

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 15 September 1999
(*Afternoon*)

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 15 September 1999

(Afternoon)

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 14:30*]

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Before we begin, I should like to inform members that the first act of the Scottish Parliament has reached the statute book. Letters patent signifying Her Majesty's assent to the Mental Health (Public Safety and Appeals) (Scotland) Bill were recorded in the Register of the Great Seal on 13 September 1999. The printed act will be available shortly, together with explanatory notes.

Food Standards Agency

The Presiding Officer: The first item of business today is a debate on motion S1M-147, in the name of Susan Deacon, on the food standards agency, and on an amendment to that motion.

14:31

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): As members may recall, in June I lodged a motion seeking agreement to the establishment of a UK food standards agency with a strong Scottish arm. The motion was, I am pleased to say, approved by this Parliament.

The passage of the UK Food Standards Bill is now nearing completion, and arrangements for the establishment of the agency are well under way. I will say more about those arrangements later.

Today I am asking members to give their backing to the priority that this Executive affords to food safety and to endorse the actions that we are taking to ensure that high standards of food safety are achieved across Scotland.

In the previous debate, I spoke about the resonance that the issue has in Scotland, of my personal commitment to getting it right and of my determination to ensure that public health is our paramount consideration in all aspects of food policy. That is what the public expect—they have a right to do so. Today I want to go beyond those statements of intent and to outline the action that we are taking to achieve our objectives.

Food safety is complex and sensitive terrain. I recognise that. However, I assure members that I for one will not shirk the tough questions—or the tougher-still decisions—that need to be taken. Equally, I want to do all in my power to ensure that those decisions are reached in the context of

open, informed and reasoned debate. It is in that spirit that today I outline to members the next steps in our plans.

I should say at the outset that I am opposed to the amendment lodged by Kay Ullrich which, I believe, seeks to narrow the debate unduly. With the greatest of respect, the terms in which it is offered are confused. However, in my remarks I will cover the issues that Mrs Ullrich has raised.

First, I want to address the question of food poisoning. Food poisoning occurs for a number of reasons and takes many different forms. For many it means little more than an upset stomach or other short-term but unpleasant ailments. However, it must be remembered that food poisoning can and does kill.

Last year, more than 30 Scots died from infections linked to food poisoning. Hundreds more required hospitalisation, and many of them will have sustained long-term physical damage. The risks, particularly to the most vulnerable—the young, the elderly, the sick and expectant mothers—are very real. Government, the industry, regulatory bodies and communities must work together to reduce them. That is why we as the Scottish Executive are taking action at a number of levels.

On regulation, I am pleased to say that we have started to put in place the key outstanding recommendation of the Pennington report, which was drawn up after the devastating E coli 0157 outbreak in central Scotland. Draft regulations for a Scottish butchers licensing scheme were issued for consultation on 23 July. There has been a good response from the industry and other interested parties. The consultation process ends two days from now. After that, I intend to move quickly to allow final legislation to go to Europe for required consideration, so that we can have the scheme in place by next summer.

The scheme aims to improve hygiene standards in butchers' shops, by ensuring that all butchers selling raw meat and ready-to-eat food—from small single-person businesses to butcher counters in supermarkets—have in place effective measures to minimise the risk of cross-contamination. As part of the consultation exercise on butchers' licensing, I have asked for comments on whether other high-risk premises, such as caterers, should be licensed. Those responses will be considered carefully.

I am determined to take all necessary steps to reduce the risk of future outbreaks, including legislative action if that is appropriate and necessary. In that way, we can reassure the public that the protection of their health remains our most important consideration. That is why the Scottish Executive faces its responsibilities and why

responsible Governments sometimes take difficult decisions such as the recent shellfish closures off the west coast and Orkney.

Of course, improved food hygiene is about more than regulation. We must enforce hygiene rules firmly and fairly, but we need to give people information and advice on how we can all work together for improved food safety.

During the summer and the somewhat short-lived barbecue season, we promoted safe-food messages; we will do the same again at Christmas. In a few weeks, I will launch a new advertising and promotion campaign to convey the safe-food message to caterers and to voluntary groups. Risks are high in the latter group, but sadly awareness of them has traditionally been low.

At the same time, we are working with schools to promote a better understanding of food safety among, for example, young people who are learning to cook for the first time. I have been genuinely impressed by the innovative and imaginative ways in which teachers and health professionals are working together to engage youngsters in the issue. After all, simple steps such as hand washing and good food handling can greatly reduce the risks of the occurrence and spread of food poisoning.

A further major component in our fight against food poisoning is the testing, monitoring and research work that goes on in laboratories and research institutions across the country. We will continue to invest in that work, and the new food standards agency will further strengthen activity.

At all times, we will monitor that work closely to ensure that the work being undertaken meets the highest standards, and that the data are produced timeously and are reliable and relevant. High standards must permeate every strand of our work in food safety, and we will take action where high standards are not being met.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): I welcome the minister's commitment to the highest standards in food safety research. Does she accept that those in the management of the national reference laboratories on E coli and campylobacter at Foresterhill in my constituency feel that they have been meeting those standards and that they would welcome the opportunity to discuss any supposed problems with those who have been advised that the laboratories should close?

Susan Deacon: I welcome Mr Macdonald's intervention; the issue that he raises is important. I was grateful to have the opportunity to speak to him and other local members about it over recent days.

The Scottish Executive received expert advice on the work that is going on in the laboratories on which it took recent decisions in relation to specific contracts. I recognise the importance of the work that is done there and the interest of local members. For that reason, I have asked officials to arrange a meeting between the reference laboratories working group, which is an expert advisory body, and the director of the reference laboratories, so that further discussion can take place. I remind members that the reference laboratories can retender for those contracts at a later date.

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Susan Deacon: I have several other points to cover, and would rather move on to them.

There is a wider issue; food safety is about more than just reducing the risks of food poisoning. I know how important it is to take other measures to ensure that food is safe to eat and, most important, that consumers can make informed choices.

In that regard, I am very much aware of the public interest in and concern about genetically modified food and of the wider environmental concerns relating to GM crops. I do not have time today to do justice to all the aspects of the issue. I want to give an assurance that the Executive is working across departments and ministerial responsibilities to examine the best way in which to take forward the many issues raised by GM science.

We want to develop a considered approach and I am deeply aware that, at present, there is confusion and misunderstanding in much of the discussion surrounding GM issues. That is unhelpful and does nothing to aid or to reassure the consumer. I recognise that there are legitimate concerns, and I want to take this opportunity to re-emphasise that all GM foods currently on sale have passed rigorous safety assessments through the UK Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes—an independent body—and the food assessment authorities of all EC member states.

However, informed consumer choice is also essential. People should be able to choose whether to eat GM food. Labelling regulations were introduced in March requiring caterers and others who sell directly to consumers to tell customers which, if any, of the foods they sell contain GM soya or maize. We are also supporting moves in the EU to extend the labelling provisions on GM—specifically to cover foods with GM additives or flavouring.

However, it is important that we understand that, although GM food is a devolved area, just like Westminster, we cannot introduce measures

outwith the scope of European rules. We will work within those rules, with our partners in the UK and the European Union, to increase the amount of information available to consumers and to ensure that consumer safety is paramount in all our considerations.

The subject of food labelling extends beyond the issue of GM foods. Too many people are confused by the information on labels. Other people, such as allergy sufferers, cannot obtain the information that they need to make an informed choice, or to avoid foods that are dangerous to them. I want to ensure that we improve our efforts in that respect.

A review of food labelling is under way in Europe, and I will ensure that Scottish views are considered in it. The UK food advisory committee will meet soon in Edinburgh as part of an open day on food labelling. I will meet members of the committee at that time. Members of the public will have an opportunity to put their views to that forum, and I encourage them to do so.

Beef on the bone is an issue that has been raised in the chamber on several occasions—not always in the considered way that it deserves. As the Executive has stated many times, it is a public health issue. As in other areas of food safety policy, we will act in the best interests of the public, based on the scientific and medical advice that is available to us, for the sake of young and old. As we made clear in the partnership agreement and again in our programme for government, we believe that the beef-on-the-bone ban should be lifted as soon as medical advice indicates that it is safe to do so.

I can assure the Parliament that our medical advisers are actively and closely considering the matter. In addition, given the considerable cross-border traffic of beef and beef products, we are working with our colleagues in Wales, Northern Ireland and Westminster on the issue. I stress that the position remains that any decisions will be taken on the basis of medical advice, which is being actively monitored.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Is the minister saying that the chief medical officer for Scotland is preparing his own report on the ban, or that he is simply accepting the advice of the UK's chief medical officer?

Susan Deacon: As we made clear in previous discussions and debates, the Executive takes regular advice from the chief medical officer for Scotland on the issue. We will continue to do that. As we have said repeatedly, we will lift the ban as soon as medical advice says that it is safe to do so. I do not think that we can make our position any clearer than that.

In the interests of time, I want now to return to

the food standards agency, which is such an important element of the debate.

As we know, and as has been discussed previously, the agency will have a major role to play in taking forward much of the future work on food standards and general food safety. The bill is completing its passage through the House of Commons and will be considered in the House of Lords shortly.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the minister assure me that no rash decisions will be taken on the location of the agency? If the agency must be put in place, there are many places where it could be located that must be given careful consideration.

Susan Deacon: I will say more about the location of the agency in a moment. We understand the importance of the decision, and I can certainly assure Mr Gallie that the matter has been and will continue to be the subject of careful consideration. First, however, I want to say a little more about where we are on the arrangements for the agency.

We anticipate that the agency will come into being at some point in the first half of next year. The recruitment process to select the chairman, board members and senior officers of the United Kingdom agency has started and it is our intention to advertise for a Scottish director later this month. The recruitment process is completely open, national advertisements have appeared in the press and rigorous selection processes are being employed to ensure that we get the best people for the various posts.

The new UK-wide agency will give us access to the best scientific advice across the UK. It will avoid unnecessary and costly duplication and will promote consistency of enforcement. It makes sense scientifically and economically and it makes sense for public health for us to work together across the UK on such an important issue.

As I indicated earlier, much food law is arrived at on a Europe-wide basis, but there is scope—in the context of Europe and the UK—to tailor our policies and practices to local circumstances to meet Scottish needs. In Scotland, therefore, we will be able to do things differently from the rest of the UK if we feel that it is necessary to do so.

The agency will have a separate Scottish arm, headed by its own director and advised by a Scottish food safety advisory committee. The committee will advise ministers and the agency board and will, like the board, publish its advice. The Scottish arm will be responsible for policy advice on all food safety and standards issues. It will also advise on nutrition and will have an important role to play in auditing and monitoring enforcement and in co-ordinating national food

emergencies.

The agency will, of course, have to consider its future priorities, but in Scotland, given the importance of the livestock and fishing sectors, I am sure that meat and fish hygiene will feature prominently in the agency's programme.

Mr Gallie raised the issue of the location of the Scottish arm of the agency, in which there has been significant interest. I want to take the opportunity today to outline our plans on that important issue.

In line with our partnership agreement commitment to decentralise government, the First Minister today, in reply to a written parliamentary question, has set out our policy on the dispersal of public service jobs. I can confirm that, where new operations are established or existing activities are reorganised, there will be a presumption in favour of wider dispersal of public service jobs throughout Scotland.

In that context, we have given careful consideration to the wide range of possible locations of the new food standards agency executive in Scotland. I have also taken account of the many representations that have been received from MSPs and from other individuals and agencies around the country.

Taking into account a wide range of factors—transport links, proximity to ministers, MSPs and the UK agency, links to research and scientific advice, and relocation costs—we have selected two possible candidates for the location of the agency: Dundee and Aberdeen. I am writing to representatives of both cities today to invite them to meet ministers so that we will have an opportunity to hear their cases at first hand and to explore fully and thoroughly the requirements of the agency and how they can best be met. We plan to meet representatives—

Phil Gallie: Will the minister give way?

The Presiding Officer: Not now.

Susan Deacon: I will finish my point, if I may.

We plan to meet representatives from the two locations and to reach a decision within the next two weeks. Of course we will advise Parliament of our decision.

I understand that I should wind up, so I regret that I cannot take a further intervention.

In closing, let me again emphasise the Executive's commitment to achieving the highest standards of food safety—

Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Susan Deacon: I am told that I can take no

further interventions because I am winding up.

It is in the spirit of open and informed debate that I have set out to members today our plans and actions. We are determined to ensure that from farm to fork and from plough to plate all our people have food that is safe to eat.

Public health is my main concern, but I firmly believe that if we take the action that I have outlined today, we will also create a leading edge for Scottish products that will mean that they are second to none. It is on that basis that I ask for Parliament's support.

I move,

That the Parliament endorses the Scottish Executive's commitment to food safety and notes the action taken by the Scottish Executive to improve food standards and to build consumer confidence, including the setting up of the new Food Standards Agency.

Phil Gallie: On a point of order.

The Presiding Officer: I think I know what it is, but carry on.

Phil Gallie: You are right. I wanted to make a very important intervention on a matter that affects my constituency. I feel that it was against the spirit of the Parliament, where open discussion should be permitted, that the minister refused my intervention because of the intervention of the chair.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Gallie had already made an intervention, and the minister was over the time agreed for her speech. I agree that it is difficult when an announcement is made right at the end of a speech, so perhaps the intervention could have been taken. In the end, it is at the discretion of the minister, but I have discouraged interventions in the closing stages of speeches. I hope that Mr Gallie will accept that.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): On a point of order. May I seek your guidance on the written question and answer on the civil service dispersal of jobs that has obviously been both lodged and answered today? I am not sure whether the answer covers issues such as the location of the agency. As a matter of courtesy, it would have been useful for members to have a copy of the answer in front of them so that we knew what it contained.

The Presiding Officer: I am not sure when the written answer is being issued, but that is not a point of order for the chair. I presume that it will be published tomorrow.

14:53

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): The sound of a baby crying in the gallery during Susan's speech must have made her feel at

home. It was nice to hear it; it is what we mean when we say we are a family-oriented parliament.

Our amendment supports the establishment of a food standards agency in north-east Scotland, so we greatly welcome today's announcement. In that respect, our amendment must rank as one of the most effective in history. In the light of the announcement, many members may seek to use the debate to make a pitch for the agency to be sited in their constituencies. However, it is important that we do not use this opportunity to engage in a turf war, as there are other important issues to consider.

The SNP supports the establishment of a food standards agency. It is not before time—for nearly three years we have been deafened by the sound of dragging feet. I must express my dismay that, on 23 June, the Parliament returned the responsibility for food standards to Westminster, despite the fact that food standards was a matter that was specifically devolved to this Parliament. It seems incredible that members of this chamber should have decided to surrender a devolved power so quickly to the reserve of Westminster. Unfortunately, those are the facts that we must live with.

Phil Gallie: Will the member give way? She has enough time.

Kay Ullrich: I think that Phil Gallie has had more than his share.

Phil Gallie: I am here to represent people. Will the member give way?

Kay Ullrich: He has had his answer.

Susan Deacon referred today, as she did in the debate on 23 June, to the Scottish arm of the food standards agency. I assure members that the SNP is determined to make that arm a very strong one indeed.

That is why we are particularly concerned by the news this week that funding is to be withdrawn from the laboratory at Foresterhill, that the contract for some of the work will be put out to tender and that the rest of the work appears to have been abandoned. That is despite the praise that has been heaped on the work done at Foresterhill, particularly on the E coli 0157 bug, which, as we all sadly know, claimed 21 lives in Wishaw in 1997.

Indeed, only two months ago in this chamber, our colleague Lewis Macdonald praised the work of Foresterhill's Professor Pennington. Mr Macdonald said that Professor Pennington's report on E coli had "set the tone" for the food standards agency bill. I am sure that Mr Macdonald will be only one among many in this chamber today who will support our amendment.

It is easy to overlook the fact that the public health work that has been done by the Aberdeen laboratories has resulted in major watersheds in improvements in public health. The Aberdeen laboratories' capacity has been proven in two major outbreaks in the past 35 years.

I am almost old enough to remember the terrible typhoid outbreak in 1964. *[Laughter.]* Why do you laugh, o ye of little faith? I am 39 and holding.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): Will the lady give way?

Kay Ullrich: The 39-year-old lady will give way.

Miss Goldie: I can remember the outbreak and I am proud that I can.

Kay Ullrich: Thank you, Annabel; I need your support.

As a direct result of the findings of the cause of the outbreak, we now know—as Susan said—the importance of hand washing after a visit to the toilet. Think about it: before 1964, there were no notices in public toilets reminding us to wash our hands, but now that is the accepted norm.

As a result of the findings of Pennington and his team during the Wishaw outbreak, cooked and raw meat are no longer displayed together in butchers' shops or on meat counters.

Those are two simple measures, but what a difference they have made in terms of improved public health. However, we are told that the Executive is dissatisfied with the quality of the service that is provided at Foresterhill. We are also told that the national reference laboratory on campylobacter—food poisoning—at Foresterhill is to be closed.

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): Will the member clarify what the SNP's position is on this issue? We have debated the food standards agency already. As I recall, Kay Ullrich's colleague, Alasdair Morgan, argued against the food standards agency because it was legislated for at Westminster rather than here. Is Kay Ullrich saying that the SNP has changed its mind and that it will vote to support the setting-up of the food standards agency?

Kay Ullrich: George Lyon should be in at the start. I ask him to stick with it so that he can understand everything that is being said.

A Scottish Executive spokeswoman—another mysterious Executive spokesperson with no name—said that there was no evidence that the information that the national reference laboratory on campylobacter produced was of any value to public health. That was despite the fact that campylobacter is the largest single cause of food poisoning in the United Kingdom, despite the fact that 6,000 people in Scotland were infected by it

last year, and despite the fact that infection is theoretically preventable if only the research could be done.

The Scottish Executive doubts the value of the research that is being done on campylobacter in Scotland, yet, in the same breath, we are told that testing has recently been expanded south of the border at the Public Health Laboratory Service in London, ensuring that a testing service is provided in England and Wales. I hope that the minister will address that in summing up.

Why do the minister's advisers appear to be saying the direct opposite of what the advisers of the health minister at Westminster are saying? Will the minister reconsider the plans to close the campylobacter service and to tender on the E coli service? At the very least, will she suspend a decision in order to allow further consultation?

Many issues surrounding food safety will be raised in this debate. The minister mentioned genetically modified foods; I feel that that important issue deserves a full debate on its own. Members have lodged a number of motions on GM foods, and I ask the Parliamentary Bureau to consider allowing time for a separate debate.

I remind Mr Lyon of what I said at the outset: the SNP welcomes the creation of a food standards agency in Scotland. The agency will be vital in ensuring food safety and public health and will have a major role to play in tackling the nutritional poverty that afflicts so many people in our nation. However, we would be failing in our duty as an Opposition party if we did not hold the Executive to account for decisions that we believe are not in the best interests of the health and well-being of the people of Scotland. We believe that elements of the Executive's proposals fall into that category; I am sure that my colleagues will expand on that. I ask the chamber to consider carefully and to support our amendment.

I move amendment S1M-147.1, to leave out from "endorses" to end and insert,

"agrees to prioritise food safety in Scotland; supports the establishment of a food standards agency in the North East at the earliest opportunity, and urges the Executive to invest more extensively in research facilities such as Foresterhill laboratory in Aberdeen to maintain Scotland's reputation for international excellence in the investigation into food safety and food poisoning in order to increase consumer confidence and restore essential markets."

The Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I would like to go back to Bruce Crawford's point of order. A written answer is technically in the public domain even before it is published because it has gone to the member who asked the question. However, the rest of us do not know what is in it. All our procedures are new, and I am not criticising, but I think that it would be good practice for a written answer—if it is going to be

referred to—to be made available to members ahead of the usual weekly printing. We are learning as we go along, but I think that that would be a good procedure for the future.

15:03

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

The Conservative party welcomes the establishment of an effective and independent food standards agency. The agency will affect not only people's livelihoods, but—more important—their lives. It will improve food safety and increase confidence in our food industry, while monitoring standards of food hygiene to address public concerns. In short, as well as improving health, it will help primary and secondary producers, and it will help to create jobs and prosperity.

Nevertheless, some points need to be made, and we will make them in the manner expected of an Opposition party in an open and accountable democracy. I hope that these points will be taken in the positive and constructive manner in which they are made, and I look forward the minister's replies.

We oppose any moves that would lead to Scotland facing additional burdens to those experienced in other areas of the UK. In that sense, we welcome the Scottish Executive's single market for the food standards agency.

It would be helpful if we could have clarification of the relationship between the food standards agency and the Scottish Executive. Several questions come to my mind. Can the Scottish Executive overrule the agency's recommendations? Will the Scottish Executive accept and fully implement all the agency's recommendations?

It is important that this fledgling Parliament is aware of the input of the ministers for health and for rural affairs in that process. Can we be assured that the agency will be truly independent of the Government and party politics?

I was pleased to hear Susan Deacon say that information will be readily available. I wanted to make a point about that, but it no longer needs to be made. I would like open, accessible and accountable judgments and I am delighted to hear that that has been addressed. It is important that judgments are publicly available, especially for those who are affected.

The agency must be responsible and accountable in issuing information so that there is not undue public concern, whether because of imbalance, lack of supporting advice or any other factor.

Will compensation be paid to any producers who are wrongly accused? We all know about the

example in Scotland that led to considerable publicity.

Decisions and risk assessments must be open to public and parliamentary scrutiny. An example would be a comparable risk assessment of genetically modified food and beef on the bone.

Would the food standards agency have the authority to lift the beef-on-the-bone ban? I am aware that Alasdair Morgan mentioned that, but we must be absolutely clear about it. What evidence is there that eating beef on the bone has harmed anyone in the United Kingdom? Knowing that would be helpful in educating us all in this debate.

I am also pleased that the minister addressed the subject of GM foods. GM crops were not mentioned but I am concerned about them, especially about their environmental impact. There is undoubtedly widespread public concern about GM foods and crops, and the food standards agency—if it were given the power to investigate—would have a role to play in allaying those concerns.

There is concern that the agency will add to the many burdens that are already imposed on small and medium-sized British food producers. That brings me back to a question that I raised in the debate in June, when I asked whether we—as consumers in Scotland—could have the same faith in the quality of imported food that we would have in Scottish and British foods.

I am pleased to say to Mr Lyon that, in its statement of 13 September, the National Farmers Union of Scotland said of the pig industry:

"Prices have been below the cost of production for almost a year and a half . . . Our Farmers are required to meet higher welfare standards than our main competitors, and we are prevented from using certain food components . . . We also suffer from high processing costs, due to meat inspection charges and the cost of by-product disposal."

I feel that that statement summarises my points.

Although I fully welcome a food standards agency, there must be a level playing field across Europe on which our farmers can compete, with the same standards and the same production costs for all farmers in Europe.

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie): Does Mary Scanlon agree that, although a level playing field would be welcome, the correct way of creating one would be for Europe to adopt our very proper standards for the pig industry, particularly in relation to the stall-and-tether ban? Does she further agree that, in relation to health, and in the wake of the BSE crisis, it would be quite wrong for us to contemplate having meat and bonemeal in animal feedstuffs?

Mary Scanlon: There is no doubt that every

person in this country would welcome the adoption by the other 14 European countries of the consistent, high-quality standards that we are discussing today. I ask Ross Finnie, as the Minister for Rural Affairs, to use his influence to bring that about. That would be very welcome, and I thank him for his intervention.

Will the food standards agency act swiftly to ban the import of meat produced in conditions and using methods that are not allowed here? I refer again to the point that the Minister for Rural Affairs made. The relevant examples relate to pig and poultry farming.

I commend the patient and competent Convener of the Health and Community Care Committee—I see that she is out of the chamber at the moment—for grappling not only with the members of that committee, but with the increasing number of statutory instruments relating to food safety. I appreciate that the system is in its early days, and that methods are coming into place, but I was alarmed to read the document that came to my desk as I sat down for the committee meeting this morning. It said that, although affected feed had been sold to 416 Belgian farms and exported to France and Holland, the ban applied only to Belgium. Why is that? I would welcome our having a greater input into such matters.

We should be concerned about the system of qualified majority voting, under which the ban was put through the European structures. The United Kingdom, with its 10 votes in Europe, could vote against a Commission proposal, yet, because of the weighting under QMV, we could still be liable to implement that proposal. I appreciate that that is called democracy, but it is none the less a matter of concern.

The Minister for Health and Community Care mentioned labelling. Consumers could be forgiven for thinking that food labelled "processed in Scotland" was produced in Scotland. Such labelling is used to disguise imported food—especially meat products—as Scottish food. Over-regulation of UK food producers, which is not matched by regulation on overseas producers, puts our farming and food processing industry at a distinct competitive advantage. To eliminate unfair competition, the food standards agency, the Scottish Executive and the Westminster Government should apply the same rigorous standards to foreign produce as are applied to our own.

The Presiding Officer: It would perhaps be helpful for me to say that, between now and the wind-up speeches, members should limit their speeches to five minutes so that I can call everyone who wants to speak. That should be taken as guidance rather than as a rule.

15:13

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I welcome the Executive's commitment, as outlined by the Minister for Health and Community Care, to food safety and the recently announced arrangements for setting up the new food standards agency.

As members will be aware, I recently lodged a motion calling on the Parliament to recognise

"that Aberdeen, in the Rowett Research Institute, the Macaulay Land Research Institute, the Scottish Agricultural College and its two Universities, has one of the largest concentrations of expertise in food science and food technology industries in Europe, and calls upon the Scottish Ministers to seek to have the Scottish branch of the Food Standards Agency established in the North-East."

I understand that there was an argument for locating the food standards agency here in Edinburgh, near the decision makers. Thankfully, that debate is now closed.

I warmly welcome the presumption on dispersal. I have always believed that Aberdeen and the north-east is without a doubt the best location for the food standards agency, on two main grounds.

First, on practical grounds, the food standards agency should be located as near as possible to our food technology experts, so that we can directly benefit from their expertise. The north-east produces 25 per cent of our red meat, white meat and sea food and a third of our food and drink exports. Proximity to an academic and industry cluster would add great value to the agency's work.

Secondly—and perhaps more important—on political grounds, by locating an agency such as the FSA outside the central belt, we send a clear political message, which I am delighted to hear today. In the north-east, there is an undoubted perception—true or not—that there is a bias in our operations towards the central belt. What better message could we send to the north-east to show that no such bias exists? The idea of devolving the Parliament's activities by involving all areas of the country in decision-making processes and by taking the committees around Scotland seems to have hit the major difficulty of cost. What could be better than to give the clear political message that we will devolve agencies, such as the FSA, to areas of expertise around the nation?

Based on the two factors that I have outlined, the decision about the location of the FSA must be political. I have been greatly heartened by the support that my motion received from all four parties in the chamber and I thank the 20 members who signed it. I particularly welcome the fact that not all of those MSPs represent the north-east, which I hope has also been noted by ministers.

I expect that ministers will weigh the chamber's opinion heavily when they reach their final decision. Despite Kay Ullrich's hope that we do not make pitches for our areas, I make no bones about making a case for Aberdeen. Because everybody knows where I stand on the issue, it would be silly of me not to address it. Aberdeen's case to be the site of the FSA is unmistakable and I am delighted that the city has been given a chance to put it directly to Parliament. I thoroughly support the motion.

15:17

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): I do not know why Aberdeen and the Grampian region suffer a higher incidence of E coli infection than other areas, not just in this country, but elsewhere in the world. I also do not know how campylobacter, which is the most common cause of food poisoning in Britain, is transmitted from poultry and wild birds to an estimated 50,000 people in Scotland every year.

I know that people are trying to find out, however. Many of them work at the national reference laboratories at Foresterhill in my constituency. I welcome the minister's offer for talks between the management of the laboratories and the advisory committee and I hope that the outcome of those talks will be that the laboratories' very important work can continue.

I also welcome the minister's outline of the broad remit of the UK food standards agency and of the steps that she will take to ensure that the Scottish arm of the agency is set up as quickly as well-informed consultation will allow. I welcome today's important declaration of principle about the dispersal of civil service and Scottish Executive jobs.

Members will not be surprised to hear that, like Mike Rumbles, I welcome the announcement that Aberdeen has been placed on the shortlist for consideration as the location of the Scottish arm of the FSA. The minister knows that I have been keen that the case for locating the agency in Aberdeen should be made directly by some of the many scientists in the city who work in the relevant fields. I hope that, in summing up, the minister will be able to tell us a little more about the consultation process that will be used to make the final decision about the shortlist.

I welcome Kay Ullrich's positive comments about the work at Foresterhill and her reminder of the world-class work on E coli 0157 that is being done by Professor Hugh Pennington at the University of Aberdeen. However, I am a little disappointed that she did not say more about where she thinks the Scottish arm of the FSA should be located.

Constituency members in the north-east know that there is more distance between Aberdeen and Dundee than just 54 miles of dual carriageway. Perhaps some of Mrs Ullrich's colleagues will be able to indicate more clearly where they believe the agency should be located.

I am sorry to disappoint Kay Ullrich; I will not support her amendment today. I have read it closely and it refers to

"a food standards agency in the North East."

I am sure that it means a food standards agency for Scotland in the north-east; the intention behind the amendment is the establishment of a food standards agency for Scotland only.

Kay Ullrich: Is Mr Macdonald not going to vote for the amendment because I omitted the word Scotland? Or is that simply his excuse, because he has been whipped?

Lewis Macdonald: Mrs Ullrich misunderstands me. The reality is that her commitment is to a Scottish agency and mine is to a British one. I welcome the establishment of a Scottish arm of the UK agency. If Mrs Ullrich wishes to clarify her position further, I will be happy to allow her to do so. I look forward to welcoming the food standards legislation on to the statute book and to welcoming the agency's Scottish headquarters to Aberdeen.

15:21

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I too welcome today's announcement, which confirmed that the Scottish food standards agency will be located in the north-east. It is acknowledged that the expertise and infrastructure exist there to support such a development.

During the past 30 years, the north-east has pioneered collaborative links between academic research, local industries and government agencies. Such links were a necessity as the oil and gas industry developed, but we are now able to recognise the wider benefits that such an approach can bring to local communities and society as a whole.

The large proportion of Scotland's food production and processing industries that are based in the north-east must have been a significant factor in the decision about location. For example, Grampian is responsible for a third of Scotland's food industry output. In addition to food manufacturing and processing, Grampian, as we have heard, is home to over 3,000 scientists and support staff in a number of world-renowned research institutes, all working on projects that could have a major positive impact on public health. We are very fortunate to have those centres of academic excellence available to us, because there are immeasurable advantages in

locating the food standards agency closest to those who will be responsible, on the ground, for ensuring food safety of the highest quality.

Scotland has an international reputation for exporting premium produce, but in recent years that reputation has been dented by a string of food scares—relating to BSE and the use of pesticides, herbicides, hormones and antibiotics—that have hit our agricultural sector hard. Those difficulties are set to be compounded by the implementation of Agenda 2000, when much of rural Scotland will be wiped off the EU aid map.

To build a sustainable future, we need to restore confidence in our indigenous industries. By building on existing practice and bringing food safety experts and producers together, we must ensure that the mistakes of the past are never repeated. There is an urgent need to restore confidence in the safety of the food that we eat and that means making positive changes at every level of food production. We owe it to the food production, processing and technology industries to provide them with a framework from which they can compete internationally once again.

Like others, I am very keen to know how autonomous the Scottish food standards agency will be, because we have a distinctive food production sector in Scotland that has suffered in recent years from remote government. The most notorious example was the BSE crisis, which could have been tackled much earlier and more effectively on a Scottish basis.

I am concerned that under the administrative concordats that define responsibilities, responsibility will rest with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food or the London-based food standards agency, rather than with the Scottish Parliament. I would like to be reassured that members of the food standards agency and the advisory committee will have the authority to act in the best interests of Scotland. Can the minister assure us that the Scottish food standards agency will be more than a toothless kangaroo?

15:25

Kate MacLean (Dundee West) (Lab): I am sure that the public, the food industry and local authorities will warmly welcome this step towards the setting up of the executive body of the food standards agency—or the Scottish arm, as people seem to be referring to it.

It is widely accepted that the establishment of an agency that gives independent advice and information on food safety and standards is crucial if the public is to regain some confidence in the food industry in Scotland—and in local authorities and Government. I suspect that whether there is a food standards agency with executive bodies or an

independent Scottish agency does not worry the public much. The important thing is that it is our job in this Parliament to ensure that the Scottish arm does its job and makes decisions that are right for the Scottish people. That is the task that we must take on. I am happy to do that, and confident that we can do that.

At this point in the speech I genuinely did not know which cities would be on the shortlist, so I could have gone down the bitterly disappointed road or the warmly welcome road. I am happy to warmly welcome the minister's announcement that Dundee has been placed on the shortlist—even better, on a very short short list. I have raised before the lack of Government jobs in Dundee, and I look forward to the debate on the decentralisation of jobs. As leader of Dundee City Council I campaigned on that issue for many years.

Bruce Crawford: Will Ms MacLean give way?

Kate MacLean: Yes, Bruce.

Bruce Crawford: I had better put my card in.

The Presiding Officer: Yes, you had. If you will jump around from seat to seat you must expect that.

Bruce Crawford: I have ants in my pants.

Thank you, Kate. I was watching your face as others talked about Aberdeen, and your reactions were interesting. You come from a local authority background, and I was interested to hear that, in the minister's introduction, no mention was made of the work done by local authority people on food safety, particularly by environmental health officers. You will be aware that in the previous public expenditure round the Government made education, social work, police and fire priorities. I hope that you will join me in pressing the minister so that, as far as grant-aided expenditure is concerned, he will in future ensure that the food safety arm of a local authority is protected in the same way as other areas of the local authority base.

The Presiding Officer: I will not join in pressing the minister, but perhaps Ms MacLean will.

Bruce Crawford: I apologise.

Kate MacLean: In future, if Mr Crawford does not have his card in, I will not give way and wait for him to get himself organised. *[Laughter.]* Bruce Crawford will recall that councils were given additional money to implement the Pennington report. I would support anyone in asking for additional money that is required for public safety and food safety, but some was given.

I am delighted that Dundee is being considered as a base for the food standards agency because of the implications that that has for civil service

jobs. Also, I genuinely believe that Dundee can put a strong and convincing case when it is given the opportunity to do so. We have been heavily lobbied by various people from Aberdeen, and they put a good case. We have heard less from Dundee, but hopefully we will hear more from it now. In Dundee, we have the Scottish Crop Research Institute.

Brian Adam: Will Ms MacLean give way?

Kate MacLean: No, I will continue.

Brian Adam: What is it about the Administration benches today that none of them is prepared to give way to me?

Kate MacLean: I said that I would not give way and I would prefer it if you did not continue to stand and talk when I say that.

The Presiding Officer: Absolutely correct. You should be in the chair.

Kate MacLean: Thank you. As well as the Scottish Crop Research Institute, Dundee has the scientific and medical research bases provided by both of Dundee's universities and by Ninewells hospital. They are situated within a few miles of each other and that would ensure that the agency has immediate access to respected world leaders in food and technology, as well as to the benefit of the close collaboration that exists between the universities in Dundee and the food industry.

By placing a high priority on food standards, Dundee City Council has been recognised as a local authority leader. Professor Pennington said:

"Dundee is pretty well at the top of the table and Aberdeen at the bottom. I know local authorities are under pressure, but I imagine that the social problems of Dundee are greater than Aberdeen."

I think that he was probably referring to resources. Having said that, I am not criticising Aberdeen as a location. Had more than two locations been shortlisted, I would have been happy for Aberdeen, if Dundee was unsuccessful.

Finally, I will take off my parochial hat and put on my equal opportunities hat. The minister mentioned recruitment and I realise that she may only be responsible for the appointment of the first director of the food standards executive body and that the FSA may be responsible for subsequent appointments. None the less, I urge the minister—although she is not here, I will urge her when I next see her—to bring any pressure to bear that she can in order to ensure that proper consideration is given to equal opportunities when such public appointments are made.

There are very worrying inequalities in the make-up of public bodies, and as we are starting with a clean slate, so to speak, we are presented with an ideal opportunity to start to try to redress

that situation. Obviously, the best people for the jobs should be appointed. However, I have no reason to believe that the best people for the jobs should not represent a reasonable cross-section of the population of Scotland.

I warmly welcome the minister's announcement today, and I am happy to support her motion.

15:31

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): I strongly agree with the member—although I cannot remember who it was—who said that this debate should not become an opportunity for everyone to make a pitch for their own areas. I hope that it does not become a bidding competition between Dundee and Aberdeen, particularly as I cannot now make the pitch for Dumfries that I would like to have made; otherwise I would have strongly majored on that aspect.

However, Presiding Officer, let me say straight away that, as a farmer, at least in a former life, I think that I speak for the whole agricultural community in that I very much welcome the introduction of a food standards agency, particularly now that it has a UK-wide brief and that its funding will come from central Government. I welcome the agency as a much-needed buffer for an industry whose confidence is at an all-time low, and whose image in the eye of the consumer is at a similarly low ebb. The agency will have an unenviable balancing act to perform: how to bolster the confidence of the consumers in the food that they buy and eat, while simultaneously laying to rest the frustrations of the producers, who feel that they are everyone's target, from the President of the European Commission down to the shoppers who buy their products on a daily basis.

In order to achieve that delicate balance, the food standards agency must have the complete confidence of every link in the complex food chain, from producer to consumer alike. Likewise, every link must have complete confidence in the food standards agency. If it is to be successful—and it must be—it must foster a two-way relationship based on mutual trust and mutual benefit, rather than a "do as we command" relationship based on the bureaucracy and dictatorship so beloved of this Administration.

To do that, it is absolutely imperative that this agency is openly and genuinely independent, both in its thinking and in its make-up. Members of the FSA must be asked to register their interests. It is important that representatives of all those links in the food chain, from plough to plate, are included in the make-up of the board. I seek the Executive's assurance that there will be farmer representation on the board of the new agency. If all that can be

achieved, the agency will be judged solely by its actions.

However, I am concerned about some possible limitations. Will the FSA be able to ensure that all food products and animal feedingstuffs are accurately labelled, showing a complete list of ingredients—whether or not those ingredients are genetically modified—the country of origin and, where appropriate, the system of production? Will the agency be able to lift the beef-on-the-bone ban without reference to the Executive, which is a perfectly legitimate question, if the ban is still in place? Will it be able to lift the ridiculous regulations requiring ewe carcasses to be split and the spinal column removed before export? Incidentally, that regulation was introduced on the results of evidence that can at best be described as spurious. Its introduction has led to many of the problems faced by today's sheep farmers as they face the prospect of culling thousands of ewes that previously were worth good money.

Will the agency accept that kitchen practices have their part to play in E coli scares, every bit as much as do manufacturing processes or butcher shops? Can it ensure that imported foods are produced to the same exacting standards as our own, and are adequately labelled to say so? If it can address those issues and others, if it can build confidence between itself and the food chain, and if it can truly remain independent, it can achieve success across the spectrum of the food industry and will be welcomed greatly by all.

Despite my disappointment that the agency will not be placed in Dumfries and Galloway, the region in which agriculture has a higher input into the rural economy than any other region in Scotland, I support this motion.

15:36

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I am very pleased to support the motion, because the creation of the food standards agency is part of a wider programme for improving public health. I was pleased to observe that Labour's manifesto for the Scottish Parliament elections reiterated our commitment to setting up a UK-wide food standards agency with an independent Scottish advisory committee. As members will know, the Food Standards Bill was brought before the House of Commons on 23 July. I welcome the Scottish Executive's document and the statement by the minister that commits the Government to establishing the agency's Scottish arm by the first half of next year.

Food scare stories have become an unpleasant fact of life in recent years. We have had reports on salmonella in eggs, and related to that the downfall of a rather colourful Tory minister. We

have had listeria in dairy products and the worry over its effects on unborn babies. In conjunction with BSE and E coli 0157, they have reduced public confidence in food, and they have severely damaged the industries that are identified with a food risk. We need only consider the damage done to British agriculture by the BSE crisis; that damage has affected many sectors of the food industry, not just the beef industry.

I am not going to hijack this debate into one about agriculture. Those of us who represent rural constituencies are well aware of the problems that have arisen from that crisis. Indeed, the damage is taking many years even to begin to rectify, because when the public lose confidence in a food product it takes a long time for that confidence to be restored. Not surprisingly, people have long memories when it comes to food poisoning. Like Annabel Goldie, I remember the typhoid food poisoning scare in Aberdeen. We recall those food threats to our own, and other people's, health because if adults are prepared to take risks with their own health, most will err on the side of safety when it comes to their children. I asked the Meat and Livestock Commission who was most affected by the fears over eating beef, and it said that still it was mothers of young children who have the greatest concerns about the health implications.

I come from a local authority background, and similar concerns exist there over the provision of food to vulnerable sections of society, such as young children and the elderly. One of the reasons why it takes so long for public confidence to return is that people do not know who or what to believe. The media, which are justified in reporting the genuine public interest and concerns, do at times add to the sense of panic. For example, some of the headlines concerning the GM debate referred to Frankenstein foods. That type of reporting does nothing to help scientific, logical or rational debate on those issues.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Does Elaine Murray consider that there is any justification now for the continuation of the beef-on-the-bone ban?

Dr Murray: I am afraid that I am not appropriately medically qualified to give an opinion on that. I would prefer to rely on the advice of the chief medical officer. On the issue of GM foods, which I thought Fergus Ewing was going to ask me about, I also believe that the matter is worthy of separate debate and I hope that this chamber gets the opportunity to do that at some point.

Public suspicion is one of the reasons why the setting up of the food standards agency is so important. It will ensure that all future Government activity relating to food will be subject to public scrutiny through an independent arm's-length agency. It is important that it is independent and at

arm's length and that the public interest is its first priority. The agency will be responsible for co-ordinating food law enforcement and research into food safety and nutrition. As Alex Fergusson mentioned, it will take a strategic approach to those issues across the food chain. We are all familiar with the old maxim that we are what we eat. Implicit in that is that what we eat is also what was consumed. We have to be aware of the effects of bad practice on other trophic levels, which eventually surface in problems for us.

The James report, on which the recommendations for the food standards agency are based, identified the need for the structure of the agency to reflect the constitutional arrangements in different parts of the UK. At the same time, it is necessary for policy and enforcement to be consistent across the UK and Europe. I would like European standards to be levelled up to the standards in the UK. Two members of the UK commission will have specific responsibility for representing Scottish interests at the UK food standards agency. We will have our own food standards agency to advise, amongst others, the Executive on food safety and standards. The Government will not tell the food standards agency what to do; it will be the other way round.

Scotland has a tradition of scientific and medical excellence. We have not translated that into successful enterprise as well as we might. Nevertheless, the quality of our academic scientific work has always been respected.

Brian Adam: Dr Murray referred to the need to examine medical and scientific evidence. In the responses from the Executive on the beef-on-the-bone ban, the advice of the chief medical officer is regularly quoted to us. Does Dr Murray agree that it is not only a medical matter, it is also a scientific matter and that it would be useful to approach the chief scientist to discover what element of risk is involved? The assessment of risk is a key aspect of the issue and it is a scientific matter as much as a medical matter.

Dr Murray: That is exactly why the food standards agency must be there, to provide that scientific basis for advice that is given to Government. We must use the reputation of our academic work to rebuild trust in our food products and restore their reputation for quality. It is in the interests of Scottish consumers and producers that public confidence in food is restored. I welcome the actions taken by the Scottish Executive to commence that process.

15:43

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It will come as no surprise that I join the,

seemingly irresistible, cross-party agreement on welcoming the establishment of the food standards agency. I also welcome the Minister for Health and Community Care's statement at the beginning of the debate that she is committed to an open debate and a lot of this is still up for consultation. I hope that, even although she is absent, she will take some of the lessons from this debate.

I was pleased to hear about the establishment of the food standards agency in the north-east. That is a long-standing SNP policy. I must give special mention to Mr Macdonald for his linguistic gymnastics in avoiding supporting an SNP amendment purely on the technicality that the word Scotland did not appear in the amendment. I have the feeling that had the word Scotland appeared, he would have objected to the amendment on the ground that it did not scan well or that the grammar was not up to scratch. I think that we knew what Mr Macdonald was trying to say, but maybe he wants to have another go at it.

Lewis Macdonald: In the light of Mr Hamilton's affirmation that locating the food standards agency in the north-east is long-standing party policy, will he tell us where the SNP would locate the Scottish arm of the food standards agency?

Mr Hamilton: Our position is that it should be located in the north-east. It was interesting listening to Ms MacLean as she talked about the league table with Aberdeen at the top and Dundee at the bottom. That must be a first for this season. The exact location is open for debate. It seems odd to try to pin down the SNP on exactly where we wish to locate it, as the Executive has not come to a decision. If Mr Macdonald supports the idea of consultation, as he claims that he does and that that is why he will not support the amendment, it seems odd to criticise us for taking time to consult.

What has been missing from this debate is the specific focus on the Foresterhill laboratory that Kay Ullrich's amendment sought. Lewis spoke about that, and was so much in agreement with the amendment that it was almost impossible for him to not back it.

Kay Ullrich put a question to the minister—and it was such a good one that the minister has legged it—about the campylobacter issue. Why is it that an expansion of the research facilities in London is occurring at the same time as a reduction in the facilities in Scotland? Someone is getting something wrong. If the evidence in England suggests that more research should be done, more should be done in Scotland as well. Similarly, if it is worth getting rid of the research facilities in Scotland, a lot of money is being wasted in England.

Why are we getting such a wide variation in scientific advice? Given that there is such a variation, why is the Scottish Executive certain that its advice is correct and the advice in England is wrong? Kay Ullrich asked that question and we have not had an answer. I hope that Iain Gray will answer when he sums up—I assume that he will sum up as he is the only member of the Executive present. I also hope that he will answer a question about the turnaround times. If he cannot answer today, I hope that he will write to me on the matter soon.

Susan Deacon skimmed over the expert advice that she had been given regarding why we had to move from the site in Aberdeen. Her explanation had to do with the service level agreement. It has been noted widely in the press that the turnaround times have not been up to scratch: the target was a 95 per cent turnaround in eight days. We were told that only 89 per cent was being reached and that that meant that other options had to be considered.

Will the Executive confirm that those figures date from more than a year ago? If that is true, what monitoring has been done since? What are the monthly percentages like now? Will they confirm that the figures for April this year show a 98 per cent turnaround within eight days? If that last fact is true, what has been said in the press is disingenuous.

I would like a specific explanation, too, on the issue of consultation. The idea that the one-off consultation done before last October is adequate and the suggestion that there was no further consultation with the trust cause us a great deal of concern. There had to have been on-going consultation. What was it? If the minister cannot tell me what it was, will he accept that the decision was wrong and undermines the credibility of a Government that claims to be putting food standards at the top of its agenda?

We talk, rightly, about the need to restore public confidence. That will happen only if we invest properly and the public believes that the Government is taking food safety seriously. I welcome the moves that have been made today but they do not tie in with the announcement earlier in the week. That is why the amendment deals specifically with the facilities that were available and are available no longer. Perhaps the Executive needs to justify itself in relation to that case.

15:48

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): The very fact of a food standards agency is to be welcomed. The monitoring of food safety has to be seen to be independent of departments that are concerned

with food production. I also welcome the fact that there is to be a Scottish arm of the agency.

I endorse the strong case that Mike Rumbles and others have made for the north-east as the obvious home for the Scottish arm of the agency. I would like it to be in the northern part of that area—Aberdeen or its environs or, indeed, in my constituency. The north-east's office rental costs are competitive compared with those in the central belt. That might be kept in mind when other agencies are being relocated.

On the subject of money, thank goodness the idea of a £90 levy on food businesses has been abandoned. It flew in the face of natural justice and common sense and would have placed a disproportionate share of the burden on smaller outlets, local shops and vulnerable village services.

It is important that the food standards agency is seen to be independent and that the public and the industry have confidence in that independence, which could have been compromised if the monitoring body had been funded by the industry it is to monitor.

Costs associated with the food standards agency could not be borne by our primary producers. The reasons for that have emerged in a number of speeches today.

Food safety is a health matter, and Liberal Democrats have argued that the agency should be funded from general taxation. I welcome the agency. Its work will underpin and confirm the very high standards of the food industry in Scotland and enable us to market our produce with confidence. I support the motion.

15:51

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): It is important to consider why the food standards agency is necessary. That is something Conservative members may want to concentrate on. It seems that there is mass amnesia in the Conservative ranks about the fact that the crisis in public confidence in food and the crisis in the agriculture industry were caused during their term in government.

The establishment of a food standards agency is essential after the food-related problems of the past 10 years or so and the resulting erosion of public confidence.

Mary Scanlon: Will Bristow Muldoon give way?

Bristow Muldoon: Certainly.

Mary Scanlon: All members on this side of the chamber have fully supported the food standards agency and complimented Susan Deacon on its establishment. There is no amnesia here. We

recognise that this is something that must be done.

Bristow Muldoon: I welcome the fact that Conservative members support the food standards agency, but no reference has been made to what caused the crisis. In the election campaign, the Conservatives talked about listening to the people of Scotland. They should have listened to the people of Scotland and accepted responsibility for this issue.

Health scares in recent years—salmonella, listeria, E coli and new variant CJD—have caused ill-health, public concern and even death. That is why public confidence has been lost. We are starting the process of rebuilding public confidence. The food standards agency will be seen to be acting in the public's interest and defending public health. It is, I note, the delivery of another Labour manifesto commitment—perhaps that is why the SNP feels it necessary to move this amendment.

The SNP's contribution, aside from its amendment, seems to be a reluctance to support a UK-wide agency. What exactly are SNP members suggesting? Are they suggesting that the best interests of the Scottish public are not served by the establishment of a UK-wide agency that will be able to avoid duplicating work—and needing to establish radically different regulations—each side of the border?

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Is Bristow Muldoon aware that Scotland has its own health department?

Bristow Muldoon: Absolutely, but in the case of the food standards agency Scotland can benefit from research that is carried out UK-wide. We can establish common rules on food standards throughout the UK and give the UK a stronger voice in Europe when it is arguing for changes in food legislation. Can the SNP cite one benefit of opposing a UK-wide agency and supporting a Scotland-only agency?

The other welcome aspect of the food standards agency, after the matter of rebuilding public confidence, is the role that it will play in promoting balanced diets. Susan Deacon has said before that the health of the people of Scotland is a key priority of the Executive. The agency will be an additional tool that will help us to improve diet and lifestyle in Scotland.

In welcoming the establishment of the food standards agency, I fully support the motion that Susan Deacon has moved and appeal to the SNP to unite in support of the establishment of that agency to give this Parliament the opportunity to endorse it unequivocally.

15:54

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I broadly welcome the setting up of the Scottish food standards agency. I am happy about everything that I have heard from the minister so far. I must get this right and address my remarks in the right direction.

I am slightly unhappy about the amendment, simply because it is a hybrid. It really consists of two amendments: one about greater funding for the Rowett Research Institute in Aberdeen, another about setting up the food standards agency in the north-east. I do not think that members should have to consider hybrid amendments—or hybrid motions either, for that matter. I would have liked the opportunity to debate the two issues separately. Hybrid motions can be confusing and the appropriate authorities should give the matter some attention.

I was happy to hear the minister say that she supports clear labelling for genetically modified foods, but that raises further questions. She mentioned European labelling laws and the fact that we will be able to have some input into making them.

Three of the major health risks for Scots are heart attacks, smoking too much and being slightly overweight—I could do with taking some exercise myself.

Seventy per cent of the food that we eat is processed, and the current system of labelling does not help people to judge whether it will damage their health. Labels are written in tiny letters and nobody really knows what is meant by “5 per cent fat” or “2 per cent fat”. I ask the minister, when she goes to Europe, to plead for much clearer labelling—in large letters and perhaps using a system of colour coding—for the salt, fat and sugar content of foods. We must bear in mind that between 10 and 20 per cent of some foods can be sugar, which is added as a cheap bulking agent.

I ask the minister to consider those points. On the whole, however, I very much welcome the setting up of a food standards agency.

15:57

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I welcome today's debate on the food standards agency. As a member of Parliament for North-East Scotland, I am delighted that the north-east has been chosen as a location for the Scottish Executive's arm of the agency.

In welcoming the minister's statement, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are talking about only 35 jobs. Yes, it will bring prestige and valuable jobs to the north-east of

Scotland, but we should have been talking about the headquarters of the food standards agency coming to Scotland. That would have meant 150 new posts and the bulk of the existing 400 posts being transferred to the north-east. There was a massive campaign to bring the headquarters to the north-east but, as usual, the Government decided to keep its grubby hands on the civil service jobs.

I hope that the Scottish Executive will not give to the north-east of Scotland with one hand and take away with the other. I am referring, of course, to the situation at the laboratories that are conducting research into E coli and campylobacter.

This morning, I spoke on the phone to the director of the Central Public Health Laboratory in London; the laboratory there is similar to the one in Aberdeen. I was told that the London laboratory is clamouring to get more funding for campylobacter research in England and Wales, and is expanding its sampling regime to cover the whole country because the issue is considered to be of vital importance. Here in Scotland, however, the Scottish Executive is proposing that such research stop altogether.

The setting up of a food standards agency has implications for the food industry in the north-east of Scotland. The food industry generates huge income for the north-east and is a massive employer. That is one reason why the agency is to be located in the north-east. We must not allow the new regulations that the food standards agency is likely to introduce to impose a higher financial burden on food producers, particularly primary food producers.

We have already seen how pig, lamb and beef producers, as well as fish processors, have taken on a huge burden of charges to meet hygiene and welfare regulations. I would like an assurance from the minister that any future regulations will not impose an even higher financial burden on the food industry and that producers will be given assistance to meet those burdens.

Finally, I hope that if the Scottish arm of the food standards agency does go to the north-east—which we would welcome—the 35 jobs it involves will not be just a gesture. We want a change of attitude from the Government, in which civil service jobs are dispersed. I do not want those 35 jobs to be the last to go to north-east Scotland, but to be the beginning of many more.

16:00

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): I, too, welcome today's announcement, particularly that Aberdeen is on the shortlist of two. I feel strongly that food should be one of life's joys, but over the past few years it has become a subject of

anxiety and fear for many people. The recent move to restore public confidence in food safety by establishing a food standards agency in the UK can only be welcomed. There has been one food scare after another—some based on fact and some on fantasy—involving all kinds of foods from eggs and cheese to beef.

There are many different messages about food and health. The messages about whether some foods—for example butter, beef or whisky—are good or bad for us appear to change from week to week. Many people are reaching the stage at which they are saying, “A plague on both your houses” and ignoring much of the information about food.

Food production and processing is important to Scotland, although the health of many Scots is very poor. I believe that we still hold the world record for heart disease. Food poisoning is constantly on the increase—one in five of us will suffer from it at some point. Food hygiene and food safety are becoming ever more important. Food and its relationship to health require clear messages that are easy to understand and are based on sound science.

Fergus Ewing: I am grateful to Elaine Thomson for giving way. What is the statistical likelihood of every one of the 59 Labour MSPs feeling that it is necessary to continue the ban on beef on the bone, given that that should not really be a matter of party politics? Can Elaine tell us whether she feels it is necessary for the ban to continue?

Elaine Thomson: I am quite happy to tell Fergus that we should continue with the ban until it is declared that it is safe to eat beef on the bone. I await that declaration from the chief medical officer.

I particularly welcome the fact that we will finally have one body with the necessary authority and expertise to be the definitive voice on food and food safety. It will be impartial and objective, as the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was not perceived to be during the BSE crisis.

The food standards agency will be at arm's length from the Executive and will be seen as putting the interests of consumers first. Establishing a Scottish arm of the food standards agency, away from the centre of government, will establish its independence. The Scottish Parliament will be reiterating that it is a Parliament for the whole of Scotland—from the Mull of Galloway to Muckle Flugga—and not just the central belt.

Food safety requires good science. Scotland is rich in that, and my corner—Aberdeen—more so than most. Aberdeen and the north-east has two universities and seven science institutes, at least two of which—the Rowett Research Institute and

the Scottish Agricultural College at Craibstone—are in my constituency. We have 3,000 scientists and support staff in the area and the sound science base required to give the Scottish arm of the food standards agency authority and to help restore and develop consumer confidence in food.

For the agency to work effectively, it must be able to build relationships with everyone with an interest in food, such as consumers, scientists, food shops and butchers, but particularly the primary processors and producers of food.

Companies in the north-east process a third of Scotland's food and some 30 per cent of the country's food and drink exports—not including whisky. Seventy per cent of the UK fish catch is landed at the Scottish ports of Aberdeen, Peterhead and Fraserburgh. Almost half of the UK's fishing fleet is based in the north of Scotland.

To restore confidence at all levels, it is essential that the Scottish arm of the FSA—wherever it is finally located—is given the best possible start. I believe that the case for it to be located in Aberdeen is unrivalled.

16:05

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): I must declare a substantial and unique interest: as the only farming pharmacist in the chamber, I have an interest in food production as well as in health.

I welcome today's announcement that the Executive intends to disaggregate the activities of the Parliament—like the SNP, we claim that as one of the planks of our manifesto. I hope that the process is carried out fully and that this is not just a gesture, particularly as the issue that has been raised today is that of confidence in the various sectors.

I would like to spin that confidence back into Aberdeen and the surrounding area. This week's very sudden announcement about the Foresterhill laboratory, headed by Professor Pennington, caught everybody by surprise; the matter was not handled with kid gloves, as one would expect from the Executive, particularly from such a charming minister. An issue of confidence is at stake for the north-east and food production in Scotland as a whole. Food production must be dealt with safely.

I regret that the Minister for Finance has left the chamber. He left his card behind once; now he has found it he has gone off again. I had hoped that he would be here to assure us that everything that has been discussed this afternoon will be adequately funded within the Scottish block. We want confirmation that it is a priority of the Executive to provide the institution with adequate support. We welcome the setting up of the agency,

but its branches throughout Scotland will also need support. If the Minister for Health and Community Care is listening, I hope that she will pass on to the Minister for Finance the message that, when he next comes into the chamber, he should give us an indication of the Executive's financial priorities in this matter.

Having said that, I welcome the minister's proposals and the fact that there will be a Scottish arm of the food standards agency. I am delighted that my home town is fairly high up the list of candidates for its location. When I left Aberdeen back in the late '60s, as a very young man—we are back on agism today—I witnessed the arrival of the oil industry. At that time, agriculture and food, along with tourism, were the mainstay of the area. Those industries are now faltering and the number—although not the quality—of jobs has fallen.

The establishment of the Scottish arm of the FSA in the area would be an important fillip for Aberdeen. However, I wish my colleagues in Dundee all the best in putting up a good show against us.

16:08

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): Many members have been anxious that the debate should not turn into a bidding contest between Aberdeen and Dundee. Mr Hamilton was so frightened of offending potential SNP voters in either place that, on principle, he would not decide between the two. I am not that principled—I am quite prepared to say that I want the final decision to go to Dundee. I would like to be given a brief opportunity to explain why I think Dundee should be the final location for the Scottish arm of the food standards agency.

Dundee needs the jobs more than Aberdeen. The city has some of the highest poverty indicators of any place in Scotland and the highest poverty indicators in the north-east of Scotland. Dundee also has far fewer civil service jobs per head of population than Aberdeen, Glasgow or Edinburgh.

It is simply right that Dundee should get a fair crack at the whip, which it has not had up until now. In the past, Kate MacLean, I and others from Dundee City Council, went to ministers at Westminster and argued about relocating civil service and Government jobs to Dundee. The answer was always that civil servants and their families cannot be moved from their existing locations and jobs—in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen and so on—and relocated hundreds of miles away to Dundee. We were told to wait until there was a new agency and new jobs. Now there is a new agency and new jobs and it is Dundee's

turn to get some of the jobs.

I will deal briefly with some of the benefits that have been talked about by those who support a decision in favour of Aberdeen. They say that Aberdeen is surrounded by rich agricultural land, that it has many of the food producers—food processors and manufacturers—and that most of the fisheries are nearby, so the food standards agency should be there.

As I recall, the idea behind setting up a food standards agency was to move things away from producers. The producers were inside the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Everybody said that they were too close and that we needed to pull the food standards agency away from the producers. It is nonsense to put the food standards agency in among all those producers again and it is a good idea to have it some distance away from them in Dundee. A decision to put the food standards agency in Aberdeen would send the wrong signal.

We are told that Aberdeen is the centre for academic excellence in food technology and science. Yes, it is, but so is Dundee. Kate MacLean was right. Is not the Scottish Crop Research Institute a centre for excellence in food technology and science? The University of Abertay Dundee does some of the finest research in the world in food science and technology. Dundee can match Aberdeen. The public analyst who is located in Dundee does some of the best work in maintaining the standards of the food chain. Dundee is an equal.

In any case, Aberdeen is only an hour away by road from Dundee. People can get there much quicker by flying. There is now an excellent air service from Dundee to Aberdeen. There is video-conferencing and all sorts of other reasons why the food standards agency does not have to be in Aberdeen and can quite easily be in Dundee.

Earlier, I did a television interview with Brian Adam, who I think will wind up for the SNP. In that short interview he first complained that the UK food standards agency, with 400 jobs rather than 40, will not be located in Scotland and then said that he wanted a separate food standards agency in Scotland that is autonomous from the rest of the UK. The SNP cannot have it both ways. If SNP members want a UK food standards agency located in Scotland, they want a UK food standards agency; they cannot want that and a separate, autonomous food standards agency for Scotland. I do not think that they can have it both ways, but SNP members usually do want it both ways on any subject.

Far from being worried, as Mr Hamilton is, about the Scottish arm of the food standards agency not following the lead of the bigger agency in England,

I want the food standards agency in Scotland to lead the food standards agency in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Hamilton *rose—*

Mr McAllion: I have not got time for interventions. The honourable gentleman—sorry, Mr Hamilton is not an honourable gentleman. That term belongs to a different place—old habits die hard.

We must have a uniform standard throughout the UK. Some of the big food distributors are located in Dundee; they distribute food throughout not only Scotland but England and Wales and cannot operate under different regimes. They can operate only to one standard and one regime. There must be a food standards agency for the United Kingdom, it must have a Scottish arm, and that Scottish arm must be located in Dundee.

16:13

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased—and I hope that John is too—that the SNP amendment has persuaded the Scottish Executive that the food standards agency should be based in the north-east. I hope that he will vote for the amendment. It is difficult for the Scottish public to understand why some Labour members will not be voting in favour of the amendment when it calls for exactly what the Minister for Health and Community Care has announced today—maybe that is politics.

I am sure that the bids from Dundee and Aberdeen will be of the highest quality and that there will be sound arguments for both locations. Like Kate MacLean, I am a little concerned that Dundee seems to have been a bit slow off the mark and is not, perhaps, lobbying as hard as Aberdeen.

The issue is about civil service job dispersal in general. Dundee has the lowest incidence of civil service employment of any Scottish area with a population of more than 40,000. It is fair to say that Aberdeen does not fare much better.

There is no doubt that the lack of Government agencies in the area compromises both Dundee's claim to be a regional centre and its ability to fulfil its job creation potential. I do not think that the dispersal of 35 jobs will reverse that, but it would represent a start. Much more needs to be done in terms of the dispersal of civil service jobs.

It is to the Parliament's credit that we have managed to hold a mature debate without much of a turf war, although I am sure that Lewis Macdonald and John McAllion will each be striking the other off their Christmas card lists. The final decision will be made on the basis of the quality of the bids.

Kate MacLean: Given that in Aberdeen 10 people per 1,000 hold civil service jobs, while fewer than seven people per 1,000 hold such jobs in Dundee, will Shona Robison support Dundee's bid for the Scottish arm of the food standards agency?

Shona Robison: As Kate knows, I am already on record as supporting Dundee in its bid to become the Scottish base of the food standards agency. However, if that bid is not successful, I would be happy for the jobs to go to Aberdeen—Kate has said the same thing. We want the jobs to go the north-east, although we all have preferences as to where exactly in the north-east they should go. The victory for the Scottish Parliament is that civil service jobs are being dispersed. I want more jobs to be dispersed.

It is a pity that Richard Lochhead's motion on civil service job dispersal fell off the agenda, because that is a crucial debate. The issue relates to far more jobs than the 35 that we are discussing today—jobs that could be dispersed to all areas of Scotland, so that they could benefit from our new constitutional framework.

16:16

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): I begin by declaring that I continue to undertake some consultancy work, purely on medical issues, to companies that I believe have food interests that may relate to novel foods.

I am not going to talk about location today. If the minister had seen fit to announce a shortlist of one, the debate would have been truncated. The important thing about the food standards agency is that the Labour party has kept its promise and instituted an important change.

The Government is answering the questions of public concern about food safety, and in setting up a non-ministerial Government department it has created a substantially independent authority. It is also addressing the question of devolution by effectively setting up a separate executive body for Scotland with its own director and advisory committee on food safety.

There are currently 12 advisory committees working on food safety and related topics. Hitherto, they have mostly been related to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, although some are related to the Department of Health. The fact that many of them will soon relate to the FSA is extremely important.

If we had set up our own food standards agency, as the Scottish National party originally wanted, the costs would have been enormous. The estimated cost was about £29 million. We would not have saved anything by having our own

separate agency. It was a spurious argument which, I am glad to say, the SNP is moving away from—at least I hope it is.

The advisory committees are of great importance and it is fundamental to the credibility of the agency that it interlocks with them. The fact that the agency will be involved in the appointment of chairmen to the various committees is very important.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): In Dr Simpson's opinion, how many of those committees should be established in Scotland?

Dr Simpson: I do not think that there is a need for any committees to be specifically established in Scotland, apart from the food safety advisory committee, which is currently being established.

I want to refer to two specific committees that are important: the Advisory Committee on Pesticides and the Veterinary Products Committee, which deals with issues relating to veterinary medicine and residues. Those committees—which have not yet been mentioned—are of importance in addressing fundamental issues such as the use of antibiotics and growth hormones in farming. We must establish how they will work and how they will interlock with the food standards agency.

The initial challenge for the agency will be the establishment of a risk assessment protocol. The protocol will be important and I hope that we will have an opportunity to debate it. I will put a question to the Executive on that at the end of my speech.

As a doctor, food poisoning is the central issue for me. Between 1982 and 1999, the number of reported incidents of food poisoning doubled to a total of 9,000 cases. In England, during the same period, the number increased fivefold, which initially may make it seem as if England's record is much worse. However, what it means is that the number of cases in England has now reached 180 per 100,000, which is the same as in Scotland. That tells us that, in Scotland, our reporting and notification system and our ability to identify cases is already well established. We have been effective and England is catching up.

We need to take care of special groups, such as children, pregnant women, the seriously ill, the elderly—particularly those in institutions—and people with allergies. The agency will address that need. I also welcome the minister's announcement on the licensing of butchers and the consideration that is to be given to other catering establishments.

The beef-on-the-bone ban has come up a number of times in the debate. I want to reiterate the fact that all 56 Labour members will—I am

sure—agree to the lifting of the ban when such medical advice is given. Recently, members from the Scottish National party have been trying to create further fear around the issue of the beef-on-the-bone ban by raising the issue of the disposal of rendered beef and bones, which are stored at two sites in Scotland. If beef on the bone is totally safe and the SNP has no worries about it, why is it raising issues about rendered beef to create fear?

Mary Scanlon asked whether anyone has been affected by the beef-on-the-bone ban. I cannot say, but I can say that the parameters for the development of new variant CJD are still extremely wide. We do not know how many cases there will be, but the number is still increasing year on year.

Meat on the bone was abandoned because prions are centred in the neural tissue, close to the bone. Cooking is not sufficient to deal with them—they must be dealt with in other ways. The ban on beef on the bone was a reasonable precaution at the time. As soon as the information from the medical officer is that we can lift the ban, it will be lifted. BSE has practically been eliminated by culling cattle that are over 30 months old. It is interesting to note that, in Europe, the number of cases is still rising, whereas in the United Kingdom the number is dropping.

The question of the food standards agency being UK-based is important. Why do we not have such an agency in Europe? The answer is that Europe has not had the same food scares, such as the one caused by BSE, which the Conservatives—with all the advice that they received—allowed to develop. That is why we are getting a food standards agency ahead of the rest of Europe. I agree, however, with the Conservatives that there should be a level playing field and that we should persuade the rest of Europe that this is an important issue.

I have some final questions. Will there be a separate research fund for Scotland, administered by the Scottish Executive body? Will the Meat Hygiene Service be looked at separately in Scotland, or will it continue to relate to the FSA at a Scottish level? Also, if the Scottish Executive has any proposed modifications to the statement of general objectives and practices, will the Health and Community Care Committee be able to debate them, particularly in relation to the risk assessment protocol?

16:24

Ms Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to support the minister's motion. Protection of our citizens is at the heart of this Parliament's work, and food safety is an integral part of that. The agency is geared

towards the protection of our citizens.

I wanted to make several points about the benefits for consumers and producers of a food standards agency, but I recognise that time is short and that many of the points have already been made, so I will refer to the location of the agency.

I welcome the Executive's commitment to dispersal, which sends a clear message that the Parliament recognises the benefits of devolution to other areas of Scotland, particularly the benefits of dispersing jobs. I am disappointed that the proposal to site the agency in Ayrshire has not been successful, but I congratulate my colleagues in Dundee and Aberdeen. The reasons the minister gave for the shortlist included transport links and proximity to ministers and the scientific community. Perhaps every cloud has a silver lining—that might be a recognition that Ayrshire's transport infrastructure does not compete with that of Dundee and Aberdeen, so we might have high priority in the strategic roads review.

I welcome the Executive's commitment to public health and to the agency and congratulate it on the central place that it has given to the public in its plans. I call on members to support the motion.

16:26

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the minister's statement and the importance that the Executive gives to public health and food safety. Liberal Democrats have supported an independent food standards agency for many years; an agency is essential for public health and public confidence in food.

We also welcome the decentralisation of jobs. I will not take part in the warfare that might break out between Dundee and Aberdeen. I am Convener of the Health and Community Care Committee, and my colleagues and I have seen how important food and public health issues are. We are all much more clued up on amnesic shellfish poisoning, having debated it with the minister for an hour and a half last week. Such attention is right. Such issues have an impact on people's confidence in the food that they eat, on their health and on those who make their living on the sea and on the land.

We must learn from the failures of the past. I do not want to see any Scottish minister or MSP ramming burgers down children's throats or standing in front of rabbit hutches for photo opportunities. An independent food standards agency goes some way towards learning from the past, but genetically modified foods could be the issue that comes back to haunt us all and should be taken up as a matter of urgency.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the delivery of our commitment that the agency should be paid for by general taxation, so that it is not a further burden on small rural businesses or on food producers. It could have cost them more than £4 million a year. I welcome the minister's clarification to me of that position.

I also ask for confirmation that there will be a publicly available statement of the FSA's general objectives, practices and remit. Although we must be rigorous in our scrutiny of the membership of all public bodies, I echo comments made to us by the Scottish Food and Drink Federation that we must make sure that the membership of the agency comes from a wide area of relevant expertise.

No one will be surprised to hear that, like Elaine Thomson, I think that food is one of life's joys. I believe that as a Parliament we have a duty to do everything we can to support our fishermen, farmers and food processors and to make sure that there is public confidence in food.

I welcome the establishment of an independent food standards agency, which will go a long way to restoring public confidence in the food on which we all depend.

16:30

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con):

This is one of those days on which we all have something to celebrate. I hope that the arrival of the food standards agency in Scotland will have benefits for the public and for the food production industry. The confidence that that will bring to our industry is important and will be a major marker on the road to recovery of an industry that is in a perilous state.

I spoke in the debate on 23 June to which Kay Ullrich referred. Having been accused of perhaps being over-supportive of the SNP, I took that opportunity to support the minister's motion—I remember that I positively gushed.

Mr Davidson: Will the member clarify whether he was gushing at the minister or at what she recommended?

Alex Johnstone: I clarify that the target of my gushing was the proposal, to which I was about to refer, that the food standards agency be run on a UK basis, rather than as separate English and Scottish organisations. I am glad that the suggestion that there should be a separate Scottish agency was not heeded. A UK standard is one of the great achievements of the proposal, as our food industry depends on not being required to jump over hurdles in Scotland that are not imposed in other parts of the UK.

However, my temptation to gush is not quite as strong on this occasion. There is a commitment to

food safety in the motion, and a reference to

"the action taken by the Scottish Executive to improve food standards".

That action should be considered in the light of the decisions that have been announced this week about funding for the Foresterhill laboratories. It is a great disappointment that, in the week that the food standards agency has been established, the future of the national reference laboratories has been called into question. Many members have paid tribute to their work.

However, it is important to recognise and express gratitude for the decision, which was announced today, that the food standards agency will come to the north-east. I have to qualify that by saying that I am speaking entirely personally. I admit that I signed Mike Rumbles's motion requesting that the food standards agency be sited in Aberdeen. However, members will be aware that I am a list member for the north-east, so the decision to slip Dundee in at the last moment has thrown me. In my capacity as a north-east list member, I say that I hope that the best city wins.

Kay Ullrich: The better city.

Alex Johnstone: I have just had my grammar corrected—I am grateful to Kay Ullrich. I hope that the better city wins.

One of the most important points that has been raised is that we need a food standards agency that does what it was set up to do, which is to trace food standards from plough to plate. We have had many arguments—small and great—about where public health ends and where rural affairs begin. People with an interest in either area have a role of some kind. Therefore, I back my colleagues' calls for representation for every area of the food industry that is involved with the food standards agency. We should ensure that there is genuine representation from plough to plate.

Members have mentioned genetically modified organisms and beef on the bone. Those issues also fall close to the dividing line between public health and food production considerations. It is important that we put down a marker and ensure that the food standards agency has a role to play.

Public health is paramount; it is the highest priority for everyone in the chamber. However, public health issues—of which genetically modified crops and beef on the bone are prime examples—have a strong and direct impact on those of us who live and work in rural industries, by which I mean both the fishing and the farming industries. For that reason, it is important to note what many people have said in the debate—both sides of the divide should have an input.

Robin Harper: Does Mr Johnstone agree that, if the Transport and the Environment Committee

and the Rural Affairs Committee were—between them—to get involved in the GM food discussion by inviting evidence during the coming year, they might take the discussion out of the realm of Frankenstein food, mentioned by Elaine Murray, and put the Scottish Parliament in the lead in the debate?

Alex Johnstone: I do not wish to comment directly on that. However, the issue of GM foods has been identified by the public and the media as being of high priority. There are many differing standpoints in the debate and we will have an opportunity to develop them over the long term. One standpoint that I have already developed is my belief in the importance of allowing the world-beating research establishments in Scotland the opportunity to become involved in future research into GM foods. Some members would like that research to be driven out of Scotland entirely.

I accept—conditionally—much of what the minister said earlier. I offer her my qualified support for the motion.

16:38

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I should declare an interest: as Mrs Ullrich said, the two major outbreaks of food poisoning in Scotland in the past 35 years have been dealt with by the laboratories in Aberdeen, and I had the privilege until very recently to work in both of them. I therefore have some knowledge of the subject, although I did not work directly in bacteriology or microbiology.

I welcome the tone of today's debate and I hope that the discussion will continue as the Parliament evolves. We have agreed on many things; I am delighted that we have agreed on the north-east as the site for the food standards agency. SNP members would claim the credit, but others may wish to dispute that, as is their privilege.

Both Mrs Ullrich and Mr Harper—in his particular way—have called for a debate on GM foods, and there seems to be general support for that. Mr Macdonald has declared that he will not vote for Mrs Ullrich's amendment, but he endorsed her calls for the issues associated with the laboratories at Foresterhill to be addressed. Indeed, Mrs Ullrich has told me that her only disappointment is that her call for there to be no turf war between Aberdeen and Dundee has been ignored. Even I have ignored it; but before anyone from the Administration has a go at me, my position has been clear since before I was elected to this Parliament—I support the bid from the city of Aberdeen. However, like Kate MacLean, I recognise that there is a case for Dundee. I hope that Aberdeen is successful, but if it is not and Dundee is, so be it.

I would say to Margaret Smith that there are significant problems with shellfish poisoning and much of the work on that is being done in the Marine Laboratory at Aberdeen.

I would like to continue by covering some of the many points that have been made, although I cannot cover them all in the limited time available.

Some members laughed about the composition of the board of the food standards agency and some of the advice given on that. The fact that the agency is to be independent is to be welcomed. That independence is crucial.

I say to those who have been pointing fingers and asking why there has been a call for a separate agency in Scotland that I am delighted to welcome your conversion to the idea that independence is good.

The Presiding Officer: Order. I have not been converted to anything.

Brian Adam: I stand corrected. You will forgive me, as I am learning the procedure.

According to David Davidson's declaration of interests, he is a pharmacist farmer. I hope that he is not personally responsible for putting antibiotics in chickens. We do not want that type of pharmacy in farming.

Mr Davidson: I declare that my interests are in sheep and beef—the problems with which are being tackled—and not in chickens.

Brian Adam: I thank Mr Davidson for that.

I will respond to Mr McAllion's robust remarks. I am glad that he recognises that he is unprincipled. Why is he so thirled at the idea, which is perhaps prevalent in the trade union movement, that it is Buggins's turn—or Dundee's turn—now and that Dundee should get the jobs? That seems to be a very irrational approach to making an important decision.

The SNP highlighted the differences in approach north and south of the border to campylobacter because we wish to have an appropriate standard. There are clearly differences between the scientific advice being given to ministers in Westminster and that being given in Scotland.

I welcome the minister's suggestion that the reference laboratory working group should meet the appropriate department in Aberdeen, but I do not think that that goes far enough. We ought to examine how such advisory committees work. I welcome Dr Simpson's remarks on the approach to such issues.

Dr Simpson rose—

Brian Adam: I will give way to Dr Simpson when I have developed my point.

I have considerable concerns about how advisory groups work. The minister said in her remarks that she wanted such groups to be open, accountable and inclusive—I may not have the phrasing quite right, but that was the general tenor of her remarks. I am not convinced that current arrangements provide that, which is something that I hope the new body will change. I welcome the intention to make the food standards agency open and accessible and I hope that that will indeed be the case.

Dr Simpson: Is Mr Adam aware that the Government has gone further than simply making the agency independent? It has also said that it will audit the quality of the advice that it is given by committees. The interlocking mechanisms at every level will ensure independence; they will also ensure that the quality of advice is good.

Brian Adam: I welcome that.

I would like the minister to give some specific answers on the position of the laboratory in Aberdeen. There is broad agreement on many other issues and some of the details are being dealt with. A meeting between the reference laboratory working group and the laboratory in Aberdeen would be a first step. A postponement on retendering would at least give us some breathing space. I ask the Scottish ministers to address the specific differences, even among the scientific community, over the importance of campylobacter.

16:45

The Deputy Minister for Community Care (Iain Gray): Our purpose in today's debate has been to make it clear that the Executive is serious about food safety and standards. Confidence in the food we eat is a fundamental requirement for the quality of life of our people. As many members have said, that confidence has been rocked in recent years. I say to Mr Fergusson that, as Bristow Muldoon reminded us, it was not any dictatorship in bureaucracy of this Administration that rocked that confidence; it was the BSE catastrophe under the previous Tory Government that wrecked it, and we have had to deal with the consequences ever since.

We are committed to rebuilding that confidence, which is why we have presented our strategy to Parliament for open debate. The tone of the debate has been welcome. Much of the debate has, quite properly, been about the food standards agency, because the agency in Scotland is central to our commitment. It is a unique body: it is a repository of expertise; it is authoritative; it can stand above the fray; and it is not tainted—as we heard a moment ago—by any dual role as a result of industry sponsorship. The food standards

agency will be able to—and will be seen to—put the protection of the public at the heart of decision making on food safety. I am pleased at the welcome—qualified as it was, but that is understandable—given to the agency by Kay Ullrich and Mary Scanlon.

One of the strengths of the agency is that, although it is UK-wide, it will be able to do things differently in Scotland if circumstances indicate that it should and if European Union legislation permits. That set-up has clear advantages for Scotland; the same advantages apply today as they did on 23 June, when we debated this matter before. We will have access to UK-wide scientific expertise, which will avoid costly duplication. We will ensure a share of the research for Scotland. The agency's funding arrangement will mean that members of the Scottish Parliament will have control and that the agency is accountable to them. The Scottish food safety advisory committee will feed information on Scottish issues to ministers, MSPs and the UK food standards agency board, two members of which will be from the Scottish committee. I can tell Mr Fergusson that the committee and the board will, of course, be appointed according to Nolan principles.

Mrs Margaret Ewing: Can Iain Gray say how much influence this Parliament will have on European Union legislation?

Iain Gray: All the members of the Executive are in close contact with their colleagues in Westminster and can take part in the discussions that take place in the framework of the European Union, as has been explained in a number of previous debates. Exactly such constitutional structures as the FSA ensure that we get the maximum benefit from that arrangement. The fact that we will have a UK-wide agency that can do things differently in Scotland means that we can have our cake and eat it—I say that in response to the point made by Mr Hamilton, who seemed to want both things at once.

Richard Simpson asked a question about the Meat Hygiene Service. The arrangement is clear; the Scottish element of the service will be accountable to the Scottish arm of the food standards agency and will be audited by it.

Mr Rumbles: Will the minister assure us that the final decision on Dundee or Aberdeen will be based on the merits of the case presented by the two cities, rather than on general issues such as the level of unemployment?

Iain Gray: I can assure Mr Rumbles that the decision will be based on factors that are important and that are in line with the policy of dispersal of Scottish Executive jobs throughout Scotland, which was announced by the minister today and to which I will return in a moment.

Mary Scanlon asked whether the Scottish Executive will be able to overrule the FSA's recommendations. The answer is yes. However, as the FSA's advice will be published, the Scottish Executive will have to be able to justify any such decision to the Parliament.

The FSA will not give advice on animal welfare, which will remain a matter for the department of rural affairs. As a result, some of the issues that Mary Scanlon mentioned rightly remain within that department's remit.

The FSA will audit local authority food safety functions to ensure that resources are spent effectively and that the required service is delivered.

The location of the FSA has been discussed at some length. I thank members for trying their absolute best to avoid making a planned sales-pitch for their locality, although some members managed it better than others. I want to emphasise to Mr Lochhead that this is only the first example of a general policy of dispersal—it is not a one-off involving 35 or 40 jobs. We have made that clear in the written answer that has been made available at the back of the chamber this afternoon. I also want to emphasise the fact that the Scottish Executive has not only talked about dispersing Scottish Executive jobs throughout Scotland, but has done so for the first time. *[Applause.]*

I stress the point that, although the agency is a welcome development, we are not hanging about waiting for things to happen. That is why we do not support the amendment, which narrows the debate to the two areas that the SNP would, for its own purposes, like to discuss. I guess that Shona is right: that is politics. We want to look at the bigger picture, however, not to narrow down the debate.

Brian Adam *rose—*

Iain Gray: No, it is getting too late to take interventions.

We have taken action. We have undertaken two consultations with the aim of improving public safety. The first is on the proposal to remove unpasteurised drinking milk and the second is on proposals to reduce, through the butcher licensing system, the risk of cross-contamination. Heartening signs from recent food poisoning statistics indicate some success in reducing the incidence of E coli and salmonella. However, that is only a sign of encouragement and we will not let up in our determination to keep making improvements. That is why we are prepared to take hard decisions and to demand the highest standards of research.

Ben Wallace *rose—*

Iain Gray: No, it is too late.

Kay Ullrich: Will the minister answer the question about Foresterhill?

Iain Gray: I am about to try to answer that question, but Kay is using up my time.

Because we are prepared to take hard decisions, we have decided to retender the sample testing work that is currently being done by Aberdeen reference laboratories. Some members have muddled the waters by, for example, referring to the research lab under Professor Pennington, whose work is not at issue here.

We have to be clear about the matter. For years, the reference lab working group, which is an expert group, has had major concerns that have not been addressed.

Richard Lochhead *rose—*

Iain Gray: I have already said that it is too late to give way. [*Interruption.*] Concerns have not been addressed and contracts should be reviewed. That advice was given after the group's consideration of the ARL annual report submitted on 31 July 1999.

We have to be clearer still. Despite the expert working group's advice, there has been no cut in funding and no laboratory has been closed. There has simply been a review of specific contracts.

Mrs Margaret Ewing *rose—*

Iain Gray: I have made it clear three times that I will take no more interventions.

There has been further confusion about campylobacter work. Again, we have to be clear about the matter. There is consensus in the public health community that the data being produced by the reference lab are of little public health use. It is widely agreed, north and south of the border, that a better typing scheme is required. Several members referred to an increase in research in England; that research is on improving the typing scheme. Further research on campylobacter is still being done by the research laboratory in Aberdeen that is run by Professor Pennington. In other words, there are two different kinds of research, which have been confused—deliberately or otherwise—during the debate. For clarity, our expert advice is the advice that has been followed.

I said that the Executive would not shirk difficult decisions. There has been much talk about the beef-on-the-bone ban, including some play on the risk and some talk about the consequences. Dr Richard Simpson made it absolutely clear that the risk is small. However, the consequence is a new and terrible disease. Our clear, consistent and continuing advice from the chief medical officer—of Scotland, to answer an earlier question—is that, at the moment, there is no evidence to suggest

that the ban should be lifted. The partnership agreement document, which was presented to and agreed by this Parliament, is clear: we will lift the beef-on-the-bone ban when the medical advice says that we should. That remains the case. I cannot imagine a clearer and more responsible position, in the aftermath of BSE, for a Scottish Executive that is trying to rebuild confidence, both here and in Europe, in our food and in the industry.

The Executive's position—on GM foods and on food safety issues—is that the health ministers take the lead. We have heard calls today for a further debate on GM organisms and we will consider those calls.

In conclusion, we are serious about improvements in food safety; the establishment of the food standards agency is a major plank in that policy. We will not sit back and wait for improvements to happen. We are committed to restoring consumer confidence in our food and the only way in which we can do that is to put public health first, last and always. We will do that.

Auditor General

16:57

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): The Scotland Act 1998 requires that an Auditor General for Scotland, who is independent of the Parliament and the Scottish Executive, should be appointed by the Queen on the nomination of the Parliament. The post of Auditor General is fundamental to ensuring probity, efficiency, effectiveness and confidence in the system of public finances in Scotland. The duties of the office are set out in the Scotland Act 1998 and are being further delineated in the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Bill which is before this Parliament.

Under parliamentary standing orders, an extensive interview process was completed by a selection panel that consisted of the Presiding Officer, me—as Convener of the Audit Committee—and four members of the Audit Committee appointed by the Presiding Officer. On the panel's behalf, I am pleased to recommend the appointment of Mr Robert Black who is currently the controller of audit at the Accounts Commission for Scotland. Mr Black brings to this post vast experience, successful auditing expertise and personal attributes that allow us to make the unanimous recommendation that he be appointed as the first ever Auditor General for Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament nominates Robert Black to Her Majesty for appointment as Auditor General for Scotland.

Lead Committees

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of Lead Committees—

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Spreadable Fats (Marketing Standards) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 (SSI 1999/34);

The Transport and Environment Committee to consider The Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 (SSI 1999/43).

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of lead committees—

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Food (Animals and Animal Products from Belgium) (Emergency Control) (No. 2) (Scotland) Order 1999 (SSI 1999/32);

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Food Animal Feedstuffs from Belgium (Control) (No. 2) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 (SSI 1999/33).—[*Mr McCabe.*]

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The first question is, that motion S1M-142, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of Lead Committees—

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Spreadable Fats (Marketing Standards) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 (SSI 1999/34);

The Transport and Environment Committee to consider The Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 (SSI 1999/43).

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S1M-150, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of lead committees—

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Food (Animals and Animal Products from Belgium) (Emergency Control) (No. 2) (Scotland) Order 1999 (SSI 1999/32);

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Food Animal Feedstuffs from Belgium (Control) (No. 2) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 (SSI 1999/33).

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that amendment S1M-147.1, in the name of Kay Ullrich, which seeks to amend the motion on the food standards agency in the name of Susan Deacon, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Galbraith, Mr Sam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McMahan, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Ms Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)

Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Johnston, Mr Nick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 27, Against 64, Abstentions 16.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S1M-147, in the name of Susan Deacon, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament endorses the Scottish Executive's commitment to food safety and notes the action taken by the Scottish Executive to improve food standards and to build consumer confidence, including the setting up of the new Food Standards Agency.

The Presiding Officer: The last question is, that motion S1M-137, in the name of Mr Andrew Welsh, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament nominates Robert Black to Her Majesty for appointment as Auditor General for Scotland.

Wigtown

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We move to members' business. The final item today is a debate on motion S1M-86, in the name of Alasdair Morgan, on the subject of Wigtown, Scotland's national book town. The debate will be concluded after 30 minutes without any question being put. Will members who are not staying for this debate please leave quietly and quickly.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the initial success of Wigtown, Scotland's National Book Town, in revitalising the Machars of Galloway since its launch as Book Town in May 1998 and offers its full support for the future growth and development of the Book Town.

17:02

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): It is with great pleasure that I speak to the motion. It might appear somewhat anodyne to some, but this motion goes to the heart of the economic well-being of the Machars. I am glad that it has been selected for debate and that it has been supported by other members.

Dumfries and Galloway is advertised by the local tourist board as the "best-kept secret in Scotland". That is not, perhaps, the most upbeat or confident slogan for a promotional campaign, but it is an accurate reflection of the reality that sees tourists from south of the border and from abroad drawn, as if magnetically, north to Edinburgh and the Highlands. As if there were a no-left-turn sign on the M74 at Gretna, tourists carry on, ignorant of the existence of the south-west.

If the south-west as a whole is somewhat neglected, that goes in spades for the western peninsulas of Galloway, the Rhinns and the Machars of Wigtownshire. The ancient burgh of Wigtown lies in the heart of the Machars of Galloway. It is a small town with a population of just over 1,000 and is the former county town of Wigtownshire. Successive, if not successful, local government reorganisations have seen political and civic power removed to larger centres such as Stranraer and Dumfries.

The town now falls into the Newton Stewart travel-to-work area, which consistently records one of the highest unemployment rates of any travel-to-work area in the country. The latest figures, which were issued only this morning, show that the area is fifth highest—an unenviable position. Even for those in work it is an area of low pay. The latest low-pay figures, released by the Transport and General Workers Union yesterday, show that, in the whole of Great Britain, Dumfries and Galloway has the highest percentage of workers, some 50 per cent, who earn less than £5

per hour.

Presiding Officer, time does not permit the unravelling of a sheaf of other statistics that would show that deprivation is alive and well in the heart of Wigtownshire. Despite that, Wigtownshire has been removed recently from the assisted area map, with the inference being that the area has no potential for growth. In that context, it is vital that it does not lose out again in the forthcoming announcement on European structural funds.

I turn now to the concept of a book town. The first acknowledged book town opened in Hay-on-Wye near the Welsh border in 1961. There are now around 20 book towns throughout the world, including Redu in Belgium, Becherel in northern France and Stillwater in the United States. Successful book towns are not simply towns that happen to have one or two bookshops—their trade in books is a central point in the life of the town. With that particular focus on the book trade, they attract visitors from all over the world and help to regenerate fragile rural economies. That happens not only through over-the-counter and postal sales but through the exponentially expanding world of internet sales, or e-commerce as it is known to buffs, which is set to be a great leveller of the playing field between rural and urban areas.

Towards the end of 1996, Scottish Enterprise built on the developing interest in a book town for Scotland. Interested towns were invited to make an application to be considered as Scotland's official book town. On the basis of the different applications and presentations that were submitted, there was a clear majority view on Scottish Enterprise's judging panel that Wigtown offered the greatest potential as a national book town development in Scotland. The Wigtown book town was launched in May 1998. I do not want to go into the reasons behind that decision; suffice it to say that the decision was taken, and that I think that it was the correct decision.

Since then, there is no doubt that that decision has helped the economic regeneration of the town. Shops and buildings that were recently derelict or out of use are now being used once again. Thirteen bookshops that cater for all sorts of different interests have already been established, and two further bookshops—that is the latest figure that I have—are due to open later this year; one, I believe, within the next fortnight. Jobs have been created in the book trade directly, or safeguarded or created in other tourism-related businesses.

Despite that, considerable ignorance remains of the fact that Wigtown is Scotland's national book town, or even that Scotland has a national book town. Just before I came across to the chamber this afternoon, I had to answer a question from a BBC researcher, who asked me where Galloway

is located. It was difficult to explain to her where Galloway is in Scotland, given her level of ignorance. After I lodged the motion that led to this debate it became obvious to me that several colleagues did not know that Scotland had a national book town in Galloway, although they do know where Galloway is. In remedying that ignorance people should, perhaps, ignore the other attraction that is taking place next weekend—the SNP conference in Inverness—and attend instead the first Scottish book town festival, to be held in Wigtown between 24 and 26 September. After the debate, members can help themselves to the brochures that are available.

The Scottish Enterprise report on the book town proposals states:

"Wigtown's emergence as the location for the national book town of Scotland provides, we believe, not just a major opportunity for the town and its immediate environs, but for Dumfries and Galloway, and will also contribute to the tourism profile of Scotland as a whole."

The report continues:

"The rate at which international book towns are now developing means that the highest priority should be put upon making a Scotland book town a success so that Scotland can be part of what is fast becoming"—

and this is quite a mouthful—

"a major international rural cultural tourism network."

It is not exactly snappy, but it is important. That is what you get from Scottish Enterprise sometimes.

The success of the book town thus far has been in no small measure due to the enthusiastic work of local people, some of whom are here today, as well as the involvement of the local council and the enterprise company. I hope that ministers will give a commitment to continue to work with local people and those agencies to aid the further development of the book town, which is still in a relatively early and fragile state. I would also like to stress, echoing the views of Scottish Enterprise, that this is not just a narrow constituency matter but one that is important for Scotland as a whole because Wigtown is Scotland's international book town.

Last week at question time, the minister who will reply to this debate assured me that the new tourism strategy would have the boosting of tourism in remoter areas as one of its objectives. The importance of the book town locally, nationally and internationally should therefore be taken into account by the Executive in developing such a strategy. Given that Scotland's First Minister is a self-confessed bibliophile—which is perhaps the only confession that a minister can safely make—I hope that he agrees.

Despite my optimism about the future of the book town, Wigtown is not without its difficulties, and it is now, when it is in its formative years, that

it needs Government support to ensure that it succeeds. Here is where I begin a small shopping list. High on the list of difficulties is the run-down state of Wigtown's county buildings, part of the municipal inheritance of the town which has suffered from years of short-sighted neglect and a lack of basic maintenance, to the extent that they are now in a dangerous condition and are surrounded by scaffolding. Those superb buildings, the crowning glory of a magnificently wide street, are an excellent asset for the community and for book-town-related events—or at least could be. I would appreciate a commitment from ministers that they will assist in trying to pull together a suitable package to ensure the complete restoration of the buildings.

The final item on my short list of modest requests derives from the fact that even in the age of the internet, accessibility is still a key factor in commercial success. The badly needed upgrade to the A75 Euroroute would go far to making Wigtown more accessible to the rest of Britain and to Ireland, from where the tourist board seeks to gain a lot of customers.

I know that in theory I could continue for another 10 minutes or so, but other members wish to contribute so I will bring my remarks to a close. To the best of my knowledge, if the Parliament today gives its official backing to the book town it would be the first time that any national book town had achieved the backing of a national Parliament. The backing of Scotland's Parliament for Scotland's book town not only would offer moral support to the area and to all the people who have worked so hard to make the project a success, but would be in line with Scottish Enterprise's call for the success of the book town to be a high priority, as it would benefit all of Scotland. I urge all members to support this motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Ms Patricia Ferguson): I remind members that they should press their buttons if they wish to speak.

17:14

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Alasdair on bringing the book town to the attention of the Parliament and on, once again, drawing attention to Dumfries and Galloway. As he said, it is an area that sometimes is overlooked. Someone described it to me recently as the gap on the map, because many people think that the Borders come over to the M74 and that Ayrshire comes down to the coast, yet in the south-west we have our own distinct area and culture.

The book town is an example of an innovative and exciting way to look for economic development. We certainly need to regenerate the Dumfries and Galloway area owing to the

difficulties that we suffered in farming and to the decline in manufacturing industry. When we consider the need to regenerate an area people tend to suggest standard projects, whereas the book town is an innovative and far-sighted attempt to bring economic development to the area.

That is replicated by the other project which I know Dr Murray, other members present and I are keen to pursue: that is, the Crichton university of southern Scotland. Those bold and imaginative projects add to the economic development and to the cultural strength of the area. I am proud of the book town. I will certainly attend, as in my new guise I am no longer allowed to attend the SNP conference. As I have said before, it was always my favourite. Reading from the list of the attractions that will be available at this year's book festival, from 24 to 26 September, Rhona, one of the great delights will be

"a very special ice-cream factory offering dairy delights from Cream O'Galloway."

For the non-bibliophiles among us, that is a positive attraction. I am pleased to support Alasdair Morgan's motion.

17:16

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I am delighted to support Alasdair's motion. I speak in this debate not just in the guise of a former English teacher, but as a former English teacher in Galloway. I taught at Whithorn and at the Douglas Ewart school in Newton Stewart, where Alasdair also taught at one point.

I know about the decline of Galloway. While I was there, the pulp mill in Minnigaff closed, Bladnoch distillery closed, Sorbie creamery closed and the granite works at Creetown closed. Those closures caused dreadful devastation in the area. People were locked into communities in poverty, with nothing happening for them.

As Alasdair said, at one time Wigtown looked like something out of a western, with tumbleweed blowing down the street. I am not being light-hearted about it; it had reached that stage. The buildings were literally falling down. As a candidate in the European elections in 1994, I went round Wigtown and saw how far it had declined in the short time since I had left Galloway to become that horrible thing, a lawyer in Edinburgh.

I am delighted that Wigtown is the national book town. I endorse what Alasdair said about the area being a forgotten corner. When I lived there, time after time people would say to me, "Galloway. You are in Newton Stewart. That will be near Dumfries." Dumfries is 60 miles away.

The greatest lack of knowledge about Galloway

is among the Scottish people, yet it is rich in Scottish history. Wallace and Bruce won victories over the English at Glen Trool. Glen Trool is a marvellous place. We should get people to come back to Wigtown, to help this town that was once the county town. People should come and imbibe Scottish history there. I wish Wigtown the book town success, and I wish the tourist board success in promoting Galloway.

17:18

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): I thank Alasdair for allowing me to speak in this debate. I congratulate him on again getting Galloway mentioned in the Scottish Parliament. One of the joys of the Scottish Parliament is that areas of rural Scotland are mentioned considerably more often in parliamentary circles than they were before its establishment.

Saturday 16 May 1998 is memorable for more than one reason. It was my first day as the approved Scottish Conservative candidate for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, which is highly notable. It was also the day of the official opening of Wigtown as Scotland's national book town. I would not like to make a pitch as to which event was the more important—it was probably Wigtown's national book town status.

My first duty as a prospective candidate was to attend the opening of the national book town. It was a joy to witness the optimism on the faces of Wigtown residents and businessmen as the initiative was unveiled. Places such as Wigtown do not often receive good news on the scale that winning the national book town competition must have been.

However, I have to ask whether that good news has been lived up to. What seemed to offer such promise has a long way to go if it is to live up to the early expectations. I appreciate that Wigtown, as a book town, is still young, but to identify some of the problems, we need look no further than the Machars visitor survey report that was published recently. Some of its findings point to areas where, as Alasdair said, there is a need for further investment.

Visitors were not satisfied with the quality of visitor attractions; the public transport; the condition of the roads; the range of catering facilities; the availability and quality of public toilets; the facilities for disabled people; the shopping facilities; the opening times; and the range and quality of visitor activities. That is a shopping list of even greater length than Alasdair Morgan's.

The shortcomings highlight the fact that it is not enough simply to nominate a village such as Wigtown as a national book town. There is a need

for follow-up investment so that the peripheral businesses and further literary businesses that are needed are encouraged to establish themselves in Wigtown.

Governments are fond of what I call headline politics. They excel at the creation of a popular headline but often fail to follow it up with the investment that is required to give substance to the headline. That is what has happened with Wigtown. If the expectations of Wigtown are to be achieved, further Government investment is necessary in this laudable and excellent initiative.

I think that it was Lord Gordon of Strathblane who said that all Galloway needed to get people to turn left at Carlisle was one substantial visitor attraction. Wigtown could be that attraction, if it receives the help that it needs.

I support the motion completely.

17:22

The Deputy Minister for Highlands and Islands and Gaelic (Mr Alasdair Morrison): Like other members, I congratulate Alasdair Morgan on securing a debate on this issue, although I must decline his kind invitation to Inverness.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): Why?

Mr Morrison: I will give you a written response on that, Margaret.

I have no hesitation in joining all members in offering the full support of the Parliament for the future growth and development of Wigtown as Scotland's acknowledged book town. In May 1998, Donald Dewar, as the Secretary of State for Scotland, was similarly pleased to offer support to Wigtown's book town committee. He said that the designation of book town was a marvellous and well merited achievement in the face of strong competition from other towns and that it would enhance Wigtown's reputation as a place to visit and live in.

I am delighted to add to that and to recognise the progress that the project has made and will continue to make. The past year and a half have seen the venture go from strength to strength, which is a credit to everyone involved. There can be few better examples of how an initiative founded on the commitment and expertise of the community can, with the right support, develop from a simple idea to the showpiece venture that Wigtown has set its heart on becoming.

These are early days for the venture and none of us has any illusions about the need to encourage the successful regeneration of a rural area that has had to cope with a legacy of economic decline. The Executive is in no way complacent about the challenges that the Machars

have had to face and will continue to face. We are committed to recognising and tackling the challenges that are presented by decline in rural areas. We have recognised that social exclusion is significant in rural, as well as urban, areas.

When I consider the successes that have been achieved in establishing Wigtown's reputation and in building up associated businesses, even in the short time since the book town project's inception, I am sure that the initiative is in good hands and is starting to make a substantial contribution to the regeneration of the Machars.

Although the book town project understandably draws to some extent on best practice elsewhere—notably, as has been mentioned, in Hay-on-Wye, whose designation as a book town dates back to 1961—many of those who are involved in Wigtown have been keen to emphasise their commitment to making the book town a place for Scottish authors and booklovers: a literary Mecca, if you like.

The targets that the book town project has set itself are ambitious, but in my view they are achievable. The successful implementation of the development plan should result in the eventual establishment of 40 book-related businesses, and the initiative aims to attract 42,000 additional visitors to the town each year. I am delighted that considerable progress towards meeting those targets has already been made. Already, 16 book-related businesses have become established in the town and several associated business development ventures are being pursued with the assistance of cash that we are making available through the self-starters programme operated by Dumfries and Galloway Enterprise and with support from Groundbase. Taken together, that is welcome news for Wigtown—it means new jobs, more tourists and increased business for existing companies.

I am sure that Alasdair is well aware that the origins of Wigtown's designation as Scotland's book town lie in a joint research exercise that was funded by Scottish Enterprise and Strathclyde University, with support from the Scottish Tourist Board, to identify the potential for a book town in Scotland along the lines of Hay-on-Wye and other examples in Europe. Five potential locations had shown an interest in being chosen and Wigtown triumphed over its competitors in May 1997 as the most appropriate choice. The town was felt to be the right size, it is set in a scenically attractive area and it possessed existing businesses and local expertise that the initiative could build on.

Since then, Scottish Enterprise, Dumfries and Galloway Enterprise, Dumfries and Galloway Council and Dumfries and Galloway Tourist Board have all been working closely with the Wigtown book town committee to ascertain the scope for

helping it to achieve its aims.

Alasdair Morgan: My question follows on from what was said earlier about the lack of recognition of Wigtown and the south-west, and of the fact that Wigtown is Scotland's national book town. Will the minister undertake to have a word with his colleague who is responsible for transport, to determine whether there is any possibility that that national designation could be recognised by the erection of appropriate signage on the M74 near Gretna?

Mr Morrison: I would be happy to take that up with my colleague. The wider recognition of Wigtown should be considered. We will include that matter when we consult on our tourism strategy and we will consider how we can—as members have suggested—put Wigtown on the map. We must not only tell the world about Wigtown; we must tell ourselves, the Scots, about Wigtown and its significance.

A development plan is now in place, which is providing public support of nearly £300,000 over three years. I understand that the positive relationship between the book town committee and the public support agencies is valued on both sides and I am sure that it is set to continue.

No budget is unlimited and no project can ever be approached brandishing an open chequebook. The Scottish Executive relies heavily on the expertise and commercial judgment of the enterprise agencies in assessing project proposals and applications for assistance and in recommending priorities and appropriate support measures. Dumfries and Galloway Enterprise stands ready to consider closely any further development plans that might identify additional benefits to the town and build on the success that has been achieved so far in promoting Wigtown's regeneration.

Today's debate is timely, as it takes place close to the start of what is possibly the book town's most ambitious venture so far. The weekend after next—when Alasdair has said he must be elsewhere, although perhaps he should go home—sees the launch of the Wigtown literary festival: an annual event that will not only place Wigtown firmly on the Scottish literary map, but will provide an event of a calibre that is bound to attract visitors from much further afield. We will assess and develop that in our strategy for tourism.

I join all members in looking forward to the day when Wigtown achieves its aim of becoming a must-see attraction for booklovers everywhere. We can all play our part in that. I join Alasdair Morgan in commending the motion to the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very

much for an interesting and well-informed debate. That brings this evening's meeting of the Parliament to a close. Thank you all.

Meeting closed at 17:30.

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