at Stirling University yesterday. It is clear that broadcasters are under increasing commercial pressure to marginalise certain kinds of participation. Political broadcasting is no doubt under pressure—people are holding the line as best they can and trying to think about new ways of going about it.

This is an inherently difficult area. The point I was making is less to do with what broadcasters can and cannot do and more to do with the problems of accessing the activity of Parliament. The Parliament does not meet at the times when most people are able to see it. While we were doing the communications audit we tried to gain a

comprehensive view of the strengths and weaknesses of how Parliament is portrayed in a variety of media and settings.

The Convener: You referred to webcasting, which is limited by the number of people who can take advantage of it—perhaps more people can take advantage of the website. Although you have noted recent improvements to our website, you have left the impression that significant improvements could still be made. What changes should we consider?

Professor Schlesinger: You have to consider what the website is really for and who is accessing it. According to our research, the vast majority of people who access it are actively connected to the political process—they are a part of the policy community. That is the website's prime audience. On the basis not only of our work for the Parliament, but of the literature on the interactive society and other research, we are somewhat sceptical about the claim that the internet will be a major way in which interaction will take place between electorates—or publics—and the political world. There has been a tendency to oversell the availability of technology and the level of interest among the public. People have to be motivated to want to know things about politics if they are to make use of such a facility. The website is an incredible research tool and a good way of demonstrating that the Parliament is available and accountable to the public. I do not wish to knock its existence—like many other people who do research, I find it very useful. It is just that perhaps one needs a sense of the inherent limitations of the technology, despite its universal potential.

Mr Paterson: When you said that the Parliament has an identity problem, you were raising a point that has been raised time and again by witnesses. Could you expand on that?

Professor Schlesinger: The point came up in earlier evidence-taking sessions. It is still not easy for many members of the Scottish public to distinguish between the Parliament and the Executive. That might be for a variety of reasons, but at the core of the identity problem is the fact that the Parliament is a young institution. How an institution acquires an identity over and above the identities of the people who are making it work is complicated. On the whole, politics is presented as the activities of the Government, conflicts between political parties and arguments about legislation and so on. Behind that is an institution that tends to be overshadowed by rows and by the fact that government—as opposed to legislature—is what is massive in politics. That is not a new problem, nor is it singular to Scotland or the United Kingdom.

I take the view that members of the public know that the Westminster Parliament is clearly distinct

from the Government and do not identify the Government with the party in power, although they recognise that there is a connection. Understanding of the Scottish Parliament has yet to reach that point. It is partly a matter of time and partly to do with the rather bruising encounters that the Parliament has had over the past two and a half years with sections of the media—although I would not over-generalise about that.

In my experience, the people who are the most positive about the Parliament are people in the policy community, people who have had interaction with MSPs or people who have, in one way or another, come to the Parliament to examine it. Outside that corpus of people, the vast majority of the public are yet to engage with the Parliament.

11:45

Mr Paterson: Would the Scottish Parliament—not the Scottish Executive—have a higher rating if, from the start, a clearer separation had been made in the public's mind between who makes up the Government and who makes up the Parliament? Even at this late stage, should we be more proactive in letting the public know who is in the Government, who makes decisions, who gets the credit and so on? That is what happens elsewhere.

Professor Schlesinger: Given the constitutional set-up, the matter is complicated. The term "Government" is a rather contentious term in Scotland. The Executive is both a civil service and a Cabinet that is recognisably similar to the UK Government but with different competencies. The way in which the institutions were developed was inherently confusing and we have not yet overcome that problem. I am not sure how the Government could be separated from the Parliament as the Government sits in the Parliament and, in the UK system, is accountable to it—it is not a separate institution. Some sort of effort needs to be made to familiarise the public with the political geography. The situation is complicated further by the existence of the Scotland Office as a legatee of the Scottish Office. All that is extremely familiar to people in this room and the specialists who cover this institution but—as you will have discovered in the course of discussions with members of the public—people on the street do not make those distinctions easily.

Mr McAveety: Are people influenced much by what newspapers write?

Professor Schlesinger: Yes, and they are influenced by the broadcast media.

Someone with direct experience of the Parliament or a need to know certain things about the Parliament will encounter the Parliament in

one way but other people will rely on what they read, see and hear and the on information that circulates in their circle of acquaintances. Without direct experience, people are reliant on a mediated image of politics. That is as true of the Parliament as it is of any political institution.

Mr McAveety: As institutions go, would you say that the Parliament has had a fair wind in that mediated perspective?

Professor Schlesinger: Blowing in which direction?

Mr McAveety: In the direction of factual accuracy.

Professor Schlesinger: I do not know about factual accuracy, but in terms of overall portrayal, the Parliament got off to a pretty bad start. I do not need to go through the whole sorry set of stories. Much of that has persisted. Some of the problems of the former First Minister were loaded onto the Parliament, partly because of the confusion between the Parliament and the Executive. If one takes the view that most people are not fantastically politically interested—that is not to say that they are ignorant, but that politics is not the be-all and end-all of their lives—things tend to get blurred. If the predominant image is negative and critical, that is what people will accept.

Mr McAveety: Has it surprised you to hear this morning that editors might have a disproportionate influence on the final outcome?

Professor Schlesinger: Not at all. That is what editors exist for—they are hired to sell papers. Some newspaper proprietors have a particular political line and that is part of the package. There is nothing uncommon about that.

Mr McAveety: Do you understand the scepticism of individuals who doubt whether a more open and pluralist approach to media involvement would be reciprocated by certain sections of the media?

Professor Schlesinger: If I put myself in your position, I would understand why one would feel that that would be risky.

Mr McAveety: Do you have any suggestions as to what course of action I should take?

Professor Schlesinger: I do not know—perhaps a steadying wee swally?

The thrust of what I have been trying to say is less directly concerned with MSPs as political individuals belonging to parties than it is with the institution of Parliament and the problem that it faces. MSPs need to look beyond their parties and to think of themselves as ambassadors for the institution as a whole. We are coming up to another election in 2003 and people would not want levels of abstention to grow—that would be

detrimental to this young institution. There must be a certain urgency in considering how the Parliament puts itself across and the other issues that have been discussed today, but I understand why members would be worried about taking risks, because they might get a good kicking.

Mr McAveety: I have a funny feeling that the *Official Report* of this meeting might get me in greater difficulty with certain sections of the media.

Professor Schlesinger: I am sure that it will not.

Professor David McCrone (Adviser): How does one reconcile the general perception—mainly anecdotal—that the Parliament has not been successful in the eyes of the public, with the considerable survey evidence from commercial opinion polls and systematic surveys, that people are actually quite happy with the Parliament? There is a dislocation—that is very interesting for academics to argue about between—the doom and gloom and the results of the surveys. Is there something wrong with the surveys? What kind of evidence do we need in order to reconcile those two ideas?

Professor Schlesinger: Professor McCrone is the social surveys expert. It is possible for people to hold quite contradictory views. The creation of a Parliament was very important and popular—we know that it had a lot of support.

There is a sense of ownership. The establishment of the Parliament has changed the way in which the British constitution operates and how the UK looks as a political entity. At one level, that is accepted and acknowledged. However, people's thinking about how the Parliament might connect with their everyday lives is something altogether different. People can accept a major political change and still not think that that change is delivering the goods.

Professor McCrone: How do we know that that is true? What evidence do we have that people see things that way?

Professor Schlesinger: I am not suggesting anything other than what people say to me. The claims that I have just made are not based on survey evidence. However, the way in which Professor McCrone framed his question suggested that he knows that the survey evidence does not tell us everything. The anecdotal evidence is not to be dismissed; it is what circulates. Survey evidence is based on what people say for the purposes of a survey, and people might sometimes tell researchers what they want to hear.

The Convener: At this point I would like Janet Seaton to come in. Our own research and information staff have been doing work in that.

Janet Seaton (Scottish Parliament Information Centre): The research and information group is developing an external communications strategy, the main theme of which is to make the Parliament more meaningful to the people of Scotland. As Philip Schlesinger said, we believe that people's perceptions of the Parliament are related directly to having direct experience of it. One of the main themes on which we intend to concentrate is that of supporting members to be local ambassadors, however they wish to do that. We also want to ensure that we are able to promote the work of committees, particularly when they go out and about, because that makes a local connection. I reassure everyone present that we will take on board all the comments that have been made today, which have been very helpful.

Susan Deacon: Professor Schlesinger has made some very important comments that we would all do well to dwell on for a moment. You have spoken about the importance of each of us being ambassadors for the institution and the wider political process, and about the urgency of the need for us to do that. In your introductory remarks, you said:

"marketing for its own sake is not valuable. Marketing will only be worth while if it addresses the problem of falling political engagement and builds relations with the electorate."

Those are fairly heavy-duty comments. We have spent a long time this morning having a pop at journalists, but let us look closer to home. Do you think that we want to have our cake and eat it? Do you think that we as politicians are too prone to appealing to others to see all the great and good work that we do while—to put it bluntly—knocking lumps out of one another when that suits us for party-political ends? Do you think that we need to take a long hard look at how we combine the political imperatives of the party system with the need for us to promote, nurture and cherish an institution that is very much in its infancy?

Professor Schlesinger: Susan Deacon puts things very well. The principles that we are discussing today—a little indirectly—were aimed at setting up a new kind of relationship with the electorate and new forms of accountability. That is incredibly difficult to do in an institution that must move very quickly to establish its procedures and to deal with what is thrown at it. For that reason, having an opportunity to reflect in an inquiry such as this is very useful.

The problem with which we are dealing is one that faces not only the Scottish Parliament, but Westminster—perhaps in greater measure.

There are problems with the way in which party politics are conducted. It has been mentioned that there are problems that have arisen from excessive spin and excessive distance and from

assuming that people do not understand that they are being manipulated by the information that they get.

12:00

People function politically by squaring off their experience with what is said to them. When that gap grows enormously, we get the kind of disaffection and retreat from politics that seems to be happening—people seem to be taking other directions such as social movement or protest or refusing on principle to vote. It is a difficult issue

Luckily I am not a practising politician—or any sort of politician—so I do not have the problem of deciding how to make that trade-off. However, that is going to be forced upon the political class of Scotland and of the UK more generally if the decline in political engagement continues. At the moment, it is a moot point—is the current situation a tendency or is it merely a blip? The evidence is not absolutely clear but it would be best to assume that it is a tendency rather than to carry on and blithely ignore it.

Susan Deacon: I want to test a little further how we might make such a trade-off and ask you to make comments based on your research and insights.

I am struck that many of your comments have been about the need to establish the identity of the Parliament. Is not that battle for identity part of the problem rather than part of the solution? For example, when the Executive washes its hands of the Holyrood building and says that it is a matter for the SPCB, or when the Parliament washes its hands of controversies surrounding future First Ministers or other specific policy issues and says that they are matters for the Executive, the public just sees politicians failing them and not delivering on the matters that are important to them. Should not we move beyond establishing identities and move away from the blame culture and instead consider the positive promotion of politics?

Rather than the Parliament and the Executive sitting in isolation and considering how they each promote and sell their wares, is not there a case for the two to work hand in hand, particularly during the early stages of devolution? They could agree on how some of the wider communications issues could be addressed. In my view, that does not dilute the differentiation and distinction of the roles of the Executive and the legislature—if anything, it could serve to clarify and reinforce them. Is not there common ground?

Professor Schlesinger: There is definitely common ground and it has nothing to do with parties. The common ground is that we do not want to set up new institutions and see them not work. There is a common and public interest in

institutions working well and credibly. That is an interest of politicians and of the wider public. I would therefore have to say yes to the question whether there is common ground.

At the same time, the differences are important because the Parliament was set up as the pivotal institution. If we think back to all the debates that took place, it seems to me that there was no discussion about the Executive. The assumption was that the Scottish Office would continue and be renamed the Scottish Executive. Another part of it was to be called the Scotland Office, although that term seems to have been invented later. All the discussion was about what the Parliament would do. That was what was sold by the white paper and the Scotland Bill. I do not think that the Executive was considered during those public debates. It seems to me that because the Parliament is what has been sold and presented as having been restored, it is the Parliament that must have an identity. I do not think that that contradicts what Susan Deacon said about how we need to think about how the different bits fit together. The issue that is before the committee is the job of selling the Parliament, but there is a broader issue about Scottish political institutions.

Fiona Hyslop: I want to build on the theme of identity. One point about the Scottish Parliament is that its identity is not connected only to the six political parties that sit in the Parliament or to individual MSPs—it is bigger and wider than that. Given that I introduced the phrase “ambassador of the Parliament”, I would be sincerely worried if public relations for the Parliament depended only on members.

I am a wee bit concerned about Janet Seaton’s comments. She seemed to say that the communications strategy will be grounded in MSPs. I believe that there is a need for the Parliament to drive the communications strategy. The three Presiding Officers are the only individuals who can speak for the Parliament. We must strengthen the Parliament’s communications; MSP’s contributions should be an add-on to that.

I am interested in Janet Seaton’s and Professor Schlesinger’s comments on how we build the institution. There is good will towards the Parliament but, as Susan Deacon said, sometimes knocking from political parties diminishes people’s relationship with democratic institutions. What can and should we do to develop the communications strategy of the institution, beyond relying on individual MSPs?

Janet Seaton: The communications strategy will not be grounded solely in helping MSPs to become local ambassadors, but we can support MSPs in their areas by providing materials. Fiona Hyslop is right that the strategy must involve presenting the Parliament as an institution. We

have a range of methods of doing that, which are based on the belief—which Professor Schlesinger mentioned—that if people interact with the Parliament, they will understand it better and take a more positive view of it.

We are improving the arrangements for people who visit the Parliament and we are planning how visits will work at Holyrood. Our educational programme involves bringing children to the Parliament to talk about how Parliament works, the development of materials for the curriculum and going to schools. We try to involve people in petitions and to make them a local story. Those measures are ways of presenting what the Parliament does separately from what MSPs do. MSPs are their own ambassadors. There is a tension between staff and officials helping to present members, and members presenting themselves with party-political hats on. We are wary of that tension. Most of our effort goes on explaining what the Parliament does and the value that it adds to people's lives.

Fiona Hyslop: In the early days of the Parliament, was there a deficiency in the outreach work of connecting to Scotland?

Janet Seaton: We have been too cautious and too reactive, but some of that is a resourcing problem. We made an early commitment to setting up a visitor centre, which Westminster is only now considering. Perhaps we must redress the balance and put more effort than we have in the past into proactive work.

Professor Schlesinger: I do not have much to add because Janet Seaton's comments sum up much of what our audit discovered. We were tasked with considering the variety of ways in which the Parliament relates to the outside world and how well it is organised to do that. We made specific recommendations. Only so much work can be done on the matter. From what I have heard and from other information, some of our recommendations are being taken on board.

The other point that strikes me is that establishing an institution, an identity for an institution and a whole new political system—that is really what is going on—does not happen overnight; it takes time and needs stability. Improving relations with the media across the board and trying to think of ways of getting round the central belt concentration of the national media are other aspects of that. It seems to me that there are many dimensions to communication, and they are not restricted to the media.

The Convener: I think that members are happy, or at least satisfied, with that. I would not like to overestimate the happiness of members on any occasion.

I bring this part of our meeting to a close. I thank

all our participants and witnesses this morning for taking the time and trouble to attend. I am impressed by the number of witnesses who stayed to hear everybody else's evidence. That is always a sign of a healthy attitude and an interesting meeting, which this has been. We will adjourn for a minute or two until our witnesses have left before we take our final item, on changes to the standing orders.

12:10

Meeting adjourned.

12:12

On resuming—

Committees (Substitution)

The Convener: We proceed to item 2, on substitution on committees of the Parliament, which we discussed at our most recent meeting. A couple of matters still have to be resolved; I hope that we will do so today.

Alison Coull has joined us for this item. I do not know whether you want to say anything at this point, but if you do, the floor is all yours.

Alison Coull (Scottish Parliament Directorate of Legal Services): All I want to say is that the draft standing order amendments are intended to reflect the various decisions that the committee made on 18 December. The standing orders are fairly short, although they have been slightly tricky to draft. I am happy to go through them and explain each amendment, or I can just take questions.

The Convener: We will address the two issues that are identified in the report and then allow members to raise points on the specific changes to the standing orders as they arise.

The report advises members that two issues require to be concluded. The first is whether substitution should be permitted for part of a meeting, or if we are out for the meeting, we are out and our substitute is there instead.

The second issue is whether the members of the single-member parties, who may or may not have sufficient numbers to constitute parties for Parliamentary Bureau purposes, should be allowed to substitute for each other. Members will be aware from the report that two of the three of those members in the Parliament have indicated that they do not want to do that.

The first item is on whether we would agree to substitution for part of a meeting, or whether the substitute, having been appointed, is in charge when the member cannot attend.

Mr Paterson: I take the view that it would be too disruptive for members to ship in and out of a part-meeting. In fact, having participated in such meetings myself, I think that it would be very unhelpful. Although I was fairly well briefed—or thought that I was—I found that coming back into a meeting, having missed part of it to attend another meeting, meant that I had to work a bit harder to pick up the threads again. It would be unfair on the members involved, but it would also be unfair on the committees themselves if we allowed members to attend only part of a meeting.

The Convener: That seems to be the general view, to judge from the number of members nodding their heads. I recall that, when the matter first arose, that question was asked to take account of the standpoint of the smaller political parties, which have only one spokesman. Perhaps, given the cross-cutting nature of the committee briefs, it might be relevant for other spokesmen to participate in debates. Substitution would be one way of doing that. I think that Donald Gorrie called it a job-share approach when we discussed it previously. The other solution would be simply to encourage conveners to recognise the problems that we have identified and allow additional members of the Parliament to attend committees and take part in relevant debates on subjects that fall within their briefs. If conveners were doing that, the problem would resolve itself to all practical intents and purposes.

Do members agree that we should not have part-substitutes?

Members indicated agreement.

12:15

The Convener: The second issue is the question whether the single-member parties should be allowed to substitute for one another.

Mr Paterson: I raised that point last week, but it is quite clear from the people who it is thought might benefit from substitution between parties that they do not believe that that would benefit individual members. I intend to drop my support for such a move. We might as well take the word of the people who know how it would affect them. I have not thought too much about how it would affect me if I were an individual member, but they certainly have.

The Convener: Does that represent the general view of committee members?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We now come to the specific changes to the standing orders, which Alison Coull has generously agreed to take us through point by point. We will identify whether members have any questions on the various rule changes. Donald Gorrie usually raises such matters, but he has not given me notice that he is concerned about anything.

Susan Deacon: I have a specific question about the intent of the changes. We have talked about substitution on a very short-term basis, but there will be occasions when a longer-term substitution might be necessary. I am thinking particularly about cases of long-term sickness, and I should declare an interest, as I am also thinking about maternity leave. Do the changes that are being put in place provide fully for such circumstances?

Would there effectively be a substitution for that period, assuming that all the parties concerned agreed to it?

Alison Coull: The rule changes as drafted would do nothing to prevent a long-term substitution. The mechanism for dealing with notification is being dealt with administratively. There is nothing in the draft that would prevent that.

Fiona Hyslop: I understand that the Parliamentary Bureau would propose a named substitute to the Parliament. If a long-term substitution was required, and if the named substitute was not necessarily suitable for a longer period, all parties would understand that one of the parties might want to make a change in the substitution to ensure that duties could be carried out over a longer period. I do not see any difficulty with that.

There are two points that I would like to raise. First, I would like clarification on the rule that a substitute could not take on the role of convener or deputy convener.

Secondly, the notification for substitution is not included in the paper. That point arose in our previous discussions. What is the time scale for substitutions? The standing orders might not have to include notification for substitution, but it would be helpful if the conveners and business managers in particular understood what is acceptable and what is the form for that.

Alison Coull: On the first point, the position of conveners and deputy conveners is dealt with in the draft standing orders. The intention is that the committee substitute attends in place of the convener or deputy convener but, in those circumstances, they have only the functions of an ordinary committee member. That is dealt with in new rule 12.2A.3. Where the convener is regarded as being unavailable, the deputy convener would take over.

The second point about time scales should be included in the report. As Fiona Hyslop said, the standing orders do not contain anything about that. The committee took the view that, depending on the circumstances, a variety of time scales for notification might be acceptable.

The Convener: Is it appropriate for the standing orders to deal with notification for substitution, or would it be better for that to be regulated by practice agreed outwith the standing orders?

Alison Coull: It is not necessary for notification for substitution to be included in the standing orders. It can be dealt with perfectly well as an administrative matter.

The Convener: As there are no further questions or comments, I invite members to agree

the proposed new standing orders. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank members and also Alison Coull.

Meeting closed at 12:21.

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