

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 2 February 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 2 February 2000

(Afternoon)

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Today, to lead our time for reflection we welcome someone who had more than a passing hand in the creation of this Parliament—the Reverend Canon Kenyon Wright.

The Reverend Canon Kenyon Wright CBE (Convener, Vision 21 and People in Parliament): A memory that will haunt me as long as I live is that of the three weeks that I spent nearly 30 years ago—revealing my age—working with young people from Coventry, Germany and Poland in the horror of the death camp of Auschwitz. In the past week, we have marked the 55th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, and the full grim reality of that greatest stain on human society of the 20th century—the Holocaust.

One memory of the camp museum is very strong—its almost unimaginable record of mass murder and inhumanity, and at the exit, a full-size figure of an emaciated man draped in death on the electrified barbed wire, a suicide that many chose rather than the misery of existence. Above that figure are two words: NEVER FORGET.

Never forget; but there is a right and a wrong way of remembering. We can remember to perpetuate the myths and reinforce the prejudices and the hatreds—we have seen only too much of that, and not just in the Balkans—or we can remember to ensure that the future will be different. The Government is right to declare that, from next year, 27 January will be Holocaust day, reminding us all that those who forget the past are condemned to relive it. I am sure that together we will find relevant ways of observing that day in Scotland.

My second memory of Auschwitz is tied to something I found while cleaning the area between the barbed wire fences. I have it with me now. It was identified as part of a musical instrument that the camp orchestra was grotesquely compelled to play each day as the slave labourers marched out under the cynical motto on the gate: Arbeit macht frei—work makes us free.

My most poignant memory is of one day finding

a young German girl who was weeping inconsolably. At length, between her tears, she told me why. She had found in the camp records what she feared to find—her father's name recorded among those of the SS guards. Her words I will never forget. She said, "I feel unclean. I will never be clean again." I could say to her only that, in the story of the infamy and cruelty of humankind, all of us are unclean. None of us will ever be clean again, but for the mercy, forgiveness and grace of God and our fellow human beings.

What we all share, I am certain, is the resolve that the new Scotland will be a nation free from racism and prejudice—a land fit for all our people. Hugh McDiarmid once wrote:

"He canna Scotland see, wha yet
Canna see the infinite,
And Scotland in true scale to it".

I offer you now the poem "Mind Without Fear", which was written by the Nobel prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore as his hope for his own nation, India—a nation in which I spent many happy years.

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening
thought and action—
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country
awake."

That is my aspiration for Scotland. I hope that it is yours, too.

British-Irish Council

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The debate today is on motion S1M-481, in the name of the First Minister, on the British-Irish Council. There is an amendment to that motion. I ask members who wish to speak to press their request to speak buttons now.

14:35

The First Minister (Donald Dewar): I am delighted to speak in this debate.

Before I start, can I say that I am not always in favour of bringing clerics out of retirement to make small public speeches, but on this occasion it was entirely appropriate. I was delighted to see Canon Kenyon Wright standing in a building that is being put to a purpose that is very important to him, and for which he worked tirelessly.

In a sense, this will be a low-key debate, which I do not imagine will be a matter of enormous controversy. The debate will also, perhaps, be tinged with a little anxiety and unwelcome uncertainty.

The genesis of the debate on the British-Irish Council was a letter that I received from David McLetchie, who urged upon me the need to consider that development and its future implications. We readily agreed to have the debate, despite the current rather difficult circumstances of the Good Friday agreement, and to outline some of the hopes—and perhaps some of the realities—of what we may expect when the British-Irish Council is fully operational and takes its place as part of the machinery of the Good Friday agreement.

It is hardly necessary to say that any discussion of the council today turns our thoughts inevitably to the current situation in Northern Ireland. I very much hope that the institutions established—including the British-Irish Council—will endure. For reasons that I have hinted at, I do not wish to dwell on that situation. The most that we can do today, as friendly politicians, is to express our support and encouragement to politicians on all sides in Northern Ireland as they attempt to deal with the very complex issues that they face.

I have never been involved directly in negotiations over the peace process in Northern Ireland, but I know many of the players and have always been awed by the commitment and determination that they have shown to find a way forward. I hope that those characteristics will stand them in good stead in the approaching period. I hope, certainly, that the British-Irish Council will be part of the future and that we will be able to play a

very useful part in the future of the Good Friday agreement.

One of the reasons why I am here today is to report to Parliament on the council's first meeting, which took place shortly before Christmas. While that meeting showed, to some extent, the characteristics of introductory passage, and the report is of necessity conditional, the council made an encouraging start.

As members will know, the council emerged from the peace process and was founded on the Good Friday agreement. That agreement looked to the day when the three—then as yet unformed—devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would join the United Kingdom and Irish Governments in a council based on discussion, co-operation and consensus. The council's role would be

“to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands.”

“Islands”, very properly, has been given a comprehensive definition. In addition to the devolved Administrations and the Irish and UK Governments, there are representatives from the Government of the Isle of Man—an organisation that has, perhaps, been rather more in our thoughts recently because of the Solway Harvester—and the authorities in the bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey. The council represents a fairly wide spread of interests from the length and breadth of the islands that we inhabit.

With devolution to Scotland and Wales secured, the progress made in Northern Ireland last October and November was remarkable, and resulted in the formation of the Northern Ireland Executive Committee, which put in place the foundations on which we could start to build the British-Irish Council.

As I said, there is a little hint of uncertainty about the situation in Northern Ireland at present, but I am sure that, in the longer term, the work that has been done already will bear fruit.

The first meetings of all the bodies envisaged by the Good Friday agreement followed swiftly, such as that of the North-South Ministerial Council. We also had the first meetings of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference and the British-Irish Council on the same day—17 December.

Those who attended the meeting in Lancaster House all recognised the origins of the British-Irish Council, stressed its role in developing and strengthening the new arrangements for Northern Ireland and welcomed—indeed, celebrated—the progress made towards a peaceful and prosperous future for Northern Ireland. They all recognised, also, the more general validity of the council in expressing the interdependence of all

the peoples of these islands. To put it simply, we all have much in common and, potentially, much to learn from one another.

Those who spoke at the first meeting of the council all shared one other belief: the council will be meaningful only if it brings real benefits to all the people of these islands. As I said earlier, the first meeting was inevitably, in large part, an occasion for expressions of good will and commitment, but it was no less significant for that. I thought that the speeches were not simply dignified, but full of optimism and hope.

It may seem an odd thing for me to say, but I was conscious of—and tremendously encouraged by—the fact that the meeting worked well. Rather than just a series of delegations coming in as little, isolated units to make a point of view, a genuine exchange of views, informality and conversation took place, in what civil servants are wont to call the margins of the meeting. I thought that the atmosphere was remarkably relaxed and friendly, despite the evident history of difficulty.

We moved quickly at that meeting to identify a range of subjects on which the council would focus in the period ahead. I occasionally see rather over-ambitious definitions of the possible future role of the British-Irish Council, so it is worth making the point that no one envisages that it is—or will be in the immediate future—other than a place for the exchange of ideas, building contacts and learning from one another. I read at least one book recently that suggested that the council might become a legislative body, and another that suggested that it might replace, in some rather ill-defined way, the United Kingdom. While those are interesting ideas—

Mr Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Hear, hear.

The First Minister: Well, well—it depends how they develop. *[Laughter.]*

However, I made that point seriously, as sometimes journalists put questions to me that are based on the assumption that the council has power to legislate, or at least to take decisions that are binding on the parties. It is important to put the council into perspective.

We want to share experiences and to learn from one another. We have mutual interests—a tremendous range of areas on which our interests coincide, overlap and perhaps occasionally even collide—where those discussions can bear fruit.

The subjects on which we will focus are drugs, social inclusion, transport, the environment and the knowledge economy—a fairly formidable list of major subjects. The idea is not that the council will be in permanent session, but that there will be occasional gatherings of the full council, in

between which working groups will prepare papers, explore possibilities and conduct conversations in a civilised and, I hope, productive way on the chosen topics.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): The First Minister's definition of the policy aspects of the council was interesting. However, it seemed to me that we should also consider with the council of the isles issues such as fisheries and tourism. Forums on drugs and fisheries also exist within the European Union. Should not more emphasis be placed on those issues?

The First Minister: I understand Margaret Ewing's interest in those areas, particularly fishing, given her constituency interests.

Such decisions are always a matter of choice, but the choice was not made by a single delegation. There was a general view that the areas that I mentioned were the right starting point. That does not exclude informal discussion or exploration of further subjects. There was a wish to ensure that we did not just throw everything to the centre of the table and end up achieving very little. We felt that some concentration and definition were required for the work.

We, with the National Assembly for Wales, took lead responsibility for the council's consideration of one very large area of importance: social inclusion. My colleague Wendy Alexander has been to Ireland and has been talking to other parties, including obviously the Welsh, who carry joint responsibility for preparing papers on areas of particular study, and deciding how to tackle policy areas that are, inevitably, rather amorphous. That will be a useful and interesting discipline for us, which I hope will be productive for stage-managing—if that is the right word—the discussions that will follow.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): The First Minister referred to working with the National Assembly for Wales. From what he said about Scottish involvement, it sounded as though he was talking about the Scottish Executive working with the National Assembly for Wales. Is that his view, or is there a parliamentary dimension that would involve work being carried out on behalf of the Scottish Parliament?

The First Minister: I have, of course, not failed to read the SNP amendment. There is—and was, long before I saw that interesting document—a passage in my speech about interparliamentary matters.

On the narrow point that John Swinney raised, I was talking about the Scottish Executive, at least at this stage. The work involves putting together agendas and preparing papers for consideration at the plenary or working party sessions. It requires

some direction at ministerial level, but much of it will involve experts and will be about gathering the right sort of information and monitoring what is happening in various areas to get the right slant. I think that that is an Executive job. It does not preclude—and certainly does not exclude—the growth of interparliamentary contact at a later date. I promise that I will say a word about that.

I have talked about the subjects on which the council must prove its worth. There will be a meeting later this year in Dublin, in June—assuming that all goes well and we are fully operational by then. Obviously, the wish is that the council can and will make a difference to people's thinking and to the actions of Governments, and will perhaps give us a better-informed and better-focused structure of government across the islands. I am confident that good things can emerge from the council.

The responsibility that we have been given on social inclusion reflects the fact that we have done a great deal of work on social inclusion in Scotland. Some of the mechanics of that work, and the practicalities of some of its aims, have been controversial, but the Parliament has paid a great deal of attention to social inclusion and the social justice agenda.

The document that we published recently—"Social Justice—a Scotland where everyone matters"—has been widely recognised as a radical step forward, with its commitments to full employment and its measurement of how we can plot and chart our way towards the end of child poverty within a generation.

We want to add to our store of knowledge and our experiences through the work of the British-Irish Council. Social justice provides a fine example of why the council ought to be there: such sharing and drawing on one another's knowledge will be valuable. We share common problems; that allows us to learn and to put in context the experience of others.

The problems of my home city of Glasgow, for example, have much in common with those of other great industrial cities around the Irish sea, such as Liverpool or Belfast. I will defend my city's record with great energy, but that is not the point of today's debate. We can learn from the other parties, and vice versa: I look forward to the development of that principle.

Rural areas should not be ignored—I say that simply in passing. I contend that there is a clear community of situation between the western isles, north Wales and the west of Ireland. In some ways, the similarities are more striking, and the experiences directly relevant. I know that a great deal of work has been done in Ireland on rural affairs and I look forward to improving my

knowledge of some of the initiatives and examining whether they would travel well in terms of what the Executive can achieve in Scotland. Responsibility for making the council's consideration of social justice positive and meaningful lies, therefore, with the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales. Such a level of co-operation will be very useful.

The success of the council will depend on the extent to which it proves to be a useful vehicle for improving the lives of the people of Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom and Ireland. I believe that it will do so—partly because the commitment to achieve that exists, but also because when we get down to constructive work there will be genuine enthusiasm for such work and the progress that it will make possible.

The United Kingdom is a complex idea—one that is defiant of instant analysis. Some of us have spent our lives trying to analyse it, without necessarily coming to completely satisfactory conclusions. Its constituent countries have much in common socially, economically and culturally. It follows, also, that there are many differences between them, but the relationships between them are important. The council must capture the reality of those relationships, whether that is based on what happens in Westminster, in a devolved Scotland or in Ireland and Wales. We need a system that expresses the social, economic and cultural realities of all the constituent parts of these islands and we can achieve that.

The British-Irish Council fits well into the model that we require. It brings together a range of institutions that have different competencies that reflect their place in the constitutional framework. The Prime Minister said at the first meeting that the council builds on what we have in common and respects our differences.

I am very pleased that the relationships that have been formalised in the council have strengthened and grown satisfyingly on an informal basis. I was delighted to visit Dublin in October, and I was also delighted to welcome to Scotland the Irish President, Mary McAleese. I have had more than one visit from the Taoiseach, and Mary Harney has also visited.

All sorts of interesting initiatives exist that are not political in nature but are culturally important, such as the Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies headed by Professor Tom Devine at the University of Aberdeen. I visited the parallel development at University College Dublin. At that level, there is more work being done on, more understanding of and more inquiry into the complex interrelationships between Scotland and Ireland than we have seen for many long years. We should all recognise that our histories are intertwined—not always happily, but always

significantly. The more common understanding that exists, the better. If you had been in Glasgow in the past few weeks, Sir David, you would have been able to enjoy the Celtic Connections festival—another form of co-operation between Ireland and Scotland that is a little less academic and rarefied, but which some might venture to say is more enjoyable. I leave that to members' judgment.

I would like to close on the point that John—that John—

Members: Swinney.

Mr Swinney: It is unforgettable.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): In his dreams.

The First Minister: Mr Swinney said that more in hope than in expectation.

I suspect that the only people who dream about Mr Swinney are the members of the committee of which he is convener. They wake up crying, "Help! How can I escape?" That is not true and not fair—I am told that he is improving.

I want to make a brief reference to the SNP amendment, with which I sympathise. We want to build relationships sensibly and practically at a parliamentary level. We should, perhaps, think of doing so in the British-Irish Council structure, but we cannot do so at the moment. There might be other ways of doing that—other options can be explored.

Strand 3 of the Belfast agreement envisages that there should be such developments in parallel with the council. Some people have talked about the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body that already exists—I am not sure that we should join that or follow slavishly such a pattern. It is a matter for the Parliaments to consider and on which each must reach decisions based on consultation with the other elected bodies. That is the best way that the issue can be taken in hand.

There are cynics who say that there is no particular evidence from parliamentary life that travel broadens the mind, but I believe that there is great use for proper and judicial discussions and experiences. There is no reason why, if Governments and Executives and suchlike benefit from that kind of contact, there should not be similar benefits for those who serve as elected members in other and equally important ways. I endorse the view that there is much to be gained from such links and that it would be useful to consider how we can best encourage and establish them.

The British-Irish Council is a significant new institution. We stand ready to make a significant contribution to its work—I am sure that I speak for

everyone in the Parliament. It represents a real opportunity for these islands to learn and work together to improve the lives of their people.

I do not want to sound sanctimonious, but I think that it is right to say that our thoughts are very much with those who are looking for a way forward today—literally today—in Northern Ireland. None of us has a right to try to second-guess what the outcome may be. From my experience, I am sure that the commitment and the wish to make progress are still very much alive. Let us hope that that becomes the force that moves events in the next few weeks.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the establishment and recent inaugural meeting of the British-Irish Council; believes it has an important role to play in the promotion and development of harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships among the peoples of these islands, in promoting co-operation between the participating administrations within their competencies and in working together on issues of importance to the peoples they serve; welcomes the fact that the Scottish Executive has lead responsibility, with the National Assembly for Wales, for co-ordinating the Council's consideration of social justice issues, and intends to develop corresponding links with the Parliaments concerned.

14:56

Mr Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The First Minister's speech contained some interesting and refreshing innovations. I heard him say that he sympathised with a Scottish National party amendment—that is not something that I often hear him say. I hope that it means that he is of a mind to accept the amendment, which is meant as a positive contribution. As this debate develops, perhaps I will get the opportunity to say as much.

The First Minister said that members of John Swinney's committee were dreaming about him, although he did not specify their names. He also said that we recently had the opportunity to visit "selic" connections in Glasgow. I am not sure whether he meant to say that—and perhaps to offend half the city—but Celtic Connections has been an important festival for a number of years.

I heard the First Minister say that he did not think that analysis of the United Kingdom had yet reached a satisfactory conclusion. I sympathise with that attitude. [*Laughter.*]

I agree with the First Minister about the importance of this debate in the Scottish Parliament. Obviously, much of our focus is on Northern Ireland—that is unavoidable and quite right. The difficulties of the peace process, particularly over the past few days, cast a shadow over today's debate. However, we do not serve the cause of the peace process by allowing that to

deflect us from taking an optimistic view of the future and, in particular, the part that the British-Irish Council—or council of the isles—can play in that future.

The peace process has been through difficult times. All 129 of us must hope that in the days and weeks ahead a way can be found to secure peace and to foster the new democratic structures in Northern Ireland. We, as a Parliament, send our good wishes to those who are working to overcome those difficulties and to secure stable and just peace, free from the use or threat of violence. For understandable reasons, we are not direct participants in the peace process. However, we can be more than mere onlookers. We can—and should—explore the positive, proactive role that the Scottish Parliament can play in the peace process. The council of the isles offers such an opportunity.

The different terminology used here—British-Irish Council and council of the isles—is explained by the genesis of the idea. It was originally a suggestion by the unionists in Northern Ireland, which was made because people in the unionist camp wanted to see an east-west dialogue as a balance to north-south dialogue. What makes it particularly exciting and interesting is that the concept has now been embraced across parties and communities and, indeed, in both the south and the north of Ireland.

The First Minister said, and I can confirm, that there is real enthusiasm across the communities for the Scottish dimension of the council of the isles and an expectation that we can play a positive role in its development. Whether that is through multilateral meetings of the council itself or through bilateral meetings, the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Irish Government and the other participants can be brought together for important work.

Bilateral meetings were an important feature of strand 3 of the Good Friday agreement. I believe that the Scottish Parliament should establish regular contact with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the other participants in the council. We should work together on the practical projects that the First Minister outlined, such as transport, tourism and tackling poverty; we should learn from one another's experiences. By those practical endeavours and by working together with respect for one another and for our democratic institutions, we can achieve positive results to benefit Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the other participants in the council. Those arrangements form part of the overall picture of the council of the isles and we should regard today's debate as an opportunity to further that work.

The SNP welcomes the creation of the British-

Irish Council. As the First Minister said, and as we indicate in our amendment, it is not just a body for Governments and Executives, but one that should have a parliamentary dimension. Where appropriate, representation should not be just from the Executive, but from the Parliament and its committee structure. That is in line with the second part of strand 3 of the Good Friday agreement, which says:

"Membership of the BIC will comprise representatives of the British and Irish Governments, devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales".

We welcome the subjects that will be covered by the council and the meetings between Executives and Governments. We are particularly pleased that the Northern Ireland Executive is taking the lead on transport. I remember the 10 years that I spent as a Westminster MP noting—until the arrival of my colleague Alasdair Morgan, at least—the many transport debates about the south-west of Scotland in which Northern Irish MPs made the running. They took the lead role and pled for investment in the infrastructure of the south-west of Scotland to make the Euro-route to the north of Ireland a reality.

I am not going to nit-pick about the topics for discussion. I am slightly surprised that education is not on the current work programme. I would have thought that there are outstanding examples of the way in which the participants in the council have already learnt from one another on that subject. In 1996, I went with Winnie Ewing to the Irish Republic and met Ruairí Quinn, the then finance minister. At that time, he was presiding over the fastest-growing economy in the European Union—the current finance minister can also make that boast. I asked to what he owed such tremendous economic success. His reply was highly significant. He did not say that it was his previous budget or the latest clever manoeuvre in the fiscal strategy; he said that 20 years before, in the 1970s, there had been a tripartisan agreement to invest in the education system of the Irish Republic. That took place at a time of huge economic stringency. The Labour party, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael came together in an educational convention and decided that Irish education needed that investment if the country was to equip itself for the future.

One of the key models that was used to redefine the Irish educational tradition was the Scottish system. At that time, Ireland looked to Scotland as an example of progress in education. Many of the features of the current education system in the Irish Republic reflect the fact that it adopted key aspects of the model of Scottish education—and I remind members that, in the republic, tuition fees for students in higher education have been removed completely. The huge success of education in the Irish Republic has been shown in

almost every survey of European countries in the past few years. Ireland learned from Scotland in education and I suspect that it may now be able to teach us things from its recent educational experience.

People were slightly surprised initially by the inclusion of the islands—the channel islands and the Isle of Man—in the council of the isles. However, as the First Minister rightly said, the response of the small island Government on the Isle of Man to the recent tragedy in the fishing community—indeed, our thoughts lie with the ongoing efforts to raise the Solway Harvester—may have things to teach the Westminster Government and this Executive and Parliament. This morning, I spoke to the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man, Mr Don Gelling. He said that he hoped that the efforts to meet the wishes of the families concerned would bear fruit in the very near future. I sent him our best wishes and thanks—I know that the Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs and the constituency MSP, Alasdair Morgan, have also done so—for the approach that the Isle of Man Government has taken to the tragedy.

There is a learning process at various levels of government in the islands that makes the council of the isles—the British-Irish Council—a welcome and potentially productive development. We can look to learn lessons from economic factors in the Irish Republic. I also want to consider the Good Friday agreement and say why I think that bilateral exchanges could be a welcome addition to the multilateral council.

The Irish Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs has said:

“Our record economic growth has enabled us to achieve things that only a decade ago seemed far beyond our reach. Unemployment has been halved since 1996, employment has substantially increased and, as a recent report . . . has shown, we have made significant inroads in combating consistent poverty.”

The outstanding Irish economic performance in recent years indicates that, as we exchange information through these institutions, no Scottish minister will, I hope, be able to say again, as Lord Macdonald did only 18 months ago, that Ireland might be a good place for a stag night, but not for an economic policy. I see that the First Minister is shaking his head, but Lord Macdonald did say that—whether he meant to say it is another question. The First Minister should be pleased that he no longer has responsibility for such unwise statements—this Parliament, too, will be pleased about that. Removing outdated impressions of other countries in these islands and of the institutions of other states is surely part of the process of learning about economic policies that have been successful elsewhere and might be applied in Scotland. I am certain that such remarks will never again be made by a Scottish minister.

Section 10 of strand 3 in the Good Friday agreement expresses the hope and expectation—it has been reflected in statements from all the Northern Irish parties—that there will be bilateral contact as well as the formal council meetings. It says:

“In addition to the structures provided for under this agreement, it will be open to two or more members to develop bilateral or multilateral arrangements between them. Such arrangements could include, subject to the agreement of the members concerned, mechanisms to enable consultation, co-operation and joint decision-making on matters of mutual interest; and mechanisms to implement any joint decisions they may reach.”

That does not mean just talking about matters of mutual interest; it looks for mechanisms to implement decisions. The First Minister is right to say that the council is not a federal body making decisions. Arrangements are based on the levels of decision making of the participants. However, where agreement can be reached on a multilateral or bilateral aspect as provided for in strand 3 of the agreement, we should expect action to follow. The council is not just a talking shop, but an institution where action will follow based on mutual or multilateral agreement.

I am confident that, in taking on board the hope for aspects of parliamentary and Executive participation, we can find common ground in this Parliament and that we can recognise that bilateral as well as formal multilateral aspects of the council can be productive as we chart the way ahead.

Although the First Minister asked us not to be overblown in our expectations for these developments, those expectations should not be too negative. In *The Herald* on 18 December 1999—perhaps the First Minister was referring to this article—Benedict Brogan felt that the first meeting of the council hinted at a federal future.

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace) indicated agreement.

Mr Salmond: I see some acknowledgement from the Deputy First Minister; he was undoubtedly pushing that issue at that meeting. From our point of view, an arrangement that consists of two state Governments, three devolved Assemblies and Parliaments and three island groups could easily be changed into an arrangement consisting of three sovereign Governments, two devolved Assemblies and three island groups.

The SNP has long considered the Nordic Council a model of co-operation between sovereign Governments, island groups and other participants on matters of joint interest. Although our hopes for the council of the isles might go beyond the First Minister's agenda—and beyond even the Deputy First Minister's agenda—they are sincerely meant to make a positive contribution to

the future.

I hope that, in this debate, the whole Parliament will reflect our good wishes to the people currently engaged in difficult decisions in the north of Ireland. In the light of that, I also hope that the First Minister is not only sympathetic to the SNP amendment, but will be able to accept it.

I move amendment S1M-481.1, to insert at end:

"recognising that this Council is not just for members of the various governments but should also have effective Parliamentary representation."

The Presiding Officer: In view of the number of members wishing to speak in the debate, speeches will be limited to four minutes. I call David McLetchie to open for the Conservatives.

15:13

David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): In our manifesto for the elections to the Scottish Parliament, we made a specific commitment to playing a full part—as parliamentarians and as an Executive—in the British-Irish Council. We believe that the council represents a great opportunity to foster closer relationships between the people of these islands. That is why I invited the First Minister to hold a debate on the subject in the Parliament at the earliest opportunity—I am delighted that the Executive has responded to that request—and also why I have subsequently asked whether the Executive intends to report on proceedings of meetings at the British-Irish Council so that we are kept fully informed about the council's deliberations and the matters under discussion.

As a result, I welcome the fact that the First Minister has given the Parliament a report on the proceedings of the first meeting of the British-Irish Council in December, and I hope that, when he or his colleagues return from the next meeting—which is scheduled for June in Dublin—they will present a similar report to the Parliament. Furthermore, I hope that this new constitutional dimension will inform debates in the Parliament on a range of issues and will be taken into account in our committees' consideration of those matters of mutual interest that form the council's agenda.

That is, of course, if there are any future meetings of the British-Irish Council. The First Minister mentioned the tinge of anxiety and concern that surrounds today's debate. Alex Salmond referred to the good will in this chamber for the peace process, and I am happy to associate my party with the sentiments that both members have expressed.

There is a great deal of good will. The First Minister was kind enough to acknowledge my interest. We should also acknowledge the

contributions of other members: George Lyon, Jamie Stone, Hugh Henry and Margaret Ewing, in motions and in questions, have offered support to the peace process and to the concept of joint working with members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the other Governments and Administrations included. There is an enthusiasm for involvement, which is reflected in our conduct today and in what has been said so far in the debate.

I agree with Mr Salmond's amendment on behalf of the Scottish National party. The formation of a parliamentary and interparliamentary dimension to the British-Irish Council would be helpful; it might build on existing interparliamentary links through the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. It would be advantageous to this Parliament to establish close working relationships because, as the agreement acknowledges, we have many issues of joint concern.

The First Minister indicated a number of the action areas in the work programme agreed at the December meeting of the British-Irish Council. As mentioned already, one is transport, on which the Northern Ireland Executive has lead responsibility. The development of transport links with Scotland is crucial to the regeneration of Northern Ireland's economy, which has been blighted by the troubles for the past 30 years. Those links are also important to the development of the Scottish economy, particularly in Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway. The sea link to Northern Ireland is vital to both countries and we must upgrade port facilities and improve access to ports such as Stranraer.

That means considering the roads, particularly the A75 and the A77. We welcome the Executive's decision as part of its roads programme to upgrade the A77, but we do not think that the route action plan for the A75 is sufficient—further dualling of that road is needed. Unless the Executive is prepared in future budgets to commit more resources to the development of the road network and to giving motorists, hauliers and businesses a fairer deal and return on the substantial amounts of money that they pay in taxes to the Exchequer, it is difficult to see how we can play our part in improving transport links with Northern Ireland, as envisaged in the agreement. Road haulage is a further area that would benefit from common standards of training, safety and operational procedures, which I hope will be examined in the British-Irish Council.

Air services could be improved by a common approach to the development of international flights to and from airports within the British Isles and to the expansion of air freight services. The British-Irish Council's most valuable role may be in identifying transport needs throughout the British

Isles and in coming up with practical solutions.

I was interested to see that drugs are part of the initial work programme. That is an area about which we can learn from the experience of other countries. I was pleased to note that the Government of the Republic of Ireland is the lead Administration in this policy area, as it has adopted the sort of tough policies to combat drug abuse and dealing that we included in our manifesto for the Scottish elections and with which other parties sympathise. The Deputy Minister for Justice, Mr MacKay, was in Dublin for a two-day visit in November to look at how drug dealers are tackled and at asset confiscation.

As we know, the Dublin Government created a Criminal Assets Bureau with sweeping powers, notwithstanding the fact that there are provisions in the constitution of the Republic of Ireland that jealously guard the rights of private property. The system that it has introduced allows the respondent to be present at each stage of the civil proceedings, and gives the targeted individual seven years in which to show that the assets were not derived from the proceeds of crime and drug trafficking. There is further protection in cases where it can be shown that seizure or freezing orders were made wrongly.

I understand that Mr MacKay returned from his Dublin trip converted to the Irish approach to dealing with drugs barons and the seizure by the courts of their ill-gotten gains. However, since his return and since the press announcements that accompanied it, barely a cheep has been heard in this Parliament on that subject. I wonder if this is another area in which the minister's aspirations have been thwarted by the ill-considered decision of his Labour colleagues in Westminster to incorporate the European convention on human rights into our domestic law—Mr MacKay and his colleagues in the Scottish Executive may discover that they cannot deliver the tougher anti-drugs measures that the Irish have been able to implement as a result of not incorporating the ECHR into their domestic law.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): On a point of information, is Mr McLetchie aware that there have been no asset seizures in the Republic of Ireland? The Irish Government has put the structure in place, but as yet has been unable to use it. That is indicative of the similar problems that we would have in Scotland.

David McLetchie: That is an interesting observation. I must say that I was relying on the report of the minister. His enthusiasm for the powers that were given to the Criminal Assets Bureau is considerably greater than that which Mr Quinan has evinced. A clarifying statement by the minister—a few more cheeps—would be welcome and would inform the debate in this Parliament.

This situation illustrates an important point. As we have seen in relation to drugs seizures, temporary sheriffs and—as we discussed last week—tuition fees, the Executive needs to be much more open in this Parliament in disclosing its legal advice on these matters. That would make it clearer to us, and to the public, whether the incorporation of the ECHR into our domestic law is hampering, or may hamper, the fight against drugs, and imperilling the confiscation of drug-derived assets. In addition, that information would tell us what general limitations European law, and the incorporation of the ECHR into domestic law, imposes on the legislative competence of this Parliament. As parliamentarians, we are entitled to know that information across a range of issues. Drug asset seizures is an example to add to those that we have already seen in this Parliament where such clarification is crucial.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I have not been too happy in the past few minutes about the direction in which Mr McLetchie's speech is going. Will he make clear his party's position on tackling drug misuse? Does he agree that, to get the balance right, it is equally important within the British-Irish Council that, as well as sharing best experience of enforcement, we share best experience of treatment and of education if we are successfully to tackle drugs misuse?

David McLetchie: I could not agree more with Mr Raffan. This is a rare occasion, and I do not expect to say those words too often in this Parliament, but I agree with his sentiments on these matters—as he rightly says, we need a concerted approach. We need a multi-agency and multi-dimensional approach to tackle drug trafficking and abuse throughout the British Isles.

As many members will be aware, in Northern Ireland the paramilitaries have been heavily involved in drug trafficking and the drugs trade, and it will be crucial to the success of the peace process for us to co-operate in cracking down on that problem. It will also be crucial for our police forces to swap information on, and ideas of, best practice on how to tackle the problem in the round. In that respect, I am happy to associate myself with Mr Raffan's comments.

I note that social inclusion is another topic for discussion and that our Executive and the Welsh Cabinet are the lead Administrations in that area. The mere repetition of the social inclusion mantra does not make social inclusion strategies more likely to succeed. Conservative members have considerable reservations about the Scottish Executive's approach to the resolution of social problems, which seems to us to attempt to deliver an agenda from on high, rather than to devolve real power in areas such as housing and education to individuals and communities. In our

view, the Executive has so far failed to address the problem of rising crime, which blights so many of the communities that we want to include in our society. We must acknowledge that, without a framework of law, no social inclusion strategy will ever work.

People in Northern Ireland know that only too well. The regeneration of communities in Northern Ireland will take place only if the punishment beatings stop and control of communities is wrested from the paramilitaries and given back to a police force in which all can have confidence and which is committed to the rule of law and to challenging the rule of the lawless. Law, freedom under the law and the rule of law are paramount in everything that we seek to do through our social inclusion strategies.

We must compare large housing estates in this country with those in Ireland to see whether there are joint approaches and ideas that could help us to tackle problems on the multi-agency and multi-dimensional basis that Mr Raffan mentioned.

The British-Irish Council offers an opportunity to emphasise the links that exist between Scotland and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Cultural links could be strengthened through greater support for bodies such as the Columba initiative. A similar initiative should be introduced to recognise the links that connect Scots with people in Ulster.

Those issues must be addressed, but there are others that need more immediate attention. One of those is the British-Irish Council's name, which is inelegant and, in some ways, misleading. The breadth of the body would be emphasised by adopting a name such as the council of the isles, which is in common parlance among many commentators anyway.

We would like to see Scotland, in particular Glasgow, as the base for the permanent secretariat of the British-Irish Council. I hope that the Executive will press that case with conviction. There are obvious connections that make Glasgow an appropriate and worthy home.

We welcome the British-Irish Council. We thank the Executive for according some of its time to allow the matter to be debated in the chamber. We believe that the British-Irish Council can be an important part of the whole process. We believe that it can be successful and that, if it concentrates on practical goals and not on impossible aspirations, it will work to our mutual advantage. We wish the council well, as I am sure all members do. I support the motion and the amendment in the name of Mr Salmond.

15:29

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I, too, want to refer to the situation in Ulster. The 1 o'clock news today led on a story about children and parents demonstrating at Stormont about the lack of provision of hot meals. It was ironic that, meanwhile, the ship that is the Northern Ireland Assembly was sadly drifting once again towards the rocks. Like the First Minister, I do not want to dramatise the situation, but we have been here before. I hope that we will get through.

One thought occurred to me, which I am sure occurred to all of us yesterday and today: what a pity that the terrorists could not find it in their hearts to make just a first move. However, in fairness, the peace and the cease-fire have held for far longer than any of us dared hope. Let us hope that David Trimble can stay in, but I suspect that the die is cast. He is in an impossible situation. However, we all hope and pray that we will get there in the end.

Rightly, speakers so far have talked about Ireland—and, really, this is about Ireland. I would like to dwell on Ireland to back up what I will say thereafter.

Alex Salmond referred to a stag night in Ireland. I had a stag night in Ireland, and I would like to say that I have happy memories of it, but—Ireland being Ireland—the memory is a little on the hazy side. I have known Northern Ireland since 1977. My wife hails from County Armagh and I have come to know the province very well—like Ben Wallace and Mike Rumbles, although they will know it better than I do. I have seen an enormous change between 1977 and recent times.

When I first went to Armagh, there were bombed-out buildings that were like gaps in the fair smile of Ireland. We walked in fear. We were scared to go into a tobacconist's in case it was on the wrong side of the line in Armagh. That line could have been in Portadown or Omagh—it was repeated right across the province. Like so many people in Ulster, I have heard the distant thump of a bomb. Ben and Mike have been far closer than I have. I have heard that bang and that distant rattle of rifle fire.

As we all know, it is all rooted in history. Alex Salmond will know better than I do, but it is possible to go back to Strongbow, to the flight of the earls, to Cromwell's invasion, to the martyrdom of Oliver Plunkett, to the battle of the Boyne, to the Grattan parliament and to the agrarian outrages—it is all there.

At each stage, Ulster moved forward step by step. One word is a key to show the way it was—the word boys. A study of Irish history tells of the Whiteboys, the Steelboys, the Oakboys, the Peep

o' Day Boys and, last but not least, the Apprentice Boys. The word shows how people formed themselves into groups and bands, and fought and killed each other.

About three or four years ago, I happened to be over there when Drumcree blew up again. As we get older, we gain a fear of heights; as we get older, such things scare us more. I can remember being in Armagh when the atmosphere was ready just for a match to set it off. It was just about to go up. We have been that close. Yet, in recent times, things have improved greatly. Ireland now is far from the Ireland that I once knew. When James Joyce described Ireland as

"the old sow that eats her farrow"—

that destroys her own children—he was not far out. But in recent times it has been different.

I remember, a few years ago, going into Kate's Bar in Port Salen in County Donegal. I do not know how many members know County Donegal, but I can recommend Kate's Bar for a football special for the kids or for a pint of Guinness. The first time I went in, people—complete strangers—were going into unmentionable Ulster subjects. Remember that Donegal is one of the nine counties of Ulster. They asked questions such as, "Where did you go to school?", "What do think about the situation?" and "What about that bombing?" The people were from both sides of the sectarian divide. In the wider province of Ulster, one found some years ago that there was a form of civilised conversation and attitude. In recent times, in the city of Armagh, I have seen the change. It is reflected right across Ulster. People are no longer scared to go into shops in case it is the wrong shop; they are no longer scared to engage total strangers in conversation.

That is where I am coming from as regards the British-Irish Council. That institution can do a great deal to heal the divisions. One of the problems of Ulster in the past was highlighted to me when I went to a conference when I was a councillor. I met a group of unionists clustered round the bar. I am not telling this story because they were unionists. I recognised one of them from Armagh and I engaged him in conversation. He asked, "What are your politics?" I replied, "I am independent," which I was then. He said, "Does that mean you are a republican?" I said no, and I explained. I tried to get people to mix—there were also people from Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour party.

Those members who are parliamentarians in another place may know this, but it is by pulling people together and going out to meet them that we will make progress. Alex Salmond talked about wider parliamentary involvement; that is important. It is about taking people on board—not just the

high heid yins, but ordinary back benchers such as myself. The process must be inclusive.

Margaret Ewing referred to pursuing such issues as fishing. Why not? Members have also mentioned the east-west divide, as well as the north-south divide. Why not? From my north Highlands perspective, I would love to see an investigation of the rural versus city divide—I mean not just London, but Edinburgh and Glasgow. There is much good work to be done.

As Liberal Democrats, we see this as a way towards federalism and we welcome it. We welcome it because it is part and parcel of the peace process and can make a big difference. We live in difficult times right now, but let us hope that things come right. Meanwhile, we must show our commitment to all the British Isles. I have no doubt that we all sing from one hymn sheet.

In closing, let me give an example that I think is of use to us all. The Nordic Council is a successful model of co-operation among institutions at different levels. It includes big ones and wee ones, from the Faroe Islands, which are not much different from Shetland, to Sweden, which has a big population. The British-Irish Council should focus on the bread-and-butter issues that I mentioned and could bring together people of similar interests—we share a common language, after all. I recommend the Nordic Council to this Parliament as a model.

I shall draw to a close now, as I know that many members would like to contribute to the debate. To me, it is simple. We are lucky here. We disagree from time to time and we howl at one another, but we are lucky to be here as a Parliament that is young but which—dare I suggest it—works. We are not under the threat of extremists who could stop us tomorrow if they felt like it. By supporting the council, we will extend a hand to our little brother or sister, the fledgling democracy across the Irish sea. Doing that will send the right message and I am glad that there is unanimity on that. I hope that, in our own small way, we can help the situation in Northern Ireland. I hope that what we say today will be printed in tomorrow's papers over there, although I rather doubt it.

15:38

Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): As all members acknowledge, we live in difficult times. Anxiety is felt all round the chamber, but so too is the good will that we extend to those involved in the peace process. In a sense, I have a direct involvement, in that my local member of the UK Parliament, Adam Ingram MP, is a minister of state over there. Through all the ups and downs, I have seen the anxiety and stress on his face during what have been delicate times. Times are

delicate again, but I am sure that we will get through this situation and beyond.

I welcome the establishment of the British-Irish Council. It strengthens the union, allows us to work in partnership throughout the British Isles and complements our work in the Parliament. It generates assistance for the peace process, and that is to be welcomed.

As convener of the Transport and the Environment Committee, I cannot ignore the fact that transport and the environment are two of the five action points. Like others, I hope that relationships will develop, enabling people to learn from one another. I am sure that members of my committee are looking forward to getting involved in that process. There is a genuine desire to ensure that the British-Irish Council works.

In a sense, there are many similarities between Scotland and Ireland with regard to conurbation—the central belt being comparable to the Dublin-Wexford belt—and rural areas. Parallels can be drawn and we can value each other as north-south neighbours conducting a positive debate through the British-Irish Council.

I was interested in what was said about the seizure of assets in relation to drugs. The point that Lloyd Quinan made was certainly not my understanding of the situation. However, I am sure that we will get further detail on that from the Deputy Minister for Justice, who was over in Ireland learning about the seizure of assets. That is one positive step forward which I hope we can take. We can also learn from each other on the social inclusion agenda. The Transport and the Environment Committee is currently interested in concessionary fares. I know that Ireland has a good concessionary fares scheme and offers free travel. We want to learn from how that operates. We can learn from best practice and take the best from each other's systems for delivering public services and democracy.

I take the point that was made about the condition of the Irish sea and the travel and tourism links that can be made. I know that plans are being made for direct sea links between Scotland and the low countries—there are opportunities for the Irish economy, both north and south, to benefit from that. Many good and positive initiatives could come from an exchange of ideas.

The First Minister's original point was that there is a genuine need to improve people's lives. That is what the British-Irish Council is about, and we are all signed up to it. I hope that the current difficulties are overcome and that this Parliament—whatever relationships are established—will help ensure that the British-Irish Council is a successful body.

15:41

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): Northern Ireland is a land that breaks the heart of all who love her, yet the people remain of the most astonishing good humour and wit. During my long connection with the European Parliament, I was privileged to be a personal friend of every Irish member from every party, north and south of the border. Most of them ran visitors groups and asked me to speak to them—there was no language barrier. I must have had question-and-answer sessions with 4,000 or so people from Ireland, north and south. I found the good will that all of them showed towards Scotland very endearing. I once asked them how they remained so cheerful, given the background against which they had to live. They replied, "It is being cheerful that makes it possible for us to continue."

A long time ago, when I was the MP for Hamilton, I was fortunate to spend an evening with President De Valera. It is remarkable how far we have come since then, because in his frank conversation with me, the republic's constitutional claim to the north still featured. That shows how much has been conceded by the different sides during the long history of this process.

Mr Stone boasted about his connections with Ireland through his Irish wife. I have an Irish daughter-in-law and an Irish granddaughter, which is highly satisfactory.

On the fragility of politics in the province, I would like to quote a one-time British ambassador to Dublin, who said:

"This is a land where words can become weapons".

For that reason, every word that people use has to be very carefully chosen. I would like to pay a tribute to Mo Mowlam, because however often she was suddenly interviewed in difficult situations, her words were always beautifully chosen. I gave her that tribute when she addressed the European Parliament during the British presidency of the European Union.

However fragile the situation in Northern Ireland is at the moment, we must carry on with our preparations for this bridge-building exercise. Like Mr McLetchie, I would like to suggest a site for the secretariat—the town of Ayr.

On transport, all the Irish and Scottish members of the European Parliament co-operated in securing support for the Ballycastle-Campbeltown ferry. However, we wanted to go further than that. We wanted a link between Stranraer and the republic—a four-cornered route that would have helped tourism in all the countries concerned.

At this point, I was going to make an appeal to the First Minister. He is not here, so I will make an appeal to the Deputy First Minister. I appeal to the

Executive to accept our amendment.

Our amendment contains no time limit. Strand 3 of the Good Friday agreement says that the elected institutions should be encouraged to develop interparliamentary links. We ask the Executive to show some of the spirit that we are asking people in Northern Ireland to show against the enormous difficulties that they face. We ask the Executive to co-operate with a reasonable proposition as put forward in our amendment.

The people of Northern Ireland are up against it in every way. Mr Trimble shows great courage, but both sides display intransigence. If we in this chamber cannot co-operate on opening the door to democracy in the council of the isles by agreeing that there should be parliamentary representation, what right have we to advise the people of Northern Ireland?

When I was in the European Parliament, I was impressed by the way that the Irish members from both sides of the border voted for any project that would benefit either side of the border. Ian Paisley voted for anything that would benefit the republic and the members from the republic voted for anything for Northern Ireland. That shows an admirable spirit of co-operation.

I ask that the Executive consider the Nordic Council. To begin with, it did not have parliamentary representation, but it has now. Mo Mowlam said that we could learn lessons from the Nordic Council because of its attitude towards parliamentary representation.

We have witnessed a political breakthrough. We have seen people sitting down together whom we would not have believed would ever do so. We cannot let the progress stop now. I hope that our words can convince the people of Northern Ireland that we care desperately, that we understand all the difficulties and that we will not try to use words that will make things worse.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): I now call John McAllion, to be followed by John Reid.

15:47

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): On the day that David McLetchie said that he agreed with Keith Raffan, it gives me great pleasure to say that I agree with everything that Winnie Ewing just said. I was particularly interested to hear that she was a personal friend of every Irish member of the European Parliament. If those Irish members were anything like the Irish members whom I befriended in Westminster, she would have to have had a very strong constitution indeed. Perhaps she has a stronger stomach for drink than I was able to develop in the 13 years that I spent

in Westminster.

I agree with what Winnie Ewing said about words being weapons. We have to be careful with our words when talking about Irish politics. One of the gratifying things about the debate so far is the way in which nobody has tried to exploit it for any narrow political agenda. That would not be the case if this subject were being debated at Westminster. That stands the Scottish Parliament in good stead.

I endorse what other members have said about the uncertainty of the future of the peace process in Northern Ireland. All of us realise that the alternatives to the peace process are too awful to contemplate, for everyone in the British Isles and particularly for those who inhabit the northern part of the island of Ireland.

If the council of the isles does nothing other than contribute in a small way to keeping the peace process going in Northern Ireland, it will have served its purpose much better than other institutions have served theirs for the past 300 or 400 years.

I was interested in what Alex Salmond said about the British-Irish Council starting as a unionist idea and ending up on the other side of the nationalist divide as the council of the isles. It is supported by Sinn Féin and the other republicans. That shows that, in politics, nobody knows where an original idea might end up. We have to be careful about that.

I agree with Alex Salmond that the Scottish Parliament can and should play an important role in the council of the isles. I am just a little bit concerned about an element in all the speeches of the front-bench spokespeople. Donald Dewar, for example, said that he could see no future in the council of the isles' becoming a legislative body. Andy Kerr said that he thought that it would strengthen the union. Jim Wallace referred to a federal future for the council of the isles, and Alex Salmond talked about co-operation between sovereign states in some kind of confederal relationship that might replace the United Kingdom in the long term. Perhaps that is an alternative to independence in Europe, and we have seen the first of it here, this afternoon.

I would be disappointed if people approached the council of the isles from that constitutionalist perspective. I am currently reading a book by Mr Tom Nairn, entitled "After Britain". I am sure that Alex Salmond and the Scottish National party would have great fun reading it. It is a good read. Tom Nairn warns against those who would elevate the reform of the state above reform of the social conditions of those who live in the state, and above the economy that determines the social conditions of too many of the citizens of these

isles. To proceed in that way would be a mistake.

Mr Salmond: I am grateful to John McAllion for his advice on reading material. I hope that he has also been watching Andrew Marr's programme over the past two evenings.

Are not constitutional aspects and social objectives related? Surely, this institution above all others makes a case for both, as it arose from a constitutional dilemma but has practical social and economic objectives. We would not be providing a service if we did not state our ambitions for Scotland's participation in such a body that makes the case for independence and interdependence at the same time.

Mr McAllion: I agree with that. However, I do not want the council of the isles to become a battleground on which to fight the old constitutional arguments that we fight in this chamber. We should try to concentrate, when we can, on the social and economic agenda, and on what we can learn from each other in the different Assemblies and Parliaments in the British Isles. That is why I support unreservedly the SNP's call for a parliamentary dimension to the council of the isles. I hope that the Executive will be able to accept the principle, at least, and debate the way in which it can be implemented.

As members will know, I recently convened a Scottish friends of the Good Friday agreement group in the Scottish Parliament. I have been authorised to write to the Presiding Officer, the Speakers in the Dáil and the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Irish Consul, and the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, to announce the establishment of that group and to try to work out with all those bodies how we can define the role of the back benchers under the Good Friday agreement and within the council of the isles. That is absolutely essential.

For example, back benchers can bring a new dimension to the debate on social inclusion. Housing is an issue that is dividing people in Scotland. Northern Ireland has had a much worse housing situation than we have ever had in our country, over the past 20 years. However, in spite of the troubles, and through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, it has made leaps and bounds that we have not been able to make. We can learn from it and it can learn from us. I look forward to the back benchers' being given a chance to play their role in that learning process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In calling George Reid, I apologise for promoting and moving his party earlier, when I referred to him as John Reid. That was entirely accidental. I now call John Reid—sorry, George Reid. I have done it again. As George Reid is the Parliament's representative on the British-Irish Council, I intend

to allow him some laxity of time.

15:53

Mr George Reid (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): This will not be a particularly party political speech; rather, it will be a report back to the Parliament on the previous plenary of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, in Cambridge, which I attended on behalf of the Scottish Parliament. In particular, I shall touch on the various models of any future council of the isles, which was discussed there, which would allow the continuance of sovereign representation between London and Dublin, while allowing parliamentary participation from Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man.

At the suggestion of the Presiding Officer, I shall also report briefly on discussions that he held during the recent meetings of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, in Sydney, with the Speakers or Presiding Officers of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Welsh Assembly, the House of Keys, and the bailiwicks of Guernsey and Jersey. In particular, I ask members to note the proposal that a conference of Presiding Officers be established, with the first meeting to be held perhaps as early as March or April.

It is a delicate matter, given the current fragility of the peace process in Northern Ireland, to consider the future of constitutional relationships in our shared islands at a time when some forces in Ulster seem determined at all costs to get back to the past. At Cambridge, a number of MPs and TDs argued that any discussion of a parliamentary council of the isles should be deferred until the British-Irish Council was fully up and running. That was not the view of Mo Mowlam, who urged them not to be "overcautious". She hoped, she said, that Scotland and Ireland would participate in British-Irish business as "more than observers".

There were also members at Cambridge who referred to the Lothian lecture of the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. I quote one extract from his remarks, of relevance to this debate:

"The Good Friday Peace Agreement . . . coupled with devolution across the UK will, we hope, lead to a new spirit of co-operation and friendship between the different component parts of these islands. It will be difficult in future for anyone to adopt the reductionist position that Britain equals England or London. In future, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will have a political personality of their own."

In that spirit, MPs and TDs in Cambridge moved on to consideration of strand 3, section 11 of the Good Friday agreement. It states:

"The elected institutions of the members will be encouraged to develop interparliamentary links".

Discussion on that immediately ran into two

difficulties, about which I will be quite frank. First, how could members of sovereign Parliaments debate matters within their exclusive competence, such as foreign affairs, defence and decommissioning, alongside representatives of devolved Assemblies? Secondly, how could parity of representation between London and Dublin—they currently have 25 members each—be secured?

The Irish have a problem, which we shall face in this chamber, as a small Parliament, at some point in the future. They cannot detach more than 25 TDs from the Oireachtas, without it coming to a virtual halt. If Scots, Welsh and Ulstermen were involved, the fear is that the British voice would be louder, but if the Westminster contingent were shrunk, the fear is that some pan-Celtic majority might arise.

A number of models were discussed, although no decision was taken. There was some agreement, however, that one way forward—at least initially—might be for any parliamentary council to have two commissions. Commission 1 would be composed exclusively of members from Westminster and Dublin, which would consider sovereign matters such as security. Commission 2 would consider devolved matters, and would be composed of members from all Parliaments and Assemblies, with no in-built majority. Both commissions might come together in plenary session, although the body would, of course, be deliberative.

At Cambridge, no final view was reached. The body decided to wait and see. However, Mo Mowlam yet again reiterated remarks made by her at the 17th plenary, that the Nordic Council model was one from which lessons could be learned.

We have heard a bit about that from Alex Salmond. I will make two points. First, the Nordic Council was not suddenly imposed top-down by Governments, but grew bottom-up from citizens movements and the Norden Association formed in 1918—a bit like the patient networking done by civic Scotland in building this Parliament. Secondly, the real work of building a Nordic identity has been done not by ministers but by ordinary parliamentarians in the council bringing together—across frontiers—employers, trade unions, women's groups and local authorities.

Regardless of what happens short term, I hope that we can continue a similar process here. Members of the consultative steering group went to Ulster to brief parliamentarians. Joan Stringer, of the CSG, chaired the forum on equal opportunities.

The Columba initiative is an excellent example of how communities these days transcend national frontiers. It brings together students from the Irish

Republic, Northern Ireland and Scotland in the youth parliament of the greater Gaidhealtachd.

There are also parliamentary matters of daily devolved politics: our common links in natural gas and electricity supply; radioactive discharges into the Irish sea from Sellafield; munitions dumped in Beaufort's dyke; the rural environment; crofting; ferry and transport links; co-operative ventures in education; peripherality in the European Union; and parliamentary follow-up to the work being done by Wendy Alexander as lead minister on social inclusion in the council.

"Se obair làtha tòiseachadh—It's a whole day's work getting started," I said to one TD at Cambridge. He replied, characteristically, perhaps, in view of the Ulster experience, "Se obair beatha crìochnachadh—Finishing the job can be a whole lifetime's work."

The logic of devolution is that we have to get started. Regardless of what happens in Ulster over the next few days—and all of us pray that men and women of good faith and common sense will prevail there—Scotland will want to keep talking to the other communities and countries in our shared islands.

In his winding-up remarks, I very much hope that Jim Wallace will welcome the creation of the Presiding Officers' conference as a small step down that road. I also hope that he will confirm his support for committees, or parts of them, and individual MSPs meeting on matters of mutual interest with colleagues from Belfast, Cardiff, Dublin, London and the smaller islands.

16:01

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):

As Jamie Stone said, the British-Irish Council offers a new dimension for Ireland and, as several members have said, for Scotland and this Parliament. It recognises that we, too, have a role to play in assisting Ireland to move forward and in providing an appropriate role for Scottish ministers, as the Executive accountable to this Parliament, working within the family of nations in these islands.

It may be of interest to members that David McLetchie, Alex Salmond and others used the name council of the isles. In this context, it is important not to be caught by history, as that name has a certain historical resonance. The last Council of the Isles existed to advise the head of clan Donald when, as Lord of the Isles, he was, effectively, an independent ruler. Indeed, the last Council of the Isles was put out of business by the last Scottish Parliament, some 500 years ago. It is clear from today's debate that the message of good will from the new Scottish Parliament to the new council of the isles will be very different.

The political and cultural traditions of Gaelic Scotland are relevant to today's debate. The cultural connections and the economic parallels between the western peripheral areas of Scotland and Ireland are ancient yet still very strong today, as colleagues who represent the Highlands and Islands will acknowledge and as George Reid just reminded us.

The strong links between central Scotland and parts of Ireland, built over centuries of migration in both directions, are well known. Donald Dewar mentioned the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, which was recently established at the University of Aberdeen, which is in my constituency. The institute is of great significance, but it is not an isolated phenomenon. University College Dublin, the Queen's University of Belfast, the University of Aberdeen and the University of Strathclyde have worked together over a period of years to build on shared interests and ties through the Irish-Scottish academic initiative and to develop the recent renewal of a sense of community between our two countries.

That work is not merely academic: it is about changing perspectives, reflecting changing communities and influencing communities. I believe that the council of the isles, or the British-Irish Council, creates an opportunity to contribute to that developing sense of identity of a community of interest that Scotland and Ireland share.

Alex Salmond spoke about bilateral aspects—I hope that they will include direct co-operation between Scotland and the Governments of both southern and Northern Ireland.

I have no doubt that all parts of these islands have much to learn and to gain from working together through the council in the years to come. It will be an important and positive development that will both strengthen British-Irish relations and underpin the devolution settlement of which this Parliament is part.

16:04

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): Prior to last year's elections, the First Minister said:

"we"—

that was not early use of the royal we, as he had held a meeting with Mo Mowlam—

"can see a wealth of opportunities for new relationships and dynamics within the British Isles. We can start to realise these aims now through our work on the BIC."

Today, he followed that up by saying that he hopes that the council will bring

"real benefits to all the people of these islands".

I for one completely concur with those sentiments.

I would like to expand on the subject touched on in David McLetchie's speech, not from what John McAllion would call a narrow political point of view, but because it is a topic of great importance if linkage between Scotland and Ireland is to be fostered and strengthened. I refer to the vital importance of transport links to Northern Ireland and Eire through the south-west of Scotland and the unacceptable state of those links at present.

It is a fallacy to argue, as many do, that nothing has been done for the past 20 years. If members do not believe me, they have only to ask the residents of the many towns and villages that were by-passed during the Conservative period in government.

Just before the Executive tries to claim—if it does—credit for the £10 million improvement at the Glen near Dumfries, I am happy to inform members that that too was brought about and sanctioned by the previous Conservative Government. It was an Administration committed to road improvement, unlike the present one, which is committed more to driver persecution.

Despite the fact that real improvements have been made, an awful lot more needs to be done. It is said that the first 30 mph restriction on a drive from Portugal to Stranraer is at Crocketford in Galloway—and that the second is at Springholm, about five miles further on. Needless to say, a Conservative Government would have by-passed those villages as part of its road improvement plan, whereas this Executive seems content to ignore their plight.

The A77 is also in need of major attention between Ayr and Stranraer. These two major links to the Loch Ryan complex, Stranraer and Cairnryan, the A77 and the A75—which, significantly, and as Alex Salmond pointed out, is a recognised Euro-route, although it is often referred to locally as a Euro-goat-track—are the major British links to Northern Ireland, the brave new Northern Ireland, which so greatly needs our help, support and encouragement in these very tricky early days of peaceful co-existence. We all want that to succeed, and the British-Irish Council was first proposed towards that end.

From a recent seminar in Stranraer organised by Dumfries and Galloway Council came a call for an all-party and, perhaps more important, all-parliamentary group from the European Parliament down, to press for urgent improvements to the A77 and A75. I commend Alasdair Morgan for facilitating a meeting of such interested parties.

It is interesting that the most vociferous calls at the seminar came from representatives of all parts of Ireland. Those roads are absolutely vital for trade and tourism. To ignore their further

upgrading is frankly to ignore the future economic prospects of the south-west of Scotland and Northern and southern Ireland. It is my fervent hope that the British-Irish Council can help raise that issue up the political agenda.

I have a similar hope—although I am not so optimistic that it may bear fruit—that the council may seriously consider the issue of Beaufort's dyke. As part of the Scotland to Northern Ireland interconnector project, underwater cables are to be laid through an area of sea bed on which lies a mind-boggling variety of munitions, explosives and other unwanted ordnance, much of which is liable to be washed ashore when disturbed.

Whereas both Westminster and the Scottish Executive are content to pass the buck on this important issue for people in the south-west of Scotland, perhaps it is not too much to ask that the British-Irish Council may have the courage to address it and give real meaning to the First Minister's optimistic appraisal of the council's relevance a year or so ago and in his speech this afternoon.

16:09

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): The interest and focus of much of this debate centres on happenings in Northern Ireland. It is good to see this institution lending tremendous support to our colleagues in Northern Ireland in the hope that they can see their way through their current difficulties.

There are very strong bonds between Scotland and Ireland. I have many relations on both sides of my family who live in Ireland. In the context of the small economy of Bute, my first experience of the Irish people was of the tattie howking squads coming every summer to work the farms along the west coast of Scotland. Most summers, they started on the east coast and working their way to the west, either singling turnips or picking potatoes—quite a backbreaking job. Many of them were, of course, left behind.

Three or four such people worked with my family for many years after the tattie howking squads stopped coming. It is with great interest that we look to the events that are unfolding in Northern Ireland.

I happen to be fortunate in that when the Northern Ireland Assembly was set up, I was a guest at a conference in Dublin on rural issues. It was attended by representatives of all the Celtic nations and the UK. We were there to discuss the common challenges and problems that face our rural economies. It was tremendous to discuss with delegates, over a beer in the evening, the hopes and aspirations that were being expressed as a result of the setting up of the Northern Ireland

Assembly. The first meeting between representatives of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Government of Eire took place on the Monday after that conference.

Speaking to taxi drivers in London and to some of the delegates who were left behind after the conference, I found that there was a great sense of hope and expectation. More than that, however, there was a sense of wonder that the two sides in Ireland were sitting down and that their representatives were having a political debate about the day-to-day issues of health, education and tourism, rather than guns and religion. There was a sense that new opportunities were being developed because of the setting up of a new political institution. I greatly regret that the peace process seems to have hit another major obstacle. We must hope that a way forward can be found.

I will move on to the institution of the British-Irish Council. When I worked with the National Farmers Union of Scotland, I took many opportunities to visit the other Celtic countries. The experiences of rural Wales, rural Ireland, rural Eire and rural Scotland have much in common. There was a formal apparatus that regularly brought together all the farming unions and there were many common causes that locked us together. Such an experience should be made available to the members of this Parliament and the Parliaments of the other Celtic nations and the UK. It is important that all parts of the British Isles have a way to exchange ideas and to communicate with parliamentarians from other parts of the isles.

The challenge for the Scottish Parliament is to talk about issues other than Scottish issues—we must look wider. We could be accused of navel-gazing on many occasions because we look no further afield than Scotland. The council of the isles gives parliamentarians a great opportunity to discuss the challenges that face all our countries. Where there are common opportunities there will be policy failures as well as policy successes, but it is important that that discussion takes place. I ask that structures be set up to allow such debate to take place so that ideas are swapped.

No part of Britain has as rich and deep a connection with Ireland as Argyllshire. We have a permanent link—I hope—via ferry between Ireland and Scotland.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con) rose—

George Lyon: I must wind up.

Argyll means the boundary of the hinterland of the Gael. The very name suggests the idea of a cultural crossroads. As the First Minister knows, I have added my support to an initiative to bring the council of the isles to Islay—I hope that the Executive will do everything it can to support that

cause.

16:14

Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP): I was charmed earlier to hear a quotation from George Santayana:

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

I used to have that over my classroom door. The children thought it meant that they would be punished if they did not remember their homework. That, however, was not the message: the message was, quite simply, that if we do not remember the lessons of history, we will make all the same mistakes again. It was interesting, in the context of today's debate, that that was the lead-in.

I suppose that I have indulged in a little co-operation with the Irish already because, in the October vacation, with the assistance of the Irish Government, I visited the Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs in Dublin and the Irish Naval Service. Wearing my defence hat, which is irrelevant in here, I was interested in how the Irish go about the process of international co-operation. I met the principal officer in the Department of Foreign Affairs and I was interested to discover how determined the Government is to press forward in every possible way to bring peace to the world at large and to make whatever contribution, however large or small, in diplomatic or military terms, to bring about peace.

Exactly the same ends are being pursued by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London. What the Department of Defence, in spirit and in purpose, was doing, was identical to what is being done by the British Government.

Margaret Ewing talked about issues such as fisheries protection. The Irish Naval Service carries out fisheries protection, coastguard, search and rescue and drug interdiction operations, as do the British forces and the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency.

What was interesting in that dialogue was that there are areas of sea to the north of Ulster and to the south-east of Ireland that are the subject of technical dispute over ownership between the British and various elements of the Irish island. However, when it comes to the bit, there is perfect co-operation between the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency, the Royal Navy and the Irish Naval Service on activities that go in and out of those areas, to meet the needs of fisheries protection, drug interdiction, coastguarding and search and rescue. The UK reciprocates in that.

I am sure that members will already have grasped the point that I am trying to make.

Although my particular interest was relations at a more international level than the council of the isles, the point was to confirm that we have common interests worldwide. We have a shared vision and a shared commitment to international peace and reconciliation. In my negotiations and talks, there was a tremendous lack of parochialism, much good humour—naturally, because it was Dublin—and a huge commitment to progress.

The council of the isles represents that commitment to progress. It represents a way for all the organisations, nations, islands, parts of islands and devolved assemblies taking part in it to raise their sights and look forward. In the past, Ireland's problem has been that it has been stuck in its history. It must learn from that history to make progress. The organisation that is being discussed today, and the possibility of parliamentary participation in it, is such a way forward.

16:18

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I start by expressing the hope that the British-Irish Council has a future. The recent news of the possible suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly is of concern to us all. The difficulties being experienced in Northern Ireland put into perspective the problems that have been exercising political minds here in Scotland over the past couple of weeks. I am sure that we all fervently hope that a solution can be found that enables our sister administration in Northern Ireland to continue to operate.

The British-Irish Council enables the Irish Government, representatives from the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, and the four Governments of the UK to work together on areas of mutual interest. Importantly, it should provide opportunities for us to learn from each other's experience.

The First Minister has reminded members that the Irish Government has been involved in pioneering work on tackling drugs misuse. Its views on the success of its efforts, and even on those areas that have been less successful, will serve to inform us.

I hope that a mechanism will be found to enable the proceedings of the next meeting of the council, in Dublin, to be reported to the Scottish Parliament so that we can hear at first hand what has been going on.

I am sure that Irish successes in tourism—particularly cultural tourism—and promotion of the film industry, for example, will also be of interest to members of the Scottish Parliament when we consider our strategies for those matters. There will also be increasing opportunities for

educational links, especially as distance learning techniques and communication processes are rapidly improving.

There are strong and historic links between Northern Ireland and the south-west of Scotland, not least in mutual interests in economic issues, particularly transport. I want to make a plea for the A75 Euro-route; I hope that there will be many opportunities to highlight its importance. For members who may not be familiar with the area, the sea crossing between Belfast and Stranraer is a key transport link between Northern Ireland and Scotland—and the rest of the UK—for both freight and passengers. Access to the main motorway network, north and south, is gained via the A75, which runs for more than 100 miles through Galloway and Dumfriesshire, parallel to the Solway firth.

Many of us who represent that area, at different levels of government—councillors, MPs and MSPs—feel that the economic significance of the route, not only to Dumfries and Galloway, but to Northern Ireland and the north of England, has been underestimated over the years. I will not try to make a party political point about this, because it is a cross-party issue. Despite funding having been made available to upgrade some sections of the road, convoys of cars and lorries leaving Stranraer on their way to the M6 and the M74 are frequently still travelling together when they reach the Annan by-pass. I know that as a result of being trapped behind them on occasion.

I look forward to the British-Irish Council providing another avenue for discussion about the economic importance of the A75 and other trade routes. I hope that informal interparliamentary links will be forged, allowing members representing constituencies in the different Parliaments to discuss matters of mutual interest. There is genuine cross-party support and cross-sectoral interest in promoting the inclusion of the A75 in future strategic roads reviews. That is one small example of the type of discussion which, if it is followed by meaningful action, will prove that the British-Irish Council is not just a high-level talking shop, but presents a real opportunity to make progress on matters of mutual interest.

16:23

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Over the past few years, I have been fortunate enough to attend informal discussions at the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, just outside Dublin. I would like to pay tribute to the work of the centre, particularly the work it does with young people in breaking down barriers. Perhaps we could take some lessons from the centre's groundbreaking work.

Such off-the-record discussions provide a great insight into the workings of the peace process. I witnessed at first hand how those with apparently diametrically opposed views could sit down together to work out what they needed to move things on. I am sure that those discussions and many others like them have contributed enormously to the peace process, resulting in the formation of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Because of the commitment and determination of such people, I am sure that, despite the current difficulties and the possible suspension of the Executive, a way forward will be found, as it has happened time and time again.

The idea of a council of the isles was often spoken of at Glencree. It was seen as an opportunity to further understanding and co-operation not only between Governments or Parliaments, but between the peoples of the isles.

My belief in the importance of such a council was further strengthened when I took part in a council of the isles study tour in the United States, before Christmas. The tour was organised by the Irish institute of Boston College. There was great excitement as the Northern Ireland Executive was being formed while we were out there. There was some awareness of the Scottish Parliament among the people I met, but their interest outweighed their awareness. As the only MSP on the tour, I spent a huge amount of time answering questions about our new Parliament. There is a great deal of good will toward Scotland out there, on which we can build.

One of the most important aspects of the tour was the opportunity it gave to build relationships between elected representatives from the various parts of the isles. Our discussions ranged from the opportunity for bilateral discussions between the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly to transport issues and environmental concerns, and the idea of an alliance to expand the tourism market by attracting visitors wishing to sample the Celtic experience.

The possibilities are varied and plentiful, but to allow them to happen we must ensure that the council of the isles develops its own dynamic, as indeed this Parliament has started to do. It is essential that interparliamentary—and not just ministerial—links are developed. As has been said, that concept is encouraged in strand 3 of the Good Friday agreement.

I hope that the Deputy First Minister will recognise the importance of parliamentary links and accept the SNP amendment, so that this Parliament speaks with one voice in support of the council of the isles.

16:26

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):

The First Minister quoted the aim of the British-Irish Council, which is:

"to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands."

That is a worthy sentiment, if somewhat inelegant phraseology. That aim underlines what Mr Alex Salmond and David McLetchie said today: that the original designation—the council of the isles—is more appropriate. The council is about the totality of relationships between all the different legislative—and, in the case of the National Assembly for Wales, non-legislative—parliamentary bodies in these islands.

I agree with much of what has been said about the Nordic Council as a possible model. The Nordic Council does an enormous amount of work at a vast array of levels, such as resolving problems about the acceptance of medical and other academic qualifications. The Scandinavians consider the difficulty we have accepting Irish medical qualifications bizarre. I do not understand the full technical details. The council also addresses much more significant and complex issues.

The Nordic Council, which has its genesis in the independence of Norway in 1905, has acted as an organisation for conflict resolution and the healing of division, as indeed the European Economic Community and then the European Union have done. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the European Union, other than the obvious economic benefits, has been to heal the divisions within Europe and to produce—sometimes at our expense in these islands—a strong Franco-German alliance following three wars between those countries in the past 130 years. The British-Irish Council—the council of the isles, as I would prefer to call it—has a similarly important role.

I agree with Mo Mowlam and George Reid, whom I have heard report back on the meeting of the British-Irish Council at Cambridge to the Parliamentary Bureau, that we should not hold back from forming a parliamentary tier. We should do that as soon as possible, as it might help the situation in Northern Ireland that is the unfortunate background to this debate. I have distant relations in the Irish Republic. Like other members, I hope that we will once again come through this difficult situation.

I am sometimes teased in the chamber about my previous incarnation as a north Walian MP, but that experience had some value—I am glad to see Mr Salmond smiling. Even SNP members will recognise that I bring experience to this chamber that other members do not have, not least in

relation to transport communications from Ireland through Holyhead. The Welsh do not gloat quite so much as SNP members do about the Irish economic miracle as they realise that the Irish are not getting quite so much from the European Union as they once did. I am being slightly mischievous—I am not going to enter into party politics.

Experience of being a north Walian MP informs my views on certain issues and has value, not least because we can learn, in some cases, not to follow the Irish way of doing things. For example, I do not believe that we should follow their lead on forfeiture of assets or some of their environmental policies. I remember losing an inward investment project in my north Wales constituency to Cork, because Cork imposed much more lax regulations on that chemical project than we were prepared to impose.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Please conclude, Keith.

Mr Raffan: Can I finally say—

The Presiding Officer: No.

Mr Raffan: Okay. I will stop there.

The Presiding Officer: I want to fit in the two remaining speakers. I call John Young, to be followed by Lloyd Quinan. They will both get in if they stick to three minutes.

16:30

John Young (West of Scotland) (Con): The timing of this debate is appropriate in view of happenings in Northern Ireland, where communication structures are being implemented that might set an example for the future. In July 1998, Dennis Canavan asked about the composition of the British-Irish Council and whether parliamentarians will be represented. The then junior Northern Ireland minister, Paul Murphy, who referred to Mr Canavan as his honourable friend—although he might not do so now—said that the answer was no and that the council would be composed of Governments and Executives in the British Isles. At present, a British-Irish interparliamentary body consists of a number of UK MPs, peers, TDs and senators. Strand 2 of the Good Friday agreement lists the various institutions that will be established—because of the time restriction, I will not name them all—and I think that the average person will have difficulty understanding why so many groups are referred to in this context.

Will the British-Irish Council be effective if disputes arise? In 1929, Eamon de Valera's ministry abolished the oath of allegiance and refused to pay the interest on moneys borrowed to purchase land for farmers. As a result, Britain

levied duties on Irish imports and refused to negotiate with the Irish Free State at the imperial economic conference in Ottawa in 1932. Decisions that were taken in Dublin in 1937—particularly that the Irish Free State's national territory would include the whole island—started a rollercoaster that had a considerable impact during the war years.

As we have heard, the British-Irish Council, or council of the isles, emanated from the Nordic Council, which now consists of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Åland Islands. In many ways, that was a more natural bonding than the British-Irish Council. Through the centuries, the countries had been linked nationally and enjoyed common historical roots, and the same overall religion, traditions and ideology. There was a logic to the establishment of the Nordic Council.

I understand that the idea of the British-Irish Council emerged as a late entry in the Good Friday agreement. We were advised that it would consist of the two sovereign states of the Republic of Ireland and the UK, the three devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and the three crown dependencies, the bailiwicks of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.

However, the one big omission is England. The question I want to ask my SNP colleagues is, who speaks for England? How can we have a British-Irish Council that does not include England? The main transport links for—indeed, the survival of—Jersey and Guernsey are dependent on England and France, which are not included in the council.

The Scottish Executive is a lead Administration on social inclusion, but can we service and fund that responsibility? We can hardly service the Mound at the moment. The council's indicative list of about 30 subjects includes tourism and fishing, which have been mentioned several times.

Alex Salmond made the point that the council must not be a talking shop, which is a danger. The next summit will be in Dublin in June, when the subject will be the important issue of drugs. Although I hope that the summit succeeds, I would say that the jury is still out on the council.

Presiding Officer, you will be pleased to hear that I have cut out much of my speech.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you very much for your brevity. I hope that Lloyd Quinan will follow suit.

16:34

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): With the greatest of pleasure, Presiding Officer.

My connections to Ireland, north and south, go back a very long way both in my ancestry and, more important, in my working life. In 1980, I worked on a cross-community programme in Belfast called the Divis project, which would now be termed a social inclusion project and which worked with young joyriders who had been victims of the paramilitaries in their communities. That project worked enormously well. We turned a number of children away from the idea of stealing cars and running the risk of being killed on the streets of Belfast, and eventually got them into work. However, the greatest sadness is that the project fell apart the following year during the hunger strikes. That made clear to me how fragile things were in the north of Ireland.

A number of years later I went back to make a television programme that was the first to be seen on British television about the punishment shootings and people exiled to Scotland. We must recognise that a large number of people live in Scotland who have been driven out of their homes by paramilitaries on both sides. Through the council of the isles we can broker their return to their homes.

The advances made in social inclusion and anti-poverty strategies in the republic and the six counties are significant. In the six counties, under the administrative guidelines on policy appraisal and fair treatment, all policies are proofed—and I hope we will do the same—for religious and political opinion, gender, race, disability and age. We can learn from that.

The national anti-poverty strategy that has been in place in the Republic of Ireland for three years has brought unemployment from 11.9 per cent to 6 per cent, and long-term unemployment from 7 per cent to 6 per cent. There are structures already in place that we can learn from.

It is only with the involvement of the Parliament as well as the Executive that we will all begin to understand that despite the tragedies of the north of Ireland and the great problems that the republic has had, imaginative and innovative ways to overcome those problems and to address social ills, like those in this country to which John McAllion referred, have been found.

Even some of the contributions today, all of which have been constructive, show that we still have a gap of understanding. I used to say to people that the only way to understand Northern Ireland is to go there. I do not believe that that is the case any more, but we should make sure that when unfortunate situations like that of the past 48 hours happen, we are not gloom merchants. The situation will be overcome because the people of the island of Ireland want peace. We can play a part. I urge members to support the motion.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, and I thank all members for co-operating and making sure that everybody could speak.

16:37

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): We welcome the Executive introducing a debate on this subject and, in so doing, embracing David McLetchie's suggestion. It has been an interesting and well-informed debate with a welcome, very courteous exchange of views.

The title British-Irish Council has a slightly sterile and restrictive redolence akin to a dreary post-second world war trade mission—that is not the ambience that we want for the new body. To me, council of the isles has a ring about it that is substantive and romantic. St Columba and Ossian would have empathised with that name and with the spirit of the entity. Nor should the council of the isles conjure up a public perception of a peripatetic group of aquatic bureaucrats observing tokenism by circumnavigating their way round the British Isles.

The council's composition and activity are important, as is its location. We feel that a permanent chairman and the imaginative inclusion of an interparliamentary dimension would be fruitful and strengthen the structure. The prospect of locating the permanent secretariat in Glasgow is alluring and would be a fitting tribute to the traditions of St Mungo. I suggest to Dr Ewing that the honest men and bonnie lasses of Ayr might indulge me in that view.

The First Minister spoke of speeches to the council full of optimism and hope. That is welcome and this party applauds those sentiments. He also considered that the council could be a forum for discussion where interests coincide, overlap and collide. That aspect is very significant. This party endorses the First Minister's view, but adds that there must be rigour and candour in the pursuit of the objectives.

Having regard to the matters that the council of the isles may discuss, specifically communications, Alex Fergusson and Dr Elaine Murray referred to the A75 and the A77 south of Ayr. Those roads are vitally significant to improving access between Scotland and Ireland, as are the expansion of our air travel and air freight. This chamber expects the Scottish Executive to pursue those matters with vigour.

In relation to drugs, Mr McLetchie rightly pointed out the instructive visit that the Deputy Minister for Justice, Angus MacKay, recently made to Dublin, but of that we need to hear more, because so far there has been silence. I would like the Executive to confirm whether the European convention on human rights is proving to be an impediment to the

implementation of Irish solutions.

Again, I find myself agreeing with Mr Raffan. He is right to allude to learning through the council about treatment and rehabilitation models in relation to drugs abuse.

Alex Fergusson pertinently commented on the current battle, which is the interconnected cables that will be laid over the North channel. Beaufort's dyke is an important element of that. This is precisely the sort of useful, relevant and important issue that the council can embrace.

Social inclusion is a vital area for the council to consider, but the input from Scotland will be flawed if it proceeds from a didactic and lofty standpoint, and if it is redolent of the Executive delivering input from a think tank, and not giving families and communities real control.

In conclusion, this party wishes the council of the isles well and supports the initiative, the motion and the amendment, but whatever else happens, we are emphatic that this council must not be empty tokenism.

The Presiding Officer: I repeat my thanks for the brevity of speeches.

16:42

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): The First Minister referred to this debate being tinged with anxiety, and others have reflected that concern. We all hope that developments on the other side of the water are successful. I hope also that the enthusiasm of all participants for the council of the isles will be a factor that works towards peace, albeit not the most important one, because surely the best argument against violence is a successful working democracy.

I am glad to speak in this debate as the member for the constituency in Scotland that is closest to Northern Ireland. It may be closest in geographical terms, but at many times in the past few years it seemed like Northern Ireland was a million miles away because of the differences that were apparent between the two countries. Yet underneath those differences, the people living in Scotland and Northern Ireland shared exactly the same economic and social problems, which we all wanted to solve, and which would be better solved by working together. Certainly, for the south-west of Scotland, there are significant benefits from having connections with the Irish. I say Irish, because it is not just the Northern Irish connection.

There has been some interchange of population, I suspect more towards us than away from us in recent years. There has been significant tourism, which has gone up and down as the peace process has ebbed and flowed. In addition, as

other members have alluded to, there is significant commercial traffic across the Stranraer-Cairnryan to Northern Ireland route, which is not just the shortest sea crossing from Scotland to Northern Ireland, it is the busiest ferry route in the British Isles, with the exception of the Dover-Calais route.

Other members have alluded to the problems of the A75 and the A77. I have a vested interest in that matter, because my house is on the speed-restricted area at Crocketford. As I woke up at 5 o'clock this morning it did not seem to matter much whether the convoy of lorries that Elaine Murray described was going at 30 mph or 40 mph, because a dozen heavy goods vehicles make a lot of noise first thing in the morning. Regardless of who was responsible for the improvement in the glens, as far as the journey from Dumfries to Stranraer is concerned, it is a case of 1 mile of dual carriageway there and 74 miles to go.

I do not want to use that as a stick with which to beat the Administration. I was conscious, as were Dumfries and Galloway Council and the other participants at the seminar to which Alex Fergusson referred, of the opportunities that the peace process provides for ordinary members to get together to pressurise their various Administrations to put pressure in turn on the Scottish Administration to develop the A75, which is a route that is of benefit not just to Scotland, but to Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Recently, therefore, I have written not only to members of Parliament on this side of the water, but to members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, TDs for the other counties in Ulster and MEPs from Ireland. I hope that the peace process will develop in a way that allows us to exploit the encouraging responses that I have received.

The council of the isles, as it is set up, is a result of the peace process in Ireland, but it is not just about Ireland and the United Kingdom. As has been explained, the council includes Guernsey and Jersey. For that reason, the best title would be the council of the isles.

The council also includes the Isle of Man, which is close to my constituency too and is visible from there on a good day. Recently, our closeness was shown in tragic circumstances. The generosity and speed of response of the Isle of Man Government in the loss of the Solway Harvester has already been alluded to. We must learn lessons from that.

Over the years, the links between the Isle of Man and Scotland have diminished. There used to be regular summer excursions by boat from Garlieston to the Isle of Man, which have long since gone. It is to be hoped that the council of the isles and the recent tragic events will allow Scotland to start a new relationship with the Isle of Man.

Other issues such as Sellafield, which has been mentioned, will be of great interest to all the participants. Sellafield is a positive issue for England, due to the number of jobs that are created in Workington and round about. However, for the Isle of Man, Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland it is a negative issue, due to the pollution, which knows no boundaries and touches all our countries. By getting together I hope that we will be able to find some resolution to the problem.

The amendment has had support from all sides of the chamber. I am glad that that is the case. It seems sensible that members, in addition to Administrations, should be involved. It seems particularly reasonable given the various electoral mechanisms that are in place in the different countries involved in the council of the isles—power-sharing Executives, proportional representation systems with coalitions and first-past-the-post Governments. It is logical that all shades of opinion from all the Parliaments should be represented in some way.

However, I emphasise that the intention, wording and spirit of the amendment was not to replace the involvement of the various Executives and Governments in the council, but to give the opportunity for an extra dimension of involvement by ordinary members.

To avoid any doubt, I ask leave to move a manuscript amendment to the SNP amendment, to leave out:

“is not just for members of the various governments but”

and insert:

“as envisaged in Strand 3 of the Belfast Agreement”.

I hope that that amendment will command wide support throughout the chamber.

In conclusion, the kind of relationship that can be fostered between the constituent nations of the British Isles is far healthier than the idea of superiors and dependants within that relationship. The council of the isles is an embryo; it is deliberately vague. However, therein lies its potential for finding co-operative solutions to common problems. That potential must be nurtured.

16:49

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): Everyone will agree that this has been a constructive debate. We have shown that the Parliament is able to raise its sights above domestic issues to deal with issues that are of considerable importance and moment.

Lloyd Quinan said that when dealing with matters relating to Ireland there was often a gap of understanding. Our debate today has been well

informed and some of that gap of understanding has been bridged by the personal experiences of a number of the people who contributed to the debate. I am thinking especially of Shona Robison's references to the Glencree centre, which brought an interesting new dimension to the debate. I am sure that members would like to learn more about it.

I congratulate Mr McLetchie, not only on the constructive tone of his speech but on the fact that he managed to turn his speech into a mini-debate on transport, drugs, social inclusion and the European convention on human rights.

As we all know, this debate takes place against a fragile background in Northern Ireland. I contrast the present tension there with the atmosphere of hope that pervaded the inaugural council meeting in London in December. As parliamentarians, our thoughts today are very much with those who are trying to find a way out of the current difficulties. We wish them every success.

The British-Irish Council will be what we make of it. There have been suggestions that we should make a new name of it, as it is more often called the council of the isles. However, I am reliably informed by my colleague Alasdair Morrison that if that name is translated into Gaelic—Comhairle nan Eilean—the British-Irish Council will have the same name as the Western Isles Council, so there may be some practical difficulties there.

As Alasdair Morrison said, the potential for the council is great. Both Alex Salmond and Margaret Ewing questioned whether there should be wider discussions on topics such as tourism, fisheries and education. I would like to point out that, in addition to the lead topics, the council agreed an indicative list of other issues that would be suitable for the work of the council, including agricultural, health, regional, energy, cultural, tourism, sport and educational issues. Someone mentioned that education was not on the list. It is not on the main list, but it was listed as being an area that could be developed, possibly bilaterally.

The British-Irish Council will be a forum for discussion where we can share best practice and learn lessons. It can support and help to develop further the links that we already enjoy with other administrations in these islands. It can be a vehicle for joint action in which we can work on initiatives that will make a real difference to the lives of the peoples of all these islands.

In many of the contributions today, we have heard examples of areas in which there might be useful dialogue and useful work done, not only in the council but in the bilateral arrangements. Alex Fergusson, Elaine Murray, Alasdair Morgan and Alex Salmond all referred to the importance of transport links, and made strong pleas for

improvements to the A77 and A75. Over many years, especially during Scottish question time at Westminster, I shared Alex Salmond's experience of MPs from Northern Ireland making the point very clearly about the importance of transport links.

References have been made to cultural links. I agree with George Reid on the importance of the Columba initiative. It was established to foster closer cultural and linguistic ties between the Gaelic-speaking communities of Scotland and Ireland. I can report to the Parliament that my colleague Alasdair Morrison recently visited Dublin and met Minister Eamon O'Cuiv. Alasdair Morrison has been invited to attend the next sitting of the youth parliament in Derry in March, which ministers from Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will attend. That is indicative of the kind of developments and relationships that are already building up.

Drugs will be the principal subject for discussion when the council next meets, which I hope will be in Dublin later this year. The Irish Government will take the lead responsibility in that. Angus MacKay has already visited Dublin to try to gain more insight and information into Ireland's strategy for tackling drugs. There are no simple panaceas. We want to examine and to tackle drug trafficking from as many angles as possible. Examining the Irish experience is important. There was a rare moment of concord between Keith Raffan and David McLetchie when it was pointed out that it was not a question of enforcement but a question of learning about, and sharing experience on, treatment and rehabilitation.

Lloyd Quinan made a point about the Criminal Assets Bureau in the Irish Republic. It has already identified and seized several million pounds of criminal assets. That is a matter of public record, and appears in the bureau's annual report. European convention on human rights issues must be carefully considered. We know that any legislation passed by this Parliament must comply with the European convention on human rights. It is also important to point out that the confiscation of criminal assets is already in place and we are examining how we can make it more effective.

The Scottish Executive and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales have been give the lead responsibility for the council's consideration of social inclusion. I look forward to further discussion and debate in this chamber on the progress that we make on that matter. It is well known that social justice is a key plank of our programme for government in Scotland, which sets radical targets for full employment and ending child poverty. Through the British-Irish Council, we can look forward to learning from the experiences of Ireland and of other devolved Administrations in

creating opportunity, tackling poverty and delivering social justice, and to sharing our experiences with them.

One or two members talked not only about the council but about bilateral involvement. It is worth recording the fact that last week Wendy Alexander and Jackie Baillie were in the Irish Republic. They accept that action is an important part of bilateral co-operation. During their meetings in Ireland, they were able to consider not just general social inclusion issues and anti-poverty strategies, but also a new role for rural post offices in the future. They met representatives from credit unions to see what lessons could be learned there, and visited peripheral estates where exclusion is being tackled through information technology training for the long-term unemployed. That is indicative of the sort of practical learning from and sharing of experience that I hope will inform our debates and the way in which we tackle key problems.

As I indicated, the next-but-one summit will be in Scotland. George Lyon kindly offered Islay as a venue. A decision on where that summit should be held has not yet been made, but consideration will be given to all proposals. This spring, we plan to bring together ministers with responsibility for social justice in the various Administrations to give a real impetus to our work and to engage with the enthusiasm that exists throughout the council.

The location of the secretariat was also discussed. Annabel Goldie backed Glasgow, and at least one other member put in a bid for that city, but there are no plans for a centralised secretariat. That might accord with Winnie Ewing's proposal that we locate the secretariat in Ayr; it could go round the country as different by-elections emerge. [*Laughter.*] I suspect that my colleagues in Wales might suggest Ceredigion as an appropriate place for it this week. It is important to point out that the secretariat is a joint effort by the two sovereign Governments, in consultation with other members. It is, one might say, a virtual secretariat, and does not need a single location.

A recurring theme throughout this debate has been the importance of parliamentary links. I particularly welcome George Reid's contribution as a constructive and positive measure. The Executive certainly supports the development of interparliamentary links in these islands in parallel with the British-Irish Council. I am pleased that Mr Morgan has proposed his manuscript amendment, as there would have been a technical difficulty in accepting the amendment as originally drafted.

The Executive and the whole Parliament will be happy to accept the manuscript amendment, because the spirit of this debate has been that if the principle of sharing and learning applies to Administrations, it also holds good for Parliaments. We hope that strong interparliamentary links will

be established in parallel with the British-Irish Council. The founding agreement of the council suggests that that might happen through the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. We want to explore how it can best happen, but I am sure that the whole Parliament would endorse the principle.

The British-Irish Council is a modern institution for a modern constitutional framework. It reflects positive and constructive relationships within these islands and Scotland's place in that framework. We will contribute to and benefit from the relationships that it enjoys. As I said, it was founded in an atmosphere of hope, it is being taken forward with enthusiasm and commitment, and I believe that it will result in better lives for people not only in Scotland but in all these islands.

Lead Committees

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of Lead Committees—

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Food (Animal Products from Belgium) (Emergency Control) (Scotland) Order 2000 (SSI 2000/15)

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Animal Feedingstuffs from Belgium (Control) (Scotland) Regulations 2000 (SSI 2000/16)—[*Mr McCabe.*]

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We have first to deal with a manuscript amendment, which I will read out to the chamber. In principle, manuscript amendments are undesirable—in fact, there is nothing about them in our standing orders. On this occasion I will accept it, in the interests of general sweetness and light. However, when I saw this amendment yesterday I started to redraft it, as I realised that it was technically incorrect. I was advised by the clerk to save my pen and ink, because the clerks had already discussed it. The moral is that advice from the clerks or from my office should be listened to a little more carefully, as we would then not have to deal with manuscript amendments. I am not looking at anyone in particular, as I do not know who was responsible.

Manuscript amendment to amendment S1M-481.1, in the name of Mr Alex Salmond, moved:

to leave out “is not just for members of the various governments but” and insert “as envisaged in Strand 3 of the Belfast Agreement”.—[*Alasdair Morgan.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that the amendment, as amended, be agreed to.

Amendment, as amended, agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S1M-481, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament welcomes the establishment and recent inaugural meeting of the British-Irish Council; believes it has an important role to play in the promotion and development of harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships among the peoples of these islands, in promoting co-operation between the participating administrations within their competencies and in working together on issues of importance to the peoples they serve; welcomes the fact that the Scottish Executive has lead responsibility, with the National Assembly for Wales, for co-ordinating the Council's consideration of social justice issues, and intends to develop corresponding links with the Parliaments concerned, recognising that this Council as envisaged in Strand 3 of the Belfast Agreement should also have effective Parliamentary representation.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S1M-490, in the name of Tom McCabe, on the designation of lead committees, 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 (Animal Products from Belgium) (Emergency Control) (Scotland) Order 2000 (SSI 2000/15)

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Animal Feedingstuffs from Belgium (Control) (Scotland) Regulations 2000 (SSI 2000/16)

The Presiding Officer: That is the shortest ever decision time.

A9 (Improvements)

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I ask for a halt to conversations, as debate is about to start on S1M-349, in the name of Mr Jamie Stone, on A9 improvements. The debate will be concluded, without the question being put, after 30 minutes. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their buttons as soon as possible, so that we can decide on the order of speakers.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament calls upon the Scottish Executive to bring forward as a matter of urgency the much needed improvements to the A9 north of Helmsdale.

17:02

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Like everyone in Caithness and Sutherland, I am absolutely delighted that this motion was chosen to be debated today. I see Dr Ewing shaking her head.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): She was nodding.

Mr Stone: I said nodding, did I not? [MEMBERS: "You said shaking."] Did I? Oh well—strike that from the record.

I will outline briefly the problems that we face, which will be familiar to all Highlands MSPs present, not least Mr Peacock and Dr Ewing.

Caithness suffers from depopulation and has done for a considerable time. As a former member of Highland Council, I saw statistics regularly that showed the number of people who were leaving the county. Young people, in particular, are leaving Caithness. I have a graph that shows the fall in the county's population from some 41,000 in the mid-19th century to 25,000 to 26,000 now. If the trend continues, Caithness is likely to lose 12 per cent of its population over the next 25 years.

As everyone who has visited Caithness knows, it is not dissimilar to an island. It is bounded on both the Sutherland and the south Sutherland side by hills. There is only one realistic road route into the county—the A9, to which the motion refers. Anyone who chooses to turn inland at Helmsdale and to travel up the Kildonan to Strath Halladale road can be in serious trouble if they meet oncoming traffic.

There is an air service to Wick, but the flights do not always suit. It is significant that during the eight months that I have been an MSP I have not taken the plane once, because the flights do not fit with my schedule. The problem is brought to our attention repeatedly by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, Ackergill Tower and

other businesses in Caithness.

The rail journey from Wick or Thurso to Inverness takes more than four hours. While I praise ScotRail and Railtrack for the work that they are doing on the service, it does not compete well with the road.

We have only one lifeline to the county. The bends north of Helmsdale as far as Latheron present a serious problem. I am sure that some members will recall the event years ago on those bends when a travelling salesman selling knickers and tights—I see Mr Peacock nod, not shake, his head—was caught in a snowdrift and survived only by putting on all the tights and knickers. He, alas, passed away a couple of years ago, but the problem is still with us.

In fighting against the depopulation of the area and the drifting away of young people, it is important that we try to boost the economy of Caithness. The east side of the county has special problems. Thurso has the facility at Dounreay, a battery factory and so on, but in the Wick area as far down as Lybster and Latheron, unemployment is worryingly high. A surprising number of people commute from the east side of the county to jobs offshore. However, there might be a downturn in offshore jobs—I refer partly to the BARMAC troubles.

The road presents a problem when we try to attract investors to the county. The Scrabster harbour trust has plans to improve the harbour. Scrabster is moving rapidly up the league table of fish landings, as those who know about fish will be aware, but the problem of the A9 stands in the way of the planned improvements.

The strategic roads review was based largely on traffic numbers. Rhoda Grant, Maureen Macmillan and I met Sarah Boyack, along with Councillors John Rosie and Alastair MacDonald, the chairman and vice-chairman of the Caithness area committee. John Rosie put the case eloquently that the problem in Caithness is one of social inclusion and that if the Executive is to achieve its goals, the problem of the A9 must be solved. It is important to remember that the problem transcends straightforward statistical analysis.

The area has enormous potential for tourism. It is like a landward Orkney. We could find out far more than we know about the area's archaeology simply by shoving a spade into the turf. We have the wildlife and the scenery to make Caithness an attractive destination, but the drive up north is not made much fun by the Helmsdale bends, especially if there are a couple of kids in the back seat asking, "When are we going to get there?" I have heard stories about bus-loads of children being taken down to Inverness—by the time that the Helmsdale bends have been passed, the bus

is ankle-deep in sick.

The cost of repairs is worth considering. The figure that was attached to the upgrading of the road was £11.4 million, but the figure might not be quite so much. A contractor in the Brora area believes that it could be done for less and that the cost could be spread over a number of years.

We are realistic in Caithness and will take all that we can get, even if it is not all that we want. Fergus Ewing was successful in the Mallaig road debate and I hope to be similarly successful today.

The point about the cost is important. It would be churlish of me not to thank Sarah Boyack, via the minister, for our meeting. I believe that the civil servants listened to us, and I know that Sarah Boyack took our points on board. She has kindly undertaken to visit the county of Caithness in the near future, to see the problem for herself.

I referred to the fact that the A9 is our only feasible lifeline. I referred to the possible costs of improvement and—principally and most importantly—to the enormous problems that we face, such as unemployment and the declining population. I put it to members that the Scottish Parliament is surely about trying to tackle the ills of all parts of Scotland. If the minister could deliver, or encourage his colleagues to deliver, on the Caithness A9 front, we would be tackling a particularly severe problem.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): Several members want to speak this evening. I apologise in advance, as it is unlikely that I shall be able to call everyone. I ask members to keep their speeches to less than four minutes.

17:11

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands (Lab): I thank Jamie Stone for initiating the debate. When that snowstorm happened on the Ord of Caithness and that salesman survived, a man from Dingwall died in his car in the drifts.

Jamie talked about economic and social regeneration, which go hand in hand. Social regeneration in the north should be highlighted, as there is a danger that, in debates on rural areas, many areas get lumped together. Several separate issues should be considered when we debate the future of the A9. It is not just a road: it is a point of access for businesses, and should provide a gateway for tourism to Caithness and Sutherland. Sadly, it often provides a barrier. It is also an important route for farmers. Many people rely on the road for their living and the future of their businesses. There is a knock-on effect on the people of Caithness and Sutherland, as employment and social issues are inextricably

linked.

Caithness has lost 6.6 per cent of its population in the past 25 years; that trend will continue if several issues are not addressed. There is considerable fear that, if the trend continues, communities will begin to die out, which would mean the loss of special communities with their own identities and cultures. The culture of the north of Scotland is different from the culture of the Highlands in general; the people there would want me to point that out.

The key issue is remoteness. Although the area is part of the mainland, it is more like an island, as Jamie said. People in Caithness and Sutherland are socially excluded from business, sport, culture and leisure, and from important support services. Addressing the issue of remoteness is the key to ending social exclusion; I cannot emphasise that point too strongly.

Greater investment from business would have the knock-on effect of creating employment. We need an adequate range of facilities but we will not get that with a low tax base. We need to increase the range of facilities that are available to local people. We can do that by bringing investment to the area, but the condition of the A9 inhibits investment, as it inhibits access to services. It is most concerning to hear that women and children who are escaping violence in the home must travel 100 miles to the nearest refuge. I have met women at the railway station in Dingwall who had undertaken a four-hour journey from Wick or Thurso to the refuge in Dingwall in great distress, as public transport by road was out of the question.

When faced with difficulties such as those, it is easy to pass over the more mundane, day-to-day difficulties that hamper and restrict people in the north. For example, as John Rosie pointed out, the nearest cinema to Thurso is a £20 ferry crossing away in Orkney—people have to cross to an island to get to the cinema. Young people are drifting away from the area in which they grew up, and the perceived lack of opportunities for young people is a contributory factor in the depopulation of the area.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Does Maureen Macmillan agree that, when debates take place on such issues, it would be extremely useful for us to meet in the reconvened Highlands and Islands Convention, together with members of the Westminster Parliament and local government, to find a solution?

Maureen Macmillan: I do not think that that point is relevant just now. We can meet here to discuss the issue; we are discussing it today.

Economic regeneration leads to social

regeneration. When more people come to an area, businesses will expand and prosperity will increase in different sectors of society. Improving the A9 is only one step towards achieving the goal of economic and social regeneration, but it is a step that we must take. We must give the people of Caithness and Sutherland the best possible platform to build a stable and prosperous future. Will the minister consider strategies to develop that platform, before it is too late?

17:15

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

It is difficult, when we are all using the same piece of research, to come up with something original to say. As the two previous speakers have been making their points, I have scored out half my speech. However, I am delighted to be reminded of the Berriedale braes by Jamie Stone. Recently, I have been having surgeries in Wick and Thurso—I am a regional member. It is certainly not funny driving home when it is icy, especially if one is not familiar with the road. Jamie, I will remember to keep my tights and knickers on, just in case.

Mr Stone: Can I have that in writing?

Mary Scanlon: I advise the Minister for Transport and the Environment to choose to visit the A9 not on a bright, sunny day but on a dark, stormy, windy, icy night to see it at its worst.

This is not just about people in the area; it is also about tourism and investment. I thank Jamie Stone for raising that point.

An important issue that has not been raised is tourism, which has increased in some parts of the Highlands in the past year. However, although the Highlands of Scotland Tourist Board figures are still on their way, there is a marked decline in tourism in Caithness and Sutherland—a reduction of 16 per cent—which would not be sustainable over time. Although tourism has increased in some areas of the Highlands, the most marked decrease is in Caithness and Sutherland.

Another important point is demography; the population decline in the area has been mentioned, but the population is also increasingly aging. The steadily decreasing school rolls and consequent school closures act as a disincentive for families with younger children to move into the area.

Mr Stone: Does Mary Scanlon agree that the aging population will present a burden on the public purse in years to come?

Mary Scanlon: Yes, especially given the health problems and the health facilities that are available in the area. As it takes four hours to reach an acute hospital—and that is only the beginning—the aging population will be an enormous burden

unless the issues are addressed now.

I am also concerned about the fact that the Executive's transport policies are based on tackling congestion, yet one is lucky if one sees a car in the area on really dark nights. Issues such as tackling congestion, workplace parking and toll roads have little resonance in remote rural areas such as the Highlands.

An air flight costs £243 from Wick to Edinburgh and £404 to Gatwick. That is not to mention the rail link on which it takes four hours to cover 130 miles from Inverness to Wick. It is quicker to take a train from Edinburgh to London, even though the distance between them is considerably longer. I will quote from the presentation, "Caithness—A County in Crisis":

"This road is bleeding us to death . . . it is a barrier to social inclusion and it is slowly killing our county and way of life."

Another concern, which has not been mentioned, relates to Dounreay and the huge quantities of radioactive waste that might have to be transported around the tortuous hairpin bends of the A9. I would question the fact that—I am sure that Alasdair Morrison will mention this—the strategic roads review assumed a daily traffic flow of fewer than 2,000 vehicles and yet a recent Scottish Office traffic survey showed a flow of more than 3,000 vehicles a day. If social inclusion means anything, it means including all of Scotland.

17:20

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I feel like an impostor at this debate of importance to the Highlands and Islands, given that I represent the great counties of Perthshire and Angus. However, I wish to bring a perspective to the debate on the A9 that is linked to the need for improvements in the area north of Helmsdale. I warmly congratulate Jamie Stone on securing this debate.

The A9 is a key road—it is the spine of Scotland. It travels through the western part of my constituency; as one drives through the Perthshire section of the road, working one's way towards Helmsdale, it becomes apparent that the road is incomplete. When the road was being developed in the 1970s, the plans did not quite reach their full potential. There are vast areas of land on either side of the single carriageway road around the Pitlochry area, the Bankfoot area or north of Blair Atholl that could quite conceivably have taken a dual carriageway. However, the road was never developed in that way.

I encourage the minister, in thinking about the A9 from the perspective of Helmsdale, to consider the problems with that road south of Inverness and the dangers that drivers, who are often from overseas, face in having to flip from driving on a

dual carriageway to a single carriageway on their way north.

The issues that Jamie Stone raised about the developments north of Helmsdale are also important to the constituency that I represent. Representations have already been made to Sarah Boyack and to other ministers about the need for significant investment to improve the quality of road safety at junctions such as those at Ballinluig, Bankfoot or Blair Atholl.

I do not want to prolong the debate with issues that are too remote from Helmsdale, so I will make a final point. Roadside services are a live issue in the political debate, including in my constituency. The Scottish Executive has, to its credit, maintained a strong policy of presumption against the development of roadside services on the A9. I wish to put it on the parliamentary record that there is absolute unanimity in the communities that I represent that that policy must be maintained. We do not want that policy undermined in any way by some of the rather loose remarks, which I hope that the Scottish Executive will studiously ignore, that have been made by some members of the leadership of Perth and Kinross Council.

I thank the Parliament for giving me the opportunity to raise those issues and I warmly support the aspirations of the people of Helmsdale and further north in securing improvements to the A9.

17:22

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): There is a phrase in Gaelic to describe Caithness, the translation of which is “the little lowlands behind the Highlands”. I think that that emphasises the sense that Caithness is almost an island.

The people of Caithness are brisk, energetic, enterprising and hard-working. Perhaps that is the key to why the young leave the area—they are used to that quality of enterprise and, if there is nothing for them, they will simply leave. Many of my friends have done so.

A story often told concerns an American tourist, who cannot believe the state of the A9. The tourist keeps leaving the road in order to look for it. It is amazing that such a road should be designated as an A road—it is an absurdity. The A9 is a deterrent.

I put it to the minister that, for the period 2000–05, European funding is available for roads in exceptional circumstances. Surely the Executive could tap into that funding, as all the speakers have outlined the fact that these are exceptional circumstances.

I remember being involved in the campaign to

build the Dornoch rail bridge at the same time as the road bridge, which at least would have made the rail journey that bit more competitive. It would have cost almost nothing—we raised almost all the money and were short by only £1.5 million. The Government was short-sighted in not giving us that money.

The Highland Council has called for support for its programme of capital works. Perhaps the minister will indicate whether he is prepared to support the council.

17:24

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I congratulate Jamie Stone on securing this debate. As he said, it is important to people throughout Scotland that their Parliament debates issues that concern them.

The A9 concerns many people who believe that social and economic trends are adversely affecting the economy of Caithness and other rural areas. The A9 is a lifeline for businesses and families in Caithness and Sutherland. It is easy to underestimate the impact that a road can have. The A9 provides a link for people who are isolated from major towns—the people who live in the north.

I want to concentrate on the impact of the underdevelopment of the A9 on the economy of Caithness. One of the key factors that will encourage business to invest in Caithness and Sutherland is a properly developed infrastructure, which includes not only the A9, but rail services.

It is crucial that we accept that an improvement to the A9 is fundamental to enhancing the economy of Caithness and Sutherland. By encouraging businesses to invest in the area, we can give people the opportunity to stay in the community in which they have grown up and we can give them the prospect of a job and a career. Rural areas are not simply to be conserved; the people who live there need jobs and economic regeneration. According to Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Caithness appears to be suffering from a lack of business growth. That reminds us that improvements to infrastructure are necessary.

One way in which to ensure that unemployment is effectively tackled is by attracting businesses to Caithness and Sutherland. Improvements to the A9 are only one issue, but are nevertheless important to achieve that. In the meeting with Sarah Boyack last week that Jamie Stone spoke about, we pressed the need for a strategy to improve the road. There is a fear that piecemeal improvement will deal only with the symptoms, not with the cause.

Fergus Ewing: Does Rhoda Grant agree that

we should urge the Executive to use money from the 2000-05 European funding programme for road improvements in exceptional circumstances? Does she agree that it would be appropriate to urge the Executive to obtain European funding for such purposes?

Rhoda Grant: I think that we should explore all options for improving the roads network in Caithness and Sutherland. I understand that European funding may concern infrastructure less than it did previously, but it could still be considered.

Simply undertaking improvements when necessary will not tackle the narrow twists and bends that are a feature of the single-carriageway sections of the road in its present state.

It is important to move freight off the road and on to rail, which will help clear the A9 and prevent delays. Some congestion on the A9 is due to slow-moving traffic. The movement from road to rail has already begun at Georgemas Junction station.

The growth in information technology has allowed the development of home shopping. That is very exciting for people who are geographically dispersed, especially the elderly and disabled, who do not have access to shops. We must avoid the frustration of that development in rural areas where people have poor transport links.

Mary Scanlon mentioned the Berriedale braes. People in the north are realistic. They are not asking for improvements at Berriedale, because they know that that would be very expensive at present. They want substantial improvements to the other parts of the road. I hope that the minister will address some of those points when he is winding up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now have to move to the winding-up speech of the Deputy Minister for the Highlands and Islands and Gaelic. I apologise to Jamie McGrigor and John Farquhar Munro, whom I was unable to call.

17:28

The Deputy Minister for Highlands and Islands and Gaelic (Mr Alasdair Morrison): Once again—I had to do this a fortnight ago—I congratulate Jamie Stone on securing a members' business debate. He certainly has the recipe for securing them. I am tempted to say, "We have to stop meeting like this," but I can assure you, Presiding Officer, that I have no intention of mentioning tights or knickers at any point in my speech.

Mr Stone: Shame.

Mr Morrison: I also congratulate Jamie Stone on his well-balanced speech and acknowledge the

important contributions of other members who had the opportunity to speak.

The strength of support from all parts of the chamber for improvements to the A9 in Caithness has been apparent. That is understandable. The A9 is vital to the whole of the Highlands. I agree with the self-proclaimed impostor, John Swinney, that the A9 is a very important route—the spine of Scotland, as he aptly called it.

There have been major improvements to the route in recent decades, which have yielded significant reductions in journey times from many parts of the Highlands to central Scotland and beyond. I readily acknowledge that most of the major improvements have taken place south of Dornoch. However, the more northerly sections of the route, including the A9 north of Helmsdale, have not been neglected.

The significant improvements that were undertaken at Dunbeath bridge some years ago represented, essentially, a bypass of that village. In 1997, implementation of a route accident reduction plan for the A9 north of Dornoch began, and that is now largely complete. A number of improvements have been taken forward under the banner of the A9 north of Dornoch route action plan, including a £500,000 resurfacing, drainage and traffic management scheme in Golspie Main Street that was completed last year.

A new bridge at the Ord of Caithness was constructed in 1999, on the section of the route that is the subject of this afternoon's debate. That £800,000 scheme involved the replacement of the old defective crossing and some road widening to allow freer passage for large vehicles and to create welcome opportunities for overtaking.

Understandably, there is keen disappointment that we are unable to proceed with the ambitious plans for the A9 between Helmsdale and the Ord of Caithness—plans that were considered in the strategic roads review. That review—which has been mentioned several times this afternoon—examined objectively and consistently our inheritance from the Tory Government. That inheritance is some 17 schemes costing more than £800 million in total. Strikingly absent from our inheritance was the public money that is necessary to pay for those schemes. Put simply, the Tories made promises that heightened expectation but that they did not intend to deliver.

We have made it clear that our key priorities are education and health and so, inevitably, the resources that are available for trunk roads have been constrained. We have, nevertheless, reversed the decline in the budget that was inherited from the Conservatives—I know that Mary Scanlon will welcome that. The comprehensive spending review put an extra £58

million over three years into the programme and the first priority has been to tackle the serious backlog of repairs and maintenance.

In the most recent round of expenditure decisions, we increased provision for motorway and trunk roads by £35 million in the period until 2002. Those funds will assist us in progressing our five top motorway and trunk road priorities, as identified in the strategic review. Those priorities are spread throughout Scotland—they include the A830 in the Highlands—and have a total capital cost of £140 million. I remember that last year I responded to a motion in the name of Fergus Ewing. A few weeks after that, the Minister for Transport and the Environment was able to secure funding for the A830. Sadly, I suspect that I am not in such a fortunate position tonight.

The roads review was thorough and assessed each scheme against five criteria—economy, safety, environmental impact, accessibility and integration. Jamie Stone said that the roads review was about traffic volumes only—it was not. The scheme on the A830 Mallaig road that I have just mentioned was approved despite low volumes of traffic, but all criteria were considered.

As the report on the review showed, the scheme suggested for the road north of Helmsdale—which would have involved almost 3 miles of new high-grade two-lane single carriageway with several new structures across valleys—was among the poorest performers. It was very difficult to see how it would offer value for the £11.4 million investment that would have been involved.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister agree that it is a pity that the trunk road programme in the Highlands has been so savagely cut? Does he further agree that it is a shame that the Highlands and Islands no longer have objective 1 status? Because of that, we have lost about £40 million over the next five years and some of that money could have been spent on improving the A9 north of Helmsdale.

Mr Morrison: I agree that we do not have objective 1 status; what we have is a fantastic deal that was secured in Berlin by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I agree that we should explore the possibility of using the European money that replaces objective 1 funding and we should examine the ways in which that could contribute to the costs of some of the major schemes that are suggested.

Given other intense pressures, we concluded that the scheme for the road north of Helmsdale—along with several others—could not proceed. However, we have not denied that there are problems to be addressed on this section of the trunk road network. We wish to explore other means of addressing the key difficulties that have

been identified. European funding is, obviously, one avenue that is worth exploring. The route action plan that I mentioned provides an appropriate framework for further work and officials are reviewing the plan in the light of the strategic review decision. A number of alternative measures for the Helmsdale to Ord of Caithness section were suggested a few years ago by the consultants who prepared the larger scheme. Our starting point will be to refresh those measures and to discuss the possibilities with Highland Council. I am unable today to give a firm timetable for the delivery of those alternative improvements.

I know that, last week, Mr Stone and several other members had a useful meeting with Sarah Boyack. She is planning to visit Caithness, which could give her the opportunity to experience this section of the A9 at first hand. She has made it clear that she wishes to make progress on assessing alternative measures for major schemes such as Helmsdale to Ord of Caithness, which, following the strategic review, will not be proceeding.

I am grateful for your indulgence, Presiding Officer—I have overrun my time by some three minutes. If it is of any comfort to Jamie Stone, I will be visiting Caithness shortly, which will give him another opportunity to articulate his concern about that part of the road.

Meeting closed at 17:36.

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